

MURFREESBORO: A TOWN “CAPTURED”

by Shirley Farris Jones

Located in the exact geographic center of the state, bounded by rivers, a railroad, and productive farmland, war came to the people living in the quiet little town of Murfreesboro much sooner than any of her citizens ever could have imagined when the Confederate flag was hoisted above the Courthouse in the summer of 1861. Since the initial founding of Murfreesboro in 1811, the townspeople had enjoyed prosperity and a sense of well-being for half a century. Murfreesboro served as the capitol of Tennessee from 1819-1826 and was to host such well-known political figures as Andrew Jackson, Martin Van Buren, and James K. Polk. Businesses flourished, educational landmarks were established, and the quality of life was good. On July 4, 1851, the first successful train run from Nashville occurred. And, the first toll road in the state was soon completed between Nashville and Murfreesboro. During this decade the high point in agriculture, transportation, education, and the economy was reached. In 1859, the completion of a grand new Courthouse, at a cost of \$59,000, was certainly a topic for conversation and by 1860 the residents of Murfreesboro and Rutherford County could well be proud of not only their prosperity but of the position of their county and city in state politics. Also, during this same year of 1860, political sentiment of the area supported Presidential Constitutional Union candidate John Bell, rather than pro-slavery candidate, John C. Breckenridge. With Lincoln's election, however, the legislature gave the people a chance to vote for or against secession and on April 12, 1861 Tennessee chose to remain loyal to the Union by a vote of 69,675 to 57,798. The “Rutherford Telegraph” of Murfreesboro expressed the people's sentiment by stating, “Under the circumstances that now exist, there is no cause whatsoever for disunion, and he that favors it can be guilty of nothing short of treason to his country.” The firing on Fort Sumpter and Lincoln's call for troops changed the existing circumstances, and the legislature voted again to submit the question of secession to the people. This time the state voted for secession by a vote of 104,913 to 47,238. In Murfreesboro, Rutherford County, the vote was, for secession 2,392; against, 73. A local citizen sent the following wire to Nashville: “All excited and aroused. All united. Secession flag waves over us. All for war.” It was said that based on population, Rutherford County furnished more men to the Confederate cause than any other county in the state.

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With Tennessee’s vote to join the Confederacy on June 8, 1861 as the last seceding state, the citizens of Murfreesboro never dreamed that they would ever hear the roar of cannon, the rattle of musketry, or groans of the dying. Much less in their own back yard! Nor that the devastating financial losses incurred during enemy occupation would be theirs alone to bear.

Following the fall of Fort Donelson on February 16, 1862, the evacuation of Nashville a few days later, and the Confederate retreat to Corinth, Mississippi, Murfreesboro found herself under Federal occupation by early March. And with the exception of one brief reprieve, following Forrest’s Raid in July until the Battle of Stones River not quite six months later, would remain in Federal hands for the duration of the war. The so-called social highlight of the Confederacy, namely the wedding of Murfreesboro’s own lovely belle, Miss Mattie Ready, to the dashing cavalryman from Kentucky, Brigadier General John Hunt Morgan, would quickly fade into history and that same, brand new Courthouse, only three years old, would find itself the target of a Federal cannon, aimed and ready to fire, in the event of Confederate intervention. The times -- “they were a’changin’.”

According to citizen John Cedric Spence, “On the tenth of March ... the ears of the citizens were greeted with the sound of drum and fife, the rattle of artillery wagons, columns of marching infantry, advancing with glittering bayonets, flags, ensignia, and banners flying, prancing steeds, bearing riders with drawn swords, all pomp and display, headed by General Mitchell in advance. ... They rode around the public square and halted opposite a crowd of citizens who had gathered about at the approach of the troops. The Genl., straitning himself up, and in a pompous manner, addresses the citizens somewhat in this style -- I am master of this place! And then goes on to say how he wishes matters to be understood and what he intends doing. His object was to restore the union, law, and order.” And with that said, the Federals took formal possession of the town, hoisting the U.S. flag in place of the Confederate flag on the Courthouse.

General Mitchell then began to question various citizens regarding the Confederate retreat and the burning of certain bridges and the destruction of the railroad tracks and whether it had been done with citizen consent or not. When he learned that “it was done with the consent of the people,” his reply

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was,”Well, if that be the case, I know what kind of people I will have to deal with!” House searching, supposedly for the purpose of collecting guns and ammunition, followed although many other items of value “disappeared”, never to be seen again, despite citizen protest. This was quite a change for people living in Murfreesboro who had never before even bothered to lock their doors. And, those who had locked up their houses prior to “refugeeing South” later learned that locked doors were not respected and collections of law libraries, silver, family heirlooms, and valuables of every description had fallen into dishonest hands. Both men, women, and children were “insulted” by lewd comments and actions of a disrespectful army. Many citizens were also arrested during this time and sent to prison, without being given any valid reason for their incarceration, other than being a “disloyal subject to the United States.” And businesses were not allowed to operate unless the owners had taken the oath and carried a pass, showing their compliance. Since many of the merchants had a son, brother, friend, or loved one fighting for the Confederacy and very few people were willing to submit, merchants closed out their stocks and refused to reopen. Everything was in scarce supply. But, as with any group of people, there are always a few who do not share the idealism, seeing instead the opportunity for making a lot of money. Such was the case with sixty-five businessmen of the town who wished to restore relations with the Union at any cost and therefore be allowed to conduct business as usual. A meeting was held, speeches were given, emotions ran high. Especially among those staunch supporters of the Confederacy who had loved ones fighting for the Cause. Promises were made to those sixty-five opportunists that “their names would be transcribed in Bibles, to be handed down to future generations as a reproach on them and their children.” Obviously, Murfreesboro was a Confederate town! Despite the pressure that was being placed on the Mayor and Aldermen, the government officials of the city, to likewise take the Oath “for the sake of peace and interest of the public,” according to the Federal Provost Marshall, O.C. Rounds. Total sympathy was for the South and how to resolve this issue and remain a recognized corporation to deal with the Federal injustices being inflicted upon the citizens of Murfreesboro was at stake. Several Aldermen who could not reconcile their feelings to do this were replaced by some who would.

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During this same time, General Mitchell desired a conference with Mayor John Dromgoole “on some business” and sent word asking where he could be found. The Mayor, being of a determined nature himself, understanding the implications, and wishing to evade the meeting, chose to go fishing instead. According to Spence’s account, “On leaving with fishing poles on his shoulder, remarking, if Gen. Mitchell wishes to see me more than I do him, he may come where I am fishing. I shall not go to him.”

From this day on, Murfreesboro was known as a “captured town.” In consequence, a town which is not surrendered to the Federal Army on their first appearance, and which is claimed to have been the duty of the Mayor at the time according to an act of Congress, shall be declared “captured” as a failure to comply with this requirement. Had a proper “surrender” been tendered, the town and citizens would be protected in person and property during the time of Federal occupation, citizens being allowed compensation for rents and damages sustained by the army. Two examples of war claims by prominent citizens of Murfreesboro which were filed against the Federal government are listed accordingly.

In October of 1872, Dr. James Maney, owner of Oakland’s Plantation, filed a claim in the amount of \$27,012.00 for damages incurred by the Union Army during its occupation in 1863-64. Most of this was for timber and rails. Dr. Maney unfortunately died thirty-nine days after filing this claim and the burden for proving it was now placed on his heirs. Since the claim was in excess of \$10,000 it would be heard in Washington D.C., and the family would have to transport all witnesses to the nation’s capitol at their own expense. Moreover, it would also now have to be proved that Dr. Maney had remained loyal to the Union, even though his son and son-in-law both served the Confederacy. “Oaklands” is the same 1500 acre plantation where General Nathan Bedford Forrest accepted the surrender of Murfreesboro from the injured Union General Duffield on July 13, 1862 and where President Jefferson Davis spent the night prior to General John Hunt Morgan’s wedding to Miss Martha Ready on December 14, 1862. It was also used as Braxton Bragg’s private residence while he was in the city. The family was never awarded any money from the government for this claim.

Thomas Hord, anti-secessionist and owner of “Elmwood”, a 1,000 acre plantation adjacent to lands

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where the Battle of Stones River occurred, fared a little better. Mr. Hord was also one of the sixty-five businessmen of Murfreesboro who had previously, but unsuccessfully, wished to restore relations with the Union. In a petition to the government for redress he wrote, “ During 1862 I furnished the Federal army 500 bushels of corn and oats, five or six stacks of hay, for which I received receipts but they were defective. ... In August, 1862 my men were taken to work on the stockade forts here and in Murfreesboro until the army fell back from Alabama to Kentucky and they were taken off by the army. For their services I claim pay and for the men if not returned. ... On December 29, 1862 the Army of Rosecrans passed. That was on Monday and on Saturday I had nothing left but 300 pounds of bacon. During the week of the battle [Stones River] a large number of wagons and teams were captured by the rebels, necessitating their being replaced as quickly as possible. I furnished 21 head of horses and mules, 37 head of cattle, 100 hogs, 900 barrels of corn, 35 or 40 tons of hay and fodder.” ... “The house was unexpectedly and suddenly taken for a hospital and the wounded brought in so rapidly that there was not time or means of removing the carpets or furniture as of December 31, 1862. ... The wounded and dying were brought in, 500 or 600 of them, and laid on fine Brussels carpets ... which became so soaked with blood as to be removed and thrown over the carriage house. ... In addition, between 80,000 and 90,000 fence rails were taken. ... Twenty-six houses, two barns, and the overseer’s house were torn down to make three bridges, two stockades and cross-ties for the railroad. ... “

When it was all over, Thomas Hord estimated his damages at \$59,124.60. However, only a portion of this claim was honored and it was not until 1911 that his heirs received a small portion in settlement.

To date, Murfreesboro has yet to surrender!

And, in all probability, Mayor John Dromgoole had absolutely no inkling of the long-range ramifications his actions would have on the citizens of Murfreesboro when he picked up his fishing pole on that fateful spring day one hundred years ago in 1862. But, as Southerners have learned time and time again, the price of pride can sometimes be a very costly one indeed

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