

**GENERAL SUMMARY:  
THE CIVIL WAR IN ARKANSAS**

**Written by Dr. Bill Shea  
Department of History  
University of Arkansas, Monticello, Arkansas**

In 1860, the United States was on the verge of disintegration. After years of growing tension between the northern and southern states over the issue of the expansion of slavery into the western territories, the election of Abraham Lincoln sparked a fatal political crisis. Many southern political leaders considered Lincoln to be a dangerous radical who threatened the very existence of slavery. During the winter of 1860-1861 seven southern states stretching from Texas to South Carolina seceded from the Union and formed a new country, the Confederate States of America, in which the continued existence of slavery would be guaranteed. They then called upon the eight remaining southern states, including Arkansas, to join them.

Arkansans were divided over the proper course of action. Governor Henry M. Rector urged immediate secession in order to maintain slavery, but many people were loyal to the old Union, and many others feared that secession and the possibility of war would cause disruption and perhaps destruction. "Nothing but ruin to property holders, and starvation to the poor would be the result," predicted a perceptive Camden resident. In March 1861 a special convention met in Little Rock and voted against secession. One month later, however, came news that fighting had begun at Fort Sumter, South Carolina, and that Lincoln had called for troops to suppress the southern rebellion and restore the Union. The convention met again and voted overwhelmingly for secession on May 6. Despite the lopsided nature of the vote, strong pro-Union sentiment existed in northern Arkansas, an upland region of small farmers and few slaves. In the rest of the state support for secession was widespread. Shortly after the vote, Arkansas joined the Confederacy.

Arkansas was the least populous and least developed state in the Confederacy, and the enormous human, financial, and material demands of the Civil War overtaxed its fragile economic base. During the summer of 1861,

however, most Arkansans believed the conflict would be brief—a few months at most—and they prepared accordingly. Men volunteered for Confederate service in large numbers. Little military equipment was available, so soldiers marched off to war wearing civilian clothes or homemade uniforms and carrying a wide array of shotguns and hunting rifles. For camp equipage they brought along whatever pots and blankets could be spared from home.

At the local level these volunteers formed companies of about one hundred men and elected their own officers, usually prominent planters, merchants, or lawyers. Upon reaching Little Rock or some other central location, the companies were formed into numbered regiments such as the 1<sup>st</sup> Arkansas Infantry or the 3<sup>rd</sup> Arkansas Cavalry. Regiments were the basic building blocks of armies. A new regiment was composed of about one thousand men, but a terrific death rate quickly reduced regiments to less than half that size. In Arkansas as everywhere else, the great killer of the Civil War was disease. Country boys who had never before been exposed to measles or cholera died by the thousands in overcrowded, unsanitary military camps. Medical care was primitive to nonexistent.

Arkansans might have been less enthusiastic had they realized that Confederate President Jefferson Davis considered the “tail” of the Confederacy west of the Mississippi River to be a region of minimal strategic importance. The Confederate government viewed the trans-Mississippi states primarily as a source of manpower and other resources for the rest of the Confederacy. Consequently, tens of thousands of men were drawn out of Arkansas, Louisiana, Missouri, and Texas and sent eastward across the Mississippi River. Dozens of Arkansas regiments were sent to armies in Mississippi and Tennessee; one Arkansas regiment was even assigned to a Confederate army in faraway Virginia. Fewer than half of the soldiers raised in Arkansas remained in the state, and these usually were among the last Confederate troops to receive proper arms, ammunition, and equipment. Confederate soldiers from other trans-Mississippi states stationed in Arkansas experienced similar problems.

Despite these handicaps, the Confederate war effort in the trans-Mississippi got off to an encouraging start. On August 10, 1861, a Confederate army won a victory at Wilson’s Creek in southwest Missouri. Several regiments of Arkansas troops played a key role in the battle, which seemed to insure that northern Arkansas was safe from invasion. A few months later, however, the tide turned when another Union army overran southwest Missouri and drove into northwest Arkansas. The Confederates counterattacked at Pea Ridge on March 7-8, 1862, but they were repulsed and driven from the field. Pea Ridge was the largest engagement fought in the state and was a crucial Union

victory. It assured that Missouri would remain in Union hands. It also meant a loss of Confederate control over most of northern Arkansas.

After the battle of Pea Ridge the defeated Confederate army abandoned Arkansas and crossed the Mississippi River, leaving the state defenseless. During the spring and summer of 1862 the victorious Union army moved eastward from Pea Ridge and eventually reached Helena, an important port on the Mississippi. Helena remained a Union enclave for the rest of the war. While marching across Arkansas the Union army liberated thousands of slaves, most of whom followed the army to Helena in search of a new life. This development took place six months *before* President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. The Union commander, General Samuel R. Curtis, eliminated slavery along the route of his army's march as a military necessity. Upon reaching Helena, he established refugee camps for the new freedmen and insured that they were treated properly and paid fairly for the work they did. This was the beginning of the end of slavery in Arkansas, though it would be three more years before emancipation reached every corner of the state.

Curtis also brought "total war" to the state. Moving farther and farther from supply depots in Missouri, his soldiers were compelled to live off the land as they marched across northern and eastern Arkansas. The path of the Union army was marked by ravaged fields, slaughtered livestock, pillaged smokehouses and root cellars, and vandalized and burned buildings. Some people made matters worse by poisoning wells and burning bridges in a vain attempt to stop the Union column. As losses mounted into the millions of dollars, many Arkansans began to have doubts about the wisdom of secession. Their concern was justified. Three-fourths of the state would experience similar devastation before the war came to a close.

In desperation, the Confederacy sent General Thomas C. Hindman to restore the military situation. Hindman did far more than that. Acting entirely on his own authority, he declared martial law and ruled Arkansas like a military dictator during the summer and fall of 1862. Among his many actions that outraged Arkansans, Hindman rigorously enforced the unpopular Confederate conscription act (the first draft in American history). Enthusiasm for Confederate military service had waned considerably since the heady days of 1861 and the threat of conscription drove thousands of men into hiding, especially in north Arkansas where Unionism remained a potent force. Civilian morale plummeted as normal patterns of government and commerce were disrupted by military edicts,

price controls, and restrictions on travel. The state government was largely superceded by Hindman's rule. No other part of the Confederacy—indeed, no other part of the United States—experienced what Arkansas went through in the second half of 1862. Hindman's harsh methods created enormous discontent in the state. The uproar led the Confederate government to send General Theophilus H. Holmes to Little Rock to replace Hindman.

Holmes's only notable contributions were to end martial law and place Hindman in command of an army in the field. Hindman attempted to recover northwest Arkansas but was defeated at Prairie Grove on December 7, 1862. Demoralized Confederate soldiers—many of whom were unhappy draftees—deserted by the thousands and Hindman's army melted away. A few weeks later, on January 10-11, 1863, a Union amphibious force captured Arkansas Post and its large Confederate garrison in eastern Arkansas. Gravely weakened by these twin disasters, Holmes abandoned the eastern and western portions of Arkansas and concentrated his forces in the central portion of the state around Little Rock. After six months of inactivity, Holmes attacked Helena but was repulsed with heavy losses on July 4, 1863, and returned to Little Rock. Following four major defeats in fifteen months—Pea Ridge, Prairie Grove, Arkansas Post, and Helena—Confederate morale and military strength in Arkansas were at low ebb.

With the Confederates in such disarray, Union General Frederick Steele in Helena seized the initiative. His army easily captured Little Rock on September 10, 1863, and soon occupied every town along the Arkansas River from Pine Bluff to Fort Smith. Confederate forces retreated to the southernmost portion of the state. With the capital city in Union hands, Governor Harris Flanagin and a fragment of the legislature fled to Washington in the southwestern corner of the state and pretended to govern from there. To make matters worse, in July Union forces had captured Vicksburg and gained control of the entire Mississippi River. Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas were cut off from the rest of the Confederacy.

The events of 1862 and 1863 knocked Confederate Arkansas out of the war. The bankrupt, refugee state government was reduced to impotence, first by Hindman's military rule and then by its flight from Little Rock. Civil authority eroded in much of the state, and collapsed entirely north of the Arkansas River. Sheriffs and judges vacated their posts. Jails, courts, and schools no longer functioned. The northern half of Arkansas became a brutal no-man's-land where anarchy reigned supreme. Gangs of criminals (many of whom falsely claimed to be Confederate guerrillas) ravaged the countryside, killing, burning, and stealing. Thousands of men, women, and children were

murdered or starved to death and thousands more abandoned their farms and villages and fled. In desperation, here and there some residents banded together in fortified compounds for protection, not against Indians, not even against Union or Confederate soldiers, but against their fellow citizens who had degenerated into savagery. The Union army was not large enough to occupy all of the territory abandoned by the Confederates. In northern Arkansas, for example, only Fayetteville had a more or less permanent Union garrison during the last two years of the war.

As the war progressed the composition of the Union army in Arkansas changed. Thousands of white Arkansans from the northern part of the state made their way to occupied towns and formed Union regiments or pro-Union irregular forces. Thousands of black Arkansans in the Delta and Arkansas River Valley enrolled in “colored” Union regiments (which came into existence in 1863) and joined in the struggle. Meanwhile, Confederate manpower steadily declined due to an epidemic of desertions. In the final year of the war roughly one-third of Arkansans in military service were dressed in Union blue.

After 1863 the nature of the war in Arkansas gradually altered as well. Military operations shifted to Georgia and Virginia and the trans-Mississippi became a backwater. Union and Confederate leaders in the state seemed content to wait for the conflict to be decided elsewhere. The one major exception to the declining level of military operations came in March and April 1864 when a Union force under General Steele attempted to march from Little Rock to Shreveport. (This was part of a two-pronged offensive aimed at Shreveport. The main Union force was advancing up the Red River in Louisiana.) The Union column was forced back after a series of battles at Poison Springs, Marks Mill, and Jenkins Ferry, but aside from the thousands of casualties and widespread destruction of property, the operation had no effect on the course of events. Increasingly, both sides turned to cavalry raids that destroyed even more property and made life miserable for civilians, but accomplished little of military importance.

While the plague of lawlessness in Arkansas worsened and the scale of military operations declined, the shortage of manufactured goods grew more acute. Without access to the industrial cities of Europe and the northern United States, Arkansans and other southerners had to make do without a wide array of manufactured products, including even everyday items as paper, ink, dyes, pins, buttons, medicines, matches, and the like. Newspapers ceased publishing and stores closed for lack of goods to sell. Shortages caused prices to soar. Paper money became

worthless and a barter economy developed. Homespun clothes and homemade items were the order of the day. What had begun as a war to achieve southern independence and maintain slavery changed into a grim struggle for survival.

During the final eighteen months of the war a pro-Union state government was established 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, but his authority did not extend into the ravaged countryside. For the remainder of the war the state had two antagonistic but equally powerless governments in Little Rock and Washington.

Hostilities ended in June 1865 when General Edmund Kirby Smith in Shreveport surrendered all Confederate forces west of the Mississippi River. Peace came not a moment too soon. A returning refugee described the scene in southwestern Arkansas: "Desolation met our gaze; abandoned and burned homes, uncultivated land overgrown with bushes; half starved women and children; gaunt, ragged men, stumbling along the road, just mustered out of the army, trying to find their families and friends, and wondering if they had a home left." The situation in much of the rest of the state, especially the northern counties, was even worse.

Arkansas was devastated and its population decimated. No exact figures are available, but over 7,000 Arkansas Confederate soldiers died from various causes during the war. At least 1,700 white Arkansas Union soldiers and perhaps an equal number of black Arkansas Union soldiers also perished. Many thousands of other soldiers were left blind, crippled, or gravely weakened by wounds or disease. A very conservative estimate is that one-eighth of the adult male population (white and black) was lost, and that another one-eighth was left permanently handicapped. How many thousands of civilians died cannot even be estimated. Widows and orphans numbered in the tens of thousands. Impoverishment and misery were everywhere. The only beneficial result of the war was the end of slavery, but even that achievement would bring little opportunity to black Arkansans for decades to come. The four years of Civil War comprised the greatest human and economic disaster in Arkansas history.