Civil War

***Introduction***

The Civil War played out differently in East Tennessee than it did elsewhere in the state or country. Since before Tennessee’s statehood, East Tennessee had always thought differently and more independently from North Carolina and the rest of the state. The Civil War era proved no different.

In the 1860 election, Abraham Lincoln was not present on the Tennessee ballot. Despite this, Lincoln knew that East Tennesseans were by and large loyal to him and the Union. He also knew that East Tennessee was going to be the main source of Union strength in the South.

***Secession***

During the secession crisis of 1861, East Tennessee largely remained pro-Union. However, enough East Tennesseans supported the Confederacy to support the Confederate cause. The area witnessed a civil war within the Civil War. Distrust and fear became the norm.

The percentage of slaves in East Tennessee was low when compared to the rest of Tennessee, contributing to the region’s pro-Union stance. In East Tennessee, 9% of the population was enslaved. In Middle Tennessee, 29% of the population was enslaved, and in West Tennessee, 34% of the population was enslaved. Yet the low rate of slavery in East Tennessee did not mean a widely accepted stance on abolition. Andrew Johnson, for example, was a prominent Unionist from East Tennessee, but he still believed in slavery. Knoxville stood out as the most Confederate-leaning of the cities in East Tennessee, although the county still voted against secession as a whole. At least 30,000 East Tennesseans volunteered for the Union Army.

***Abolition***

Not only were a majority of East Tennesseans opposed to secession, but several in the area were also against slavery. Nearly every county in the eastern part of the state had a branch of the East Tennessee Manumission Society, a group dedicated to convincing masters to free their own slaves, though not necessarily the abolition of slavery as a whole.

The mountainous terrain did not lend well to plantation agriculture like elsewhere in the state. As such, fewer slaves were needed to maintain the farming, typically hogs and corn, in the region. A vast majority of white men owned no slaves.

***Geography***

East Tennessee’s geography was important for both sides of the war for several reasons. First, the low rate of slavery distinguished East Tennessee from the rest of the South. Second, minerals needed for the war effort abounded in the region. Saltpeter, also known as niter, and copper were two of these minerals. Combatants used saltpeter for gunpowder and copper for gun parts. East Tennessee also held large reserves of timber and iron.

The Cumberland Gap served as an escape route for Unionists to flee to the North. Horace Maynard, a mathematics professor at the University of Tennessee, escaped through the gap to avoid arrest after being elected to Congress. While in Washington, D.C., he learned that, after his escape, the Confederates in the region had confiscated his land.

Many others chose to escape to Kentucky after the Conscription Law, requiring all males between 18 and 35 to serve for the Confederacy. At least one large group was caught and imprisoned for trying to escape from the South.

***The Free and Independent State of Scott***

After Andrew Johnson, the U.S. Senator and soon-to-be President, gave a speech in Huntsville that denounced secession, Scott Countians voted in opposition by a greater percentage than any other county in Tennessee. When the majority of Tennessee voted in favor, Scott County seceded from the state and formed the “Free and Independent State of Scott” in protest. This secession was never recognized by the state, the Confederacy, or the Union.

Scott County never experienced any major battles, but it did experience violent guerilla attacks between local Confederates and Unionists.

Scott County did not request readmission to Tennessee until 1986, but as the secession was never officially recognized, it was only ceremonial.

***Guerilla Warfare***

As most of East Tennessee was pro-Union, the area largely resented Confederate occupation. Resistance sprung up from this resentment, leading to guerilla attacks. Guerilla warfare often pitted neighbors and family members against each other. Guerilla soldiers often were not directly associated with either side; instead, they would raid farms and towns, ruining whatever they came across.

Many of these guerilla attacks took place in counties that had no significant clashes between the armies, as seen in Scott County. In counties that were divided in their support, such as Morgan County, many times the county governments would break down under pressure of the war and leave residents vulnerable to guerilla attacks.

Samuel “Champ” Ferguson’s pro-Confederate band from White County mainly attacked Unionists on the Cumberland Plateau and also managed to attack a Union supply post near Strawberry Plains. Federal authorities hanged Ferguson in 1865, after the war was over.

In Fentress County, “Tinker Dave” Beatty, a Unionist guerilla soldier, retaliated against Ferguson’s raids beginning in 1862. When the Union entered East Tennessee in 1863, he continued to help their forces. He became a local hero.

***Occupation***

Shortly after the war began, Confederates occupied the land in East Tennessee due to the pro-Union nature of the area. By 1863, Unionists were able to break into the area and occupied it. Raids destroying bridges and brief duels disrupted Confederate defenses during that summer. Following the Battle of Fort Sanders in Knoxville in November 1863, in which the Confederate suffered many losses, General Longstreet moved his forces to Russellville. By April 1864, his army had rejoined General Lee’s army in Virginia, ending all major military operations in East Tennessee. From this point until the end of the war, focus in East Tennessee turned to destroying pro-Confederate guerilla pockets.

***East Tennessee Women and the Civil War***

Women on the East Tennessee home front during the Civil War faced numerous challenges, even though they were often not on the battlefield themselves. As with men, women divided into the Confederate and Union camps. Generally, the more educated and wealthier East Tennessee women lived on large farms with a few slaves. These women often sided with the Confederacy. In the meantime, the poorer women living on self-sustaining farms had little money for slaves. They tended to side with the Union.

East Tennessee women helped the war effort on both sides. Women often worked in hospitals as volunteer nurses. They also wrote to their military and political leaders for aid when required.

At home, women became the main providers for their families. Supplies were low for both Union and Confederate households throughout the war, making it difficult for women to support themselves and their children. Some women even stole food and clothing. Groups of women banded together to help each other out and formed home guards to protect their households.

Many of these women left behind diaries and letters of their life during the Civil War. Their writings show the nature of life on the home front and the sacrifices women made during the war.

***The Knoxville Whig***

“Parson” William Brownlow became the most vocal advocate of the Unionist cause in East Tennessee during the Civil War. Originally a Methodist pastor in the upper part of the region, Brownlow cast off the profession at the age of 33 and began his own newspaper in Knoxville, *The Knoxville Whig*. The paper held strongly Unionist views in keeping with Brownlow’s own leanings. Despite his earlier views on the necessity of slavery in the South, he had become an ardent abolitionist by the end of the Confederate occupation in 1863. The Union praised him and allowed him to tour its states. The South despised him, even throwing him in jail for a few days. He and his paper served as an inspiration for the Unionists in East Tennessee, especially in the way each defied the Confederacy. He was elected as the state’s first governor after the Civil War.

***David Farragut***

David Farragut was born near Campbell’s Station in western Knox County in 1801. He joined the U.S. Navy, and at the age of eleven fought in the War of 1812. His ship, the *Essex*, was responsible for capturing the first British ship in the war. During the Civil War, he commanded the fleet that captured New Orleans and led the attack on Mobile in 1864. During the battle in Mobile, he famously shouted, “Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead,” after a torpedo sunk one of his ships. For his service in the Civil War, he became the United States Navy’s first full Admiral in 1866.

***Sultana***

The *Sultana*, a side-wheeler riverboat, had a mission to carry home Union prisoners of war (POW) in April 1865. The boat was only licensed to carry 356 passengers and crew, but the boat may have been carrying well over 2000 men. There were also stock animals on board, adding to the weight. Many of the men on board had been POWs in Andersonville, Georgia and Cahaba, Alabama, and were finally on their way home. Many of these POWs were from East Tennessee, including Blount, Claiborne, Hancock, Knox, Sevier, and Union counties.

In the early morning hours of April 27, 1865, the worst inland marine disaster in the United States occurred. One of the boilers exploded due to three unfavorable conditions: the ship’s weight overload, unfavorable weather, and a surging current on the Mississippi River just north of Memphis. When the boiler exploded, it ripped the boat in half. At least half of those onboard were instantly killed or mortally wounded. Many who survived the explosion jumped overboard because they thought they were near the shore. However, the Mississippi was at flood surge, and the boat had about four miles to either bank. Those who jumped thus had difficulty reaching shore, if they did at all.

The number of dead from this disaster stood between 1459 and 1900. This number exceeds the death toll from the 1912 sinking of the *Titanic*. No exact numbers exist for either the dead or those initially on board. There were about 800 survivors, though about 300 died later from burns or exposure. Many were buried in mass graves in Memphis. A monument for the East Tennessee victims stands in the Mount Oliver Cemetery in Knoxville. Despite such enormous loss of life, the *Sultana* disaster was quickly forgotten due to the assassination of President Lincoln and the end of the war, both of which occurred in the same month.

***Impact of the War***

Tennessee was the first Confederate state to rejoin the Union. By rejoining so soon after the end of the war, Tennessee avoided the military takeover of the South that began in 1867.

Before his death, Abraham Lincoln expressed to General Oliver Otis Howard that he desired to reward East Tennessee for supporting the Union. In 1897, Howard and Reverend Arthur A. Myers and his wife Ellen founded Lincoln Memorial University. The university’s Abraham Lincoln museum contains the United States’ largest Lincoln and Civil War collection, a collected begun with donations from Howard.