

## Chapter One

# A HEART THAT KNEW NO FEAR

—Joseph Garnet Wolseley

### 1800-1861

The United States had nearly doubled its size with the purchase of the Louisiana Territory in 1803, a vast new domain of big skies and long horizons that seemed so limitless there did not seem to be Americans enough to fill it. But within a hundred years it was done. A hundred years of astonishing growth and expansion saw the United States of America roll forth aboard the *Manifest Destiny Express* all the way to the Pacific coast and beyond. Along the way America fought a second war with Great Britain, settled boundary disputes with three European nations, making all of the Pacific Northwest American, wrested enough land from Mexico to make five new states, and nearly destroyed itself by Civil War.

America was in its first blush of nationalism following the War of 1812 against Britain, the end of which ironically had been negotiated just days before Andrew Jackson led his countrymen to one of the most staggering military victories in their history at Chalmette, downstream from New Orleans, on January 8, 1815. The young country had finally won a measure of respect from Europe, and the next decade would be known as the “Golden Age of American Diplomacy” as the United States assumed its place among the family of nations. Newly elected congressmen came to Washington from the recently added western states of Tennessee and Kentucky, demanding recognition for their rapidly growing section and calling for the expenditure of federal funds for internal improvements to the infrastructure of the new nation.

South Carolina’s John C. Calhoun, who had allied himself with the western Warhawks, calling for war against Great Britain after his election to Congress in 1810, became the champion of American

nationalism when the war was over. His voice led the chorus calling for the federal government to underwrite great transportation projects like the National Road, bridges, and canals that would, in his words, “cement this nation together.” As a committed nationalist he went on to serve as secretary of war to one president, vice president to two others, and even flirted seriously with the presidency himself. Yet, when he ended his public career on the floor of the United States Senate in 1850, he did so calling for an end to compromise between the states that had already resolved themselves into two separate sections, each with its own culture and set of political demands. He died the symbol of that sectionalism. The great “ism” he had expressed at the beginning, however, had been achieved, but that nation then stood at the edge of an abyss too horrible for many Americans to name: Civil War.

Perhaps the journey to that point had been too rapid, too filled with great, epochal change. The Erie Canal Project, completed in 1825, made New York City a port through which the world connected with the great waterways of North America. Very quickly other canals tied rivers and lakes and cities together over thousands of miles of water highways. Passengers and cargo could travel on the Erie Canal from New York City to Buffalo, thence to the Lake Erie shore of northern Ohio, where the Wabash and Ohio Canal could be taken southwest across the entire state of Indiana to connect with the Ohio River at Evansville. From there passengers could travel the Mississippi River to connections with a dozen other major rivers branching off east and west before finally reaching New Orleans and the Gulf of Mexico beyond.

Great steamboats plied the rivers carrying cargoes of cotton, trade goods, and food staples. Freight wagons fanned out from the river ports to share the bounty with villages and hamlets across the land. The introduction and expansion of railroad transportation added greatly to the mobility of America’s citizens and to the movement of goods back and forth, as each stage of development added more layers of complexity to the national fabric. The combination of improved roadways, canals, river travel, and railroads continued to bind the country together, providing farmers, merchants, and manufacturers with unprecedented access to markets and the exchange of commodities and ideas.

However, as America was evolving and coming together in new ways, the old ways were driving her people and states apart. In the early nineteenth century, politicians struggled to contain the

expansion of slavery, while growing numbers of moralists called for its extinction. The first attempt at maintaining a balance had come in 1820, with the Missouri Compromise, which offered that balance through Missouri's admission to the Union as a slave state against Maine's as a free state. The Missouri Compromise further attempted to draw a new line, permanently separating slave territories from free. America had become, in a sense, two nations: one coming and one going. The one coming was a nation bound to become the greatest in history. The nation going was one that could not find a way to put the baggage of the old world behind and rise to the promises made in its birth certificate, the Declaration of Independence. At the crossroads where those two nations met, Abraham Lincoln stood and declared, "A nation divided against itself cannot stand."<sup>1</sup>

On the frontier of these two nations, and forty years from the fulfillment of Lincoln's words, a future military genius was born on July 13, 1821, in the wilderness of middle Tennessee. His name was Nathan Bedford Forrest; Nathan after his grandfather and Bedford for the county of his birth. He would draw his first breath in a world where survival was a daily task and opportunity a birthright. The frontier in which he was bred and born was not only remote, but also more violent than the more cultured tidewater regions of the South. The daily struggle for survival produced self-reliant, independent men who carried with them, just barely tethered by a slim cord of civility, a rough sense of justice and a quick temper. The land of his birth was a beautiful but unforgiving place inhabited by wild beasts and often wilder men.

The Forrest genealogy was not uncommon in that place and time. The family boasted no kings in their family tree, not in recent generations, at least. Bedford, as he was more commonly called, came from ancestors who had emigrated from England and Scotland and, on this side of the ocean, had been mainly traders in horses, cattle, and mules. Shadrack Forrest, Bedford's great-grandfather, who had immigrated to North Carolina, eventually moved to middle Tennessee in 1806.<sup>2</sup>

Shadrack Forrest owned 471 acres near Caney Spring Creek in Bedford County, and he also owned at least one slave. His second son, Nathan, produced a son named William, the father of Nathan Bedford Forrest, whose name is immortalized in military history. Bedford arrived in the world with a twin sister, Fanny, and they were the first of eleven children born to Miriam Beck and William Forrest.

William was a blacksmith and a small-time farmer struggling to survive on the edge of civilization. The family lived in a primitive log cabin consisting of two small rooms and struggled with the frontier on its own uncompromising terms. Typhoid fever ravaged the Forrest family, taking two of Bedford's eight brothers and all three of his sisters. Bedford also contracted the disease but survived. It was an early demonstration of the tenacity for which he would become famous. These circumstances required that Bedford work like a man at a young age.<sup>3</sup>

When the Chickasaw nation was relocated to the new Indian Territory, opening up land for white settlement, William moved the family to Tippah County, just below the Tennessee line, in Mississippi. Soon after the family relocated, and for causes lost to history, William died, leaving Bedford the dubious charge of head of the family. He was fifteen years old.<sup>4</sup> If it is difficult to imagine Nathan Bedford Forrest as a teenager there is a reason; he never really was one except in age. After his mother gave birth to his last brother, Jeffery, two months after his father, William, had died, Bedford had the responsibility of feeding eight mouths and managing a hardscrabble farm.<sup>5</sup> With an eye for detail and a formidable will, he took control of the situation. Hard work, frugality, and good management had the family on a solid footing within three years. From age sixteen to nineteen Forrest was required to work the fields during the day and spend the nights helping his mother sew the family clothes and make footwear out of buckskins.

In his premature role as father figure and vigilant protector, as well as big brother, he became well acquainted with the realities of frontier life, which often included sudden death from a variety of causes. Bedford learned early on that a man must rely solely upon himself, and, if necessary, he must kill to protect his own. Growing up as he did in an arena ruled by law similar to that of the jungle, Bedford's primal instincts would have been magnified in his formative years of hard and fast experience.

That he learned his lessons well was demonstrated when he was sixteen years old. The Forrest family's neighbor allowed his bull to roam freely, and often the bull would get into the Forrests' field, breaking down the fence as it went. Once on Forrest land the bull would rampage through the recently planted field. Those crops were the currency of survival for the Forrest family, and whatever the neighbor might have thought about his bull's freedom to roam, such behavior just could not be tolerated on the Forrest side of the fence. Bedford went to the neighbor to complain and put the man

on notice. If the bull got into the Forrests' crops again, Bedford warned him fairly, he would shoot the animal.

When the bull once again trespassed into his fields, young Bedford backed up his words. His neighbor heard the shot and surmised what had happened. He grabbed his gun and went running toward the Forrest homestead. Seeing Forrest standing over his dead bull, the man shouted out a threat and came forward, climbing over a fence to close the distance between him and the audacious young man. As the outraged neighbor was straddling the fence, Forrest, who had already reloaded, fired a shot that whizzed by the man's ear, sending him back over the fence in a hurried retreat to the sanctuary of his own farm.<sup>6</sup>

Both men learned a valuable lesson that day, but to young Forrest it would become a motto of sorts throughout his life: during violent confrontation with man or beast, immediate and fierce action is the key to success. Once he established a reputation as a dangerous individual, he could use that notoriety as a weapon or a shield. As a weapon it could make an enemy flinch or blink at the moment of truth. As a shield it could subvert his enemy's confidence. When he recognized the psychological edge this gave him during a fight, intimidation became an integral part of Forrest's arsenal.

Forrest always attributed his inclination to seize the initiative to an experience during his formative years. He was out riding through the woods one day when he and his horse were suddenly attacked by a pack of wild dogs. Startled, the horse reared and threw Forrest directly into the group of snarling animals. When he landed among the pack of dogs, an amazing thing happened. As it turned out, the dogs were as scared as Bedford was. They broke and ran. Bedford never forgot that lesson, either.<sup>7</sup>

With all the burdens upon the young man's shoulders, there was little time for formal education. He never attended school beyond the fourth grade, and Forrest's borderline illiteracy would be an irritation for years to come. His speech and expressions would always carry the mark of his limited education, and writing became a difficult thing for him. He once said, "I cannot think of a time when I looked upon a pen and did not think of a snake." Later, most of his battle reports and letters were dictated and then read back to him so he could decide if the words "had the right pitch."<sup>8</sup>

Ray Allen Billington, noted historian of the American frontier experience, found this attitude toward life common among the pioneers. "These people understandably had little time to devote to luxuries such as education when other concerns, not the least of which was

food and shelter, occupied most of their time.” Nevertheless, Billington observed, “they developed a practical mind that served them well in their circumstances.”<sup>9</sup>

Bedford’s single-mindedness was probably inherited, as was his size. By the time he was eighteen, Bedford had grown to a height of six feet, one inch, and he weighed 190 pounds. His mother, Miriam, was nearly six feet tall herself and a fighter in her own right. Once when returning from a neighbor’s farm where she had just purchased a basket of baby chicks, a cougar attacked the horse she was riding as she was fording a creek. Miriam’s horse bolted, and she was thrown into the water. Although the wild cat clawed her leg, she did not relinquish her hold on the basket of chicks and nearly drowned attempting to reach the creek bank.

When she made it back home and young Forrest saw his mother’s condition, he went into action. The panther’s accustomed role of hunter was about to be reversed, as the cat became the prey of vengeful young Bedford. Miriam tried to talk her son out of stalking the panther, but he would not be deterred. “I am going to kill that beast if it stays on the earth,” he said. Taking his hunting dogs with him, Forrest began to track the cat through the woods until his dogs had the animal treed. By then it was growing dark, so Forrest took his time. He waited all night so that he would have a clear shot. One shot might be all he would have time for. When the sun began to rise, Forrest took careful aim, and with a single ball dropped the panther from the boughs of the tree. To verify his kill he cut off the panther’s ears and brought them home as a trophy for his mother.<sup>10</sup>

Side-by-side, Miriam and Bedford worked and fought to hold the family together until all the younger Forrest brothers were sufficiently grown to allow Bedford time to venture away from home. From early on in his life the future Wizard of the Saddle had been drawn to a fight like a moth to the flame, and in February 1841, he heard the faint beckoning of a distant bugle. Since Texas had won its independence from Mexico in 1836, rumors had circulated of an impending war between the United States and her southern neighbor. In that late winter of 1841, the stories coming out of Texas suggested that Mexico was threatening the Texas town of Houston. In Holly Springs, Mississippi, that kind of threat was taken seriously, and Capt. Wallace Wilson raised a company of volunteers to support their Southern compatriots in Texas. Forrest joined this unit with high hopes, and perhaps a yen for adventure, but the short-lived campaign soon turned into a comedy of errors. By the time the company of volunteers arrived by steamer at New Orleans, poor management had left them busted and stranded.

Their resolve drained, most of the men found their own way home, but Forrest doggedly led a few of the others into Texas. Upon arriving in Houston, Forrest found that he was five years early. The war with Mexico would not begin until 1846. There he was, first with the most, so to speak, but with no one to fight. Soon he was broke and forced to take a job splitting fence rails at fifty cents per one hundred to earn enough money to go back home.<sup>11</sup>

When Forrest returned to the old homestead, he continued to run the farm until his mother was remarried to Joseph Luxton in 1843. With his yoke of responsibility thus lifted, Bedford left home for good.

By the early 1800s, slavery had become the natural order of things, especially in the southern United States. The two-hundred-year legacy of slavery was well entrenched in the Southern psyche. It was a way of life, the only way of life that several generations of Southerners had known. In reality, slavery predates the United States of America, for Europeans brought the seeds with them across the Atlantic and planted the American hybrid in the 1600s.

The South became more defensive concerning slavery as Forrest was growing into manhood. By the time he was ready to strike out on his own, the South, with respect to slavery, had become a closed society with a closed mind. After two centuries of white domination and control, the “peculiar institution” had become a determining factor in driving a wedge between the North and the South.

Though slavery was a deeply seated establishment, its foundation was beginning to crack. The year before Bedford’s birth, the bloody slave revolt of San Domingo had occurred. By the time Forrest was ten years old, the South’s own worst nightmare became reality with the slave uprising in Southampton County, Virginia. Nat Turner’s rebellion in 1831 was only one of many such revolts since the turn of the century, but its ferocity rattled the complacency of whites across the South. Soon after, a series of new laws was enacted that sought to create more control over both slaves and free blacks. Among other things, these laws forbade them to gather in large groups without a white man’s supervision and prohibited them from learning to read and write. This embattled attitude of oppression swept across Dixie like a prairie fire, matching the moral outrage of the abolitionists to the north. Like the times into which he’d been thrust, Forrest’s future was written against a crimson sky.

## Law of the Gun

In the winter of 1844, Forrest moved to Hernando, Mississippi, a small hamlet of less than four hundred inhabitants, twenty-five miles south of Memphis. There he hoped to go into business with his uncle, Jonathan Forrest, who owned a store and had some trading interests in livestock and land. In the nine years he resided in Hernando he became a successful businessman, but not without hardships and setbacks. As it had been since he was a child, nothing seemed to come easy to Nathan Bedford Forrest. He would later lament, "My life was a battle from the start."<sup>12</sup>

Shortly after arriving in Hernando he found himself in the middle of a quarrel that had been brewing between Forrest's Uncle Jonathan and a local man named William Matlock. The quarrel, the seriousness of which even Jonathan might not have fully realized, had grown out of a misunderstanding with William Matlock concerning a "security" bond issue. The situation turned violent on March 10, when William Matlock came to town to settle the matter. He obviously intended that the outcome should be in his favor, for he brought with him his two brothers, James and Jefferson Matlock, and a man named Bean, the overseer on the Matlock plantation. Apparently, they were not looking to parley with the sixty-year-old Jonathan Forrest.

It is uncertain whether the men knew of Bedford's presence in town or his association with Jonathan, and they certainly had no idea how protective the young Forrest felt toward his family members. However, it seems clear that they had not counted on any intervention from Jonathan's hot-blooded nephew. Before the day ended the new Forrest in town would have a reputation as a dangerous man capable of violence and swift to take life.<sup>13</sup>

The details of how the gunfight broke out are sketchy. In one fashion or another, Bedford intervened as the three Matlocks and the overseer were looking to confront Jonathan. Very quickly, heated words were exchanged and guns were drawn. According to some versions, Jefferson Matlock fired upon Bedford, who immediately returned fire, hitting two of the Matlock brothers. Other accounts had Forrest drawing and firing first when one of the Matlocks raised a stick to strike his uncle. Approximately thirteen shots were fired during the gun battle.

When Bedford ran out of ammunition a bystander tossed him a bowie knife. Brandishing the weapon, he charged his last two



opponents, Bean and James Matlock, who were reloading. The sight of young Forrest bearing down on them with the wicked-looking knife at the ready must have been an unsettling image. Both men quickly withdrew, to put a romantic twist to it, but in fact they were unceremoniously chased out of town by a fierce young fighter who understood the value of determined pursuit. The Matlocks were not the last to be routed so ignominiously. In a few years Forrest would regularly be doing the same thing to professionally trained soldiers.<sup>14</sup> In battles to come Forrest would call this tactic “getting the bulge” on the enemy and “keeping up the ‘skeer.’”

The brief brawl had been costly. By the time the smoke cleared, Bedford had discovered he was suffering from a minor flesh wound, but his Uncle Jonathan was dead, shot by one of the Matlocks during the lethal exchange. Jefferson Matlock was soon under the surgeon’s knife and had his right arm amputated. The other brother died later from complications of the chest wound he suffered at the hands of young Forrest.

The following account was published on March 21, 1845, in the *Memphis Eagle*:

T.J. Matlock, Esq., and his brother and overseer on one side . . . had a dispute with another person when a young Mr. Forrest made some interfering remarks; sometime after which he and the Matlocks met, some exciting language rose and one of the Matlocks raise[d] a stick to strike Forrest, who immediately drew a pistol and set it to work as fast as possible, shooting both of the Matlocks through; the younger T.J., through the shoulder and upper part of the breast, and the other through the arm, which since has been amputated; Mr. T.J. Matlock lies in a doubtful state; young Forrest received a slight wound in his arm.<sup>15</sup>

The article goes on to mention that Jonathan Forrest was also killed. A few days later, Bedford was arrested and held briefly. He was released, however, upon the testimony of witnesses who said that Forrest had acted in self-defense.

In the months following the gunfight, Bedford took control of Jonathan’s business, which entailed the sale of farm equipment, horses, cattle, and sheep. He also inherited his first six slaves.<sup>16</sup> However, his new interests and responsibilities did not come without strings attached. His uncle had been in considerable debt, which required Bedford to quickly find other sources of income. His immediate solution was to expand his business with a new brickyard in Hernando

and to take one of his first business gambles by opening a new stage-coach line between Memphis and Hernando. Within a year he was well on his way to building his business into a thriving enterprise.

As an up-and-coming member of the business community, all he seemed to need to continue his rise was a wife at his side to cement a public picture of steadfastness and honesty. It is not known if Forrest was actively looking for a bride, but he certainly made the most of the opportunity when it came. His courtship of Mary Ann Montgomery during the summer of 1845 was not unlike his future military campaigns. He got there “first with the most” and put the “skeer” into the opposition.

While riding in the countryside Forrest came upon Mary Ann, her mother, and their slave team-driver with their carriage stuck in the muddy bottom of a shallow creek. As Forrest rode up he noticed two local men sitting on the creek bank. The two men were having a few laughs at the expense of the Montgomery women but were offering no assistance. Forrest charged up and quickly dismounted. Wading into the hip-deep water, Bedford carried Mary Ann and her mother to the creek bank. Then he gave the driver some terse instructions and went around to the rear of the carriage. Upon the given signal, Forrest lifted the carriage while the teamster whipped the horses, and the job was soon completed. Quick introductions were made and before the Montgomery ladies were sent on their way, permission was granted to call upon Mary Ann in the near future. Bedford then turned his attention to the two spectators who were still amused by the situation. Mounting his horse, he rode up to the two hecklers and blasted them for being big-mouthed no-accounts and advised the men not to cross his path again or he would whip hell out of both of them.

The next Sunday, Bedford rode to the Montgomery home to ask for Mary Ann’s hand in marriage. Forrest wasted no time taking action when he saw something he wanted, and he wanted Mary Ann for his bride. When he arrived at the Montgomery place he spotted the same two men from the incident at the creek. They too had come to ask permission to court the popular Miss Montgomery. One of the suitors was said to be studying for the ministry. Competition and confrontation were issues from which Forrest never shrank. Still mounted, he approached the two men and this time made his threat more emphatic. They were to immediately withdraw or face the consequences. Undoubtedly, the two men had already heard of Bedford’s prowess with gun and knife and decided not to push their luck. They, like Bedford, may have considered Mary Ann a prize, but

not one worth dying for. That was the difference. Forrest was ready to fight to the death for what he wanted; most men were not.

Once he was invited inside the Montgomery home, Bedford asked for Mary Ann's hand in marriage, mentioning during his proposal his willingness to fight for what he wanted. This was only the second time Mary Ann had spoken with him, and she naturally hesitated. Forrest told her that he would always take care of her, while men such as those whom he had just chased off could never protect her, as their cowardice demonstrated. On his third visit she accepted the marriage proposal; however her uncle and guardian proved to be a harder sell.<sup>17</sup>

The Reverend Samuel Montgomery, of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, was Mary Ann's uncle and foster father, and he initially declined when Forrest asked for Mary Ann's hand. Forrest's reputation had obviously reached the reverend's ear. He had no doubt that Forrest could protect Mary Ann; however, he had some other issues with his potential "son-in-law." The reverend told Forrest, "Why Bedford, I couldn't consent, you cuss and gamble, and Mary Ann is a Christian girl." Forrest's reply was smart and "theologically unassailable." "I know it," he said, "and that's just why I want her."<sup>18</sup>

Marriage to Mary Ann Montgomery was a step up the social ladder for Forrest. Her family was well respected and could trace their roots to Gen. Richard Montgomery, who had been killed at Quebec in 1775 during the failed attack in which Col. Benedict Arnold was wounded. They owned 350 acres near Cowan, Tennessee, in Franklin County. The Montgomerys were also slave owners who were associated with planters throughout the region. Such connections could be useful to a young businessman.<sup>19</sup>

Bedford and Mary Ann were married on Thursday evening, September 25, 1845, and wasted no time starting their own family. In 1846, William "Willie" Montgomery Forrest was born, and on June 26, 1847, Mary Ann gave birth to a baby girl, Frances "Fanny" Forrest, named for Bedford's twin sister who had died of typhoid fever when she was only five. Tragically, Fanny would die of dysentery in 1854 at the age of six.

Forrest continued to reside in Hernando for the next seven years as his business became more and more profitable. However, he soon discovered that the real money was in the slave trade. Unlike established planters, who in many cases came from old money and eschewed slave traders and their ilk, Forrest would indulge in the buying and selling of slaves to fund his move upward, into the

planter class of wealthy landowners. To this end, in the spring of 1852, he moved his family to “establish himself in Memphis as a broker in real estate and a dealer in slaves.”<sup>20</sup>

### **The Peculiar Institution**

Slavery and slave trading was a monumental dilemma for Southern whites. White Southerners benefited from slavery, but they were simultaneously intimidated by it and ashamed of it, a part of the psychological burden attached to white supremacy. Memphis was the largest slave-trading boomtown in the South. By 1845, the population of Memphis had grown to twenty-three thousand and attracted commerce of all kinds from miles around. From his farm supply trade Forrest became familiar with planters and farmers throughout the region and these customers also demanded slaves. He was in the right place at the right time, and possessing a good instinct for business, he was poised to become one of the more prolific slave traders in Tennessee.<sup>21</sup>

The growing business took Forrest on many wide-ranging business trips, and it was during the time he was establishing himself as a major player in the Memphis slave trade that he narrowly escaped disaster in a spectacular steamboat accident on such a trip to Houston, Texas. Heading home in the spring of 1852 aboard the steamboat *Farmer*, from Houston to Galveston, Bedford retired early one night but was awakened by the rowdy festivities of the drunken gamblers on board. After having a few words with some of the men responsible for the noise, Forrest stepped out on the deck for some fresh air. Once outside, he noticed that the steamboat chimneys were red hot and ready to explode. He immediately hustled to the pilothouse to speak to the captain. There Forrest found the captain drunk and engaged in a race with another vessel. He advised the captain that the boat was on a suicide course, but the captain’s drunkenness had overtaken him, and he would not relent. He told Forrest that he would win this race to Galveston “or blow the old tub and every soul on board to hell.”<sup>22</sup>

Forrest no sooner had moved to the extreme rear of the boat when suddenly it happened. An explosion tore the *Farmer* nearly in half. Debris and bodies were thrown into the air and scattered across the water. Forrest was tossed around violently by the blast and received a bruised shoulder, but he was able to lend a hand in the rescue efforts. The accident occurred as the two competing steamboats were passing by Rockfish Bar, where luckily the water was shallow. The other boat came alongside to help with the rescue and

transfer of the wounded to the medical facilities at Galveston. It was said to have been gruesome work, as more than one hundred of the passengers on board were mangled and burned. Sixty of these victims “were swept from mortal existence by this dreadful affair, including the wretched captain.” Once again Forrest proved to be a survivor. Fate seemed to be saving him for something singular.<sup>23</sup>

Back in Memphis a few months later the following advertisement ran in the July 27, 1853, *Local Eagle Inquirer* on behalf of the Forrest & Maples slave trading company:

Five hundred negroes wanted. We will pay the highest cash price for all good negroes offered. We invite all those having negroes for sale, to call on us, at our Mart, opposite Hill’s old stand, on Adams Street. We will have a lot of Virginia negroes on hand, for sale, in the fall. Negroes bought and sold on commission.<sup>24</sup>

By 1853, Forrest also owned two extensive plantations in Coahoma County, Mississippi, each producing upward of one thousand bales of cotton. Forrest was not afraid of being accused of nepotism and eventually brought all of his brothers into the business. Jesse, William (“Bill”), Aaron, and Jeffrey helped expand his holdings into Tennessee and Alabama. Very soon Forrest was able to buy his way into the upper crust of the planter elite.<sup>25</sup> As Forrest’s reputation as a prominent citizen was solidified, the slave trader stigma seemed to fade in the minds of the people in west and middle Tennessee. Soon he was taking part in the civic life of Memphis. Forrest’s election as city alderman of Memphis three times running seemed to blur any memories of his origins. The rest of the nation, however, would not demonstrate the same selective amnesia or forgiving attitude.

Although Forrest had many similarities with the slave trader stereotype, he also had his differences. Whenever possible he attempted to keep slave families together. And he clothed and fed them well. The slaves whom Forrest bought and sold could expect better medical treatment than was the norm for the time. However, these considerations for his slave property were only good business practices. Dealing with a trader who had a reputation for being humane could ease the consciences of aristocratic plantation owners who viewed slave traders as low-class barbarians. They naturally preferred dealing with a reputable company.

When pondering the depth of Forrest’s racism, one must consider the man’s personality, which, with the slavery issue aside, was dominating and explosive. But one thing he was not was a hypocrite. He never

attempted to hide his personal position behind the smoke screen of states' rights or tradition. He was a businessman who looked at a situation or obstacle with a cold, deliberate practicality. The South's economy depended on slaves and Forrest supplied the goods. No less guilty, the plantation owners who purchased slaves from Forrest and the consumers who purchased the cotton and tobacco produced by a slave-driven economy may have looked down their noses at slave traders, but their noses were breathing the same corrupt stench.

A recurring quote found in several Forrest biographies states: "Forrest was reported to have been kind to his slaves yet taught them to fear him exceedingly." The quote has been used to indicate that Forrest was a caring slave owner. It also has been interpreted as a blatant contradiction indicating that there was no possible way he could be kind and instill fear at the same time. His biographers, Jordan and Pryor, who wrote the first account of his life in 1868, had Forrest looking over their shoulders as they wrote the book. Their assessment of Forrest's relationship with his slaves is that "they were strongly attached to him."<sup>26</sup> Strongly attached or not, his slaves probably recognized that Forrest was a fair and responsible owner in comparison to many others. Undoubtedly they resented him, but perhaps they also realized that these might very well be the best circumstances they were likely to find themselves in while remaining in bondage.

Slavery was a "peculiar institution" in more ways than one, and the relationships between slaves and their masters often extended beyond the literal chains that bound them together. Was this the case with Forrest and his slaves? Perhaps. If anyone might have been able to pull off this contradictory style of supervision, it was Forrest. The soldiers and officers who fought with him in the war could easily attest to the loyalty and kindness he felt for the men he led. But, to a man, they all knew he could be terrifying and unforgiving when he lost control of his mercurial temper.

Between the year of Forrest's birth and the eve of the Civil War, the number of slaves in the American South nearly tripled, from 1.5 million in 1820 to 4 million in 1860. This increase mirrored the expansion of commerce and wealth in the South. Forrest rode this wave of unparalleled growth in the Southern economy, and by anyone's standard he had become an astounding success. In fact, by 1860, Nathan Bedford Forrest had become a millionaire. Having experienced and survived the poverty of his childhood, he was driven to ensure that his family would have a secure and comfortable life. On the eve of the Civil War in 1861, it looked as though he had accomplished that task.