

Benjamin Franklin Terry: From Civilian Through The Battle of Woodsonville, Kentucky
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Benjamin Franklin Terry was born in Russelville, Kentucky on February 18, 1821, but his family moved to Brazoria County, Texas ten years later where Terry's uncle, Ben Fort Smith, lived. Terry's father died on the way to Texas, and his mother died shortly after arriving in Texas. Terry and his brothers were raised by their uncle on his Brazoria plantation. Terry grew to be a large man--six feet tall with broad shoulders--and he towered above most men of his time. He could ride for long distances and was an excellent shot! It was in Brazoria County that he befriended Albert Sidney Johnston.¹

Another friend was William Jefferson Kyle. In 1849 California gold fever swept the United States. Terry and Kyle went to California and had to fight Indians along the way. They did find gold and returned to Texas in 1852 and purchased Oakland Plantation in Fort Bend County. They turned this sugar and cotton plantation of 8,000 acres into a modern operation, and soon Terry was one of the richest men in the state.²

Eventually, Terry married Mary Bingham, the daughter of one of Stephen F. Austin's original 300 settlers. They constructed a two story brick home on Oryster Creek, and it was here that they entertained local people with dancing, hunting, and horse racing. Their home became the social center of Fort Bend County.³

When the Cortina War began, Terry played a role in trying to capture the Mexican bandit, Juan Cortina. In this effort he fought alongside John Austin Wharton, Rip Ford, and Robert E. Lee. Terry fought to keep the Mexicans from pushing the American settlers from the Rio Grande

to the Nueces River. Freedom was again threatened as a result of the Presidential election of 1860. To Terry and most southerners, the election of Abraham Lincoln was a threat to the southern way of life.⁴

Citizens from all over Texas held county-wide meetings in order to determine what to do next. Their answer was secession. Terry was elected as Fort Bend County's delegate to the state convention that soon met. In February 1861 the convention voted in favor of secession. Terry enthusiastically supported the idea of leaving the Union in order to protect the freedom of Texas. On the way home with his friends Wharton and Thomas S. Lubbock, they decided to raise a cavalry regiment. Soon Terry was involved in an expedition that led to the capture of Fort Brown on the Rio Grande.⁵

After the firing on Fort Sumter, Terry and some of his friends went to Montgomery, Alabama—the current seat of the Confederate government—in order to get permission to raise troops in Texas for the war effort. Permission was not granted at this time, but Terry and his friends did secure positions on General James Longstreet's staff as scouts and volunteer aides. They were soon in northern Virginia and fought in the first Battle of Bull Run or Manassas Junction. Terry distinguished himself, and the Confederate War Department now gave Terry and his friends permission to return to Texas and recruit a cavalry regiment.⁶

Some three weeks after the recruiting began, the regiment had been raised and sworn into Confederate service in Houston on September 9, 1861 for the duration of the war. The regiment stood at over 1,000 men. As Terry was about to leave to be mustered in, he had on his new uniform and his uncle's sword, a weapon that was used at the Battle of New Orleans against General Edward Pakenham's British army and at the Battle of San Jacinto against the dictator of

Mexico, General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna. In the mind of Terry, this sword would now be used against the tyrant Abraham Lincoln. Terry told his family and slaves goodbye. A nanny came up to Terry with Terry's young son who was crying for his father. This would be the last time that the son would see his father alive.⁷

After the 8th Texas Volunteer Cavalry Regiment, better known as Terry's Texas Rangers, reached New Orleans, it was diverted from its journey to Virginia by General Albert Sidney Johnston—the commander of Confederate forces in the West. Terry's men were urgently needed in Kentucky.⁸ Johnston was busy establishing a line of defense that ran from Columbus, Kentucky on the Mississippi River through southern Kentucky to Cumberland Gap in the eastern end of the state. The movement of Terry's regiment into Kentucky was part of the build-up of Confederate forces in southern Kentucky that had been in progress since the occupation of Columbus, Kentucky on September 4, 1861, an action that Major General Leonidas Polk had taken on the basis of military necessity. This action was upheld by General Albert Sidney Johnston when he took over command of the Western Department a few days later. Columbus was of great strategic value in terms of controlling the Mississippi River. It was also the northern terminus of the Mobile and Ohio Railroad. In fact, if Polk had not acted when he did Union forces would have occupied Columbus, a fact that was made evident by orders General John C. Fremont gave Brigadier General U. S. Grant and by Grant's own actions on September 2.⁹

Johnston not only sustained Polk's actions in regard to Columbus but he went further by ordering Brigadier General Felix K. Zollicoffer to take his few thousand troops through Cumberland Gap into southeastern Kentucky where they could guard the approaches to

Knoxville. He also ordered Brigadier General Simon Bolivar Buckner, former commander of the Kentucky State militia, to take several regiments to Bowling Green, Kentucky. In short, within a few weeks, Johnston had most of his army north of the Kentucky line. He had less than 25,000 men to guard a defensive line that was roughly 400 miles long. As this line was being strengthened there was continuous fighting and skirmishing along its entire length. The Battle of Belmont, Missouri, right across from Columbus, was fought on November 7, 1861, a battle in which General Grant was defeated. Further to the east Confederate cavalry was active along the front, with two men in command of units that would soon make names for themselves throughout the Confederacy and much of the North as well. These men were John Hunt Morgan of Kentucky and Nathan Bedford Forrest of Tennessee.¹⁰

At the same time two unfinished forts, Fort Henry on the Tennessee River and Fort Donelson on the Cumberland River, were occupied in greater force, and their construction was pushed as it was vitally important that these rivers should not be used by the enemy for purposes of invading Tennessee and Alabama. Having established this 400 mile line of defense, Johnston had pitifully few troops with which to man the line. He needed Terry's cavalry. Even as late as February 1862 he only had about 50,000 men that were opposed by two Union armies of approximately 100,000 men. Johnston had an almost impossible task.¹¹

From New Orleans Terry's Texas Rangers (the 8th Texas) traveled in box cars to Nashville, Tennessee. There the Rangers were encamped in the fair grounds, and for a few days the men of the unit enjoyed themselves very much with Nashville ladies in great numbers visiting them. For their entertainment their expert horsemen gave them a truly "wild-west" bit of enjoyment, the first of its kind ever seen east of the Mississippi River. From Nashville, the unit

traveled by train to Bowling Green, Kentucky to be part of the defense force.¹²

The regiment's horses were driven through from Nashville by a detail sent back for them. They now received tents, camp utensils and wagons. Here, too, on October 28, 1861, the various companies were formally organized into a regiment. Terry was elected colonel; Terry's friend, Thomas S. Lubbock, was elected lieutenant colonel, and Thomas Harrison was elected major. The field officers having been elected, the next task was the appointment of the staff personnel. M. H. Royston was appointed adjutant; B. H. Botts, Quartermaster, Robert D. Simmons, Commissary; R. F. Bunting, chaplain, Dr. John M. Weston from Richmond, Texas, surgeon; Dr. Robert E. Hill, assistant surgeon; W. B. Sayers, sergeant major. Lubbock was from Harrison County, Texas. He would die at Nashville on January 9, 1862; Harrison was later promoted to lieutenant colonel and brigadier general and was wounded at Johnsonville, North Carolina on March 10, 1865. Botts was from Houston, Texas and was later promoted to major. Hill was from Bastrop County, Texas. He was captured four times. Royston was from Galveston, Texas and would later be promoted to captain and major in the Adjutant General's Department. The selection of field officers and staff over, the regiment was immediately assigned to duty in and around Bowling Green, Glasgow, and the Green River area.¹³

The regiment would do patrol and scout duty and see minor action. Their real baptism of fire would take place on December 17, 1861, when Brigadier General Thomas C. Hindman led an expedition to the Green River which included Colonel Terry's Texas Rangers. Hindman went to Woodsonville for the purpose of destroying the railroad from the vicinity of that town southward. His command consisted of 1,100 infantry, 250 cavalry, and four pieces of artillery. When Hindman was within two and a half miles of Woodsonville, around noon, he halted his

command and sent Colonel Terry's Rangers to occupy the heights to his right, left, and front, with Major Phifer's cavalry being assigned to watch the crossings of Green River. These movements executed, the main body of troops were advanced to the railroad. Hindman was now within three fourths of a mile of the river and the enemy.¹⁴ He discovered that the north bank of the river was occupied by Union troops, and some were on the south bank. Others would soon be sent over.¹⁵

From this location a company of Rangers was sent to observe the enemy from Rowlett's Knob which was to the right of Hindman's position and across the railroad. A stand of timber bordered the river that was parallel to the line held by the Rangers. Open fields were between. A body of Union infantry, a company or two, as skirmishers, moved through the timber by their right and Hindman's left flank. They were fired on by the Rangers and soon left the field.¹⁶

The firing now ceased for about thirty minutes. This is when General Hindman went to the rear to select a suitable place for his command to make camp. Colonel Terry was left in command and with instructions to decoy the enemy away from their artillery support and across the river. This would give Confederate infantry and artillery a much better chance to do more damage.¹⁷ The boys in blue were successfully decoyed and came across the river in large numbers. They appeared on Hindman's right and center. Terry took action immediately. He sent Captain Stephen C. Ferrell and 75 Rangers against the Union left flank; Terry took 75 Rangers and charged their right flank where about 300 of the enemy infantry were located.¹⁸

As General Hindman's report indicates, Terry was able to drive the enemy back.¹⁹ Colonel August Willich, the commander of the Thirty Second Indiana Regiment states: "With lightning speed, under infernal yelling, great numbers of Texas Rangers rushed upon our whole

force. They advanced as near as fifteen or twenty yards of our lines."²⁰ Some, Willich states, even got between our lines "and then opened fire with rifles and revolvers" but "they were repulsed with severe loss."²¹

Willich goes on and tells how Lieutenant Colonel Von Treba led an advance of the center and left of Willich's line. While this was in process the Rangers under Captain Ferrill, who was to the right of the turnpike, charged right into the very ranks of the advancing Union troops. Some Rangers even cut their way through the boys in blue. However, reinforcements came up and perhaps saved the day for Willich. The enemy was repulsed with heavy loss.²²

By this time Willich's entire force had crossed the river. Hindman ordered an attack by infantry and artillery and drove the enemy back to the banks of Green River. Firing soon ceased on both sides, with the enemy making no further attempt to advance. Hindman, believing he was outnumbered, left the field of battle to the enemy. He withdrew his command by way of the turnpike some two and a half miles and took good position to meet the enemy should Willich decide to advance. He soon realized that the Union command would not advance, and so Hindman began to return to his camp at Cave City, Kentucky which he reached at 8 p.m. on December 17.²³

According to Colonel Willich, he lost one officer and ten men killed, twenty two were wounded, and five were missing. He estimated Hindman's loss at much more.²⁴ According to Hindman, he lost Colonel Terry and three men of his regiment killed; dangerously wounded were Lieutenant Morris and three men of the Texas Rangers; slightly wounded were Captain Walker and three men of the Texas Rangers and two men of the First Arkansas Battalion. The enemy's loss was estimated at seventy five killed and left on the ground; wounded unknown. Hindman

reports taking seven prisoners and with other prisoners being too badly wounded to be moved and were left at citizens' homes.²⁵

On December 21, Major General William J. Hardee, in General Orders #46, thanked General Hindman and his command for their actions in the Woodsonville area. "The conduct of our troops," Hardee said, "was marked by impetuous valor. In charging the enemy Colonel Terry of the Texas Rangers, was killed in the moment of victory. His regiment deplores the loss of a brave and beloved commander; the army one of its ablest officers."²⁶

Writing about this engagement years later, L. B. Giles, who was slightly wounded in this engagement, said: "Had he lived he would, without doubt, have reached the highest rank and would have achieved a fame second to none. We had other brave leaders, but none like the matchless Terry."²⁷ After Terry's death, Lieutenant Colonel Lubbock was given command of the regiment. Captain John G. Walker became lieutenant colonel. Lubbock was in bad health when appointed and died at Nashville on January 9, 1862. Captain John A. Wharton of Brazoria County, Texas was elected colonel to command the regiment. He would lead it gallantly. He distinguished himself on many fields of battle and would rise to the rank of major general. Wharton would survive the war.²⁸

From the Woodsonville battlefield, Terry's body was taken to Cave City, Kentucky and then to Nashville, Tennessee. At the state capitol, the state legislature adjourned for two days in order to pay their respect to Colonel Terry. From Nashville, Terry was shipped to New Orleans where respect was also paid before the body was sent on to Texas. Hearing of Terry's death, the Texas Senate Chamber was draped in black, and state senators wore mourning badges for the next thirty days. Once back at home in Texas, Terry was buried at his plantation.²⁹

Terry's Texas Rangers did great honor to his name by distinguishing themselves on over one hundred fields of battle—including Shiloh, with Forrest at Murfreesboro, the 1862 Kentucky campaign, Stone's River, Fort Donelson, Chickamauga, with Wheeler in Tennessee, and Bentonville, North Carolina in 1865.³⁰ Few units in the Confederate army had a record that surpassed that of the 8th Texas Volunteer Cavalry which was better known as Terry's Texas Rangers.

In 1880, after a memorial service that was led by Ranger Gustav Cooke, Terry's body was disinterred and moved to Glenwood Cemetery in Houston, Texas. The State of Texas honored him by naming a county in northwest Texas after him. A school in Richmond, Texas is also named after Colonel Terry. However, few people, even in Texas, remember Terry today, but he is a person like Travis, Crockett, Fannin, and Bowie of Alamo fame that deserves to be remembered. Terry could be a role model for America's youth today because he rose from a parentless child to be a very successful and rich man. He was a man who valued freedom and gave his blood, treasure, and honor in the righteous cause of a free people to choose their own government as the thirteen American colonies did in the 1770's and 1780's in the civil war that was fought with 11 in the British Empire. Terry made the supreme sacrifice for the Confederacy and the freedom of its people who were fighting for the right of self-determination just as the American colonies had done.³¹

1. <http://www.restorethefamily.com/bfterry.htm>

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. John Allen Wyeth, Life of General Nathan Bedford Forrest (Dayton, Ohio: Press of Morningside Bookshop, 1975), pp. 27-28; Nashville Patriot, September 9, 1861; William M. Polk, Leonidas Polk, Bishop and General, 2 volumes (New York: Longmans, 1893), 2:21; James D. Richardson, ed., Messages and papers of the Confederacy (Nashville, Tennessee, 1905), p. 137. The orders which General Fremont gave Grant are dated August 28, 1861. In them Fremont stated that it was his intention to "occupy Columbus, Kentucky, as soon as possible.." On September 2 Grant, from Cairo, Illinois, dispatched a land and naval force against Belmont, Missouri, which was just across the river from Columbus, a movement that threatened C9lumbus. See War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, 128 volumes (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, 7:141-142; Lonnie E. Maness, "Columbus: The Gibraltar Of The West," Journal of the Jackson Purchase Historical Society, June 1982, p. 24.

10. Arndt M. Stickles, Simon Bolivar Buckner (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1940) p. 86; Shelby Foote, The Civil War: A Narrative, 3 volumes (New York: Random House, 1958-1974), I:169-173; T. Harry Williams, Lincoln and His Generals (New York: Vintage Books, 1952), pp. 57-61; Clement Eaton, A History of the Southern Confederacy (New York: The Free Press, 1954), pp. 155-160; Lowell H. Harrison, The Civil War In Kentucky (Lexington, Kentucky: The university Press of Kentucky, 1975), chapter 2; Robert U. Johnson and Clarence C. Buel, eds., Battles and Leaders of the Civil War, 4 volumes (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, Inc., 1956), I:373-429; Maness, "Columbus: theGibraltar of the West," pp. 23-33.

11. Johnson & Buel, eds., Battles and Leaders of the Civil War, I:373-429.

12. <http://www.terrystexasrangers.org/library/giles/chap1.html>

13. [Http://www.betsywheat.com/terrysrangers/terry3.htm](http://www.betsywheat.com/terrysrangers/terry3.htm)

14. Official Records, Series I, 7:19-20. See Hindman's report to Major General William G. Hardee.

15. Official Records, Series I, 7:19-20.
16. Ibid., p. 20.
17. Ibid., p. 20.
18. Ibid., p. 20.
19. Ibid., p.20.
20. Ibid., p. 17.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., p. 17, 20.
23. Ibid., p. 20.
24. Ibid., p. 18.
25. Ibid., p. 20.
26. Ibid., pp. 20-21.
27. [Http://www.infomagic.net/~thgroves/ttr/info/giles/chap2.html](http://www.infomagic.net/~thgroves/ttr/info/giles/chap2.html)
28. Ibid.; <http://www.betsywheat.com/terrysangers/terry3.htm>
29. <http://www.restorethefamily.com/bfterry.htm>
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.