

The soldiers who fought here called it the

Byram's
Ford

Meadow

"Meadow and Bloody Hill"

BATTLE OF WESTPORT

21-23 OCTOBER 1864

"At 8 a.m. crossed the creek called the Big Blue, the battlefield of yesterday. There for the first time the unburied dead were seen -- the unmistakable marks of stern and cruel war. At every step of our advance, the evidence of a fierce and bloody conflict was around us. It was a sad sight, the old, the middle aged and youth.

*"The enemy took here a stubborn and determined stand. It was a cavalry fight – carbines, pistols and sabers—horse against horse –man against man—sabers right and left. The saber cuts visible on face, neck and arm; the wounded and dead horses seen all over the field. Our loss is estimated in killed and wounded at about 400; the enemy's loss is from 1000 to 1500." **George Sawin**, QUARTERMASTER, 58TH ILLINOIS INFANTRY REGIMENT, 24 OCTOBER 1864*

*By Daniel L. Smith
Chairman of Monnett Battle of
Westport Fund*

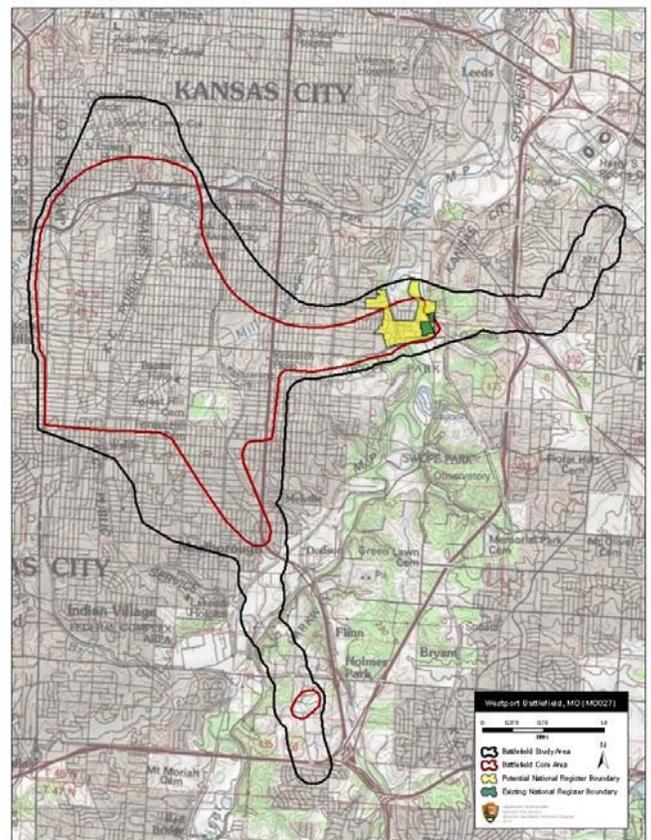
Quartermaster George Sawin's description captures his vivid impression of a portion of the Battle of Westport that he witnessed on October 24, 1864, the day after the intense fighting along the Big Blue River at the Byram's Ford Crossing.

The overall Battle of Westport will be commemorated on October 24-26, 2014 on this same Hallowed Ground that Quartermaster Sawin crossed 150 years earlier.

The Battle of Westport was the largest battle fought west of the Mississippi River. This battle, fought on 21-23 October 1864, involved 32,000 troops over the three day engagement and marked the final dramatic and decisive conclusion to a decade of strife in Missouri. It sounded the death knell for Confederate hopes of fomenting a popular uprising in Missouri and wresting the state from Union control.

As a consequence of the battle, Kansas City and Fort Leavenworth were saved from falling into Confederate hands. Missouri remained firmly under Federal domination.

The Battle of Westport ranks among the top 25 most significant Civil War sites in the nation as a Class A battle site according to the National Park Service's Civil War Sites Advisory Commission. The Wilson's Creek battlefield, which marked the beginning of the war, and the Battle of Westport are the only two Class A sites in Missouri.



The above National Park Service map of the Battle of Westport site CWSAC #MO27 depicts the large scope of the battle's core area outlined in red. All of the battle site today lines within the limits of Kansas City, Missouri.

Price's Missouri Expedition and the Battle of Westport

Confederate General Sterling Price, a popular former governor of Missouri, took to the field in 1861 hoping to rally the people of Missouri to the Confederate cause. He commanded Missouri troops at the Battle of Wilson's Creek in 1861 and won a series of victories. Despite his victories General Price was compelled to take his Missouri troops and leave the state to fight elsewhere.

In 1864, General Price remained hopeful that he could yet rally Missourians to the southern cause and eject the Federal authorities from the state. He launched the Missouri Expedition in August 1864 from southwest Arkansas with 12,000 troops. Price's operation was that of a mounted infantry expedition intended as a force of occupation. This expedition would cover 1400 miles over the next four months, becoming the longest expedition of the Civil War. After battles at Fort Davidson/Pilot Knob and Lexington, Price's Army arrived near Independence on October 21 on the Little Blue River. Here the Battle of Westport commenced.

With his headquarters at Kansas City, Union General Samuel R. Curtis, commander of the Department of the Border, constructed the Federal's primary defensive line along the west bank of the Big Blue River. Curtis' command numbered approximately 17,000 troops, the bulk of which were untrained Kansas militia.

At the same time, a second Union force comprised of a cavalry division of 4,100 troopers under the command of General Alfred Pleasonton (commander of cavalry at Gettysburg) was advancing rapidly from St. Louis and approaching upon the rear of Price's army.

When Price launched the rebel assault on Independence on October 21, his Confederate army faced the threat of total destruction between the twin Federal forces: Curtis' entrenched troops to its front and Pleasonton's mobile forces to the rear. Price needed to strike quickly and decisively against Curtis' relatively weaker, but well-fortified forces before turning to counter attack Pleasonton's pursuing cavalry.

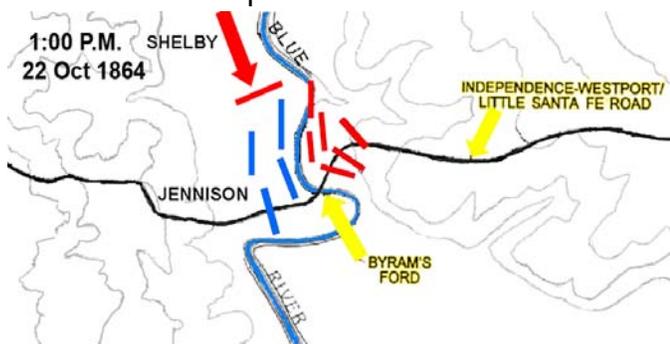
Consequently, the Westport battlefield on the Big Blue River at the Byram's Ford crossing was the scene of two successive battles on October 22 and 23, 1864 — the first a Confederate victory and the second a Union victory. A total of approximately 11,000 troops clashed on October 22 and 23, 1864 over the Hallowed Ground at Byram's Ford.

On October 22, the notorious Kansan Col. Charles "Doc" Jennison, who earlier led Jennison's Jayhawkers, commanded the 15th Kansas cavalry on the heights of Bloody Hill overlooking Byram's Ford.



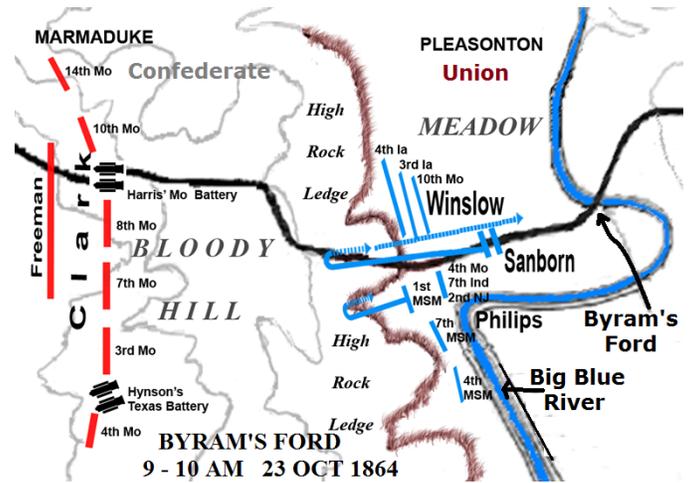
Col. Charles "Doc" Jennison

Confederate cavalry under Gen. Jo Shelby assaulted the Byram's Ford crossing for four hours on October 22 and were unable to dislodge the Kansans. Ultimately, the Confederates made a crossing farther down the Big Blue River and were able to flank Jennison's forces and compel them to retreat to Westport in the late afternoon.



Late on the evening of October 22, the Confederate cavalry under Gen. John S. Marmaduke now held the heights on Bloody Hill overlooking the Byram's Ford. The Confederates extensive wagon train continued to cross at the Ford until midnight. By this time Pleasonton's Federal Cavalry division of 4100 troops was a mere one to two miles from the Ford.

The battle resumed before daylight on 23 October. The Confederate and Union forces remained engaged for the next six hours. The Federal cavalry forced a crossing of the Ford under a heavy fire from Confederates on Bloody Hill. Winslow's Federal Cavalry advanced along the north side of the Byram's Ford Road, present 60th Street while Philips Cavalry advanced along the left of the Road. After skirmishing dismounted across the wide flood plain known as the Meadow, the Federal cavalry were pinned down at the foot of abrupt rock wall which prevented their advance but provided protection from the Confederates fire atop Bloody Hill.



The spirited stalemate continued for two hours until 11 a.m. when the Confederates were compelled to withdraw due to running out of supplies and ammunition as the Confederate wagon train continued to move southward. The collapse of this point of the Confederates lines compelled Gen. Shelby, who was fighting along Brush Creek four miles to the west, to withdraw as well.