



Butcher Burbridge:

Union General Stephen Burbridge and His Reign of Terror Over Kentucky

Abstract

One of the most vilified and hated men during the Civil War in Kentucky had to be Kentucky born Union (brevet) Major General Stephen Gano Burbridge, but why have Kentuckian historians continued to cast him negatively? Burbridge had a meteoric rise as a military commander, starting out as a colonel of the 26th Kentucky Union infantry and becoming a Major General by 1863. He had fought well at Arkansas Post and Champion's Hill during the Vicksburg Campaign and received the praise of Union General William T. Sherman. Burbridge also received the thanks of President Abraham Lincoln for his victory over Confederate General John Hunt Morgan's forces at Cynthiana, Kentucky. Burbridge's problems arose when he became military commander of Kentucky in January of 1864. Burbridge issued an order in which for every Union soldier killed by a guerilla, four Confederate prisoners would be taken to the spot and shot. His brutal tactics to stop guerilla warfare in Kentucky ended up alienating Unionists in the state and moved Kentucky away from the Republican Party and towards the Democratic Party. Burbridge has also been accused of fixing the 1864 state and presidential elections as well as being involved in the Great Hog Swindle of 1864.

The thesis of this book will deal with the military career of Stephen Gano Burbridge and the factors that eventually led to his downfall as military commander of Kentucky and his eventual ostracism from Kentucky. The thesis will demonstrate how Burbridge's policies towards guerillas did not differ from Union General William T. Sherman's treatment of guerillas and Sherman actually influenced Burbridge's policy decision towards guerillas. Not only did Union General William T. Sherman influence Burbridge's decisions, but so did the Reverend Robert Breckinridge, Secretary of War Henry Stanton, Kentucky Governor Thomas Bramlette and the Radical Republicans. While Burbridge commanded a brigade in Kentucky in early 1862, he made friends with powerful radical Republicans, who later helped him secure his position as military commander in Kentucky and influenced his decisions on how to govern the state. While Burbridge fought in the Vicksburg campaign, he became friends with Union General William T. Sherman, who also influenced Burbridge's decisions as military commander in Kentucky. Governor Bramlette also influenced Burbridge's decisions, but Burbridge's decision to recruit and arm blacks and disarming the state guard, brought an end to their friendship and the governor's efforts to remove Burbridge from command.

Chapter 1 follows the early military career of Stephen Gano Burbridge, when he joined the Union Army and becomes a Colonel of the 26th Kentucky Infantry. He fought in several small skirmishes in Kentucky. While commander of the 26th Kentucky, he meets several members of the radical republican Kentucky legislature who will become his good friends and help to secure his position as military commander of Kentucky in 1864.

In Chapter 2, Burbridge participates in the Kentucky Campaign of 1862, where he continues to build his friendships with powerful members of the state legislature and strengthen his military abilities as a commander.

In Chapter 3, Burbridge participates in the Vicksburg Campaign of 1863, including the Battle of Arkansas Post. During the Campaign he becomes friends with Union General William T. Sherman.

In Chapter 4, Burbridge fought in the Bayou Teche Campaign and continued to impress his fellow military commanders and his superiors in the field and Washington.

In Chapter 5, powerful members of the state legislature, including his friend Governor Thomas Bramlette of Kentucky secured General Burbridge as military district commander in Kentucky, replacing General Jeremiah Boyle.

In Chapter 6, General Burbridge confronts Confederate General John Hunt Morgan's raid into Kentucky. He defeats General John Hunt Morgan at the Battle of Cynthiana and gains the praise of Governor Thomas Bramlette, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, General William T. Sherman, and President Abraham Lincoln.

In Chapter 7, General Burbridge began his controversial reign in Kentucky. General Burbridge used laws passed by the Kentucky legislature and Governor Thomas Bramlette to seize property from "disloyal citizens" and to arrest "disloyal citizens" of Kentucky. With guerilla warfare playing havoc in the state, General Burbridge instituted a series of controversial orders including Order Number 59, which stated that for every Union citizen or civilian killed by a guerilla, four Confederate guerillas would be taken to the site and executed in retaliation. Unfortunately, General Burbridge made no distinction between a Confederate guerilla and a Confederate soldier caught in Kentucky. He also

began to recruit black Union soldiers. To impress his military superiors, he decided to arm the black Union soldiers, which infuriated not only the slave owners in Kentucky, but also Governor Thomas Bramlette.

In Chapter 8, General Burbridge used his newly recruited black soldiers recruited from Camp Nelson to fight in the Battle of Saltville, which resulted in one of the worst massacres in Civil War history.

In Chapter 9, General Burbridge has been heavily influenced by the Unconditional Union Party and tried to influence the state and national election of 1864. Burbridge wanted to do everything in his power to make sure that only Republicans won the elections. He also becomes entangled in the Great Hog Swindle of 1864.

In Chapter 10, relations between General Burbridge, Governor Thomas Bramlette, and President Abraham Lincoln breaks down over election scandals and Burbridge's heavy-handed tactics in Kentucky. Lincoln personally becomes involved in the feud between Governor Bramlette and Burbridge. When Burbridge deemed the Kentucky State Guard part of the Union army and no longer under the Governor of Kentucky, Governor Bramlette demanded that Lincoln and the rest of the war department relieve Burbridge of command.

In Chapter 11, General Burbridge's career comes to an end and in Chapter 12, Burbridge is forced to leave Kentucky. After the war, Kentucky Democrats took control of the state and used Burbridge's support of the radical republican element as a tool to defeat the Republicans. Because of military district commanders such as General Burbridge, Kentucky turned against the Republicans. Kentucky remained loyal to the

Union government early in the war, but with General Burbridge’s heavy-handed rule in Kentucky, many Kentuckians felt that they were being treated as a secessionist state. ■

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