

This Day in History... August 10, 1861

Battle of Wilson's Creek

On August 10, 1861, Union and Southern forces fought the Battle of Wilson's Creek near Springfield, Missouri, the first major Civil War battle west of the Mississippi River. The six-hour struggle ended in a Southern victory, but it did not settle the larger contest for control of the divided border state.

Missouri entered the war in a dangerous political position. It permitted slavery, but its state convention voted against secession by 98–1 in March 1861. Governor Claiborne F. Jackson favored the South and refused President Abraham Lincoln's request for Missouri troops. Unionists, including Congressman Francis P. Blair Jr. and Army officer Nathaniel Lyon, worked to keep the state in the Union.

Tension erupted near St. Louis in May. Jackson had called the state militia into a camp known as Camp Jackson. Lyon believed the force threatened the large federal arsenal in the city. The militia had also received cannons taken by Confederates from the US arsenal at Baton Rouge. On May 10, Lyon and Blair led about 6,500 troops against the camp and forced its roughly 700 defenders to surrender.

As the prisoners were marched through St. Louis, an angry crowd gathered. Insults, thrown objects, and gunfire followed. Some Union soldiers returned fire into the crowd, producing Missouri's first major bloodshed of the war. Three prisoners, two soldiers, and twenty-eight civilians were killed. The incident increased support for both sides rather than settling the dispute.

Missouri then created the Missouri State Guard under former governor Sterling Price. Jackson and Price soon cooperated with Confederate authorities. Lyon occupied the state capital at Jefferson City and defeated the State Guard at Boonville on June 17. Jackson, Price, and their supporters withdrew into southwestern Missouri.

By early August, Lyon's Army of the West held Springfield with about 5,400 troops. Roughly ten miles southwest, Confederate Brigadier General Benjamin McCulloch commanded a much larger Southern force along Wilson Creek. It included Confederate soldiers from Louisiana, Arkansas, and Texas, Arkansas state troops, and Price's Missouri State Guard. Some Missouri guardsmen had no weapons.

Both commanders planned attacks for August 10. McCulloch abandoned his planned night advance after rain began, but Lyon continued with a risky plan. He divided his smaller army. Lyon led the main body toward the northern end of the Southern camps, while Colonel Franz Sigel took about 1,200 men around the opposite flank.

Before dawn, Lyon's troops surprised Missouri guardsmen and seized high ground later called Bloody Hill. Sigel opened artillery fire on soldiers camped near the Sharp farm, forcing them to scatter. For a time, the Union attack threatened McCulloch's army from two directions.

McCulloch and Price organized counterattacks. Confederate troops struck Bloody Hill three times, but the Union line held. Lyon was wounded more than once. At about 9:30 a.m., he was shot and killed while leading troops forward. He became the first Union general killed in combat during the Civil War. Major Samuel D. Sturgis assumed command.

Sigel's early success ended suddenly. Near the Sharp house, he saw gray-uniformed soldiers approaching and assumed they belonged to the 1st Iowa Infantry, which also wore gray. They were actually members of the Confederate 3rd Louisiana Infantry, supported by Missouri and Arkansas troops. Their close-range attack shattered Sigel's brigade. His men fled toward Springfield and abandoned several cannons.

On Bloody Hill, Sturgis did not know what had happened to Sigel. His troops had suffered heavy losses, ammunition was running low, and no reinforcements were arriving. He ordered a withdrawal. The exhausted and disorganized Southern forces did not pursue.

The Union army lost 1,317 of its 5,431 troops, nearly one-fourth of the force. Southern losses totaled about 1,222 from a force listed at more than 12,000, including roughly 2,000 unarmed Missouri guardsmen. The victory gave Southern forces temporary control of southwestern Missouri and helped Price advance north to Lexington.

The result did not carry Missouri securely into the Confederacy. A pro-Southern legislature later claimed to secede, while a Union-backed state government remained in power for the rest of the war. Federal forces retained St. Louis and forced Price out of

southwestern Missouri by early 1862. Price tried to invade again in 1864, but was soundly crushed. Battles, raids, and guerrilla warfare continued, making the state one of the conflict's most bitterly divided regions.



Issued for the 150th anniversary of Missouri's statehood.



Missouri's position on the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers made keeping the divided state in the Union a major priority for Lincoln.



After Nathaniel Lyon's body was left behind during the Union retreat, Southern soldiers carried it to the nearby Ray House, where the family laid him on their best bed.



Issued on Missouri's 200th statehood anniversary—August 10, 2021—this stamp pictures Bollinger Mill, rebuilt on the foundation of a mill burned by Union troops, and Burfordville Bridge, whose construction was delayed by the Civil War.

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