

The Civil War in Western Kentucky and West Tennessee, 1860-1865: Toward Understanding the Significance of the Jackson Purchase

By William H. Mulligan

Tip O'Neill, the late speaker of the House of Representatives, famously remarked, "All politics is local." Much the same can be said about history. History happens in specific places and the character of those places shapes how events unfold. The Jackson Purchase and the Civil War is no exception. I will argue here that the Purchase played a very significant, one can say decisive, role in the outcome of the Civil War. We are now in the middle stages of the sesquicentennial of what clearly is the central event in our national history, the Civil War. Although the political crisis that led most directly to war was precipitated by the election of Abraham Lincoln, conflict had been brewing for decades. I remember the centennial observance from newspaper and television coverage, although I was quite young at the time, and have read quite a bit about its challenges, occurring in the midst of the debate over Civil Rights as it did.¹ The fiftieth anniversary shortly before World War I was very much focused on reuniting the nation. We are, of course, in a far different place as a nation today—Mississippi, for example, now has the largest number

¹Robert J. Cook, *Troubled Commemoration: The American Civil War Centennial, 1961-1965* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007).

of elected African American officials. Another aspect of history is that each generation looks at the past from a different perspective, asks different questions, and often has different sources to draw on. The past of course does not change; but history-how we construct understandings of the past can and does. So, perhaps this time we will reflect more fully on the Civil War itself; the breakdown of the political system that led to a long and bloody war; the heroism and commitment on both sides; and the legacy of the conflict that preserved the Union and ended slavery for our nation has for all Americans rather than be embroiled in other issues.

One hundred fifty some years ago, no one knew what the future held as the 1860 election resulted in the election of a candidate who had not even been on the ballot in most slave states. Tensions were high. There was still hope, however faint, that armed conflict could be avoided. Kentucky Senator John J. Crittenden played a leading role in those efforts—donning, if you will, the mantle of the great Kentuckian Henry Clay who had devoted his political career to preserving the union. In the presidential election Kentucky had voted for John Bell, a Tennessean with business interests in Kentucky (at least in Crittenden County). Nine of the ten men elected to Congress had run on Unionist platforms. A majority of the legislature had done the same. Kentucky certainly leaned strongly toward the Union. Tennessee was also unsure of its course for some time before ultimately seceding. Far western Kentucky and the entire Jackson Purchase definitely did not share these ambivalent views. The sole Kentucky congressman to be

elected on a platform that defended secession was from the First District—Henry C. Burnett.² The course of the war would be different in west Kentucky and west Tennessee than elsewhere in either state. That, broadly stated, is the principal focus of this essay. One more caveat, I have done much more research on the Kentucky aspects of this than the Tennessee.

Another important, if underappreciated, aspect of the history of the Civil War in the Jackson Purchase is the continuing process of the discovery of new information and the development of new insights into the Civil War as historians uncover new, or previously underutilized sources, using the Purchase as a “case study.” We all continue to wrestle with the meaning of the Civil War, both for the generation that fought it and for subsequent generations, including our own. The Jackson Purchase is an especially fruitful area to examine if one is interested in new insights into the Civil War for three reasons:

- relatively little has been published compared to other regions of the country,
- it was the site of critical events and played an important role in the outcome of the War, and
- it stood at a strategic crossroads of the War for both sides.

Anyone who studies the Civil War in the Jackson Purchase must acknowledge the important work of Berry Craig, whose two MA theses at Murray

²<http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=B001120>; Berry F. Craig, “Henry Cornelius Burnett: Champion of Southern Rights.” *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 77 (Autumn 1979): 266-74.

State and other essays are a tremendous source of information and ideas, and several articles in the *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* by Hunter Whitesell.³ They were both very important when I first began this research in pointing me to sources as well as providing a framework for investigation.

If one looks at the Civil War as having been decided in the eastern theatre, particularly in Virginia, then far western Kentucky would certainly be on the "margin" of the conflict and the extent to which it has been ignored perhaps justifiable. If however, one considers that while the media of that day were largely focused on events in the eastern theatre, out on the "margin" Union troops were winning a series of victories that demolished the South's western defenses and cut Kentucky and middle and west Tennessee, with their food, hemp, mules, horses, and iron, as well as the Trans-Mississippi region off from the rest of the South. These Union victories seriously eroded, I would

³ Berry F. Craig, "The Jackson Purchase region of Kentucky in the Secession Crisis of 1860-1861," (MA Thesis, Murray State University), 1973. Craig, "Kentucky's Rebel Press in the Secession Crisis of 1860-1861," (MA Thesis, Murray State University), 1977. Hunter B. Whitesell, "Military Operations in the Jackson Purchase Area of Kentucky, 1862-1865," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 63 (April 1965): 141-67; (July 1865): 240-267. More recently, Alan Bearman, "'The South Carolina of Kentucky': Religion and Secession in the Jackson Purchase," *Filson Club Historical Quarterly* 76 (October 2002): 495-521. See also, William H. Mulligan, Jr., Project Director, *The Civil War in the Jackson Purchase Region of Kentucky: A Survey of Historic Sites and Structures*. Kentucky Heritage Council: Grant Number 21-93-80135, 1996.

suggest destroyed, the South's ability to sustain the War long enough to succeed.⁴ The Civil War was won and lost, one can argue, along the rivers of western Kentucky and west Tennessee. So, if you think the war was won or lost, depending on your point of view, in the east you are wrong. In fact it was largely decided right here in the Jackson Purchase and the adjacent counties.

Control of the Mississippi and the other western rivers was a key war aim for the North and denying that control was a key objective for the South. The Jackson Purchase, especially the Kentucky portion, was thus squarely in the center of the War, not out on the margin.

While eastern theatre battles and Union failure and frustration there attracted the larger share of the contemporary media's attention, and until recently of scholars of the War, in the West, the Union was winning the War. Not simply winning isolated battles, but winning strategically because their victories were depriving the South of essential elements that were needed to sustain the only war they could hope to win--a long and indecisive conflict that sapped Northern willingness to continue. The same type of war the colonists had sustained against England to win their independence four score and some years earlier interestingly. For the South, it was very much a war for independence.

While Kentucky never actually seceded from

⁴ Kendall D. Gott, *Where the South Lost the War: An Analysis of the Fort Henry-Fort Donelson Campaign, February 1862* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2003).

the Union, it found itself increasingly treated as occupied territory as the War wound on, especially after the emancipation of African Americans became first an unofficial and then an official Union war aim and the recruitment of African-American troops became official policy after 1863. The enlistment of African Americans into the Union army increasingly separated Kentucky from its "allies" north of the Ohio River, and became a source of real tension in the strongly pro-Union (at least at the beginning of the War) Bluegrass region that, then as now, was the politically dominant region of the Commonwealth. Kentucky came to occupy an increasingly ambiguous position after 1863, supplying fewer and fewer white troops to the Union army, while black Kentuckians rushed to enlist in large numbers. The loyalty of the state's political leaders came into question as their opposition to emancipation, even rejecting a proposal for compensated emancipation, and black enlistment became more vocal and vehement.⁵ Tennessee

⁵ In a very real sense Kentucky did not commit to the Southern cause until well after Lee's surrender at Appomattox Courthouse, one of several strange episodes in the Commonwealth's Civil War history that there is not space to get into here. Its progress toward that position was well along by the end of 1863, however, as Kentucky felt increasingly alienated from the Union cause. Aaron Astor, *Rebels on the Border: Civil War, Emancipation, and the Reconstruction of Kentucky and Missouri* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2012) discusses this. On the recruitment of African American troops see John David Smith, "The Recruitment of Negro Soldiers in Kentucky, 1863-1865," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 72 (1974): 364-390. Three-quarters of white

ultimately did secede and was rapidly occupied by Union forces after the fall of Forts Henry and Donelson. There was no ambiguity about its status—it was occupied territory.

Because Kentucky never seceded from the Union officially, its experience with military occupation has not been discussed in several books that have begun to investigate the importance of the military occupation of the South, both during the War and afterwards during Reconstruction. Neither Steven V. Ash, *When the Yankees Came* nor Mark Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War*, for example, has a single entry in their indices for Kentucky.⁶ Benjamin Franklin Cooling's more recent *Fort Donelson's Legacy* is a major exception to this pattern, but there still is a great deal of work to be done on the question of Union army activities in Kentucky during the war and its aftermath.⁷

Kentuckians who fought in the War fought for the North, yet nearly all of Kentucky's Civil War monuments are to the Confederacy and the only veteran's home the state maintained was for Confederate veterans and the only Civil War cemeteries that receive (still) annual appropriations of state money are Confederate cemeteries. On the monuments see Joseph E. Brent, "Civil War Monuments in Kentucky," Multiple Property Documentation Form, National register of Historic Places (1996).

⁶ Stephen V. Ash, *When the Yankees Came: Conflict & Chaos in the Occupied South, 1861-1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Mark Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War: Union Military Policy Toward Southern Civilians, 1861-1865* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁷ Benjamin Franklin Cooling, *Fort Donelson's Legacy: War*

In no section of Kentucky were pro-Southern loyalties stronger, earlier to solidify and the consequences of the ambiguity of Kentucky's position clearer than in its then seven (today there are eight) westernmost counties, the Jackson Purchase.

The Purchase counties as a whole did not have large numbers of slaves, but had strong cultural and economic ties to the lower south. Indian territory until 1818 when Andrew Jackson and Isaac Shelby purchased it from the Indians,⁸ the area was settled largely from the back country of far south-western Virginia and especially western North Carolina—my former colleague Hughie G. Lawson has done excellent research on this and published his results in the *Filson Club Historical Quarterly*.⁹ Early settlers in the Purchase moved along the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers and nearly all of the Purchase's trade flowed down these same rivers to the Ohio and then to the Mississippi and finally to the lower South.

The Purchase elected pro-secession state legislators in August 1861 and was part of the only Congressional district, the First, in Kentucky, to not elect a Unionist candidate to the House of

and Society in Kentucky and Tennessee, 1862-1863 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997).

⁸ Thomas D. Clark, "The Jackson Purchase: A Dramatic Chapter in Southern Indian Policy and Relations," *Filson Club Historical Quarterly* 50 (July 1976):302-320.

⁹ Hughie G. Lawson, "Geographical Origins of White Migrants to Trigg and Calloway Counties in the Antebellum Period," *Filson Club Historical Quarterly* 57 (July 1983): 286-303.

Representatives in a separate election in June of the same year, as stated earlier. The Purchase was also heavily represented at the secession convention held at Russellville, Kentucky. Several pro-secession meetings were held in the Purchase, including one in Mayfield, and outspoken Unionists were lynched in both Murray and Milburn. The Civil War in the Purchase was just as much the site of "extra-legal" actions that historians have studied in the states that did secede.

The Purchase was also a very strategic area for both sides. Bounded on the North by the Ohio, on the West by the Mississippi, and on the East by the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers, the Purchase contained rivers crucial to the control of transportation into the lower South. That put it at the center of the action beginning in the summer and fall of 1861 as the War in the West took shape. Maintaining control of this area in the face of an increasingly hostile population would be a challenge for Union commanders.

Initially, both sides opted to stay out of Kentucky, respecting the state's "neutrality" proclamation--a long story we won't get into here.¹⁰ This led to a period of "watchful waiting" by both sides. U.S. Grant in Cairo, Illinois and several Confederate generals in Union City, Tennessee. The respect both sides gave Kentucky's ambiguous position had profound consequences for the way the War unfolded in the West. Both sides needed Kentucky. Lincoln is alleged to have said, "I hope

¹⁰ James W. Finck, *Divided Loyalties: Kentucky's Struggle for Armed Neutrality in the Civil War* (El Dorado Hills, CA: Savas Beatier, 2012) .

God is on my side, but I must have Kentucky." Fort Henry, for example, was built on low ground on the eastern bank of the Tennessee River because the more desirable high ground on the west bank was in still neutral at the time Kentucky, as was the best site for defending the Cumberland River in Eddyville.

As soon as Confederate General Leonidas Polk moved to occupy Columbus, a strategically important position on the Mississippi, in September 1861, Grant countered quickly and moved from Cairo to occupy Paducah and Smithland near the confluences of the Tennessee and Cumberland and the Ohio and the Tennessee. Polk was enthusiastically welcomed by the people of Columbus and Hickman, where he established a secondary position. Grant, on the other hand, found that the citizens of Paducah, whom he came to "protect from invasion" at the invitation of the legislature had been preparing a hero's welcome for Polk, whom they were expecting. Unwelcome though he was, Grant had seized the key points for the control of the lesser western rivers, the Tennessee and Cumberland, as well as protecting the Ohio. He was also on the south side of that important river.

The Confederates deployed a defensive line along the Kentucky-Tennessee border from Columbus in the West, through Bowling Green, to the Cumberland Gap in the east. In addition to Grant's forces, Union troops soon moved into Louisville and also deployed 10,000 men in Calhoun, Kentucky to protect the lock and dam there on the important Green River.

Western Kentucky quickly became heavily occupied by both sides and Columbus, with

extensive earthworks, 13,000 troops, 10,000 slaves as labourers, and more than 140 cannon earned the title, "Gibraltar of the West." U.S. Grant fought his first action of the war at Belmont, Missouri directly across the river from Columbus. While claiming victory in his *Memoirs*, Grant and his men withdrew in haste under very heavy fire from the guns across the river after initially overrunning the Confederate camp at Belmont. The artillery on the high ground across the river had been decisive. Later, when Grant learned that the new Confederate commander at Fort Henry, Lloyd Tilghman was constructing new fortifications on the high ground directly across the river he began seeking permission aggressively to launch an offensive against forts Henry, on the Tennessee, and Donelson, on the Cumberland. In one day Grant sent his superior Henry W. Halleck eight telegrams asking permission to attack Fort Henry.¹¹ While Grant was waiting for Halleck's authorization, Gen. George H. Thomas defeated a Confederate force under Gen. George B. Crittenden (whose brother, Union General Thomas T. Crittenden, commanded the Union troops at Calhoun, KY) at Mill Springs in east central Kentucky. Gen. Thomas's success not only prevented the Confederates from pushing their defense line further into Kentucky, but as George Crittenden's troops retreated Thomas was able to shift his forces west to support General Don Carlos Buell's planned movement against Bowling Green, a key point on the transportation route that sent food, hemp, mules, and horses south.

¹¹Telegram Books, RG 393 National Archives.

Grant and Union gunboats under Flag Officer Andrew H. Foote, or more accurately Foote's gunboats and the untenable position Fort Henry's defenders found themselves in, quickly brought Fort Henry and its uncompleted companion, Fort Heiman, under Union control on February 6. Within ten days Fort Donelson fell as well--although this time it was Grant's troops, (actually it was Gideon Pillow's lack of nerve,) rather than Foote's gunboats that were decisive.

The Confederate defensive line across Kentucky crumbled rapidly. Between February 11 and 14 Bowling Green was evacuated as indefensible after the Confederate losses at Mill Springs and Fort Henry. The Union army then held it, a key transportation link, for the rest of the War. Disease was also decimating Confederate Camp Beauregard in western Graves County, Kentucky, an important part of the outer defenses of Columbus. Nearly 2,000 of about 3,000 troops died within a few weeks from a combination of measles and meningitis.¹² After the fall of Fort Donelson, with nearly 15,000 troops captured, and the effective loss of Camp Beauregard, Polk evacuated Columbus between February 27 and March 1 seeing it as indefensible. The advance scouts from the Union force who had been sent from Paducah to take the fort rode right in without opposition. The only fire

¹² Dieter Ullrich, "Confederate Operations in the Jackson Purchase: A History of Camp Beauregard, Kentucky" *Filson Club History Quarterly* 76 (Fall 2002): 459-493. Philip M. Shelton, "Camp Beauregard, Graves County, Kentucky," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 61 (1963): 148-157.

they drew was from the main Union force, which arrived before they had raised the Union flag.

The Confederate defense line so boldly pushed into Kentucky by Polk at Columbus in the west and by Felix Zollicoffer (one of Crittenden's brigadiers) in east central Kentucky, was demolished in less than six months. Zollicoffer, sadly, lost his life in the effort.

As the War moved south, first to Shiloh, and then Corinth, Memphis, and ultimately Vicksburg, large numbers of Union troops paused at Columbus, Paducah, and Smithland before heading further South to the action. Countless tons of supplies followed the same routes. A hard to enumerate number of soldiers, mostly from Illinois and other Midwestern states, manned the garrisons and guarded railroad bridges and key transportation links as well as the principal towns. Confederate raids in the Purchase, in both Tennessee and Kentucky, were frequent and annoying, but did not really threaten Union control of the region. The loyalty of the population, however, did not change. If anything, the citizens of the Purchase became more resolutely pro-Confederate as the war continued. Troops that strayed from fortifications were regularly attacked by snipers and guerrilla bands. An example is Jack Hinson from Dover who carried out a personal vendetta after the death of his sons.¹³ Other incidents were simple lawlessness

¹³ Thomas McKenney, *Jack Hinson's One-Man War, A Civil War Sniper* (Pelican Publishing Co., 2009). Some reviewers have noted a lack of primary sources in this book. The story is well-established in local memory and tradition.

that took advantage of the chaos of war.

Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest recruited heavily and moved quite freely in the area. According to local lore, he took out ads in the local papers informing his men when and where to reassemble after a two-week furlough. He burned railroad bridges on a number of occasions and captured several transports at intervals, serving as a nuisance and disruption. As Ed Bearss, former chief historian of the National Park Service has said, "Bedford Forrest knew how to wreck a railroad." His activities and those of the other guerrillas in the region certainly required a larger force than would have been necessary if the population had supported the Union cause, but they never seriously threatened the loss of Union control of the key transportation nodes. Their activities were also a source of friction between Grant and local commanders.

The full extent of this disruption these raids, largely led by Nathan Bedford Forrest, however, are not clearly shown in the *Official Record* or other readily accessible and frequently used sources. This is an area where previously underutilized sources, especially RG 393 in the National Archives, can offer new insights into the nature of the War. If one relies on the *Official Record (OR)* one will fail to see the full impact of these Confederate cavalry raids. Whenever there were reports of guerrilla activity or a sighting of Nathan Bedford Forrest and his troops, invariably by a "loyal citizen" or an "intelligent slave," telegrams, emphasis on the plural, would fly. In reviewing the telegram books one gets a clearer sense of the turmoil such reports stirred up than the

OR offers. One sighting of Forrest or a report of a sighting would lead to a dozen telegrams or more and troops would be on the move across the entire district. More importantly, troops who were supposed to be heading for Corinth or Vicksburg or other points south to advance the Union offensive were frequently held in Columbus by the various district commanders to counter Forrest. There are numerous telegrams from Grant inquiring about a particular regiment that was overdue. The response is always that they are being held to defend against guerrillas, or specifically Forrest. This is followed VERY quickly by an order from Grant that they be sent forward immediately and reminding the commanders that there were sufficient troops to carry out their mission. Grant went through three commanders at the district level in Columbus alone in two years. One, Gen. Alexander Asboth, who had come to the US after the failed Hungarian revolution of 1848, went over Grant's head to get permission to regarrison Fort Heiman against Grant's expressed command that it was unnecessary. He was successful only for a brief period. He soon disappears from the records at Columbus and resurfaces in west Florida. None of the district commanders who crossed Grant moved on to bigger things, they all simply vanished into the bureaucracy or went home.

Local support for the Confederacy in the Purchase was not merely verbal or completely reflected in occasional assistance to raiders like Forrest and guerrillas (I want to be clear Forrest was not a guerrilla). During the 1864 Battle of Paducah, more a diversion during a Forrest raid on Paducah to

facilitate the gathering of horses and supplies than a major battle for control of the city, residents near Fort Anderson, the focal point of the diversionary attack, allowed Confederate sharpshooters to climb onto their roofs to give them a better line of fire into the fort. This was not unnoticed by the Union commander, Col. Steven Hicks, who ordered a number of buildings near the fort demolished after the battle.

Conflict and tension between Union troops and local citizens were constant, especially in Paducah. Many people were arrested and sent north to face trial on vague charges of "disloyalty" or disloyal speech. Grant had issued an executive order early in the occupation expelling all Jews. One Union occupation commander, E. A. Paine, was vilified as a tyrant by local residents in the press and in letters to Congress that led to a formal inquiry and hearings on his conduct. After all, Kentucky was a loyal Union state. The people of Paducah might disagree with that decision, but they used it when they had a chance to do so to their advantage. Paine, apparently was not convicted or punished beyond a reprimand, but he did not return to Paducah either. He was sent to Gallatin, Tennessee where he also earned a reputation as a tyrant. Reading the letter books and telegram books in RG 383 offers some insight into the tension Union forces must have felt surrounded as they were by a very hostile population. However, reviewing the docket books for the trials of Paducah citizens shows many acquittals and very few harsh sentences. This is another area that merits additional research.

A particular grievance for white citizens in the

Purchase was the garrisoning of significant numbers of African-American troops at Columbus and Paducah, as well as other locations in the region, and the Army's enlistment and protection of escaped slaves, especially at Columbus. Columbus and the area south of it into Fulton County was one of the few areas of Kentucky that grew cotton in the nineteenth century and had, proportionally, more slaves than the Purchase did generally. It was also close to the Tennessee border and the garrison attracted many fugitives, known as contrabands, from slavery there.

The army remained for several years after the end of the war to protect former slaves, along with the Freedmen's Bureau. Reading the correspondence in the Freedmen's Bureau files for the Purchase, another little used source, reveals the extent to which area African Americans were subject to violence and threats of violence and refusal of area magistrates and grand juries to indict whites for crimes, including murder against blacks. It also reveals that there were areas in Hickman County the army felt were too dangerous to patrol.¹⁴

One last new insight or question raised by reading the material in RG 393. While the assassination of Lincoln was noted the day after the shots were fired, telegrams arrived with the news the day the president died, pickets were still sent out on patrol until late July. Finally, in the general order book there is a note that pickets no longer need be posted, the inner guard will be sufficient. We know

¹⁴ Kentucky Freedmen's Bureau Records, RG 105 National Archives.

the War ended on April 9, 1865. It was as the phrase goes all over but the shouting, but did the participants know? Particularly, did Union troops surrounded by a hostile population know the War was over? There is no mention of Appomattox in the letter, telegraph, general, or special order books for Columbus and everything seems to have gone on for several months just as it had been.

In the Purchase the tensions between Union troops and citizens were never far from the surface and was more violent than in other areas of the Commonwealth. Routine patrols were frequently attacked by guerrilla bands or snipers. Pro-southern rhetoric took on a more ominous tone in the Purchase because of the reality of violence that lay behind it. At the onset of the secession crisis, the Purchase and western Kentucky, including the Green and Barren river valleys, had been out of step with the rest of a state that held tenaciously to a strongly Unionist political tradition--inherited largely from Henry Clay and built on the economic ties the state had with the North that were at least as strong as those it had with the South. The Purchase and the Green and Barren river valleys were more recently settled and much less part of that political tradition and also were much more economically tied to the lower South than the rest of Kentucky was.

The Purchase and western Kentucky had welcomed the "invading" Confederates in 1861 and conducted a low key, but pervasive, resistance that caused the Union commanders in the area to treat the citizens as hostile. The Union won control of the rivers and the rails, but they never won the minds and hearts of the people. As the war moved

forward and first emancipation and soon thereafter the enlistment of African American troops became Union policy, the rest of Kentucky came to see itself as occupied by a hostile force. The citizens of the Purchase had had that feeling from the beginning of the War. The experience of the region during the war brings together a great many elements it has in common with other areas, but in important ways the experience of the people of the Purchase was different and deserves much more study than it has received so far.

(An earlier version of this essay was presented to the Jackson Purchase Historical Society at its February 2011 meeting.)

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