

This Day in History... December 15, 1864

Battle of Nashville

On December 15, 1864, Union forces launched the decisive Battle of Nashville, delivering one of the most crushing Union victories of the Civil War. The battle ended the last major Confederate offensive in the West and broke the already-weakened Army of Tennessee beyond repair.

After his disastrous defeat at Franklin in late November, Confederate General John Bell Hood pressed onward toward Nashville despite heavy losses, poor supplies, and low morale. On December 2, his outnumbered army approached the city from the south. Knowing he lacked the strength to attack, Hood ordered his troops to dig nearly four miles of defensive works and waited behind them, hoping the Union Army would come to him.



Following an 1895 counterfeiting scam, US stamps, such as this, were printed on watermarked paper for a time to prevent fakes.

Union forces under Major General John Schofield had already reached Nashville after their hard-won victory at Franklin. They joined the large Union garrison that had been reinforcing the city for weeks. The defensive line around Nashville stretched seven miles in a semicircle, with the Cumberland River completing the barrier. Inside the city were about 55,000 Union soldiers commanded by Major General George H. Thomas.

Thomas prepared carefully for an attack. Much depended on his cavalry, which needed new horses and better arms before taking the field. He knew they would face the skilled Confederate cavalry commander Nathan Bedford Forrest. Military leaders in Washington grew impatient with the delay, worried Hood might slip away and raid Kentucky or Ohio. By December 13, General Ulysses S. Grant threatened to replace Thomas if he did not attack immediately. Grant was already traveling west to take command when he received word that Thomas had begun the offensive.

Before dawn on December 15, Thomas ordered two Union brigades to strike the right side of the Confederate line as a diversion. These units included several regiments of US Colored Troops, many of whom had previously guarded supply routes rather than fought in open battle. They advanced under heavy fire, briefly fell back, and then held their ground for the rest of the day. Though their assault fixed Confederate attention on the right, Hood did not shift reinforcements as Thomas had hoped.

Meanwhile, the main Union attack unfolded on the Confederate left. Union cavalry charged forward first, driving off Southern horsemen. Two infantry corps followed. Around 2:30 p.m., Union troops stormed a chain of five Confederate redoubts. Four fell quickly, opening the way for a wider advance. Farther east, another Union corps made a frontal assault and found that the Confederates had withdrawn from their original position on Montgomery Hill. Pushing forward, the Union forces helped capture the final redoubt. Hood's troops retreated to a new line farther south. Fighting stopped as both sides prepared for the next day.

The Confederate position on December 16 was shorter and anchored on two hills—Peach Orchard Hill on the right and Compton's Hill on the left. During the night, Confederate soldiers hurried to build new defenses. The Union attack resumed in mid-afternoon, again hitting the right first. Southern artillery and rifle fire stopped much of the Northern advance. But the 13th US Colored Troops continued forward, seized part of the Confederate works, and suffered extremely heavy losses—about 40 percent of their men.

Hood reinforced his right flank in response, leaving the defenses on Compton's Hill dangerously thin. At the same time, Union cavalry was circling behind the Confederate left, forcing Hood's army to stretch even farther.

Major General John Schofield, assigned to lead the main frontal assault, hesitated. Division commander John McArthur, seeing the Confederate weakness on Compton's Hill, sent word to Thomas that he would attack within five minutes unless ordered not to. Receiving no reply, he launched the assault. His brigades stormed uphill in three columns, overwhelming the depleted Confederate defenders. The entire Confederate line collapsed. Hood's army retreated south toward Franklin, with Union cavalry pursuing.

The Union pursuit continued until the shattered Army of Tennessee reached Alabama. Hood withdrew to Tupelo, Mississippi, and resigned his command. Of the roughly 38,000 men he began the Tennessee campaign with, fewer than 15,000 remained by mid-January—marking the effective destruction of one of the Confederacy's last field armies.

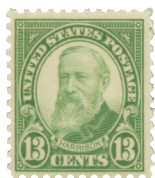
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Antigua & Barbuda stamp picturing a scene from the Battle of Nashville.



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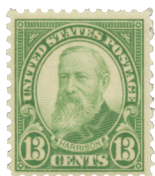
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