

# Homegrown Yankees: Tennessee's Union Cavalry in the Civil War

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## Review

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**Baggett, James Alex** *Homegrown Yankees: Tennessee's Union Cavalry in the Civil War*. Louisiana State University Press, \$45.00 ISBN 9780807133989

### Telling the Complex Story of Unionism

As the Union army surged into Tennessee in the late winter and early spring of 1862, it gained control over a staging area for operations to the south and east. But it also became an occupying force in a state where internal conflict simmered. Most Tennessee whites were pro-Confederate, but some were not. Throughout the state, pockets of Unionism persisted. In East Tennessee, Unionists outnumbered Confederates.

President Abraham Lincoln promptly appointed Andrew Johnson, until recently a U.S. Senator, to head a military government for the state. Under its auspices, fourteen Union cavalry regiments ultimately were raised. Many blue-coated volunteers—dubbed “Tories” or “homegrown Yankees” by spiteful Confederates—came from East Tennessee. Others came from embattled pro-Union communities in Middle and West Tennessee. The Cumberland Plateau of Middle Tennessee and a region of West Tennessee adjoining the Tennessee River included significant numbers of loyalists. Most pro-Union localities held fewer slaves than the statewide average and had a tradition of Whig politics. Bedford County, located in the prosperous Middle Tennessee basin, was an interesting partial outlier (it did have Whig majorities).

Tennessee's Union volunteers enlisted to protect their home communities. Federal advances in early 1862 liberated many pro-Union strongholds in Middle and West Tennessee. After an unhappy year of occupation, Middle and West Tennessee loyalists were intent upon stopping pro-Confederate depredations and re-establishing security for their families and kinfolk. East Tennessee volunteers itched to rescue their home region, which remained behind Confederate lines until late 1863.

But Union commanders planning campaigns into Mississippi and Georgia cared little about protecting loyalists. William T. Sherman saw no reason to chase guerrillas who were “chiefly engaged in harassing their own people” (179). Sherman expected Tennessee cavalry to participate directly in support of Union army offensives. He also wanted the Tennessee cavalry to flush out Nathan Bedford Forrest, Joseph Wheeler, and John Hunt Morgan, rebel cavalry commanders who disrupted the Union army’s increasingly long and vulnerable rail supply lines and telegraphic communications.

James Alex Baggett’s *Homegrown Yankees: Tennessee’s Union Cavalry in the Civil War* expertly surveys the history of Tennessee’s Union cavalry. Seven regiments were raised in 1862 and early 1863, four from East Tennessee and three from the middle and western parts of the state. The most formidable was the First Tennessee Cavalry, composed of East Tennessee refugees and successively commanded by Robert Johnson and James B. Brownlow, sons respectively of Governor Johnson and Knoxville newspaper editor William G. “Parson” Brownlow. William B. Stokes, a long-time Whig and former congressman from DeKalb County in Middle Tennessee’s Cumberland uplands, led the Fifth Tennessee Cavalry. The units first organized in West Tennessee were the Sixth, commanded by Fielding Hurst of McNairy County, and the Seventh, led by Judge Isaac R. Hawkins of Carroll County. The fourteen regiments of Tennessee Cavalry, which consisted of three-year volunteers, were joined by eight additional regiments of mounted infantry, who enlisted for one year in late 1863—four from Middle Tennessee and four from East Tennessee.

Initially hopeful that an armed Union presence might pacify the state, Governor Johnson and his cavalry soon confronted the ugly reality of pro-Confederate guerrillas, coupled with daring raids by Forrest, Wheeler, and Morgan—all actively or passively supported by white civilians. Union cavalry thereupon began to expel leading rebels and to confiscate their crops and animals. A violent spiral of tit-for-tat retribution intensified. Civil institutions and agricultural output collapsed, as has been memorably recounted in Steven V. Ash’s book, *Middle Tennessee Society Transformed, 1860-1870: War and Peace in the Upper South* (1988).

Patriotic Confederates have always denigrated the Tennessee Union Cavalry—they were traitors and Tories, they committed atrocities, they welcomed slave rebels as allies, and they were inept amateurs who never could

stand up against Forrest, Wheeler, and Morgan. Baggett suggests a more complex story. Loyal volunteers most wanted to protect their kinfolk and home communities from the scourge of war. They hoped that Confederates would see the writing on the wall and abandon armed resistance. That did not happen, of course, and both sides behaved inexcusably at times in the dirty war that followed.

Ulysses S. Grant, George H. Thomas, and Sherman, the renowned generals who led Union forces in the west, likewise tended to take a dim view of the Tennessee Union Cavalry. Baggett reminds us, however, that top Union commanders and the Tennessee volunteers had differing priorities. The Union brass thought that cavalry existed either to support the advance of the main armies or to defeat and capture Confederate raiders who threatened Union supply lines and communications. But pro-Union Tennesseans had an intensely local focus. Baggett contends that the Tennessee Union Cavalry, aided by mounted infantry, ultimately liberated the state from Confederate guerrillas, whose excesses forfeited civilian "support and sympathy" (164, 385). This tangible accomplishment has long been overlooked. Baggett also shows that the Tennessee Union Cavalry campaigned creditably with the main armies—especially at Nashville. They did much to keep rail and telegraph lines open, and they did bag Morgan.

*Homegrown Yankees* broadens the scope of Civil War military history. It changes the focus from broad strategy and generalship to the complicated realities of what was happening behind Union lines in the occupied South. The focus on Tennessee is auspicious. Confederate allegiances there were not universal, and Union support persisted in localities far from the Union-loving heartland of East Tennessee. Because Middle and West Tennessee were the first major parts of a seceding state—other than Northwestern Virginia—to fall into Union hands, they may have contributed to a misleading mirage. Like Lincoln, Grant initially hoped that sensible white Southerners soon would realize their folly and abandon the Confederate cause. This is what he thought he saw happening when many ordinary white Tennesseans flocked to his army to enlist. Writing to his wife on March 18, 1862, Grant hailed "the strong manifestation of Union feeling" that he had encountered (35-36). But three weeks later at Shiloh, Grant discovered what he really was up against. Grant—if not yet Lincoln—appears to have realized that most of the Confederacy was not honeycombed with Middle and West Tennessee's Unionist localities, and he famously "gave up all idea of saving the Union except by complete conquest."

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