

The Battle of Wilson's Creek **<http://civilwar150.longwood.edu>**

On August 10, 1861, the most significant early battle to occur during the Civil War in Missouri took place at Wilson's Creek in the southwest portion of the state. While Union forces were defeated and their commander killed, the engagement helped delay a possible southern movement against St. Louis.

By June 1861, Union forces, with the help of the loyal German population, had solidified its control over St. Louis, while the pro-Confederate Missouri State Guard had established a camp near Boonville on the Missouri River. On June 17 Brigadier General Nathaniel Lyon, commanding the Union Army's Department of the West, captured the southern position and dispersed the Confederate force, which retreated towards the southwest.

By early August, the aggressive Lyon, who had established his headquarters at Springfield, began an advance against the southern position at Wilson's Creek, located about ten miles away. The Confederate force of some 11,000 men included Texans under Brigadier General Ben McCulloch, Arkansans led by General Nicholas Pearce, and the Missouri State Guard commanded by Major General Sterling Price. Lyon was outnumbered by about two-to-one, as his force consisted of just 5,000 men, with German-born General Franz Sigel serving as his second-in-command.

Lyon divided his force into two columns, descending upon the Confederates from the north with the bulk of his army, while Sigel led about 1,200 men on a flanking march to strike the Confederates from the south. The Federals launched their attack just after 5:00 a.m., but

soon southern troops under General Price counterattacked Lyon's position on Bloody Hill. The Federals held their position as they waited for news concerning Sigel's advance. After driving off a force of southern cavalry, however, Sigel's men were stopped by a Confederate artillery battery. The German general determined to advance no farther, allowing the rebels to concentrate their forces against Lyon to the north.

The Confederates launched a general attack at about 9:00 a.m., which the outnumbered Federals fought desperately to stop. Lyon brought forward his remaining reserves and frantically moved units between threatened locations, and for a time the blue ranks held. During the latter stages of the battle, General Lyon was wounded twice, before finally falling mortally wounded with a bullet to the heart. The Federals stopped a final Confederate attack during the late morning, but following Lyon's death, the new Union commander General Samuel Curtis determined to withdraw his force from the battlefield towards Rolla. In the aftermath, Sterling Price occupied Springfield and won a victory at Lexington the following month. After inconclusive skirmishing in the Fall of 1861, the Union victory at Pea Ridge, Arkansas in March 1862 would finally help secure Missouri for the Union.

Both sides had lost approximately 1,200 men in the fighting at Wilson's Creek. Historian Mark Boatner writes that "[a]lthough a minor engagement, this was one of the most fiercely-contested of the war." Another student of the war in Missouri wrote that "[h]ad the fortunes of war spared Lyon, Wilson's Creek might have been the most brilliant victory of the Civil War." As it was, it did provide the Union forces with additional time in which to bolster the defenses of the state, and Missouri would never officially join the Confederacy.