

**REGIONAL SUMMARY:  
CENTRAL ARKANSAS**

**By Dr. Bill Shea**

The road to the Civil War began in central Arkansas. In March 1861 a special convention met in Little Rock at the state capitol (now the Old State House) and voted against secession. One month later, however, came news that fighting had begun at Fort Sumter, South Carolina, and that President Abraham Lincoln had called for troops to suppress the southern rebellion and restore the Union. The convention reconvened and voted overwhelmingly for secession on May 6, 1861. The only delegate who refused to approve secession was Isaac Murphy, a schoolteacher from Huntsville in northwest Arkansas. A short time later Arkansas joined the Confederacy.

Determined secessionists already had taken matters into their own hands. Before the first meeting of the special convention hundreds of militiamen from surrounding counties had poured into Little Rock and demanded the surrender of the Little Rock Arsenal, one of two United States military posts in the state (the other was Fort Smith). The handful of soldiers at the arsenal (now MacArthur Park) turned over control of the post to Governor Henry M. Rector on February 7, 1861, and left the state.

Little Rock was the focus of Confederate political and administrative activities in Arkansas during the first two years of the war. Because of its relatively large size, its central geographic location, and its concentration of wharves and warehouses along the Arkansas River, the city also was the principal logistical center for Confederate military forces in the state. Deep inside the Confederacy, Little Rock seemed safe and secure.

Barely a year after the beginning of the war, however, central Arkansas unexpectedly changed from a rear area to the front line. Following the Union victory at Pea Ridge in March 1862, all Confederate military forces in Arkansas crossed the Mississippi River. Arkansas was left defenseless. Union gunboats and transports appeared on the Mississippi, Arkansas, and White rivers. A Union army reached Searcy—only fifty miles from Little Rock—in June 1862 before turning eastward and capturing Helena. Governor Rector was so frightened by the approach of the Union column that he fled to Hot Springs.

About this time Confederate General Thomas C. Hindman arrived in Little Rock to restore the military situation. Acting on his own authority, Hindman declared martial law and ruled Confederate Arkansas like a military

dictator during the summer and fall of 1862. He expanded existing military facilities in and around Little Rock and established new ones. He also constructed a fort at Arkansas Post to protect Little Rock from Union vessels coming up the Arkansas River.

During this period the Confederate state government declined in power and prestige as more and more of Arkansas came under Union control or slipped into anarchy. Governor Rector and his successor, Harris Flanagin, were little more than figureheads and the legislature was powerless. Elections took place only in Confederate-held territory and were ignored by most voters.

In late 1862 and early 1863 Confederate forces in Arkansas suffered defeats at Prairie Grove and Arkansas Post. The new Confederate commander, General Theophilus H. Holmes, abandoned most of eastern and western Arkansas (northern Arkansas already was lost) and concentrated his meager resources in the central portion of the state around Little Rock.

The expected Union invasion did not come, so in the summer of 1863 Holmes led his army out of Little Rock to attack Helena. After suffering a severe defeat on July 4, 1863, the weakened Confederate army retreated to Little Rock. Holmes was succeeded by Sterling Price, who constructed fortifications on the north bank of the Arkansas River northeast of the city. In late summer General Frederick Steele and 12,000 Union soldiers marched towards Little Rock from Helena. East of the city, half of the Union army crossed to the south bank of the Arkansas River to avoid the Confederate fortifications. Price had only about 8,000 troops and he made no real effort to halt Steele. He abandoned Little Rock and retreated southward. The ineffectual Confederate state government also abandoned the capital city. Governor Flanagin and a fragment of the legislature fled to Washington in the southwest corner of the state and pretended to govern from there.

Steele captured Little Rock on September 10, 1863. Little Rock was the fourth of eleven Confederate state capitals to fall into Union hands (Nashville, Baton Rouge, and Jackson were the first three). Heavy skirmishing east of the city cost the Union army 137 casualties. Incomplete Confederate records indicate 64 casualties. Hundreds of other Confederate soldiers lost heart and deserted.

Steele had too few men to hold all of central Arkansas, so he occupied only Little Rock and De Valls Bluff. Before the Kerr-McClellan system of dams and locks was completed in the 1960s, the Arkansas River became so

low in the fall and winter that steamboats often could not reach Little Rock. De Valls Bluff on the White River was a year-round riverport and it was linked to Little Rock by the state's only railroad line. Consequently, Steele made De Valls Bluff the principal supply depot for his army in Little Rock. The Union logistical system worked well enough to produce a modest economic boom in Little Rock, where "greenbacks" (Union paper money) circulated freely and consumer goods not seen for many months could be found in stores and markets. In addition to depending on supplies from the outside, Union soldiers in Little Rock combed the central Arkansas countryside for food.

Having learned the value of fortifications at the battle of Helena, Union soldiers and freedmen encircled both Little Rock and De Valls Bluff with earthworks. The Union garrisons in both places (along with the Union garrisons at Helena, Fort Smith, and Pine Bluff) eventually consisted of both white and black soldiers; only the tiny Fayetteville garrison was an all-white force. Most of the black troops were former Arkansas slaves who had enrolled in "colored" regiments beginning in the spring of 1863. Residents of the Union-occupied towns were the first Arkansans to experience some of the social and economic changes engendered by the Civil War.

The most important political development during the second half of the war was the establishment of a Unionist state government in Little Rock under the protection of the Union army. Isaac Murphy, the only man who had voted steadfastly against secession in the May 1861 convention, was elected governor in March 1864 by residents of Union-occupied towns. Voters also elected a Unionist legislature and approved a new state constitution that prohibited slavery. The new state government was essentially symbolic. During the war its authority extended only as far as Union military forces could reach, but it was the foundation for all successive state governments to the present day.

Only one large-scale military operation took place in Arkansas after the capture of Little Rock. In March and April 1864 Union authorities launched a two-pronged offensive towards Shreveport, Louisiana. The main Union force advanced up the Red River in Louisiana, but a secondary column led by Steele set out from Little Rock into southwest Arkansas. The operation was a failure and Steele's battered army returned to Little Rock in a weakened condition. (This development is described in the regional summary for southwest Arkansas.)

These events led to a modest Confederate resurgence in central Arkansas and elsewhere. Little Rock and De Valls Bluff were too strong to be attacked directly, but Confederate cavalry forces constantly interrupted railroad

traffic and shot at steamboats on the Arkansas and White rivers. Skirmishes between Union patrols and Confederate cavalry or guerrillas became more frequent and occasionally escalated into small battles. In the fall of 1864 Union forces regained the initiative and the military situation became a stalemate.

The heightened level of violence in the final months of the conflict produced nothing but misery and death for innocent people in central Arkansas. Uncontrolled guerrilla bands and packs of deserters and criminals avoided contact with both Union and Confederate soldiers and preyed on helpless civilians. Though conditions did not quite descend to the level of anarchy and barbarism prevalent in the northern third of the state, a dismally familiar no-mans-land of devastated and abandoned hamlets and farms soon characterized much of central Arkansas.