

The Fight for Kentucky: Part 1
From Camp Wildcat to Mill Springs and the Cumberland Gap,
the Winter 1861-62 Kentucky Campaign
with Lee White
A BGES Civil War Field University Program
October 2-5, 2025, from Richmond, KY

The Fight for Kentucky

After the Confederate firing upon and capture of Fort Sumter on April 15, 1861, President Abraham Lincoln called on the remaining Union states to provide volunteers to suppress the insurrection in the seven seceded states. This prompted four more—Virginia, Arkansas, North Carolina, and Tennessee—to secede. Kentucky’s pro-Confederate governor, Beriah Magoffin, refused to send troops. However, the Kentucky General Assembly, largely pro-Union, kept the Bluegrass State in the Union. On May 16, a legislative committee recommended neutrality, and Governor Magoffin officially declared it on May 20.

But the August 5 elections shifted the tide. Pro-Union legislators gained control, and the next day, Camp Dick Robinson was established near Lexington. Union men flocked to enlist while Southern sympathizers headed to Tennessee. Meanwhile, both Union and Confederate forces gathered just outside Kentucky’s borders, poised to reclaim the state.

On September 2, 1861, the U.S. flag was raised over the capitol in Frankfort. The very next day, Confederate Maj. Gen. Leonidas Polk ordered Brig. Gen. Gideon Pillow to seize Columbus, Kentucky—forcing Union Brig. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant to take Paducah on September 6, 1861. Kentucky’s neutrality was officially over, and the fight for control was underway.

Join historian Lee White as he leads you across the key sites in this pivotal early campaign in the Bluegrass State. With fresh analysis and in-depth narrative, Lee brings new perspective to Kentucky’s contested winter of 1861–82.

Looking ahead: In 2026, BGES and Lee White plan to return to Kentucky in “**The Fight for Kentucky: Part 2**,” covering Bragg’s Fall 1862 Kentucky Campaign, including the battles of Richmond, Munfordville, and Perryville.

Itinerary

Thursday, October 2, 2025

Meet Lee at our headquarters hotel at 6 p.m. for a one-hour orientation and overview of the sights and events that your tour will cover. Program materials will be distributed (or the following morning for late arrivals).

Friday, October 3, 2025

We depart the hotel at 8 a.m. to follow the routes of Union and Confederate forces as they parried across the route leading to the Cumberland Gap and explore the camps and clashes of the combatants along the way.

Cumberland Gap

Straddling the border of Kentucky and Tennessee along the Cumberland Plateau, Cumberland Gap held strategic importance during the Civil War. For Union forces, the gap offered a vital corridor through the mountains into East Tennessee, where many people voiced opposition to secession. Controlling the route would allow Federal forces to disrupt crucial Confederate supply lines. The Confederacy, meanwhile, viewed the gap as an integral part of a gateway to reclaim resources in Kentucky. Both sides understood its value—and through a series of tactical maneuvers and skirmishes, each managed to occupy the gap twice.

On September 14, 1861, Brig. Gen. Felix Zollicoffer led approximately 5,400 Confederate troops through the Cumberland Gap in a bid to control eastern Kentucky. He established a position at Cumberland Ford (near present-day Pineville, Kentucky). Five days later, on September 19, Zollicoffer sent 500 men under Col. Joel A. Battle to threaten Camp Andrew Johnson, a Union base near Barbourville. While the camp was largely deserted, the Union troops had regrouped nearby at Camp Dick Robinson, where several thousand Federal soldiers were now under the command of Brig. Gen. George H. Thomas.

The Battle of Barbourville

As Colonel Battle's men approached Camp Johnson, they encountered 300 pro-Union Home Guards led by Capt. Isaac J. Black. In a quick attempt to slow the Confederates, Black's men removed planking from the bridge to prevent crossing. At what became known as the Battle of Barbourville, sharp skirmishing broke out. Despite the home guards' efforts, they were outnumbered. The Confederates drove them off, resulting in 1 Union death, 1 wounded, 13 captured, while suffering 7 fatalities themselves. After securing the camp, Confederate forces destroyed the remaining structure and captured weapons and supplies left behind.

Although the action had resulted in a Confederate victory, Zollicoffer soon withdrew to his camp at Cumberland Ford. A week later, he sent a detachment to drive off another Union Home Guard encampment at Laurel Bridge in Laurel County, Kentucky. On September 28, another Confederate detachment seized 200 barrels of salt and destroyed

the Goose Creek Salt Works in Clay County. By September 30, all units had returned to Cumberland Ford. Then, on October 16, Zollicoffer launched another foray into Kentucky, aiming to advance into the heart of the Bluegrass State.

Lunch is included, but dinner is on your own.

Saturday, October 4, 2025

Today, we depart the hotel at 8 a.m. to examine the troop movements and maneuvers leading up to the engagement at Camp Wildcat and analyze the battle's outcome and broader implications.

The Battle of Camp Wildcat (or Wildcat Mountain)

In response to Zollicoffer's aggressive movements, Union Brig. Gen. George H. Thomas dispatched troops under Col. Theophilus T. Garrard to set up Camp Wildcat at Rockcastle Hills, near London, Kentucky. Located at the base of Wildcat Mountain, Camp Wildcat was just 30 miles north of the salt works that both sides wanted to seize and control. Holding the camp also allowed Union forces to secure the Rockcastle River ford and block the Wilderness Road—a critical route through the region.

Outnumbered and in need of support, Garrard warned Thomas that without reinforcements, he would be forced to retreat. Claiming odds of seven to one, Garrard's plea was answered with the arrival of Brig. Gen. Albin F. Schoepf, bringing the total Union strength to around 7,000 men. Schoepf arrived on October 20—just one day before Zollicoffer prepared to attack.

Zollicoffer, unaware of Union reinforcements, mistook an arriving column of Federal troops for the full garrison and proceeded cautiously. That evening, Union pickets engaged in light skirmishing with the Confederates and returned to camp to report that a large Confederate force was nearby.

Lunch is included, but dinner is on your own.

Sunday, October 5, 2025

On this, our final day, we will depart the hotel at 8 a.m. and delve into the events of the Winter Campaign of 1861–62, culminating in the Battle of Mill Springs. Through on-site analysis and expert commentary from Lee White, we'll explore the tactical decisions and terrain that shaped the outcome.

The Battle of Mill Springs

In the ongoing contest for control of Kentucky, Confederate Gen. Felix Zollicoffer established a camp at Beech Grove on the Cumberland River. Recognizing this threat, the Union sent Gen. George H. Thomas to confront the Confederate position. As Thomas approached, Confederate Gen. George Crittenden arrived to take command at Beech Grove. Concerned about Union momentum, Crittenden opted for a preemptive

strike—setting the stage for one of Kentucky’s most significant engagements, known as the Battle of Mill Springs.

Hoping to surprise the sleeping Federals, the Confederates trudged through a dark, rain-soaked night. However, they were spotted by Federal pickets, and a series of sharp exchanges ensued. Confederate lines pushed forward until confusion and poor visibility brought the attack to a halt. In the chaos, General Zollicoffer—attempting to stop what he believed was friendly fire—rode directly into Union lines and was killed.

With Zollicoffer down, General Crittenden assumed command and ordered a general assault. At a split rail fence, Union forces held firm, engaging in brutal close-quarters combat. As additional Union troops arrived and flanked the Confederates, the Southern line began to break. A bayonet charge finally drove the Confederates into full retreat.

Reorganized, the Federals pursued the remnants of the Confederate army. Cautious of potential ambushes, the advance was slow and methodical. Though some officers urged an immediate attack, General Thomas opted to wait for daylight. Overnight, Crittenden ordered a retreat across the Cumberland River. At dawn, the Union moved in to find the enemy gone, having abandoned their supplies and artillery.

Thus, on January 19, 1862, through foggy and mired conditions, Brig. Gen. George H. Thomas secured the first major victory in the Western Theater. The death of General Zollicoffer and the Confederate retreat into Tennessee marked a turning point in the war for eastern Kentucky.

We will return to the hotel by 5 p.m. Lunch is included.

About the Faculty

William Lee White is a park ranger at the Chickamauga and Chattahoochee National Military Park, where he leads tours and presents programs on the Chickamauga and Lookout Mountain battlefields. He is the author of *Bushwhacking on a Grand Scale: The Battle of Chickamauga*, and *The Battle of Franklin, November 30, 1864*, both parts of the Emerging Civil War Series, as well as several articles and essays on topics related to The Western Theater. Lee also edited *Great Things Are Expected of Us: The Letters of Colonel C. Irvine Walker, 10th South Carolina Infantry CSA*, and contributed numerous articles and essays on the Western Theater. Over the years, he has spoken to many roundtables, historical societies, and other history-minded groups, and he has led countless tours. A veteran BGES tour historian, Lee is known for his sharp analysis, engaging delivery, and deep understanding of terrain—bringing Civil War history to life with nuance and clarity.

Hotel Information

This program will be headquartered at Hampton Inn Richmond, KY, 1099 Barnes Mill Road, Richmond, KY; 859-626-1002. The BGES special hotel rate is \$110 plus tax, with a rate cut-off date of September 2, 2025. When you call the hotel, be sure to tell them that you are booking your room with the group “Blue and Gray Education” to get the special rate. The hotel does not have an airport shuttle.

Transportation

The servicing airport is Lexington, KY, Blue Grass Airport (KLEX). It is 33 miles from the hotel via I-75.

Recommended Reading

You will receive maps and materials that will meet your onsite requirements. The following books are suggested to enhance your readiness for the program.

Brown, Kent Masterson. *The Civil War in Kentucky: Battle for the Bluegrass State*. Conshohocken, PA: Da Capo Press, 2000. ISBN 978-1-88281-047-5.

Clark, Donald A. *The Notorious "Bull" Nelson: Murdered Civil War General*. Carbondale, IL: SIU Press, 2011. ISBN 978-0-80933-011-9.

Daniel, Larry J. *Days of Glory: The Army of the Cumberland, 1861–1865*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004. ISBN 978-0-8071-3191-6.

Fowler, John D. *Mountaineers in Gray: The Nineteenth Tennessee Volunteer Infantry Regiment*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2004. ISBN 978-1-57233-314-7. Retrieved June 26, 2014.

Hafendorfer, Kenneth A., *Mill Springs: Campaign and battle of Mill Springs, Kentucky*. Louisville: KH Press, 2001. ISBN: 978-0-96485-504-5.

Hafendorfer, Kenneth A. *The Battle of Wild Cat Mountain*, Louisville: KH Press, 2003. ISBN: 978-096485-504-5.

McKnight, Brian D. *Contested Borderland: The Civil War in Appalachian Kentucky and Virginia*. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2006. Paperback edition: 2012. ISBN 978-0-8131-4113-8.

Sanders, Stuart W. *The Battle of Mill Springs Kentucky*. Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2013. ISBN 978-1-6094-9829-0.

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Name: _____

Address: _____

City/State/Zip: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

Registration includes 3 lunches, all paid admissions, maps, the academic program, support of a historian and a tour director, and transportation by passenger bus or van. We will also provide snacks and bottled water.

_____ Current BGES member \$825

_____ Non-BGES member \$875

_____ I am not a member but would like to join so that I can get the member's rate; or I am a member who is past-due to renew. Please accept my membership donation of \$_____ (must be \$75 or more, which is tax-deductible; see [blueandgrayeducation.org](http://www.blueandgrayeducation.org) for levels).

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