

Brices Cross Roads and Tupelo

National Park Service
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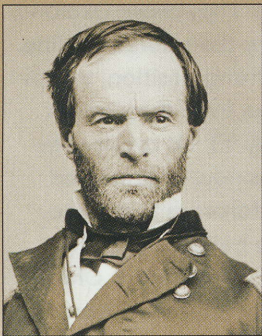
National Battlefield Sites
Mississippi





FROM "THE BATTLE OF BRICE'S CROSS ROADS" © BY RICK REEVES. COURTESY RICK REEVES

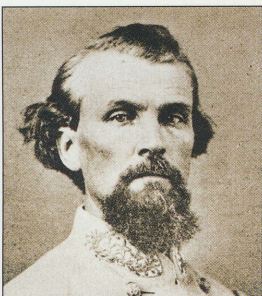
The Battle of Brices Cross Roads, June 10, 1864



William T. Sherman
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Samuel D. Sturgis
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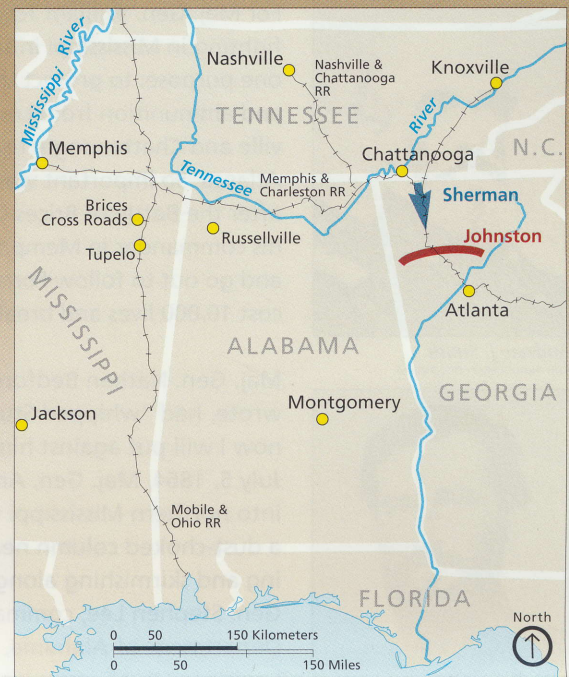


Nathan Bedford Forrest
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

In the second half of 1863 Federal armies won important victories at Vicksburg, Gettysburg, and Chattanooga. Four of the 11 Confederate states were completely in Union hands. The strong positions Federal armies held all around the Confederacy only grew stronger early in 1864 as President Abraham Lincoln unified all commands and named Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant supreme commander of all Federal forces. As the 1864 campaigns began, Grant accompanied the Army of the Potomac and put Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman in charge of the western armies. This coordination saw two great Federal armies now set to advance into the South simultaneously.

In spring 1864 the Federal plan for war in the West was to bisect the South, east of the Mississippi River, with Sherman's armies working out of Chattanooga and Nashville. Their task: destroy the Confederate Army of Tennessee led by Gen. Joseph E. Johnston, occupy Atlanta, and, if possible, go on to Savannah and Charleston. From May until September 1864, Sherman's troops fought doggedly through northern Georgia, finally forcing Atlanta's evacuation.

Early in the Atlanta Campaign the Confederate high command contemplated attacking Sherman's vulnerable main supply line—the 151-mile, single-track Nashville & Chattanooga Railroad. Late in May, Maj. Gen. Stephen D. Lee, commanding the Confederate Department of Alabama, Mississippi, and East Louisiana, sent Maj. Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest to strike Sherman's line of supply. Forrest's mounted infantry knew how to wreck a railroad.

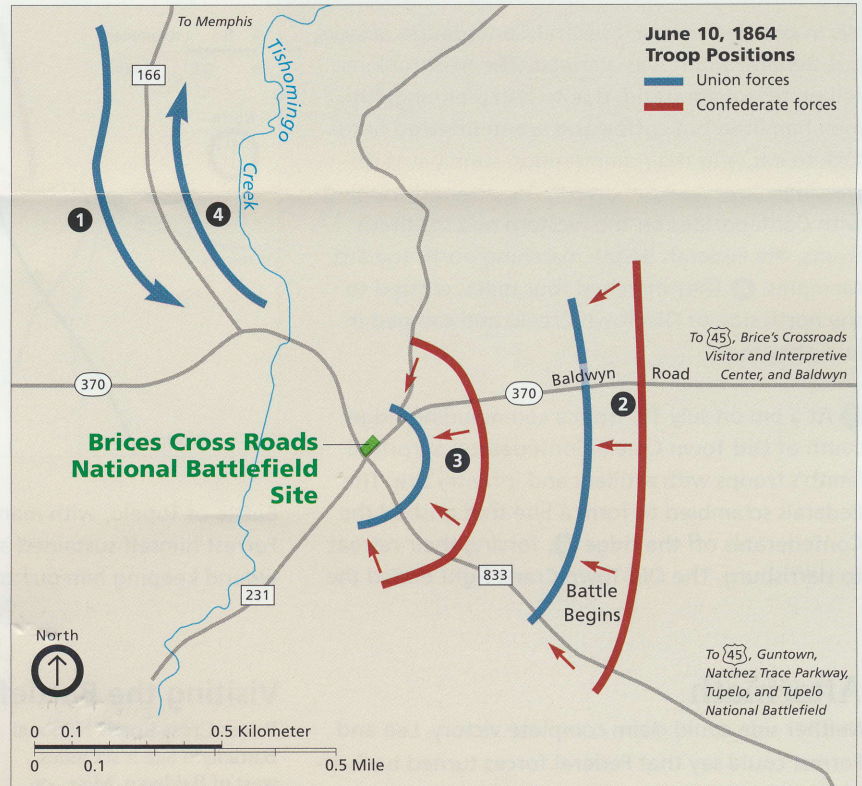


On June 1 Forrest put his horsemen in motion at Tupelo, Miss.; three days later they were in Russellville, Ala. Knowing his supply line vulnerable, Sherman ordered Brig. Gen. Samuel D. Sturgis and 8,100 Federal infantry and cavalry to move from Memphis into northern Mississippi to eliminate Forrest and his troopers. Alerted by Lee of Sturgis's intent, Forrest rushed back to Tupelo to concentrate his 3,500-man force along the Mobile & Ohio Railroad south and north of Brices Cross Roads. On the evening of June 9, Forrest learned that Sturgis's force was in camp 10 miles northwest of Brices. Both commanders were planning to march in the morning.

The Battle in Brief

Sturgis's army moved out southeast June 10 at dawn, cavalry leading. ❶ A mile-and-a-half from Brices they routed a Confederate patrol, pursuing it across rain-swollen Tishomingo Creek, through the crossroads, and a mile down the Baldwin Road. There Forrest and a brigade of Kentuckians stopped them ❷—and the Battle of Brices Cross Roads began about 9:30 am. By 11 am Forrest, reinforced now, began to push the Federals back toward the crossroads. The Federals held out long enough for Sturgis's infantry to arrive. Having set arcing battle lines around the Brices Cross Roads intersection ❸, the forces battled for the next four hours.

By 5 pm, after enveloping both Federal flanks and launching a slashing frontal attack, Forrest had shattered Sturgis's line, forcing the Federals to abandon the field and retreat back to Memphis ❹. An overturned wagon at the Tishomingo Creek bridge slowed the Federal's retreat, causing the loss of at least 16 artillery pieces and supply wagons of guns and ammunition. Thanks to defensive actions by several regiments of United States Colored Troops, most of Sturgis's army escaped almost certain capture.



Aftermath

Students of military tactics agree that the Brices Cross Roads engagement was marked by the hardest kind of fighting and that it marked a brilliant tactical victory for Forrest. But the battle brought no relief to the Confederacy. Sherman forestalled any attack on the Nashville & Chattanooga Railroad by sending small commands to northern Mississippi.

One of Sherman's objectives was to hunt down and kill "that devil Forrest." A Tennessee native with no formal military training, Forrest became one of the Civil War's leading cavalry commanders. When war broke out he enlisted in the Confederate army as a private and by 1864 was a major general with an independent command. Sherman called him "the most remarkable man the Civil War produced on either side" and feared that "there never will be peace in Tennessee till Forrest is dead." At the later Battle of Tupelo, Sherman almost got his wish.

U.S. Colored Troops at Brices Cross Roads and Tupelo

As the Emancipation Proclamation took effect January 1, 1863, former slaves and free black men could volunteer for U.S. military service. Formed into regiments commanded by white officers, these men were called the United States Colored Troops (USCT). Several USCT regiments commanded by Col. Edward Bouton played critical roles in the battles of Brices Cross Roads and Tupelo.

At Brices Cross Roads, Bouton's regiments, held

in reserve until Forrest's troopers soundly defeated the Federal forces, made several critical stands that slowed the Confederate pursuit of the Federal retreat.

Before the Battle of Tupelo the USCT protected the supply train and served as rear guard for the Federal army. The USCT held off several Confederate attacks, which allowed the Federals to secure the most advantageous ground for the battle of July 14–15.



This USCT soldier typifies those who fought at Brices Cross Roads and Tupelo.

COURTESY DON PIERCE

Soldiers! Amid your rejoicing do not forget the gallant dead upon these fields of glory. Many a noble comrade has fallen, a costly sacrifice. . . . The most you can do is cherish their memory.

Nathan Bedford Forrest



The Battle of Tupelo, July 14–15, 1864



Andrew J. Smith
BOTH PHOTOS LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



Stephen D. Lee

For Maj. Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman the fighting in Mississippi in summer 1864 had only one purpose: to protect the railroad carrying food and ammunition from Louisville, through Nashville and Chattanooga, to his army advancing on Atlanta. So important was this to Sherman that after the Battle of Brices Cross Roads he ordered his commander in Memphis “to make up a force and go out to follow Forrest to the death, if it cost 10,000 lives and breaks the Treasury.”

Maj. Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest, as Sherman wrote, had “whipped Sturgis fair and square, and now I will put against him A.J. Smith. . . .” So, on July 5, 1864, Maj. Gen. Andrew J. Smith marched into northern Mississippi with over 14,000 men in a dust-choked column nearly 15 miles long, fighting and skirmishing along the way. Both Maj. Gen. Stephen Lee, commanding the Confederate Department of Alabama, Mississippi, and East Louisiana, and Forrest knew Smith would try to bring the Confederates to battle. Both believed their best move would be to await an attack in

a strongly fortified position. They chose Okolona, 18 miles south of Tupelo, for their defensive line. But in order to prepare a strong position, troops had to be drawn to Okolona from throughout northern Mississippi. On July 13, his cavalry having learned that Tupelo was now unprotected, Smith marched his Federal forces in that direction. By taking the town he believed that he would both gain a hold on the Mobile & Ohio Railroad *and* force the Confederates to attack him—in a fortified position.

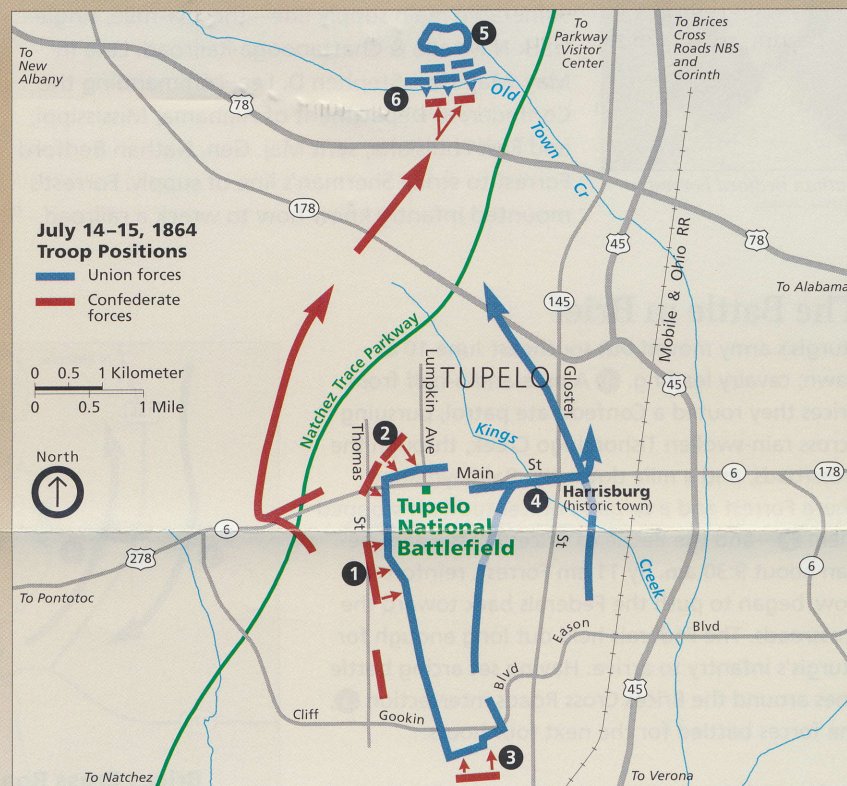
Realizing what was happening, Forrest hurried up his main force to attack the long Union column. Smith’s soldiers beat back the attacks and marched on, reaching the little village of Harrisburg (now in the Tupelo city limits) about dark the same evening. Here they camped, forming a battle line along the crest of a low ridge, and awaited the attack they expected the next day. Lee did not plan to disappoint them. As he told Forrest, Smith’s army must be “dealt with vigorously and at once.”

The Battle of Tupelo in Brief

The battle began here **1** at 7:30 am, as Confederates started a series of uncoordinated charges against the Federal position. The attacks were easily beaten back with heavy losses. Failing to break the Federal center, the Confederates attacked the Federal right flank, **2** again without success. That attack was followed by a Federal counterattack that quieted the Southerners temporarily. After dark on July 14, the Confederates made another attack from the south **3** without significant effect.

His troops had repulsed several Confederate attacks, but General Smith was alarmed. The heat took its toll on his soldiers, and, due to bad planning, his men had little but coffee and worm-infested hard-tack to eat, and their ammunition supply was distressingly low. At 2 pm on July 15, after skirmishing with Confederates on the western and southern fronts, the Federals began marching north toward Memphis. **4** They marched four miles, crossed to the north side of Old Town Creek, and camped in late afternoon.

5 At 5 pm on July 15, from a commanding ridge south of Old Town Creek, Confederates surprised Smith’s troops with artillery and infantry fire. The Federals scrambled to form a line that pushed the Confederates off the ridge **6**, forcing their retreat to Harrisburg. The Old Town Creek fight ended the



Battle of Tupelo, with many casualties on both sides. Forrest himself sustained a temporarily disabling wound keeping him out of action for three weeks.

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