

CHAPTER 6

Protecting Johnsonville: Union Defense of the Supply Depot

DURING the height of Johnsonville's operation as a supply depot from May to November 1864, a garrison of both white and United States Colored Troops protected the logistics center. Johnsonville's garrison included artillerists, infantrymen (both foot and mounted), cavalrymen, and armed civilian laborers from the Quartermaster's Department in Nashville. The unique supply depot and railroad terminus also had two commanders, an army officer and a naval officer.¹

Johnsonville's Commanders

Col. Charles R. Thompson of the 12th USCT commanded the U.S. Army forces, or "the troops," as one 1865 report put it, while Acting Volunteer Lt. Edward M. King served as the ranking officer for "the gun-boats." As correspondence between Thompson and King demonstrates, neither officer liked the other, and the records remain silent as to whether one served under the overall command of the other. Each made important command decisions that impacted operations at Johnsonville, and both

¹ *OR Supplement*, vol. 77, 473, 477; *OR* 52, pt. 1, 655-59



Colonel Charles R. Thompson,
Commander of the 12th U.S.C.T
Regiment, ca. 1862.

Dayton Metro Library, Dayton, Ohio

regularly communicated directly with the commander of the Department of the Cumberland, Maj. Gen. George H. Thomas in Nashville.²

Charles R. Thompson was born in 1840 in Bath, Maine, and was a resident of St. Louis, Missouri, by the age of nineteen. He was engaged in the mercantile trade there when the Civil War broke out in 1861.

Thompson enlisted as a private in the Engineer Regiment of the West, Missouri Volunteers, and served under Brig. Gen. John C. Fremont. In March 1862, Thompson was promoted to 1st lieutenant and participated in the Battle of New Madrid, Missouri, and the Siege of Island No. 10, where, according to one writer, he assisted in building “the famous canal which led to the capture of the entire rebel force.”³

That June, Thompson received an appointment as Post Quartermaster at Hamburg, Tennessee, and later as Ordnance Officer in the Army of the Mississippi under Maj. Gen. William S. Rosecrans. He was a young man on the rise, and Thompson’s fellow officers in the Department of the Cumberland held him in high esteem. At the October 3-4, 1862, Battle of Corinth, Mississippi, Thompson served as Rosecrans’ aide-de-camp and

² *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, 30 Vols. (Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1894-1927), vol. 26, Series I, 615, hereafter cited as *ORN*. All references are to Series 1 unless otherwise noted; *OR* 39, pt. 1, 861.

³ John Fitch, *Annals of the Army of the Cumberland: Comprising Biographies, Descriptions of Departments, Accounts of Expeditions, Skirmishes, and Battles* (Philadelphia, 1864), 53.

Major General George H. Thomas,
Army of the Cumberland, 1864.

Library of Congress



turned in a fine performance. The army commander so revered Thompson that he awarded him with the “red ribbon of the Roll of Honor for his organization of the First Regiment of Colored Troops in the Department of the Cumberland, and for his meritorious services and gallantry as aide-de-camp to the general commanding at the

battles of Corinth and Stone’s River.” Rosecrans also expressed his admiration “for the qualities which have raised Colonel Thompson from the position of private, in which he entered the service at the commencement of the rebellion, to his present rank, which has been attained solely by his own merit and attention to duty.”⁴

In August 1863, Thompson was promoted to colonel and given command of the 12th USCT. His regiment was stationed at various locations in Tennessee and at practically every section along the Nashville and Northwestern Railroad from Kingston Springs westward to Johnsonville. Though Thompson’s command performed primarily guard duty at these posts, the 12th USCT, along with the 13th and 100th USCT regiments, participated in their fair share of engagements with bands of marauding guerillas.⁵

It is unclear when Thompson arrived at Johnsonville, but various accounts point to reaching the depot in mid-October 1864. By that time Johnsonville was well-established with buildings, loading platforms, corrals, and barracks. How, exactly, he came to be there, and whether he was

4 Ibid., 54; *OR* 30, pt. 3, 298.

5 *OR Supplement*, vol. 77, 470-77.

at some point supposed to command the entire facility is something of a mystery. “I was in command of all troops on line of the N. and N. W. Rail Road, and went to Johnsonville when the place was threatened by [Gen. Nathan Bedford] Forrest early in October with about 600 Col’d Troops from the 12th, 13th and 100th U.S.C. and 43rd Wis.,” Thompson confirmed in an affidavit later that year. “I was not ordered there but took my Head Quarters and all the men that could be spared from the defence of the Rail Road. My Quarters were about four hundred yards from the Levee in the beginning of the fight,” he added, “when I moved on the hill.”⁶

Thompson’s statement makes it clear he was not ordered to move to Johnsonville to assume command. As he explained it, Thompson never received orders from Gen. Thomas, Governor Johnson, or any other superior officer assigning him to that effect. Instead, as colonel of the 12th USCT, he took it upon himself to move his command there to protect the vital logistics center. As one of the ranking officers present, Thompson established his headquarters at Johnsonville and awaited for new orders.

The 43rd Wisconsin’s Cpl. Atwood provided a clue about this command confusion when he failed to mention anything about Col. Thompson being in charge of the post. Atwood and his Wisconsin regiment comrades arrived at Johnsonville in mid-October, and a short time later Atwood wrote home that “Colonel Cobb has received the command of this post and Lieu Paine has the com. of the Reg.” The “Colonel Cobb” to whom he referred was Amasa Cobb, a seasoned veteran and former commander of the 5th Wisconsin Infantry in the Army of the Potomac. The Illinois native who had spent most of his life in Wisconsin was also a sitting member of Congress and had only just weeks earlier resumed his military career by taking command of the newly formed 43rd Wisconsin.⁷

The 43rd Wisconsin arrived at Johnsonville on October 15, and Atwood’s reference to Cobb being in command was penned just four days later. Perhaps Cobb commanded at Johnsonville for a short period before

6 Affidavit account provided by Colonel Charles R. Thompson regarding the actions of the U.S. forces at Johnsonville, Tennessee, that resulted in the destruction of government property on November 4, 1864, for the Board of Survey at Nashville, Tennessee, in the Court Martial case of Acting Volunteer Lt. Commander, Edward M. King, December 29, 1864, *U.S. Navy Records 1864-65, Courts Martial*, RG 11-86, U.S. Navy Department Records, National Archives, Washington, D.C., page # not provided.

7 Atwood, October 19, 1864.



Colonel Amasa Cobb (center, seated) with staff officers of the 43rd Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry Regiment, Nashville, Tennessee, 1865. *Wisconsin Historical Society*

Thompson's arrival. It appears that Thompson became the overall commander simply because he got there and began making decisions before Col. Cobb and his 43rd Wisconsin arrived.

Cobb verified his subordination to Thompson's authority on November 4 when he reported, "I was ordered by Colonel Thompson to remain in the fort with my regiment. My orders from Colonel Thompson were to keep my men in the intrenchments." However it came to be, Col. Thompson was in command of the land forces at Johnsonville.⁸

Early that same November, Acting Volunteer Lieutenant Edward M. King was at "the town of Johnsonville, Tennessee as the senior naval officer present." King commanded the "USS *Key West* (Gunboat No. 32) in company with the USS *Tawah* (Gunboat No. 29) and the USS *Elfin* (Gunboat No. 52), all part of the United States Navy's Mississippi Squadron." Why he was sent to Johnsonville, or by whom, remains unclear. Very little is known about Johnsonville's ranking naval officer. King hailed from Massachusetts and enlisted in the U. S. Navy on October 31, 1863.

⁸ OR 39, pt. 1, 866.



Private Ralph Bushnell, 43rd Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry Regiment, 1864. *Courtesy of Mr. Don McFall and Family*

Apparently, he shared dual-command responsibility with Thompson at Johnsonville, but there is no evidence to suggest that either officer understood his official capacity.⁹

Johnsonville's Defense Forces

Although Cpl. Atwood wrote home that Johnsonville's garrison included "nearly 4,000 men," the number of troops present prior to the arrival of reinforcements on November 5 was only about 2,200. No other site in Tennessee hosted such a convoluted array of U.S. Army and Navy forces assisted by armed civilian employees, all within a 90-acre perimeter whose duty it was to protect one of the country's most important military supply depots and railroads.¹⁰

It is difficult to calculate the exact number of troops stationed at Johnsonville prior to October 1864 because the place was a rotating door of troops present one week but ordered away the next to fill outposts at various

⁹ Jack B. Irion and David V. Beard, *Underwater Archaeological Assessment of Civil War Shipwrecks in Kentucky Lake, Benton and Humphries Counties, Tennessee. Study for Tennessee Dept. of Archaeology, Department of Environment and Conservation* (Nashville, 1993), 35, 39. There is very little biographical information on Edward King, other than a handful of thin references in the *Official Records*. It appears he was honorably discharged from the Navy on July 18, 1867. Acting Volunteer Lieutenant Edward M. King to Capt. Henry Howland, November 3, 1864, RG 94, Carded Records Relating to Civil War Staff Officers, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; *ORN* 26, 607, 615.

¹⁰ Atwood, November 8, 1864; David W. Higgs, *Nathan Bedford Forrest and the Battle of Johnsonville* (Nashville, 1976), 59-62.

Unidentified Union Private, United
States Colored Troops, ca. 1863.

Library of Congress

sections along the Nashville and Northwestern Railroad. Tabulating the forces there for October and November is much easier because when it became known that Nathan Bedford Forrest's Confederate cavalry had entered the region and the exact number of troops and where they were located was reported, various regiments or companies of regiments received orders to move to Johnsonville to defend it.

As a variety of Union officers stationed at Johnsonville in early November 1864 reported, the garrison included 700 men from the 43rd Wisconsin Infantry, various companies of the 12th, 13th, and 100th USCT totaling 400 men, and another 800 armed Quartermaster's Department employees (300 civilians who had been working there since May 1864, and some 500 employees who arrived on November 3 from the Nashville Depot). Other troops included 20 men of the 11th Tennessee Mounted Infantry, and 100 men of the 2nd Tennessee Mounted Infantry (which was operating in the vicinity of Johnsonville, but who were not assigned to the post.)¹¹



¹¹ The *Official Records* offers no evidence the 13th, 40th, 100th, and 101st USCT were present at Johnsonville after October 1864. Only two companies of the 12th USCT (Companies C and I) seem to have been at the supply depot during the battle of November



Unidentified Union Corporal, 2nd
Tennessee Mounted Infantry Regiment.

Courtesy of Scott W. Gilmer

The artillery forces present at Johnsonville from September to November 1864 included six 10-pounder Parrott Rifles of the 1st Kansas Battery (80 men), two 12-pounder Napoleons of Battery A, 2nd U.S. Colored Light Artillery (40 men), two 12-pounder Napoleons belonging to a battery operated by the Quartermaster's Department from Nashville (about 30 men), and a pair of 20-pounder Parrott Rifles captured from the Confederates aboard the transport USS *Venus* "mounted on a hill north of the battery of 10-pdrs" (manned by 30 artillerists who were likely Quartermaster's Department employees).¹²

4-5, 1864. However, an after-action report by Lt. Col. William Sinclair, assistant inspector General, U.S. Army, on January 7, 1865, in *OR* 39, pt. 1, 861, claims that "detachments of the Twelfth, Thirteenth, and One hundredth U.S. Colored Infantry" were present at Johnsonville on November 4, 1864. Sinclair also mentioned in his report that Col. Thompson stated "the 400 colored troops were the only ones that were drilled." *OR* 39, pt. 1, 865. It is my conclusion that "the 400 colored troops" were "detachments" of the 12th, 13th, and 100th USCT regiments, and they were present at the post on November 4-5 and were engaged with the Confederates.

12 U.S. Navy Department, testimony of Acting 1st Assistant Engineer for the USS *Key West*, Peter Wagner, regarding the destruction of government property at Johnsonville, Tennessee, on November 4, 1864, for the Court of Inquiry at Mound City, Illinois, for the Court Martial case of Acting Volunteer Lt. Commander Edward M. King, May 15, 1865, *U.S. Navy Records 1864-65, Courts Martial*, RG 11-86, 75.

U.S. Navy and Quartermaster's Department

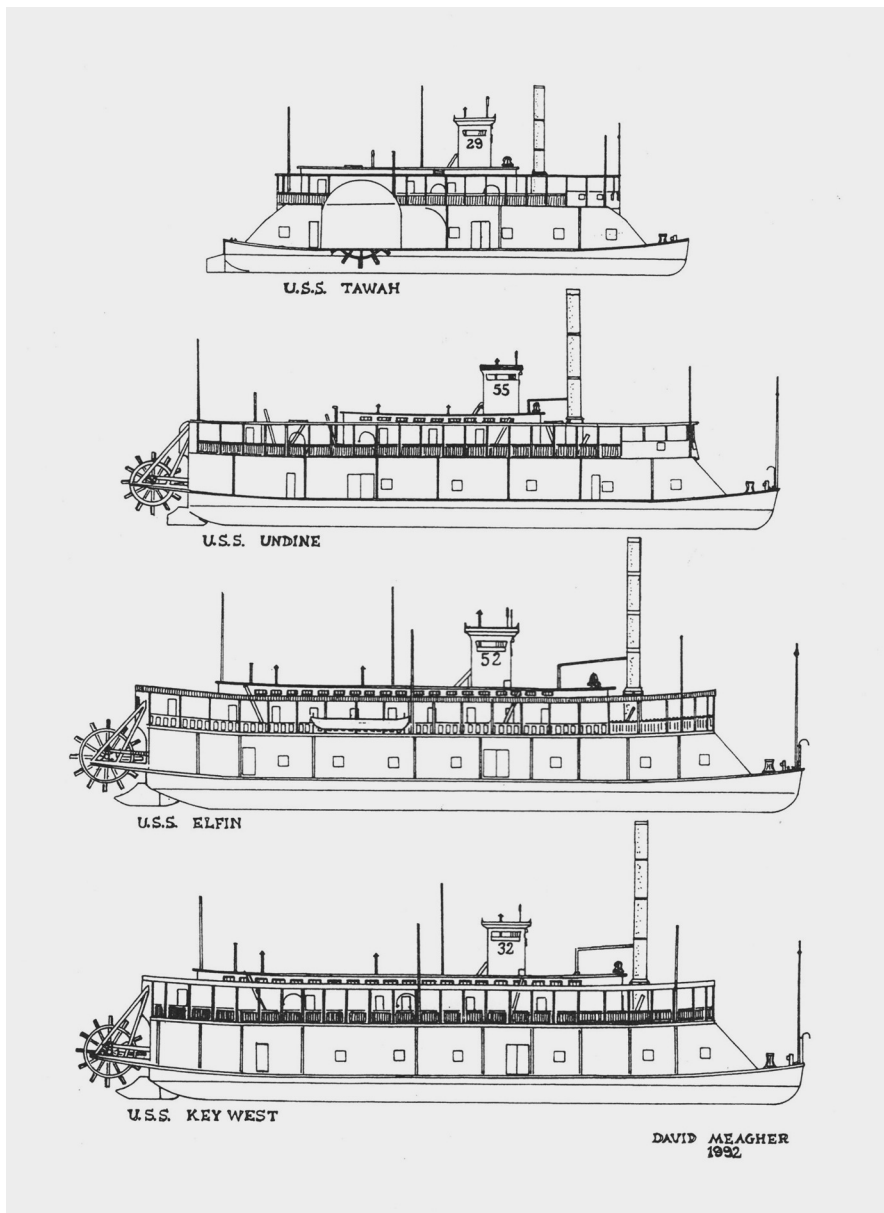
In addition to the land forces, Johnsonville had a thriving river front and served as a docking point for gunboats and privately owned transports leased to the U.S. Navy. The Quartermaster's Department operated the wharf, a macadamized surface (compacted layers of broken stone) at which riverine vessels regularly moored for unloading. Quartermaster employees ran wharf operations, and the Navy, garrison troops, and armed Quartermaster's Department civilian employees helped defend it.¹³

Johnsonville's riverfront was a hive of activity from dawn to dusk every day. Fifteen to as many as thirty boats and barges could be seen moored at the massive wharf at any given time. Sailors served primarily as deck hands, cooks, engineers, mechanics, and gunners aboard their assigned vessels, and assisted with the loading and unloading of supplies, and, at times, even helped haul them inside warehouses alongside employees.

When sailors were not performing the heavy manual labor associated with a busy supply depot, they were participating in gunnery drills or working on repairs and other associated naval matters. Most sailors on the gunboats at Johnsonville's wharf were not stationed there. Instead, they served as crew members aboard transports and other gunboats that frequently docked at the long wharf during their patrols of the 257 miles of the winding Tennessee River between Paducah, Kentucky, and Muscle Shoals, Alabama. In early November 1864, the U.S. Navy could count some 400 sailors and officers aboard the various gunboats and transports docked at the wharf.¹⁴

13 Affidavits from representatives of the states of Ohio, Tennessee, Kentucky, Illinois, and Iowa regarding the destruction of privately owned transports destroyed at Johnsonville, Tennessee, on November 4, 1864. Affidavits sworn and subscribed from January to February, 1865, at Nashville, Tennessee, *U.S. Navy Records 1864-65, Courts Martial*, RG 11-86, U.S. Navy Department, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; *OR 52*, pt.1, 659.

14 *Muscle Shoals Hearings, Before the Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, United States Senate, Sixty-Seventh Congress, Second Session* (Washington, 1922), 901; Charles Dana Gibson and E. Kay Gibson, *The Army's Navy Series, Volume II, Assault and Logistics: Union Army Coastal and River Operations 1861-1866* (Camden, 1995), 385; *ORN 26*, 589; Roscoe C. Martin, "The Tennessee Valley Authority: A Study of Federal Control," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 22 (Summer 1957): 351-377.



Profile Drawings of Johnsonville's U.S. Navy "Tinclad" Gunboats: U.S.S. *Tawah*, U.S.S. *Elfin*, U.S.S. *Undine*, and U.S.S. *Key West*, 1992. Courtesy of David J. Meagher

Johnsonville's gunboats, called "tinclads," were civilian packet boats converted to military use by adding guns and light armor to the front and sides. A gunboat's armor "was intended to deflect light arms fire and not much more, hence its name "tinclad" instead of the more heavily shielded "ironclads." Four gunboats regularly operated out of Johnsonville: USS *Tawah* (Gunboat No. 29), USS *Undine* (Gunboat No. 55), USS *Elfin* (Gunboat No. 52), and USS *Key West* (Gunboat No. 32). The latter was the flagship of Johnsonville's naval commander, Acting Volunteer Lt. Edward M. King. The gunboats at Johnsonville were all stern-wheels except for the side-wheeler USS *Tawah*.¹⁵

Drill and Quarters

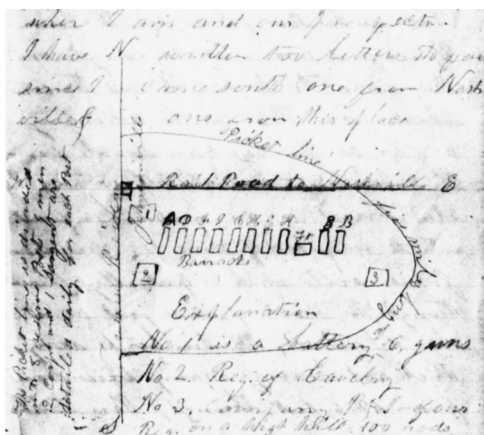
Officers drilled infantry in the open areas of Trace Creek and along the Tennessee River on the clear-cut bank north of the supply depot's central area. Brothers Henry and Walter Howland shared quarters at the supply depot, along with other officers and enlisted men permanently assigned to Johnsonville. On September 23, 1864, Walter described a brief sojourn outside the depot and discovered just how dangerous it was there. "I went with two others some eight miles into the country to attend a meeting," he began,

It was a little exciting too as a guerrilla band stopped there the night before and interrupted a meeting which was then going on. We are hearing reports constantly of guerrillas abroad and I suppose it is not quite safe to venture out. Rumors are again afloat of an anticipated attack from Forrest and the men are today out drilling.¹⁶

Captain McConnell of the 71st Ohio Infantry (who was also acting assistant-inspector general for the District of Tennessee), filed an informative report about the lack of military drill and training by infantry forces at Johnsonville. "None of the troops, except the men of the First

15 Stephen R. James, Jr., "Additional Archaeological Investigations of Two Battle of Johnsonville Troop Transports Site 40HS338, Tennessee River, Humphries County, Tennessee," Pan-American Consultants, Inc., Memphis, Tennessee (February 2011): 11; *ORN* 26, 605-18.

16 Walter Howland, September 23, 1864; *OR* 39, pt. 1, 865.



Original Sketch of Johnsonville's Interior by Corporal Lorenzo D. Atwood, 43rd Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry, October 19, 1864.
 Courtesy of Warren, Robin, and Leon Atwood

Kansas Battery, had ever been under fire,” he complained, and “the 400 colored troops were the only ones that were drilled.” The infantry “were posted in rifle pits that had been dug on the flat just north of the railroad—the remainder of the troops were stationed in and around the fortifications.”¹⁷

When not serving on picket duty or drilling the men did all the things soldiers have been doing for centuries: sleeping, resting, telling stories, writing letters, or playing games. They were housed in a variety of shelters, including 30x60 clapboard barracks with bunks along the walls and a stove at each end. The 43rd Wisconsin built small wooden huts with chimneys in anticipation of a long winter. Generally speaking, garrison troops had it easy, and certainly much easier than soldiers at the front. They went to sleep each night in roofed quarters and usually prepared their own meals or were served hot meals by regimental cooks. Cpl. Atwood seemed content with the posting and even wrote home that his friend “Jairus” was “a good bunk mate.”

In one of his letters to his wife Cordelia, Atwood enclosed a remarkable sketch showing the perimeter of Johnsonville that included many interior details of the depot. The young corporal sketched the barracks in which he lived, how they were arranged like row houses, and even identified them by their company letter. (It is interesting to note that the sequence of company letters did not match military alphabetical sequence.) Atwood’s sketch also identified specific postings, such as “No. 1 is a battery of 6, guns,” and “No 2. Reg. of Cavalry.” Another important detail found no where else was his semi-circular sketch identifying a “picket line five miles long.”

¹⁷ ORN 26, 641.

Atwood's drawing is an extremely important contribution to Johnsonville's Civil War history because it identifies details, including the existence of eleven wooden barracks, the location of a second corral at the position of ("No.2 Reg. of Cavalry), and possibly the position of Redoubt No. 2 (described in the sketch as "No. 3, Company Batt'y of our Reg. on a high hill 100 rods.")¹⁸

Land Defenses at the Supply Depot

When a train from Nashville arrived at the entrance of the supply depot, a combination of USCT troops, various mounted infantry and cavalry, and men from the 43rd Wisconsin searched the cars for any unauthorized persons. Cpl. Atwood told his wife about how he served as "Corparel of the guard" that conducted some of these searches, and, on occasion, helped "keep out a picket guard in the edge of the woods."¹⁹

A wagon road sixteen feet wide ran along the left side of the railroad directly into the central area of the depot. The rutted dirt route accommodated regular trains of supply wagons, trotting cavalry, tramping infantry, civilians, and every individual who entered the supply depot who wasn't aboard a train.

No records or correspondence indicate whether the post had a formal entrance gate. Other similar posts and forts, including Fort Donelson in Dover, Tennessee, and Fortress Rosecrans in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, did have such designated entrances, meaning Johnsonville almost certainly did as well. An entry gate is visible in one of Coonley's photographs of Fort Johnson Redoubt No. 1 (i.e., the lower redoubt), so it makes sense that something similar or identical would have been constructed at the depot's main entrance, especially since there were "reports constantly of guerrillas abroad." Soldiers stationed at Johnsonville quickly learned it was dangerous outside the depot. Lt. Walter Howland, who rode the rails with a satchel

¹⁸ Atwood, October 31, 1864.

¹⁹ Atwood, October 19, 1864.



Trace Creek Trestle and Blockhouse, Nashville and Northwestern Railroad near Denver, Tennessee, 1864. *Tennessee State Library & Archives*

holding \$20,000 in pay for the men inside the entrenchments, fully acknowledged that it “was not quite safe to venture out.”²⁰

The Blockhouse

Trains could not enter Johnsonville’s 90-acre compound without passing a small blockhouse sitting atop a steep knob on the left side of the tracks. Richard Wagner, acting first assistant engineer aboard the gunboat USS *Key West*, remembered the fortification as “a small blockhouse, unfinished and unmanned.”²¹

20 Samuel D. Smith, Benjamin C. Nance, and Fred M. Prouty, *A Survey of Civil War Era Military Sites in Tennessee* (Nashville, 2003), 133. Detail from Jacob Coonley’s photographic image of Johnsonville’s south view of the supply depot and Fort Johnson taken in November 1864, at Johnsonville, Tennessee; Walter Howland, September 23, 1864.

21 *The Official Atlas of the Civil War*, Plate XIV; Testimony of Acting 1st Assistant Engineer for the USS *Key West*, Peter Wagner, regarding the destruction of government

By 1864, blockhouses had replaced the more popular spike-topped military log stockades. Johnsonville's blockhouse would have followed military specifications of "30 feet square and designed to hold about 30 men: a sufficient guard for the less important railroad bridges," but no details seem to exist describing it other than it looked "small." Almost certainly the square log stronghold boasted shuttered windows and loop holes—small openings in the walls that allowed soldiers inside to slide their rifle barrels out and fire while protected from the enemy.

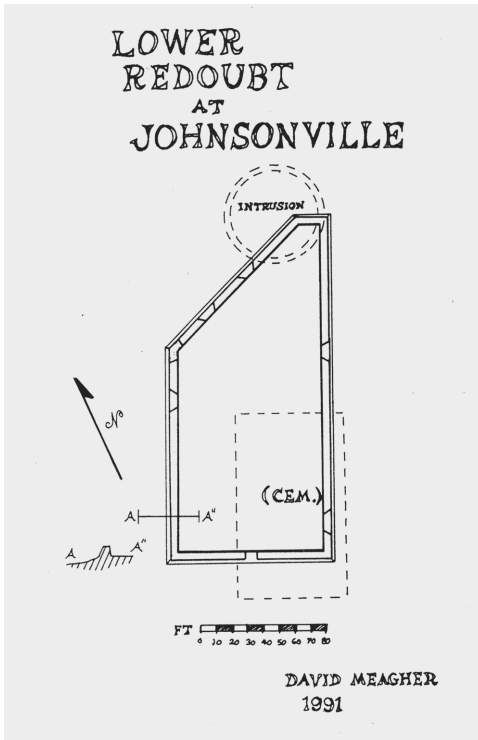
The blockhouse roof consisted of a "layer of logs laid side by side and covered with earth. On top of that was a roof of shingles or boards and battens. It was very important to keep the block house dry so the garrison could live comfortably inside. Blockhouses were supplied with ventilators, cellars, water tanks, and bunks." Blockhouse guards had a clear view of anyone traveling on the road within a mile of the post, and could spot incoming trains from about the same distance.²²

It is clear that Johnsonville boasted fairly significant defensive lines, but a report by Henry Howland, captain and assistant quartermaster, indicated otherwise. "I should here remark that at this time," he later wrote, "that we had nothing worthy [of] the name of fortifications, only one small block-house and a little earthwork thrown up on two hills overlooking the town and river, where were mounted the six 10-pounder Parrotts of the First Kansas Battery, the only guns then here." As we will see, the "little earthwork thrown up on two hills" was in fact two strong redoubts that helped anchor a long line of entrenchments.²³

property at Johnsonville, Tennessee on November 4, 1864, for the Court of Inquiry at Mound City, Illinois, for the Court Martial case of Acting Volunteer Lt. Commander Edward M. King, May 15, 1865, *U.S. Navy Records 1864-65, Courts Martial*, RG 11-86, U.S. Navy Department, 75.

22 *OR* 16, pt. 2, 178; Smith, Nance, and Prouty, *A Survey of Civil War Era Military Sites in Tennessee*, 144-48. Battens are cut boards that provide the fixing point for other roofing materials, such as shingles.

23 *ORN* 26, 621.



Footprint drawing of Redoubt No. 1
(Lower Redoubt), Johnsonville,
Tennessee, 1992. *Courtesy of David J. Meagher*

Fort Johnson (Redoubts No.1 and No. 2)

Johnsonville's land defenses were anchored by two earthen redoubts collectively called Fort Johnson, after Gov. Andrew Johnson. For reasons that remain unexplained, the Federals often referred to both forts collectively as "Fort Johnson," even though many references to "Fort Johnson" are actually a reference to the lower redoubt closer to the

Tennessee River. Unfortunately, very little information exists regarding the upper redoubt.

A redoubt is a square, polygonal, or circular fortification enclosed on all sides and reinforced with artillery. Engineers usually erected redoubts on top of a hill or some form of high or rising ground to help strengthen related lines of earthworks. Johnsonville's redoubts were 350 yards apart. Each was atop a hill overlooking the supply depot and enjoyed a commanding two-mile view up and down the Tennessee River.

Fort Johnson's lower redoubt (Redoubt No. 1) sat atop a lower hill close to the center of the supply depot. The name "lower" redoubt referred to its proximity to the river. Built of earth, Redoubt No. 1 was 210 feet long by 100 feet wide with walls 10 feet high (measured from the bottom of the outer ditch). It was designed with six embrasures, or openings, so artillery could be rolled forward, aimed, and fired.

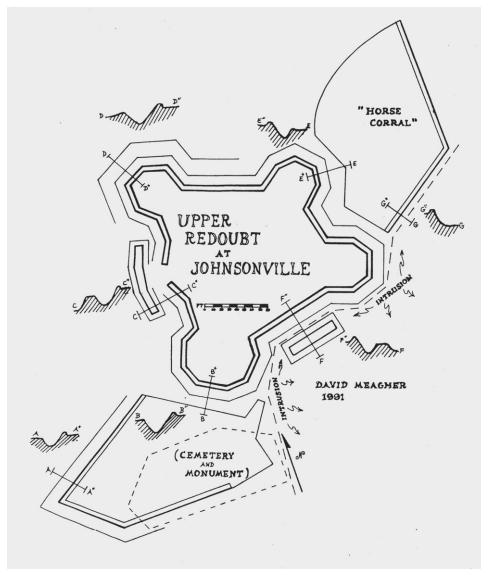
Fort Johnson's upper redoubt or, Redoubt No. 2, sat 350 yards southeast behind the lower redoubt on a higher hill overlooking the Tennessee River. Also made of earth, Redoubt No. 2 was 255 feet by 120 feet, with walls 15 feet high. The general shape and layout, however, was more circular in shape

Footprint drawing of Redoubt No. 2 (Upper Redoubt), Johnsonville, Tennessee, 1992. *Courtesy of David J. Meagher*

than Redoubt No. 1. The ground was raised and prepared in each circular “corner” so gunners could position their artillery pieces to fire above the parapet.²⁴

Both fortifications were identified by officers and soldiers as “forts,” “redoubts,” and even collectively as “Fort Johnson,” as illustrated in personal letters and in the official correspondence. Col. J. C. Peterson, commander of the U.S. 2nd Infantry Regiment (mounted) wrote that “my command was posted in Fort Johnson and remained under arms during the night.”²⁵ Maj. Gen. Thomas referenced both redoubts in his correspondence: “I do not see how the enemy can cross the river to attack the forts.” Lt. Col. William Sinclair offered a revealing description of the lower redoubt, but doesn’t mention the upper redoubt (Redoubt No. 2) at all: “on the hill, near the river, there was an earth-work, the artillery being posted in and about this work. Part of the infantry was posted in this work, and part in rifle-pits that had been thrown up on the flat north of the railroad.”²⁶

Theodore Gardner, a sergeant in the 1st Kansas Battery, remembered two different locations for his battery. In his description of Redoubt No. 1, Gardner recalled:



24 Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer “National Register Nomination, Johnsonville Historic District,” Humphries County, Tennessee, Section 7, 1990, 1.

25 *OR* 52, pt. 1, 656.

26 *Ibid.*, and *OR* 39, pt. 1, 859; *ORN* 26, 621. Sinclair’s failure to mention a word about Redoubt No. 2 is difficult to explain. Perhaps it was simply an oversight. However, artillery and infantry forces were posted there as well, and Redoubt No. 2 was in sight from Sinclair’s observation point in Redoubt No. 1.

At the southern edge of the village in a round knob some seventy-five feet above the river and a few hundred feet east of it . . . was constructed an earthwork with embrasures in which were installed the six guns of the First Kansas battery, giving them a commanding position, covering the village and the great warehouses on the levee, which were filled with supplies for the Army of the Cumberland. Just south of this redoubt was our camp, a few yards away.²⁷

Gardner also provided details about the possible position of Redoubt No.2 when he added, “at the back of this knob about a thousand feet was a second ridge, perhaps a hundred feet higher. This second ridge was dubbed by the battery boys “Mt. Pisgah.”²⁸

Kansas artillerists manned their pieces inside Redoubts No.1 and No. 2. In fact, the 1st Kansas Battery camped at several locations inside Johnsonville’s defensive perimeter. The “six 10 pd’r parrots of the 1st Kansas battery,” Henry Howland reported “were stationed in the small fort.” A report filed after the Battle of Johnsonville by Capt. Charles H. Lovelace, one of many assistant quartermasters at Johnsonville, suggests a third possible defensive position. According to Lovelace, “on the range of hills between the fortifications before mentioned, here the 1st Kansas Battery of Six Guns was stationed,” meaning at some point the battery was not at either redoubt.²⁹

The accounts by Gardner, Howland, and Lovelace all agreed the 1st Kansas Battery participated in the Johnsonville battle of November 4-5, 1864. Exactly where the 1st Kansas Battery was located at the time is

27 Theodore Gardner, “The First Kansas Battery: An Historical Sketch, With Personal Reminiscences of Army Life, 1861-65,” in *Collections of the Kansas State Historical Society, 1915-1918: Together with Addresses at Annual Meetings, Memorials and Miscellaneous Papers*, vol. XIV, ed. William E. Connelley (Topeka, 1918), 277.

28 Ibid., 276. Pisgah is a Hebrew name for mountain, often referring to Mount Nebo as illustrated in the Book of Deuteronomy (34:1-4): “Then Moses climbed Mount Nebo from the plains of Moab to the top of Pisgah, across from Jerico.”

29 AQM Henry Howland to Brigadier General James S. Donaldson, November 16, 1864, Johnsonville, Tennessee, RG 94, Carded Records Relating to Civil War Staff Officers, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Affidavit account provided by Captain Charles H. Lovelace regarding the destruction of government property at Johnsonville, Tennessee on November 4, 1864, for the Board of Survey at Nashville, Tennessee, in the Court Martial case of Acting Volunteer Lt. Commander, Edward M. King, December 29, 1864, *U.S. Navy Records 1864-65, Courts Martial*, RG 11-86, U.S. Navy Department, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

unclear. The Gardner and Lovelace accounts make it likely the Kansas battery relocated during the battle from the area of Redoubt No. 2 (“Mt. Pisgah”) to a more strategic position somewhere to the left and outside of Fort Johnson’s Redoubt No. 1. This makes sense because most other accounts have Battery A, 2nd U.S. Colored Light Artillery occupying the upper fortification, or Redoubt No. 2.³⁰

According to Lovelace, “we had a fortification on the hill, I think four Brass 12 pdr’s manned by a Colored Battery [Battery A], the two 20 pd’r Parrotts taken from the steamer ‘*Venus*.” Gardner firmly remembered that the 1st Kansas Battery was positioned inside Redoubt No. 1, but after fighting on November 4 relocated to Redoubt No. 2. “The small earthwork in which our battery was located, being within easy range of the enemy’s guns,” explained Gardner,

caused us, on the night of the 3rd [4th] to move them back to the higher ground of Mt. Pisgah, where we were out of their range and yet within effective range of our own. The morning of the 5th was damp and a dense fog hung upon the river. We were up bright and early having bivouacked on the high ground beside our guns.³¹

Infantry and cavalry soldiers from the 12th, 13th, 40th and 100th USCT regiments, the 43rd Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry, the 8th Iowa Cavalry, and the 2nd and 11th Tennessee Infantry (mounted) deployed in and near each redoubt in support of the artillery. Additionally, as Colonel Thompson recalled, armed civilian employees from the Quartermaster’s Department in Nashville helped defend Redoubt No. 1, perhaps as guards.

Gardner recalled that “the battery [inside Redoubt No. 1] recruited a number of civilian men from the quartermaster’s department,” which suggests the civilian employees helped the 1st Kansas Battery in some capacity. Gardner also remembered being ordered to Nashville to retrieve civilian quartermaster employees who had been assigned to assist the

30 Affidavit account provided by Captain Charles H. Lovelace, December 29, 1864, *U.S. Navy Records, 1864-65, Courts Martial*, RG 11-86, U.S. Navy Department, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

31 Theodore Gardner, “The First Kansas Battery: An Historical Sketch, With Personal Reminiscences of Army Life, 1861-65,” in *Collections of the Kansas State Historical Society 1915-1918: Together with Addresses at Annual Meetings, Memorials and Miscellaneous Papers, Vol. XIV*, ed. William E. Connelley (Topeka, 1918), 277.

battery, and return with them to Johnsonville. Some of the civilians never made it: “The train ran out fifty miles from Nashville, when it was ditched by guerrillas and burned, the passengers being murdered in cold blood.”³²

Entrenchments

A continuous arc of earthen entrenchments encircled the depot like a giant horseshoe. Company G, 13th USCT, together with other companies from other regiments, spent July and August 1864 constructing this outer line, in addition to an inner line connecting Redoubts No. 1 and No. 2.³³

The entrenchments were substantial at approximately six feet deep and ten feet across, and included strategically placed traverses. Head logs—medium-sized trees felled, de-limbed, and positioned to offer soldiers added protection and concealment when firing at the enemy—lined the top of the trenches. The makeup of the troops manning the outer line of entrenchments—recorded by Cpl. Atwood as “being 5 miles in extent”—changed every six hours.³⁴

A line of entrenchments “5 miles in extent” is substantial and would have given any enemy pause. Asst. Quartermaster Henry Howland, whose quarters where he and his brother Walter were “quite comfortably settled” and had “a very comfortable little house,” curiously made no mention of this extensive line in his letters, reports, or other communications. Thankfully, others did. Capt. Samuel J. McConnell, acting assistant-inspector general for the District of Tennessee, had orders to rotate his employees “in the intrenchments” below Redoubt No. 1. “I commenced to improve the works we occupied,” reported Col. John C. Peterson, commander of the Second Regiment of Quartermaster’s Department employees. “The works erected were of sufficient strength to resist field artillery, and they were well protected from a flank fire by heavy traverses every fifteen feet.”³⁵

32 *OR* 39, pt. 1, 865-66; Gardner, “The First Kansas Battery: An Historical Sketch, With Personal Reminiscences of Army Life, 1861-65,” 277.

33 Atwood, October 19, 1864; *OR Supplement*, vol. 77, 495.

34 Atwood, October 19, 1864.

35 *ORN* 26, 626; Walter Howland, September 23, 1864; Henry Howland to mother, October 23, 1864, Johnsonville, Tennessee; *OR* 52, pt. 1, 656.

Based on these descriptions, which describe the earthworks located around and inside Johnsonville's perimeter, it is difficult to understand why Howland, who was "in charge of this quartermaster's depot," appeared unaware of the outer defenses, or didn't think them worth mentioning.³⁶

Johnsonville's earthen defenses were well-positioned on high terrain, but Col. Thompson's undersized and inexperienced ground forces were expected to defend an important supply depot with a five-mile perimeter. For the first many months of its existence, Johnsonville rarely had more than 500 defenders. Only after November 1, 1864, just three days before the battle, could the depot boast a defense force of 2,500 men. More than once Thompson, Howland, and King appealed to Maj. Gen. Thomas for more troops, but none were made available until early November.

Except for the 1st Kansas Battery, the mounted Tennessee commands, and some of the USCT men, Johnsonville's garrison was wholly inexperienced and left the depot vulnerable to capture from its land side. Even after Thompson arrived in mid-October, his correspondence revealed that he could not defend the warehouses or hold the perimeter around the depot in an organized effort against a determined enemy. Thompson knew Johnsonville was threatened by Maj. Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest and his cavalry, and was fully aware of the very real danger they posed.

By this stage of the war, most Union field officers in Tennessee understood that Forrest often used mounted troops to lay siege to static posts in an effort to force their surrender. He had done so at Murfreesboro, Union City, and Fort Pillow, Tennessee, as well as Paducah, Kentucky, and Athens, Alabama. If he came for Johnsonville, every soldier and civilian at the post would be put to the ultimate test.

36 Henry Howland to mother, October 23, 1864, Johnsonville, Tennessee.