

Iowa
and the
Civil War



A Military Review

by Julie E. Nelson and Alan M. Schroder

Her silent gaze is fixed on the northern portion of the city, and her cold granite eyes stare at the passing motorists. She seems pensive, as if seeing a vision of the pain of dealing with an irreparable loss. The inscription on the granite memorial reads:

Iowa, her affections, like the rivers of her borders, flow to an inseparable union.

She is one of the figures on a 135-foot monument erected in Des Moines to commemorate the people who gave up their lives in America's Civil War. Constructed from 1,840 tons of granite, the monument stands as a tangible tribute, the inscription reads, "to the courage, patriotism, and distinguished service of all her soldiers and sailors who fought in the war of rebellion, 1861-1865."

When President Abraham Lincoln issued his first call for troops for the Union army, three days after the South fired on Fort Sumter, he set one regiment as the quota for Iowa. Governor Samuel J. Kirkwood was uncertain that he could raise the thousand men needed to fill this quota, but he did issue a proclamation warning Iowans that "The Nation is in peril. A fearful attempt is being made to overthrow the Constitution and dissever the Union. The aid of every loyal citizen is invoked to sustain the General Government. For the honor of our State let the requirement of the President be cheerfully and promptly met." Iowa's response far exceeded Kirkwood's hopes. The Iowa quota was filled by volunteers in the first day of recruiting, and the governor had to begin turning away offers of additional locally-formed companies.

With the enthusiasm for the Union cause at its peak, Kirkwood's real problem was in providing the material to supply and equip the

Iowa volunteer regiments. Troops were recruited at stations throughout Iowa, then collected in camps at Dubuque, Iowa City, Davenport, Burlington, and Keokuk. At the camps, they had to be fed, provided with uniforms, weapons, and equipment, and given some rudimentary military training. Food could be supplied from sources within the state, but cloth for uniforms was in short supply. Governor Kirkwood was forced to conclude that the state could provide the same uniforms for everyone in a company, but that not all the companies in a given regiment could be clothed alike. The same situation existed throughout the Northern states early in the war, so the Union forces marched off to war in a rainbow of uniforms. The dark blue uniforms so closely associated with the Union cause were not generally adopted until after the battle of Bull Run, when some Union troops fired on other gray-clad Union regiments.

Weapons to arm the Iowa regiments were in similarly short supply early in the war. Muskets that were supposed to have been held for them at the federal arsenal in St. Louis were sent elsewhere, and when a shipment of 2,000 finally did arrive they were described by Franc Wilkie of the Dubuque *Herald* as "more dangerous to friend than enemy—[they] will kick further than they shoot, and are appropriately known from their awkward peculiarities in this and other respects, among our Germans as *Kuh-fuss*—'cow-foot.'" Eventually, the Iowa troops raised in these early days of the war in 1861 were provided with some kind of uniform, a weapon of sorts, and just a bit of training and then sent downriver by steamboat to St. Louis. There they were reassigned to the latest point of confrontation between the Northern and Southern armies or to more peaceful rear

areas for garrison duty.

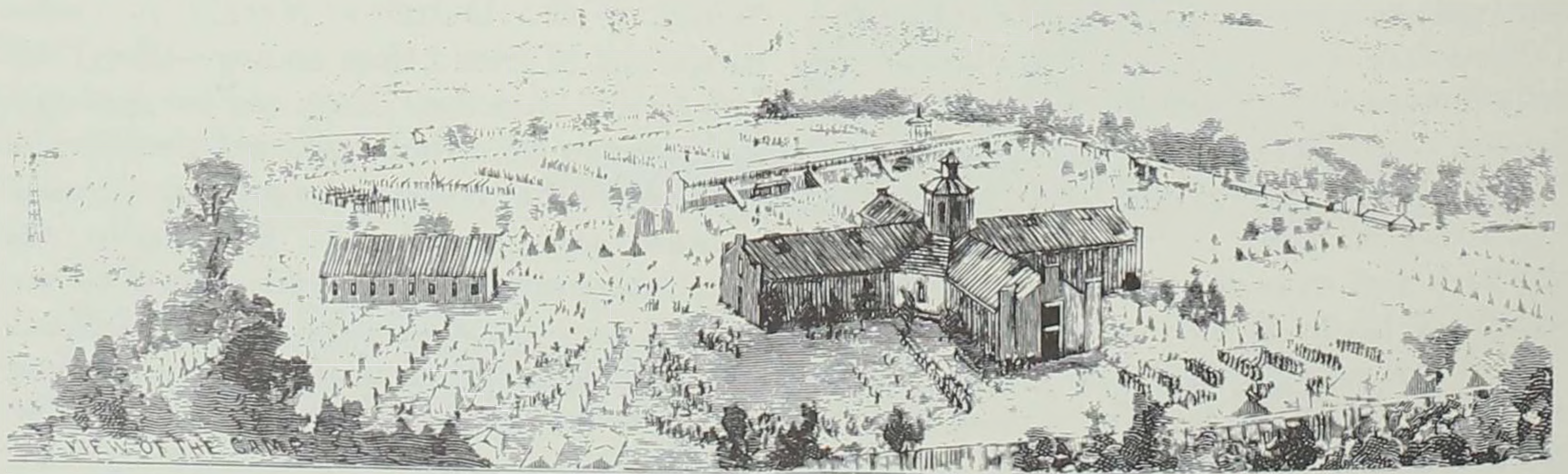
Over the course of the war, Iowa raised between 72,000 and 76,000 troops, counting enlistments and re-enlistments. Iowans filled forty-six infantry regiments, four companies of light artillery, and nine cavalry regiments, and black Iowans provided the basis for a black infantry regiment. Most enlistments were for three years.

Though the most prominent battles in the Civil War were those in the East—like Gettysburg, Antietam, and Fredericksburg—that were part of the struggle for the two capitals of Washington and Richmond, the battles of the western theatre were at least as important as factors in the Northern victory. These were the battles that secured the border states for the North and that eventually split the South in two and seriously damaged the economic base the South needed to support its military effort. Nearly all the troops Iowa sent to war were directed to the western theatre.

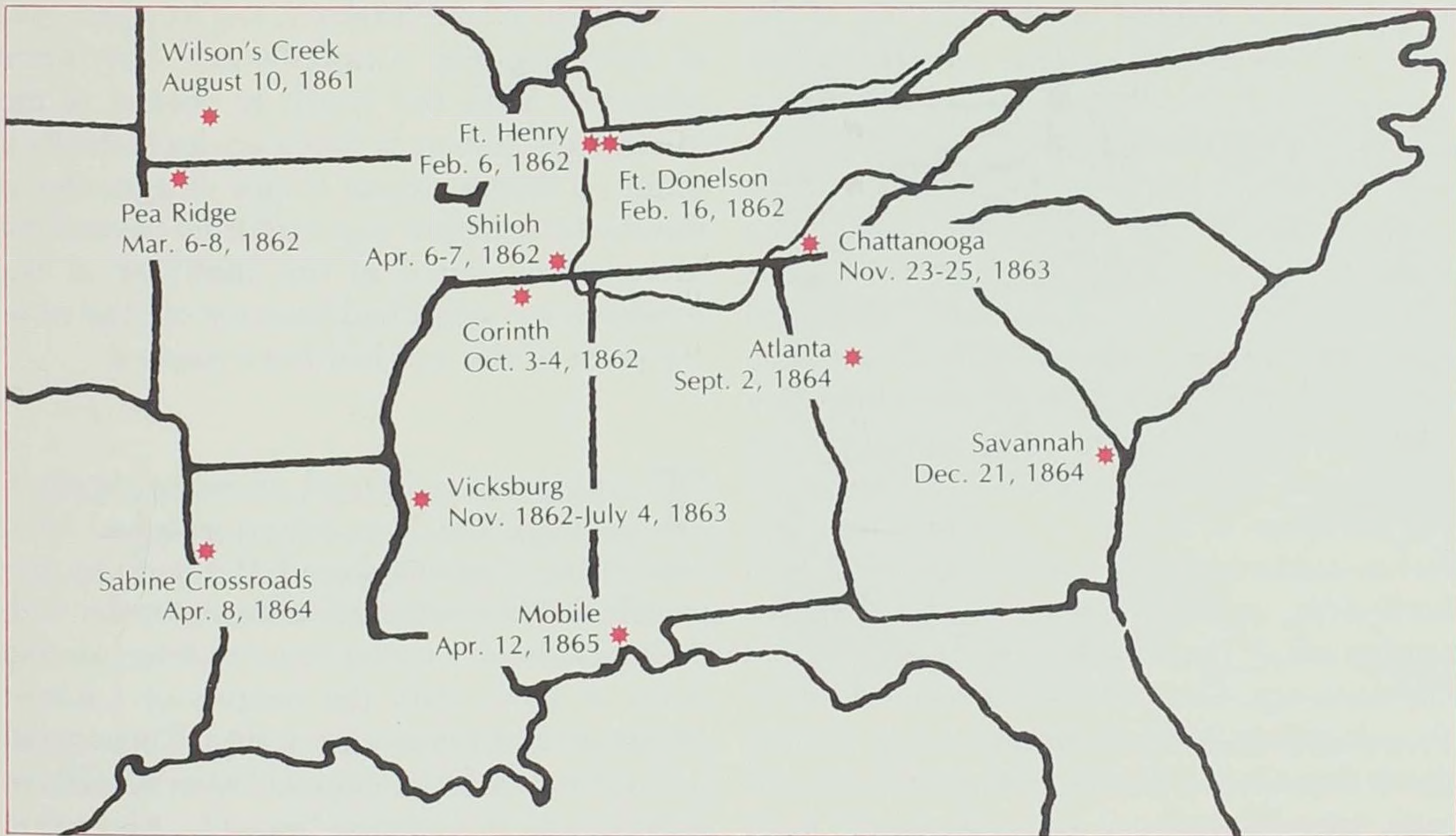
When the war began in April 1861, the allegiance of the border states was very much in doubt. Though a Missouri state convention favored the North, for example, the governor—Claiborne Jackson—sought to obtain the state's secession from the Union. To secure the state, most of the Iowa regiments raised in the early months of the war were sent first to Benton Barracks in St. Louis, then distributed

throughout the northern Missouri counties to guard key communications points and rail lines. To strike at a concentration of Missouri Confederates being collected south of Springfield by General Sterling Price, Union Brigadier General Nathaniel Lyon moved out of Springfield on August 9 with a force of 5,800 troops from Missouri, Kansas, and Iowa. At the battle of Wilson's Creek on the following day, Lyon split his force and saw both halves defeated in turn. He retreated to Springfield with a loss of a thousand casualties. The following spring, however, the Northern forces—now under the command of Brigadier General Samuel R. Curtis of Keokuk—pushed the Southern forces commanded by Major General Earl Van Dorn out of Missouri and into Arkansas. Van Dorn was defeated at the battle of Pea Ridge, and the threat of Missouri's secession came to an end.

Farther east, the ultimate control of the key border state of Kentucky was also in doubt that spring of 1862. For the South, Kentucky meant a buffer against the Northern drive to split the Confederacy in two. For the North, control of Kentucky meant protection of the essential transportation routes of the Ohio River Valley and of the cities in southern Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio. Striking against the Southern line that ran through central Kentucky from Bowling Green in the east to



Recruits for the Iowa regiments were collected at military camps like this one, Camp Henderson, at Dubuque. (SHSI)



As this map shows, Iowa troops were mainly involved in the Civil War campaigns to secure the border state of Missouri, to cut the South in two by gaining control of the Mississippi, and then to push eastward to the sea to starve the remaining Confederate armies by destroying the economic base on which they depended.

Columbus on the Mississippi River, a relatively unknown Union general—Ulysses S. Grant—moved up the Cumberland and Tennessee rivers with a force of 17,000 troops that included four Iowa regiments. His goal was the capture of Forts Henry and Donelson just across the border in Tennessee. Fort Henry, which was very poorly located, fell easily on February 6, 1862, and the Second Iowa led in the assault on Fort Donelson that produced a Confederate surrender on February 16. When the Southern commander requested Grant's terms, his famous reply was: "No terms except an unconditional and immediate surrender can be accepted. I propose to move immediately upon your works." With his success at Forts Henry and Donelson, Grant's star began to rise, and he gained the nickname "Unconditional Surrender Grant" that remained with him in his eventual command of all the North-

ern armies.

Apart from securing western Kentucky, the Northern victories in February also began the inexorable Union march southward to split the Confederacy and gain uninterrupted control of the Mississippi River. As Grant continued southward, Confederate General Albert Sidney Johnston concentrated a force of 40,000 troops at Corinth, Mississippi, and on April 6 attacked Grant's force of an equal size that was milling around Pittsburg Landing twenty miles north in Tennessee. In the resulting battle of Shiloh, one of the bloodiest battles of the war, Johnston's surprise attack gained him an initial success. But a stubborn defense of the Northern center by the Eighth, Twelfth, and Fourteenth Iowa regiments and the Fifty-eighth Illinois under General Benjamin M. Prentiss in the area that came to be known as the Hornet's Nest bought Grant enough time

to organize a defense on the first day of the battle and an offensive on the second day that drove the Confederates back to Corinth at a cost of half of Johnston's troops.

Grant rested his army at Shiloh for three weeks and then, reinforced by General John Pope after his successes along the Mississippi at Island Number 10 and at Memphis, he moved slowly southward to Corinth, which had been evacuated by Johnston. The invading force that had been collected for this drive southward was now broken up, with the Army of the Ohio and two divisions of the Army of the Mississippi sent to reinforce the Union forces that had been bottled up at Chattanooga in eastern Tennessee after their defeat at the battle of Chickamauga. General Halleck was ordered to Washington to become the general-in-chief of the Union armies, leaving Grant in command in the west. Corinth was a key rail center for the South, and Grant expected an attack as he settled in for the summer. The attack finally came on October 3, but in one of the most violent battles of the war, the Southern forces were eventually forced to retreat, leaving Corinth securely in Northern hands. Pope's earlier victories along the Mississippi and the seizure of New Orleans by David Farragut and his gunboats in April 1862 left only Vicksburg and Natchez as Southern strongpoints on the all-important river.

Unlike the two- or three-day battles that had preceded it, the campaign for Vicksburg was an eight-month struggle of maneuver and siege. The four army corps that Grant brought on the campaign included twenty-eight infantry regiments, two artillery regiments and two cavalry regiments from Iowa, and they played an important role in the operations that cut off Vicksburg from supply and reinforcement and allowed Grant to settle in for a siege. Finally, on July 3, 1863, the Confederate force, which was by then faced with starvation, surrendered.

With the fall of Vicksburg, the Northern goal of splitting the Confederacy had been achieved. With the North in control of the Mississippi, Robert E. Lee's armies in the East could no longer expect troops or agricultural commodities to flow eastward from beyond the Mississippi. Much of the lifeblood of the Southern war effort had been cut off; the turning point of the war had been marked.

The fighting continued, of course. At Chattanooga, the Iowa troops who had been sent from Corinth found themselves entrenched at the bottom of an amphitheater with the Confederates under Braxton Bragg staring down at them from the heights of Lookout Mountain and Missionary Ridge. Encouraged to break out of the position as fast as possible in order to relieve Ambrose Burnside, who was in a similar position in Nashville, Grant decided on a frontal assault on the Southern positions. On the first day of battle, November 24, 1863, the Northern attack led to a Southern evacuation of Lookout Mountain, and the second day's assault up the steep slopes of Missionary Ridge produced a general Southern retreat that left Chattanooga secure and allowed Sherman to relieve Nashville.

Grant's successes in the western theatre led President Lincoln to appoint him general-in-chief of the Union armies in February 1864. When he left for Washington, Grant left Sherman in charge of the forces at Chattanooga with orders to destroy General Joseph E. Johnston's

Note on Sources

Works consulted for this article included the following: A. A. Stuart, *Iowa Colonels and Regiments* (Des Moines: Mills & Co., 1865); Mildred Throne, "Iowans and the Civil War," *The Palimpsest* 50 (February 1969): 65-144; Jacob A. Swisher, *Iowa In Times of War* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1943); Vincent J. Esposito, *The West Point Atlas of American Wars*, vol. 1: 1689-1900 (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1959); Bruce Catton, *This Hallowed Ground: The Story of the Union Side of the Civil War* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956).

The Hornet's Nest at Shiloh, where three Iowa regiments and an Illinois regiment held the Union center long enough to give Grant time to organize a defense against the Confederate attack. (SHSI)



army and move into the interior of the South, which Sherman interpreted to mean capturing Atlanta. He began his advance southeast in May with the Army of the Tennessee, the Army of the Cumberland, and the Army of the Ohio, a total of 90,000 men. The Iowa troops on Sherman's march were concentrated in the Army of the Tennessee, which included eighteen infantry, two cavalry, and one artillery regiment from Iowa.

Sherman moved slowly forward through May and June, carefully avoiding any major engagement that would divert his course from Atlanta. He reached the city on June 19 and began to encircle it with entrenchments. General John B. Hood, who had replaced Johnston, was in danger of being trapped in a besieged city, just as the Confederate forces at Vicksburg had been, but he evacuated his troops from the city before Sherman's encirclement was completed. Sherman entered Atlanta on September 2, having achieved one of the goals set by Grant, but allowing Hood's army to escape.

By now, the war was drawing to a close. Hood planned a march north into Tennessee that he hoped would draw Sherman away from his plans to attack Savannah or, failing that, to defeat Thomas at Nashville and then turn east

to join Lee in Virginia. All these plans were, however, only delaying actions to stave off defeat. Sherman was not particularly distressed by Hood's movements, pausing only long enough in his plans to ensure that Thomas had sufficient reinforcements to stop any invasion of Tennessee and Kentucky. Along with the Iowa cavalry regiments already in Nashville, these included five Iowa regiments brought in from Missouri. By the time Hood reached Nashville on December 1, Thomas had collected 55,000 troops to Hood's 25,000. Hood's army was defeated fairly easily in a battle that began on December 15, and in the retreat that followed it dissolved as an effective military force.

The Iowa troops who had been in Sherman's Army of the Tennessee since Chattanooga now set off again as part of his "March to the Sea." Leaving Atlanta with 62,000 troops in mid-November, Sherman met little opposition in what was essentially a punitive campaign. His intention was to deal a final blow to Southern morale and, by cutting the rail lines to Virginia, to further weaken Lee's desperate defense of Richmond.

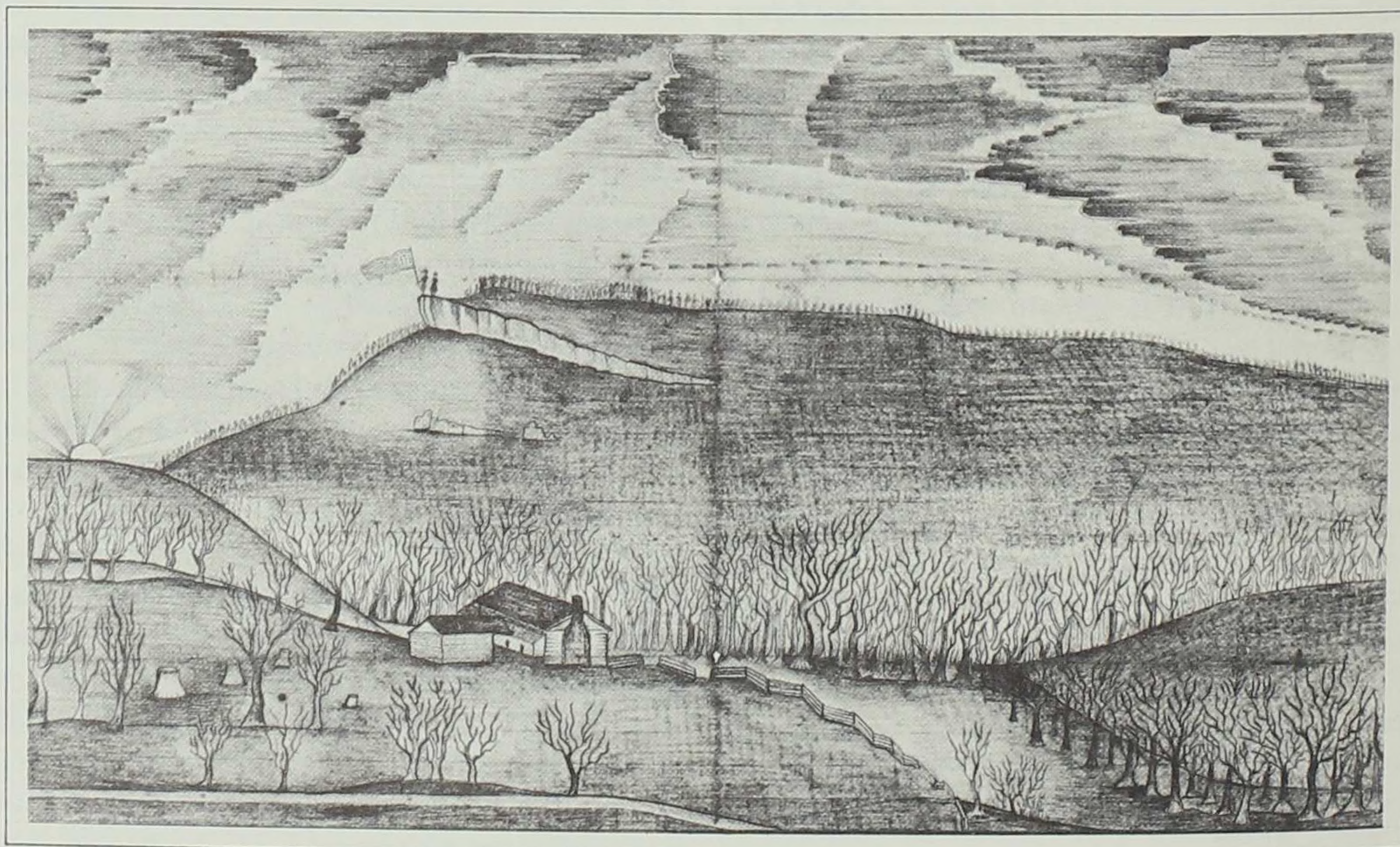
Sherman's army reached Savannah on

December 22, in time to present it as a Christmas gift to President Lincoln, then turned north on a campaign through the Carolinas. The remnants of the Confederate forces were placed under the command of Joseph Johnston, but they offered little resistance to Sherman's hardened troops. By the time Lee had been driven from Richmond to surrender at Appomattox Courthouse, Sherman had reached Raleigh. After a period of negotiations and a truce, Johnston formally surrendered on April 26.

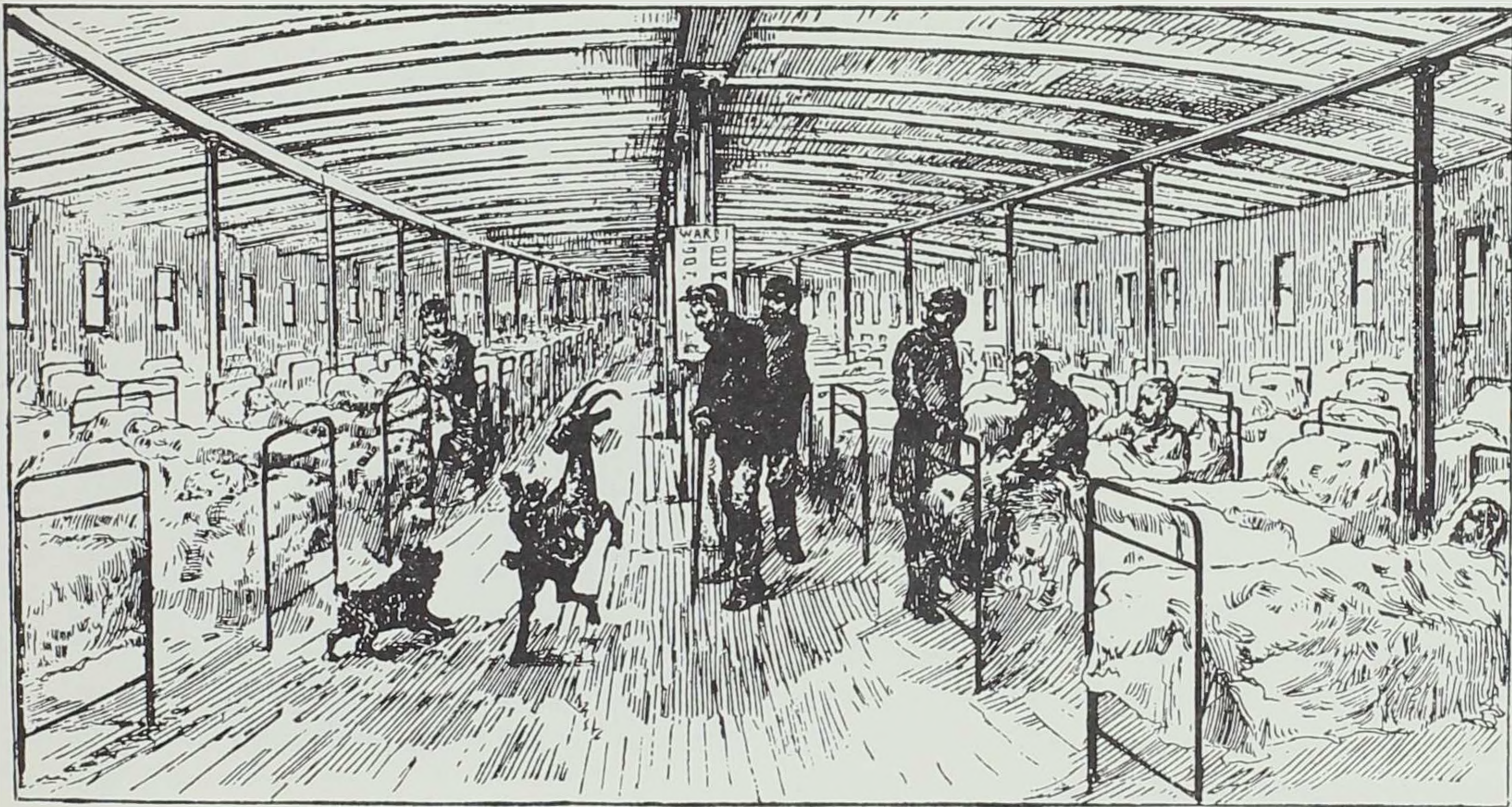
While the most significant campaigns involving Iowa troops were farther east, a number of Iowa regiments were also assigned to duty in Arkansas and Louisiana after these states had been cut off from the remainder of the Confederacy by Union control of the Mississippi. These states were not a major focus of attention

for the North, and Grant in particular only grudgingly assigned troops to the area. Several Iowa regiments were involved in the disastrous Red River Campaign, a poorly planned and poorly executed operation into northwestern Louisiana in the winter and spring of 1864. Led by the political general Nathaniel Banks, the campaign came to an abrupt halt with a Union defeat at the battle of Sabine Crossroads. Late in the war, Iowa troops also participated in the successful campaign to seize Mobile, Alabama in April 1865, but by then the military significance of the formerly very valuable port city had ended.

By the time the fighting ground to a halt for the Iowa troops at Raleigh and Mobile, they could look back on four years of war that had cost the state 13,000 of its men. Fully 30



William F. Coffman of the Thirtieth Iowa made this drawing of the Union victory at Lookout Mountain in the battle of Chattanooga on the morning of November 25, 1863. Two days later he was wounded in battle. (SHSI)



Iowa casualties in medical facilities like this Mississippi River hospital boat were much more likely to be the victims of disease than of battle. (SHSI)

percent of all the Iowans who had served in the Union army had been either killed or wounded, and more than twice as many of the deaths had come from disease as from battle injuries. The soldiers' diet of bread, salt pork, and coffee had combined with the unsanitary conditions in military camps and hospitals to produce conditions that allowed diseases like typhoid fever, dysentery, consumption, and smallpox to spread rapidly through whole

regiments. The months of marching and sitting in camp proved far deadlier to the Iowa troops than the few days of battle that punctuated the monotony. From Wilson's Creek through Pea Ridge, Forts Henry and Donelson, Shiloh, Corinth, Vicksburg, Chattanooga, Nashville, and Atlanta to the final days at Raleigh and Mobile, Iowa troops won the glory of fighting for the cause of the Union, but they paid the price as well. □