

Battle of Lexington, Missouri

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In the latter part of September 1861, Union and Confederate forces continued to struggle for control over the Border State of Missouri, while military operations in Virginia foreshadowed the vital role that state would play in the upcoming conflict.

On August 10, 1861, Federals and Confederates had fought in the bloody battle of Wilson's Creek, which had left the Union commander Nathaniel Lyon dead and nearly 25% of his force killed, wounded, or missing. Following the battle, the southern forces did not immediately pursue the retreating Federals, but General Sterling Price would eventually lead his pro-Confederate Missouri State Guard into the northwest portion of the state, in an attempt to regain control of that region. Price's advance culminated in the battle of Lexington on September 13-20.

When Price began his northward movement, Federal forces in Missouri under General John C. Fremont were unsure of the rebel objective. Colonel James Mulligan commanded a force of about 3,500 men that defended the town of Lexington in Lafayette County, which turned out to be Price's target. Mulligan focused his defense around the buildings of the town's Masonic College. Fremont sent reinforcements to Lexington, but they were attacked by Confederate troops and forced to retreat. Price's force reached Lexington on September 11, and two days later the two sides skirmished amongst the tombstones of an outlying cemetery.

Price delayed making another assault, waiting for all of his troops to arrive and using his artillery to soften the Federal defenses. On September 18, heavy fighting took place around the

Anderson House, a brick structure used by the Federals as a field hospital. As the fighting continued on September 20, Price's men used hemp bales, which had been soaked in water from the nearby Missouri River, as moveable fortifications as they pushed them toward the Union lines. Federal artillery fired heated shot at the bales, but could not ignite them. The engagement subsequently went down in history as the Battle of the Hemp Bales.

With their position increasingly untenable, Mulligan's officers voted to capitulate, and by early afternoon on the twentieth, the Federals had surrendered their position. Confederate casualties at Lexington numbered under 100, while the Federals lost a little more than 150 men, not counting those who were captured and then paroled. Despite Price's victory, he was soon forced to retreat southward, as superior numbers of Union forces under Fremont threatened his small army. Lexington would be the scene of a second battle in October 1864, when Price would lead another raid into northwest Missouri.

While the fighting at Lexington dominated the week, continued activity took place in western Virginia, where General Robert E. Lee, commanding Confederate troops in the vicinity of Big Sewell Mountain, was organizing his forces to oppose an advance by General William Rosecrans' Federals. Union troops also moved against Romney in the lower Shenandoah Valley, fighting several skirmishes as they approached the town. They occupied the village but were driven out by Confederate forces the following day. They reoccupied Romney in October and held it for several months until the Confederates recaptured it yet again. The town typified many that would suffer through numerous occupations during the course of the war. Still, despite these small-scale operations, there had been little activity between the main Union and Confederate armies near Manassas since the major battle there the previous July.

