

STONES RIVER National Battlefield Park

by Doug Dearth



Although not as celebrated as Antietam in the east, Stones River in the Western Theater was nevertheless equally important in ensuring the liberty of 3.5 million enslaved Americans.

Stones River National Battlefield Park
 1563 North Thompson Lane, Murfreesboro, TN 37129
 Hours: Park Grounds: Sunrise - Sunset all week
 Visitor Center: 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. all week
 Closed Christmas

Fought three months after the strategic “victory” of Antietam, and the same month as the disaster of Fredericksburg, the Battle of Stones River (AKA Second Battle of Murfreesboro) lasted from 31 December 1862, to 2 January 1863. While the battle itself was considered inconclusive by many, it dashed Confederate aspirations for control of Middle Tennessee and possibly the West entirely. This helped bolster Lincoln’s confidence that his Emancipation Proclamation would be able to stand.

Day 1

Inactivity in the West frustrated Lincoln, causing him to sack yet another general – the overly cautious Don Carlos Buell. Major General William S. Rosecrans replaced him and on 26 December 1862 he moved his Army of the Cumberland out of Nashville and headed south. On 31 December, he met General Braxton Bragg’s Army of Tennessee at Murfreesboro. Each commander planned to attack his opponent’s right flank, but Bragg struck first.

At 6 a.m., the Confederates attacked the

Union’s right flank and drove the troops back three miles. The Federals wavered, then rallied, then faltered again.

The salvation of the North came in the form of the diminutive Major General Philip Sheridan who anticipated a dawn attack and had his troops up and in line by 4 a.m.

Sheridan’s right flank was hit first by three separate charges, then his front and then his flank again. They fell back to a dense cedar forest where the terrain worked both for and against the combatants. The trees gave adequate cover and rocky limestone outcroppings made for impromptu trench works.

The Confederate assault began to come apart: the infantry lurched through the broken ground and artillery struggled to keep pace.

Sheridan’s delaying action slowed the enemy advance, but at great cost.

He lost all three brigade commanders, killed or mortally wounded, and about one-third of his men. The Confederates fared little better. The four hours of fighting in that cedar forest and amongst those rocks became known as “The Slaughter Pen” – one of the many places so named in the Civil War.

The Army of the Cumberland’s right flank was in ruin and beyond recall.

Now it was the center of Rosecrans’ line under attack. He canceled all his own plans of attack, called up reserves, rallied fleeing troops, and hoped to save his army. At the Nashville Pike, a new line began to form, stiffened by massed artillery.

The Army of the Cumberland now had tight interior lines and, due to its “horseshoe” shape, better communication. Cannon was sighted over every foot of ground ahead and commanded the field. The troops in line were supplied with full cartridge boxes, their rifle bores clean, their resolve steeled.

As they pecked their way through the trees, the Confederate lines began to fall apart. Their artillery could not penetrate the dense forest and limestone boulders. In stumbling disarray, they reached the clearing, when all hell was unleashed. The Confederate troops began to crumble under withering fire but still they came. Wave after wave along the pike was bloodied by Federal artillery and musket. The Northerners held.

Anchoring the Union’s left was Colonel William B. Hazen’s Brigade in “The Round

OPPOSITE TOP
 Federals fall back after an intense Confederate assault

OPPOSITE LEFT
 Iron silhouette in and amongst the limestone outcroppings of “The Slaughter Pen”

OPPOSITE RIGHT
 A Chevaux de Frise and iron cut-out figures at the Pioneer Brigade Earthworks Trail

BELOW
 Army of the Cumberland Pioneer, Soldier Study by Don Troiani. No.TCWSU60

BOTTOM
 18th/19th century Chevaux de Frise, No.51013
 Hasty Works Straight Sections, American Civil War, No.51001
 American Civil War 10 Pound Parrott Gun No.1, No.31065

Forest.” Between the Pike and the Stones River, it was crucial to the integrity of the Union line.

At 10 a.m. that morning, Mississippians under General James Chalmers advanced across the field toward the trees. Union artillery on the flanks and deadly rifle fire from the center tore into the Confederate ranks. General Chalmers was wounded as his men wavered then broke.

Chalmers’ attack was followed by General Daniel Donelson’s Brigade.

Two more brigades under General Breckinridge went in, suffering the same fate as those who went before. The final assault was made as twilight began to wane, and the last of the attackers could not march through the carnage in a straight line.

The ground became known as “Hell’s Half Acre.”

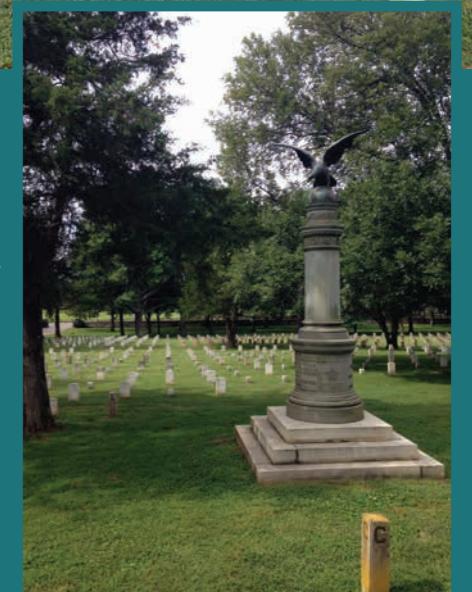
Colonel Hazen’s Brigade was the only Union unit not to retreat that day. Their stand against four Confederate attacks saved



“These men who had given their lives for the country... and now sleep beneath the green sod of our beautiful cemetery, on the immortal field of Stone’s River.”
 ~Chaplain William Earnshaw, the first Superintendent of Stones River National Cemetery.

Work began in October 1865: The 111th United States Colored Infantry were charged with locating and reburying Union soldiers from the battlefield, Murfreesboro, and the surrounding area.

Today, more than 6,100 Union soldiers are buried in Stones River National Cemetery. Of these, 2,562 are unknown.



Rosecrans’ line along the Nashville Pike and checked the Confederate advance.

Proud of their efforts there, Hazen’s men erected a monument just months after the battle. Completed October 1863, The Hazen Brigade Monument is the oldest intact Civil War monument in the nation.

Late that afternoon found the Union battered but retaining control of the pike, the Confederates still resolved, both sides still in the fight.

Day 2

Even with the horrific casualties suffered by the South on that first day, the Confederate general staff remained optimistic if somewhat

myopic: “The enemy has yielded his strong position and is falling back. We occupy the whole field and shall follow him...God has granted us a happy new year.” ~General Braxton Bragg, CSA

1 January, found the battlefield cold and wet. Bragg had no plans to resume fighting. In fact he was surprised to see Rosecrans had stood his ground and actually fortified it with strong military engineering of hasty works, ditches and Chevaux de Frise (a medieval defensive apparatus of a log covered with many projecting wooden spikes). This work was done by the Union’s Pioneer Brigade, a special engineering unit that normally fought the war with picks and shovels. However, this

