



May 2021

Fight for the Backdoor to Knoxville License Plate to Blount County



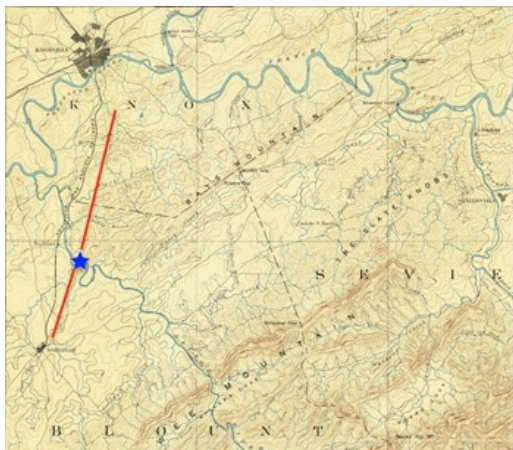
*This battlefield preservation supporter visited the privately-owned site of the **skirmish at Rockford in Blount County**. Here in November 1863, 1500 Federal cavalry under the command of Brig. General William P. Sanders were camped when “Fightin’ Joe” Wheeler’s Confederate cavalry of 4,000 attacked. The site is located along TN Highway 33, north of Maryville and south of Knoxville. Sanders’ encampment area is partially visible to the right of the vehicle in the photo. The map depicts the marker where the vehicle is parked; the skirmish area is circled in blue, and the encampment area is circled in red.*

Access to the “back door” of Knoxville

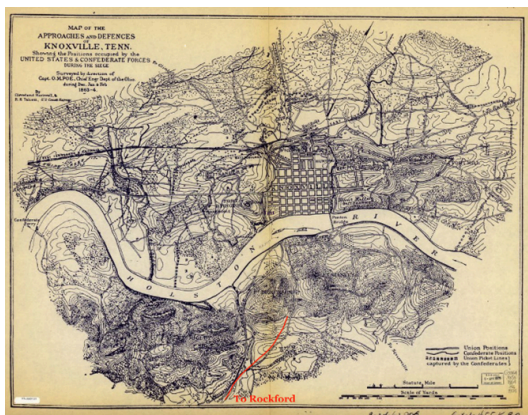
After the Sept. 1863 Confederate victory at Chickamauga Confederate Major General James Longstreet moved towards Knoxville with the goal of driving the Federals out of East Tennessee. Union Brig. General William Sanders commanded the Union cavalry assigned to guard the Little Tennessee River fords from Confederate advances there and throughout Blount County. While the county was mostly Unionist, there were Confederate sympathizers in the area. Blount County Unionists and Home Guards served as scouts, collecting information on Confederate activity in the area and reporting incidents to the Federals.

Constant reports of “elusive Confederates and fear of rising water in Little River” caused Sanders to move his camp and wagon train to **Rockford** north of Maryville, leaving one KY brigade at Maryville. On the morning of November 14th, Wheeler attacked the KY brigade. Sanders and his men, upon hearing the distant sound of guns, “sprang to their saddles without their breakfast and charged to the rescue – so anxious they failed to put out a skirmish line.” Facing withering fire from Wheeler’s forces who anticipated Sanders’ attack, the Federals retreated across the Little River

to the north bank and awaited Wheeler's charge. Wheeler, unaware of the size of Sanders' force did not attack. Later than night Sanders retreated towards Knoxville.



*After skirmishing at Rockford, Wheeler pushed towards Knoxville battling a stubborn Union cavalry along the way. When the Confederates reached **Stock Creek** on the Blount-Knox County line, at the site pictured above, they found the bridge partially destroyed and the creek too deep for the horses to ford. Sanders positioned his cavalry on high ground on the opposite bank. Wheeler dismounted half his force and crossed the creek under cover of fire from his artillery. Despite meeting rifle and cannon fire from the Federals, Wheeler was able to push back the Federals, forcing them to retreat. After repairing the bridge, Wheeler's troops moved toward Knoxville where he again engaged Sanders' troops.*



*As Wheeler approached Knoxville, he confronted not only Sanders' Cavalry but troops and artillery from Knoxville. Additionally, he encountered the impossibly steep slopes of a 300-foot-high ridge and earthworks in progress for the future Fort Dickerson. The 1864 topo map depicts the slopes and ridges across the river from Knoxville. After exchanging fire and assessing the large number of Federals, Wheeler was convinced his task was impossible and "the **back door** had slammed in his face."*

Though Wheeler's Cavalry swept away Union positions along the Little River at Rockford, the Union defenders slowed his pursuit to Knoxville. After Wheeler's encounter of the Federals at the well-defended bluffs across the river from Knoxville Wheeler retreated and joined Gen. Longstreet's march to Knoxville and the **Battle of Fort Sanders**. With the approach of General William T. Sherman's 25,000 reinforcements a few days later – all hopes of Confederate reoccupation of Knoxville were dashed. The "**front door**" was also closed.

Special thanks to TCWPA past president and member, Dorothy Kelly, for sharing her expertise and narrative "The Civil War in Blount County" 1998.

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