

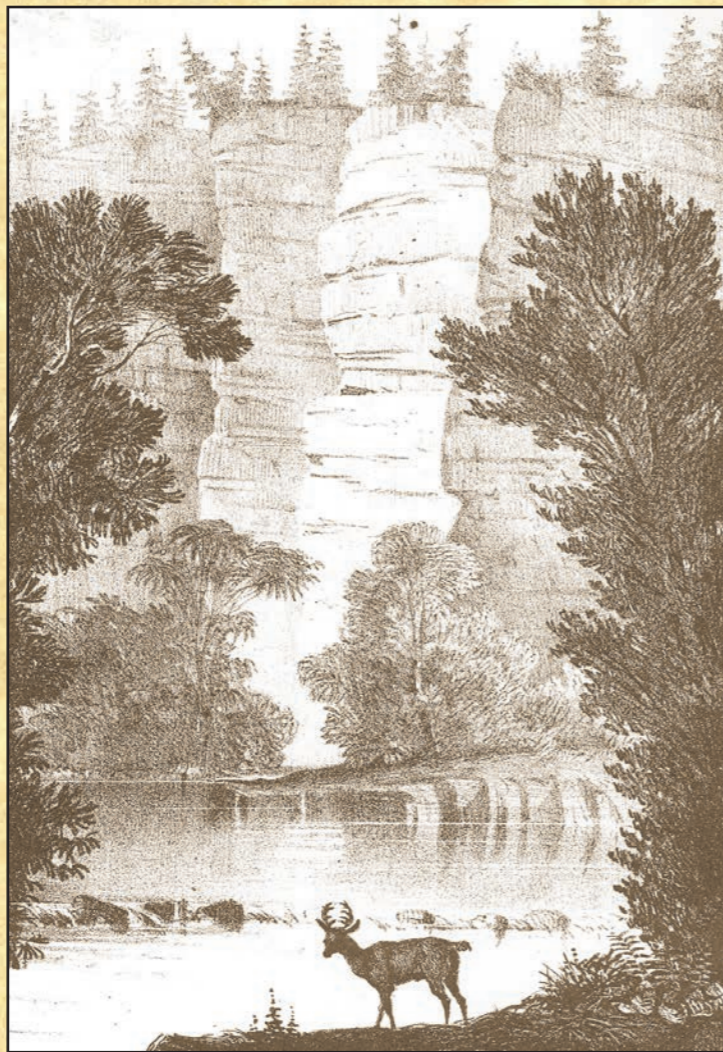
The Kentucky River in the Civil War

The Kentucky River presented difficulty for moving large numbers of men and materials. There were only two bridges over the river, one at Frankfort and the other near Nicholasville at Camp Nelson. Between these bridges were some 50 fords and ferries. Mounted riders could often ford the river, a tactic the Confederate cavalry used to their advantage. Soldiers on foot, however, were confined to crossing on the bridges or by ferry, a slow and tedious process. As a result, mounted Confederate raiders were able to out maneuver the Union infantry sent to pursue them

The Union command took advantage of the river's topography. They constructed their first major supply depot in Lexington, north of the river. The Confederates, they reasoned, would be coming into the state from the south and the Kentucky River would be a barrier between them and Lexington.

While the geography of the river did, indeed, serve as a barrier for infantry, Confederate cavalry officers turned it to their advantage. Confederate raiders crossed and recrossed the Kentucky River, eluding the Federal troops chasing them and creating confusion by concealing their location and destination. Union troops were able to expel the Confederate raiders, but not before they had caused a great deal of aggravation for the Union commanders and the local populace.

Union commanders turned to their engineers to create a defensive strategy for the river that would address the situation. Capt. Thomas B. Brooks, Chief Engineer of the District of Central Kentucky, offered a solution in early March 1863. Brooks' plan called for fortifications to be built high above the Kentucky River, once more using the river's topography to the Union's advantage. The Civil War fort at Boonesboro was one of those forts.



The beautiful palisades of the Kentucky River created a barrier to transportation, however, they also made the river easy to defend.



Winchester-Clark County
Tourism Commission
2 South Maple Street
Winchester, Kentucky 40391
859-744-0556
www.tourwinchester.com

Civil War Fort at Boonesboro
1250 Ford Road (KY 1924)
Winchester, KY

Park Hours

October - April 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.
May - September 9:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.
Self-guided tours daily
or call (800) 298-9105 for guided tours



For a Guide to the
Kentucky Civil War Heritage Trail
call 800-255-TRIP



Civil War Fort at Boonesboro 1863-1865



Union Civil War Fort for the Defense of the Kentucky River

The Defense of the Kentucky River

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Controlling access to the major crossing points on the Kentucky River became an important part of the strategy of the Union army in late 1862 and early 1863. In the spring of 1863 construction was begun on a fort overlooking the Kentucky River in Frankfort and above the important river crossings at Boonesboro, Clays Ferry and Tates Creek. That summer work began on Camp Nelson, a large fortified supply depot, situated in an easily defended position high above the Kentucky River.

The Confederate Raids



Col. Benjamin Runkle. His command chased Rebel raiders in Kentucky.

Ongoing Confederate cavalry activity in central Kentucky was the catalyst for devising the strategy developed by Capt. Thomas B. Brooks for the defenses of the Kentucky River. Lexington, an important supply depot for central Kentucky, was the target of repeated Confederate raids whose purpose was the procurement of supplies, horses and cattle for the Confederate army. Confederate raiders also attacked numerous small garrisons and took livestock from local farms.

During the spring and summer of 1863 central Kentucky was hit with three major Confederate raids. Confederate cavalry crossed and recrossed the Kentucky River. The raiders came not only to seize supplies for the Confederate army in Tennessee but also to create confusion for the Union army in Kentucky. The raids led by Col. Roy S. Cluke, Gen. John Pegram and Col. John S. Scott forced Union troops in central Kentucky to divert their attentions to stopping the Confederate incursions. As a result, construction of the defenses for the Kentucky River were slowed.



Gen. John Pegram. His mission was to obtain beef for the Confederate army.

The Road to the Fort

This steep road, constructed by Union soldiers, provided access to the fort. It was used to bring construction materials, tools, food and supplies to the Civil War fort. The switchbacks were designed to decrease the grade of the road, making the climb less arduous. Even then it would have been a long grueling trek, especially in wet weather.

Capt. Thomas B. Brooks

Capt. Thomas B. Brooks was an engineer officer with the Co. A, 1st New York Engineers. He was assigned to the corps of engineers of the Army of the Ohio, which included Kentucky. Brooks worked on the construction of many important forts in Kentucky, including Fort Clay in Lexington and the Defenses of the Kentucky River. He was later sent to Port Isabelle, (now Burnside), to construct the defenses there.



This is Capt. Brooks' original design for the fort at Clays Ferry. His plan called for a similar fort to be built at Boonesboro.

The Defensive Strategy

A system of blockhouses and forts to defend the railroads at their most vulnerable points, bridges and trestles, had recently been implemented. After reviewing the situation on the Kentucky River Brooks suggested to his commanding officer that “. . . *small defensive works be erected at the most important Fords, Ferries, Mountain Passes and Towns in this District South and East of this post, [Lexington] or in other words that the present system for the defense of the Rail Road be extended Southward.*” He envisioned “. . . *an enclosed earth work, surrounded by an abattis and enclosing a block house, to be used as a keep in case the work was assaulted.*” Brooks' idea was not new. In fact, what he was advocating was not too different from the fortified stations constructed by Kentucky settlers in the 18th century. Brooks saw these defensive positions as an important part of the overall defense of the Commonwealth. He felt that they were justified militarily, politically and economically.



This Engineer's uniform button, introduced in 1812, is still worn today. The motto on the button "Essayons" is French meaning "Let us try," the Corps of Engineers motto.

The Fort

The Civil War fort at Boonesboro was a redoubt, an enclosed earthen fort, which was surrounded by a ditch. An abatis, an entanglement made of tree branches and sharpened sticks, the 19th century equivalent of barbed wire, was in front of the ditch. The fort never mounted permanent artillery.



The earthen walls of the fort may have been revetted, or supported with logs, like that pictured above.

The War Moves South

After the Battle of Perryville in October 1862, the Union war effort began to shift toward Knoxville. Over the next year most of the Union troops were stripped from the Commonwealth and taken to Tennessee to help take, and then later defend, Knoxville. By the summer of 1864 the front had moved even further south, to Atlanta. When the focus of the war moved south, Confederate activity in the state decreased. The fort continued to be used when Confederate cavalry periodically threatened, but the grand design for the defense of the Kentucky River envisioned by Capt. Brooks was eventually abandoned.



The Civil War fort at Boonesboro was not constructed with machines but by men, using only hand tools. Capt. Brooks' plan specified the exact number of men and tools need to build the fort in the time allotted - 40 men with 10 shovels, 10 axes, 10 picks, one hand saw, one square, one two-inch auger, one adz and two one-inch chisels.