Action at Athens and Sulphur Branch Trestle - by Gene Eric Salecker

Thanks to Gene for this very informative article which helps to explain the importance of our April 2007 reunion site in Athens, Alabama. Gene will not be able to be with us this year, and we will certainly miss him! - Ed.

By late September of 1864, General William Tecumseh Sherman had captured Atlanta, Georgia from the Confederacy and was preparing to move southeast towards South Carolina and the Atlantic coast. Deep inside Confederate territory, Sherman had to worry about his lines of supply, which brought tons of ammunition and foodstuffs over hundreds of miles of captured rail lines. To protect these vital lines, Sherman had left behind numerous boys in blue at dozens of strategic forts. Two of these forts were at Athens, Alabama, (about 17 miles south of the Tennessee state line in the center of northern Alabama) and at Sulphur Branch Trestle (about 12 miles north of Athens.)

The garrison of troops stationed at a star-shaped earthen fort at Athens, Alabama consisted of 464 African-American soldiers from the 106th, 110th and 11th United States Colored Troops under the command of Colonel Wallace Campbell. As described later, the fort was “an earthwork, 180 by 450 feet, surrounded by an abatis of brush [a series of pointed sticks and felled trees] and a palisade 4 feet high, and a ditch 12 feet wide...” With earthen walls rising “18 feet from the bottom of the ditch to top of parapets,” the fort was said to be “the strongest work between Nashville and Decatur.”

On September 11, in response to Confederate cavalry raids against Sherman’s rail lines, the 3rd Tennessee Cavalry set their tents near the fort at Athens to supplement the Colored Troops. Over the next few weeks “things went along in the usual way” but on September 23, a telegram was received that Confederate cavalry were tearing up the railroad tracks between Athens and Decatur, about twelve miles straight south. Since most of the Tennessee cavalrymen, about 400 men, were out on a patrol west towards Rogersville and Lexington, Alabama, with their commander, Colonel John B. Minnis, only about 130 horsemen set out with Major Samuel Pickens to put a stop to the rebel shenanigans. Unfortunately, after traveling south for only about five miles, they ran into a larger number of Confederate cavalrymen.

Putting up a good fight, the 130 3rd Tennessee cavalrymen turned around and fought their way back towards Athens. Upon reaching the town however, they discovered that “some skirmishing had been going on, [and] some houses were on fire.” While the Tennesseans were out of Athens, Confederate cavalry leader, General Nathan Bedford Forrest, had swung in behind them with a large number of troopers to attack the town and capture the abandoned camp of the 3rd Tennessee Cavalry. As Forrest’s troopers closed in around Major Pickens and his small band of men, the Union cavalrymen fled to the safety of the star-shaped Athens fort and joined ranks with Colonel Campbell’s colored troops. In total, the strong fort now held about 600 men supported by two 12 pound howitzers.

While the 100 men from the 3rd Tennessee Cavalry were trying to get back into Athens, the 2nd Tennessee Cavalry was coming up from Decatur. Although they managed to fight their way all of the way into the Athens town square by 10:00 p.m., they then received word that General...
Forrest had 10,000 men in the area. With Confederates all around them, the 2nd Tennessee Cavalry located a local guide and managed to get out of Athens before they were surrounded and captured.

Around 5:30 p.m. on the 23rd, General Forrest’s Confederates descended on the Athens fort, keeping up a steady fire “until long after dark.” Those within the fort felt secure in the strength of the fortification and by the fact that they had food and water to last for two days and over 70,000 rounds of ammunition. In addition, each cannon had 120 rounds.

Near 7:00 a.m. on Saturday, September 24, General Forrest opened the affair by throwing a number of cannonballs towards the earthen walls from a nearby battery of guns. A short time later, another battery of guns opened fire from another direction. At the same time, Forrest sent his soldiers towards the fort from east and west. In about two hours time, 24 cannon balls fell inside the fort, killing one man and wounding another.

At this point, General Forrest decided to stop the assault. “While my troops were steadily advancing upon the fort, and the artillery was pouring into it a concentrated fire,” Forrest recalled, “I ordered a halt and the artillery to cease firing. Knowing that it would cost heavily to storm and capture the enemy’s works, and wishing to prevent the effusion of blood that I knew would follow a successful assault, I determined to see if anything could be accomplished by negotiations.”

Also, Forrest was well aware that a Union relief column was at that very moment trying to fight its way through to reinforce the beleaguered garrison. Early on the morning of September 24, the commander at Decatur put about 350 soldiers from the 18th Michigan Infantry and 102nd Ohio Infantry on train cars and sent them north towards Athens. Upon reaching the break in the tracks caused by the Confederates on the 23rd, the infantrymen climbed off of the trains and started north towards Athens on foot. Almost immediately, they were met by detachments of General Forrest’s Confederates, who were determined to stop them or slow them down before their fort at Athens, Alabama could be captured.

After General Forrest stopped his assault on the fort, he sent forward a flag of truce to see if Colonel Campbell would surrender before more blood was shed. Twice Colonel Campbell refused to give up and then General Forrest asked for a personal interview. Under a flag of truce, Colonel Campbell rode out of the fort to meet with the wily Confederate cavalry leader.

Hoping to convince Colonel Campbell that surrender was the most prudent thing to do, Forrest let the Union commander examine the Confederate troops. As Forrest wrote, “He accompanied me along my lines, and after witnessing the strength and enthusiasm of my troops he surrendered the fort with its entire garrison.” However, it was not that simple.

After inspecting Forrest’s troops, Campbell went back into the fort and called for a council of war with eight of his officers. Campbell told the assembled men what he had seen and called for a vote to see if they should surrender. Of the eight, only two voted against surrendering. Colonel Campbell then said, “The jig is up; pull down the flag.” With that, the “best fortification on the line of the Nashville and Decatur Railroad” was surrendered.

Unfortunately, this move did not sit well with the men and other officers. On October 17, only three weeks after their capture and eventual exchange, more than 30 officers who had been inside the Athens fort wrote an official letter of complaint to the War Department. The letter stated that they had not been consulted about the surrender and that there was no “disposition on the part of the men to surrender or to avoid a fight, it was just the reverse.” As the officers wrote about their men, “When told that the fort had been surrendered, and that they were prisoners, they could scarcely believe themselves, but with tears demanded that the fight should go on, preferring to die in the fort…”

With the surrender of the garrison at Athens, Forrest next turned towards the relief column that was at that very moment inching nearer to the star-shaped fortification. Even while Colonel Campbell had been reviewing General Forrest’s lines, the men within the fort heard the sound of gunfire coming from the south. Then, as the Union flag came down over Colonel Campbell’s command, the Union relief column broke
from the woods and moved within musket range of the fort. Just then however, the reinforcements from the 18th Michigan Infantry and the 102nd Ohio Infantry, witnessed the unbelievable sight of a white flag of surrender being raised over the earthen ramparts of the fort. Noted one Union officer, “The surrender of the fort allowed General Forrest to throw a portion of his force between the fort and them, thus compelling them to surrender after a hard fight of three hours’ duration, during which they lost one-third of their number in killed and wounded, and after they arrived at the very gates of the fort.” With their commanding officer severely wounded, and with no place to go, the 260 or so survivors of the relief column were forced to surrender.

Having captured both Athens and the Union reinforcements, Forrest next captured a couple of blockhouses along the Nashville and Decatur Railroad before turning towards the rectangular fort guarding the tall railroad trestle bridge over Sulphur Branch. On the morning of September 25, General Forrest’s men advanced and quickly drove the defenders back into the fort. As was later reported, “The fort was located on a rise, or knoll, at one end of the trestle-work, so constructed that if an enemy should be fool enough to attempt to tear down or burn the trestle-work, a sweeping fire could be given from the fort.” Unfortunately, however, there were four higher points of land around the fort that gave any attacker the advantage to fire down into the fort.

On September 24, before the fort at Athens fell, the 400 troopers of the 3rd Tennessee Cavalry with Colonel Minnis had attempted to reach Athens, but when their way was blocked by Forrest’s cavalry, they quickly retreated back to the Sulphur Trestle fort. Once there, they joined 300 men from the 9th Indiana Cavalry and 300 African-American soldiers from the 111th U.S. Colored Troops, all under Colonel C.O. Lathrop of the U.S. Colored Troops. In all, Colonel Lathrop had about 1,000 men and two cannon to defend the Sulphur Branch trestle fort.

On September 25, after the Confederates arrived at the trestle, General Forrest immediately ordered eight pieces of artillery up on top of the four high hills. Almost immediately they began firing down into the exposed fort. At the same time, Forrest sent in his cavalrymen, moving forward on foot. Within a short time, the hot fire from the advancing rebels had killed a number of Union defenders, including Colonel Lathrop. As the next ranking officer, Colonel Minnis of the 3rd Tennessee Cavalry took over.

As the Confederate shot and shell fell within the fort, Colonel Minnis was also knocked silly from a well placed shot. Still, the defenders held back the attackers until “both the Ninth

[Indiana] and Third [Tennessee] were out of carbine ammunition.” In addition, the Union defenders “suffered severely in the assault... Almost every house [inside the fort] was perforated with shell, and the dead lay thick along the works of the fort.” With 27 men killed and another 112 wounded, Colonel Minnis, who had regained his senses, asked for a parley.

After talking with General Forrest and weighing his options, Colonel Minnis surrendered the fort and blockhouses at Sulphur Branch Trestle at about 11:00 a.m. on September 25, 1864. After the Union forces laid down their arms and marched out of the fort, the blockhouses and the 72-foot high, 300-foot long trestle were burned.

In two days of fighting, General Forrest had captured about 530 men of the 3rd Tennessee Cavalry, 300 men of the 9th Indiana Cavalry, and 350 men of the 18th Michigan and 102nd Ohio Infantries. Most of these men would go on to spend the rest of the war in “Castle Morgan” Prison at Cahaba, Alabama and eventually be released and sent to Vicksburg, Mississippi. From there, the men would be crowded on board the ill-fated steamboat Sultana and from there they would steam into history.
Come join us for our 2007 reunion held for the first time in Athens, AL. The primary reason to meet here is to visit the Union fort sites in Athens (Ft. Henderson) and Sulphur Branch Trestle where many of your Union ancestors were captured in the fall 1864 railroad raid by none other that Confederate Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest. Only one trestle of Ft. Henderson remains, but the fortification at Sulphur Branch Trestle is well preserved with a modern home situated in the middle! However, we are very fortunate in that the owners have agreed to, even welcomed, a visit by our group to the interior (with some restrictions).

We also have the privilege of using some of the facilities of Athens State University for our events. The use of the Ballroom will be twofold: for the Friday evening talks with displays arranged around the room and for the Saturday evening banquet catered through the university. Something new has been added this year for Friday afternoon starting around 3:00 p.m.—a musical time of about 1.5 hours for singing, playing instruments, etc. to be held on the stage reserved at Athens State. Descendant Penny Lyle has volunteered to oversee the planning of this event (see her article in this newsletter) so please contact her if you have something to offer and don’t be shy. Remember, you will be amongst friends. Penny is the perfect person to take on this task as she teaches music in her home state of Florida. Some local talent may also be involved.

Again, we will have a tour on Saturday starting in the morning and ending late afternoon. Athens is not a large town so the trips between stops are short. We will commence with a short walking tour of Athens State conducted by one of its history professors. Lunch will be at a local restaurant large enough to serve our group with each person ordering for himself/herself off the varied menu. Following our midday meal, we will travel a few miles north to reach Sulphur Branch Trestle which will be the conclusion but highlight of the tour. I am still working on the details of the tour but expect a good time.

The costs for the weekend will be amazingly low. Through my contact at Athens State (Debbi Kelley is an employee there. I went to high school with her husband, Mike, who has been to several of our reunions) there will be no cost for the use of the Ballroom and auditorium! I feel that school buses will adequately serve our purposes for the tour since the distances between stops are short and a bus coach may not make it up the steep hill at Sulphur Branch Trestle, let alone turn around there. I have reserved two school buses with a company in nearby Huntsville, and can add another if needed. I estimate the charge per person will be $10.00 for a 48 passenger bus.

The Sat. banquet will only cost $14.95. I gave the menu in the last newsletter, but let me repeat it here: buffet of roast beef, or lemon and pepper grilled chicken; green beans, scalloped potatoes, salad, roll, tea or coffee, and dessert! (makes my mouth water just typing it!).

Lodging will be on your own. There are a variety of motels at the primary Athens exit (No. 351) off I-65. Here is a partial list: Best Western, Budget Inn, Comfort Inn, Days Inn, Hampton Inn, Holiday Inn Express, Super 8, and Town & Country. You might contact the local Chamber of Commerce at 256/232-2600 for more information. There are also a number of eating places at this location. As a side note, the nearest airport is at Huntsville, AL, only about 30 miles east of Athens if you want to fly in.

I’d also like to invite everyone to attend my talk on the Sultana to be given to the Huntsville CW Roundtable on Thurs., April 12th (the day before our reunion starts) at the Elk’s Lodge in Huntsville. A chicken buffet meal will be available for $7.50 starting at 5:30 p.m. with the meeting to begin at 6:30 p.m. There is no charge if you wish to skip the meal and only come for my presentation.

Let’s now talk registration. The banquet and bus costs need to be prepaid for a total of $24.95. A check should be made out to me and mailed to me at P. O. Box 30372, Knoxville, TN, 37930. I will need contact information on you and any in your party and your ancestor’s name, if any, and unit. You can enclose these facts with the check or e-mail me at nshawatty@hotmail.com.

I think our record attendance was around 140 at our initial visit to Vicksburg. Let’s see if we can surpass that number. Let me know if you have any questions or need further information or have suggestions. -Norman Shaw
A GLIMPSE OF THE CIVIL WAR THROUGH MUSIC

Music speaks to our hearts as no other medium can, and music played an important role during the Civil War—it served as a morale booster for the soldiers and provided an emotional outlet for soldiers’ families left behind.

We are planning a wonderful program of music for that Saturday in Athens, but WE NEED YOUR HELP. We would like to involve those of our reunion group who are interested in singing or playing an instrument, as solos or in groups. Penny Lyle (Sgt. Samuel A. Dyer, TN Cavalry Co. C), musician and music teacher, will be arranging the program.

DON’T BE SHY— you don’t have to be a professional. Many of the tunes of the Civil War are simple but poignant. We welcome voice, guitar, violin, cello, drums, harmonica, brass, woodwinds, piano, etc.

“We already have a women’s vocal duet and a fiddler signed up! So please contact Penny AS SOON AS POSSIBLE at (904) 629-2179 (if no answer, PLEASE leave a message) or email her at Pianopenny@aol.com.