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150 Years: Battle Lines Drawn In Bootheel

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150 Years: Battle Lines Drawn In Bootheel

By Annabeth Miller, ShowMe Times Editor

The sun had not even started its journey in the sky that morning 150 years ago, when the first salvo was fired in a Civil War that had undoubtedly been brewing for years.

Nearly four months earlier, South Carolina had voted to separate from the Federal union. The Charleston Harbor – and the garrison at Fort Sumter - was smack in the heart of South Carolina. On April 10, 1861, Brig Gen. P.G.T. Beauregard, in command of the provisional Confederate forces at Charleston, demanded the surrender of the Union garrison of Fort Sumter in the harbor.

Major Robert Anderson, the Federal commander at Fort Sumter, refused.

So at 4:30 on the morning of April 12, 1861, Beauregard's forces opened fire upon the fort – a bombardment that would continue until Anderson surrendered at 2:30 in the afternoon on April 13. There were no casualties during the bombardment.

The Civil War had begun.

But west of Charleston Harbor – here in Southeast Missouri – the news from Charleston surely wasn't a shock. The situation in the country and in Missouri had been brewing for months. The first engagement in the war was not a surprise.

Local historian Paul Arnold said the lines in the war had already been drawn when the bombardment at Fort Sumter began. Arnold, a Dexter native, has done extensive research into the Civil War in the region, participated in numerous Civil War battle reenactments, and is completing his doctorate in history at Southeast Missouri University.

Southeast Missouri Mobilizes

The issues that created the divide in the country had been blooming for years prior to April 12, 1861. It all just landed “in the lap” of 1861.

“Southeast Missouri was already mobilized by the time of Fort Sumter,” Arnold said. “By then the state had already divided up into its Missouri State Guard units, this one (in Southeast Missouri) being the First Division.”

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These divisions were divided in the state geographically, he explained. Stoddard County had the Stoddard County Rangers, a Confederate unit that was formed in Bloomfield.

“By the time that first shot is fired at Charleston, we are already preparing for war down here just like the rest of the state is,” he said. The Stoddard County Rangers probably had 50-60 men - less than full strength of a company. The Rangers, commanded by Captain Van W. Hale, would have joined nine other companies to form a regiment.

“There were no Union companies raised by themselves at the beginning of the war here in Southeast Missouri,” Arnold said. He explained there were, however, some men who left Stoddard County – maybe in groups of 5 or 10 – that went to Cape Girardeau or into Illinois to enlist in Union units.

The Battle of Fredericktown was fought about 90 miles north of Dexter early during the first summer of the war. The Battle of Wilson’s Creek near Springfield was fought in August of that same year.

“The units that were raised here in Stoddard County at the beginning of the war were all Confederate,” he said. “There was just not that much support for the Union in Stoddard County.”

South of present day Dexter is an area that was well known in 1861 – Frenchman’s Springs.

“Frenchman’s Spring is where the First Division of the Missouri State Guard officially organized,” Arnold said. “It is the origins of the Confederate contingent in Stoddard County.”

The site was also a stopping place for troops throughout the war, he added. The First Division eventually became the "Swampfox" unit.

However, Arnold pointed out that folks in Stoddard County in the spring of 1861 were not hard-core secessionists, either.

“Stoddard County had a slave population that was less than one percent of the total county population,” he said. “Which is kind of surprising because we were on the Ridge and there was a lot of farm land – just not a lot of slaves.”

Missourians Divided

Missourians were divided just as the nation was divided. In the election of 1860, Lincoln did not carry a single southern or border state – including Missouri. He received just over 17,000 votes in the state, mostly in St. Louis and the German counties along the Missouri River; Lincoln ran a poor fourth in the voting. Missourians elected Claiborne Fox Jackson as governor – who eventually refused to cooperate with Lincoln’s call for troops from the state. This set things in Missouri on a unique path.

“Governor Jackson was run out of Missouri by Nathaniel Lyon and a very aggressive force of Union soldiers,” Arnold said. “Lyon and the Union forces took it upon themselves to ‘capture’ Missouri for Lincoln. Then Lincoln backed the move by not only allowing it, but I think instigated the replacing it (the elected government) with an appointed Federal government. I think, when you have outside forces like the Federals coming into the state, that did more to hurt them than what they thought it would.”

Arnold said Missourians – especially those in the southeast corner – saw this move as an “invasion.”

A Connection With The South

“People here felt they had more of a connection with the Upper South and Deep South states,” he said. “The demographics of Stoddard County show that most of these people

had lived for a short time in either Kentucky or middle or western Tennessee. Many had originated in North Carolina and Virginia.”

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Arnold, who has spent a number of years researching the Civil War in Stoddard

County and the settling of the region, says historic documents show many of the “founding families” in Stoddard County came from these Southern states.

Historic documents show the Temples, Dowdys, Riddles, and Fields - all early settlers of the area – all were originally from Chatham County, North Carolina.

“They came here together. They started out together in North Carolina and ended up here together,” he said. He noted many of those families are still in the Dexter area. “They stopped off near Savannah, Tenn.; some went north to Kentucky and stopped at Cadez, Kent., before they came on over into Southeast Missouri.”

Significance Of Anniversary

This spring marks the beginning of four years commemorating one of the most – if not the most – significant moments in American history.

Anniversaries are great occasions for historians and history buffs. But they can also be opportunities for people to become better acquainted with their country’s history, for families to learn of their own heritage, and for the county to pay tribute to past generations.

For people like Paul Arnold, anniversaries are also ‘teaching moments’.

“Like the 100th anniversary did in the 1960s, this is going to bring a lot more people to study the war. More people are going to become Civil War buffs. You’re going to have all these reenactments that’ll be going on, money that will be made available for programs and events,” Arnold said.

Arnold compares the 150th anniversary of the Civil War to the Bicentennial that the country celebrated in 1976 and says that lessons from that Civil War era can still be applied to today.

“I don’t think there were be a Tea Party movement if there was not this entrenchment of

conservatives and “politics by the roots” that did start when those guns were fired 150 years ago,” he said.

When it was all said and done, there were a million American casualties from the Civil War, and more than 620,000 dead – all Americans and all on American soil.

“The Civil War changed the way we looked at death,” Arnold said. He noted that before the Civil War, most people died in or near their own homes and surrounded by family.

“There just wasn’t a young person who died far off – unless he chose to leave home. These guys left their homes at 17, 18 19 years old to fight in the war and they didn’t come back.”

In addition, there was the development of photography – photography that created these haunting images of battlefields, and destruction, and death. Photography masters like Matthew Brady and others captured the Civil War as no other war had ever been captured.

“We had families – parents, wives, loved ones – who grieved for loved ones they were never able to say their goodbyes to,” he said. “That had a profound effect on families. Even more so in Missouri where families are split, families are divided.”

For historians, the Civil War is a pivotal point in the American timeline - some consider it second American Revolution.

"The Civil War is such a defining moment of our past. I think we learn much from such a profound time."

Links of Interest

Civil War Trust: <http://www.civilwar.org/>

National Park Service: <http://www.nps.gov/civilwar150/>

Missouri Civil War Sesquicentennial Commission: mocivilwar150.com

Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum: alplm.org

Smithsonian Institute: <http://civilwar150.si.edu/>

Photos Above: #1 - The Monument at French's Springs, south of Dexter; #2 - Civil War Museum and historic site at Fredericktown; #3- Battlefield at Wilson's Creek National Battlefield near Springfield. (SMT File Photos)

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