



Revisiting Our Civil War Legacies: Tennessee State Parks and the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area

By Carroll Van West

The American Civil War years of 1861-1865 were four years of ghastly bloodshed, numbing destruction, and lasting devastation.

Nor did all of the violence end when the armies stopped fighting; the following five years of social and political reconstruction witnessed countless acts of retribution and domestic terrorism, including the formation of the original Ku Klux Klan. These were Tennessee's terrible years and they transformed the state like no other events in history.

Preserving important places associated with the Civil War has long been a mission of Tennessee State Parks. Assisted by numerous state agencies and volunteer groups, the state administers Civil War parks at Fort Pillow, Johnsonville, N.B. Forrest, and Big Hill Pond, where the Davis Bridge battlefield is located. Other divisions within the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, especially the Tennessee Division of Archaeology, the Tennessee Historical Commission, and the Tennessee Wars Commission, have inventoried and studies scores of other significant historical properties.



These various state efforts have a new potential federal partner. Through legislation written by Congressman Bart Gordon and supported by the state's entire delegation, Congress established the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area to help state and local partners to preserve and tell the story of Tennessee's terrible years.

The Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area helps state and local partners to preserve, interpret, and promote a wide range of historical properties that are publicly-owned or publicly-accessible. These historic places are concentrated along eight different heritage corridors that crisscross Tennessee, following the routes of old turnpikes, railroads, and rivers in all three Grand Divisions. The river corridors follow the Cumberland, Tennessee, and Mississippi rivers. The turnpikes and railroad corridors stretch from Memphis to Shiloh; from Dover to Chattanooga; from Gallatin to Pulaski; from Nashville to New Johnsonville; and from Bristol to Chattanooga. These historic routes connect the hundreds of places that help tell the story of the Civil War and Reconstruction in Tennessee and provide convenient paths for visitors and residents who wish to explore the whole history of the war years.

The Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area is a partnership unit of the National Park Service and receives most of its funding from federal and state sources. Administered by the Center for Historic Preservation at Middle Tennessee State University, assisted by a board of advisors with representatives from various state agencies, non-profit organizations, and local officials, the National Heritage Area is the only statewide program in the nation.

The National Heritage Area does not own or acquire historic property, but through direct assistance and partnership funds, it enhances Tennessee's efforts to conserve, enhance, and promote the heritage of the Civil War and Reconstruction. By working with key partners such as the Tennessee Historical Commission, the Tennessee Department of Tourist Development, and Tennessee State Parks, the National Heritage Area has already assisted state parks and state historic sites in many ways, from preparing nominations to the National Register of Historic Places to funding research projects for new exhibits.

How the National Heritage Area Helps State Conservation Efforts

The Civil War is among the most carefully researched, and debated, eras in American history. To tell the whole story of those years, the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area is particularly interested in focusing programming and conservation efforts at neglected resources associated with wartime occupation, the homefront, emancipation, and the later social and political reconstruction of the state.

Among the National Heritage Area's first projects in 1999-2000, for example, was to

nominate Johnsonville State Historic Area to the National Register of Historic Places, a project that has been initiated by local officials, the chamber of commerce, and the Tennessee Historical Commission. Listing in the National Register, officials hoped, would bring new attention to this little-visited jewel in the state park system. It also would create new preservation and interpretation possibilities for the park's resources.

Why Johnsonville? First, the physical setting of the federal fort, named Fort Johnson in honor of then Military Governor Andrew Johnson, was excellent. To tell the story of the military base and the town of Johnsonville that grew around it, many resources remained: two redoubts, rifle pits, site of a horse corral, an old railroad turntable, excellent views of the river, and later historic cemeteries.

Adding to those valuable resources was the story of Johnsonville itself. The park was directly associated with the Union occupation of Tennessee, a key November 1864 battle, and the actions of African-American soldiers, members of the famed regiments of the United States Colored Troops (USCT). Many Civil War era sites neglect the story of the USCT and ignore the drama of enslaved peoples gaining freedom and taking up arms against their former masters. Here at Johnsonville was an opportunity to tell the whole story of the Civil War—how these years of destruction were also times of Emancipation and new opportunities for formerly enslaved men and women.

The National Register nomination detailed the important historic resources while it also documented the park's Civil War history. As a military-created river base, Johnsonville was a strategic federal river-rail supply depot and distribution center. On November 4-5, 1864, about 3,000 Confederates under the command of Gen. Nathan B. Forrest used the high ground on the opposite side of the river (now preserved as the Nathan B. Forrest State Park) to attack and lay siege to the town, its naval base, and its defensive fortifications. At Johnsonville, Union Col. Charles R. Thompson commanded about 2,000 men, including several hundred USCT soldiers. The federal soldiers defended their post and suffered few casualties, but lost four United States Navy "tinclad" gunboats, numerous transports and barges, supplies and war materiel, and numerous buildings.

Johnsonville's story, however, did not end in the winter of 1864, but extended well into the 19th century. For the rest of the war, the town remained an important base on the Tennessee River. During Reconstruction, federal officials established a Freedmen's Bureau agency and many USCT soldiers stayed in the vicinity. For example, the 1890 Civil War Veterans Census lists 30 veterans of the 12th Regiment USCT and 13th Regiment USCT as residing in Johnsonville; at least a dozen of these veterans, such as Privates Dempsey Green and Jacob Anderson, were stationed there during the war.

Once the military left Johnsonville, the town remained but never grew too large. A history from the 1880s recounted that Johnsonville was "the chief shipping point for Humphreys County on the Tennessee river," but that the place was "much retarded in its growth," with two-thirds of its 300 residents being African Americans. Today, the historic AME Cemetery is the final resting place, and the primary remnant, of this post-Civil War black community. Most of the town was submerged under the waters of Kentucky Lake in the early 1940s.

With the National Register listing in place, the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area looks forward to working with park officials in developing and installing new exhibits about Johnsonville's unique story. It is already working with local tourism groups in Benton, Henry, Houston, Humphreys, and Stewart counties to develop driving tours aimed at increasing the number of visitors to Johnsonville State Historical Area, the Nathan B. Forrest State Park, and related Civil War and Reconstruction sites along the Tennessee River in Middle Tennessee.

The Many Stories of Tennessee's Terrible Years

Many places across the state help to tell the story of how the war and Reconstruction transformed Tennessee. Stories of African-American emancipation and the creation of freedmen farms is central to the section of Shelby County now conserved as T.O. Fuller State Park in Memphis. T.O. Fuller State Park, which is named in honor of prominent early 20th century educator, historian, and minister Thomas Oscar Fuller, contains over 1,000 acres of land, a portion of which were farmed by freed families in the decades after the war. Park officials are currently researching this story of how the war created new opportunities for Tennesseans once enslaved.

Many Tennesseans are joining with the National Heritage Area to broaden our understanding of this pivotal era in history. Working to preserve and interpret the legacies of the Civil War and Reconstruction era through partnerships between state agencies, local groups, and property owners is a basic strategy of the National Heritage Area. In East Tennessee, the National Heritage Area has carried out a two-county resource study of the Nolichucky River Valley, which included the Davy Crockett Birthplace State Park and many nearby historic farms, churches, and houses. It also provided funds for the development of new exhibits about slavery and the Civil War years at the Tipton-Haynes State Historic Site in Johnson City.

In Chattanooga, the National Heritage Area worked with local, state, and federal officials to carry out a multiple county resource study of Civil War properties outside of the national park. This led to the National Register listing of the historic Wauhatchie Pike, a mile-plus recreational trail on Lookout Mountain in Chattanooga.

Heritage Area staffers have prepared interpretive and site plans for two developing Middle Tennessee historic sites, Rosemont in Gallatin and the Matt Gardner Homestead in Elkton. In West Tennessee, the heritage area has worked to document and nominate the Salem Cemetery Battlefield in Madison County to the National Register. These efforts complement earlier ones by the Tennessee Historical Commission and the Tennessee Division of Archaeology, which combined forces in the 1990s to conduct a comprehensive survey of archaeological resources associated with the Civil War.

Out of that work came the listing of the Davis Bridge Battlefield, the second largest Civil War battlefield in West Tennessee, in Big Hill Pond State Park. Like Johnsonville, the history of Davis Bridge had been forgotten. But in October 1862, some 18,000 Confederate and Union troops fought for control of the railroad at this place, bloody combat that left an estimated 1,000 casualties. Afterwards, again similar to Johnsonville, the Union army built earthworks to protect the railroad route and manned them, in part, with soldiers from the United States Colored Troops.

Although most projects are along the heritage corridors, the heritage area offers opportunities to all counties. Recently, it assisted the preparation of a driving tour for "The Borderlands," an area including Pickett, Fentress, and Overton counties, as well as a portion of Kentucky. It will be important to connect that tour with the route of the newly-designated Justin P. Wilson Cumberland Trail State Park, which stretches along the entire Cumberland Plateau and ends at the Cumberland Gap National Historical Park. Thousands of soldiers crossed the Cumberland Gap and the park contains extant Civil War fortifications.

Helping Parks and Sites through Technical Assistance

The National Heritage Area's Technical Assistance program touches many Tennessee communities. Since Middle Tennessee State University provides the required matching dollars, through its Center for Historic Preservation, the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area offers many services free to local museums, historic sites, local governments, chambers of commerce, state agencies, and non-profit organizations. National Heritage Area staff conduct on-site preservation assessments, carry out needed research, and develop exhibit and brochure texts for interpretation and heritage tourism.

The National Heritage Area's partnership with Tennessee State Parks and the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation will certainly expand as the state nears the 150th anniversary of the Civil War in 2011. Telling the many layers of the Civil War story is an on-going activity. On March 6, 2004, the National Heritage Area and Stones River National Battlefield will host a one-day symposium on

"Slavery and the Civil War in Tennessee" at Middle Tennessee State University. This marks the first effort to discuss how slavery affected the coming of the war, and the actual fighting, in Tennessee.

Through lecture series, driving tours, preservation planning, and research, the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area is devoted to expanding our understanding of the years when hundreds of thousands of Tennesseans lived with the terrors of war on a daily basis.

To find out more, or to get involved, check out the heritage area Web site at: www.mtsu.edu/~tncivwar or call the heritage area staff at 615-898-2637.

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