

HELL BY THE ACRE

A Narrative History of the
Stones River Campaign,
November 1862–January 1863

Daniel A. Masters

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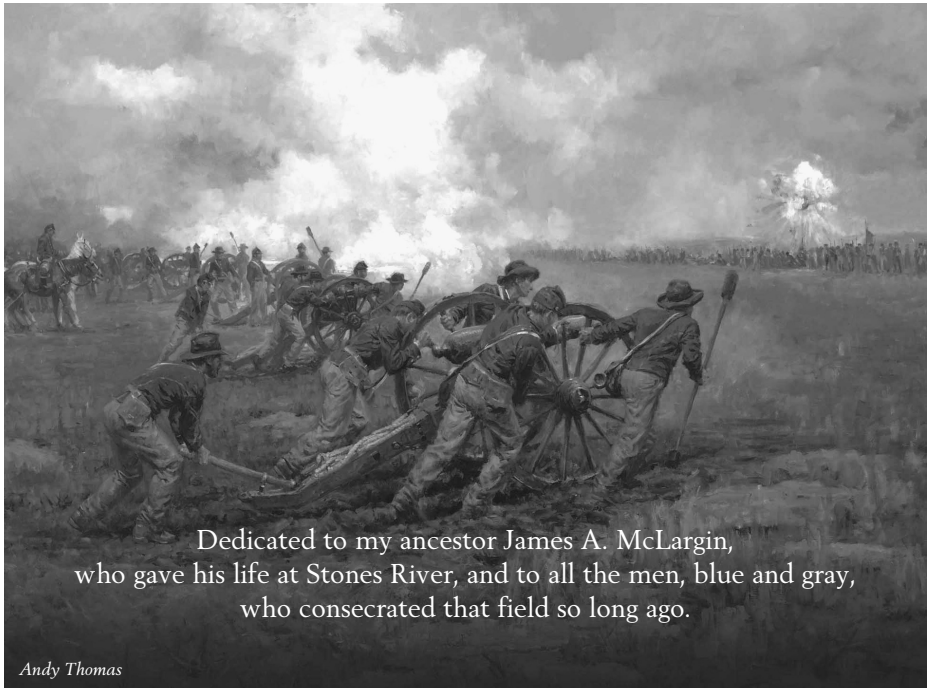
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Dedicated to my ancestor James A. McLargin,
who gave his life at Stones River, and to all the men, blue and gray,
who consecrated that field so long ago.

Andy Thomas

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Foreword



MAJOR GENERAL WILLIAM Starke Rosecrans took command of the newly designated Army of the Cumberland—formerly the Army of the Ohio—on October 30, 1862, three weeks after the Battle of Perryville. He replaced Maj. Gen. Don Carlos Buell, who the Lincoln administration found wanting after the Kentucky Campaign. Rosecrans's tenure would run 11 days short of one year until October 19, 1863, when Ulysses S. Grant replaced him with George H. Thomas. Under Rosecrans, the Army of the Cumberland grew and transformed into one of the three great armies of the Republic, destined to play a crucial role in winning the war and suppressing the rebellion.

As noted by the change in designation, Rosecrans inherited a force in transition. It was also in the middle of a supply crisis, as Confederate raids and the invasion of Kentucky disrupted the rail line between Louisville and Nashville, the army's two most important bases. It was also absorbing tens of thousands of new recruits in dozens of new regiments, rushed into service to meet the threat of Confederate invasion. Many of those new men saw their first combat at Perryville, that strange, lopsided battle for control of Kentucky. Prior to his promotion, Rosecrans had fought and won his own battle at Corinth, Mississippi, just a fortnight before. There, he led a force one-third his new command's size. Preparing the Army of the Cumberland to secure its rear and for future offensive missions was a huge task.

Confederate General Braxton Bragg, Buell's opponent in Kentucky and now Rosecrans's adversary in Tennessee, rose to command the Army of Mississippi in

June 1862, whose name would change to the Army of Tennessee that November. He would be this Western army's longest-tenured commander, holding the position for 17 months until President Jefferson Davis accepted Bragg's letter of resignation on December 3, 1863, after a damaging defeat at Chattanooga. During that time the army experienced great internal turmoil, at times nearing outright mutiny, despite Davis's largely ineffectual efforts to instill peace within the high command. Simply put, Bragg's querulous personality did not inspire harmony, but he was also saddled with equally quarrelsome and headstrong subordinates who, over time, increasingly found him wanting as a general.

The Battle of Stones River (Murfreesboro, to the Confederates) marked a significant milestone in the development of both armies. It was the first of three critical campaigns between these two forces and these commanders. The others were Tullahoma in the summer of 1863, and Chickamauga later that fall. Each campaign saw an increase in geographic scope. Although Tullahoma did not result in a major battle, Rosecrans forced Bragg out of Middle Tennessee via maneuver; the collision at Chickamauga in North Georgia resulted in the second bloodiest battle of the entire war.

Unlike in the Eastern Theater, where the Army of the Potomac often outnumbered Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, the contest between Bragg and Rosecrans was about even. In early December, Bragg's army numbered 49,500 men, while Rosecrans could count about 55,000, some of whom would have to remain to guard Nashville during any offensive operations. Rosecrans carried about 41,500 to the field at Stones River, while Rebel estimates vary between 35,000–37,000. That number would have been larger had Bragg not been forced to detach Carter Stevenson's entire division to Mississippi on the eve of battle. In a similar vein, at Chickamauga in September 1863, Rosecrans engaged just fewer than 61,000 officers and men, while Bragg's command numbered nearly 65,000. In each case the strength advantage for the larger force was minimal and was not the decisive factor in success.

In many ways, Stones River was a curious battle. Although Rosecrans was on the offensive in the campaign, the battle saw a role reversal with Bragg's army doing most of the attacking. Each general adopted a similar battle plan, attacking with their respective left wings while holding on the right. Bragg threw the first punch, derailing Rosecrans's plans before they fully developed. As happened at Perryville (and foreshadowing Chickamauga) Union Maj. Gen. Alexander McCook's "Right Wing" was surprised and all but routed by the early attack, a fact that produced considerable finger-pointing and blame-laying after the battle was over.

The Union rout that followed did not produce a complete victory for Bragg. Instead, Rosecrans's men grimly clung to their final positions on the night of December 31 and, to the Confederates' shock and dismay, refused to retreat to Nashville. A second Rebel assault delivered two days later on January 2 failed utterly. On January 3, Bragg concluded that he had no choice but to fall back. This marked the second time in two battles that the Army of Tennessee had achieved tactical success but conducted an operational retreat. Bragg's decision astounded civilians, the Confederate government, and the army itself. The rift between Bragg and some of his generals, unhealed by the failure in Kentucky, widened. Long months of discontent ensued.

Though far from the largest battle of the war either by size of the force engaged or by overall casualty count, it was nonetheless an intense engagement. Total casualties were 24,645—more than 13,000 Federals and 11,000 Confederates, or 32.2 percent of the total forces involved. By contrast, Maj. Gen. George Gordon Meade's Federals at Gettysburg suffered a 24.7 percent loss and Lee's army 31.6 percent. The severity of the combat on December 31 and January 2 cannot be understated. Both armies went toe-to-toe and paid the price for doing so. Federal resilience matched Confederate tenacity—characteristics that would become hallmarks of both the Army of the Cumberland and the Army of Tennessee in the more than two years of fighting yet to come.

Many students of the war first come to appreciate a battle or campaign thanks to a visit to a national park. While Stones River National Battlefield serves as that gateway today, the limited nature of the modern park makes much of the action hard to grasp. In 1896, a veterans' association placed an option on thousands of more acres, intending to create a park similar to Chickamauga & Chattanooga National Military Park in Georgia and Tennessee. The United States Congress failed to pass the needed legislation. A much smaller park came into being in 1927 with just 570 acres—a fraction of the estimated 3,000 acres over which the main engagements unfolded.

Even today, with additional acquisitions and donations, only 709 acres are protected. While much of the battle has been lost to development (including key sites of the opening action on December 31), what remains still allows students to interpret many of the most crucial fights. Despite the current urban sprawl, acquisition opportunities still exist. Hopefully, over time, more land will be preserved. The park we have now should not be overlooked because of past lapses; this magnificent ground can still teach a dedicated scholar much about the battle.

Although the literature of the Civil War's Western Theater has not entirely neglected the battle, no single extant work can be considered definitive. In addition

to some broad overview and specialty titles, there are just three modern studies of Stones River: James McDonough's *Stones River—Bloody Winter in Tennessee* (1980), Peter Cozzens's *No Better Place to Die: The Battle of Stones River* (1987), and Larry J. Daniel's *Battle of Stones River: The Forgotten Conflict between the Confederate Army of Tennessee and the Union Army of the Cumberland* (2012). All three have their merits and remain valuable contributions, and all three are largely top-down military and political studies. This new volume takes a much deeper dive into the campaign and battle.

Since both armies remained inactive in the six months following Stones River, there was ample time for commanders to draft reports, for civilian reporters and soldier-correspondents to write epistles to their hometown broadsheets, and for thousands of participants to digest and record their impressions of the struggle—all of which provides modern scholars a treasure trove of primary sources upon which to draw. Although Stones River is arguably one of the best documented battles of the war, there are still important untapped sources available. The most significant of these are the approximately 30 Confederate official reports of the battle that did not find their way into Volume 20 of the *Official Records* but are included in the Braxton Bragg Papers at the Western Reserve Historical Society. Equally crucial in importance are the many detailed soldier letters in period newspapers that put flesh on the bones and personalities to the statistics found in the official reports.

We are in a new era of Civil War scholarship. While this golden age is in part driven by the unprecedented ease of access to new source material thanks to the benefits of search engines and archival digital access, it is not solely due to a wealth of previously underused accounts. We are also benefitting from a new approach to military history that includes a broader spectrum of viewpoints, from a reappraisal of battle tactics to an exploration of environmental factors—without neglecting the work that has come before.

Hell by the Acre is a fine example of this new synthesis. Dan Masters has mined all these resources to produce both an unparalleled soldier's view of the battle and a superb command study.

David A. Powell

Introduction



“THE HISTORIES OF the Lost Cause are all written out by big bugs, generals and renowned historians,” declared Sam Watkins in his landmark Civil War memoir *“1861 vs 1882. “Co. Aytch,” Maury Grays, First Tennessee Regiment. or, A Side Show of the Big Show*, better known today as simply *Company Aytch*. As far as Sam was concerned, he had as much right to pen a history of his experiences as anyone. As he explained it, “I propose to tell of the fellows who did the shooting and the killing, the fortifying and ditching, the sweeping of the streets, the drilling, the standing guard, and who drew the ramrod and tore the cartridge.”

Those few simple words perfectly describe why I wrote *Hell by the Acre*: to ensure that the men who did the actual fighting get their just due in the history of the Stones River campaign.

* * *

The Battle of Stones River provided the United States with a much-needed victory at a time when the fortunes of the Union had seemingly reached their nadir. Stymied at Fredericksburg, Virginia, and Chickasaw Bayou near Vicksburg, President Abraham Lincoln pinned his hopes for a victory on Maj. Gen. William S. Rosecrans and his Army of the Cumberland.

Marching from Nashville the day after Christmas 1862, Rosecrans’s 41,500-man army took four days to arrive just northwest of Murfreesboro, where General Braxton Bragg and his 37,000-man Army of Tennessee awaited. On the last day of the year the two armies clashed in some of the war’s most brutal fighting to date. By the time it ended, the casualty list approached 25,000, making it the sixth bloodiest battle of the entire war and the second bloodiest in the Western Theater.

The majority of these casualties occurred during a 10-hour slugfest on December 31 and roughly two hours on January 2, with nearly one in three men (32 percent) killed, wounded, or captured. Stones River rivals Antietam as the bloodiest 12 hours in American military history and was fought with 40,000 fewer men.

For more than a century after the war, the story of this campaign received scant scholarly attention. The only book-length studies were William D. Bickham's hagiographic 1863 tome *Rosecrans' Campaign with the Fourteenth Army Corps* and Alexander F. Stevenson's *The Battle of Stone's River Near Murfreesboro, Tenn.* in 1884.

The first modern historian to deliver a balanced treatment of the campaign was James Lee McDonough's *Stones River—Bloody Winter in Tennessee* (1980). A decade later Peter Cozzens released the first in a trilogy of the war in Tennessee with *No Better Place to Die: The Battle of Stones River* (1991), which remains the standard work on the battle. Lanny Smith released his privately printed two-volume campaign study *The Stone's River Campaign 26 December 1862 — 5 January 1863* in 2008 and 2010, a mammoth and detailed study that incorporated numerous heretofore undiscovered Confederate brigade and regimental after-action reports. Shortly thereafter, Larry J. Daniel weighed in with *Battle of Stones River: The Forgotten Conflict Between the Confederate Army of Tennessee and Union Army of the Cumberland* (2012), a fine overall history with a deeper examination of the political context of the campaign. All of these contribute mightily to the historiography of the campaign, adopting a mostly top-down view of the action with the narrative driven by accounts of the political and military leaders who set the events in motion.

To understand the battle from a different perspective, we need to shift our point of view to that shared by most of the men who lived through those events: the ground-level view experienced by the men in the ranks. As Sam Watkins might have asked, "What about what I saw and experienced?" *Hell by the Acre* is intended to fill that niche.

I approached the task of attempting to describe this Civil War battle with no little trepidation. Battle at its core is bloody terrifying chaos, which in turn makes soldier accounts little more than snapshots touching faintly upon the reality of the action being described. For the participants, the war was little more than the narrow slice of what they individually saw and did. Many correspondents frankly admitted their pens and command of language were inadequate to describe what they experienced. They could speak to its horrors in snippets and vignettes, but none could contemplate the whole, let alone command the language necessary to impart its reality to others.

Depicting Stones River as viewed from the ranks with a heavy emphasis on the accounts of company-level officers and enlisted men is the primary focus of this

work. In the process of reading, reviewing, and processing thousands of documents about this campaign, I drew from the strongest sources to provide the best “you are there” feel and experience without overwhelming readers with minutiae. It is admittedly a messy process at best, but I hope readers will find this detailed ground-level view of combat at Stones River both fresh and enlightening—complimenting prior studies rather than competing with them.

To accomplish this, I assembled more than 20,000 pages of source material on the campaign and have walked nearly every inch of the battlefield, whether it is grass, trees, and limestone, or parking lots, buildings, and golfing greens. During the last seven years I used my research to publish more than 100 articles about varying aspects of Stones River on my blog Dan Masters’ Civil War Chronicles. My work on this topic includes several articles in nationally recognized publications, including *America’s Civil War* and *North & South*. I believe I understand the strategy, tactics, operational aspects, and terrain of this campaign as well as anyone.

But for me, there is more to this project than just an academic fascination with this battle. In September 2021, I toured several Tennessee battlefields with a group of fellow Civil War buffs. One of our most poignant stops was a visit to the grave of the aforementioned Confederate soldier and writer Sam Watkins. As a member of the 1st Tennessee, Watkins took part in the ferocious fighting at Stones River and was badly wounded charging the Wilkinson Pike. A cedar tree just a few yards from his grave beckoned my family’s deep connection to Stones River.

Three of my forebears fought at Stones River in Rosecrans’s army. Statistically speaking, we were like just about everyone else, losing one of the three. My fourth great-uncle James McLargin, a private in the 21st Ohio, was mortally wounded in the head on December 31, 1862. He was hit in the so-called “Slaughter Pen” amid cedar trees like the one growing over Sam Watkins’ grave. Uncle Jim died of his wounds a few weeks later in Nashville and is buried at the national cemetery beneath a gravestone bearing the wrong name: Joseph McLargin.

My fascination with the campaign was triggered when I learned Uncle Jim’s story in the late 1990s. A few pieces of bark and a sprig from the cedar tree growing over Sam Watkins’s grave in Columbia, Tennessee, occupied an honored space on my desk throughout the writing process. They served as a constant reminder that I was writing this book for the ordinary men in the ranks like Sam and Uncle Jim, who shouldered their muskets, did their duty, and offered their lives in our country’s greatest hour of peril.

This is their story.

A Study in Contrasts



ON THE MORNING of March 16, 1898, thousands of citizens lined the bustling streets of Los Angeles waving flags. Most were draped in black to mourn the death of one of the nation's few remaining Civil War generals. Some wore badges denoting membership in the Grand Army of the Republic or the United Confederate Veterans. "It was a soldier's funeral in the truest and tenderest sense of the word," reported the *Los Angeles Herald*. "There have been pageants more extensive and imposing when the other great Union generals were laid to rest, but never was there one more simply beautiful, more tender, and sympathetic than was that of Major General William S. Rosecrans."¹

Such outpourings of emotion for Civil War veterans had become commonplace as the 20th Century approached, and now, more than 30 years since the guns had gone silent, the nation was on the precipice of war with Spain and a rising wave of nationalism had further inspired combatants of that earlier conflict to heal their wounds. Rosecrans's final letter, written mere weeks before his death on March 11, 1898, had focused on reconciliation with Confederate veterans. "My heart goes out in greeting to our brothers of the South, knowing well their dash and gallantry in the face of the leaden hail, their indomitable courage in the face of overwhelming obstacles," he wrote. "Happily, reunited and bound to us in the

1 "A Nation's Hero Honored: Stately Funeral of General William S. Rosecrans," *Los Angeles Herald*, Mar. 17, 1898, 7.



Major General William S. Rosecrans

Author's Collection

bonds of closest sympathy, should grim war again assail us, there will be none more ready with arms to strike as those gray-clad heroes and their descendants.”²

The Army of the Cumberland’s former commander valued this theme of reconciliation so much that he requested to have his casket borne to the grave by eight Civil War veterans: four Federals and four Confederates.³ Rosecrans had outlived a number of prominent Union commanders: George Thomas, perhaps his closest friend during the war, passed in 1870, George Gordon Meade in 1872, and Ambrose Burnside in 1881, followed by Ulysses Grant, his wartime nemesis, and George McClellan, an old friend, in 1885. Rosecrans’s protégé Phil Sheridan, a fellow Ohio Buckeye, died in 1888; William T. Sherman in 1891.

Moving to California after the war, Rosecrans entered politics. He would serve two terms in Congress, and one of his key actions was opposition to a bill providing a pension to Grant and his wife, Julia. Rosecrans was supposedly unaware of the precarious condition of Grant’s family finances following his two presidential terms, but he had no doubt that Grant had destroyed his army career during the Civil War by making malicious false statements against him, particularly in the wake of the September 1863 Union travesty at Chickamauga. An unforgiveable sin for the devout Catholic.

Although bitter passions for some of his former commanders certainly died hard for Rosecrans, that did not extend to the men of the Army of the Cumberland. Almost to a man, those who served under “Rosey” adored him; he, in turn, had reciprocated. This esteem and respect were evident as the general’s body lay in state at Los Angeles City Hall. More than 1,500 waited in line for a chance to pay their respects before the doors opened, and by the end of the day an estimated 15,000 mourners would pass through, among them veterans of Rosecrans’s old commands.

“There were old men to whom the Civil War had been a stern reality, and young ones to whom it was but a fascinating tale of battles and heroes,” the Herald declared. “There were aged women, plainly dressed, whose pained faces told of someone left on a Southern battlefield. A tall, square-shouldered veteran and a comrade with him leaned over the casket to see the face and burst into tears. Their

2 “A Nation’s Hero Honored,” 7.

3 Ibid., 7.

hands touched tenderly the shot riddled, tattered silk flag that lay on top. ‘He was our commander,’ they said as they slowly passed out.⁴

Praise came even from former enemies. Confederate veteran Spencer Thorpe, who fought Rosecrans’s army in Tennessee with the legendary John Hunt Morgan’s cavalry, was among those asked to serve as a pallbearer and would write that “in ability, in courage and magnanimity, [Rosecrans] had no superior among the military chieftains of the North. His chivalry was superb. When the sword was sheathed, he stood for a complete rehabilitation of the Union, a perfect reconciliation of the sections.”⁵

The soldiers’ fealty for Rosecrans began shortly after he assumed command of the army in October 1862. The new commander made it a point to see and be seen by his troops, his energy and constant drive immediately evident to all. That stood in stark contrast to his predecessor, Maj. Gen. Don Carlos Buell, rarely seen by his men and considered haughty, stiff, aloof, and unpopular. To help rebuild the army’s morale, Rosecrans made sure to stage several reviews.

Veteran Lt. Marcus Woodcock of the 9th Kentucky (US) recalled the impression Rosecrans had on the men of his division, writing: “The smiling face of the commanding general was seen coming up the lines between the ranks, saying a word of kindness or instruction to almost every soldier he passed; asking one why he had no canteen, another ‘where is your haversack?’ and still another ‘have you no blanket?’ Thus, he proceeded along the lines creating a good opinion among the troops of his magnanimity and careful consideration for those under his control.”⁶

“As the soldiers broke ranks, they appeared to be overcharged with enthusiasm, and there was loud cheering from one end of the camp to the other,” echoed Wilbur F. Hinman, orderly sergeant of the 65th Ohio. “The boys had ‘inspected’ General Rosecrans and from the very outset he commanded their fullest confidence. ‘Ain’t he a daisy!’ they shouted in the free and easy army vernacular, this expressing the highest compliments. Although General Rosecrans passed into the shadow of an eclipse at Chickamauga, he never forfeited the affection, esteem, and confidence of his soldiers.”⁷

4 Ibid., 7.

5 “Last View of the Old Commander,” *Los Angeles Herald*, Mar. 16, 1898, 6.

6 Kenneth W. Noe, *A Southern Boy in Blue: The Memoir of Marcus Woodcock, 9th Kentucky Infantry, U.S.A.* (Knoxville, 1996), 115.

7 Wilbur F. Hinman, *The Story of the Sherman Brigade* (Alliance, 1897), 326-27.

Fittingly, Army of the Cumberland veteran Austin Shafer of the 92nd Ohio delivered the eulogy at Rosecrans's funeral mass at the Los Angeles Cathedral. In describing the general's character, Shafer turned his thoughts to the battle of Stones River, Tennessee, on the morning of December 31, 1862, when the fortunes of Rosecrans's command were at perhaps their nadir.

"A scene rises in vision before me; it is at Stones River," the Yankee veteran recalled. "[Union Maj. Gen. Alexander M.] McCook is broken. The exultant foe, sweeping on in its taunting challenge, emerges from the cedars. As far as the eye can see, all is lost. A cannon ball sweeping on in its deadly mission missed [Rosecrans] by a hair's breadth but carried with it the head of Lt. Col. Julius Garesche, his chief of staff. His courage is undaunted, his spirit unconquered. He breathes upon the soldiers the inspiration of his own magnetic personality."⁸

* * *

A magnetic personality was a trait few used to describe General Braxton Bragg, Rosecrans's opponent at Stones River. Although the North Carolina native was industrious, brave, competent, and exhibited both a stern sense of duty and devotion to the Confederate cause, he made quick enemies with his autocratic, petulant, indecisive, and argumentative demeanor. His troops often laid the onus for their army's misfortunes upon his shoulders. Though accounts of Rosecrans's deep interest in his men made the rounds throughout the camps of the Army of the Cumberland, any stories told about Bragg centered on his harsh disciplinary measures.

"None of [his] soldiers ever loved him," insisted Private Sam R. Watkins of the 1st Tennessee, a Bragg veteran. "He was looked upon as a merciless tyrant. He loved to crush the spirit of his men. The more of a hang-dog look they had about them, the better."

Lieutenant General Alexander P. Stewart, a top subordinate, wrote that while Bragg was "an able officer, his greatest defect was that he did not win the love and confidence of either the officers or the men." Added Colonel William Preston Johnston, General Albert Sidney Johnston's son and a longtime aide to Confederate President Jefferson Davis: Bragg was "an able man, but he was too rigid and narrow to be a great one. He was very harsh and intolerant and was always