
The Civil War And What It Meant For Arkansas

Something that most Americans learn about in school is the civil war. There a different perspective from both sides. Sometimes the information can be skewed on way and some towards the other, but one can usually get the information they need by sifting through both. Something interesting as an Arkansan, is how Arkansas held up during the war. I know that there are battles that occurred here, such as Pea Ridge, and I know that since North Arkansas was close to the Union lines, that there were some issues when it came to who was on which side. Something like this is much more then a black and white story, which is interesting to uncover. Objectivity is key when writing history, so I am hoping I can give you that.

As with most wars and their histories, it is important to at least have a small background as to why things happened or why specific decisions were made. An important factor of the history of Arkansas and the Civil war is what led the state to secede from the Union. At this time, the cotton industry kept getting bigger, which increased the need for slaves. Arkansas produced a large amount of cotton, but plantation owners did not own that many slaves. Of the 110,000 slaves in Arkansas at this time, they were spread throughout the state. Most families did not own many slaves, only twelve percent of families that owned slaves had over twenty. The problem that slavery cause was that the people with slaves and in the cotton industry created a disproportionate spread of the wealth in the state. This division of wealth also created a division of power, and the state was controlled by "The Family", so government decisions were skewed to one side. When Lincoln was elected president, there was not much uproar in Arkansas, many people were just wanting a less drastic approach to ending the debate on slavery.

When states decided to secede from the Union, some had an easier decision than others. For Arkansas, the decision came harder then most. When the attack on Fort Sumpter happened on April 12, 1861, many southern states had already seceded from the Union. Arkansas, however, was not on that list. It had been a popular debate within the state on whether the state should or should not stay in the Union. With the states background, it appeared they would be leaving due to their stance on slavery. Their main reasoning for wanting to become part of the Confederacy was because they wanted to convince the other states to come back to the Union. They couldn't encourage the seceded states to come back if their image of Arkansas was clouded by the fact that they were still part of the Union. After the attack on Fort Sumpter, Lincoln was asking for people to send troops to aid in battle, including a commission for troops from Arkansas. This is when a decision had to be made, Arkansas had to pick one side or another. It took almost a month to make this decision as it went through the specific areas needed to determine the decision. On May 6, 1861, Arkansas seceded from the Union. There was only one vote opposed to this decision. Then, on May 18, 1861, Arkansas became the 9th state to

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enter the Confederate States.

For the duration of 1861, Arkansas was setting up training stations and trying to figure out a game plan for the war. There was a lot of support coming from the state, a lot forming in the southern part of the state. There were many able-bodied men from the state that had volunteered to fight for the Confederate Army. There are sources that say that Arkansas had given the most troops to fight throughout the war, second most to Tennessee if not the first. Since the capital of Arkansas at this time was Little Rock, this is where many troops traveled to prepare for the war. This would come to a halt later in the war. While many troops for the Confederacy during the war, many of them did not stay to protect Arkansas. Instead they were moved to places like Missouri and Tennessee to join their armies. The Confederate states believed that their victory in the war would come fast and they would take control of the Union with ease. This would come to be a harder feat than they expected. The first battle that Arkansas participated in was in 1861 in Missouri. The battle of Wilson's creek was a victory for the Confederacy, and it enabled them to obtain the control of southwestern Missouri. While this was a victory for the confederacy, it wasn't a win by much. The Union troops retreated due to lack of ammunition and exhaustion. The Confederate troops were not experienced or trained enough to follow. This gave the troops and the confederacy the first look as to what to expect throughout the war.

In 1862, Arkansas participated more in the war, and some battles came to the state. Perhaps the most influential battles in Arkansas during the Civil War was that of the Battle of Pea Ridge. This was also an important turning point in the beginning of the war in the Union. This battle was pursued by the Union to gain control of the Missouri border. The battle lasted from March 7th to the 8th. Things could have been different, but the Confederacy did not get their supply and ammunition was running low. There was some back and forth between who they thought was going to win the battle, but two Confederate generals were killed in this battle alone. A final counterattack from the Union army forced the Confederate army to retreat. The Confederate troops left, and Arkansas was put in an almost defenseless state. The Union Army would keep this control over Missouri for the next two years of the war.

In the year 1862, a new governor was elected. Harris Flanagin was put into office in the fall of 1862 and remained in office until 1865. He was the person who was responsible for life back in Arkansas. After the Battle of Pea Ridge, and during the years after, the economy and livelihood of people in Arkansas was deteriorating. Something not often talked about between all the destruction and battling during wars, is how the people at home are affected. Some stories are told, but never to the full extent. Something that is important to remember in war time is that everyone that is in a country that is part of the world is affected. The economy is affected, the way of life is affected, and it can have an impact for longer than the war goes on. In Arkansas, the people who were left in the state were affected in many ways.

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The government on both county and statewide levels were slowly starting to deteriorate. There were countless jobs that were not being done during this time. People like sheriffs and tax collectors were not seeking out to do the things that needed to be done. Taxes were going without being collected, lawsuits were not being handled like they should have, and this had a great affect on the state and the war. Since people in the government were not handling jobs as they should have, especially law enforcement, this war brought out the worst in people. Crime was at a high. People were killing, stealing, torturing one another, and not a lot of people were doing any thing about it. Since the able-bodied men who decided to fight were gone and dispersed elsewhere, it gave more of an incentive for criminals as they knew that the people most likely to stop them were gone. Resources were also leaving the state as well. The goods they used to profit on, cotton, salt, and more, had almost disappeared from the state. People couldn't produce as much, which was difficult for the people left in Arkansas.

The first full year of fighting had taken a large toll on the Arkansan people.

Things did not look up for the Arkansans in 1863 either. Their land was slowly being taken over by the Union Army, and the state of Arkansas was still slowly falling apart. It all started in January at the Battle of Arkansas Post. By this time, the Union had taken control of a large portion of the Mississippi River. They were planning an attack on the Vicksburg stronghold nearby. The Confederate army figure there may be a pending attack at Vicksburg, so they were planning for if that was to happen. Troops were station at the Arkansas Post, which they believed was enough man power to take down an attack at Vicksburg. After some miscommunication between Generals, and some decisive action, the Union army decided that it would be a smart idea to attack the Arkansas Post to clear a path to Vicksburg. They traveled up the Arkansas River and began the attack. It started off as man versus man, but on January 11th, the naval forces joined in and it wasn't long until the Confederate troops surrendered. While Union casualties were high and Confederate casualties were low, over 4,000 Confederate troops were taken prisoner. This loss of soldiers, supplies, and ammunition took a heavy toll.

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