Lincoln was worried as 1862 came to a close. Confederate attacks in Maryland and Kentucky had shaken Northern confidence. Generals McClellan and Buell wasted victories at Antietam and Perryville by refusing to advance on the Confederates. The Emancipation Proclamation was to take effect on January 1, but military success to enforce it seemed impossible. The Union war effort was stalled.

Lincoln needed a victory soon, and he pushed his generals to strike a blow. In December General Ambrose Burnside’s Army of the Potomac met with disaster at Fredericksburg, Virginia. Grant’s Army of the Tennessee proved unable to crack defenses north of Vicksburg, Mississippi. Lincoln’s only hope lay with General William S. Rosecrans’s Army of the Cumberland.

On December 26, 1862, Rosecrans led his army out of Nashville to seek the victory Lincoln demanded. Their target—Murfreesboro and General Braxton Bragg’s Army of Tennessee. From December 26, 1862 through January 2, 1863, the armies raged against each other. Each side lost nearly one-third of its men. The Confederates limped away from the battlefield. Rosecrans marched his battered Union army into Murfreesboro and declared victory.

Union forces held Murfreesboro and much of middle Tennessee in an iron grip. Soon the earthen walls of Fortress Rosecrans protecting a vast supply base loomed over the town. Murfreesboro became a launching point for campaigns that slashed through the heart of the south and dealt a deathblow to the Confederacy.

Stones River’s success bolstered northern spirits. Victory—and the Emancipation Proclamation—crushed Confederate hopes for international assistance and shifted the war’s aims from restoring the Union to remaking the nation.

A relieved and grateful Lincoln thanked Rosecrans and his men for a “hard earned victory, which had there been a possibility would have longer endured.”


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**Life in Murfreesboro and on the Battlefield**

Murfreesboro—Tennessee’s state capital from 1818 to 1862—was a proud town. Early legislators included Sam Houston, Davy Crockett, and future U.S. presidents Andrew Jackson and James Polk. By the 1860s Murfreesboro boasted schools, stores, churches, a railway, nearby estates, and over 2,000 white residents. Many owned enslaved workers.

Spirits were high in December 1862. Local soldiers reunited with their families. Confederate President Jefferson Davis visited Murfreesboro with the hopeful, but incorrect, news that the Union army was capturing Richmond. Residents and soldiers celebrated the holidays with parties and dances, not realizing that the hard hand of war was about to strike their town.

Union forces occupied Murfreesboro after the battle. Soldiers tore down houses for lumber, destroyed churches, devastated cemeteries, and confiscated supplies. Staves fenced to Union camps to secure their freedom, leaving hundreds of farms untended. The Union occupation lasted beyond the war’s end into 1866.

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**Fighting Amid Cotton**

Murfreesboro’s rich agricultural district was the breadbasket of Middle Tennessee. Timbukyes and a railroad branching out from the town carried goods to far-reaching markets. Family farms worked by whites and enslaved blacks produced huge, horses, corn, cotton, and wheat.

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**Women Do Their Part**

Women’s groups for Union armies formed after the war. The Union Army of the Republic, led by William Rosecrans, left the Army to work as an architect, mining engineer, and inventor, the hobbled by the outbreak of the war. Rosecrans was popular with his troops who called him Old Rosy. His “Impressive and colorful personality” made him a hero to Murfreesboro but caused problems that led to his defeat at Chickamauga.
Touring Stones River National Battlefield

Stones River National Battlefield preserves a small part of the original battlefield. You can reach points of interest on the self-guiding auto tour (below and right). Numbered markers identify stops. Events are explained along short trails and on exhibits. Please use caution when crossing highways. Cell phone tour: 585-797-0076.

Go out the back door of the visitor center. Look across the field where Union and Confederate soldiers fought. Imagine opposing armies totaling 81,000 men battling to control Middle Tennessee in one of the Civil War’s bloodiest encounters.

Union troops made their final stand here, defending Nashville Pike and the railroad—both vital lines of supply. Today’s scene differs little from 1862. The railroad and pike are in the same place, and fields are now planted with native grasses between cedar thickets.

Dear Battle: On December 30, after Rosecrans’s Union army arrived at Murfreesboro, troops occupied this area along McFadden’s Lane. Soldiers struggled to sleep in the freezing mud without campfires knowing a major battle was imminent. For thousands, that night would be their last.

Slaughter Pen: Union soldiers fiercely defended their position here. Confederates launched three attacks in the early morning, but the delay gave their army time to form a new line along the Nashville Pike.

Cotton Field: On December 31 Union troops established a defensive line along the Nashville Pike. Pursuing Confederates entering the cotton field were greeted by cannon fire. A Texan recalled, “the artillery opened up on us . . . and it seemed that the heavens and the earth were coming together.” At dark both sides dug in for the night. Rosecrans’s army had been pushed back three miles, but the Confederates had failed to capture the pike.

Defending Nashville Pike: Thousands of Retreat Union troops burst from the cedar in front of these cannon, followed by Confederates. The Chicago Board of Trade Battery sprang to action as the Pioneer Brigade poured volley after volley into the gray ranks. Cannon charges forced the Confederates back to the cedar.

Round Forest: This was the Union position that held throughout the first day. Artillery and infantry halted the first attack at 10 am and beat back three more as the day wore on. By dark the fields of Hel’s Half-Acre were covered with Confederate dead and wounded.

McFadden Farm: Union soldiers hid behind stone and rail breastworks as men fled across the river chased by Confederates. Union cannon firing from above McFadden’s Ford halted the Confederates with shot, shell, and canister, killing and wounding over 1,800 men in less than an hour. This was the battle’s final action.

Black Men in Blue Uniforms

Once let the black man get upon his brass letters U.S. let him get an eagle on his button . . . and there is no power on earth which can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship in the United States.

—Frederick Douglass

Visitors Center

The visitor center and restrooms are wheelchair accessible. Some park trails are paved. Service animals are welcome.

Planning Your Visit

Visitor Center The visitor center has information, museum exhibits, a film, and bookstores. It is open daily except Thanksgiving Day and December 25. For details about activities, special events, and hours, contact park staff or visit www.nps.gov/stri.

There’s a Lot to See Here: You can see part of Fortress Rosecrans in Old Fort Park on Highway 96. Redbud Brannan is on West College Street. Paved trails lead to the earthworks. Stones River and Lylle Creek greenways offer places for activities and the chance to see important battle sites.

Don’t miss the Hazen Brigade and Artillery monuments, the National Cemetery, the Fortress Rosecrans (monument below right), and Evergreen Cemetery (Confederate). Ask at the visitor center about historic sites and places to see in Murfreesboro (see map).

Accessibility: The visitor center and restrooms are wheelchair-accessible. Some park trails are paved. Service animals are welcome.

A Fortress Like No Other

Fortress Rosecrans

In 1863 Rosecrans’s army and hundreds of formerly enslaved men built a depot and fort at Murfreesboro to distribute weapons, food, and supplies. Fortress Rosecrans had three powder magazines, and four interior redoubts and supplies. Fortress Rosecrans had three

Keeping Memories Alive

Hazen Brigade Monument

Colonel William Hazen’s men were the only Union soldiers to retreat during the fighting on December 31. They repelled attacks so fierce that soldiers named it the Hazen’s Half-Acre. Over 400 of Hazen’s troops fell in the battle, and the survivors didn’t want to forget Hazen’s men built this monument in 1863. It is the oldest intact Civil War memorial (below).

Stones River National Cemetery

After the battle most Union and Confederate dead were quickly buried on the field. In 1865 soldiers of the 111th US Colored Infantry began the grim job of reburying Union dead in the new Stones River National Cemetery. Each mound in the 1866 photo (below) is the grave of a newly buried soldier. Over 6,100 Union soldiers are buried here, 2,500 of them unknown.

Evergreen Cemetery

About 2,000 Confederates are buried in Evergreen Cemetery at Evergreen Cemetery in Murfreesboro. For many, first buried on the battlefield, this was their third resting place. In 1867 their remains were moved to a cemetery south of Murfreesboro. In the 1890s they were moved again, this time to Evergreen Cemetery (monument below right).

The Community of Cemetery

After the war, 11th US Colored Infantry soldiers, including William Howard (stump bottom stone below) and other formerly enslaved people started a new life in the area around the national cemetery (residents below). They built homes, a school, churches, and a theater. Their community, named Cemetery, endured until 1927 when creation of the national battlefield park uprooted many residents, beginning a period of decline.

Touring by Rail

Battle sites became tourist attractions after the war. Nashville, Chattanooga, and St. Louis Railway excursions to Stones River brought tourists—and much needed dollars—to Murfreesboro. Signs along the tracks helped passengers imagine the bloody actions. In 1920 the railway published Southern Battlefield guides with battle accounts and maps showing rail lines near battlefields (below right).

Artillery Monument

Artillery Monument marks the battle’s final attack on January 2. Here 57 Union cannon fired upon the approaching Confederates, killing or wounding 1,800 men in a short time. In 1906 the railway built this 34-foot tall monument (below) so that passengers could see it from their train window—and offered special fares for Confederate veterans.