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... “
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
Nicholas Chronicle Summer Intern

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 90 of the men. Tyler and his remaining men retreated west towards Charleston. At the time, the transportation of the Carnifex Ferry area by Floyd was fairly insignificant. 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
Nicholas Chronicle Summer Intern

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 take 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 short-handed by illness, and on top of that, he needed to utilize all of the able-bodied men 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. Yellow Confederate General John Floyd was currently holding Carnifex Ferry west of Summersville, but as surely knew, it would not go unconnected 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 his men, and decided to agree. Crowning off 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 camp on the night of the 9th at present-day Middletown, nearly miles away from Summersville. When Confederato 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 Middletown 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 met with no resistance at Summersville, they continued southeast towards what would become Gadd 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 further 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!

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

The Battle of Carnifex Ferry

By James Connell
Nicholas Chronicle Summer Intern

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 Lyle and the 10th Ohio Infantry arrived at the battle and attempted to flank the Confederate troops. While doing so, Colonel Lyle 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 Lyle’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 Lyle’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 McGroarty. In the end, the 10th Ohio lost nine men and fifty others were wounded.

The first coupling 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 infantry 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, Lyle’s injury, and the 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 infantry 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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