



March 2022

Defending the River

License Plate on the Road to Fort Defiance



This battlefield supporter visited Fort Defiance which is located on top of a hill in Clarksville, Montgomery County. This fort was established in 1861 and named Fort Sevier after Clarksville pioneer Valentine Sevier. The fort was renamed Fort Bruce after Colonel Sander D. Bruce who expanded the fort and renamed for the third time as Fort Defiance.

In September 1861, the Confederate defense line in the western theatre extended from Columbus, Kentucky to Cumberland Gap in East Tennessee. It included most of the Cumberland River and protected the Memphis, Clarksville, and Louisville Railroad, as well as the major supply base at Nashville. The three small forts constructed at Clarksville were integral parts of this perimeter.

Confederate Gen. Albert S. Johnston ordered West Point-trained engineer Maj. Jeremy F. Gilmer to **"arrange the works for the defense...at Dover, Clarksville and Nashville."** Gilmer hired an experienced civilian, Edward Sayers, to execute the construction. Sayers constructed Fort Sevier on a bluff located 200 feet overlooking the Cumberland and Red rivers, Fort Clark located to the south where the two rivers merged, and Fort Terry was located northeast on the Red River. In January 1862, Sayers reported, "work progressing very well now; 200 slaves and 50 soldiers at work; 24-pounders mounted; one 12-pounder also mounted."

After the fall of Fort Donelson on February 16, 1862, the Union navy headed upstream for Clarksville. Flag Officer Andrew H. Foote found the fort deserted and **flying a white flag**. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant ordered the other earthworks destroyed but spared Fort Sevier. In December 1862, Col. Sanders D. Bruce's brigade expanded the fort and occupied it for the rest of the war. Renamed Fort Bruce, it provided a **safe haven for local freedmen**, many of whom joined the U.S. Colored

Troops (USCT). The fort would be renamed one more time, Fort Defiance, while the origin of the name is unclear. After the Civil War ended the property became overgrown and mostly forgotten.



Fort Bruce, from Benson J. Lossing's Pictorial Field Book of the Civil War, 1868.

In 1982, preservation work began at Fort Defiance. Today it features a 1,500 square foot interpretive Center which features exhibits, well-preserved outer earthworks, a powder magazine, and gun platforms. The center interprets the early part of the Civil War in Middle Tennessee and life under Federal occupation. For more information on the preservation of Fort Defiance visit <https://www.cityofclarksville.com/461/Fort-Defiance-Civil-War-Park-Interpretiv>.

SEND US YOUR PHOTOS!

If you have a “Save our Battlefields” license plate, please consider stopping by and taking a photo of your plate at a battlefield or other battle-related Civil War site in your area... we’re especially interested in sites that don’t always get the historians’ spotlight! If you’re looking for a site in your area, we can help find one nearby – just email us - or if you’ve already got that special photo please send to info@tcwpa.org.



You can purchase the license plate at your County Clerk's office for \$36.00 plus your regular registration fees. Proceeds from the sale of the plate will help protect and interpret important battlefields in Tennessee.

For more information, visit: tcwpa.org/license-plate

The Tennessee Civil War Preservation Association preserves and interprets Tennessee's Civil War Battlefields and their contributing landscapes for present and future generations.

Become a member: tcwpa.org/join Make a donation: tcwpa.org/donate [Purchase a license plate](https://tcwpa.org/license-plate)



Copyright © 2022 Tennessee Civil War Preservation Association, All rights reserved.