



The Civil War and the Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area

The Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area (MSNHA) was the site of many skirmishes and the launching point of major raids during the Civil War. It was the site of the first Union raid in Alabama and was prized by both sides because of its location on the Tennessee River and its other transportation routes. The war caused division among its people and caused destruction in its cities.

A State Divided

During the nation's Civil War, another civil unrest took place between north and south Alabama, as well as amongst citizens within the same counties. Although a minority, many North Alabamians opposed the decision to secede and supported the Union during the war. Union supporters joined the First Alabama Cavalry, a Union cavalry, as well other Union forces camped throughout North Alabama.

The division of support pitted neighbors and even family members against each other during the war. It would also have a lasting effect on the government, including the formation of a new county, Colbert County. Franklin's residents were primarily Union supporters, where Colbert County's loyalties lay with the Confederacy.

A Dividing River

A physical separation also occurred during the Civil War, as Union and Confederate troops tried to use the Tennessee River. The natural barrier that the shoals created made boat travel on the river difficult and also made it harder for troops to cross the river. Sometimes troops from opposing armies would



*After the bridge was burned in Decatur
(Library of Congress)*

face each other from opposite banks of the river, unable to cross. The rocky shoals area also kept the Union Army from controlling the entire Tennessee River and forced the army to create separate naval forces – one to operate above the Muscle Shoals and a second to operate downstream from Tuscumbia.

The shoals made North Alabama's established railroad system an even more valuable and attractive asset to both sides. The Union's ability to maintain control in North Alabama, helped to cut off supply

routes to the Confederate armies in the North. This control over the railroads in North

Alabama, led to the establishment of iron foundries in central Alabama, including the Selma foundry, which produced more than 100 Brooke rifled cannons.

Minor Battles in the Region

Two of the more significant skirmishes in the region took place at Athens and Decatur. The biggest fight in Athens was on September 24, 1864, when Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest seized the

town and fort. His troops captured 1,300 Union soldiers and large amounts of supplies. They also destroyed railroad bridges in the area.

In Decatur, the Battle of Decatur occurred from October 26-29, 1864. Fighting ensued between Union troops stationed in Decatur and Confederate troops who were advancing north toward Nashville in an attempt to take over the Union depot, cutting off the supply route to Union General William T. Sherman's troops in the deeper south. Confederate General John Bell Hood chose to cross near Decatur because of the river's shallow point there and because of its close proximity to the railroad and the National Road. The Union army held off the advance and forced Hood's army to move westward to a cross the river near Florence. Flood conditions in Florence, along with a decision to wait for Forrest's cavalry and time needed to gather supplies, would delay Hood's crossing by three weeks, providing enough time for Union troops to prepare for the attack near Nashville.

A Starting Point for Raids

Though many of the skirmishes in the Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area were not major, the region was a starting point for some of the war's better known raids. In 1862, Florence was the site of the first invasion into Alabama by Federal troops when three gun boats traveled the Tennessee River to the city. Later in the war, Union General James H. Wilson camped at Gravelly Springs in Lauderdale County before embarking on a raid in central Alabama, which would destroy the University of Alabama, iron furnaces in Jefferson and Bibb Counties, and the Selma industrial complex. Additionally, Union Colonel Abel Streight left Tusculumbia with his troops riding mules to attempt a raid on the Chattanooga-Atlanta railroad.

The Effects of War on the Cities

The cities would also feel the brunt of the war, with many city buildings and homes being looted and burned during raids. Nearly two years prior to the Battle of Athens, the city was taken over by Union troops led by Colonel John Basil Turchin, who allowed his soldiers to ransack the city. Many homes and buildings were burned during the raid. In Decatur, the city was also burned during the war, though it is thought by many that the buildings were used for firewood for the occupying forces rather than burned out of spite. Both Union and Confederate forces occupied buildings such as Old State Bank in Decatur, Wesleyan Hall in Florence, and a former courthouse in Moulton, among others.

Key People from Region

The Muscle Shoals region would also contribute leaders to both sides of the war. Confederate General John Gregg graduated from LaGrange College in Colbert County, and graduates from Florence Wesleyan College (now the University of North Alabama) included Confederate General Lawrence Sul Ross and Union General Daniel McCook, Jr. Additionally, many of the region's men (both white and black) fought in the armies of both sides.