

Fourth in a series — Civil War Weekend Sept. 10 & 11, 2011 at Carnifex Ferry State Park

The Battle of Carnifex Ferry: Preparing for Battle

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It was early September in western Virginia, 1861, and the Confederacy's attempt at controlling the western section of the state housing their own capital was beginning to look bleak. General Henry Wise managed to control Hawk's Nest on the New River but failed to capture Gauley Bridge from General Jacob Cox and the Union. Fellow Confederate General John Floyd was currently holding Carnifex Ferry west of Summersville, but as he surely knew, it would not go uncontested by their enemies for very long. On September 9, Floyd received news that Union General W.S. Rosecrans had left Clarksburg with three brigades to either meet with General Cox at Gauley Bridge, or to make

an assault on Carnifex Ferry. With this in mind, Floyd, once again, asked for Wise's help.

General Wise, being defensive minded, knew that he would need all of his men to make sure Hawk's Nest was occupied. He felt that it would be very possible that General Cox could plan an attack on Hawk's Nest, which would give the Union the ability to combat General Floyd from the north and the south. For these reasons, Wise once again declined Floyd's orders. Floyd then began setting up defenses with what men and artillery he had. Roy Bird Cook of the West Virginia Review in November, 1931, had this to say about Floyd's defenses at Carnifex Ferry:

"The defenses constructed consisted of a parapet battery 350 feet long in the front and center, flanked by breastworks laid in a direct line with the front, and

curving back to the ends, which rested on the cliffs along the river. On the left a double line of breastworks was constructed. A trench protected the battery epaulment. The interior afforded cover against infantry fire and, to some extent, against artillery fire. Some protection was afforded in front by a deep ravine, but at the right and left there were cleared spaces on slight ridges protected by abatis. The whole was protected by forest trees and much undergrowth. The ferry road at that time ran into the ravine, debouched into a cross ravine, in line with the parapet two hundred yards away. A small by-road led to one side. It was about a mile and one-half down to the site of the ferry."

Obviously, Floyd was not taking the threat of Cox and Rosecrans lightly. The area fortified was being called "Camp Gauley."

Meanwhile, on the Union side, General Rosecrans was leading his three brigades from Clarksburg, through Sutton, with a wagon train nearly five miles long. They set up camp on the night of the 9th at present-day Muddlety, merely miles away from Summersville. When Confederate General John McCausland, who was stationed in Summersville at the time, learned of Rosecrans and his three brigades approaching his position, he withdrew back to "Camp Gauley." Rosecrans and his men would not stay at Muddlety for long. On the morning of the 10th, at around 4:00 am, they left their temporary camp for Summersville.

When General Rosecrans and his men were met with no resistance at Summersville, they continued southwest towards what would become Gad and Sparks (and what would eventually become the

Summersville Lake). When they reached Salmon Run near Hughes Ferry on the Gauley River, the second brigade was attacked by a Confederate detachment, which was easily driven away with no injuries or casualties. Rosecrans and his men were then able to cross the river via the ferry and continue towards Keslers Cross Lanes.

The Union forces were still unsure of General Floyd's exact whereabouts, so they proceeded towards Keslers Cross Lanes with caution. Rosecrans halted the expedition a mile outside of Keslers Cross Lanes and ordered his first brigade to scout the area around them and towards Carnifex Ferry. It did not take the scout party long to clash with another Confederate detachment; this one camped alongside the road from Keslers Cross Lanes to Carnifex Ferry. The detachment retreated towards the

ferry, and Rosecrans ordered the brigade to scout farther down the road.

Not 300 yards down the road, they were met by heavy Confederate resistance, to which they returned fire. It was clear to them by the number of Confederate soldiers and sophisticated defenses that they had located Floyd and his forces. General Henry Benham of the first brigade sent a courier back to General Rosecrans and requested more men. The Battle of Carnifex Ferry had officially begun!

Information from this article was obtained from George A. Hall's *Civilian War in West Virginia: The Moccasin Rangers* — available for purchase at *The Nicholas Chronicle* office in Summersville for \$18.61.