

# CHARGE OF THE ORPHAN B



*In Battle at Stones River by John Paul Strain, Captain Charles B. McClaskey leads the 6th Kentucky Infantry across the river. It was the only element of the Orphan Brigade to make it that far.*

With the Battle of Stones River at an impasse, Confederate General Braxton Bragg decided on a desperate gamble—an uphill attack.

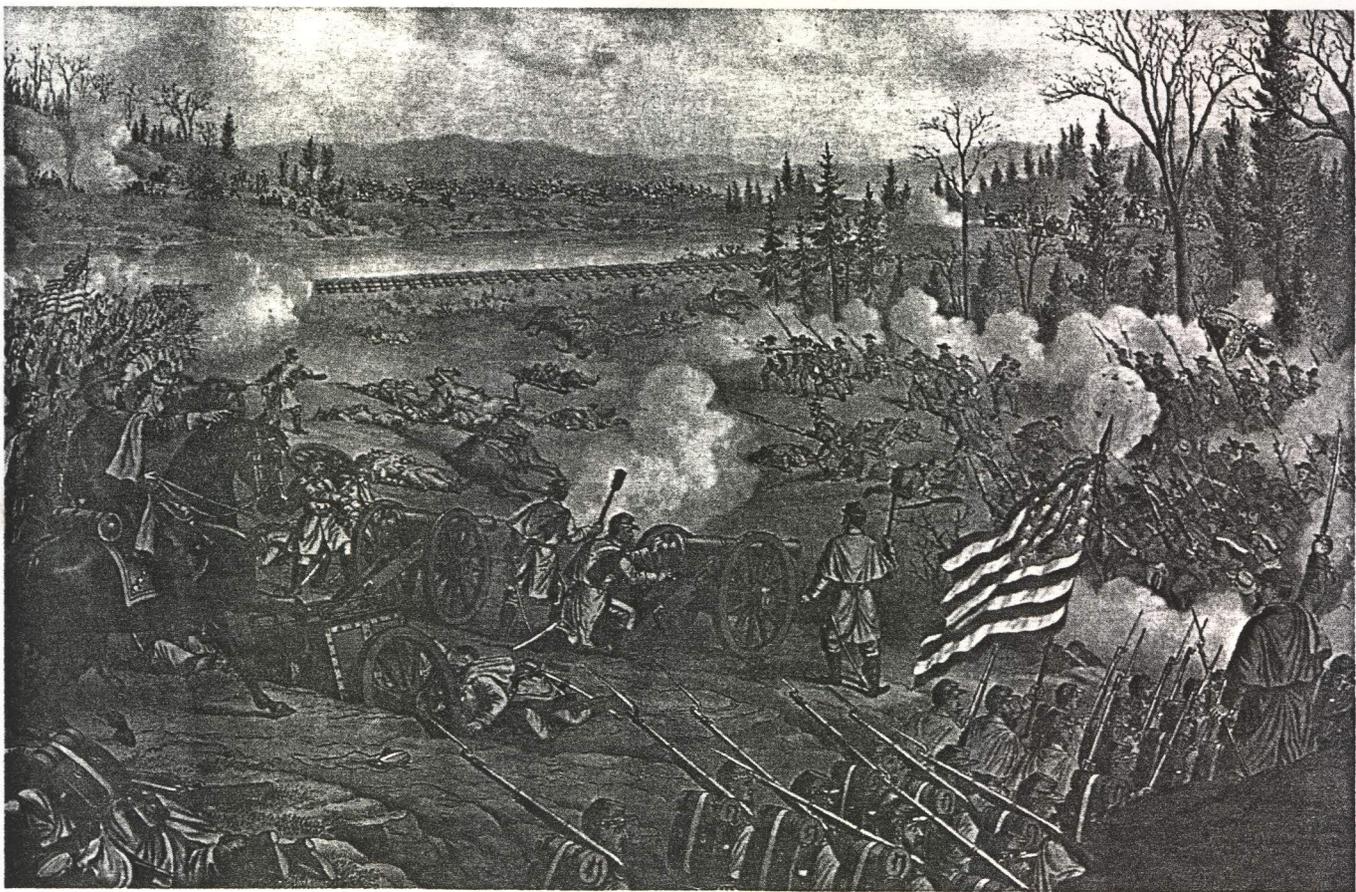
*by Robert Collins Suhr*

The morning of January 2, 1863, was cloudy and cold, with a steely hint of snow in the air—suitably gloomy weather for the equally gloomy military situation then facing the Confederate army at Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Two days before, the Southerners had made a valiant attack on the Union Army of the Cumberland, staving in the enemy right and nearly winning one of the most decisive battles of the war. But, as was all too often the case for the gray-clad army commanded by General Braxton Bragg, the pre-dawn assault near shallow, rock-strewn Stones River ultimately had fizzled out, leaving the Confederates frustratingly short of victory. The only thing they had to show for their efforts were a few hundred yards of bullet-scarred countryside and the clumped, frozen bodies of their fallen comrades. The dour, beetle-browed Bragg, perhaps the most unpopular officer on either side of the war, had done it again—snatching defeat from the very jaws of victory.

Following the brutal bloodletting on the last day of 1862, both sides had settled in to wait the other out. New Year's Day passed solemnly, with sporadic skirmishing but few casualties. Veteran soldiers, however, took little comfort in the comparatively light fighting. With neither side showing any inclination to retreat, they knew that the killing at Stones River had merely taken a one-day holiday. Soon, death would return in earnest to the insignificant bottomlands of north-central Tennessee.

With an eye toward preparing for that eventuality, Confederate Maj. Gen. John C. Breckinridge, a former vice president of the United States, was up early on the morning of January 2, scouting enemy positions on the east bank of the river. Accompanied by his son Cabell and a group of staff officers, Breckinridge crept on foot through a narrow

# N BRIGADE



Major General William S. Rosecrans directs his artillery to mow down attacking Confederate infantry in a Kurz & Allison depiction of the Battle of Stones River. In about an hour, 431 of the Orphan Brigade's 1,852 troops were dead, wounded or missing in action.

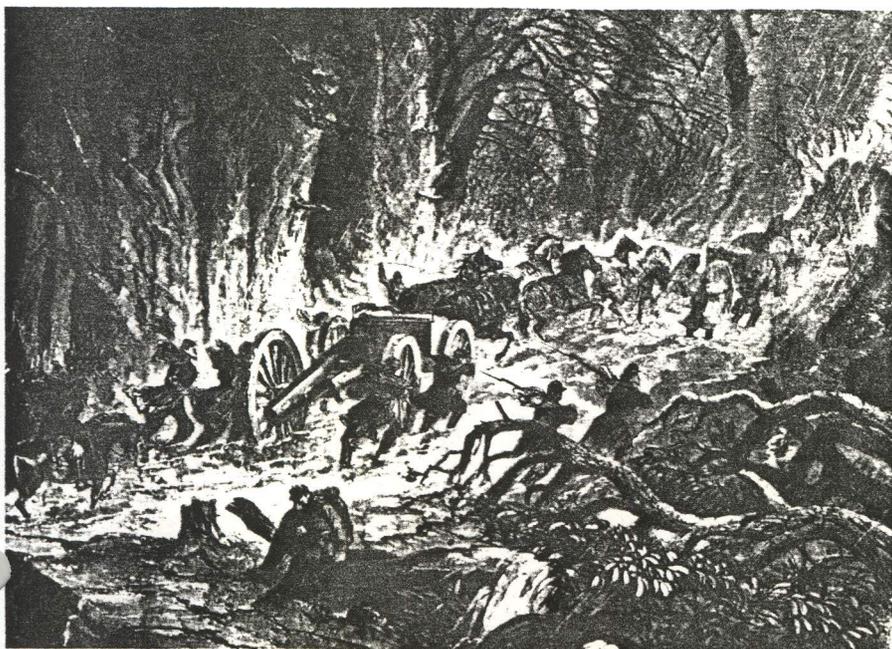
band of timber that ran alongside the river until he came to a vantage point a few hundred yards from the Union lines. Across a narrow cornfield, Breckinridge could see the base of a small hill overlooking McFadden's Ford. A second, higher hill was directly across from it on the other side of the river. Union troops swarmed in the clearing beyond the trees.

Breckinridge had scarcely taken a good close look when he received orders to report to Bragg immediately. Remounting, he

rode quickly to army headquarters, in the shadow of a drooping sycamore tree alongside Nashville Pike. There, a glowering Braxton Bragg waited to give the Kentucky-born Breckinridge his battle orders.

It would not be a happy meeting. Bragg had ample reason to dislike any and all soldiers from the Bluegrass State, and the dislike was reciprocated by the Kentuckians in his command. Relations between Bragg and his Kentucky troops had been deteriorating for weeks. The problems began in mid-1862, when the one-year enlistments of two Kentucky regiments expired. Confederate leaders wanted to extend the length of the men's military service to three years, a decision that nearly drove each regiment to rebellion. Breckinridge had been forced to intervene to end the insurrection, but the bad blood it engendered still festered between the members of the so-called Orphan Brigade (the Kentuckians were cut off from their home state, which remained in the Union throughout the war) and their much-hated commanding general.

Those feelings had been immeasurably soured by the fate of brigade member Asa Lewis, a private in the 6th Kentucky. Lewis, who had served creditably at the Battle of Shiloh, had declined to re-enlist when his regiment was reorganized. Nevertheless, he had loyally stayed on until December 1862, when he received word that Union soldiers had burned his widowed mother's home. Denied a furlough, Lewis deserted (although some of his friends insisted that



A Union heavy artillery unit drags its ordnance over the mountains during Rosecrans' 30-mile march through drenching rain, muddy roads and forbidding terrain to Murfreesboro.

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# A POLITICIAN SOLDIER MEETS HIS END

he planned to return in time for the next campaign). The private was arrested, court-martialed and condemned to death. Bragg refused to overrule the death sentence, reportedly telling Breckinridge that "Kentucky blood was too feverish for the health of his army." On the day after Christmas—five days before the Battle of Stones River—Lewis was executed by firing squad. Along with him died any chance of rapprochement between Bragg and the Orphan Brigade.

Now Breckinridge, who had fainted dead away when Lewis was executed, faced the man who had ordered the young private killed. With mounting anger and incredulity, he listened to Bragg outline his battle plans for that afternoon. Since the Federals occupied the only high ground on the eastern bank of the battlefield—the small prominence on the east side of the river on the enemy left—it was necessary in Bragg's view to dislodge them at once, before they brought artillery to bear on the Confederate positions south of the river. He wanted Breckinridge's division, spearheaded by the Orphan Brigade, to make the necessary dislodgement.

Breckinridge, who had just come from scouting that very position, vehemently argued against the attack. With a long stick, he sketched in the dirt at Bragg's feet the various dispositions of Union infantry and artillery. The apparently unmanned hill directly across the river from the objective was even higher, Breckinridge argued, and would undoubtedly be occupied by the enemy troops when they fell back across the river. From there, they could sweep his own men with irresistible fire. The assault would be disastrous.

"Sir, my information is different," snapped Bragg. "I have given the order to attack the enemy in your front and expect it to be obeyed." With the assault scheduled for 4 p.m., less than two hours away, Bragg curtly suggested that Breckinridge return to his command at once. Knowing that further argument was useless, the furious Breckinridge rode away, convinced that Bragg was hoping he would be killed in the ensuing attack. En route to his men, he met Brig. Gen. William Preston, who commanded the 3rd Brigade in his division. "General Preston," said Breckinridge, "this attack is made against my judgment, and by the special orders of General Bragg. Of course we all must try to do our duty and fight the best we can. But if it should result in disaster, and I be among the slain, I want you to do justice to my memory and tell the people that I believed this attack to be very unwise, and tried to prevent it."

In Bragg's defense, the strategic situation at Stones River left him little choice—short of retreating—other than to attack the Union left. His Federal counterpart, Maj. Gen. William Rosecrans, had himself contemplated retreating. After withdrawing from the Round Forest, the focal point of the fighting on the first day (December 31, 1862), Rosecrans had decided to advance his left to a more tenable position on the heights across the river. At 3 a.m. on New Year's Day, he sent Brig. Gen. Horatio P. Van Cleve's division, now commanded by Colonel Samuel Beatty (Van Cleve was wounded), across the river at the upper ford. Beatty moved the division to the high ground overlooking the

Roger Hanson was typical of a number of Confederate generals—he was a politician with a military background.

During the Mexican War, Hanson was a lieutenant under Captain J.S. Williams. After the war, he fell in love with a young woman who shortly thereafter announced her engagement to another man. Hanson insulted his rival, and in January 1848 the two men met in a duel in Indiana. Hanson came away with a ball in his leg that gave him a limp, resulting in his nickname of "Bench-leg."

While recovering from the wound, he studied law and was admitted to the bar. He followed the Forty-Niners to California, but by 1851 he was back in Kentucky, running for the legislature against his old commander, J.S. Williams. Williams ran on his war record—he had captured cannons at Cerro Gordo and was the first to plant the U.S. flag on the heights. During the campaign, Hanson attacked Williams' account of the battle. He claimed that the cannons Williams had captured had been abandoned by the Mexicans, and that during the battle he had led his company in flight toward the rear.

Hanson lost that election by six votes, but won the next one and later was elected from another district. In the 1850s he ran for Congress as a "Know-Nothing."

In the 1860 presidential campaign Hanson supported moderate Union

Party candidate John Bell. The same year, Hanson joined the Kentucky State Guard and was commissioned a colonel of the 2nd Kentucky. When the war started, he led his regiment across the border to Camp Boone at Clarksville, Tenn. The 2nd Kentucky became the nucleus of the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th Kentucky regiments.

When General Albert S. Johnston wanted to concentrate his forces early in 1862, he ordered Maj. Gen. Simon Bolivar Buckner to take his Army of Central Kentucky from Bowling Green to Fort Donelson. On February 13, Hanson's regiment repulsed two Union attacks. Buckner wrote of his attack on the 15th: "The Second Kentucky, under Colonel Hanson, charged in quick-time, as if upon parade, through an open field and under destructive fire, without firing a gun, upon a superior force of the enemy, which broke and fled in all directions." Later that day, Hanson and the 2nd Kentucky surrendered along with the rest of Buckner's force.

Hanson was exchanged, and in October Breckinridge appointed him commander of the 1st Kentucky Brigade. During that fall he supported Confederate raiders Nathan Bedford Forrest at Nashville and John Hunt Morgan at Huntsville.

Three weeks before his death at Stones River, Hanson was promoted to brigadier general. R.C.S.

river behind a fence in the woods. He placed Colonel Samuel W. Price's 3rd Brigade on the right and Colonel James P. Fyffe's 2nd Brigade on the left. The two brigades were arrayed in two lines, the second 200 yards behind the first. Colonel Benjamin Grider's 1st Brigade remained across the river.

Later, Bragg moved into the Round Forest, still expecting Rosecrans to retreat. The next morning he had four batteries fire at the Union center. The heavy volume of fire returned by the Union guns told him that Rosecrans was still there in front of him in strength.

At about the same time, Bragg discovered Beatty's troops across the river on the high ground overlooking the Round Forest. In that position, Beatty could control the Confederate position with artillery fire. (Beatty had moved onto the heights early on the 1st, but Bragg did not discover this until the 2nd.)

Bragg now believed he had no options other than to attack. "The dislodgement of the force or the withdrawal of [Lt. Gen. Leonidas] Polk's line was an evident necessity," he later reported. "The latter involved consequences not to be entertained." To attack Beatty, Bragg chose the unit that had seen the least fighting so far—Breckinridge's division of Lt. Gen. William Hardee's corps.

Bragg still had a manpower shortage, which had contributed to his inability to drive home the attack of December 31, only now

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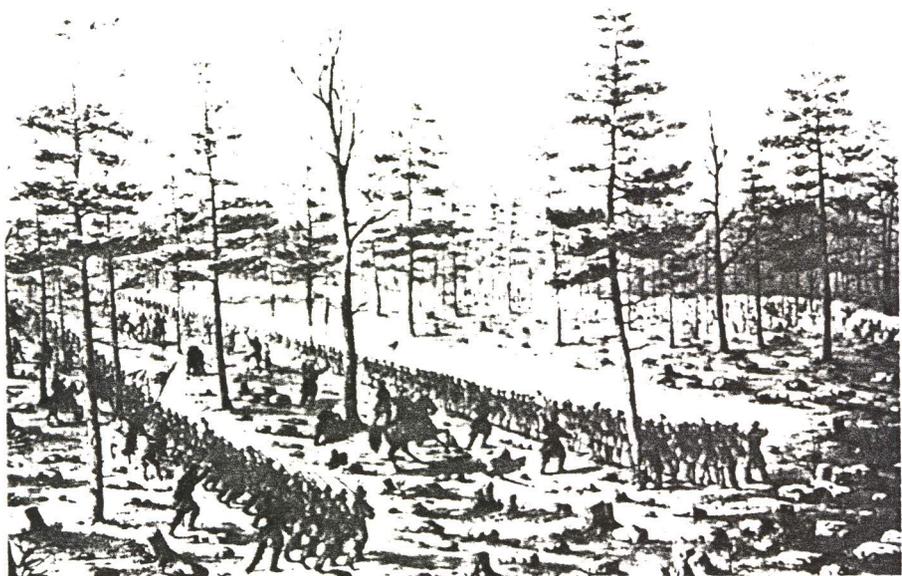
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*Colonel Samuel Beatty's Ohio troops engage Brig. Gen. Patrick Cleburne's Rebels in late morning, December 31, 1862. By noon, Rosecrans' right and center had been pushed back.*

the situation was worse. The sharp angle of the Union line gave Rosecrans the advantage of interior lines. So extreme was the Union position that some batteries could switch their support from the right to the left merely by turning their guns around.

Bragg compounded his problems by not having Hardee demonstrate against the Union right. While he did order Polk's artillery to fire at the Union center during the attack, the demonstration was ineffective. Without a threat to his right, Rosecrans felt free to move his reserves to support his left.

Grider's 1st Brigade crossed the river and formed as a reserve one-half mile from the heights. At the same time, Lieutenant Cortland Livingston's 3rd Wisconsin Battery crossed over. Beatty ordered it to deploy with Fyffe's brigade on the heights. Meanwhile, Bragg brought artillery batteries over to support Breckinridge. Captain E.E. Wright's Tennessee battery rejoined Preston's brigade, and Captain Felix Robertson brought his Florida battery and Captain Henry C. Semple's Alabama battery over from other divisions to support the attack. Bragg also returned to Breckinridge the two brigades he had sent across the river to attack the Union center.

When Breckinridge informed his subordinates of the order to attack, they protested bitterly, claiming the attack would be suicidal. Brigadier General Roger W. Hanson, commanding the Kentucky Brigade, even threatened to go to Bragg's headquarters and kill him to keep the attack from taking place. Preston and Breckinridge's son had to restrain Hanson to keep him from carrying out his threat. After Hanson calmed down, he gloomily prophesied his own death during the coming attack.

To protect Breckinridge's right, Bragg ordered Brig. Gen. John A. Wharton's

cavalry brigade to that flank. Wharton had been operating against the Union trains and did not return to the Confederate lines until daylight. Bragg ordered him to move to the right flank, but did not inform him of the attack that he had ordered Breckinridge to make. As a result, Wharton did nothing beyond directing the fire of his single battery.

Worried about his right flank being exposed during the attack, Breckinridge sent two staff officers to look for the cavalry. So emphatic was Bragg that the attack must take place as ordered that Breckinridge decided he could not wait until the cavalry was in position before attacking.

The Confederate movement to the right did not go unnoticed. At about 11 a.m., Colonel William Grose's Union brigade of Brig. Gen. John M. Palmer's division crossed the Stones River. Grose moved to the high ground on Beatty's left flank. He placed one regiment in a line parallel to Beatty's, but about 200 yards to the rear. He had a second regiment on a line 200 yards behind the first, with another on a diagonal from the left flank, so that it could fight either forward or to the left. Grose had two regiments in a final line, with their right flank anchored on the bluff overlooking the river. Grose's brigade was thus positioned on the Confederate right. If the enemy advanced beyond Grose's position, his troops would be firing into their exposed right flank.

Around noon, the Confederate artillery opened fire to try to soften up the Union position. Skirmishers advanced to join in. Livingston's battery tried to return fire, but only drew unwelcome attention to itself. As the fire grew heavier, Beatty decided to move Livingston's gunners back to Grose's brigade. At about 3 p.m., Beatty also moved Price's brigade to the reverse slope of the hill to protect it from the Confederate fire,

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but before the unit could be moved, the Southerners attacked.

Breckinridge deployed his division in two lines—Hanson's brigade on the left in the first line with Brig. Gen. Gideon J. Pillow's brigade on the right, and Colonel Randall L. Gibson's brigade on the left in the second line with Preston's brigade to his right. The second line formed 150 yards behind the first and served as the reserve. Each line was about two regiments wide and six men deep.

The division formed below the heights in woods thick with underbrush, which protected it from Union observation and cannon fire. From the edge of the woods up the slope to the Union line, however, the ground was clear.

As Colonel Joseph H. Lewis finished forming the 6th Kentucky, Hanson arrived with his orders: "Colonel, the order is to load, fix bayonets, and march through this brushwood. Then charge at double-quick to within a hundred yards of the enemy, deliver fire, and go at him with the bayonet."

After the men loaded their rifles, the gray lines started forward. Once beyond the underbrush, they put their rifles at "charge bayonet."

The rough terrain caused major difficulties. To avoid obstacles, Lewis had to move the 6th Kentucky's line behind the 2nd's until the men reached open ground. A pond and a thicket were in the Kentuckians' path, but the officers maneuvered their men around them.

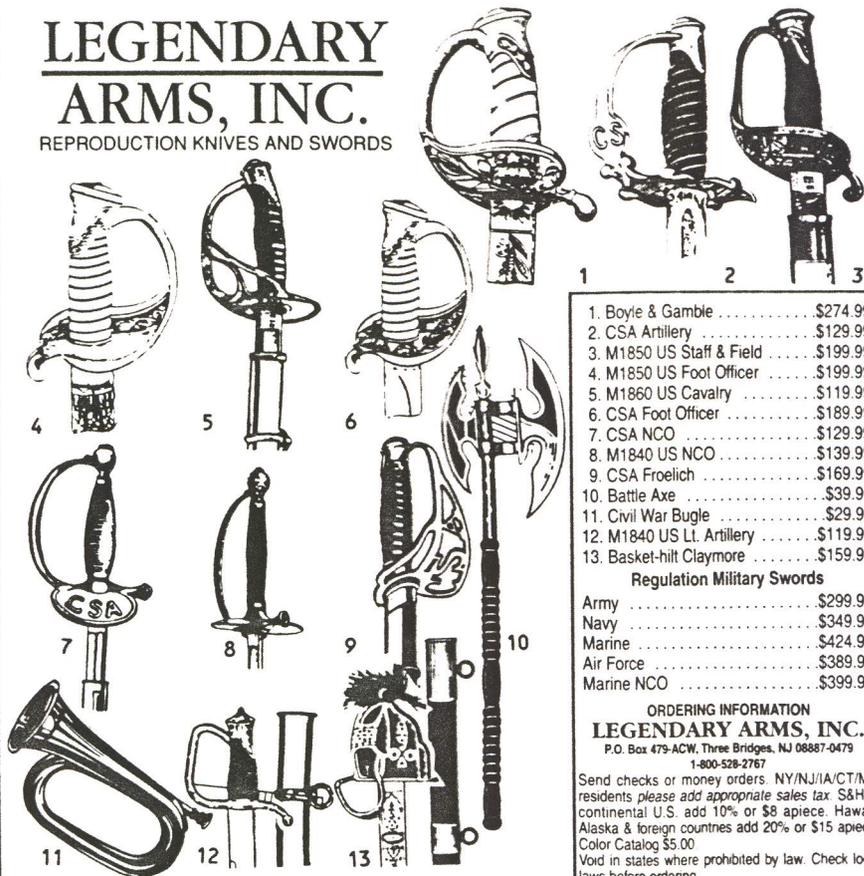
As the Confederates emerged from the woods, Union artillery across the river opened fire. Still, the Confederate line continued advancing. A few steps up the hill, the Kentuckians fired and charged with a yell. Price waited until the Confederates were close before giving the order to return fire. When the Southerners paused to climb over a fence, the Union troops had time to reload and fire again. The brunt of the attack smashed into two regiments of Price's line, sending them reeling back into the second line in confusion.

Colonel Fyffe watched as the battle swept past his brigade. "The weight of the columns of attack fell first on the Eighth Kentucky and the Fifty-first Ohio in the first line," he wrote. "They stood gallantly for a few moments, but were swept away. The enemy, still pushing on, received heavy flank and oblique fire from the Thirty-fifth, Forty-fourth, and Eighty-sixth Indiana and the Thirteenth Ohio. The column next encountered the Ninety-ninth Ohio, Twenty-first Kentucky, and Nineteenth Ohio, who were borne backwards as were the Ninth and Eleventh Kentucky." When the Confederates passed his second line, Fyffe fell back to the low ground near the lower ford.

Gibson maintained the 150-yard interval between his brigade and Hanson's line as the Confederate regiments advanced

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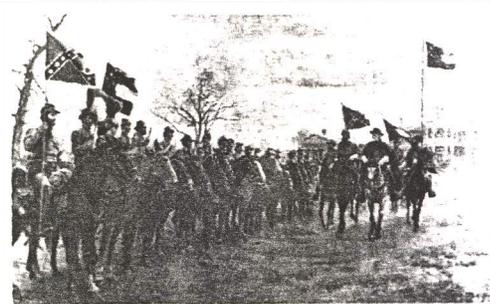
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