

The Emancipation Proclamation and the Battle of Murfreesboro, Tennessee

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During this week in the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation was officially put into effect, and Union and Confederate forces met in a bloody battle at Murfreesboro, Tennessee. When President Lincoln had issued his preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in September, he had given the rebelling southern states three months to return to the Union before its provisions would go into effect. On January 1, 1863, the president signed the permanent proclamation and the document became official. With the exception of several areas under Union control and not considered in rebellion, slaves in all other regions of the seceded states were considered free. He did this under his authority as commander-in-chief to seize enemy property in time of war. The proclamation freed few slaves initially, as it did not apply to the slaveholding but loyal Border States; it was designed instead to weaken the Confederacy as it led additional slaves throughout the south to escape to Union lines. Lincoln understood that the Emancipation Proclamation was a wartime measure only, and that a constitutional amendment would be necessary to permanently outlaw slavery. The passage of the Thirteenth Amendment by congress near the end of the war, pending ratification by the required number of states, would set the south's "Peculiar Institution" on the road to extinction. Another important political event would take place at the end of 1862 when President Lincoln signed the act making West Virginia the thirty-fifth state, further strengthening the Union and weakening the Confederacy.

While these momentous political events were taking place in Washington, the carnage continued on the battlefield. Following the culmination of the Confederate invasion of Kentucky in the late summer and fall of 1862, southern forces under General Braxton Bragg had retreated into Tennessee, pursued by the Union Army of the Cumberland, now commanded by William

Rosecrans. By the end of the year, Rosecrans' army occupied Nashville, while Bragg's Army of Mississippi had taken position along Stones River near Murfreesboro about thirty miles to the southeast. On December 26, Rosecrans began to move his army out of Nashville towards Murfreesboro. As the Union army approached, both commanders made plans to attack their opponent's right flank. On the morning of December 31, Bragg's army struck first, with William Hardee's Corps routing a portion of Rosecrans' force commanded by General Alexander McCook and bending back the Union line. The northern commander abandoned plans for his own attack, and instead established defensive lines along the Nashville Pike. Bragg then ordered General Leonidas Polk to attack the Union center, which was held by troops under General George Thomas. Thomas' men held their line despite continued attacks, and by the end of the day the southerners had lost their best chance for victory.

After a day of fighting, both armies expected the other to leave: neither did, though Rosecrans did seriously consider a withdrawal to Nashville. On January 1 there was little fighting, as both sides strengthened their lines, and the Federals occupied a strong position across Stones River on the Confederate right. On January 2, Bragg ordered the division under John C. Breckinridge to cross the river and attack this new Union position. Late in the afternoon the Confederates struck. They drove back the Federals, but Union artillery from the main portion of the line pushed the rebels back, and allowed the Yankees to reoccupy the position.

On January 3, Rosecrans received reinforcements, and Bragg determined to withdraw southward to Tullahoma. Casualties in the battle numbered nearly 25,000. The Confederate withdrawal improved northern morale and would eventually lead to a Union movement against the important communications center of Chattanooga, though that would not take place for several months. For a time, both armies settled into winter quarters.