



September 2022

License Plate to the Battle of Thompson's Station



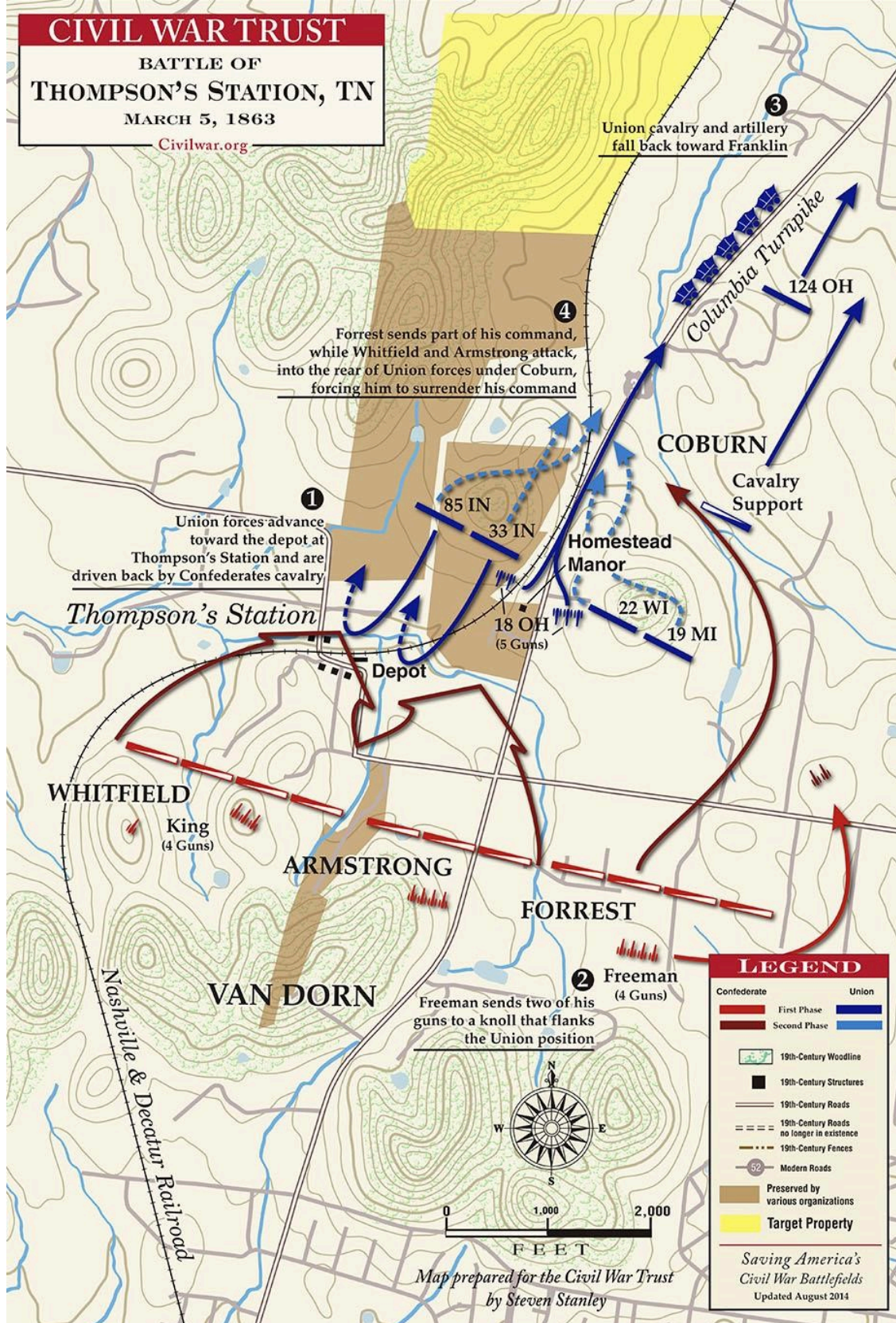
This battlefield supporter traveled to Thompson's Station which is located just north of Spring Hill. On March 5, 1863, Nathan Bedford Forrest's cavalry under Gen. Earl Van Dorn collided with a strong Union force, hoping to make up for their defeat at Dover. They drove Union troops back and captured 1,221 men.

Following his defeat at The Battle of Stones River (December 31, 1862 - January 2, 1863), Braxton Bragg retreated from Murfreesboro, eventually positioning his Army of Tennessee about 25 miles south of Murfreesboro with large troop concentrations near Shelbyville and Tullahoma. His cavalry covered his front and flanks along an arc stretching from McMinnville to Columbia. Meanwhile, General Rosecrans sought to secure his supply route and build up supplies for the intended advance of his Army of the Cumberland towards Chattanooga in the spring. Rosecrans also sought to improve both the quantity and quality of his mounted arm before beginning the campaign.

Meanwhile, General Joseph Johnston, commanding the Confederate forces in the West, decided to reinforce Bragg by sending Earl Van Dorn and his cavalry to Middle Tennessee. On February 12, Rosecrans received the alarming intelligence that Van Dorn and his cavalry, estimated to be 6,000-7,000 strong, were on the way. On March 3, eager for information on Van Dorn's whereabouts, and fearing an attack on Franklin, Rosecrans' Chief of Staff, and future President, James A. Garfield, sent an order to Gen. Charles C. Gilbert at Franklin to send an infantry brigade with cavalry support towards Spring Hill to forage and gather information. Gilbert chose the brigade of Col. John Coburn, reinforced by about 600 cavalry under Col. Thomas Jordan along with the 18th Ohio Battery of six Rodman guns and the 124th Ohio Infantry. Coburn's force, reported as 2,837 men, set out towards Spring Hill on March 4. At the same time, Van Dorn, seeking information about the Union forces at Franklin, sent the cavalry division of General William H. Jackson on a reconnaissance toward Franklin.

The two forces collided on March 4th a few miles south of Franklin. After a brief skirmish and an exchange of artillery fire the Confederates withdrew towards Thompson's Station. Casualties were light, but Coburn lost one of his Rodman guns, which had to be returned to Franklin due to a broken axle. Coburn pursued the Confederates for a short distance but due to the lateness of the hour he went into camp a few miles north of Thompson's Station.

The next morning, March 5, 1863, Coburn proceeded towards Thompson's Station. Unknown to him, Van Dorn had brought up the bulk of his forces, and had three cavalry brigades lying in wait just south of Thompson's Station. Coburn took up a position on two hills straddling the Columbia Pike, the one on the right just behind Homestead Manor, and the other directly across the Pike, just north of today's Thompson Station Church.



American Battlefield Trust map of battle at Thompson's Station.

Coburn immediately came under fire from Captain Houston King's artillery battery positioned on the hills behind Thompson's Station. Being unaware of the presence of Whitfield's brigade, positioned in concealment behind a stone wall, Coburn ordered an assault by the 85th and 33rd Indiana regiments in order to drive Confederate skirmishers out of Thompson's Station and dislodge King's battery, if possible. As the advance approached the stone wall, Whitfield's troops rose from concealment and charged the Indiana troops, chasing them back up the hill. Whitfield's troops were repulsed, and Van Dorn ordered two more charges which were also repulsed by the stubborn Indiana regiments.

Meanwhile, on the east side of the Pike, Forrest's troops were in motion. After dislodging the Union cavalry from a hill on the left front of the Union line, he placed Freeman's artillery on the hill where it could enfilade the left of the Union line. The 19th Michigan was forced to withdraw to a more sheltered position whereupon the regiments of Starnes and Edmondson began an assault on the 22nd Wisconsin. Forrest's other regiments began returning from their positions on the Lewisburg Pike, threatening an attack on Coburn's left rear. At this point, whether through confusion about orders or in disregard of orders, the Union cavalry, artillery, and a portion of the 22nd Wisconsin began to leave the field, retreating back up the Columbia Pike towards Franklin, taking the 124th Ohio and the ammunition train with them. Despite efforts by Coburn's aides and Colonel Uteley of the 22nd Wisconsin, a large part of Coburn's force left the field, leaving the remaining regiments to their fate. That fate was not long in coming as two of Forrest's regiments reached the rear of Coburn's position and more of Van Dorn's troops arrived and attacked Coburn's right. Seeing no alternative and seeking to avoid needless bloodshed, Coburn surrendered. Union casualty figures vary, but it appears that approximately 293 were killed or wounded while 1,221 were captured. 85 of the captured soldiers died of exposure while on their way to Libby Prison in Richmond, Virginia. Confederate casualties were heavy, with 357 being reported as killed or wounded.

Homestead Manor, a house built by Francis Giddens in 1819 and now on the National Register of Historic Places, was at the center of the battle, and was used as a hospital after the battle.



Left Photo: On March 5, 1863, Homestead Manor was the home of Lt. Thomas Banks of the 11th Tennessee Cavalry who fought in the battle. Right Photo: Aaron Sanders, Property Manager of Homestead Manor for Hope UC Nashville holding a picture of Alice Thompson in the basement of Homestead Manor. Thompson's Station is named for Alice's father Dr. Elijah Thompson who donated the land for the town.

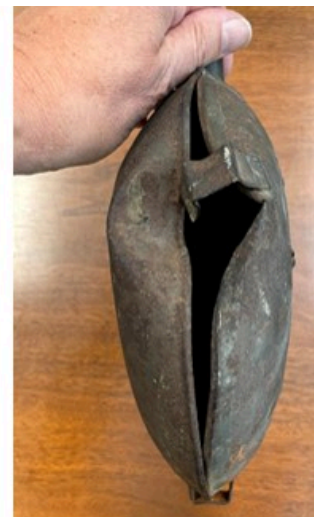
The Homestead Manor property is owned by Hope Unlimited Church of Nashville. The first floor of the historic house is open to the public Monday through Saturday. During the battle, as the Third Arkansas Cavalry was attacking near the house, the flag bearer was killed. Alice Thompson, a young woman of sixteen who lived nearby and was taking shelter with the Banks family in the basement during the battle, rushed out of the basement and picked up the flag, waving it to encourage the troops. Col. Samuel G. Earle of the Third Arkansas reportedly yelled "Boys, a woman has your flag." According to the account, the Arkansas troops rallied and drove the Union troops back. Col. Earle was killed shortly thereafter. He was buried on the grounds of Homestead Manor, possibly in the Giddens family cemetery, but was moved from Thompson's Station to the Spring Hill Cemetery along with 33 other Confederate soldiers in 1866.

The flag that Alice picked up that day is known as the Van Dorn battle flag. In 1862 General Earl Van Dorn ordered that all regiments under his command should use this flag. The flag of the Third Arkansas Cavalry was requisitioned by Col. Earle on September 10, 1862.



Example of the Van Dorn battle flag. A similar flag was carried by the Third Arkansas Cavalry and picked up by Alice Thompson at Thompson's Station. This picture shows the actual flag of the Fourth Missouri Infantry from the American Civil War Museum in Richmond, Virginia.

There are several stories of premonitions of death at Thompson's Station. Captain Abner Floyd of Company A, 85th Indiana and Captain Alfred Dysart of Company D, 4th Tennessee Cavalry both mentioned premonitions of death to comrades and both died at Thompson's Station. For Captain William S. McLemore of Company F of the 4th Tennessee, things worked out better. After the war, McLemore, who was born in Thompson's Station, told his children that he went into the Battle of Thompson's Station with a feeling that he was going to be shot. This was the only time in the war that he had that feeling. During the battle, McLemore was hit and felt what he thought was blood trickling down his side. Upon further examination, he realized the bullet had gone through his canteen and what he felt was not blood but was water from the canteen that had been warmed by the sun. His children recounted how McLemore kept the canteen his entire life. McLemore eventually reached the rank of Colonel and after the war became a Judge and later started a law firm called McLemore and Richardson in Murfreesboro with his son-in-law John E. Richardson. The story might seem too fantastic to be true were it not for the fact that McLemore's canteen is still in the possession of his great-great and great-great-great grandsons who run the successor law firm to McLemore and Richardson.



John R. Rucker, Jr. (left) and Rich Rucker, great-great and great-great-great grandsons of William S. McLemore, with McLemore's canteen from Thompson's Station. The portrait behind them is McLemore's partner and son-in-law John E. Richardson.

No account of Thompson's Station would be complete without recounting the story of Forrest's horse Roderick. As Forrest lead two of his regiments on a wide sweep to get around Coburn's left, Forrest's horse Roderick was wounded three times. Forrest traded horses with his son Lt. William Forrest and William took Roderick to the rear to get medical attention. After Roderick's saddle and bridle were removed, Roderick heard Forrest's voice and ran back to the scene of the battle where he received a fourth wound that proved to be fatal. Forrest ordered that Roderick be buried on the field where he fell. A statue of Roderick was placed in the field on March 5, 2008 as part of the town's commemoration of the 145th anniversary of the battle. Interestingly, the location of Roderick's burial provides important information on where Forrest's flanking force crossed the Columbia Pike during the battle, and that location appears to be somewhat further north than shown on most maps of the battle.



Statue of Forrest's horse Roderick on the grounds of the future Roderick Place development in Thompson's Station.

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