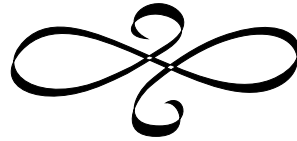


# Civil War in Ripley County

The Burning of Doniphan



Current River Heritage Museum  
*a project of the*  
*Doniphan Neighborhood Assistance Program*  
101 Washington Street  
Doniphan, MO 63935  
573- 996-5298  
[www.doniphanmissouri.org](http://www.doniphanmissouri.org)  
[rctourism@windstream.net](mailto:rctourism@windstream.net)

## **The Civil War Begins**

**One would have expected that settlers on the eastern edge of the Ozarks were looking forward to growth and prosperity in 1860. Land was cheap, more families were moving in, and communities were being established with churches, schools, stores and post offices. But in America, the slavery question had led to a conflict between states' rights and the union; a breakup between the North and the South was at hand.**

**Missouri was a border state. In the spring of 1861 the sectional lines solidified and across the state, men had to decide for the Union or Confederacy. In southeast Missouri and Ripley county the sentiment was pro-South. When one pioneer and his sons went to vote for president at the courthouse in Poplar Bluff in 1859, the clerk told them there was no A. Lincoln on the ballot.**

**Governor Claiborne Jackson set up a pro-Confederate state militia headed by General Sterling Price and a secessionist convention was held in Jefferson City in July. When Federal troops under General Nathaniel Lyon moved on the city, Jackson and his supporters fled to the southwest part of the state. Those who stayed constituted themselves the state legislature and elected Hamilton Gamble governor. Missouri had two groups claiming to be the state's legitimate government.**

**On the morning of August 10, 1861, Lyon's forces clashed with an army of Missouri Confederates under General Price at Wilson's Creek, ten miles south of Springfield. After five hours of bloody fighting the Union forces retreated. General Lyon had been killed and the federal forces had lost 1,317 killed or wounded. Confederate losses totaled 1,222 and weakened them so they were not able to march on the capital. Although the Union forces had lost the most significant Civil War battle in Missouri, they maintained control of the state. Nevertheless, Governor Jackson's faction of the legislature met at Neosho, and on October 28 announced it supported an ordinance of secession. A month later the Confederacy ushered Missouri into its ranks, gave it a star in the Confederate flag and a seat in its congress even though it remained in the Union**

**Missouri would be the scene of some of the most destructive fighting of the Civil War. Ripley County, a no-man's land border county, would be the site of an ugly guerrilla conflict in which no quarter was given. Although a number of citizens fled to the north or east, and some joined the Union forces, many joined the Confederate side. However, the majority, while sympathetic to the Southern cause, waned to stay home, tend their farms and keep out of the conflict. Some families, like the Keels, had sons fighting on both sides.**

Ripley County provided four colonels, all to the South. Col. Aden Lowe was killed at the battle of Fredericktown and replaced as head of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Regiment, 1<sup>st</sup> Division, Missouri State Guard by Doniphanite Isaac N. Hedgpeth. Willis Ponder was commander of the 12<sup>th</sup> Missouri Regiment when he was captured in 1864. Locally, the best know of the colonels was Timothy Reeves (Reves), who commanded the 15<sup>th</sup> Missouri Cavalry Regiment.

Like other southern Missouri border counties, Ripley was the scene of several skirmishes between Union and Confederate forces. Three major roads, the Old Military, St. Louis-Little Rock and Bellevue, gave the county a degree of military importance. Neither North nor South was ever fully in control of the region, making it a fertile ground for lawless bands of bushwhackers. Federal forces, first Company B of the 12<sup>th</sup> Missouri State Militia Cavalry under Captain William Leeper, and later the 3<sup>rd</sup> Missouri State Militia Cavalry led by Major James Wilson, were charged with removing Confederates from the area. However, they never had enough men or materiel to hold the border counties. The Confederacy was not willing to devote enough forces to the area either and left much of the defense and recruitment effort up to the 15<sup>th</sup> Missouri Cavalry Regiment under Colonel Reeves. Reeves was a “fire and brimstone” Baptist minister who migrated to Ripley County in 1844. During the first part of the war, he led a company of Independent Scouts that acted as a Ripley County home guard unit. It was a unit that showed little compassion for the populace it was defending, taking crops, horses and livestock when needed and forcing recruits, willing or unwilling, into its ranks. In 1863 Reeves was promoted to Colonel and given command of the 15<sup>th</sup> Missouri Cavalry and integrated his Scouts into that regiment.

### **Skirmishes 1861-63**

The first clash was a small skirmish on March 26, 1862, at Briar Creek on the Pocahontas-Van Buren road between Union forces (38<sup>th</sup> Illinois Volunteer Cavalry) under Colonel William P. Carlin and Confederates. Union losses were two killed and seven wounded. The action continued at Pitman’s Ferry on April 1 and at Doniphan on April 4 where the town came under cannon fire. Earlier, William L. Russell, the county clerk, hearing of the Briar skirmish and reports of Union forces moving down the Greenville Road, took action to protect the county’s records. According to Hume, Russell took the records and hid them in a cave “on Eleven Point River near what used to be Johnston Ferry.” In 1867 G. H. Hutcherson, then County Clerk, retrieved them. Very few Ripley County records exist for the 1863-1867 period.

In October, 1862, Union units from Iowa and Missouri attacked 1,500 rebel soldiers at Pitman’s Ferry and took 40 prisoners, but were unable to hold the area

and returned north. Confederates under General William Hardee had built fortifications on the south side of the river in 1861 defending the Old Military Road's ferry crossing. In December Union Brigadier General John Davidson took Van Buren and in January passed through Ripley County to Alton and West Plains before returning to Pilot Knob on February 20, 1863. In April, CSA General John Marmaduke invaded Missouri from Arkansas and advanced north in two main columns. The eastern column under Marmaduke passed through Doniphan while the western column under General Jo Shelby entered western Ripley County from Oregon County and headed north on the Bellevue Road. As the war ebbed and flowed across Ripley and other border counties the devastation grew. If one army didn't take what little a farmer had, the other one did. And when there was no army, there were the bushwhackers like Sam Hildebrand. Those circumstances made victims of Father Hogan's small Irish colony which disappeared as families fled the area.

In August 1863, Federal forces, mounted cavalry of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Missouri State Militia, came south and went through Doniphan and on to Pocahtonas. There, in a surprise attack, they captured General M. Jeff Thompson and part of his staff and quickly returned north. In the aftermath, the Confederate's 15<sup>th</sup> Missouri cavalry was meshed with Reeves' company of scouts and Timothy Reeves was put in command. Except for General Price's raid in 1864, Reeves' unit would be the Confederate force in the Ripley County area for the rest of the war.

For much of the rest of the war, Reeves' men had small battles with Missouri State Militia units, usually either under Captain William Leeper or Major James Wilson. There were skirmishes at Buckskull on the Arkansas line and brief engagements in other parts of the county. In November 1863, Wilson's troops occupied Doniphan, Poplar Bluff and Alton with the intent of guarding the polls for an upcoming election and eliminating bushwhackers.

On December 21, a company of Reeves' cavalry under Captain David Reed captured Centerville and about 100 Union soldiers with their horses. Leaving a small garrison behind, Reed returned to Ripley County to turn the prisoners over the Colonel Reeves who had been recruiting soldiers in the area and was camped at Pulliam's farm 14 miles southwest of Doniphan. Word of the Centerville raid quickly reached Pilot Knob and two mounted cavalry companies under Major Wilson were sent in hot pursuit of Reed.

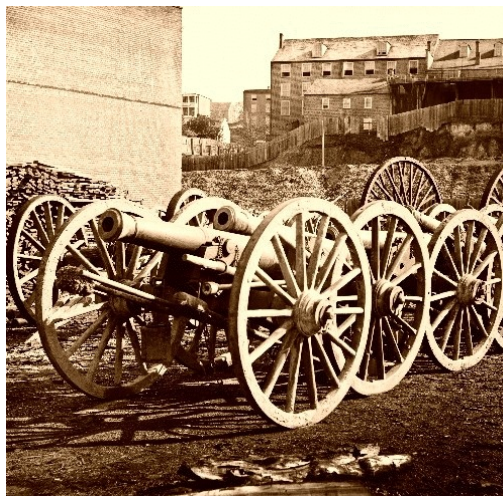


*Col. Timothy Reeves*

The unit passed through Doniphan and headed southwest capturing some of Reeves' pickets along the way. The force made a surprise attack on the Confederates at Pulliam's on Christmas Day, killing about 35 and capturing over 100, some of them new recruits to the southern ranks. All the Union prisoners were freed and there were no Union casualties. It was a devastating blow to Reeves, who with a number of his men, managed to escape.

In the 1980s, author Jerry Ponder (1937-2005) wrote that 60 or more civilians, including women and children, were "massacred" on that Christmas day as they were at Pulliam's for a Christmas dinner with Reeves' troops and their prisoners. That story is not supported by eyewitness and other contemporary accounts from either side. A credible source for this version of the events of that day has not been found.

## **The Burning of Doniphan and Price's Invasion**



In September, 1864, General Sterling Price formed an army of some 12,000 troops with 14 pieces of artillery in Arkansas and began "Price's Invasion" of Missouri. The objective was to reclaim Missouri for the South by retaking Jefferson City and installing the exile government. It was the last attempt of the dying Confederacy to gain victory in the west. General Price, a Mexican War hero and former governor of Missouri, divided his army into three divisions. General Shelby,

with his cavalry, formed the column on the left flank and General Marmaduke's division was on the right. General James Fagan commanded the center column. Price, who weighed over 300 pounds, was there on a special wagon made for the occasion and accompanied by a small brass band. There was about 20 miles between the columns as they moved forward.

As the invasion advanced on Ripley County, a detachment of Union troops commanded by Lt. Erich Pape, arrived in Doniphan at daybreak of September 19, drove Reeves' soldiers out and burned the wooden courthouse and the town with it, sparing only the Methodist Church and Aden Lowe's home. The widow Lowe was apparently feeding some Union troops while others torched the town. While the burning of Doniphan was tied to Price's raid, it was also an act of retribution for guerrilla attacks.

Shelby's cavalry arrived in the afternoon, crossing Current River about a half mile above the present bridge, but the Yankees had fled to the north, burning farmhouses and outbuildings as they went. Shelby's troops caught up with Pape's unit at Ponder's Mill on Little Black just over the Butler County line. In the battle that followed 16 of the 80-man Yankee force were killed or captured while the Rebels lost only six. Generals Price and Fagan crossed the river at Indian Ford near Pratt while Marmaduke's division entered at Pitman's Ferry. Once again the Old Military Road was the scene of history as Price's army moved north.

The invaders soon reached Pilot Knob where they took Fort Davidson after heavy losses and the successful escape of the Union troops. Turning west, Price's army fought a series of battles south of the Missouri River, was unable to take Jefferson City and received final defeat at the battle of Westport near the Kansas Corder.

One outcome of the battle at Pilot Knob is part of Ripley County history. Price's soldiers captured major Wilson, leader of the Christmas Day attack at Pallium's and the man who gave the order to burn Doniphan. Wilson had earlier told a nephew that if he were ever captured and turned over to Timothy Reeves, he would be given "no quarter" because he had been successful in "breaking up three of Reeves' recruitment efforts" in the Ripley County area. The prophecy proved correct as Wilson and five others were handed over to Reeves and summarily executed near Washington, MO on October 3, 1864. The Federals soon retaliated, summarily executing six rebel prisoners in St. Louis.

