

1964

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Recommended Citation

Stickle, Arndt, "UA37/37 The Ruins of a Confederate Fort on the Campus of Western Kentucky State College" (1964). *Faculty/Staff Personal Papers*. Paper 55.

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THE RUINS OF A CONFEDERATE FORT ON THE
CAMPUS OF WESTERN KENTUCKY STATE COLLEGE

by
Arndt M. Stickles

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The casual reader of Kentucky history today would naturally inquire why a Confederate fort was ever begun in American Civil War time and partially completed as far north as Bowling Green, Kentucky. When he takes a glance at our Census of 1860, however, and finds that there were almost 225,000 slaves in the state then, distributed so that each county had some and also that there were more slave holders here than in any other state in the Union except Virginia, he then realizes why slavery and slave extension, coupled with the old question of State Rights, had been causing so much controversy in recent debates and elections in Kentucky and elsewhere.

In the state election of 1859, Kentucky chose for governor Beriah Magoffin, a man who might have been an average executive in normal times, but who proved now to be weak and vacillating in the impending crisis the state faced when the Union was breaking and soon eleven states had seceded. Magoffin soon found his Southern sympathy blocked by pro-Union legislatures, and was virtually forced to resign. In the voting for President in 1860, Kentucky gave a new party, the Constitutional Union, its electoral vote; but only three other states did. It is very interesting that Lincoln received but 1,360 votes in that election. The business interests, which meant many of the large slave holders, tried

earnestly to preserve neutrality between North and South, but so intense was the feeling in the state that neutrality proved a miserable failure. By the mid-year of 1861, invasion by both sides was imminent, and it was ominous that Kentucky would be a battle-ground.

General Albert Sydney Johnston, a native of Mason County, Kentucky, and a West Point graduate, was in September, 1861, appointed by the Confederate government as regional commander of Tennessee, Kentucky, and other southwest territory of the Confederacy. Johnston soon issued from Nashville an order to Brig. Gen. Simon Bolivar Buckner to occupy Bowling Green on September 18, 1861.

Bowling Green, in 1861, was a small country town of about 2500 inhabitants. Although 65 miles north of Nashville, it was considered as an outpost of that city and needed to be well fortified. General Johnston made Bowling Green his headquarters and took charge of the troops here. The Confederate command rightly felt that its greatest danger at Bowling Green lay from the Union army stationed on Green River north of Munfordville. To be safe from capture, Johnston, soon after Buckner's arrival, began the fort on what is today called College Heights.

Other protective outposts for the defense of Nashville were two forts in extreme northwest Tennessee to guard the interior of the state and the rail connection with Memphis. On the banks of the Tennessee River was built Fort Henry; the other fort was Donelson on the Cumberland River. These forts were about 12 miles apart. It was Brig. Gen. U.S. Grant, a West Point graduate who

had left his position in the Union army under a cloud, who was the first to see the value of these forts if captured by the Union army. He was intrusted with a small army of probably 15,000¹ infantry, and was assisted by Flag Officer A.H. Foote with seven small mortar boats and ironclads. General Grant ordered an attack on Ft. Henry, February 6, 1862, and Foote's gunboats captured it before Grant arrived with the infantry. Nearly all the garrison in Ft. Henry had escaped to Ft. Donelson. General Johnston ordered General Buckner at Bowling Green to go with a small army of infantry to help reinforce Ft. Donelson; he arrived there February 11. In command of the Confederate troops at Donelson were Gen. John B. Floyd and General Gideon J. Pillow. After a few days of fighting Generals Pillow and Floyd deserted their armies, and the command fell to General Buckner, who surrendered the fort to General Grant on February 16, 1862. The loss to the South of the forts was a very serious blow; in reality, it put all of Tennessee into Union hands for a time. Soon after the fall of Ft. Henry, the Confederates began to evacuate Bowling Green. When it had become evident that Ft. Donelson also would soon fall, large quantities of war materiel were burned, and the bridge across Barren River was destroyed before the officers and remaining troops, still in Bowling Green, fled to Nashville when General O.M. Mitchell of the Union army from Munfordville, began shelling the city. This meant Union army control of the city as well as the unfinished fort here--in fact, Union control for all this area of Kentucky.

¹It should be stated that the actual number of men is still disputed.

In 1906, the Kentucky Legislature enacted a law creating two State Normal Schools, one for the eastern part of the state, the other for the western section. The law also provided for the appointment of a commission to locate the schools. For Western Kentucky, Bowling Green was selected, and a Board of Regents chose Henry Hardin Cherry as the first president for the Western Kentucky State Normal School. The new Normal School received from the city of Bowling Green the building on College Street which after a few years was sold to the Bowling Green Business University. The building, which is still standing, was recently partially burned. The young State Normal school grew rapidly and soon needed a new site where it could expand.

In its unfinished condition, the fort and all the remainder of the Hill, after a long period of neglect, became the property of Prof. B. F. Cabell, who had organized a stock company to found a college for young women. Professor Cabell landscaped only a small fringe of the Hill along Fifteenth Street. On this small area was built a stone house for his own home; also, he erected a large three-story brick building which served as a dormitory and provided classrooms for the college he founded. The new school was called Potter College, and it was ready for student enrollment in the fall of 1889.

Except for the immediate surroundings of the buildings above mentioned, the remainder of the Hill was allowed to continue its inglorious neglect. The numerous dead cedars, bushes of all sorts intermingled with greenbriers, and the remains of an abandoned limestone quarry, all were evidence of travesty and of being a first-class nuisance to Bowling Green's future progress.

The Board of Regents for Western State Normal School wanted a new location site. Professor Cabell offered to sell the board Potter College, his home, and the whole Hill owned by him and his company. In spite of all its miserable appearance, the Board of Regents of Western State Normal School accepted Professor Cabell's offer in 1908. Whenever Pres. H. H. Cherry was in charge of affairs, there was action. In a few years there was almost a miraculous transformation in the physical appearance of the Hill, as the squalor of yester-year gaveway to new beauty and grandeur. In 1922, the Legislature of Kentucky enacted a law that changed the two State Normal Schools to Kentucky State Teachers Colleges, and they were authorized to grant degrees at the completion of courses offered.

One day when Mr. Cherry discussed a new library with me, he mentioned that the Cabell home would be removed and all the area about and around the old Confederate fort would be destroyed. I was greatly dismayed at his plans and told him so. It was at this juncture that I personally began to have a part in this narrative of my efforts to save the priceless ruin of the old Confederate fort of Civil War days. I shall ask the indulgence and pardon of this group for a frequent use of the pronoun I. It is well known that President Cherry was very much an idealist concerning most matters; however, on this matter of choosing a site for a new library, he saw but little good in an old stone wall that at the time when he needed space was blocking his plan. I was greatly discouraged but at once began with all the persuasion I could command begging him not to tear down the old stone fort walls.

My argument in brief was that while all Kentucky Colleges had buildings for libraries, there was not another one in our state that had the ruins of a real Confederate fort in the heart of its campus. I tried to convince President Cherry that in other Border States and in all of the South, there would probably be but few colleges having the ruins of a Confederate fort in their midst; also, if some did have such a ruin, they would be justly proud of it as an asset, and most certainly would never destroy it.

One day after listening to my arguments until I am sure they had become beresome to him, Mr. Cherry told me he had advised with Mr. Henry Wright, who had charge of landscaping the campus of Western Teachers College and who was always consulted when a building site was being considered. He told me they had reached a different decision concerning the new library site and the removal of the fort walls. He said they decided to save the westerly part of the old fort wall which would be its entire breadth, with a bit of each corner's projection as you see it today. This was but a partial victory for me, but I was convinced it might be a fair compromise and all the concession we would get. Not only was the width of the fort wall saved, but with it many of the drill markings showing where explosives had been placed, and the resultant cavities which furnish mute but authentic evidence of how and where the men who wore the Gray laboriously got the rocks that formed the wall. Each rock in the old wall blasted out of solid limestone spells history, and its echoes bear silent testimony to the worst Civil War in modern History, a fratricidal struggle that should never have occurred.

The present Library, which was built in 1926-28, was put farther down the slope of the old fort territory toward Fifteenth street. Much of the ground excavated for the library foundation was used to level the fort area now partly occupied by a water tank and a central electric light tower. The elevation seen today on the eastern side of this area served as a sort of stage several years for out-door theatrical plays during the summer-school sessions.

In early 1930, President Cherry asked me to get for him a brief, authentic statement of Confederate occupation of Bowling Green and the building of the fort ruin we see today. I was glad to comply with his request and began to gather the facts from the official war records. After several weeks I submitted the data you find inscribed now on the plaque, and he liked it. He then asked me to find some company which manufactured plaques, submit my data, and find what would be the total cost. I found a company in Virginia, and after some delay, I was given the price of a metal plaque with our inscription on it in good-sized raised letters. President Cherry accepted the Virginia company's proposition, and after a lapse of several months, the finished plaque came to use here in November, 1931. Mr. Rhea Price, a friend of the college, donated the fine limestone slab from his quarry upon which the plaque was mounted.

Referring again to the inscription on the plaque, at Mr. Cherry's request we had included the Kentucky State Seal at its top; also, we agreed that what was left of the old fort wall, should have a name. Since General Johnston had charge of the building of the fort, although never finished, we thought

it could appropriately be called Fort Albert Sydney Johnston. I should relate here that I saw the marker when it was ready for permanent placement, but I was not asked where I thought it should be placed. Presumably, Mr. Cherry advised with Mr. Wright on the matter. The next time I saw the marker it was on its present site.

When one day Mr. Cherry asked me how I liked the placement of the marker, I told him frankly I did not like it at that place at all; moreover, I told him it looked as if it had been dumped on the elevation of the fort area described above, giving the appearance of castaway junk.. I remember telling him that at the slant the marker was given, the inscription on it would be battered by all the prevailing western and south-western rains, which would soon spoil all the paint used on it, and after a time, would wear down and ruin the lettering. He agreed that my views were correct, and, in all sincerity, he assured me the present location and setting of the marker was but temporary; also, he said he would give it an attractive setting off the corner of the north wall of the fort area, set it erect so the inscription would face eastward, and make a path to it from the sidewalk leading to Van Meter Hall. I agreed to all of his proposals. Time went on, and I reminded him a few times that the plaque was getting no attention. He always assured me most pleasantly he would get around to the re-setting of the marker as he had told me. I shall never call it neglect, but the pressure of other business and cruel Fate decreed otherwise.