

Kentucky Loses its Neutrality

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In early September, 1861, Confederate forces moved to strengthen their positions in Kentucky, while at the battle of Carnifex Ferry in western Virginia they were unsuccessful in dislodging Federal troops from the positions they had occupied in the region.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Kentucky was one of a number of slave states that did not secede and officially join the Confederacy. Though agriculture and the institution of slavery tied the commonwealth to the south, it also maintained close economic and political ties to the north. Consequently the state government of Kentucky had declared its neutrality in May 1861. This neutrality lasted until early September, when Confederate forces entered the state and occupied the strategic position at Columbus on the Mississippi River, in order to prevent a threatened Federal occupation of the town. They quickly constructed a series of strong fortifications to defend the location, and even stretched an anchor chain across the Mississippi to thwart a Union naval assault.

The Confederates subsequently would occupy a series of defensive positions across the southern tier of the state, while Union forces took control of northern Kentucky. On September 6, Union General Ulysses S. Grant led a small force that captured the vital Kentucky town of Paducah, located at the mouth of the Tennessee River. Throughout the Fall, both sides strengthened their positions in the Bluegrass State. Though a provisional government of Kentucky was admitted into the Confederacy in December 1861, the state never officially seceded, and the majority of Kentuckians would ultimately express their loyalty to the Union.

Finally, in early 1862, the Confederate defensive line in southern Kentucky would be broken, and the state effectively lost to the south.

Meanwhile, at Carnifex Ferry on September 10, Federal and Confederate forces met in the latest of several small-scale yet strategically important battles that would eventually secure western Virginia for the Union. In the aftermath of the northern victory at Rich Mountain in July, the two sides had maneuvered and engaged in a number of skirmishes. These included the action at Cross Lanes on August 26, where Federal forces under Colonel E.B. Tyler were defeated by Brigadier General John B. Floyd's Confederates. Following that engagement, Floyd's forces established an entrenched camp at Carnifex Ferry, a crossing of the Gauley River in Nicholas County. Floyd, an ex-governor of Virginia, had about 2,000 men at the position, with several thousand additional troops in the vicinity.

In early September, Floyd's force was threatened by about 5,000-6,000 Federals under Brigadier General William Rosecrans. The lead Union brigade under General Henry Benham stumbled into the Confederate position on September 10 and fighting erupted, which lasted for several hours. During the engagement the Federals lost about 150 men and the Confederates twenty. Benham's troops could not capture the southern position, located in a clearing near the Patteson House, but that night Floyd determined to evacuate his men to avoid being trapped by the superior Union army. The Confederates escaped across the river successfully, but their retreat solidified Federal control over the Kanawha Valley. With much of the western part of the Old Dominion now in Federal control, unionists were able to continue their plans to establish the new state of West Virginia. An unusual aspect of the small battle at Carnifex Ferry was the presence there of two future presidents of the United States, Rutherford B. Hayes and a very young William McKinley, as well as twenty current or future Union and Confederate generals..