

# Sandwiching in History Tour Palarm Battle Site (Brooks–Baxter War)

Palarm Creek Park, 950 AR-365 near Mayflower, Faulkner County

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By Ashley Sides and Dr. David Ware



View of the Arkansas River from the north bank of Palarm Creek Photo by Ashley Sides, 2023

# Welcome and Introduction

## **ASHLEY SIDES:**

Hello and welcome to Palarm Creek Park, an unassuming place that became the site of some bloody action during a tense period of our state's history! This is where the Battle of Palarm took place 150 years ago this week.





I'm Ashley Sides, Preservation Outreach Coordinator at the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. I'm joined here with my colleague within the Division of Arkansas Heritage, Dr. David Ware, Director of the Arkansas State Archives and Arkansas State Historian. It's fitting to have the Archives represented in this presentation, because so much of what we know about this event is due to the fact that so many primary sources have been preserved—newspapers, telegrams, letters and memoirs—at the Archives.

David, why are we here?

#### DAVID WARE:

We are observing the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of one of the most significant events in Arkansas's history—the Brooks–Baxter War. It gets glossed over in the school instruction about Arkansas history, because it's confusing, but it's a great story and it has a lot to do with the way Arkansas developed after 1874.

# History of the Site of Palarm Creek Park

SIDES:

Before we get into that story, let's talk about this place. Where are we gathered right now?

WARE:

This site, where Palarm Creek enters the Arkansas River, is near where our first territorial governor James Miller chose to establish his plantation, and as far as he was concerned, the seat of government could be out here too—convenient for him.

It's also a spot along historic roadways through the Arkansas River valley. Native trails ran through here for centuries before the Europeans arrived here, and of course in the nineteenth century, what do we have?

SIDES:

Well, in the 1830s, this was an Indian Removal route. Several parties of Native Americans crossed Palarm Creek here on one route of the Trail of Tears. Choctaws in 1831 and 1832; Muscogee (Creeks) in 1834, 1836, and 1837; Seminoles in 1842; Chickasaws in 1837 and 1838; and Cherokees in 1838. Not to mention the many groups of Native Americans of all nations who came up the Arkansas River right past this point over the years.



So you're standing on ground that has witnessed some of the darker episodes of Arkansas history, and as our story goes today, a very interesting episode. Tell us about the background of the Brooks–Baxter War that led up to the events of the Battle of Palarm.

## The Election of 1872 and the Brooks-Baxter War

#### WARE:

It all comes down to post-Civil War Arkansas politics. In the wake of the war, most former Confederates were disenfranchised. They were called conservatives or Democrats. They had sided with the losers in the great unpleasantness. Government was dominated by the Republican party. But the Republican party was made up of factions; it wasn't one big tent where they got together and had fish fries on Friday. The factions existed uneasily with each other.

In general terms, you had two main camps. There were the more or less native Federalists, who had opposed secession before the war and had fought on the federal side during the war; they considered themselves the "regular" Republicans. The other, more radical, group organized around Republican leaders who came here during and after the war—pejoratively called "carpetbaggers"—trying to implement a mission of social reform including citizenship and civil rights for African Americans and other opportunities for growth and development. They saw opportunities to get rich, too!

Matters came to a head in the gubernatorial election campaign of 1872, with the two candidates representing these two factions. Elisha Baxter, a moderate native from Batesville, was the "safe," or conservative candidate, but he was backed by the political boss of Arkansas, former governor Powell Clayton, now in the Senate and hoping to put someone safe and loyal in the governor's seat. On the other hand, the loyalist Republicans coalesced around Ohio-born Methodist preacher Joseph Brooks. He was an advocate for voting rights and economic development for Blacks. He was a force for change where Baxter was seen as a voice of stability and continuity.

The election of 1872 was one of the dirtiest in Arkansas history. The candidates themselves were as clean as any nineteenth-century politicians could be, but that didn't mean their supporters didn't pull strings and do dirty deeds, lose ballot boxes, suppress ballots for various reasons. In the end, in 1872, Baxter was declared the winner. Brooks and his deputies immediately cried foul. They appealed to federal authorities, the federal authorities deferred to the state-level authorities, so they took it to the state courts.



Finally, in 1874 a Pulaski County judge decided things in Brooks's favor...

#### SIDES:

By now the loyalties of each side have shifted. Those who originally supported Baxter, thinking he could be bent to their will, have found him to be independent-minded. So they turn on him. Meanwhile, those who originally supported Brooks—in many cases in protest against the Powell Clayton political machine—have now found that Baxter isn't so bad after all. Turns out he's not beholden to Clayton and his cronies. And in fact, some of his policies are rather to their liking. So they're happy to see him stay in office. And the reason the court only decided in 1874 that Brooks was the winner was that by that time, the powers that be in Arkansas had turned against Baxter.

#### WARE:

So Brooks and a group of armed men marched straight from the courthouse to the State House and evicted Baxter from the governor's office. He walked down Markham Street and set up his headquarters in the Anthony House Hotel.

#### SIDES:

Both men claim to be the governor. Men start flocking into Little Rock in support of both sides. Militias are camped out at the State House and the Anthony House, just a couple of blocks from each other, with federal troops stationed in between them to keep the peace. Both sides need weapons, and we have a steamboat shuttling back and forth on the Arkansas River, one day carrying reinforcements for Brooks, another day being commandeered by Baxter's men. So, David, tell us about the *Hallie*.

## The Steamboat Hallie

#### WARE:

The *Hallie* was a shallow-draft steam packet built in the spring of 1873 to trade along the waters of the Arkansas River. We do not have a full description of *Hallie* as she sailed, but we do know something about other shallow-draft boats that plied the western rivers. One such, for which we do have some figures, was the Missouri river steamer *Far West*, built in 1870. *Far West* was 190 feet long with a beam of 33 feet and had three decks, a cupola-like pilot house and two tall smokestacks.





#### SIDES:

That's pretty much the exact same size as a jumbo barge on the Arkansas River today.

#### WARE:

She drew only 20 inches of water unloaded and 30 inches fully loaded with 200 tons of freight. Between her first and second decks were two powerful high-pressure steam engines, each with 15-inch-diameter pistons and a 5-foot stroke. The engines were powered by steam from three boilers that consumed as many as 30 cords of wood a day. A boat like *Far West*—like, say, *Hallie*—could make maybe five MPH against a moderate current. Faster than walking, at any rate!

Captain A. M. Woodruff built *Hallie* in Little Rock in the spring of 1873. He named it for the young daughter of his partner, Captain J. N. Jabine. *Hallie* made her first run to Fort Smith (Sebastian County) in early April, with the Arkansas Gazette reporting on April 13 that the vessel "proves to be one of the fastest boats on this river. ... She left for Fort Smith one week ago yesterday, at 6 o'clock, and arrived here at 12 o'clock yesterday."

On July 5, 1873, *Hallie* left Little Rock for St. Louis, Missouri, and the *Gazette* reported on August 13 that "the Hallie has been up there to have a heavy oak bottom put on in obedience to the inspector of the underwriters. She is the best low water boat that comes here." With its bottom section better protected, *Hallie* returned to her home waters and work. James Bowlin took over as captain of the *Hallie* in February 1874, with Woodruff staying on as the ship's clerk; Bowlin was replaced later in the Spring by veteran river skipper Sam Houston.

Hallie steamed to Fort Smith in late April 1874, where the Arkansas Gazette reported it was "detained...for forty-eight hours waiting on about sixty refugees who wanted to come down and "get something to eat from Joe in the state-house." – In other words, Brooks supporters coming east. On the way down they would not allow her to land at Lewisburg for fear there might be a "Baxter reception committee" awaiting them."

Hallie was in Little Rock for two days when Robert C. Newton, commanding Baxter's militia, ordered it upriver to intercept a shipment of weapons—160 stands of rifles—that Brooks backers had seized from the Arkansas Industrial University—now the University of Arkansas (UA) in Fayetteville (Washington County)—that were reported heading to the capital via flatboat from Fort Smith. Between thirty and forty men from Captain Alexander Welch's militia company (young men, most of them Little Rock "society," later known as the Hallie Rifles) and possibly men from the commands of Captains Jack Cottrell and O.S. Mask boarded the



steamboat and set off toward Fort Smith either late on May 7, 1874, or early in the morning of the 8th.

General James F. Fagan, commanding Brooker's forces at the capitol, learned of *Hallie's* departure—one account has it that he saw *Hallie* steaming up the river about 3 AM!—and ordered Colonel John (Jack) Brooker to take six companies of their militia—about 200 men more or less—and board a special train west to intercept the steamboat.

# The Ascendancy of the Railroads

#### SIDES:

Now wait a minute—what train? This is 1874. Arkansas had been talking for years about getting some railroads built, but they were having trouble getting it done. There weren't all that many completed routes in 1874, were there? Was this track here in 1874?

#### WARE:

Only just. It was the route of the Little Rock and Fort Smith. Organized in 1853 but largely quiescent, except as a financial mess, until after the War, the LR&FS was organized as the Little Rock and Fort Smith Branch of the Cairo and Fulton Railroad Company.

The start of the Civil War in 1861 postponed construction but in 1869, this branch of the Cairo and Fulton Railroad renewed its Arkansas charter, shortening its name to the Little Rock and Fort Smith Railroad (LR&FS). Later that year, a freight yard and depot were built in Argenta, and by August, the LR&FS began laying track, founding the rail yard that would soon be called the "Fort Smith Crossing."

In 1870, the LR&FS laid its first twenty-four miles of track, following the north bank of the Arkansas River westward toward Fort Smith, which would put its end-of-track somewhere west of here, maybe past today's Mayflower. And they kept on going—

It's worth noting that after Palarm station, the line swung away from the river, arcing north toward Conway, then again coming this close to the river west of Conway, at Gleason Station. This was the only place for Brooks's men to disembark from the train and take up a position at the river until way down the line.

We have a dueling technology battle here. Old-style transport on the river—even with steam—versus newfangled transport—the way of the future—iron rails.





So let us go back to the morning of May 8, 1874. About 200 men board the train in Argenta yard, leaving the yard limits about 6 AM.

#### SIDES:

Where were they, and how did they reach the yard? That's across the river. Wouldn't the Baxter men have tried to prevent them from getting down to the ferry?

#### WARE:

Chances are that they had to either row over across the Arkansas river in boats, slip past Baxter's men standing between them and the ferry landing at the foot of Ferry Street (near today's Clinton Library) or...hike west, to march over the new Cairo & Fulton Railroad bridge—the Baring Cross Bridge. It was NOT a pedestrian bridge—but the exigencies of war, don't you know?

#### SIDES:

As a matter of fact, there's one account that does say that after the battle they came back into Little Rock, crossing the Cairo and Fulton railroad bridge on foot. So that makes sense.

# The Battle of Palarm

#### **WARE:**

At any rate, they're *en voiture* by 6 and they head "west by northwest." The 200 men disembarked at Palarm Station, near the mouth of Palarm Creek, almost opposite today's Roland and just a mile or two upstream from Natural Steps, about 8 AM. They took up positions along the banks of the river.

Hallie, after stopping at Natural Steps (Pulaski County) for wood, approached the ambush. It must have taken a long time to load the fuel wood—because we are what? 15, 18 miles upriver from the State House?

It's worth noting that the Arkansas River was a narrower, more meandering river back then—what's a short distance downstream for us was certainly a longer route back then. Even so, if Fagan's story was right and he saw *Hallie* pass at 3, where had they been? Ah, that's a question to ask the pilot—and he's not speaking.





At any rate, let us advance to, say, 9 AM or after? A Lieutenant Grove from Brooker's troops met the vessel, at or just above Natural Steps and ordered *Hallie* to return to Little Rock. The captain, Sam Houston, "answered him with his usual brusqueness and signaled the pilot to go ahead," according to John Harrell's history of the Brooks-Baxter War. And, as *Hallie* churned up past Palarm, the Brooks forces, fat and happy and snug under cover on the north shore, opened a "murderous fire"; the Baxter forces, many apparently armed only with shotguns, fired back from behind barricades of thick planks and cotton bales.

SIDES:

Now, who do you think *really* fired first?

WARE:

Most accounts, presumably taken from the *Hallie* survivors, didn't say anything about the men on the boat firing first.

SIDES:

Right. And why would they? A slow-moving boat running the gauntlet, outnumbered by soldiers in ambush... They're a sitting duck! Why would they start the firefight? But, when you read the firsthand accounts, it really depends on who you asked. The Baxter men of course said the Brooks men hiding in ambush shot at them first. Which makes total sense. But the Brooks-supporting paper, the *Republican*, tells the story numerous times, taking great pains each time to say it was the other way around:

"By this time (9 o'clock) the boat had reached the state troops and a fire was opened on them from the boat, which they returned."

(Quoting Brooker) "Lieut. Grove again ordered the captain to halt, and simultaneously two shots were fired from the boat at Lieut. Grove, and the firing instantly became general on both sides."

(Relating the point of view of Bill Clark, who happened to be employed on the *Hallie* when it was pressed into Baxter service) "He was on the boat during the battle, and says the first shot was fired from the boat. After they were up the river a few miles he was informed where the boat was bound; that they were 'going to kill or be killed.'"

On the other hand, you have the version of the story told in the *Arkansas Gazette*:





"Dr. Dale was below, and the first thing he heard was a shot, and then an order from Capt. Welch for his men to fire. Mr. William Green states that prior to this a party on shore had hailed the boat. A volley was fired into the boat from Brooker's men on the shore, who were hid behind rocks on the bank of the river, and the fire was returned."



"The Battle of Palarm" by J.M. Fortenbury, courtesy of the Arkansas State Archives

## WARE:

Be that as it may, a firefight ensued. Soldiers on board the *Hallie* quickly ducked under the cover of cotton bales that had been placed on deck to protect them in case they ran into trouble.

How close to shore were they? We don't know, but the river was narrower then, and the channel apparently swung to the north in this stretch, so *Hallie* may have been as little as 50 feet offshore—and she may have been fast for her type, but she was a big, slow-moving target. A shot cut *Hallie's* steam pipe, leaving it to drift uncontrolled to the southern bank of the river, and the vessel was riddled by rifle fire. One of her crew later tells the *Republican*, a Brooksfriendly paper, that they were able to proceed up the river a couple of miles or so further—all the while, with men shooting at them from the north bank. The question of how far upstream they reached is left to your imagination—but it is clear that *Hallie* lost way fairly quickly, and confusion reigned.



#### SIDES:

Hearing this guy say they continued up the river for two miles under constant fire is so ridiculous that it actually gives you a clue into what the experience must have been like.

This was claimed by Capt. Bowlin, who spent the entire firefight lying on the floor of the cabin. He said, "The firing commenced, and was kept up by both parties until the boat had proceeded <u>about two miles</u>. We moved very slow, in consequence of the steam-pipe being shot, and the steam going down, otherwise we would no have been so long under fire."

If the shooting lasted 10-15 minutes, as Brooker and others stated, it probably seemed much longer to someone huddling for cover on the floor, unwilling to look about for fear of getting shot. Bowlin, lying there with windows shattering around him, said he, "never saw before such a heavy fire and heard the bullets whiz so thick, and I have seen some hard bushwhacking along the river." It might have seemed like half an hour or longer.

Knowing his boat could go 5 mph under normal circumstances, he might have expected it to have traveled some 2 miles during the firefight. He wouldn't know. He wasn't looking up from the cabin floor.

#### WARE:

On *Hallie*, a man named Frank Timms was killed instantly, Houston was mortally wounded, and pilot John Meyers was shot in the chest, knee, and calf; he would die of his wounds on June 20. At least three other Baxter supporters were wounded—one, Bascomb Leigh, was left crippled—in the fight. At least three Brooks men were killed or mortally wounded.

Writing on May 8th, the St. Louis correspondent of the New York Herald correspondent said:

"Last night a party of twenty-five Baxter men under command of Lieutenant Welsh [sic], took passage on the steamer Hattie [sic], which was in charge of Captain Sam Houston and his brother Ed. Houston. Their object was to intercept and capture 160 stand of arms belonging to the Industrial University, which were shipped in a flat boat from Fort Smith on Wednesday in charge of six men. The Brooksites heard of this expedition and started Colonel John Brooker with, with his regiment of 200 negroes, on a special train over the Fort Smith Railroad, to intercept the boat at Palarm, 20 miles above this city.

"Brooker's party arrived there before the Hattie got into position; and as the boat came along, they fired on her. Most of Lieutenant Welsh's men were on the hurricane roof at the time and got down as soon as possible. As they did so, Frank Timms, a prominent young man of the city was killed, and several others injured, viz, Captain Sam Houston,





through the body, badly; Edward Houston, sprained ankle; John Myers, through the breast; Bascomb Leigh, in his left leg. Lieutenant Welsh's men returned the fire, killing one and wounding another. Of Brooks's men, both were negroes. One of the shots from Brooker's men passed through a steam pipe on the Hattie, disabling her, and she floated down the river to the opposite bank from where Brooks's men were, and the squad then left the boat. Brooker's men then took possession of the steamer, put a squad on board to bring her to town, and the remainder of them took the train and came back, arriving about 3 o'clock this evening. Soon after their arrival, the Hattie came down and was landed at the State-house, where the wounded were taken off. Captain Sam Houston died soon after the arrival of the Hattie and John Myers, a pilot, is mortally wounded. The body of young Frank Timms, who was killed on the steamer this morning, is now lying in state at the Chapel of the Presbyterian Church. The body of Captain Sam Houston has been taken to his residence.

"After the boat was fired upon and disabled, captain Welsh held up a white flag, which was riddled with bullets and several holes were shot through his clothing. Doctor Dale, who was with him, received a slight wound in the leg. Bascomb Leigh, who was wounded in the leg, is badly hurt; John Meyers is thought to be mortally wounded. The Brooks party set a squad of cavalry up the south side of the river this evening to attempt the capture of Captain Welsh's party, who escaped from the boat. The Baxter side sent out a squad of cavalry also to hunt captain Welsh's party and to conduct them to the city. Fort Smith trains have been stopped by the Brooksites to prevent any more of the Baxter men and members of the legislature from reaching the city from that direction. It is also reported tonight that trains on the Cairo and Fulton Railroad are to be stopped for the same reason. ... The latest reports tonight state four negroes were killed on Colonel Brooker's side during the attack to-day, and a number wounded. Brigadier General Thompson and Colonel Fowler of the Brooks forces were captured by the Baxterites at Clarksville yesterday." 1

## Bascomb Leigh told the *Gazette*, in 1914:

"It was 32 against 200. We were not prepared to meet such a force of men as our entire force only numbered 32 men including the officers, and as the *Hallie* steamed slowly up the river she made a good target for the enemy. In a few minutes she was entirely disabled. Expecting trouble, we had taken on a cargo of cotton which we used for breastworks, and had it not been for this precaution, every man of us would have been killed for we were armed for the most part with shotguns, while the enemy had secured repeating rifles. During the few minutes of the battle Captain Houston was killed; the pilot John Myers was wounded so seriously that he died in a few weeks. Frank Timms

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> This story from the *New York Herald* was quoted in the July 17, 1874 edition of the Sydney, Australia newspaper *The Empire*, demonstrating that this event made international news.





was also killed... I received a wound in the knee which disabled me for life. Of the survivors of the battle only six are now living; four of whom reside in Little Rock: they are W.L. Terry, Elias N. Conway, W.F. Green and myself. The others are doctor J.R. Dale of Texarkana and E.W. Rector of Hot Springs. The battle was called the Battle of the *Hallie* after the boat upon which we fought and the company afterward named the Hallie Rifles."

One of the Hallie Rifles was Elias W. Rector, son of former Arkansas Governor Henry Rector. In 1892 or 93, Some years after the battle, Rector, by now serving as Speaker of the Arkansas House of Representatives, told John Hallum:

"Captain Welch and the men of his command, after the boat had landed or drifted to the South side of the river, went ashore, and were soon aware that a body of cavalry had passed along the riverbank. And so, for fear of capture, took a by path that led through a defile in the hills. We reached Maynard's in time for supper and were most hospitably entertained.

"After supper, as I was somewhat acquainted with the country, they made me guide and pushed on down the South Side until opposite my father's plantation at Cabin Point. There we all crossed the river, 35 or 40 of us in a single canoe, two at a time, and we camped by a spring branch of White Oak Bayou near Old Jack Smith's house, a leader of the Colored in that locality. At the McCann Place on White Oak, we were furnished with breakfast by Mr. John Collins, who had been proprietor of the Anthony House for many years. After breakfast, we marched along the roads and railroad track until we reached the Clendenin place opposite Little Rock. There, a scout of cavalry sent by General Churchill met and escorted us into the Baxter camp."

The *Hallie* survivors escaped into the woods and made their way back to Little Rock. Brooker put two officers and twenty-four men aboard the steamboat to sail it back to the capital while the rest of his men returned by railroad. Early in the morning on May 10, *Hallie* was scuttled in the Arkansas River during a raid by Baxter supporters; both sides blamed each other for the sinking. Five days later, President Ulysses S. Grant signaled his support for Baxter, who returned to the Old State House on May 19, ending the Brooks—Baxter War and Reconstruction in Arkansas.

On July 15, 1874, the Gazette noted that "the steamer *Hallie*—or what's left of her—will be sold by the quartermaster-general on Saturday next," adding on August 1 that "the sunken steamer *Hallie* is being taken to pieces." Woodruff, Jabine, and two partners purchased a new steamboat, *Maumelle*, from a builder in Indiana in September and continued their river trade.



And so did the railroad. Albeit through some difficulties. On December 10, 1874, the LR&FS Railroad was foreclosed on, and nine days later, December 19, 1874, a new group of eastern investors reopened the company, keeping the name Little Rock and Fort Smith Railroad. Six months later, on June 12, 1875, the name of the railroad was changed to the Little Rock and Fort Smith Railway.

But that's a story for a different day.

# **Epilogue**

#### SIDES:

There's still one nagging question: Whatever happened to the shipment of arms coming down the river from the Arkansas Industrial University via Fort Smith? Did it make it to the Brooks forces in the end, or did Baxter's men find another way to intercept it? Its story gets forgotten in the vivid retellings of the battle. But we have a clue in one of the primary documents preserved in the Arkansas State Archives.

On the afternoon of May 8, the day of the ambush, Baxter's top commander, Major General R.C. Newton, telegraphed to Brigadier General H. King White from Little Rock to Pine Bluff to tell him of the news. His account of the capture of *Hallie* is unremarkable, but he adds one tantalizing detail to the end of the telegram: "As our troops reported as capturing Fort Smith arms at Lewisburg the object of *Hallie's* trip accomplished."

In other words, it seems that Welch's ill-fated expedition upriver with the *Hallie* wouldn't have made a difference anyway; the arms shipment from Arkansas Industrial University was captured upriver at Lewisburg before the *Hallie* could have even gotten there. So in the grand scheme of things, the *Hallie's* expedition was pointless, and those young men did not have to die.

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Thank you for coming! Next tour will take place on June 7th. We will be touring the old Choctaw Route Station, AKA the former Rock Island depot in downtown Little Rock, better known today as the home of the Clinton School of Public Service.





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