

Chapter One

Barbourville

September 18, 1861

“The charge was made...and the enemy completely routed.”
—*Richmond Dispatch* October 2, 1861

The division between pro-Union Kentuckians and their secessionist peers eventually led to the first bloodshed in the state on September 18, 1861. A literal tug-of-war between the two forces had warranted the establishment of Union recruiting and training camps, and the subsequent Confederate response was an effort to thwart the effect of the activity. As a result, the settlement of Barbourville, known as Barboursville at the time of the war, would earn a place in the annals of Kentucky’s Civil War history. Although the number of casualties was relatively small and the battle provided little impact upon the struggle between the United States and the Confederate States of America, the conflict deems coverage as the first battle within the borders of Kentucky and the designation as one of the Civil War Sites Advisory Commission’s “most significant and endangered”¹ battlefields from the war.

The town of Barbourville, located near the Wilderness Road and just twenty-five miles north of the Cumberland Gap, is usually regarded as owing its settlement to Dr. Thomas Walker. This Kentucky pioneer was a practicing physician as well as a surveyor and an agent for the Loyal Land Company of Virginia. Walker erected a cabin approximately six miles southeast of

present-day Barbourville, near a bend of the Cumberland River. In 1795 Richard Ballinger established a tavern in the vicinity, and a few years later James Barbour donated land for the development of a town. The resulting village survived and was designated as Knox County's county seat in 1800.²

More famous individuals, such as Daniel Boone, followed Walker's expedition and the area continued to grow, eventually producing a series of state leaders for Kentucky, Missouri, and Texas. The town's nickname "Home of Governors" denoted its rich contribution to the maturation of the United States. As a result, Barbourville became one of the most important cities in Kentucky.³

Barbourville's aforementioned location near the Cumberland Gap drew the attention of the opposing armies as soon as the war began in 1861. Despite its declaration of neutrality, Kentucky saw its borders crossed by Union and Confederate men alike. Barbourville, situated in eastern Kentucky and a short distance north of the pro-Union section of East Tennessee, became an early point of contention in the military events.

East Tennesseans' strong stand to remain in the U.S. had literally separated it from its two sister sections to the west. Both Middle and West Tennessee were, from an economic standpoint, more agriculturally based and therefore possessed stronger sentiments in favor of the preservation of slavery. Because of East Tennessee's heavy stance on remaining in the Union, Andrew Johnson was able to remain in Washington, D.C.; he was the only Southern Congressman to do so. The circumstances in East Tennessee had not gone unnoticed in the United States capital as Abraham Lincoln openly stated that he saw the importance of the region and likewise sought its retention of membership in the Union.

In July of 1861, U.S. naval lieutenant William "Bull" Nelson, a native Kentuckian, was given the assignment of establishing a camp in Kentucky for the purpose of recruiting and training Union-minded men of the Bluegrass State to assist in the efforts to secure East Tennessee, its neighbor to the south. The resulting camp was located a short distance east of Danville, Kentucky, and lay

approximately halfway between Danville and Richmond, along an east-west line. A Danville-area farmer named Richard Robinson provided the land for the camp that was given the designation Camp Dick Robinson. The farmer was known as “an extensive mule dealer and stock raiser” whose pro-Union stance “incurred the malignant enmity of not only his secession neighbors, but of leading secessionists of the state.”⁴

Located six miles from Lancaster and only eight miles from Nicholasville, the Robinson farm held great accessibility for the Union cause. Nicholasville “was a southern terminus of the Kentucky Central Railroad, connecting it with Cincinnati.” Lexington, another major city in the state, was only twelve miles north of the agricultural base.⁵

The Robinson farm included more than 1,800 acres that Dick Robinson gained through his marriage to the daughter of William Hoskins, Sr. A mansion of some twelve rooms graced the property that was proclaimed as being “one of the very best and richest tracts of land in the Bluegrass” and that the presence of a “never-failing spring . . . furnish[ed] an absolute inexhaustible flow of water.”⁶

A *New York Times* article published in November of 1861 reported that Mr. Robinson sold \$22,000 worth of mules to the Confederacy and did so by extending them credit. He had mortgaged his estate to make the initial purchase himself. When the Confederate government failed to pay the debt they owed, Robinson found it necessary to rent his farm. The U.S. government complied for some \$33,000, a handsome profit and sizeable return on Robinson’s investment.⁷

The presence of Camp Dick Robinson infuriated Kentucky governor Beriah Magoffin, who left no doubt that he wanted the facility shut down. In August, Magoffin wrote Pres. Abraham Lincoln noting that Magoffin desired “the removal from the limits of Kentucky of the military force now organized, and in camp within said state.” The request for the camp’s removal drew a response from Lincoln that he “acted upon the urgent solicitation of many Kentuckians” and “must respectfully decline” such action.⁸

Confederate leadership responded to the situation in Kentucky by placing recently promoted Brig. Gen. Felix Kirk Zollicoffer in command of soldiers in East Tennessee. Deeply admired and respected among his troops, Zollicoffer soon received an assignment from Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston to negate the growing threat from the increasing Union presence in Kentucky. Zollicoffer's significance in the events of the coming months could not have possibly been foreseen.

In spite of their similar leadership roles in the opposing armies, Nelson and Zollicoffer were distinct in a number of ways. Nelson's nickname of "Bull" exemplified his flamboyant personality and physical size. Political connections undoubtedly played a significant role in Nelson's appointment, related to Camp Dick Robinson. His brother, Thomas, was a Lincoln-appointee serving as minister to Chile and likely helped secure Bull's new leadership role and a promotion to brigadier general.⁹

Zollicoffer's troops regularly referred to him in affectionate terms, such as "Pap." Nelson was a U.S. officer in his mid-thirties while his Confederate counterpart was approaching the half-century mark. Zollicoffer was also a former newspaper editor and U.S. Representative from Tennessee. Their differences ended though with their similar determination to eliminate the other, or his cohorts, from establishing a firm foothold with the confines of Kentucky.¹⁰

East Tennesseans who were sympathetic to the Union were not forced to simply rely upon others to fight for them. In fact, the loyalists willing and able to cross the Kentucky state line were given the opportunity to join their fellow Unionists in the effort to suppress the Confederate "rebellion." The base of operations for this opportunity was another loyalist camp named for the Tennessee state senator serving in Washington, D.C., Andrew Johnson.

Camp Andy Johnson was established through the determination of Dr. R. T. Tuggle. In early August, Lt. Samuel P. Carter, a native East Tennessean and U.S. Naval Academy graduate, completed a journey of several months, arrived at the camp, and assumed his role as its commander. Upon doing so, Carter moved Camp

Andy Johnson from its original location near the Barbourville town square to a site approximately two miles east of the settlement. By the middle of the month, Carter had assembled some eight hundred Tennessee loyalists to form the 1st East Tennessee Infantry Regiment.¹¹

Groups such as those established at Camp Andy Johnson and destined for pro-Union service were called Home Guard units. Their counterparts, determined to serve the Confederate cause, were known as State Guards. As the nation became more divided and violence erupted, Kentucky reflected this divisiveness in many ways. One of these was through the establishment of Confederate recruitment and training camps that opposed the earlier camps such as Johnson and Robinson.

A military chess match evolved as the opposing armies sought to gain control of several locations across the ever-decreasing neutral land of Kentucky. Confederate leaders Brig. Gen. Simon Bolivar Buckners well as Maj. Gen. Leonidas Polk moved into the Bluegrass State while Union groups established similar positions at other key sites. Tensions mounted as the time neared for the players in this real-life strategic game readied for a more forceful display of military might.

By mid-September, Union forces occupied Paducah in Northwestern Kentucky and Elizabethton in the North-central portion of the state. In addition to these soldiers, the Home Guard members stationed at Camp Dick Robinson had enabled the Union army to gain a solid foothold across the state. Total U.S. troop strength in Kentucky topped 20,000 as the state continued to declare its neutrality and—thus far—avoid bloodshed within its borders.¹²

Zollicoffer held the view that the Cumberland Gap would serve as the primary entry for a Kentucky Unionist invasion of Tennessee. He notified officials in Richmond that reliable sources had informed him of forces numbering in the thousands “threatening to force a passage through the mountains into East Tennessee.” In turn, the Confederate general grew determined to eliminate the ability of the Kentucky Unionists to initiate actions in Tennessee.¹³

To more effectively facilitate his plan of defending against Union aggression, General Zollicoffer moved across the Cumberland Gap and entered the southeastern section of Kentucky. Zollicoffer had his men establish Camp Buckner during the second week of September.¹⁴ From this location the Confederates could closely monitor Union activity in the area.

One Confederate wrote that an encampment near Camp Buckner was located “on high, steep, and rough ground” where soldiers determined it was necessary “to tie themselves in bed at night to keep from rolling out.” Zollicoffer’s command consisted of the 11th, 17th, 19th, and 20th Tennessee Infantry Regiments as well as two cavalry companies of Benjamin Branner’s 4th Tennessee Battalion. This group of “the most completely exhausted set of men imaginable” entered camp on the Rufus Moss farm a short distance from the junction of Clear Creek and the Cumberland River.¹⁵

A Confederate recalled that a “monotonous routine of military duties” became commonplace at Camp Buckner in addition to what another declared was a siege from “measles, diarrhea, and all the diseases camp life is heir to.” A lack of food and forage hampered the campers and added to the poor conditions. Undoubtedly, earlier encounters with residents some ten miles from Camp Buckner were present in the Confederates’ minds. The contrasting observations of an abundance of “mountain girls, nearly all brunettes, with long dark, uncombed hair” and bare feet to that of “long-legged, long haired men with long squirrel rifles ever ready to shoot a rebel”¹⁶ provide insight into the situation at hand for non-native soldiers.

The arrival of Rutledge’s Tennessee Battery and the 15th Mississippi Infantry Regiment placed the number of Confederates in the vicinity of Camp Buckner at approximately 5,000. Although the amount of troops was significant, Zollicoffer appeared threatened by the Federals gathered and training at Camp Andy Johnson, less than twenty miles north of the Cumberland Ford.¹⁷ The issue of this perceived threat would soon lead to the first confrontation on Kentucky soil.

From Knoxville, Tennessee, Zollicoffer sent orders for Col. Joel Allen Battle of the 20th Tennessee to advance north on September

18 with the assignment of neutralizing the training efforts at Camp Andy Johnson. Colonel Battle's face was graced with a thick white mustache and beard, the presence of which earned Battle the nickname "Grandpa" among his command. Battle's force of some eight hundred men was comprised of two companies from the earlier noted Branner's Cavalry battalion as well as portions of the 11th, 17th, 19th, and 20th Tennessee Infantry Regiments. One historian has proposed that these companies were chosen because they were among the most well armed men present at Camp Buckner. Although it appears uncertain as to the exact number of Federal troops Zollicoffer believed were stationed at Camp Andy Johnson, one individual reported an estimate as high as six hundred.¹⁸

Zollicoffer was unaware of the serious lack of supplies and sufficient weapons at Camp Andy Johnson. Almost all of the 1,000 Union soldiers who had spent the majority of the last month at Camp Andy Johnson had relocated eighty miles away to Camp Dick Robinson where ample provisions did exist. Various sources record the number of Home Guard members remaining at Camp Andy Johnson to have ranged anywhere between a reported "small . . . unit" and Zollicoffer's official recording of three hundred. Historian Kenneth A. Hafendorfer stated, "there probably was at least 150 Home Guards" at the camp.¹⁹

On September 18 a detachment of Confederate cavalry companies from Branner's Battalion and under the leadership of captains John Rowan and A. C. Plumlee left the Cumberland Ford and moved north toward Camp Andy Johnson. Eight infantry companies followed the cavalry as the latter reached the area of Barbourville before sundown. With the arrival of darkness, a reported fifty members from Plumlee's command approached the bridge that spanned Little Richland Creek.²⁰

The advancing Confederates encountered members of the Home Guard positioned at the bridge. Reportedly, the Confederates fired the first shots and the Home Guards replied in a like manner. One of the Confederate accounts countered this recollection of the series of events as the soldier recalled, "We went rather cautiously

until their pickets fired on us. . . . We charged along the road, not knowing where the men were stationed . . . within a quarter of a mile of Barbourville . . . we were fired on from the wood 50 or 75 yards from the road.”²¹

A member of the Home Guard noted that when the Confederates caught sight of the Home Guard, members the Confederates opened fire. A Barbourville resident remarked, “There were some thirty of the Home Guard guarding the bridge; the seceshers [pro-secessionists] fired at them.”²²

Another participant recorded that the Confederates retreated at the same instant that the Home Guard left the scene. Discrepancies exist in relation to the number of casualties inflicted, as the Home Guard reported no losses and three Confederates wounded. The Confederates denied any losses while claiming to have killed a member of the Home Guard and inflicted minor wounds. By “about 1 or 2 a.m.” the fighting was reportedly over.²³ However, the action of September 18 was merely a prelude of what was to come the following day.

Col. Joel Battle and his detachment of Confederate infantry arrived at the outskirts of Barbourville at approximately 6 a.m. on September 19, Battle’s fiftieth birthday. The infantrymen had covered several miles in their approach upon Barbourville. Capt. Dick McCann of the Cheatham Rifles recalled the presence of anti-secessionism was extremely strong. McCann wrote that in the suburbs of Barbourville the “atmosphere is foul with the stench of Unionism,” and that he witnessed, “every house decorated with that old flag.” After being informed of the skirmish that took place a few hours earlier, Battle determined that the entire force of cavalry, not a mere group of fifty, should advance toward the town. Battle’s eight infantry companies were to bring up the rear.²⁴

A Confederate noted, “The morning was very foggy and we were not able to distinguish a man one hundred yards off.” Another stated that the thickness of the fog negated seeing anything over a distance of thirty feet. Ormond Beatty was an area educator and served as the weather observer for the town of Barbourville. He

recorded that the rains of the previous night had helped create the fog on the morning of September 19 and that the temperature at 7 a.m. was 70 degrees. The foggy conditions would soon be eradicated as the temperature rose to 85 by 2 p.m.²⁵

A member of the Confederate force approaching the town reminisced, “a lane leads to the town, over a bridge, crossing the ravine to the left and right of the road. On our right was a field of luxuriant corn . . . on our left stubble fields.”²⁶

An estimated three hundred members of the Confederate force approached the bridge spanning Little Richland Creek. As few as twenty-one Home Guard members protected the approach to the bridge and had likely participated in removing the planks of the structure. As least one Barbourville resident claimed that his fellow townspeople had anticipated the morning return of the Confederates and ripped the floorboards from the bridge frame. With the cross planks gone, the bridge could only be traversed along the “sleepers,” the section of the bridge used to support the cross planks.²⁷ Otherwise, the Confederates would have to enter the creek in order to successfully reach their goal.

The exact sequence of events that followed is filled with conflicting recollections. One citizen of Barbourville recalled that when the three hundred Confederate cavalrymen arrived, they fired upon the Home Guard. A period newspaper article written by a Confederate participant indicated the Home Guard fired the first shots of the day. He wrote, “When we had approached to within about thirty yards of the bridge, the enemy, concealed in the ravine, behind fences, in the corn-field, and under the bridge, commenced a brisk fire.”²⁸

Lt. Robert Davis Powell, 19th Tennessee Infantry, had volunteered to accompany Capt. John Rowan’s cavalry squadron in its approach upon Barbourville. Powell gained permission to join the expedition, secured a horse, and rode with the advance guard. The young officer secured a horse and rode with the advance Confederate guard. In his mid-thirties, Powell was an attorney who had never been married.²⁹

J. P. Coffin recalled the events of the Confederate arrival in noting, "When the front rank of the advanced guard had gotten within about thirty steps of the bridge and saw in the early dawn that the floor had been taken up, they hesitated for a moment, and just then the enemy gave us their first volley, and Lieut. Powel [sic], who was riding at my right, fell forward and to his left, striking the neck of my horse and falling to the ground."³⁰

It is a generally regarded fact that Powell holds the unfortunate distinction of being the first Confederate officer killed in action in Kentucky. He is also considered to be the first Confederate officer killed outside of the Virginia borders. In the ensuing events, Pvt. John Hendrickson, a member of the pro-Union Barboursville Home Guard, was also killed. His death secured the town's place in history as the sight of Kentucky's first armed struggle that resulted in the death of a soldier from both armies.³¹

The Confederates followed orders from Captain Rowan as one company moved to the right and another to the left of the road. Several of the men in gray heard Colonel Battle give the command to "clear the way for the artillery." Another interpretation of the order was, "let the artillery come forward." The fact of the matter was that the nearest Confederate artillery was at Cumberland Ford, some eighteen miles away. However, the call for artillery yielded the desired effect upon the Home Guard as the steadfast twenty-one members, who refused to abandon their position during the initial contact and had twice beaten back the Confederate attacks, began fleeing their defensive positions.³²

The Home Guard retreat was described in a *Richmond Dispatch* article in early October. The article stated that part of the Home Guard detachment was silenced with a few pistol shots and that a subsequent charge was made upon their position. The writer recalled, "The charge was made, the corn field cleared, and the enemy completely routed. The infantry . . . gave them the farewell shot."³³

Another Confederate wrote, "Our men were running up and down the gulley [sic] trying to get over to the enemy. When they

made way, so that the infantry could fire a few charges, the enemy ran.”³⁴

A Knox County resident wrote of the action and the Confederates negotiating a ditch to gain an advantage on the Home Guard. The writer noted, “the [Confederate] cavalry . . . went back, crossed the gut back about one-fourth of mile, made their way around, came up the town, and . . . upon the rear of the Home Guards, intending to surround them. When [the Home Guard] . . . saw that, they escaped . . . one was shot through the ear and one through the top of the shoulder.”³⁵

One Confederate recollection offered humorous insight in relation to the Home Guards’ resistance. Statements providing credence to the stubbornness of the defenders’ fighting noted “A hostile bullet emptied my canteen of a very good article of peach brandy, leaving me otherwise unwounded as I charged across the stringers of a bridge from which the planks had been removed. Here I saw my brother’s cavalry company . . . emptying their revolvers at the enemy.”³⁶

For all practical purposes, the battle of Barbourville ended with the retreat of the Home Guard. The Confederates moved to Camp Andrew Johnson where they took possession of supplies, weapons, and ammunition. The raiders then destroyed the camp before returning to Barbourville.

Related events are preserved in an article published a week after the battle. The writer recorded, “When they [Confederates] took possession of the town they destroyed a great amount of property and . . . were reveling upon the spoils of victory. . . . Men, women, and Negroes are all fleeing in the direction of Camp Robinson.”³⁷

An inaccurate account of the Confederate casualties gave the number as some thirty killed and twelve mortally wounded. This same report stated that the attacking force loaded a wagon “with their dead, and the blood was strewn all along the road from the wagon for miles.” Zollicoffer, in his official report, listed Lt. Powell as the only death yet noted that one of the additional four soldiers who were wounded was mortally wounded. The Confederate

commander also proclaimed that his soldiers had killed twelve members of the Home Guard and captured two. He was unable to provide an estimate of the wounded Home Guardsmen.³⁸

Barbourville has grown a great deal since the battle and modern structures have been built on a large amount of the land where fighting took place in September of 1861. There are three historical markers on the north side of town and one of these, state marker 518, is related to the action of that fateful day. From a negative standpoint, it is positioned at a dangerous and busy intersection, making it difficult to reach, read, and interpret. Additionally, a Civil War Sites Advisory Commission Report on the Nation's Civil War Battlefields studied approximately 940 acres and summarized the condition of the Barbourville battlefield as "landscape and terrain have been altered beyond recognition."³⁹

Debate exists about the exact location Camp Andrew Johnson occupied, but Union College is often regarded to be located on the site. The institute of higher learning was founded in 1879 and is one of the oldest in the region.⁴⁰ Aside from these facts, several positive aspects exist in relation to the preservation efforts at Barbourville.

On September 12, 2008 the Barbourville Civil War Interpretive Park was dedicated near the intersection of Cumberland Avenue and Daniel Boone Drive. This outstanding one-quarter-acre memorial to those who fought in Kentucky's first battle will, in the words of historian Joseph E. Brent, make "it difficult for citizens and visitors alike to be uninformed about" the battle of Barbourville.⁴¹ The initial impact of viewing this memorial is positive and arouses curiosity to seek additional information in relation to the contents of the signage and other aspects of the attractive site.

Several groups working together enabled this dream to become a reality and preserve the memory of the battle and its participants. Fundraising products and a grant greatly helped this multi-year dream to come true. A land donation from Curry Oil Company as well as an equipment and labor donation from William and Rhonda Roach of Compliance Industrial LLC to clear a building from the site was combined with the efforts of other entities to create the

park. Among those who added to the construction of the site were the Barbourville Tourism Commission, the City of Barbourville, Renaissance on Main Street, and Congressman Harold Rogers. The Southern and Eastern Kentucky Tourism Development Association, the Knox County Chamber of Commerce, and the Knox Historical Museum are also to be commended for their efforts. No less important to the project were the Knox County Area Technology Center, Corey Patrick Jones of Berea College, Mudpuppy & Waterdog, Inc., and Union College.⁴²

Two informative and easy-to-access kiosks, each consisting of three panels, enable readers to gain an understanding of the battle while standing on some of the actual ground where the military action took place. Benches and a gazebo provide locations for rest and reflection for park visitors. Area buildings contain murals that add to the reverence for each soldier who long ago offered his best in defense of the cause he so unselfishly and willingly served. In addition to the kiosks, individuals entering the park are able to view a miniature replica of the bridge that spanned the gulch on the outskirts of town. Flags, a cannon, and memorials add to the impressive location.

More insight into the area's history can be gained by visiting the Knox Historical Museum, established in 1987 in Barbourville. A series of themed rooms focuses on various aspects of the rich heritage Knox County possesses. The building is located on the corner of Liberty Street and Daniel Boone Drive. Additional information can be gained by calling 606-546-4300. In addition, the Knox County Public Library, located on Knox Street, contains research material on local and state history. The facility is open every day except Sunday and hours of operation vary. More information is attainable at 606-546-5339. Dr. Thomas Walker State Park is open year round and is situated near the Cumberland River and memorializes the settler who arrived in the area seventeen years ahead of noted explorer Daniel Boone. The park's phone number is 606-546-4400.

A successful and active means of preservation of the Battle

of Barbourville is the annual reenactment. Ray Adkins founded this event, which usually occurs in mid-September and includes campsite and battle action. In its first decade of existence, the reenactment has grown to include several hundred participants. Contacting the museum above will provide interested parties with additional and up-to-date information.

The modern city of Barbourville contains a population of approximately 3,600 people. As with many towns across the nation, Barbourville could greatly benefit from the economic opportunities offered in taking advantage of the park and resources the area offers. The groundwork for both preservation and monetary gains has been laid. The willingness and continued devotion of interested townspeople to properly utilize these will determine the success of the efforts previously enacted.



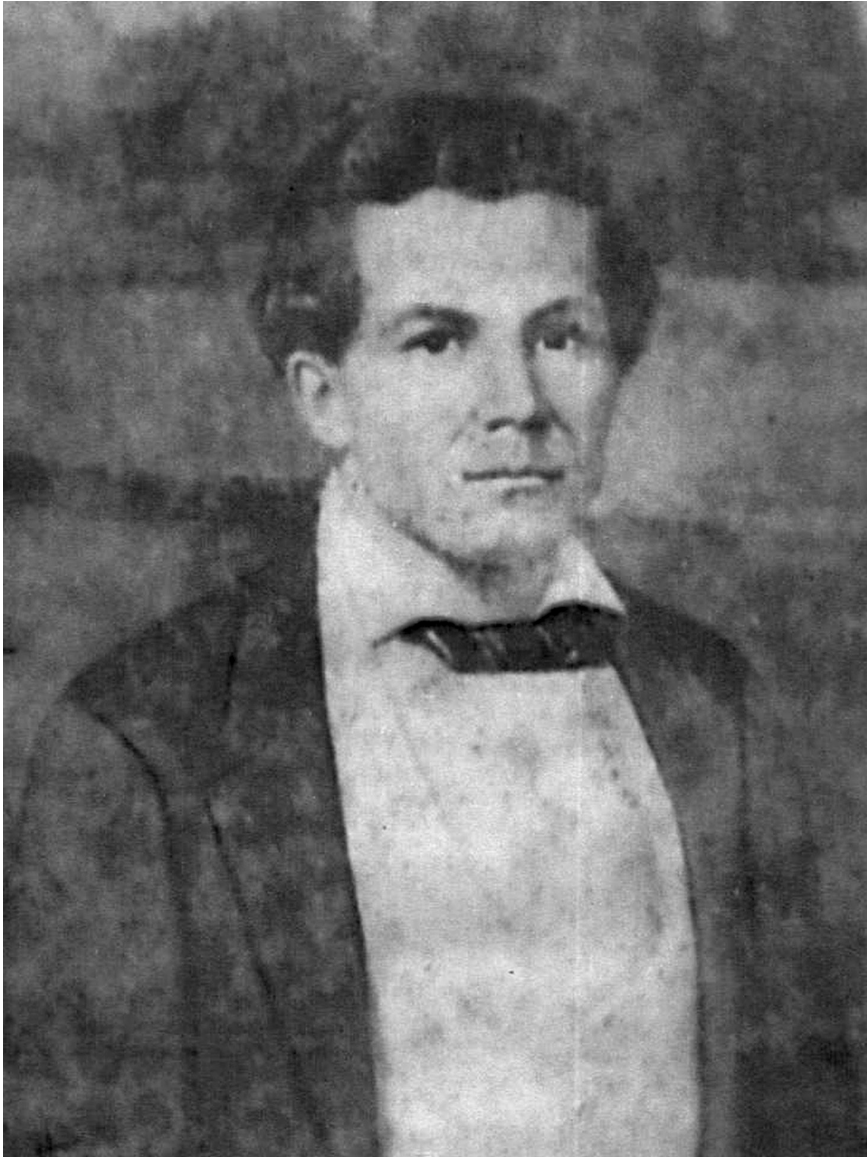
These headstones honoring two of the casualties of the battle of Barbourville, the first combat deaths in Kentucky, are located in the Barbourville Civil War Interpretive Park. (Photo by author)



The Barbourville Civil War Interpretive Park. (Photo by author)



These markers are virtually stacked to the side of a busy highway outside of Barbourville. (Photo by author)



Lt. Robert D. Powel (Powell) was the first Confederate killed outside of Virginia. (Courtesy of Lt. Robert D. Powel, S.C.V., Camp #1817)