

A Murder in Kentucky

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In late September 1862, most of the nation's attention was focused on Kentucky, where Confederate forces under General Braxton Bragg were advancing into the central region of the state, while Edmund Kirby-Smith's command moved into Eastern Kentucky. As Bragg's army occupied Bardstown, a Union force under General Don Carlos Buell raced northward from Tennessee in a frantic effort to reach Louisville before the Confederates could occupy that strategically important city. On September 25 Buell's force arrived in Louisville, beating Bragg in the race to the city. The Federals still had much work to do over the following days in order to complete the city's defenses in the event of a southern attack. Buell also sent a portion of his force towards the Kentucky capital of Frankfort, in an effort to prevent Bragg and Smith from uniting their commands. Buell eventually moved his troops southward against Bragg, which would culminate in the October 8th battle of Perryville. As the Federals strengthened Louisville's defenses, a bizarre confrontation would occur between two Union generals that would leave one of the men dead.

Union Brigadier General Jefferson C. Davis had been born in 1828 and served in the Mexican War, where he earned a promotion to lieutenant. At the outbreak of the Civil War he took part in the defense of Fort Sumter, before leading units at the battles of Wilson's Creek and Pea Ridge and subsequently being assigned to the command of Major General William Nelson in Kentucky.

"Bull" Nelson as he was often called, was born in Kentucky in 1824 and had graduated from the United States Naval Academy. He served in the navy during the Mexican War and

throughout the 1850s. When the Civil War began, as the member of a prominent Kentucky family, Nelson was sent to his native state by President Lincoln to organize Unionist sympathizers. He was detached from the navy and received the acting rank of brigadier general, followed by a later promotion to major general. Nelson led a division at Shiloh, Corinth and Chattanooga, before returning to Kentucky to command northern forces at the battle of Richmond. In the aftermath of that defeat, he withdrew his small army to Louisville, where he helped organize the city's defenses against the approach of Braxton Bragg's army.

Nelson had a harsh manner and a violent temper, and after they had begun working together he and General Davis soon clashed, leading to Davis being temporarily placed under arrest. The growing tension between the general officers reached its peak early in the morning of September 29, when Davis, accompanied by Indiana Governor Oliver Morton, approached Nelson at Louisville's Galt House, demanding an apology for the previous incident. "Go away you God Damned puppy," Nelson scowled, which led Davis to impulsively throw a crumpled greeting card in his superior's face and Nelson to then slap his subordinate. Davis warned, "You will hear from me again," before storming off and obtaining a pistol from a friend. He returned and found Nelson near a stairway, shouted out "General Nelson, take care of yourself," before firing and hitting him in the chest. "I am murdered," the wounded man gasped before collapsing.

Nelson, after being baptized into the Episcopal Church, died that morning at 8:30. In the aftermath Davis was placed under arrest, though many observers felt that his actions had been justified. Probably because of political influence, Davis never faced trial for the murder. He subsequently commanded a division in many of the war's western battles, ending the conflict as a brevet major general. His shooting of Nelson, however, had undoubtedly hampered his

promotion to a permanent general's rank in the regular army and left him disgraced in the eyes of many northerners.