

We Shall Conquer or Die

Partisan Warfare in 1862
Western Kentucky

Derrick Lindow



Savas Beatie
California

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To
Allie, Ezra, and Owen
and
Mom, Dad, and Rachel

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Preface

My interest in the Civil War began in elementary school when I developed a fascination for all things historical. Both of my grandfathers fostered this curiosity. My maternal grandfather took us on car rides through the country showing us where the family came from. I used to sit with my paternal grandfather on the couch as we watched old black-and-white World War Two documentaries and read the books he gave me every year. Some of my teachers also had a way of teaching history like it was a story, and it grabbed me.

By middle school, I wore out my VHS copy of *Gettysburg* and tried to read as much as I could on the war. My parents took me to my first reenactment at Sacramento, Kentucky, in the spring of 2001, ironically Adam Johnson's and Robert Martin's first real skirmish together, and there the smell of the gunpowder ensnared me. Two years later, I started reenacting. As my dad drove us home from that first reenactment in Sacramento, we stopped at a historical marker on Highway 431. There we read about the "only" skirmish to take place in Owensboro, Kentucky, our home. Since that day, I desired to learn more about that event but never really researched it in any depth until my college years. For my Kentucky History class, I decided to write my ten-page paper on the Battle of Sutherland's Hill, also known as the Battle of Panther Creek. While researching that paper, I found some interesting sources, several of which I used in this work, but my understanding of the events that took place here on September 19-20, 1862 was still only surface level. I had yet to grasp the overarching connections and ramifications this seemingly insignificant skirmish had on the war in western Kentucky.

Years later in the fall of 2017, my curiosity for the war in my area reached an all-time high. I wanted to write something just for local consumption. Some sort of work that told the stories of my hometown and maybe the surrounding

counties. As I started my research, I began with my original interest, Sutherland's Hill, and went from there. The more I researched, the more I began to realize that this was part of a much larger story. A story that stretched from western Kentucky, to Indiana, and even down to western Tennessee. I could not believe how very little had been written on the events that I researched. It also meant that this would no longer be just a local history. It mattered in the broader picture of the war. Only a few works had anything with a fair amount of research into these topics. Ray Mulesky's *Thunder From a Clear Sky: Stovepipe Johnson's Raid on Newburgh, Indiana*, focuses on the Newburgh raid itself. Benjamin F. Cooling's *Fort Donelson's Legacy: War and Society in Kentucky and Tennessee, 1862-1863*, a fascinating study into the region after Fort Donelson's fall, was an area of extreme importance to my own research. There are also several scholarly essays referenced throughout my own work and I encourage readers to enrich their understanding of the war by reading these. There was so much to the overall story in different places. Pieces here and bits there eventually turned into a complete narrative that could complete the story and put it in its proper place.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to several people who have helped me along with this project. My friend, Tim Hubble, who was the first to read the first draft and caught many of my initial grammar errors, and suggested several ways to make it better. Greg Biggs, who has turned into a Civil War history mentor of sorts, also read the manuscript and offered suggestions and information on many additional sources. His help was extremely useful for the Tennessee portion of the book and made the story of these events much better, especially after taking me to the sites and walking the ground. Dr. Benjamin F. Cooling offered a wealth of sage advice on how to improve the manuscript, and that advice was invaluable. I also want to thank Stuart Sanders for offering lots of encouragement as I started this writing journey several years ago, and also read a version of the manuscript. My good friend and fellow teacher, Josh Bishop, stayed after school with me for several days to help plot the movements of the Partisan Rangers and the Indiana Legion on a map for the battle of Sutherland's Hill, and also offered frequent encouragement and listened while I "thought out loud." The Smith family, particularly David and Preston, introduced me to the awesome power of Newspapers.com, offered frequent encouragement, and supported me from the beginning. I also want to thank my students whom I have had the pleasure of teaching the last several years, who also offered loads of encouragement and at least pretended to lend an ear as I rambled on about the book and other historical topics.

A special thanks is in order for Theodore P. Savas and the amazing staff at Savas Beatie: David Snyder, who worked with me on the developmental edit; Rebecca Hill, who helped with the final copy edit; Ed Alexander, who produced the maps; and Veronica Kane, who designed the layout and oversaw production. Thank you for your patience in working with this first-time author and thank you for giving me a chance. I am forever grateful, and humbled, by this opportunity. I look forward to more projects in the future.

I am grateful for my parents, who nurtured my love of history in my younger years; without that, this book never would have happened, at least not by me. Most importantly, I want to thank my wife, who is my biggest cheerleader, and perhaps, the one who suffered most through this process. Her patience was saintly, and her love was unending. Allie, Ezra, and Owen, thank you for being the best. To God be the glory.

Introduction

Musket fire echoed across the Ohio River. Thousands of Union and Confederate soldiers fired as quickly as they could pull the trigger and ram home another cartridge. Thunderous artillery fire mixed with the small arms discharges. By the time the shooting ceased, some 30,000 cartridges and 1,000 rounds of artillery had been expended along the banks of the river separating North and South. The Union forces held the field, victorious, while Col. Robert Martin's Confederates fell back to their camp. Martin complimented his officers and men for their "bravery and hard work." The Union and Confederate soldiers, all of them unbloodied, shook hands to the applause of tens of thousands of spectators who had traveled to observe the 1887 Blue and Gray Reunion in Evansville, Indiana. Columns paraded up and down streets while jubilant citizens waved flags and cheered. Veterans bent with age once again marched with upright pride and patriotism. General James Shackelford, a prominent former "guerrilla hunter" in western Kentucky, just across the river from the city through which he now marched, led the column.¹

Delegates from all over the country attended the grand reunion. One of the most prominent was former Confederate general and Kentucky governor Simon Bolivar Buckner. In his speech Buckner reflected on the peace that once again permeated throughout the nation. "I call you comrades, for today we are all comrades," proclaimed Buckner. "It gives me great pleasure to be here today and testify to my gladness that today all bitterness is gone and we recognize but one glorious flag." Shackelford echoed these sentiments when he said, "There is no North or South, but one Union." For a city that had once sat in dread of attack

¹ *National Tribune*, Sep. 29, 1887, 6; *Indiana State Sentinel*, Sep. 28, 1887, 2; *Evansville Journal*, Sep. 24, 1887, 4.



Wartime image of Confederate General Simon Bolivar Buckner. *LOC*

by some of the same troops who now marched gaily through their streets, the reunion was a smashing success.²

Perhaps the most infamous Rebel to attend the reunion was Adam Rankin Johnson. For nearly four months in 1862 Johnson's name regularly filled the pages of the *Evansville Daily Journal*. His regiment of partisan rangers wreaked havoc in western Kentucky along the Ohio River, and he and his bold raiders even ventured onto Indiana soil.

In 1887, Johnson's name reappeared in the Indiana press but this time he arrived as a guest instead of an enemy. Even the *Indianapolis Journal* was impressed: "Of all the visitors to the city there is none with

a more interesting history than Gen. Adam Johnson, who was on the staff of the famous guerrilla, John Morgan." Veterans of the 65th Indiana, men who spent a large part of their early service chasing Johnson, maintained less polite words to describe their guest. "The conspicuous presence of the noted gentleman, horse thief and robber, Adam Johnson, who was never a confederate soldier in any true sense, did not enthuse the boys who had worn the blue," declared one of the regiment's publications.³

Kentucky proved ripe for the sort of warfare that the soldiers of the 65th Indiana endured in the fall of 1862. Though the main armies marched away after the Union army broke Confederate Gen. Albert Sydney Johnston's line in Kentucky and western Tennessee at Forts Henry and Donelson, a divided population remained behind and the war continued. The partisan warfare pursued by Johnson differed from the bloodiness and brutality of guerrilla warfare. Instead of fighting a

2 *Indianapolis Journal*, Sep. 21, 1887, 2; Sep. 23, 1887, 4.

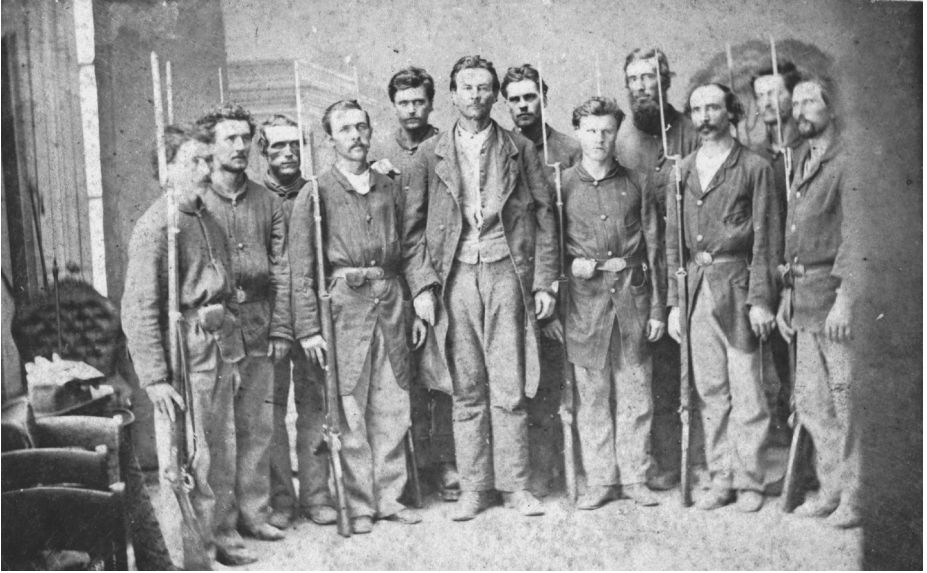
3 *Indianapolis Journal*, Sep. 21, 1887, 2; Jacob V. Admire, *Memoranda: Company E, 65th Regiment, Indiana Infantry Volunteers* (Osage City, KS, 1888), 56.

bloody war devoid of the common rules of war and without any Confederate army attachment, like most guerrillas, Johnson followed army orders and attempted to command his men as a regular army unit that happened to operate behind enemy lines. Yet partisan warfare created a challenge for the Confederates that joined these regiments, the Union soldiers tasked with eradicating it, and for the civilians stuck in the middle, often burdened with mixed loyalties. Kentucky, a border slave state that remained loyal to the Union, saw its population deeply divided over slavery, emancipation, secession, and the ultimate aims of the war. The Lincoln administration carefully navigated this complicated mix, but it would prove impossible to tame Kentucky.

Though a loyal state, the experience of thousands of Union soldiers marching through and garrisoning their communities embittered many Kentuckians, especially those with familial ties to the Confederacy. Even with a large portion of the population remaining loyal to the government, many Kentuckians sided with the South. The protection of hearth and home, or even the peculiar institution, presented only two of the many reasons for this sympathy. Because of this reality, the Union military operated in Kentucky as an occupying force out of necessity. An unstable environment such as this, as historians have noted, required the Union to “[establish] garrisons throughout occupied territory” to tamp down incipient secessionism and to protect valuable communications and supply lines. As will be seen, the Union took time to learn this lesson in the western part of Kentucky and even northwest Tennessee in the summer and fall of 1862. Johnson and his partisan rangers embodied what William T. Sherman believed about the war behind the lines, expressed in a letter to his brother in 1861: “[Union] armies pass across and through the land, the war closes behind and leaves the same enemy behind.”⁴

In time, the war drastically changed in Kentucky, especially in 1864 and 1865. The armies moved even further away, allowing the cruelty to increase behind the lines. Such wars are “particularly messy, and it was clear that many leading Confederates were too humane to inflict the requisite bloodshed and terror on either their enemies or fellow southerners,” suggest some historians. During the Civil War Kentucky became infamous for accommodating Rebel leaders, at least those who found the Confederate moniker convenient during the time, who operated in small bands away from the main armies, and who operated at times with extreme brutality. Such leaders included William Quantrill, Marcellus Jerome Clarke (also known as Sue Mundy), Champ Ferguson, “Bloody Handed” Bill Davison, and a long list of others who caused serious trouble in the state as the war

⁴ Robert E. Beringer, et al., *Why the South Lost the Civil War* (Athens, GA and London, 1986), 246-247; William T. Sherman, *The Sherman Letters: Correspondence Between General and Senator Sherman, 1837 to 1891*, ed. Rachel Sherman Thorndike (New York, 1894), 166.



Confederate guerrilla Champ Ferguson surrounded by guards during his trial in 1865. Charged with 53 murders, Ferguson admitted to killing over 100 men during the war and was found guilty and hanged on October 20, 1865. *LOC*

dragged on. The murder of civilians, executions of Union soldiers, and property theft and destruction were common. Though guerrilla leaders such as these spread chaos and terror across the state in 1864 and 1865, partisan [sic] leaders who operated earlier insisted that their operations were militarily and morally different.⁵

The distinction is important. Adam Johnson and his partisan rangers scoffed at the idea of the guerrilla label. Johnson vehemently denied being a guerrilla and responded to such accusations in 1862 by assuring his enemies that “every man on our side who fired a gun upon that occasion was a Confederate soldier, and had special orders not to interrupt in any way any citizen on account of his politics.” This is perhaps one reason why Johnson enjoyed the support of many Kentucky Southern sympathizers in a way that the late war guerrillas did not. Never a fool, Johnson realized that barbaric treatment of Unionists could cause major trouble for his base of support.⁶

Western Kentucky in 1862 also offered unique war aims for the Confederates who fought there. Historians Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones argue that the Confederates did not necessarily need to “conquer” territory, but successful raids

5 Beringer, et al., *Why the South Lost the Civil War*, 246-247.

6 *Ibid.*, 343.



A fortified railroad bridge across the Cumberland River in Nashville, Tennessee. To safeguard its rear and lines of supply, the Union army constructed many fortifications near important river crossings to thwart Confederate raids. *LOC*

behind the lines disrupted Union operations. Lincoln lamented, “In no other way does the enemy give us so much trouble, at so little expense to himself, as by the raids of rapidly moving small bodies of troops . . . supplying themselves with provisions . . . surprising and capturing small detachments of our forces, and breaking our communications.” The Union army’s lack of appreciation for mounted forces early in the war provided opportunities for a force like Johnson’s to slice through Union controlled territory. The remedy to this problem required significant time and money. Consequently, a lack of equipment, arms, and a clear doctrine governing the use of cavalry and infantry behind the lines plagued Union efforts to eliminate Johnson’s partisan rangers and those like him. By 1863, 56,000 Union soldiers guarded Kentucky and West Virginia from a significantly smaller number of Confederate cavalry, raiders, partisan rangers, and guerrillas. The Union

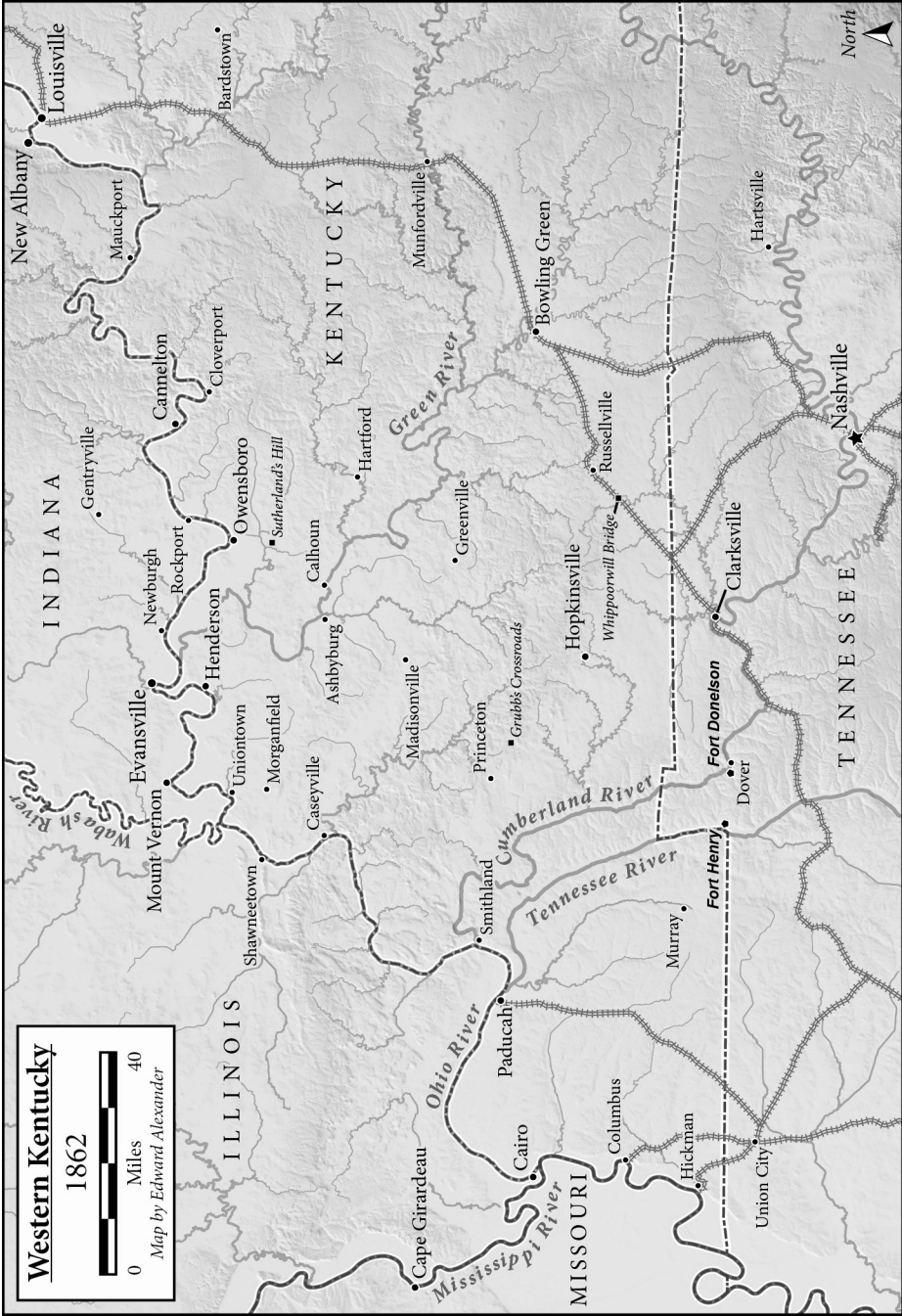
had finally learned its lesson, but not before Johnson and the partisans in other parts of the south exacted a heavy toll.

Though distinct differences existed between these four classifications of fighting men, the 1862 sources used various terms such as raider, guerrilla, cavalry, and partisan indiscriminately to describe Adam Rankin Johnson and his men. The public did not always understand the differentiation between a cavalryman, raider, partisan ranger, or guerrilla at the time. Even the veterans of the 65th Indiana showed this lack of understanding years following the war.⁷

During the reunion, the now blind Johnson met with his old friend and fellow partisan, Robert Martin. A reporter from the *Evansville Journal* chatted with Martin about his and Johnson's experiences in the western Kentucky region in 1862, 25 years earlier. Martin explained to the reporter that "the Confederate Congress became alarmed" with the state of the war and authorized partisan warfare to be established "for the purpose of harassing the Union forces and retarding their movements." On their success Martin commented, we "gave the Union forces considerable trouble."⁸

7 Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones, *How the North Won: A Military History of the Civil War* (Chicago, 1983), 323, 356-357.

8 *Evansville Journal*, Sep. 17, 1887, 5.



Chapter 1

“If you can equal him as a scout
I will have a good team”

Robert Martin hurried the wagonloads of weapons, supplies, sundries, and even some looted items to the riverbank, while his comrade and commander, Adam Johnson, kept the locals of Newburgh, Indiana, occupied. On July 18, 1862, with a force of less than 40 men, they had accomplished something that no other Southerner had been able to do: capture a town on Union soil. The Confederate partisans bluffed Newburgh citizen, and local commander of the Indiana Legion, or state militia, Union Bethell, with a dangerous threat by positioning two pieces of artillery to shell the town if trouble came to the raiders. The bluff worked.¹

Soon Martin landed on the Kentucky side of the Ohio with the captured, or stolen, supplies. They expected Federal reinforcements at any time, and already they spied the black smoke coughed out by three steamboats moving upriver. One brandished a six-pound swivel gun, the others loaded with infantry and field artillery.²

Johnson anxiously watched for Union activity on the Indiana shore from his small skiff. Martin led the newly recruited partisans across while Johnson made sure no attack came from the direction of Newburgh. Their landing place near the eastern side of the mouth of the Green River formed a narrow peninsula with the larger Ohio River. The position looked tactically precarious. If the steamships

1 Adam R. Johnson, *The Partisan Rangers of the Confederate States Army* (Louisville, KY, 1904), 105-107.

2 *Evansville Daily Journal*, July 21, 1862, 2.

2 *We Shall Conquer or Die: Partisan Warfare in 1862 Western Kentucky*

made it to the Green before Johnson's men crossed, Union forces stood a good chance of ensnaring the raiders, and the whole enterprise would end in disaster.³

July 18, 1862, marked the beginning of a campaign that would last more than two months and plunge western Kentucky into the uncivil business of partisan warfare and (in Union nomenclature) anti-guerrilla operations. During those fateful months of 1862, Johnson and Martin's little band would grow to nearly 800 men, capture five towns garrisoned with Union troops, and turn neighbor against neighbor.

* * *

Only 22 years old in the summer of 1862, Lt. Col. Robert Maxwell Martin hailed from Muhlenberg County, Kentucky. Few sources exist to describe his life before or after the war. Born on January 20, 1840, near Greenville, Kentucky, Martin came from a large family of seven children. His father, Hugh, labored as a bricklayer and farmer, both occupations carried on by his sons. In 1860, Hugh Martin possessed a personal value worth \$5,000 and possibly owned four slaves. Son Robert eschewed his father's manual labor but maintained his father's penchant for earning money, becoming a merchant near Dixon, Kentucky, in Webster County. By 1860, he had amassed a personal value of \$1,100.⁴

Despite growing up in a Union family, Martin threw in his lot with the South. Two of his brothers served in the Union army, one in the 11th Kentucky Infantry and the other in the 35th Kentucky Mounted Infantry. Both wore officer's insignias. Martin first enlisted as a private in Nathan Bedford Forrest's cavalry when it arrived in Kentucky in the fall of 1861. With his local knowledge, he proved himself an excellent scout in the areas south of the Green River. This became especially valuable as Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston's Confederate army and Gen. Thomas L. Crittenden's Union division vied for strategic position in the region. Martin quickly rose to the position of chief scout for then-Lieutenant Colonel Forrest.

Martin's impressive physical features drew the attention of soldier and civilian alike. Described as "splendidly mounted" and wearing "his hat in a long black plume," the young Kentuckian presented "a large and striking figure." His prewar familiarity with the Green River region armed him with the knowledge to help Johnson lead what would become the 10th Kentucky Partisan Rangers.

3 Johnson, *Partisan Rangers*, 107.

4 John W. Headley, *Confederate Operations in Canada and New York* (New York, 1906), 62; 1860 Webster County, KY Census, 155; 1850 Muhlenberg County, KY Census, 101-102; Otto A. Rothert, *A History of Muhlenberg County* (Louisville, KY, 1913), 318; Basil Duke, *Morgan's Cavalry* (New York, 1906), 275.

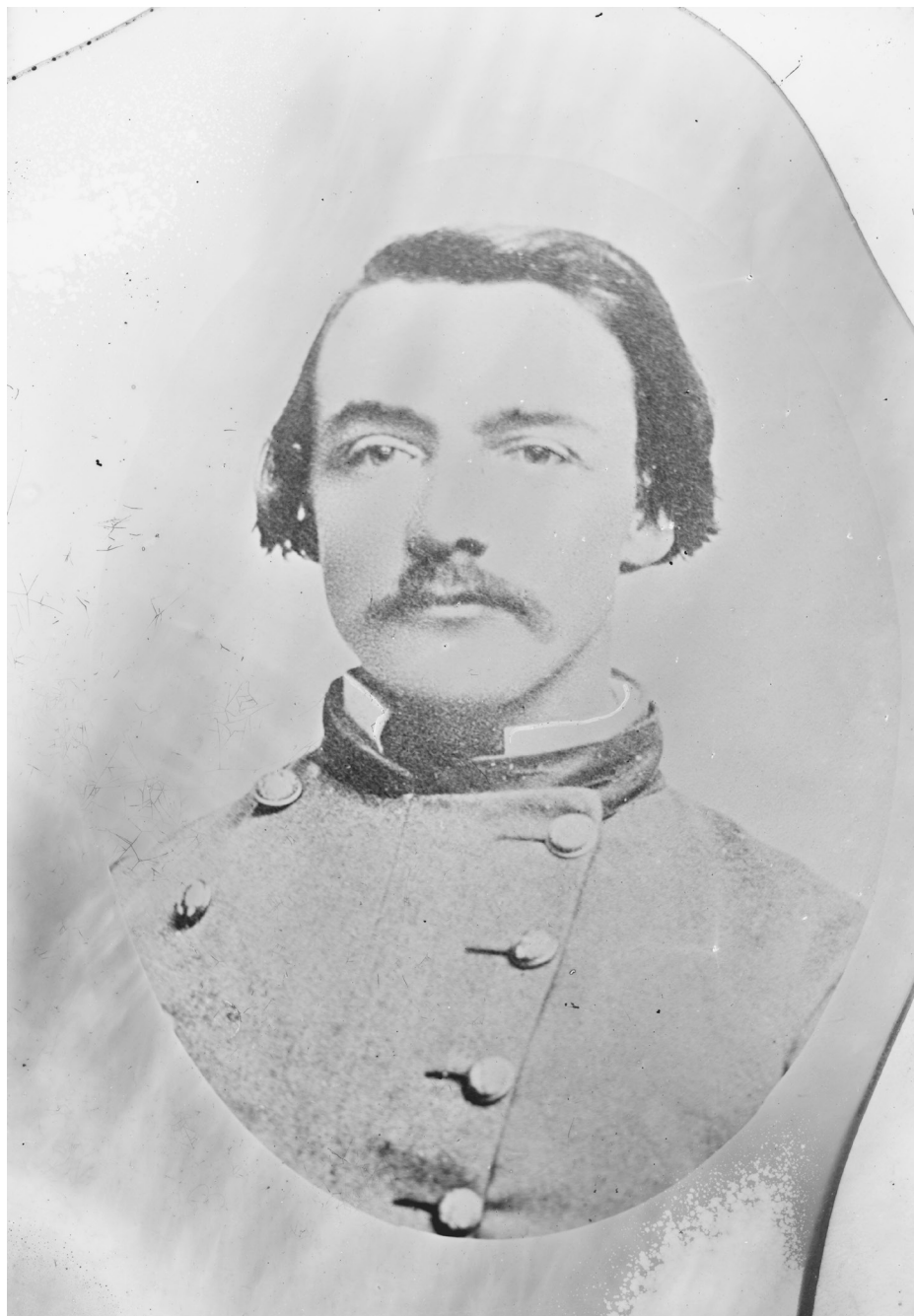
Adam Rankin Johnson’s background differed greatly from Martin’s but their paths crossed by the fall of 1861.⁵ Juliet Spencer Rankin gave birth to a son, Adam, on February 8, 1834 in Henderson, Kentucky. His father, Dr. Thomas Jefferson Johnson, flourished as a physician and the couple amassed a personal fortune of \$6,000 as influential Henderson citizens. During his childhood, Johnson became a distinguished hunter and strong swimmer. Those who knew him remembered his outsized charisma, and that he seemed always the fastest, strongest, and wittiest. For “Ad,” daytime meant the outdoors; nighttime was for reading the history and literature that helped grow the boy into a well-rounded young man. As a teenager, Johnson’s father assigned him to a local druggist to learn the pharmacy trade, but the appointment did not stick. By the age of 16, Johnson began work in the tobacco industry, overseeing nearly 80 “hands” for a man by the name of David Burbank, a close associate of John C. Breckinridge. This friendship would allow Johnson to raise his own regiment nearly ten years later.⁶

One of the wealthiest counties in the United States at that time, Henderson County enjoyed a prominent location on the vital Ohio River transport artery. A hub for the tobacco trade, Henderson County shipped the lucrative crop across the United States and the world via the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, bringing enormous wealth to the county and the city of Henderson itself. A perfect region for the crop’s cultivation, the county offered lowlands along the Ohio and Green Rivers and even the land away from the rivers provided superb soil for the region’s many planters. Thanks to tobacco, Henderson incubated more Southern sympathy than many of the neighboring communities.

Because of the labor intensity of tobacco, Henderson County maintained the second highest rate of slave-ownership and enslaved population in the western Kentucky region. In 1850, there were 677 slave owners and 3,988 enslaved persons. By 1860, the numbers increased to 993 owners and 5,046 enslaved persons. According to the 1861 map by Edwin Hergesheimer, 40.7 percent of the county’s population remained enslaved. This translated to the political climate as demonstrated by the 1860 presidential election. Constitutional Union candidate

5 Rothert, *History of Muhlenberg County*, 318-319.

6 Johnson, *Partisan Rangers*, 2; Edmund Lyne Starling, *History of Henderson County, Kentucky: Comprising History of County and City, Precincts, Education, Churches, Secret Societies, Leading Enterprises, Sketches and Recollections, and Biographies of the Living and the Dead* (Henderson, KY, 1887), 713, 804-805. Starling states that there were 5,767 in the county in his postwar history; William C. Davis, *Breckinridge: Soldier, Statesman, Symbol* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1974), 572-583. Burbank appears to have been so close with former Vice President John C. Breckinridge that he named his youngest son John Cabell Breckinridge Burbank. He also accompanied Breckinridge to the Holy Land and Europe during Breckinridge’s exile. Johnson, *Partisan Rangers*, 1; 1860 Henderson County, KY Census, 48.



Adam Rankin Johnson in Confederate Uniform.

LOC

John Bell took 846 votes, while Southern Democrat John C. Breckinridge and Northern Democrat Stephen Douglas received 498 and 211 votes respectively. Republican Abraham Lincoln, who spent his boyhood years just a few miles upriver in Spencer County, Indiana, booked only five votes. The overwhelming preference for Bell’s Constitutional Union platform—of maintaining the status quo on slavery—represented the region’s pro-slavery attitudes. Though the leading candidates supported slavery’s continuation, pro-slavery attitudes did not mean automatic support for secession. When the secession crisis erupted, Henderson County, like most other Kentucky counties, voted for the Democratic Union ticket in the Border State Convention. This suggests that Henderson’s populace favored compromise rather than secession. However, when the war came, the county split, like others in that area of Kentucky.⁷

In the decade preceding the war, Johnson and two of his brothers, Ben and Thomas, made their way to the west Texas frontier. Here, Johnson lived the frontiersman’s life full of danger, adventure, and ingenuity. For five years, he worked as a surveyor in hopes of securing a place to make a home for himself. The young man also drove a stage for the Butterfield Overland Mail. Johnson knew that many families would soon settle the open Texas country and the work offered job security. The stream of new settlers would need their land surveyed and mail delivered. The Kentuckian eventually purchased a plot of land that suited him and found himself neighbors with veterans of the Texas Revolution. These men filled Johnson’s imagination with heroic stories of the war and frontier life—an impression that undoubtedly influenced him when he fought his own war.⁸

Johnson also experienced brushes with Native Americans who continued to fight for control of their land. In one of the first meetings, Johnson and four other men found themselves isolated from the safety of other settlements while on a surveying job. During the night, a party of Native Americans attempted to annihilate the small group, which they perceived as trespassing. The war party nearly surrounded the camp before Johnson and his companions detected their presence. Johnson instructed the others to maintain constant gunfire upon their attackers while he snuck through the tall weeds and brush to shoot at them from the

7 Starling, *History of Henderson*, 111, 193; “Henderson County (KY) Slaves, Free Blacks, and Free Mulattoes, 1850-1870,” Notable Kentucky African Americans Database, <https://nkaa.uky.edu/nkaa/items/show/2367>, accessed Jan. 13, 2021; E. Hergesheimer, *Map showing the distribution of the slave population of the southern states of the United States compiled from the census of Washington*, Henry S. Graham, 1861, <https://www.loc.gov/item/99447026/>; James W. Finck, *Divided Loyalties: Kentucky’s Struggle for Armed Neutrality in the Civil War* (El Dorado Hills, CA, 2012), 110-119.

8 Johnson, *Partisan Rangers*, 3; Thomas W. Cutrer, “Johnson, Adam Rankin,” *Handbook of Texas Online* (Texas State Historical Association), <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/johnson-adam-rankin>, accessed Jan. 13, 2022.

rear. The crossfire forced the attackers to flee. Such trickery and deception helped keep him alive through other dangerous encounters while in Texas. Sometimes he fooled Native American raiding parties into believing he commanded more men than he actually possessed, used diversions in others, or boldly rushed headlong into an unexpected raiding party. “If the enemy could thus elude me, so also I could deceive them by this and similar devices,” he later expressed. “Afterward I had occasion to put this idea in practice, I always acted promptly and confidently, ever holding the conviction that the ruse resorted to, whatever it was, would succeed.” In the war to come, Johnson frequently applied the stealth tactics he had learned in his frontier days.⁹

When news of Abraham Lincoln’s election reached Texas, Johnson sensed the future upheaval. He immediately arranged to marry his sweetheart, fearing the coming war might prevent their union from occurring. On January 1, 1861, he married Josephine Eastland in Burnet, Texas. War and secession failed to arrive immediately, so Johnson returned to his work on the plains. When secession did come and Texas communities formed military companies, Johnson’s two brothers enlisted in a Texas artillery battery. Instead of joining them, Adam traveled back home to Henderson.¹⁰

On his return to Kentucky in the fall of 1861, Johnson remained aware that his parents, and two of his other brothers, sided with the Union. One of those brothers, William, served as sergeant major of the 25th Kentucky before that regiment consolidated with the 17th Kentucky in early 1862. As a lieutenant in the 17th, William received a dismissal from the service along with his commanding officer, Col. John H. McHenry, for refusing to follow the order prohibiting the return of runaway slaves. William’s file reports that the dismissal occurred because he “expressed sentiments of disloyalty and insubordination.” The story of Johnson’s brother provides a microcosm of Kentucky’s political dysphoria during the Civil War. The Union they would defend, but emancipation seemed a step too far for many.¹¹

While in Confederate-occupied Bowling Green, Kentucky, Johnson reunited with many of his childhood friends, now members of Graves’s Kentucky Battery. The men earnestly wanted Johnson to join them, knowing his background and skills, but he declined and traveled to Hopkinsville, Kentucky. There Johnson met

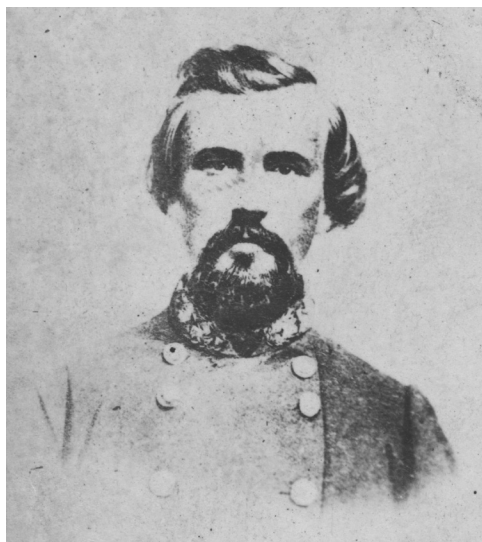
9 Johnson, *Partisan Rangers*, 2-5.

10 *Ibid.*, 35, 38.

11 *Ibid.*, 48; William Johnson, U.S., Compiled Service Records of Volunteer Union Soldiers Who Served in Organizations from the State of Kentucky, 1861-1865, M397, Roll 0303, National Archives; Benjamin F. Cooling, *Fort Donelson’s Legacy: War and Society in Kentucky and Tennessee, 1862-1863* (Knoxville, 1997), 89.

Nathan Bedford Forrest

LOC



Nathan Bedford Forrest. So struck with the man, Johnson immediately asked to join Forrest’s command. He asked to be a scout and Forrest readily agreed after Johnson informed him of his background and knowledge of the region. He also asked to travel to Henderson to see his parents, to which Forrest readily assented. He also introduced Johnson to his other scout. As Johnson related in his

memoirs, Forrest told him, “I wish you to meet a young man who has just come from the front, where he has been killing Yankees. If you can equal him as a scout I will have a good team.” It seemed to Johnson as if all the troopers in his new company talked about this other man’s merits as a Yankee killer. He met the young scout at Forrest’s tent. His name: Bob Martin. The two men examined each other thoroughly before speaking, and both “were mutually pleased.” Johnson described Martin as over six feet tall and slender with brown hair and blue eyes. “I met for the first time,” Johnson remembered with cheerfulness, “a man who all through the war was to be my constant companion.”¹²

Martin and Johnson quickly bonded and showed themselves to be excellent scouts. Within days of meeting, the two men reconnoitered the area south of the Green River, in close proximity to Gen. Thomas L. Crittenden’s division in Calhoun. On December 28, 1861, they alerted Forrest to the approaching 3rd Kentucky Cavalry. Forrest prepared his men for what would be his first engagement, the battle of Sacramento in McLean County.

Forrest grabbed a weapon from one of his soldiers and fired the opening shot. The two sides skirmished until he ordered his men to charge both Union flanks and center. The battle quickly devolved into a running fight through the village of Sacramento and brutal saber battles erupted all the way back to within a few miles of the main Federal camp at Calhoun. In the chaotic fight, Johnson and Martin witnessed Forrest’s aggressiveness and disregard for his own personal safety. The

12 Johnson, *Partisan Rangers*, 38-40; Scott A. Tarnowiecky, “Branded by the Lincolnites as Guerrillas: Adam Rankin Johnson, Guerrilla Identity, and Irregular Warfare in the Lower Green River Valley in 1862,” *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, 2015, 648.

Confederate cavalry won a resounding and lopsided victory, one in which Martin walked away with several trophies. After the battle, Johnson saw a delighted Martin appear out of the woods with a belt full of pistols. Johnson inquired about his activities, to which Martin replied that he got “even with a fellow that stole my horse.” When asked what became of the Union soldier Martin smiled and crowed, “Well, here is his horse, his pistol, and this is his gun,” and that he left the soldier “over yonder in that strip of woods you see to the left of the road.” Even this early in his military career Martin demonstrated his fighting talent.¹³

The duo became a formidable backstage pair, relying on their wits and not a little bit of theatrics when necessary. On one scouting mission in Daviess County, for example, Martin and Johnson managed to steal several horses originally meant for the Union’s 3rd Kentucky Cavalry, the same regiment they fought at Sacramento. The scouts forged requisition documents from General Crittenden, commander of Union forces in the area at nearby Camp Calhoun, the original destination for the mounts. Johnson later revealed in his book, “Martin had agreed to act as sergeant and I as Lieutenant Johnson, personating my brother who was with Crittenden. Leaving Martin to hold the horses, I entered the house, introduced myself and told my business, and learned that Mr. Field had gone to headquarters and expected to return soon with a squad of men to drive the horses over to camp,” Johnson remembered. Meanwhile, Mrs. Field had “invited me to stay for supper, and if possible, to remain all night. I accepted the first invitation and told her I would have a ride all night under my orders.” Johnson next “went out and explained matters to Martin, and we arranged to fight. It was not long before Mr. Field made his appearance, riding up the lane alone. I felt very much relieved, but Martin seemed disappointed, and think he had rather had a fight than to have captured the horses.”¹⁴

Martin and Johnson stayed for a meal, and while they ate Johnson played the part of a Union officer well. He quizzed Martin about the “Secesh” that had been stealing horses. Mrs. Field commented, “that was not any more than she could expect from people who were trying to break up the government.” Martin tried to hide his amusement by “stuffing his mouth full of biscuit to keep from laughing.” After dining and with horses now in their possession, they quickly retreated to Confederate lines. Amusingly, Mrs. Field visited a neighbor and commented, “that

13 Johnson, *Partisan Rangers*, 41-43; *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1880-1901), Series 1, vol. 7, part. 1, 56. Hereafter cited as *OR*. All references are to Series 1 unless otherwise noted. Forrest mentions in his report that a local teenage girl, Mollie Morehead, also alerted him to the nearby Union cavalry.

14 Johnson, *Partisan Rangers*, 45-46.

if the rebel army had two such men in it she would have more respect for it.” At least that is how Johnson told the story in his memoir.¹⁵

During another expedition to acquire horses for Forrest’s cavalry in January 1862, Johnson took the opportunity to travel to Union-controlled Henderson. Though they disagreed about secession, the young man yearned to see his family for the first time in over five years. After stashing his weapons on the property of some friends, Johnson rode to his home inside a carriage. Once inside, he embraced his mother whose “loving heart no difference of political sentiment could estrange.” Johnson’s brothers from nearby Camp Calhoun also arrived home for a few days to see their returned brother. The brothers all talked openly of their experiences in the war and vowed to protect each other if they found themselves on the same battlefield, which transpired sooner than any of them predicted.¹⁶

While in Henderson Johnson took the opportunity to spy on occupying Union forces. Playing the part of the prodigal son returned from the wilds of Texas and secessionism, and shielded by his family’s public Unionism, Johnson easily convinced others that he shared loyalist sympathies. He gathered intelligence by attending dinner parties where he apparently met the commanding officer of the 31st Indiana, Col. Charles Cruft, and other Union officers. The “swaggering braggadocio” and “blustering boasts” of some of the officers repulsed the young Kentuckian. Friends warned the Confederate scout that Federal authorities began to suspect this “prodigal son” of ill intentions, so he began planning to make his way back to Confederate lines.¹⁷

Escape proved problematic as no person could leave the city without a military pass. In the January 10, 1862, edition of the *Evansville Daily Journal*, complaints mounted about the illegal smuggling of goods across the lines in the area between Henderson and Smithland, Kentucky. “Thousands of dollars worth of goods, and letters containing important information, are daily taken across the river and sent to the Southern Confederacy,” the paper grumbled. Pressured to act, Union authorities began to limit traffic by increasing patrols and stopping travelers. Though Johnson knew the area well, this would be a serious obstacle.¹⁸

Before leaving, Johnson acquainted himself with the approximate positions of Union soldiers picketing the roads and bridges outside of town. While moving on foot a Union soldier spotted the Rebel and Johnson fled to the woods amid orders to halt. A confident Johnson believed he could outpace any man bogged

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid., 48.

17 Ibid., 47-49.

18 *Evansville Daily Journal*, Jan. 10, 1862, 2.

down by a larger weapon and infantry gear but to his surprise the Union soldier gained on him. Changing his strategy, Johnson hid in a hollow tree and as the soldier approached, Johnson brandished his pistol and pulled the trigger. The bullet entered the man's skull and "with a cry of pain and a leap into the air he sprang over the bluff into the surging waters." Uncertain what to do next, Johnson retreated to his family's home and "resolved to put on a brave front." Not only did he have to contend with the growing Federal suspicions that he was a spy, but he had also just killed a Union soldier. If caught, he believed that soldiers would riddle his body with bullets, but with the help of his family he might gain a good lawyer and avoid punishment.¹⁹

The following Sunday, Johnson accompanied his mother to church. While passing a group of Union soldiers he mentioned that he would hurt anyone that attempted to "jolt" his mother or any of the women present. Upon seeing his hidden pistol, his mother implored him to "leave this town tonight." Sitting through a service full of enemy soldiers, Johnson must have been planning a new way to escape. He entertained the rash idea of stealing Colonel Cruft's horse tied up outside the church. Again, his mother talked him out of such a foolish notion and he returned home.

Johnson remained in Henderson for only a day or two before making a second attempt at escape during the night, though not without one last snag. Determined to ride out with a good horse, he noticed a lone Union sergeant riding on the road. Hiding in a deep cut Johnson surprised the man and demanded his surrender. To his shock and chagrin, the sergeant spurred his horse and galloped away. Johnson fired one shot, missed, and then ran home. He settled for his brother's horse and quietly slipped out of town. He collected his weapons and rode south to rejoin Martin and Forrest.

Johnson's story concerning Cruft and his horse raises a few questions, as does Johnson's earlier attempt to escape Henderson. Johnson's memoir is known to contain embellishments and exaggerations, but enough of his wartime derring-do has been verified that even the inflated stories are not out of character for this highly ingenious, battlefield actor. In early 1862, the 31st Indiana encamped at Calhoun and South Carrollton, Kentucky, with Cruft taking the role of acting brigadier general. Several newspapers and the regiment's own history place Cruft

19 Johnson, *Partisan Rangers*, 49-50; Starling, *History of Henderson*, 714. Johnson's daring story of escape back to Confederate lines appeared in Starling's history of Henderson County and then in Johnson's own memoir several years later. However, nothing of the incident ever made it into any of the contemporary sources. The regional newspapers generally reported any violent incident, especially when it included the death of a Union soldier. Though Johnson's memoir includes some clearly exaggerated derring-do, the general events often corroborate with other sources with few exceptions.

with his men and not at Henderson. However, it is possible that in his old age Johnson misremembered or mistook another officer to be Cruft. It is also possible Cruft visited Henderson for a short time.²⁰

In February 1862, Gen. Ulysses S. Grant advanced into Tennessee and captured Fort Henry, rendering the Confederate line in Kentucky untenable. When the armies encountered one another at Fort Donelson, Martin and Johnson again provided good service to Forrest as he observed the Federal advance. On February 12, 1862, Johnson returned to Forrest’s command after performing other solitary assignments of which no records exist. Upon reaching Dover and the Confederate fort, Johnson heard the distant crack of gunfire. The scout immediately rode to the scene and found Forrest sitting on his horse by himself while he watched two of his companies skirmish with Union infantry coming up the Pinery Road. Delighted to see the Kentuckian, Forrest remarked, “Johnson, I am glad you have come. Ride over there and bring those fellows in; they are wasting powder.” Riding toward the action, Johnson noticed that a body of Union infantry was attempting to flank the Confederate right toward Hickman Creek. Contrary to Forrest’s orders, Johnson commanded the two companies to redeploy to ambush the Union advance. The Confederates fired a volley and drove back the small Federal force. Forrest never mentioned the disobedience to his orders, perhaps because he himself might have done the same thing.²¹

As the Union army tightened its grip on Fort Donelson, Johnson frequently ventured between the lines. In his memoir, he claims to have discovered a ravine that allowed him to sneak between the beats of the Union pickets and hide within a few feet of the headquarters tent of Gen. Charles F. Smith. Johnson seems to have accomplished the feat on three occasions, garnering important information on impending Union movements. This included Smith’s thrust on the Confederate right on February 13th, news that the Union gunboats intended to attack on the 14th, and a report that more regiments were destined to reinforce the Federal army. On the night before the Confederate breakout of February 15th, Johnson claims that he scouted the entire length of the Union line. He began at Smith’s area of operation and scouted all the way to the Union right flank. Interestingly, Johnson appreciated that two of his brothers stood very near, with the 17th and 25th Kentucky Infantry regiments, and he vowed not to shoot if he came upon them.

20 Johnson, *Partisan Rangers*, 51-52; *Terre Haute Star*, Jan. 13, 1862, 2; *Dawson’s Fort Wayne Daily Times*, Jan. 13, 1862, 4; John Thomas Smith, *A History of the Thirty-First Regiment of Indiana Volunteer Infantry in the War of the Rebellion* (Western Methodist Book Concern, 1900), 10-11; *Evansville Daily Journal*, Jan. 10, 1862, 2.

21 Johnson, *Partisan Rangers*, 49; Timothy B. Smith, *Grant Invades Tennessee: The 1862 Battles of Forts Henry and Donelson* (Lawrence, KS, 2021), 168, 174.

Fortunately, Johnson crept along unseen until he made it back to Confederate lines later that night.²²

After scouting and fighting for four days and facing death multiple times, Johnson and Martin began to feel the repercussions of the taxing duty and bitter weather. One night an exhausted Martin fell asleep in “a bed of snow.” Fearing for his well-being, Forrest helped Johnson carry Martin to shelter and covered him with a few warm blankets. Martin eventually returned to duty and the bond between the two men continued to grow.²³

The situation at Fort Donelson was becoming dire for the Confederate army after a bungled breakout attempt. Most of the fighting on February 15th went well for the Southerners, but after driving Grant’s right flank back several miles, the Rebels received orders to return to their original positions. Naturally, the Federals again occupied their positions from the morning and continued to grow stronger as reinforcements arrived. The Southern high command lost the nerve to continue fighting and arranged for the army’s surrender.

Forrest approached his scouts and angrily informed them that the Confederate leadership intended to surrender. Johnson recalled that while he was finally getting something warm to eat he heard the clatter of horse hooves. Forrest “dashed up” and asked, “Johnson, where’s Martin?” “In the tent still asleep, General,” came the reply. “Rouse him up, for God’s sake, rouse him up; there’s work to be done.” With great effort, Martin awoke. He was still wrapped in his blanket when Forrest entered the tent. Forrest fumed, “Boys, these people are talking about surrendering, and I am going out of this place before they do, or bust hell wide open. That’s what these damn fools intend to do, so you boys must go at once and find some way for my regiment to get out of here, for get out they must.” Shocked at such a turn of events both men sat in silence with “open-mouthed astonishment.”

The scouts left at once, riding out from the defenses to find an escape route. Anxiety nearly consumed Johnson, not only about the Federals but also for the Confederate pickets, since he believed they had orders to shoot anyone who attempted to pass. Eventually, they made their way to the extreme of the Rebel picket line near the Cumberland River through which they waded to avoid the pickets of both armies, or so claims Johnson. The two Kentuckians found a route for Forrest that could take his cavalry through the swollen waters of Lick Creek and returned by wading through the icy Cumberland again. When they reached Confederate headquarters Generals Buckner, Pillow, and Floyd listened to the duo’s report of the escape route. As the generals contemplated surrender or escape,

22 Johnson, *Partisan Rangers*, 60; Smith, *Grant Invades Tennessee*, 219-223.

23 Johnson, *Partisan Rangers*, 54-66.



The Dover Hotel, place where Gen. Simon B. Buckner surrendered to Gen. Ulysses S. Grant on February 16, 1862. *LOC*

Johnson and Martin warmed themselves at the stove. The night did not go well. The army would surrender and Forrest received permission to leave, but Johnson and Martin could not go with him. Removed from Forrest's command, the scouts received orders to stay at the fort with Pillow and Floyd. Martin accompanied Pillow on a small boat that crossed the Cumberland River while Johnson escaped by steamboat with Floyd and his Virginia regiments. Thus the scouts avoided the Union prison camps, making their way instead to Nashville.²⁴

In Nashville, the two comrades reconnected and again found themselves aiding Forrest, this time in restoring order to the panic-stricken city. The reunion did not last long as orders arrived for the pair to travel to Texas to deliver dispatches to Governor Francis Lubbock. This journey caused them to miss the battle of Shiloh.²⁵

Weeks after the Confederate defeat at Shiloh, Johnson and Martin returned to the army near Corinth, Mississippi. Here, Johnson's Henderson connection with Mr. Burbank opened the door for him to meet Gen. John C. Breckinridge. The two young Kentuckians transferred to Breckinridge's staff as scouts. After several weeks

²⁴ *OR* 1, vol. 7, part. 1, 295, 383; Johnson, *Partisan Rangers*, 45-46, 66-70.

²⁵ Johnson, *Partisan Rangers*, 45-46.



General John C. Breckinridge, former vice president of the United States. *LOC*

of successful scouting and intelligence gathering, the Kentucky general and former Vice President of the United States presented the pair with a challenging task. He wanted them to recruit men in western Kentucky for a partisan ranger regiment. This assignment began several months of success for Martin and Johnson behind Union lines. There is no official record from the Confederate government authorizing Johnson to raise such a regiment and the only source of this order is Johnson himself. As scouts for Forrest, Martin and Johnson held no rank and no record exists of them serving in his regiment. The men carried no authority or commissions from the Confederate government though Johnson believed his authority came from the Confederate army and Breckinridge's order. In his memoir, Johnson argued that both men indeed served as commissioned officers while on the staff of General Breckinridge. In his later report to President Jefferson Davis, Johnson asserted that he received authority to "proceed to Kentucky, to raise men, leaving discretionary powers as to my procedure."²⁶

Western Kentucky had become a backwater to the war by the summer of 1862. Several western counties in the state harbored obvious sympathies for the South. After the fall of Forts Henry and Donelson and Confederate evacuations from Bowling Green to Nashville, western Kentucky hardly seemed a location of great strategic importance. No railroads of any significance ran through this region and the Green River ferried few steamboats transporting soldiers or military goods after the spring of 1862. The Union army spared few soldiers to occupy the region. Only a sprinkling of small garrisons guarded intermittent posts along the Ohio while small companies of poorly trained home guards offered desultory protection to towns in the interior. With the area no longer teeming with enemy soldiers, Johnson planned to ride into a region full of potential recruits.

26 Tarnowiecky, "Branded by the Lincolnites," 649-650; Davis, *Breckinridge: Statesman, Soldier, Symbol*, 381; Johnson, *Partisan Rangers*, 85-86; *Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph*, Nov. 26, 1862.

By June, Johnson and Martin slipped past the Union garrisons and patrols in Tennessee and Kentucky and arrived back near their homes. Initially, recruiting proved a difficult task. The men were only in their twenties and their relative youth did not inspire the confidence of potential soldiers. They may have impressed Forrest, but neither Johnson nor Martin had done enough to inspire their Green River peers to risk their lives in a dubious cause. One group of potential fighters, who apparently already conducted some sort of guerrilla or bushwhacking actions, told Johnson they could muster a full company for the right man. Another lukewarm fighter disparaged Johnson: “You seem to be quite a young man for such a business. What we want in Kentucky is a leader, and when one comes I will be willing to follow him, and could bring a good company to back him.”²⁷

Besides their age, they had nothing by which to provide for a cavalry regiment. They possessed no weapons for any potential soldiers, nor money to pay them, nor horses to ride, and no good reason why men should follow the two young scouts. The possibility remained that not only the recruits themselves, but also their property might suffer at the hands of Federal authorities or Unionist neighbors. Others wondered who would protect the families of these new Confederate soldiers from Federal retribution if they joined up. If they wanted recruits, then they had to prove themselves. Johnson and Martin did manage one follower, a seventeen-year-old by the name of Frank Owen. Owen originally served in the Confederate 8th Kentucky Infantry at Fort Donelson that had been surrendered to Grant in February. After spending time as a prisoner at Camp Morton in Indianapolis, Owen made his escape back to Kentucky. The young man zealously wanted to return to the fight and Johnson and Martin offered the promise to do just that.²⁸

In his memoir, Johnson lamented the fact that many of the former Confederate soldiers they hoped to recruit seemed to enjoy the return to civilian life rather too much. “A Federal amnesty policy and local hero worship by the fair sex . . . kept a number of ex-Confederates from returning,” notes historian Benjamin Cooling. Prying them from their homes and families and convincing them to return to the perilous life of soldiering would not be easy.²⁹

The army of three’s first opportunity to open a new theater of the war occurred in June. While discussing their first attack on the road outside of Henderson, near the small hamlet of Hebbardsville, an unexpected convenience presented itself. The surgeon of the 11th Kentucky, Lt. John F. Kimbly, and a companion enjoying a carriage ride in the country offered themselves as unsuspecting prizes.

27 Johnson, *Partisan Rangers*, 90.

28 Tarnowiecky, “Branded by the Lincolmites,” 649-651.

29 Johnson, *Partisan Rangers*, 90; Cooling, *Fort Donelson’s Legacy*, 71.

Upon hearing the rattling of the carriage wheels and the steady cadence of the horses' hooves on the road, Johnson, Martin, and Owen decided to capture the Union officer. Martin sprang from the trees, grabbed the reins of the horses, and forced the buggy to stop while Johnson covered the Union officer with his weapon. Johnson asked for Kimbly's papers, which the doctor readily produced. They informed Kimbly of his new status as a prisoner and assured him that his friend, Ms. Georgia Shelby, would receive a safe escort to a friendly home.³⁰

The three men never intended to keep Kimbly as a prisoner but instead wanted to impress upon him that they commanded a much larger force. If men refused to join Johnson's new regiment, then a ghost command would have to suffice. Johnson loudly began issuing orders to his invisible regiment: "Tell Captain Ray to move his company up to the forks of the road and Bennett to go at once to Slaughtersville!" Kimbly surrendered and the ghost commanders brought him to the Green River where a passing steamer took him to Louisville. Kimbly's story rapidly spread through the area. So much, in fact, that the newspapers believed Johnson, Martin, and Owen to be the shadowy guerrilla George Davidson, known only as a "notorious character" that stole horses. The Unionists in Evansville, Indiana, were furious and the staunchly pro-Union newspaper echoed their sentiments:

This gang of land pirates arrested on Friday of last week, Dr. Kimley Surgeon of the 11th Kentucky volunteers, who was spending a few days at home on furlough—In company with a young lady, the Doctor, in a two-horse buggy, was on his way to visit some friends in Henderson county,—He was overhauled near Hebardsville, and compelled to surrender the horse and buggy, (which he proposed to redeem with \$600) and was taken to Davidson's headquarters and released on what the guerrillas termed a parole. The young lady was taken to the house of a gentleman in the neighborhood and left there. The horses and buggy were carried off—the thieves claiming they had specific use for just such an establishment. That bands of outlaws should be permitted to commit such outrages on loyal citizens in the county of Henderson is a disgrace to its patriotic inhabitants. Davidson and most of his men are well known, and that they are still at large is highly discreditable to the military and peace authorities . . . We say to the Union men of those counties, unless they organize and visit speedy and summary justice upon the heads of these marauders, they will never be permitted to live in peace.³¹

Indian fighting in Texas had proved to be an excellent education for Johnson. The men seized their first prisoner and incensed the Unionists of Indiana in the process. The time to escalate now arrived. If Johnson and Martin could not

30 Johnson, *Partisan Rangers*, 92-93.

31 *Ibid.*; *Evansville Daily Journal*, June 28, 1862, 2.

convince Southern men to join them, then they would return to their previous commands without any recruits. For Johnson and Martin, that was not an option. Instead, they decided to provoke the potential recruits from their proverbial slumber. Johnson later confessed:

Now my plan is to make the Yankees run these stay-at-home Confederate soldiers out of the country and to raise such a rumpus in this region that they will think all the boys are doing devilment. . . . [M]ost older men, even among our friends, would have shaken their heads in disapproval of an apparently reckless scheme which would put the country into turmoil and perhaps accomplish no useful results. . . . [T]here was work to be done that would gain fresh recruits for our hard-pressed army.³²

The friendship between Johnson and Martin allowed them to cultivate their skill sets behind enemy lines while scouting for Forrest, and now those same skills would help raise a partisan ranger regiment. Indeed, Johnson and Martin intended to raise a serious rumpus in the region and it would bring spectacular results.

³² Johnson, *Partisan Rangers*, 91.