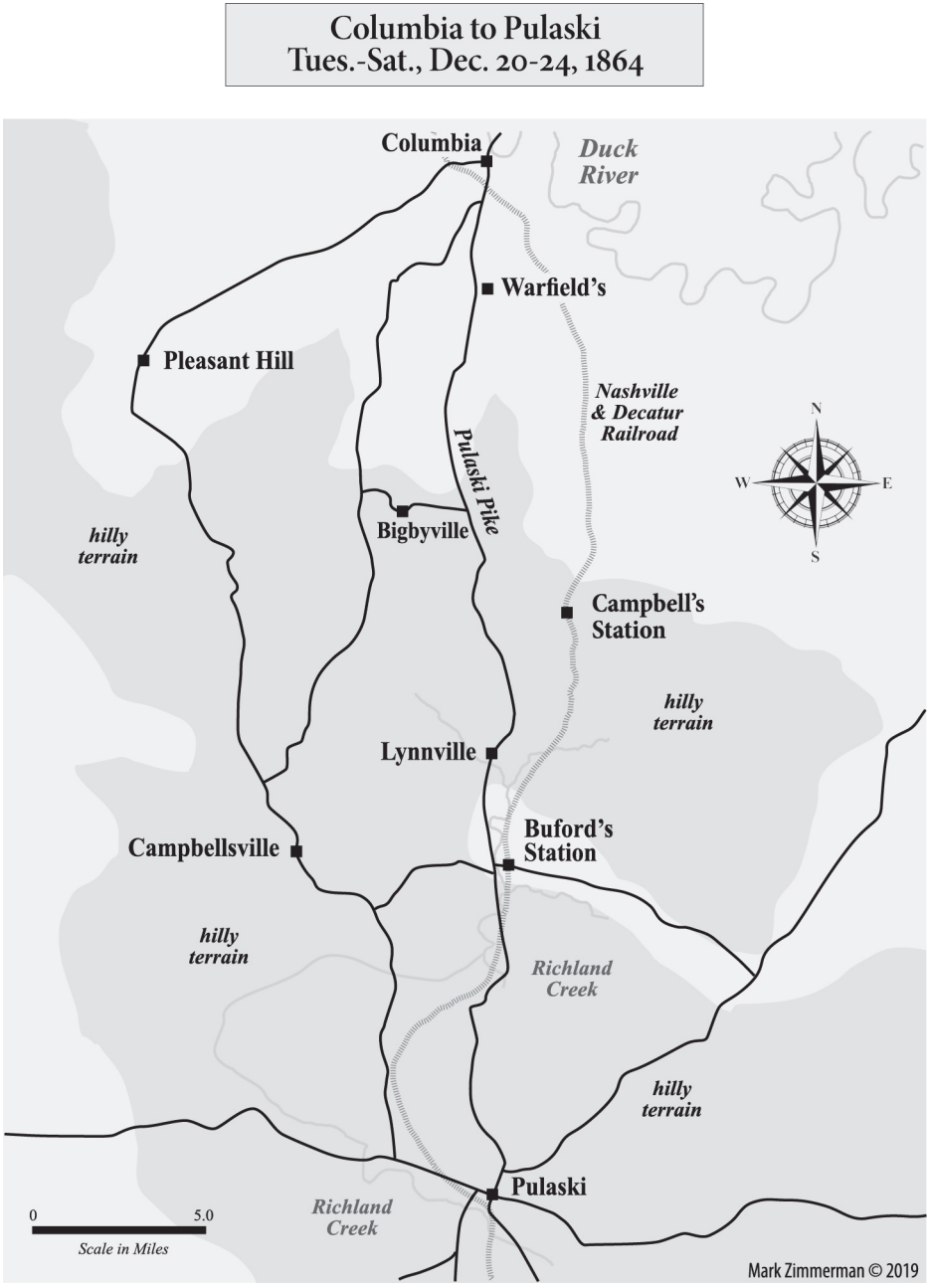

Columbia to Pulaski
Tues.-Sat., Dec. 20-24, 1864
Columbia
Duck River
Warfield's
Pleasant Hill
Nashville & Decatur Railroad
Pulaski Pike
N
W
E
S
Bigbyville
hilly terrain
Campbell's Station
hilly terrain
Lynnville
Buford's Station
Campbellsville
hilly terrain
Richland Creek
hilly terrain
Pulaski
Richland Creek
0
5.0
Scale in Miles
Mark Zimmerman © 2019

The Rearguard Reorganizes

Tuesday, December 20th, 1864

By the morning of Tuesday, December 20th, the sleet had turned to snow as Hood and the main portion of his army left Columbia, having put Forrest in charge of the rearguard with orders to hold the Duck River line as long as possible. The next destination down the turnpike was the small town of Pulaski, 28 miles to the south, where both the paved turnpike and the railroad came to an end. South of Columbia, the soldiers found the rolling countryside turning into a much more hilly and barren terrain. The narrow defiles through the hills would restrict movement along the flanks and provide ample opportunities for setting up an ambush.

The march of the Army of Tennessee, miles in length, was resumed on the Pulaski Pike with S.D. Lee's Corps in front, commanded by Stevenson; Cheatham's Corps next; and A.P. Stewart's Corps bringing up the rear. From the perspective of a hawk soaring high above, the main road must have appeared to be a gigantic moving thing, a serpent rippling forward in fits and starts. By the end of the frigid day, the head of the column camped within two miles of Pulaski with the three corps bivouacking in order of their march.

On the morning of the 20th, Hood summoned the young yet experienced Walthall to command the infantry portion of the rearguard. Walthall noted, "I have never asked for a hard place for glory nor a soft place for comfort, but take my chances as they come. I will do my best." Hood replied, "Forrest wants you, and I want you."

Walthall then organized his troops. His rearguard infantry consisted of eight brigades, nominally more than 30 regiments—four of Cheatham's brigades, two of his own (Reynolds and Quarles), Ector's Texans under Coleman, and one of Loring's—

Featherston's Mississippians. The brigades, totaling 1,920 riflemen, were consolidated as follows:

- Featherston and Johnston under Brig. Gen. Winfield S. Featherston (498 men);
- Coleman and Reynolds under Brig. Gen. Daniel H. Reynolds (528 men);
- Heiskell and Feild under Colonel H.R. Feild (278 men); and
- Olmstead and Palmer under Colonel J.B. Palmer (616 men).

Forrest had 1,600 effective infantry (not counting the 400 men marching without shoes) and 3,000 cavalry to face a pursuing Federal force of more than 10,000 cavalry armed with repeating rifles and perhaps up to 30,000 infantry.

The 400 men without shoes? One of Walthall's staff officers reported: "The sufferings of the troops were terrible…Without protection from the severity of the weather, without blankets, and many without shoes, and nearly all indifferently shod, the horrors of the retreat were to be seen as the bare and frostbitten feet of the soldiers, swollen, bruised, and bloody, toiled painfully over the frozen pike."

A master tactician, Forrest devised a workable solution. At Columbia, Forrest left half the wagons along the pike and doubled the teams for the other half. Then the teams returned and hauled the rest of the wagons away. He did this during the two days the Federals needed to cross Rutherford Creek and the Duck River. Then Forrest used the wagons to haul the shoeless infantrymen of the rearguard until they were needed to fight. He secured as many oxen as he could find to haul the wagons and sent the rest of the cargo wagons off with the main body of the army.

However much the hardships and privations, these men were rugged and hardened veterans. "The usage and customs of war, and its privations had inured them to such hardships as but few men could bear, and made them veteran soldiers," wrote Ralph J. Neal in his history of Co. E, 20th Tennessee. By this point, those Confederates inclined to surrender or desert had done so already.

Artillery commander Lt. Joseph Chalaron noted that "Corporal D.A. Rice, a gunner in the Washington Artillery, had been wounded in the head at Kennesaw Ridge so that is was impossible for him

to close one eye, and the cold striking it, kept it with flowing tears continually, tears that froze and formed a pendant icicle six inches long at times."

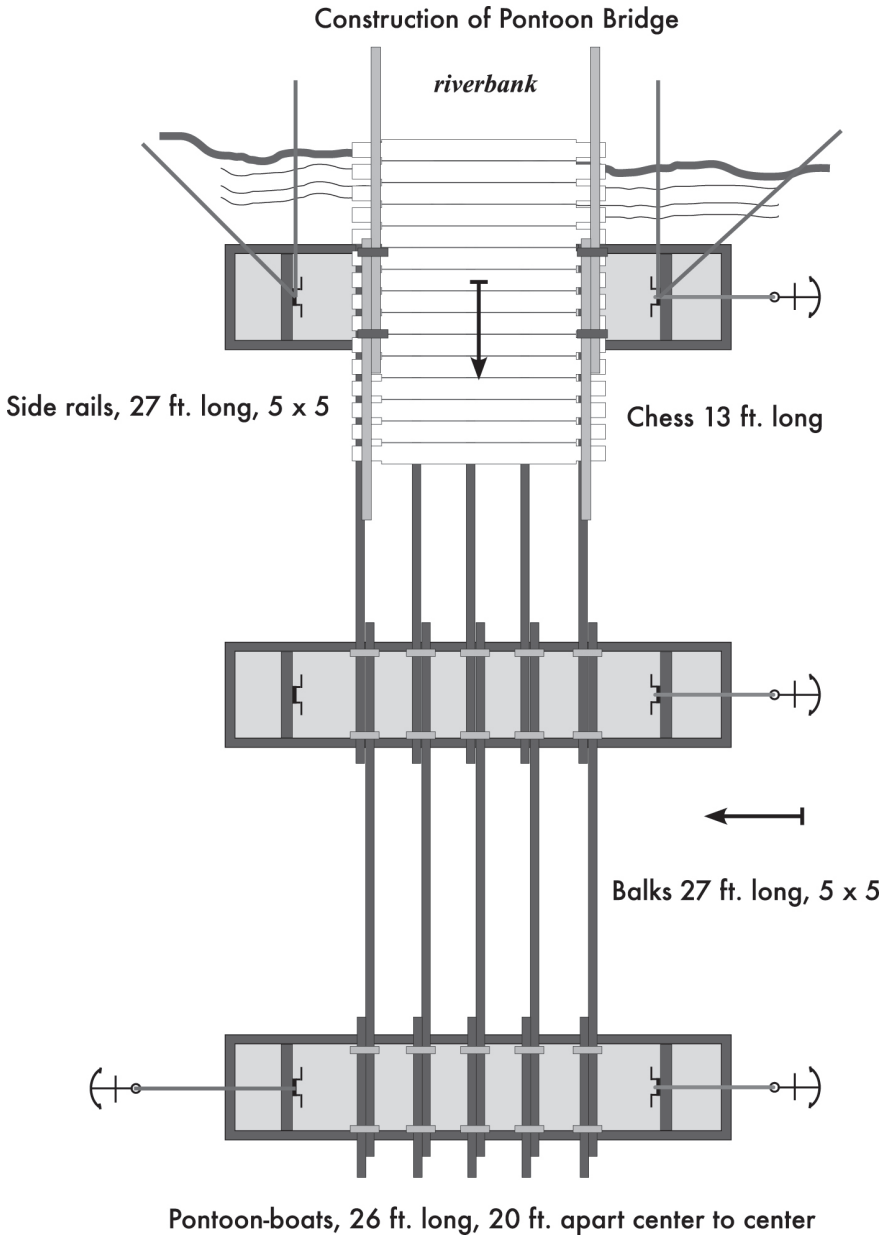
Forrest also had eight artillery pieces under Capt. John W. Morton. Morton was only 22 years old but he had served capably as Forrest's chief of artillery for several years. Morton joined the army as a cadet at the Nashville Military Institute and was captured at Fort Donelson as a member of Porter's Battery. After months in a Northern POW camp, he was exchanged and joined Forrest in the fall of 1862. Due to his youthfulness and slight build, Morton had to work twice as hard to gain Forrest's confidence.

At mid-morning on December 20th, with Cheatham's gunmen now gone, the pioneering men of Wood's IV corps and Hatch's division fashioned two makeshift footbridges over Rutherford Creek, one using the remains of the old wrecked railroad bridge. (The 58th Indiana Regiment was composed of trained pontoniers and bridge-builders, but unfortunately they were with Sherman in Georgia.) Hatch's cavalry took the lead and arrived opposite Columbia in the early afternoon, along with the 7th and 9th Illinois regiments on foot.

Wood reported: "During the night (of the 19th) and the early forenoon of the following day, the 20th, two bridges for infantry were constructed across the stream—one at the turnpike crossing, by Colonel Opdycke's brigade, of the Second Division, and the other by General Grose's brigade, of the First Division. So soon as these were completed the infantry of the corps was passed over, marched three miles, and encamped for the night on the northern bank of Duck River."

Wood's infantry reached the north bank of the Duck River at 2:00 pm, having been delayed 34 hours waiting for the pontoon train to cross the Harpeth River and Rutherford Creek.

Marching took its toll. Wood requested 15,000 pairs of shoes and socks from Nashville warehouses for his weary men. Their shoes, most likely of dubious quality in the first place, had been ruined by the rain and the tromping on the rough turnpike. The mud and muck churned up during the day froze into sharp ruts and furrows during the night, making foot travel precarious. Wood claimed that many of his men would be disabled within days without a new supply of footwear.


Construction of Pontoon Bridge
riverbank
Side rails, 27 ft. long, 5 x 5
Chess 13 ft. long
Balks 27 ft. long, 5 x 5
Pontoon-boats, 26 ft. long, 20 ft. apart center to center

Two types of Federal wooden pontoon-boats on their carriages. (Library of Congress)

Federal cavalry leader Wilson lost two days building bridges, and three more days were needed to cross the Duck River while they waited for more rations and ammunition. Even the railroad wasn't functioning properly due to the delays in reconstructing the railway bridge at Franklin. Hammond, Croxton, and Harrison remained in camp drawing supplies. Under orders from Wilson, the remainder of Richard Johnson's and Knipe's troopers made their way back to Nashville to find new horses to mount. Captain Orlando H. Sheaver of Fielding Hurst's 6th Tennessee U.S. Cavalry said his men "pursued the enemy to near Springhill when we went back, reached Nashville on the 21st, Wet, Cold, Hungry and Pised." Wilson also sent two dismounted brigades back to Louisville for mounts.

General Thomas, now at Rutherford Creek, said that A.J. Smith's men would assist in getting the pontoon train forward—at 6:00 pm that day it was passing through Spring Hill. Many of the pontoons were basically long boats; others consisted of rafts and wagon beds covered in canvas.

Hatch stopped at the Duck River and began a furious artillery shelling of Columbia. By this time, the only occupants of the town were some of Forrest's men, the wounded of both sides, and Federal prisoners. Forrest rode to the riverbank under a flag of

truce and persuaded Hatch to stop the bombardment. Forrest also offered to exchange 2,000 Federal prisoners who had been suffering from exposure to the elements (the Confederates had no blankets or clothing to spare). Within two hours, Thomas himself replied, refusing to accept the offer. Thomas said most of the rebel prisoners had already been sent north and therefore could not be exchanged. But he also probably reckoned that an exchange would favor the Confederates, that having to care for 2,000 Federal prisoners would hinder their retreat. (It is not clear what became of those prisoners.)

As much as the soldiers of both sides suffered during the retreat, worse off were the civilians who remained in the towns and villages and on their farms. In rural Tennessee, the civilians had already suffered through three years of war. In destructive power, nothing compared to the movement of a large army through the countryside, regardless of the flag flown. Nimrod Porter, a 73-year-old plantation owner near Columbia, said the Army of Tennessee stole hogs and other foodstuffs and burned his fence rails for firewood. But the Federals were worse. During Hood's retreat, "Croxton's Yankees came through and stole everything. They cooked the last old gobbler and all the chickens, over a fire. They even took the boots off the blacks. Last night they took all of black Sukey's money, all my corn and what little oats I have left … A gray fox ran under the kitchen walk. I shot it for dinner. We have a little parched corn."

During the first half of the 19th Century, chattel slavery and white supremacy were the way of life in the South. Men and women under bondage suddenly finding themselves displaced from their masters followed the Federal army wherever it roamed and were known as contrabands. Most were put to work at menial labor, digging trenches, tending to livestock, or working as teamsters. Some were recruited or joined the ranks of the newly founded U.S. Colored Troops, which were led by white officers.

Nothing frightened white Southerners more than the threat of a violent insurrection by their black slaves. Nothing enraged Southern soldiers more than an armed black man in a blue uniform, unless it was a white Yankee officer leading the colored troops. If captured, white USCT officers were to be tried for inciting a slave insurrection, punishable by death, according to Southern courts.

The Southern government did not condone execution of prisoners, but the practice was not uncommon. On December 20th, two white officers of the 12th U.S. Colored Troops and one from the 44th USCT were captured by the Forrest scout company of Capt. Addison Harvey about 14 miles southeast of Murfreesboro. They were stripped of their uniforms, and marched for the better part of two days. They were then directed into a ravine three or four miles west of Lewisburg and each man shot in the head. One miraculously survived—Lieutenant George W. Fitch of the 12th USCT. He was shot behind the ear with a pistol, a glancing blow, the bullet lodging in the bone behind the ear. He pretended to be dead and managed to crawl to a nearby house, surviving the horrendous incident.

By nightfall on Tuesday, December 20th, Wood's Federal infantry rested on the north bank of the Duck River, opposite Columbia, waiting for the pontoon train to arrive. Wilson's cavalry remained in bivouac, waiting for supplies, while Hatch's men stared across the river at Columbia. The main body of the Confederate army was well on its way down the turnpike to Pulaski (where Hood had already established his headquarters), while Forrest's cavalry rearguard and Walthall's infantry lingered at Columbia.

As the Federals fumed on the north bank of the Duck River, Hood established his headquarters in Pulaski at the home of Thomas Jones. From Pulaski, it was 49 more miles over abominable roads to the Tennessee River at Bainbridge. Most of Hood's army would reach and pass through Pulaski in the next two days.

Acting on a directive from Thomas, who was using every resource at his disposal, beginning December 20th, Acting Rear Admiral Samuel P. Lee led a flotilla of gunboats up the Tennessee River towards Florence, where the Confederates had established an artillery battery. Thomas was hoping that the gunboats, in a naval flanking maneuver, could destroy any bridge over the Tennessee so that the Federals could bag Hood's army on the north bank. Lee's squadron boasted more guns than Lt. Commander LeRoy Fitch had commanded at Nashville, and included the river monitor *Neosho,* the City Class ironclads *Carondelet* and *Pittsburg,* and the timberclad *Lexington.*