

# A Battle Series

“James Connell, a 2011 summer intern at the *Nicholas Chronicle*, researched and wrote about the history of the Battle of Carnifex Ferry. The history series commemorates the 150th year since the battle was fought – September 10, 1861. The series was printed in advance of the battle reenactment, September 10-11, 2011.

“The *Nicholas Chronicle* has served the heart of West Virginia since 1880. The West Virginia State Park system extends a ‘thank you’ to the newspaper for sharing the series...”



## *First in a series — Civil War Weekend Sept. 10 & 11, 2011 at Carnifex Ferry State Park* **Precursor to the Battle of Carnifex Ferry**

**By James Connell**

*Nicholas Chronicle Summer Intern*

In the early part of the American Civil War in 1861, western Virginia was treacherous, contested territory. Despite housing a great deal of Confederate sympathizers, as well as the Confederate capital of Richmond, Virginia's western portion was considerably different from the central and eastern portion. There were few slaves in western

Virginia, and many of the citizens supported the Union. Nonetheless, there were many dangerous guerilla forces that occupied the area that claimed to side with the Confederacy, but would steal from and kill members of either side for their own pleasure or needs.

This didn't stop both sides from attempting to claim the western Virginia area as their own. In the summer of 1861, the Union

had already gotten a leg up on the competition by securing the Ohio River, which bordered the state to the North and West. The Confederates sought to maintain control of the western portion of the state by sending former Governor General Henry A. Wise and his forces to occupy Tyler Mountain, west of Charleston. When General George McClellan learned of Wise's occupation of Tyler Mountain,

he sent General Jacob Cox on an expedition with 3,000 men to oppose Wise.

General Wise had a force larger than Cox's, but he acted in a very defensive manner. He began his campaign with over 3,500 men and, thanks to the strong Confederate presence in the Kanawha Valley at the time, was able to gain the services of around 500 militiamen, putting the size of his men to around

4,000. But, despite being stronger in number, he was driven out of Tyler Mountain on July 24 by Cox's men. Wise's forces retreated east passed Charleston into the mountains. Cox then occupied Charleston, but did not stop there.

General Wise retreated east all the way to Lewisburg to rendezvous with fellow former Governor John Floyd and his forces. It was here that many of Wise's men

contracted measles, which left them immobilized for over a month. General Cox went on to occupy Gauley Bridge, as it was an ideal spot to receive supplies from the river. Also at this time, General W. S. Rosecrans was assembling an even greater force than Cox's in Clarksburg. Fighting would cease during late July and early August, but it would not stay this way for long.

*Second in a series — Civil War Weekend Sept. 10 & 11, 2011 at Carnifex Ferry State Park*

## Precursor to the Battle of Carnifex Ferry: The Battle of Knives and Forks

By James Connell  
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It was now August, 1861. On the Union side, General Jacob Cox and his men were occupying Gauley Bridge until further notice, and General W.S. Rosecrans was busy building up a formidable force in Clarksburg. On the other hand, General Henry A. Wise and his men were stationed in Lewisburg, where General John Floyd and "Floyd's Brigade" were stationed as well. While Wise's men were recovering from an outbreak of measles, Wise and Floyd discussed their next move. Floyd had been given the

rank of Brigadier-General, which made him Wise's senior in rank. The two had never gotten along, and this made it difficult for them to agree on their next move.

General Floyd was determined to move into the Kanawha Valley to combat General Cox's forces at Gauley Bridge, but, as stated before, Wise's tactics were defensive in nature. He felt that it would be the better decision to draw out the enemy from their current position before confronting them, instead of trekking to their position to combat a rested and potentially more numerous army. With neither side compromising, Floyd prepared

to lead an attack without the help of Wise, but when General Robert E. Lee learned of this, he ordered cooperation from both sides and to undergo the plans of Floyd because of his higher rank.

After many of General Wise's forces were once again ready for duty, they, accompanied by General Floyd and his men, moved west in the direction of the Kanawha. When they arrived east of Carnifex Ferry, Floyd ordered Wise to send a scouting group to the area north of Carnifex Ferry, and also a group west towards Gauley Bridge. Both groups encountered the enemy and turned back. The enemy

encountered east of Gauley Bridge was most likely General Cox and his men, whereas the opposition north of Carnifex Ferry was Colonel E.B. Tyler and the 7th Ohio Infantry, which had been stationed there just days prior to General Wise's scouting mission.

Upon the return of the scouts, General Wise and General Floyd rendezvoused and decided that Wise was to confront the enemy at Carnifex Ferry. When Wise arrived there, they found that one of the ferryboats had been sunk and the other had been set adrift down the river. Needless to say, this was the work of E.B. Tyler and his men, and

they had headed north. Floyd then ordered Wise to hold the position south of Carnifex Ferry and, against the advice of Wise, attempted to cross the Gauley River by means of the sunken ferry boat. Floyd and his men successfully crossed, though four of the men drowned.

After crossing the river, General Floyd and his men engaged Colonel E.B. Tyler and the 7th Ohio at Keslers Cross Lanes. Tyler had been completely taken by surprise. At the time, the 7th Ohio were enjoying breakfast. The ambush left one of Tyler's men dead and 20 wounded. On top of that, Floyd managed to capture 96 of the men. Tyler and

his remaining men retreated west towards Charleston. At the time, the takeover of the Carnifex Ferry area by Floyd was fairly significant. This area had been used a part of a chain of communication from General Cox at Gauley Bridge to General Rosecrans at Clarksburg.

After learning about what had happened at Keslers Cross Lanes, Wise entitled the ambush, "The Battle of Knives and Forks."

Information from this article was obtained from George A. Hall's *Civilian War in West Virginia: The Moccasin Rangers* — available for purchase at the Nicholas Chronicle office in Summersville for \$18.61.

*Third in a series — Civil War Weekend Sept. 10 & 11, 2011 at Carnifex Ferry State Park*

## The Battle of Carnifex Ferry: The Skirmish at Gauley Bridge

By James Connell  
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It was late summer 1861, in the mountainous region of western Virginia. Autumn would soon arrive, which would mean the dying of local flora, colder days, and shorter time of daylight. Along with the shortening of daylight, the patience of the Union with the lingering Confederate presence in the area was growing short as well. Confederate Brigadier-General John Floyd had successfully driven Colonel E.B. Tyler and the 7th Ohio Infantry out of the Carnifex Ferry area and west to Charleston. The closest Union forces to the area were now that of

General Jacob Cox and his men at Gauley Bridge, around 15 miles west-southwest.

General Floyd left Keslers Cross Lanes after the ambush on the 7th Ohio and returned to Carnifex Ferry. Despite the victory, Floyd knew that it was only a matter of time before Union forces would combat him in an attempt to retake the ferry. Knowing this, Floyd asked General Henry A. Wise to reinforce him there. When Wise heard of the order, he declined. His forces were still shorthanded by illness, and on top of that, he needed to utilize all of the able bodies he had at his disposal to hold his position at Dogwood Gap, south of the New River.

After declining General Floyd's

orders, Floyd heard news of a Union force approaching him from the north and assumed it was led by General W.S. Rosecrans. With this in mind and not much time to spare, Floyd once again ordered Wise's reinforcement at Carnifex Ferry. Unhappy with the second order but also understanding of its importance, he gathered all able-bodied men and marched for Floyd's position. Wise and his men had already traveled half the distance before receiving word that Floyd did not feel that Wise's help was necessary. Wise's men were weary from travel, so instead of marching back to their original station south of the New River, they felt that it would be best to attempt to take Hawk's Nest so that they

could utilize the mills there for sustenance and also secure Miller's Ferry.

In this attempt, General Wise and his forces faced little opposition, and successfully took Hawk's Nest and the surrounding area. Here, they recuperated and prepared for their next move. Wise was unsure of the Union's next plan of attack, but he knew that recent scare of a Union attack at Carnifex Ferry was premature but was most certainly plausible. With General Jacob Cox and his men occupying Gauley Bridge and General W.S. Rosecrans organizing a force to the north, they could converge onto General Floyd's position from the north and the west, leaving Floyd little to no chance of holding the ferry. With

this in mind, Wise felt it necessary to take action.

General Wise's force, as it stood at the time, would not be able to combat General Cox's men and succeed in a battle, but he was able to gain and utilize a local militia. With Wise's force now considerably larger, he marched northwest of Hawk's Nest to Gauley Bridge. Wise ordered his troops to attack Cox from the north side of the river, while he ordered the militia to flank Cox from the south of the river. This would turn out to be a crucial error for Wise. Without that order, he could have possessed a numerical advantage over Cox and possibly driven him out of Gauley Bridge. Instead, the militia was rendered nearly useless, as they

could not cross the river onto Cox's position and only manage to set up minimal artillery, which fired only a handful of shells at the Union forces.

Once he saw that the battle was a lost cause, General Wise withdrew his troops and the militia withdrew also. On that same day, General Rosecrans had finished putting together a strong force of his own and began his expedition south toward Carnifex Ferry. It is possible that after Cox got a look at Wise's forces, he assumed that General Floyd's force was similar in number and informed Rosecrans. When General Floyd learned of Rosecrans' expedition, he began setting up for a potential battle.



*Fourth in a series — Civil War Weekend Sept. 10 & 11, 2011 at Carnifex Ferry State Park*

## **The Battle of Carnifex Ferry: Preparing for Battle**

**By James Connell  
Nicholas Chronicle Summer  
Intern**

It was early September in western Virginia, 1861, and the Confederacy's attempt at controlling the western section of the state housing their own capital was beginning to look bleak. General Henry Wise managed to control Hawk's Nest on the New River but failed to capture Gauley Bridge from General Jacob Cox and the Union. Fellow Confederate General John Floyd was currently holding Carnifex Ferry west of Summersville, but as he surely knew, it would not go uncontested by their enemies for very long. On September 9, Floyd received news that Union General W.S. Rosecrans had left Clarksburg with three brigades to either meet with General Cox at Gauley Bridge, or to make

an assault on Carnifex Ferry. With this in mind, Floyd, once again, asked for Wise's help.

General Wise, being defensive minded, knew that he would need all of his men to make sure Hawk's Nest was occupied. He felt that it would be very possible that General Cox could plan an attack on Hawk's Nest, which would give the Union the ability to combat General Floyd from the north and the south. For these reasons, Wise once again declined Floyd's orders. Floyd then began setting up defenses with what men and artillery he had. Roy Bird Cook of the West Virginia Review in November, 1931, had this to say about Floyd's defenses at Carnifex Ferry:

"The defenses constructed consisted of a parapet battery 350 feet long in the front and center, flanked by breastworks laid in a direct line with the front, and

curving back to the ends, which rested on the cliffs along the river. On the left a double line of breastworks was constructed. A trench protected the battery epaulment. The interior afforded cover against infantry fire and, to some extent, against artillery fire. Some protection was afforded in front by a deep ravine, but at the right and left there were cleared spaces on slight ridges protected by abatis. The whole was protected by forest trees and much undergrowth. The ferry road at that time ran into the ravine, debouched into a cross ravine, in line with the parapet two hundred yards away. A small by-road led to one side. It was about a mile and one-half down to the site of the ferry."

Obviously, Floyd was not taking the threat of Cox and Rosecrans lightly. The area fortified was being called "Camp Gauley."

Meanwhile, on the Union side, General Rosecrans was leading his three brigades from Clarksburg, through Sutton, with a wagon train nearly five miles long. They set up camp on the night of the 9th at present-day Muddlety, merely miles away from Summersville. When Confederate General John McCausland, who was stationed in Summersville at the time, learned of Rosecrans and his three brigades approaching his position, he withdrew back to "Camp Gauley." Rosecrans and his men would not stay at Muddlety for long. On the morning of the 10th, at around 4:00 am, they left their temporary camp for Summersville.

When General Rosecrans and his men were met with no resistance at Summersville, they continued southwest towards what would become Gad and Sparks (and what would eventually become the

Summersville Lake). When they reached Salmon Run near Hughes Ferry on the Gauley River, the second brigade was attacked by a Confederate detachment, which was easily driven away with no injuries or casualties. Rosecrans and his men were then able to cross the river via the ferry and continue towards Keslers Cross Lanes.

The Union forces were still unsure of General Floyd's exact whereabouts, so they proceeded towards Keslers Cross Lanes with caution. Rosecrans halted the expedition a mile outside of Keslers Cross Lanes and ordered his first brigade to scout the area around them and towards Carnifex Ferry. It did not take the scout party long to clash with another Confederate detachment; this one camped alongside the road from Keslers Cross Lanes to Carnifex Ferry. The detachment retreated towards the

ferry, and Rosecrans ordered the brigade to scout farther down the road.

Not 300 yards down the road, they were met by heavy Confederate resistance, to which they returned fire. It was clear to them by the number of Confederate soldiers and sophisticated defenses that they had located Floyd and his forces. General Henry Benham of the first brigade sent a courier back to General Rosecrans and requested more men. The Battle of Carnifex Ferry had officially begun!

Information from this article was obtained from George A. Hall's *Civilian War in West Virginia: The Moccasin Rangers* — available for purchase at *The Nicholas Chronicle* office in Summersville for \$18.61.

*Fifth in a series — Civil War Weekend Sept. 10 & 11, 2011 at Carnifex Ferry State Park*

## **The Battle of Carnifex Ferry**

**By James Connell  
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The battle for Carnifex Ferry was now underway as the forces of Union General W.S. Rosecrans clashed with the defenses of Confederate General John Floyd. The time of initiation was around 3:15 in the afternoon on September 10th, 1861. General Benham, overseeing the First Brigade of Rosecrans' three brigades, had sent for more men that were stationed to the east of Keslers Cross Lanes. Colonel Lytle and the 10th Ohio Infantry arrived at the battle and attempted to flank the Confederate

troops. While doing so, Colonel Lytle suffered a gunshot to his leg and the same shot mortally wounded his horse. He was then taken to the Patteson House near the battle where, despite the house being pelted with fire from both sides, he managed to recover and eventually even became a Brigadier-General.

Colonel Lytle's 10th Ohio was one of the most critically hit Union companies in the battle. John Fitzgibbons, the state color-bearer, got his right hand shot off in Lytle's flanking attempt. After the wounding, he said "Never mind me, boys; save the flag.", and then fell mortally wounded. National color-

bearer Sergeant Luke O'Connor carried the flag from then on, until he was also mortally wounded. The flag eventually ended up in the hands of Captain Stephen McGroaty. In the end, the 10th Ohio lost nine men and fifty others were wounded.

The first couple hours of the battle consisted mainly of a lack of Union organization and order aside from the 10th Ohio's assault. Inaccurate artillery and infantry fire from both sides rendered little results. After the 10th Ohio's flanking attempt, a brigade lead by Colonel W.S. Smith and consisting of members of the 28th, 13th 23rd, and 12th Ohio infantries began a

flanking assault to the right of the Confederate defenses. The assault was not as effective as it could have been, as the official orders to engage the enemy did not come until dusk, when visibility was very low. Their artillery units did manage to do some damage on the Confederate defense structures. Colonel Lowe also led some of the 12th Ohio in a flanking attempt to the left of the Confederate defenses. Before the assault could even begin, Lowe suffered a gunshot to the forehead and was dead within minutes.

General Rosecrans now lead the remaining men that he had control of in a general assault, but

with the news of Lowe's death, Lytle's injury, and the many men that were left without order in the surrounding woods, Rosecrans' men were uneasy. The many wounded that were being brought back did not help calm them either. Some of the men managed an assault on Confederate defenses and made it up to their barriers, but eventually retreated and lost two men with eight others wounded. Meanwhile, Colonel Smith's brigade managed to penetrate Confederate lines, but lost two men with twenty-nine others wounded.

By nightfall, gunfire had ceased for the most part. It was so dark that there was little to no visibility.

Out of confusion, the 13th and 28th Ohio infantries actually fired on each other for a short period of time. Eventually, General Rosecrans regained order of his men and they retreated back to their camp. In the end, the Union suffered 17 casualties with 141 wounded, while the Confederates lost only a few men with 30 wounded.

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# BATTLE OF CARNIFEX FERRY, WV

September 10, 1861

