



Hatchie River



An Army on the Run

The Confederate Army of West Tennessee was in full retreat. The heavy fighting at the Battle of Corinth, October 3 & 4, 1862, had crippled the army under Major General Earl Van Dorn and he sought to return to Mississippi to rest and refit his forces. The path to safety led across Davis Bridge on the Hatchie River in Tennessee. In an effort to block the Confederate escape, a Union column under Major General Edward O. C. Ord was dispatched from Bolivar, Tennessee.

A Campaign to Retake West Tennessee.



Major General Earl Van Dorn

In September of 1862, Van Dorn placed into motion a campaign to clear the Federals from West Tennessee and drive the enemy to the Ohio River. He planned to crush the forces under Major General Ulysses S. Grant by marching fast and attacking isolated garrisons, a process known as “defeating an enemy in detail.” The first target of the 22,000 man Confederate army was the Federal garrison at Corinth which, was defended by 23,000 Union soldiers. Van Dorn marched north from Ripley, Ms., and entered Tennessee in an effort to confuse the enemy as to his

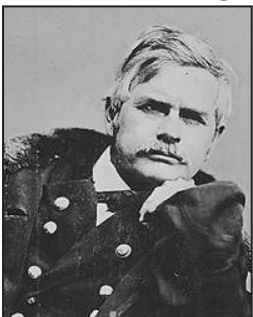
intentions. On October 2nd the Confederates turned to the east, crossed the Hatchie River and left one thousand men to guard the supply train of five-hundred wagons. On the morning of the 3rd Van Dorn attacked the Corinth defenders under Major General William S. Rosecrans and in two days of brutal fighting was decisively beaten by the Federals. His campaign in a shambles, Van Dorn concluded to retreat back through Tennessee to secure his supply wagons and then push on for the safety of Mississippi.

A Race to the River

In response to the Confederate offensive, Grant dispatched a column from Bolivar to relieve the Union forces at Corinth, if they were still under attack, or to block the Confederates at the Hatchie River if the enemy was in retreat. General Ord led 6,000 men in a forced march and on the morning of the 5th arrived at Metamora Ridge overlooking the Hatchie River. The lead elements of Van Dorn’s army had arrived on the field, and with the wagon guard crossed Davis Bridge and took up a tenuous defensive position along

Burr’s Branch. The Federals deployed along the ridge and opened a devastating artillery barrage with eight cannon which silenced the four guns of the Confederate artillery. At 10:00 a.m. the Union regiments charged down the slope and overwhelmed the Southern defenders, capturing over 400 men and securing the critical river crossing. Unsatisfied with merely taking the bridge, Ord concluded to take his troops across the river and attack the Confederate army.

That Miserable Bridge



Major General Edward O. C. Ord

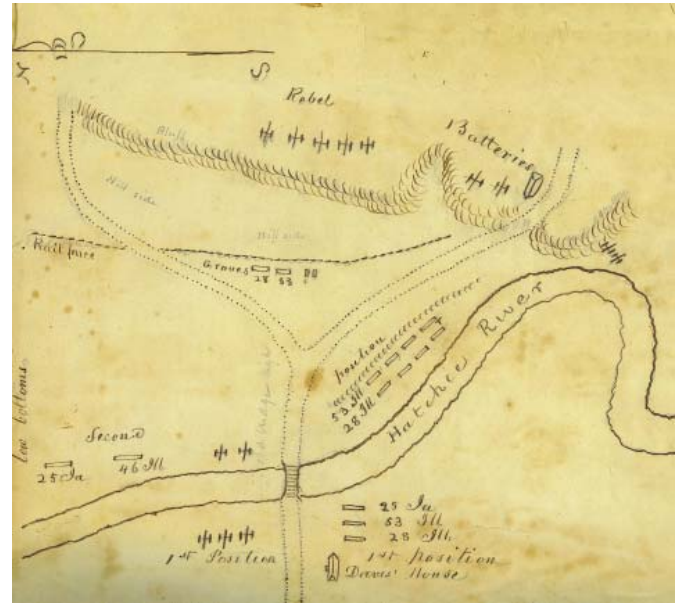
Ord’s plan was simple: his twelve regiments would cross the river, alternating one regiment to the left one to the right, until a long line was formed which would charge up the opposing heights and attack the Confederates. The plan was thrown into disarray due to a sharp bend in the Hatchie which prevented the Union from extending the line to the south. Federal units became hopelessly intermingled as Confederate reinforcements took a strong position on the heights overlooking the east bank and began to fire into the mass of blue

uniforms. In an attempt to bring order to his line, Ord rode out on what he called “that miserable bridge” where he was seriously wounded in the leg and taken from the field. Major General Stephen Hurlbut assumed command. Hurlbut sent artillery across the river and extended the line to the north. Many of the Confederates were running low on ammunition and the slower rate of fire allowed the Federals to strengthen their disorganised line.

Escape to Crum's Mill

As the fighting raged along the banks of the Hatchie, Van Dorn sought an alternate route across the river and back into Mississippi. Six miles to the south, at Crum's Mill, Confederate cavalrymen were ordered to rebuild a damaged mill dam which would allow the army to cross to safety. As the repairs commenced, Van Dorn sent his wagons and troops down the Boneyard Road to the crossing at Crum's.

Meanwhile, at Davis Bridge, Hurlbut had brought order to the Union lines and ordered an attack up the heights. The Confederates, many out of ammunition, fell back fighting and then slipped away down the Boneyard Road. General Hurlbut did not pursue, his forces having suffered 46 killed and 493 wounded, most of them to the devastating fire on the east bank of the river.

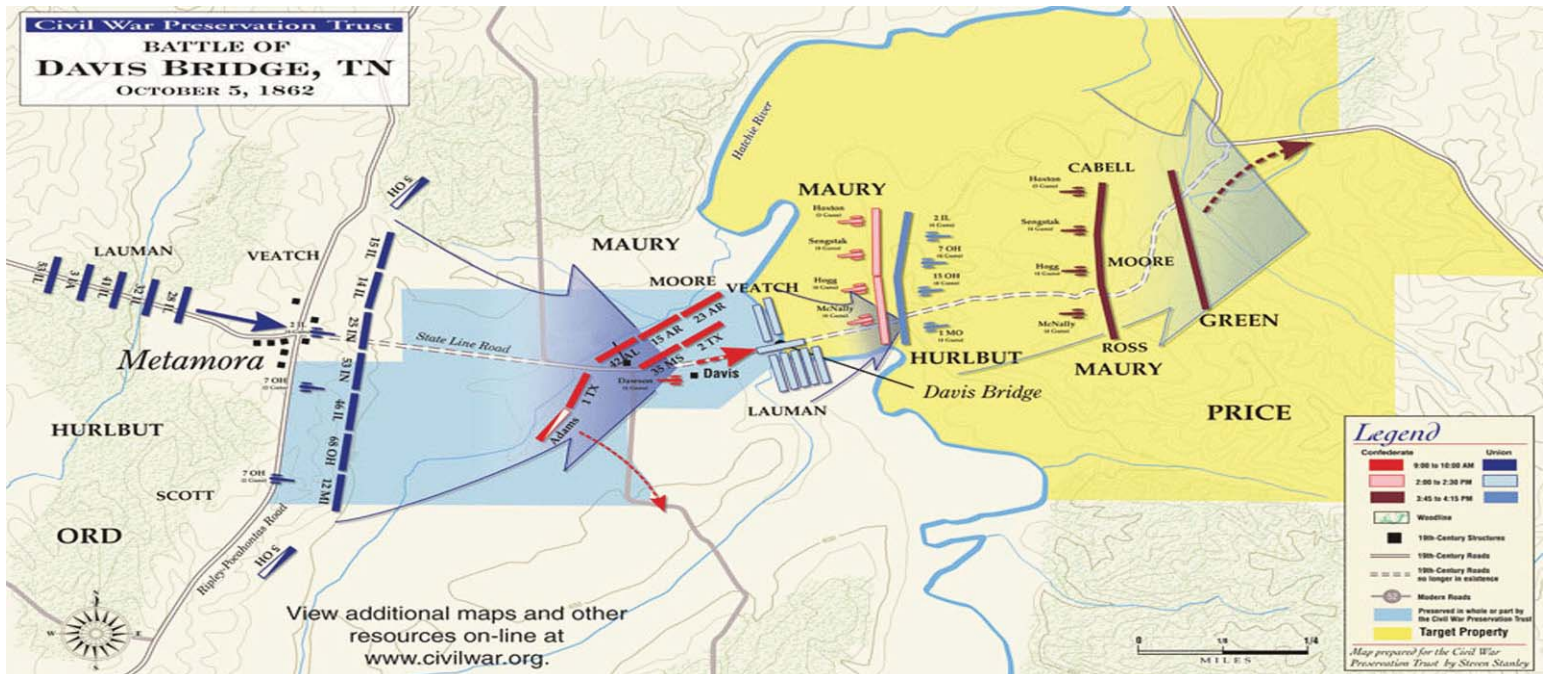


A sketch of the east bank of the battlefield by an unknown soldier of the 53rd Illinois Infantry.

On the Banks of the Tuscumbia

While the head of Van Dorn's army was engaged at Davis Bridge, the rear guard was busy fending off the pursuing Union forces marching from Corinth. Brigadier General John S. Bowen kept the Union advance at arms length throughout the day, skirmishing when necessary to buy time for the retreating army. Near sunset the lead Federal troops under Brigadier General James B. McPherson attacked, driving Bowen's men to the banks of the Tuscumbia River. A Confederate counter-attack pushed McPherson's force back,

allowing the Southerners to cross the river at Young's Bridge then burning the structure behind them. Bowen's column rejoined Van Dorn's army and by midnight the last of the Confederate troops slipped across the Hatchie River. By the narrowest of margins, the Confederate army had escaped being trapped between two rivers and two converging forces. The escape was not without cost however, as over 500 Confederates became casualties of the fighting.



The Davis Bridge Battlefield Map courtesy of Civil War Preservation Trust

Saving the Battlefield

The efforts to preserve the site of the fight at Davis Bridge began in 1987 when the Davis Bridge Memorial Association purchased 4.5 acres on the west bank of the Hatchie River. In the following years the State of Tennessee, with the assistance of the Civil War Preservation Trust and the Tennessee Heritage Conservation Trust Fund, has secured land on both banks of the river. Today 839 acres of the battlefield have been protected and is administered by the State of Tennessee (Big Hill Pond State Park) and Shiloh National Military Park.

Notice: The possession or use of metal detectors and the hunting, collecting, or possession of archeological artifacts within national park boundaries is prohibited by federal law. The intentional or wanton destruction, defacement, or removal of any natural or cultural feature or non-renewable natural resource is prohibited.

Use good judgement when near the river bank.