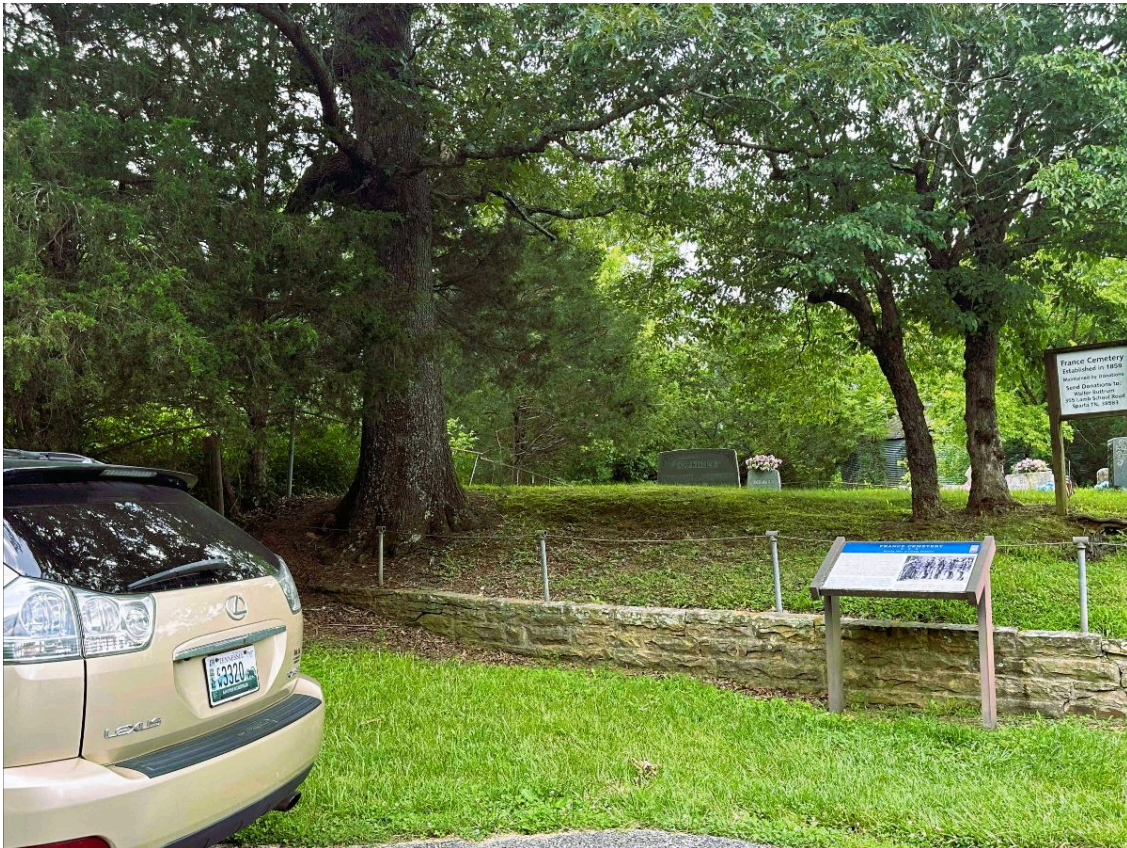




July 2023

## License Plate Travels to The Battle of Calf Killer River (Dug Hill)

### A War of Extermination



*This battlefield supporter traveled to the site of the Battle of Calf Killer River (Dug Hill) in Sparta, White County.*

In his biography of [Champ Ferguson-Confederate Guerilla](#) (Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville, 1942), Thurman Sensing noted the following:

*Guerilla warfare was nothing new to the people of the Cumberland mountains. Their forebears*

*had been trained to such fighting by Indian warfare and had continued the custom in their personal feuds. It was only natural that this would be the accepted method of battle in this region.*

So it was, that in early 1864, unconventional warfare between Union and Confederate sympathizers in the Upper Cumberland Mountains had intensified. Since the Civil War began, guerilla warfare in that region had generated a continual cycle of retribution often with no strategic value beyond terrorizing the home front. The partisan and guerilla forces frequently declared a ‘black flag’ (take no prisoners) principle. Prior to his execution for war crimes, the Confederate guerilla, Champ Ferguson, would offer the deadly explanation that he was only killing those that would ultimately try to kill him later.

In January, 1864 urgent requests had been made to Union authorities from communities in the Upper Cumberlands seeking relief and protection from “rebel bands.” The appeals had gone as far as Maj. Gen. Ulysses Grant who inquired of Military Governor Andrew Johnson if the 5<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Cavalry commanded by Col. William B. Stokes could “be sent Immediately to clear out the country between Carthage & Sparta of guerillas?” The response was remarkably prompt as Stokes dispatched several companies of the 5<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Cavalry on January 30 from Alexandria to begin counter-guerilla operations in the counties of Jackson, Overton, Putnam, Smith, White and Fentress. Most of these troopers had been recruited from those counties, and they knew the land and the families in that region well. After establishing temporary camps in Yankeetown, Stokes located his headquarters in Sparta by February 18.

Stokes ordered numerous scouting parties, and the word spread that the Yankees would take no prisoners in their operations. Accordingly, Confederate forces increased their harassment and bushwhacking activities against the Union cavalry. These partisan and sometimes detached Confederate units included companies from the 25<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Infantry (Col. John Hughes and Capt. Scott Bledsoe), 8<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Cavalry (Capt. George Carter), Shaw’s Cavalry Battalion (Lieut. Col. Oliver Hamilton), Texas Rangers, and Champ Ferguson’s Partisan Rangers. Looking to make a decisive strike and statement against Stokes, the Confederates planned an ambush against one of the Union patrols near Sparta.

On the afternoon of February 22, 1864, a patrol of approximately 100 troopers with the 5<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Cavalry commanded by Capt. James Exum, Capt. Ezekial Bass and Lieut. Enoch Stone were returning to Sparta after scouting for guerilla activity near Cookeville. Marching through Dry Valley on the Old Kentucky Road (Cookeville Road), the Yankee troopers approached a narrow pass along the Calf Killer River near the Dug Hill community. Looking ahead, an advance guard saw two Confederate cavalymen and according to later accounts shouted, “Boys, yonder stand two Confederates. Suppose we get them!” A bugle sounded the double-quick charge, and the 5<sup>th</sup> Tennessee patrol galloped into the pass.



*(Left) Col. John M. Hughes 25<sup>th</sup> Confederate Infantry, Commanded the Confederate Guerilla Force at Calf Killer River (Dug Hill)*



The ambush as set by Col. John Hughes was now sprung. The Union cavalry found themselves on a narrow road bordered by a sheer hillside on their right and the steep banks of the Calfkiller River on the left. The Confederate guerillas closed off the road to the front and back of the column and began a withering fire from multiple directions. Caught in the crossfire, horses spun in confusion as the Yankee troopers fell and tried to find cover for return fire. Some tried to cut their way through the Confederate line on the road while others stumbled down the banks of the Calfkiller River. Still others sought to surrender but reportedly had their throats slit or skulls crushed with large stones by Champ Ferguson and his guerilla band. The ambush now turned into a search and kill operation as Yankee troopers sought hiding places in the woods along the Calfkiller or protection with families and friends that might conceal them.



*Approximate location of the Battle of Calf Killer River (Dug Hill)*

When some of the survivors of the attack made their way back to Sparta that evening, Col. Stokes was dumbfounded and angered with the behavior his troopers, even noting that some should have stayed and died in the ambush at Dug Hill. Preparing for further Confederate attacks against his cavalry, Stokes barricaded some of the streets and buildings in Sparta and ordered pickets to be posted on the edge of town. One of those on picket duty was Private William Countess from Warren County, an ancestor of TCWPA Board member Mike Countess. Countess had been recruited to the 5<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Cavalry by his older brother (J.M. Countess alias John Martin) who had deserted from the Confederate 16<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Infantry the previous year only to later change allegiance and join Stokes' Cavalry. On February 24, Countess and three other cavalymen with Companies G and C observed six Federal cavalymen approaching their post. But it was a ruse—the apparent Yankee cavalry were actually Confederate guerillas with Capt. George Carter's 8<sup>th</sup> Tennessee in uniforms that they had likely taken from dead soldiers with the 5<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Cavalry. Before they could react to the encounter, Countess and his companions were captured and killed—most of them shot in the head.

The bodies of the slain troopers were recovered by Capt. Joseph Blackburn and brought back to Sparta where they were laid side by side on the floor of a store to be viewed by their comrades in the 5<sup>th</sup> Tennessee cavalry. Not surprisingly, oaths of vengeance were taken, and in the quid pro quo world of guerilla warfare more ambushes and bushwhacking would follow. About two weeks later near Monterey in what would become known as “Stokes' Atrocity,” the 5<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Cavalry would burn the home of a Southern sympathizer and kill several unarmed Confederates with Champ Ferguson's Partisan Rangers.

Reports of casualties for the Battle of Calfkiller River (Battle of Dug Hill) vary considerably.

Probably, the most accurate account for losses in the 5<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Cavalry were 21 killed on February 22, and 4 troopers killed at their picket post near Sparta on February 24. Confederate Col. John Hughes would report that only two of his command were wounded. Locals would report finding skeletal remains for years following the battle that may or may not have been accounted for in official records.

By the end of March, 1864 extraordinary correspondence occurred between Col. Stokes and Col. Hughes. Perhaps recognizing that continued warfare was futile and clearing his name of potential allegations of war crimes, Hughes proposed to surrender to Stokes. In his letter to Stokes, Hughes asserted that he was “not to blame for that kind of warfare that is carried on in this country,” and he would “offer a full explanation of the Calf-Killer affair” that would exonerate him. Acknowledging his letter, Stokes responded that he understood that the atrocities at Dug Hill were committed by Champ Ferguson and some of the Texas Rangers. Stokes made the observation that, “The war of extermination was made upon me, and I was determined to retaliate.” And, to be sure Hughes understood his expectations, Stokes closed with the chilling statement, “You will at once comply with this by surrendering, or the war of extermination will continue.” Accordingly, Hughes surrendered his command to Stokes at Sparta on March 30, 1864.





*General Morgan's Cavalry was joined at Sparta by Champ Ferguson, as a guide for Morgan's Invasion into Kentucky. Captain Ferguson and his co-fighters were the only protection the people of the Cumberland and Hickory Valley area had against the Federal guerillas. Ferguson was hanged by the Federals, in Nashville, but by his request, buried in White County.*

This engagement is one of the 122 sites included in TCWPA's Statewide Preservation Plan. Check out more battlefield sites and the new interactive map at <https://www.tcwpa.org/preservation-plan/>.

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