Wilson's Creek

NATIONAL BATTLEFIELD • MISSOURI

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National Park Service

U. S. Department of the Interior

The Battle of Wilson's Creek (called Oak Hills by the Confederates) was fought 10 miles southwest of Springfield, Mo., on August 10, 1861. Named for the stream that crosses the area where the battle took place, it was a bitter struggle between Union and Confederate forces for control of Missouri in the first year of the Civil War.

Brig. Gen. Nathaniel Lyon

After the firing on Fort Sumter in April 1861 precipitated hostilities, Missouri's allegiance was of vital concern to the Federal Government. The State's strategic position on two vital waterways—the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers—and its abundant manpower and natural resources made it imperative that Missouri remain loyal to the Union. But many Missourians, including the Governor, had strong secessionist sympathies and planned to cooperate with the Southern States in their bid for independence.

When President Abraham Lincoln on April 15 called for 75,000 troops to suppress the rebellion, he asked that Missouri furnish four regiments of 90-day enlistees as her quota. Gov. Claiborne F. Jackson, an active secessionist, condemned the request as "illegal, unconstitutional, and revolutionary in its object" and vowed that the State would send not a man for such an "unholy crusade." Instead, he ordered the State Guard to assemble at Camp Jackson outside St. Louis and, when the time was right, seize the nearby Federal arsenal with its huge stockpile of weapons. But the Governor had not counted on the resourcefulness of the arsenal's commandant, Capt. Nathaniel Lyon.

Lyon, a West Point graduate and veteran of the Seminole and Mexican Wars, was as determined to keep Missouri in the Union as Jackson was to take her out. Learning of the Governor's intentions toward the arsenal, Lyon had the arms removed and shipped to Illinois. On May 10, anxious to stamp out the secessionist movement as quickly as possible, he marched 7,000 men out to Camp Jackson, surrounded it, and compelled its surrender. Then in June, after a futile conference with Jackson to try to reconcile their differences, Lyon (now a brigadier general) led an army up the Missouri River, captured Jefferson City and Boonville, and routed the Governor, the legislature, and the State Guard under Maj. Gen. Sterling Price.

After installing a new State government and picking up reinforcements at Boonville and Clinton, Lyon moved on toward southwest Missouri where Price had retreated to reorganize his command within supporting distance of Brig. Gen. Ben McCulloch's Confederate troops and Arkansas State Guard then assembling in northwestern Arkansas. By July 13, Lyon was encamped at Springfield with about 6,000 soldiers, consisting of the 1st, 2d, 3d, and 5th Missouri Regiments, the 1st Iowa Regiment, the 1st and 2d Kansas Regiments, several companies of regular troops, and three batteries of artillery. He spent the rest of the month drilling these men and procuring supplies.

In McDonald County, 75 miles southwest of Springfield, Price had been busy drilling the soldiers under his command—about 7,000 men. When troops under Generals McCulloch and N. Bart Pearce rendezvoused with Price at Cassville on July 29-30, raising the total Confederate force to about 12,000 men, the three generals worked out plans to capture Lyon's army and regain control of the State. On July 31 the lead Confederate division marched northeast to attack the Federals. Lyon, hoping to surprise the Confederates, had marched from Springfield on August 1. On the 2d, at Dug Springs, his troops mauled the Confederate vanguard. Lyon now learned that he was outnumbered and fell back into Springfield. The Confederates pursued, and by August 6 they were encamped in the fields near and on the bluffs overlooking Wilson's Creek.

General Lyon decided to attack the Wilson's Creek encampments of the Confederates. Leaving about 1,000 soldiers behind to guard his supplies, the Union commander marched the rest of his army (about 5,400 men) out of Springfield on August 9. The Federal plan called for Col. Franz Sigel, with about 1,200 men, to swing wide to the south and come in against the enemy's right and rear, while Lyon and the main body of troops struck from the north against the left. Success hinged on the element of surprise.

Meanwhile, the Confederate leaders had alerted their troops to be ready to march to attack Lyon on the evening of the 9th. A rain caused McCulloch to cancel his orders for a night march, and many of the pickets who had been called in did not return to their posts. The Confederate leaders were surprised on the morning of August 10, when Lyon's skirmishers assailed and drove in their outposts. The Federals forged rapidly ahead, overrunning several Confederate camps, and occupied the crest of a ridge subsequently called "Bloody Hill." There they were checked by Price's Missourians who formed a battleline on the southern slopes of the ridge.

For 4 hours the battle raged on Bloody Hill. The fighting was at close range, frequently hand to hand. At times, the Federals would gain a few yards, only to see their gains erased by a Confederate counterthrust. Then the process would be reversed. Though this was one of the first battles of the Civil War and many troops had little training, on few other fields was there a greater display of courage and bravery. It was later reported that "some of the best blood in the land was being spilled as recklessly as if it were ditch water."

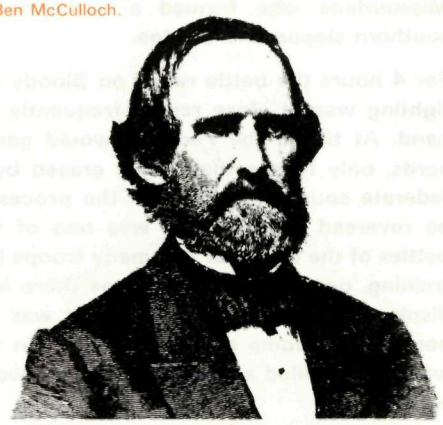
Sigel's flanking maneuver was initially successful. The camps of the Confederate cavalry were overrun, but the attack slowed as troops stopped to plunder and came under the fire of an Arkansas battery. Sigel's attack collapsed when General McCulloch counterattacked with the 3d Louisiana. Routed, the Federals fled, abandoning five cannon. Sigel, accompanied by a small escort, fled to Springfield.

Maj. Gen. Sterling Price

About 10:30 a.m., General Lyon, who had been wounded in the head and leg by a bursting shell, was killed while trying to lead a countercharge by the 1st Iowa Regiment. Maj. Samuel Sturgis—all the other senior officers being dead or wounded—assumed command of the Federal forces and, with ammunition nearly exhausted, ordered a withdrawal to Springfield. Subsequently, the Northerners retreated to Rollo, Mo.

Losses in the battle had been heavy and about equal on both sides—1,317 for the North, 1,230 for the South. The Federals lost 24 percent of their personnel engaged, the Confederates, 12 percent. On Bloody Hill, where most of the fighting took place, 25 percent of the men were casualties. One eyewitness later reported that after the battle the ground was so covered with dead and wounded that "one could have stepped from one man to another."

Maj. Gen. Ben McCulloch.



Though the Southerners had won a victory, they had been so crippled that they were not able to pursue the retreating Federals. In a few days, Generals McCulloch and Pearce took their troops back to Arkansas. General Price with his State Guard advanced to the Missouri River and captured Lexington and its garrison. He soon found his position untenable and retired into southwestern Missouri. In February 1862 Price was driven into northwest Arkansas, where he joined forces with General McCulloch, and on March 6-8 the combined Confederate armies were defeated at Pea Ridge. Missouri, although it continued to be a scene of savage fighting between Confederate raiders and partisans and Federal soldiers and Home Guards, had been secured for the Union.

Lyon lost the battle and his life, but he achieved his goal. This strengthened the hand of the Unionists in Kentucky who succeeded, in the face of Confederate invasion, in keeping much of that State loyal. Had Missouri and Kentucky seceded, chances for Southern victory in the Civil War would have been greatly enhanced.

TOURING WILSON'S CREEK BATTLEFIELD

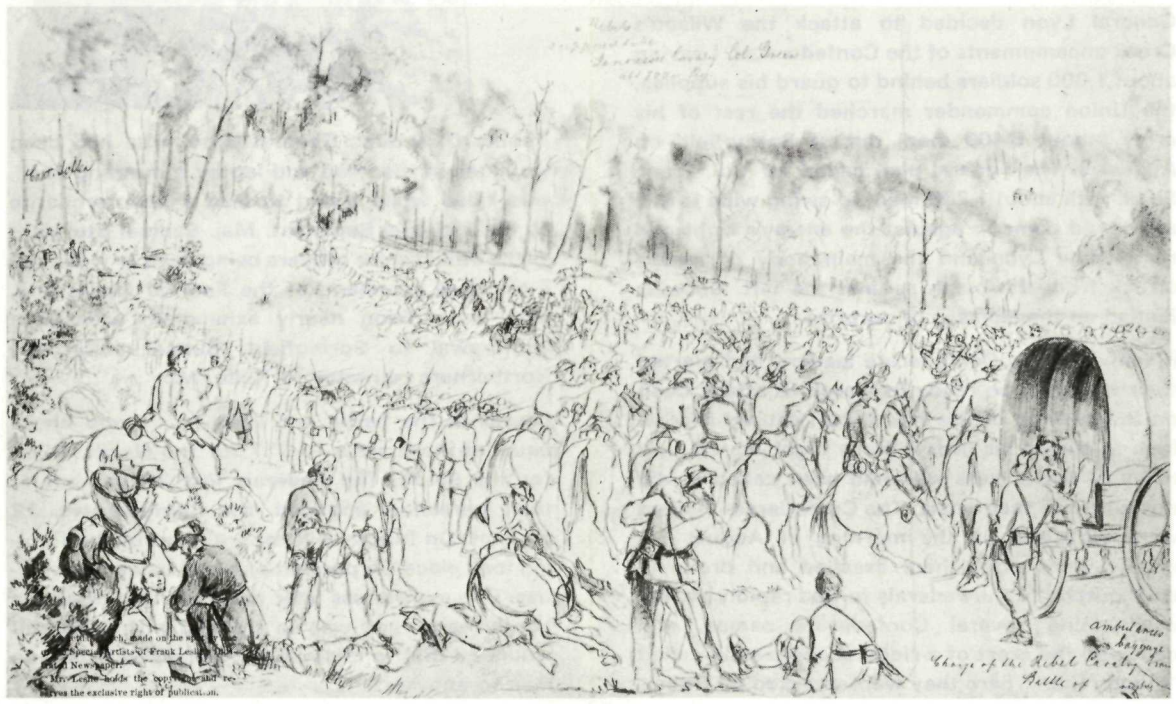
To get the most out of your visit to the park, follow the tour route outlined below. As you leave the information trailer, turn right on Mo. ZZ and go south for 0.8 of a mile. Turn left on the road leading to the Bloody Hill parking area and interpretive shelter.

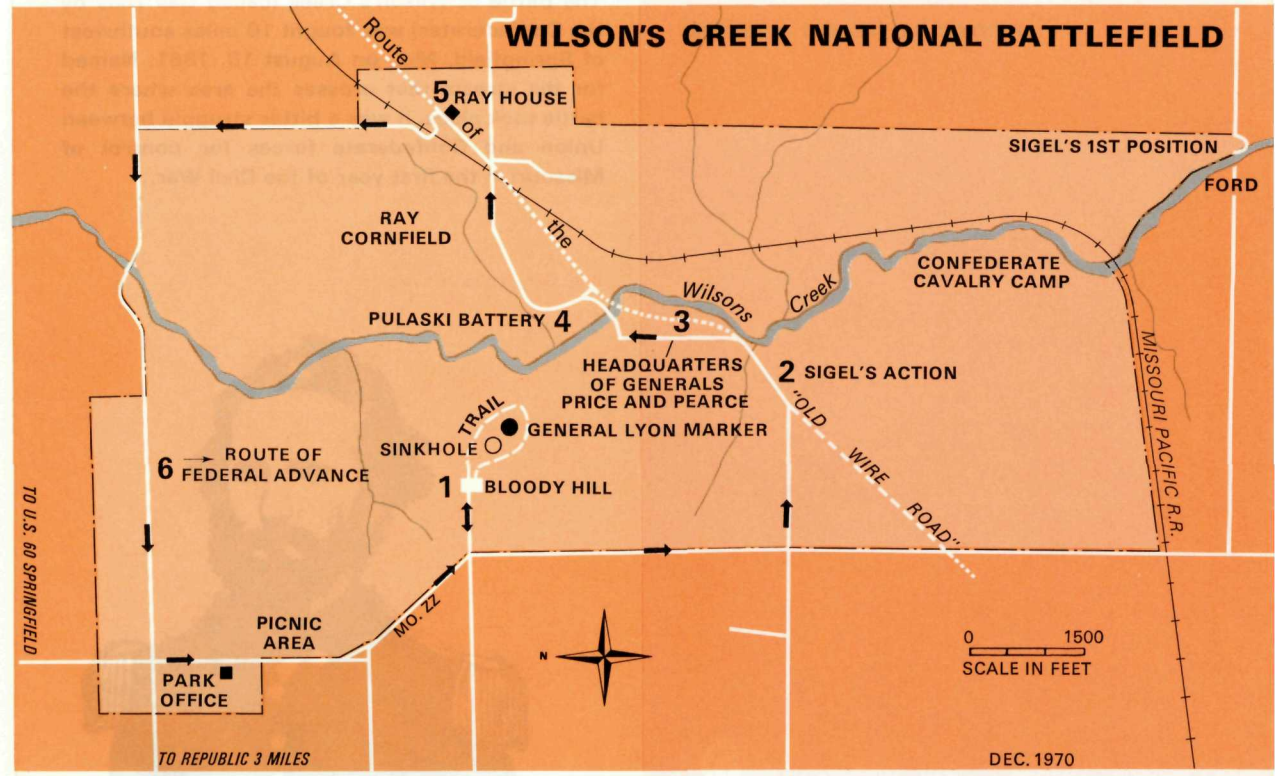
1. *Bloody Hill,* the highest point in the park, was where the climactic action of the battle was fought and where General Lyon was killed. The fighting was the fiercest and most intense near the *sinkhole.* After the battle, the Southerners buried both the Union and Confederate dead. The bodies of 72 Northern soldiers were buried in the sinkhole. In a nearby clearing, a granite marker, placed there in 1928 by the University Club of Springfield, shows the approximate spot where General Lyon fell.

2. *Sigel's Action.* From the ridge east of Wilson's Creek and southeast of the fields where the Confederate cavalry was encamped, Colonel Sigel's artillery opened fire and surprised the Southerners. Sigel then moved west across Wilson's Creek and north to this hillside. Here his column was routed by McCulloch's troops whom Sigel mistook for a Federal regiment and allowed to advance. This was decisive and turned the tide of battle in the Confederates' favor.

3. *Headquarters of Generals Price and Pearce.* The major part of the Missouri State Guard commanded by General Price was camped here on the bottom land along Wilson's Creek. Across the stream to the east, a short trail led to where General Pearce was headquartered with his Arkansas State Guard.

4. *Pulaski Arkansas Battery.* This battery, commanded by Captu. William E. Woodruff, was to





have taken a lead position in the Confederate advance on Springfield. Though a Union battery under Lt. John V. DuBois forced the Confederate guns to change positions several times on the high ground to the southeast, quick action, well-timed fuses, and good sighting by Woodruff had much to do with checking Lyon's advance and enabling Price's troops to get into position and form their battlelines.

5. *Ray House and Cornfield.* Built about 1852, the Ray House served from November 1858 to March 31, 1860, as a mail stop on the Butterfield Overland Stage route to California. The house and its occupants were closely connected with the battle. On August 10, 1861, John A. Ray and his family watched as General Lyon's column joined battle with the Confederates on Bloody Hill. The family took refuge in the cellar just in time, as the house and outbuildings came under Union artillery fire. In Ray's cornfield, across the ravine, one of the bloodiest actions of the day was fought as McCulloch's Confederates repulsed Capt. J. B. Plummer's regular troops who had crossed Wilson's Creek in an effort to turn the Southerner's right flank. The Confederates used the house as a field hospital, and General Lyon's body was brought here to be cleaned and examined before being taken to Springfield. The National Park Service plans to restore the house to its 1861 appearance.

6. *Route of Federal Advance.* At approximately this point, Lyon's troops moved southwest to the first action of the battle, on the ridge beyond Short's Spring.

Confederate cavalry charge during the Battle of Wilson's Creek. From a pencil drawing by Henri Lovie, 1861.
Courtesy Chicago Historical Society

ABOUT YOUR VISIT

The park is reached from U.S. 60 via Mo. M and ZZ and is located 3 miles east of Republic, Mo., and 10 miles southwest of Springfield. Int. 44 is 5 miles north. Overnight accommodations are available in Springfield; there is no public transportation to the park.

Visit the information trailer at Mo. ZZ, take the self-guiding loop drive, and stop by the interpretive shelter at Bloody Hill. Exhibits in the trailer and the exhibits and audio-visual program in the shelter will help you to understand not only the battle itself, but the events leading up to it, the part it played in keeping Missouri in the Union, and its significance in the total Civil War story. Along the drive are parking pullouts with interpretive signs, exhibits, and foot trail departure points.

Buildings, historical artifacts, and plant and animal life are protected by Federal law and should be left undisturbed. Report all accidents and send all suggestions or complaints to park headquarters.

ADMINISTRATION

Wilson's Creek National Battlefield is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. The Superintendent of George Washington Carver National Monument, whose address is Box 38, Diamond, MO 64840, is in immediate charge.