

Self-Guided Tour to the Big Blue Battlefield

Self-Guided Tour to the Big Blue Battlefield

By Dick Titterington, aka theCivilWarMuse

Introduction

The Battle of the Big Blue took place over a two day period in October 1864. Back in 1850s and 1860s, there were three major towns in western Jackson County, Missouri. Independence and Westport were competing against each other to be the main jumping off points for the Santa Fe, Oregon, and California Trails. Kansas City had gotten its start as a place to offload supply goods destined for Westport, but by 1860 Kansas City boasted more residents than Independence and Westport combined. In 1864, there was plenty of wide open spaces separating these three towns. Much has changed in 150 years.

Most of the battlefield has been consumed by the Greater Kansas City Metropolitan Area. Since 1983, the Monnett Battle of Westport Fund has been working to preserve a small portion of the battlefield along the Big Blue River just north of Swope Park. The result is the Big Blue Battlefield Park, part of the Kansas City, Missouri parks system. But it is not your typical city park with swing sets and tennis courts.

This section of the Big Blue Battlefield was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1989. The Monnett Fund continues to restore and interpret this part of the battlefield. This self-guided tour interprets those areas of the battlefield accessible today by car and by foot. Although this area of the battlefield was the scene of fierce fighting on both October 22 and 23 in 1864, this tour focuses on the events of October 23, 1864.

Prologue

The Battle of Westport began around 8:00 a.m. on October 21, 1864 at the Little Blue River and continued until midafternoon on October 23 on the prairie south of Westport. Due to the number of soldiers involved, the Battle of Westport was the largest battle west of the Mississippi River during the American Civil War. It was also a decisive victory for the Union. For these reasons, some have given the battle a nickname, "The Gettysburg of the West."

The confrontation at Westport was the result of a three-year long quest by Missouri Confederates to take their state back from the Federal occupying forces. Sterling Price wanted to lead once last attempt to reclaim Missouri for the Confederacy. A Virginia native, Price had moved in 1831 to Chariton County, Missouri and became a prominent tobacco planter and slave owner. By 1864 and Sterling Price was a Major General in the Confederate States Army in command



Sterling Price

Self-Guided Tour to the Big Blue Battlefield

of the District Arkansas. He had been fighting the Federals for three years. Once again, Price believed it was time to re-enter Missouri. Price said so in a July 23 letter to his commanding officer, Lieutenant General Kirby Smith.

The Confederate flag floats over nearly all the principal towns of North Missouri, and large guerrilla parties are formed and operating in the southern portion of the State ... I respectfully but urgently suggest the propriety of making a move into the State.

On August 4, Sterling Price received his marching orders from General Kirby Smith.

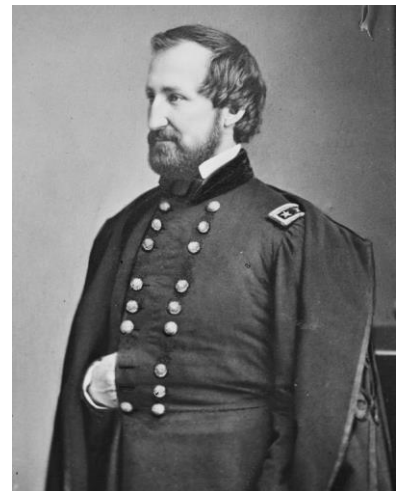
You will make immediate arrangements for a movement into Missouri, with the entire cavalry force of your district ... Rally the loyal men of Missouri, and remember that our great want is men, and that your object should be, if you cannot maintain yourself in that country, to bring as large an accession as possible to our force ... Make Saint Louis the objective point of your movement, which, if rapidly made, will put you in possession of that place ... Should you be compelled to withdraw from the State, make your retreat through Kansas and the Indian Territory, sweeping that country of its mules, horses, cattle, and military supplies of all kinds.

Price named his invasion force the Army of Missouri, consisting of about 12,000 cavalry, although Price reported to headquarters that 4,000 of them were unarmed. The army included 14 pieces of field artillery. There were three Divisions commanded by Major General James F. Fagan, Major General John S. Marmaduke and Brigadier General Jo Shelby. Leaving from Pocahtontas, Arkansas, Price's army entered the State of Missouri on September 19, 1864.



The Federal commander in Missouri, Major General William S. Rosecrans, kept hearing rumors about an invasion of Missouri by Sterling Price. When Rosecrans finally learned that Price has entered southeastern Missouri, he ordered Brigadier General Thomas Ewing, Jr. to proceed with reinforcements down to Fort Davidson in Pilot Knob, Missouri. He also ordered his commanders in Springfield and Rolla to bring as much of their cavalry as possible and head for Jefferson City as quickly as possible.

The Federal commander in Kansas, Major General Samuel R. Curtis, had also heard the invasions rumors and had kept in touch with Rosecrans. Curtis had even fewer troops to protect Kansas than Rosecrans had in Missouri. By the end of September, Curtis had convinced the Governor of Kansas to call out the state militia. Curtis also ordered his second-in-command, Major General James G. Blunt, to bring his veteran cavalry troops east to the Missouri border.



William S. Rosecrans

Self-Guided Tour to the Big Blue Battlefield



The stage was set. Rosecrans was mobilizing troops to defend Missouri, and Curtis was mobilizing his forces to defend Kansas. Price's advance on St. Louis was delayed when he decided to attack the Federal garrison at Fort Davidson. By the time Price moved north towards St. Louis, he discovered it was too well defended to attack. So Price turned west, setting his sights on Jefferson City. The Army of Missouri moved slowly west, collecting plunder and destroying infrastructure. The Confederates reached the outskirts of Jefferson City on October 6. Once again, Rosecrans had time to mobilize reinforcements, and Price decided not to attack Jefferson City. The Confederates continued moving west up the Missouri River.

Now that Jefferson City was safe, Rosecrans ordered his second in command, Major General Alfred Pleasonton, to assume command of the Federal cavalry and take out after the Confederate army. Pleasonton planned to "proceed as a corps of observation after the enemy, to harass and delay him as much as possible until other troops could be brought forward."



With Price headed his way, General Curtis readied his defenses. Curtis had around 17,000 Kansas State Militia arrayed along the Missouri border. Curtis ordered Blunt into Missouri with about 2,000 of veteran cavalry. Blunt reached Lexington the day before Price's advance did. Blunt was trying to buy time for Curtis to complete the Federal defense line back near Kansas City. Curtis decided to set up his main line of defense along the Big Blue River just east of Kansas City and Westport.

The Big Blue [River] should be a first main line of battle, Kansas City a second, and finally, if overpowered, Wyandotte, on the north side of the Kansas River ... I directed my chief engineer to construct field works at each of these positions.

Around 11:00 a.m. on October 19, the Confederate advance ran into the Federal pickets just south and east of Lexington. Colonel Thomas Moonlight, 11th Kansas Cavalry, described the fighting that took place on October 19.

We held our ground for a couple of hours, checking his advance and sparing for time. A retreat was ordered in the direction of Independence ... On the rebels came ... [we] contested every inch of ground, fighting hand to hand with the advancing & flanking forces, never yielding their position until ordered.

Blunt was convinced that the Federals could defend the bridge over the Little Blue River on the Independence to Lexington Road. He assembled his men there to wait for the Confederate advance. On October 21, Price ordered General Marmaduke to capture the bridge. It took all day, but Marmaduke's Division with support from Shelby's Division crossed the Little Blue River and drove the Federals all the way through

Self-Guided Tour to the Big Blue Battlefield

Independence and back to their main line of defense along the Big Blue River. That night Price's army encamped in and around Independence. His wagon train of plunder and supplies contained between 500 and 600 wagons. On October 22, Price planned to force a crossing of the Big Blue River at Byram's Ford on the Independence to Westport Road.

By nightfall on October 22, the Confederate attack had succeeded. Curtis had fallen back to Westport and Kansas City, and Price now controlled Byram's Ford. Price sent word back to the wagon train to start moving towards Byram's Ford. Shortly after midnight, most of the wagons had crossed Byram's Ford and were heading south down the Harrisonville Road towards the town of New Santa Fe.

But on October 22, General Pleasonton's cavalry attacked Price's rear guard in Independence, driving them out of the town. With the wagon train safely away, the Confederate rear guard withdrew to the Big Blue River. That night General Sterling Price devised a new plan for October 23. In the morning, Shelby's Division, supported by Fagan's Division, was going to attack the Federals in Westport. Marmaduke's Division was going to man the defenses along the Big Blue River at Byram's Ford and hold off Pleasonton while the wagon train got safely away.

The Tour

The self-guided tour has two main driving stops, each containing a number of walking tour stops. The first stop described is on the east side of the Big Blue River. The second stop describes battlefield sites located on the west side of the river. During the walking part of the tour, you will find the trails range from easy to moderate in difficulty. We strongly recommend you wear sturdy hiking boots or shoes and long sleeves and pants. During the warm weather months, you should use insect repellent (primarily to discourage ticks) and be on the lookout for poison ivy, which is very common in Missouri's woodlands. We hope you enjoy your tour of the Big Blue Battlefield.

Tour Stop, "Big Blue Battlefield, East"

Directions

[Waypoint = 39.018664, -94.520517]

This tour stop is located about 0.25 miles north of the intersection of Hardesty Avenue and E 63rd Street in Kansas City, Missouri. You should readily notice the openings in the brush on either side of Hardesty. There is also a sign indicating the Historic Byram's Ford Road crossed at this point (this sign is a future enhancement).

There is a fairly wide shoulder on the west side of Hardesty Avenue. You should be able to easily pull off the pavement and park on the shoulder. Please be careful. Hardesty Avenue is a fairly busy street.

Self-Guided Tour to the Big Blue Battlefield

Description

There's not a whole lot to see at this stop. It's a jumping off point for walking to other tour stops. Please keep in mind that you will be walking over the old Historic Byram's Ford Road. In total it's about a one mile hike of moderate difficulty over uneven ground. You will experience a total change in elevation of about 320 feet (uphill and downhill combined), although not all at once.

Of course, Hardesty Avenue did not exist in 1864. Its construction has cut a swath through the battlefield, changing the terrain a bit. But on either side of the road, you will be walking through the least disturbed part of the battlefield existing today. This section of the Byram's Ford Road is located in the Big Blue Battlefield Park and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Tour Stop, "Price's Wagon Train"

Directions

[Waypoint = 39.019064, -94.520287]

This tour stop is located just about 100 feet up the Historic Byram's Ford Road. It's a change in elevation of about 20 feet. From the east side of Hardesty, walk up the Historic Byram's Ford Road. Continue walking up the road until you come to the place where the road narrows because of two large outcroppings of limestone. Stop after you get past this spot on the road. Look for one of those temporary signs attached to a thin, orange fiberglass pole, about three feet tall.

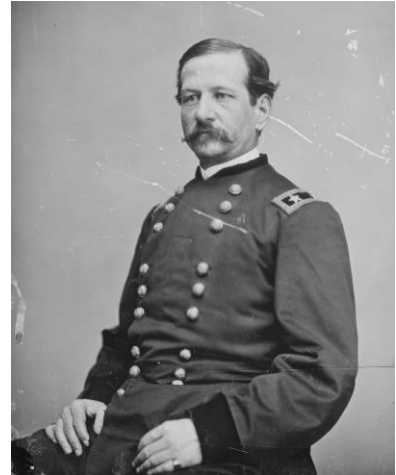
Description

When Major General Sterling Price entered Missouri on September 19, 1864, his train included around 300 wagons, most of them empty. One of his objectives was to capture as much of the Federal's war-making supplies as possible. By the time Price reached western Missouri, he had between 500 and 600 wagons loaded with plunder. The Confederates were also trying to bring along a herd of some 3,000 cattle. By the time he reached Independence, Price was concerned with getting his wagon train loaded with plunder safely away to Arkansas. He planned to leave the area through the eastern part of Kansas continuing his work of plunder and destruction. His immediate objective was the border town of New Santa Fe.

You are standing on the same road on which the wagons travelled in 1864. A team of four to six mules hauled each wagon down the road through numerous these limestone outcroppings. This was not the main road from Independence across the Big Blue River. Byram's Ford was not the best ford available to cross the Big Blue River. It's unlikely the road was much better condition than it is today.

Self-Guided Tour to the Big Blue Battlefield

Major General Sterling Price chose this route because of the tactical situation facing him on October 22, 1864. On the surface, it seems the simplest route would have been to continue down the Santa Fe Trail, cross the Big Blue River at the Red Bridge and then on to New Santa Fe. When his wagon train was on the move, it stretched out for over five miles. Price knew this would make an easy target for the Federal cavalry under Major General Alfred Pleasonton. Likewise, going down river over the crossing on the Main Independence to Kansas City Road would leave his wagon train exposed to the Federal cavalry under Major General Samuel R. Curtis.



Alfred Pleasonton

So Price decided to split the difference and use the Byram's Ford crossing. He would put the Big Blue River between his wagon trains and Pleasonton's cavalry. His wagon train would be exposed to Curtis' cavalry for a relatively short distance. In addition, while exposed on the east side of the river, Price would have the advantage of being able to defend interior lines. So Byram's Ford turned out to be the best of a bad lot.

As you walk up the hill to the next tour stop, remember the Confederate wagons passing over this same road on October 22, 1864. As you walk on this section of the Historic Byram's Ford Road, you can get a sense of the difficulty in moving such a large wagon train from Independence to New Santa Fe described by Howard N. Monnett in his book, *Action Before Westport 1864*.

During the night the movement of the wagons and herd had been particularly difficult. The road went up one hill and down another and in the darkness the files stretched and came together again, accordion fashion, until the officers swore at the continual halts, succeeded by bone-jarring trots to keep up as the leading units stretched their pace on the downhill stretches.

Union Brigadier General John B. Sanborn described the situation faced by Major General Sterling Price with his huge wagon train.

During his progress through the state General Price had secured by almost universal and indiscriminate impressments a long train of several hundred wagons, chiefly common farm-wagons of good quality, into which had been loaded the spoil of the campaign — clothing, provisions, forage, the contents of drug-stores, etc. He had also collected from the country large herds of cattle and flocks of sheep, which were being driven along. Realizing now that he was in a "fix," Price [was now] passing his train and supplies to the southward, sought to escape into Arkansas with the plunder he had secured.

Self-Guided Tour to the Big Blue Battlefield

Tour Stop, “Federal Attack on Oct 23”

Directions

[Waypoint = 39.019018, -94.518879]

This tour stop is located on the high ground at the eastern end of the Historic Byram’s Ford Road. It’s a short, 200 yard hike of moderate difficulty over uneven ground. You will experience a change in elevation of about 50 feet from the previous tour stop. Continue walking up the Historic Byram’s Ford Road. You’ll know when you reach the end because you should see one of those temporary signs attached to a thin, orange fiberglass pole, about three feet tall.

Looking to the east, you should be able to see the former roadbed of 58th Street. Just to your right (south) is what used to be a cul-de-sac at the end of 58th Street. There used to be a bridge over railroad tracks about one block east of the cul-de-sac. The bridge fell into disrepair and was condemned. The neighborhood houses were purchased by the city of Kansas City because it was cheaper than rebuilding the bridge. The pavement of 58th Street and the houses west of the railroad tracks are no longer there. But you can see that 58th Street in this area followed the route of the Byram's Ford Road.

Description

When you get to the top of the hill, turn to look west. Unfortunately, you won’t be able to see what the Federals saw back in 1864. At some point in the future, we hope to open up the view so you can see more of the terrain. There were a lot fewer trees back in 1864. Most of the area around you was tall grass prairie. There was a substantial growth of trees along both sides of the Big Blue River and along the creeks flowing into the river. But the Federals positioned on this hill certainly could have seen across the river to the high ground west of the river about three quarters of a mile west of where you are standing. This was Marmaduke’s main defense line where Pratt’s artillery was deployed.

Up until about 10:30 p.m. on Saturday, October 22, cavalry forces from Winslow’s Brigade had been fighting with units from Clark’s Brigade in Marmaduke’s Division. The darkness forced the Federals to pull back, allowing the Confederate rear guard to head down the hill and cross at Byram’s Ford to the west side of the river.

The men in Winslow’s Brigade spent Saturday night a little east of your position, catching what sleep they could. At that time of year in 1864, the nights were getting very cold with ice forming on the edges of the creeks and streams. There had been a light snowfall on October 21, so there may still have been a little snow on the ground.

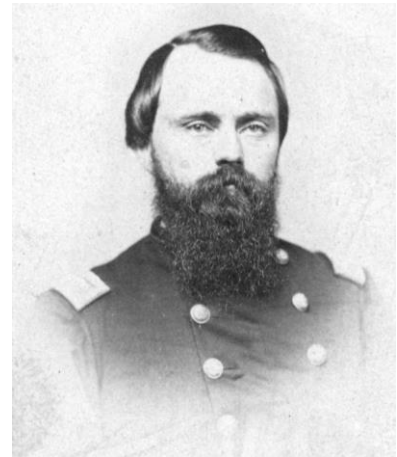
Major General Alfred Pleasonton was keen on pressing the attack. His blood was up because of what he considered a great victory by his cavalry in Independence yesterday. His men had inflicted fairly high casualties on the Confederate rear guard. Pleasonton ordered Brigadier General Egbert G. Brown to take the First Brigade and force a crossing

Self-Guided Tour to the Big Blue Battlefield

at Byram's Ford first thing Sunday morning.

There was just one small problem. The First Brigade was not at the head of the Federal column; Winslow's Fourth Brigade was. So when they tried to switch positions, everything got all jumbled up. It was 8:00 a.m. or so when Pleasonton realized it was too quiet, so he rode to the front to find out what was going on. He became enraged when he discovered his orders to attack had not been carried out. Pleasonton placed Brown under arrest and sent him to the rear. Brown objected, but obeyed the order and removed himself from the battlefield.

Pleasonton then elevated Colonel John F. Philips, Seventh Missouri State Militia Cavalry, to command of the First Brigade and ordered him to "take charge of this entire brigade and go down there and put those people out." He ordered Colonel Edward F. Winslow to take overall command of the attack and sent the Fourth Brigade to attack on the right.



John F. Philips

Winslow deployed three guns from Battery H, Second Missouri Light Artillery, just a bit down the hill from where you are standing. Lieutenant Philip Smiley's 3-inch Ordnance Rifles were easily in easy range of the Confederate positions across the river to the west. But the Federal artillery was also within easy range of the Confederate artillery across the way (a later tour stop).

Philips ordered his men to dismount and move down the road towards Byram's Ford. As they moved down the hill, they came under fire from the Confederate artillery to the west. The Seventh MSM Cavalry deployed to the left of the road while the Fourth MSM Cavalry went down the road, supported by the First MSM Cavalry. The rough terrain would have made it difficult for the First Brigade to maintain its lines as it moved down the hill towards the river.

After Philips' Brigade came down the hill, they were afforded some cover as there were more trees in the river's flood plain. But they found many trees had been cut down to impede their progress. Once the Confederate wagon train passed through this area and was headed down the Harrisonville Road, Marmaduke got his men busy cutting down trees to block the ford and the road. Added to this were the trees that had been felled a few days earlier by the Federals under Sam Curtis. But the worst obstacle was Confederate artillery lobbing explosive shells into the Federals as they tried to advance down to the Big Blue River.

Waiting for them on the west bank of the Big Blue River were the Missourians and

Self-Guided Tour to the Big Blue Battlefield

Arkansans of Freeman's Brigade (Freeman's Skirmish Line tour stop) under the command of Colonel Thomas R. Freeman. Brigadier General John B. Clark, Jr. had his brigade deployed several hundred yards to the rear of Freeman (Bloody Hill tour stop).

Colonel John F. Philips, Seventh Missouri State Militia (MSM) Cavalry, wrote in his diary about the confusion on the Byram's Ford Road first thing that Sunday morning.

We were up all night, dragging and sleeping along on our horses and by fires. No feed. Crackers for men, worn out. General Brown ordered to take the advance and attack the enemy at daylight. I took the advance and moved forward at daylight. Trotted up three or four miles. Halted for a few moments on account of Winslow's brigade blocking the road. On again. Came up to the front about 7:30 AM. Dismounted to fight on foot. Was forming line. General Pleasonton came up, was terribly fierce. Pleasonton reprimanded Brown severely for not attacking sooner. Arrested him and sent him to the rear. Put me in command of brigade.

Tour Stop, "Dee's Battalion"

This tour stop consists of two physical locations. At first you will walk down into the ravine used by the 150 or so men of Captain Edward W. Dee's Battalion from the Fourth Iowa Cavalry on their approach to the Big Blue River. Then you will follow the ravine down to the Big Blue River just as Dee's Battalion did. One obstacle you have to deal with is Hardesty Avenue, which cuts across the ravine. The road wasn't there in 1864 so your approach to the river will be a bit more difficult, physically, than it was for the men in Dee's Battalion.

Dee's Battalion Staging Area

[Waypoint = 39.020733, -94.520883]

Dee's Battalion River Crossing

[Waypoint = 39.020550, -94.522167]

Self-Guided Tour to the Big Blue Battlefield

Directions and Description

Colonel Edward F. Winslow sent Dee's Battalion down the hill into this ravine to anchor the Federal right. According to their maps, there was a ravine that Dee's Battalion could follow all the way to the Big Blue River. There the Third Battalion could get across the river and attack the Confederate left flank. There is another tour stop on the west side of the Big Blue Battlefield to see where Captain Dee began his attack from the west bank after crossing the river.

You get to Dee's Battalion Staging Area by following the Dee's Battalion Trail (marked with yellow paint) into the ravine to the northwest of your current location. It's a 350 yard hike of moderate difficulty over uneven ground. You will experience an approximate change in elevation of 100 feet from the top of the hill down into the ravine.



Edward F. Winslow

Return to and walk back down the Historic Byram's Ford Road. About halfway down to Hardesty Avenue, you should see a path on the right that heads north. The trail starts just about where the Bram's Ford Road begins its steep descent. It is marked with one of those temporary signs attached to a thin, orange fiberglass pole, about three feet tall.

Follow the trail (marked by yellow flags and yellow paint on the trees) down into the bottom of the ravine until you reach the location for Dee's Battalion Staging Area. This position is located next to a very large sycamore marked with two yellow paint dots. Look for another one of those temporary signs attached to a thin, orange fiberglass pole, about three feet tall.

Now that you have reached the bottom of the hill, you are standing in the ravine used by Dee's Battalion to move west to the Big Blue River. Take a look around and notice the vegetation in the ravine. In 1864, this ravine was similarly filled with trees, although the undergrowth may not have been as thick as it is today. So it's easy to see why Dee's Battalion was not observed as it moved into the ravine and towards the Big Blue River. From this position, take note of the culvert that passes under Hardesty Avenue following the path of the ravine. When you get to the west side of Hardesty, you will be able to see the other end of this culvert.

Dee's Battalion River Crossing is on the opposite side of Hardesty Avenue from your current location. The construction of Hardesty Avenue filled in part of the ravine. From your position, you can see the culvert that passes under Hardesty Avenue following the path of the ravine. This culvert goes the length of the ravine, exiting at the river on the other side of Hardesty Avenue. You are going to climb up to Hardesty, a change in

Self-Guided Tour to the Big Blue Battlefield

elevation of about 20 feet, and then cross over to the other side.

When you're ready, follow the trail west to Hardesty Avenue. From the bottom of the ravine, it's a short climb up to the road. When you reach Hardesty, light pole number 1550 should be just to your right (north). Then cross the road and follow the hiking trail back down into the ravine. Watch carefully for any traffic before crossing over to the west side of the street. Follow the trail down into the bottom of the ravine and then northwest to the river until you see another one of the temporary markers, a thin, orange pole. It's about 120 yards from Hardesty, and the change in elevation down to the river bank is about 35 feet. When you reach the river bank, you are in the approximate location where Dee's Battalion crossed to the west side.

Major Abial R. Pierce, commanding Fourth Iowa Cavalry, wrote about sending Dee's Battalion to the right.

The Third Battalion of the Fourth Iowa, under Captain [Edward W.] Dee, which had been watching during the night, was concentrated and sent to the right, with orders to wade the stream and effect a lodgment on the other bank.

Tour Stop, "Byram's Ford Road, East"

Directions

[Waypoint = 39.017896, -94.521194]

From the Dee's Battalion River Crossing position, walk back up the trail to return to Hardesty Avenue. What great exercise! Walk south along Hardesty Avenue until you reach the Byram's Ford Road back near where you parked initially. At this point, the Byram's Ford Road was heading in a southwesterly direction. Walk down the Historic Byram's Ford Road towards the Big Blue River until reach the point where the road bed drops down into the flood plain of the Big Blue River, about 100 yards from Hardesty Avenue. Look for another one of those temporary signs attached to a thin, orange fiberglass pole, about three feet tall.

Description

As you walk down the Historic Byram's Ford Road, you are following the same route taken by the men in the brigade commanded by Colonel Philips, Colonel Winslow and Brigadier General Sanborn. We learned at a previous tour stop ([Federal Attack, October 23](#)) the initial attack by Philips' Brigade did not succeed in getting across the Big Blue River.

Colonel Edward F. Winslow reacted to this setback by sending Dee's Battalion over to the right and ordering the remainder of his brigade down the hill to the right of Philips' Brigade. Following in support was Sanborn's Brigade. Colonel Philips ordered his men to dismount and renew their attack. Meanwhile, the Confederate skirmishers did not

Self-Guided Tour to the Big Blue Battlefield

discover the movements of Dee's Battalion until they crossed to the west side of the river. Dee's attack on the Confederate left flank caused enough confusion to allow Philips and Winslow to get across to the west bank of the Big Blue River. The Confederate skirmishers from Freeman's Brigade were forced to fall back across the open meadow to the Confederate defense line on Bloody Hill.

Colonel John F. Philips, Seventh MSM Cavalry, described the attack in his official report.

The enemy had planted a heavy gun as to sweep this ford, and shelled us furiously, killing a number of horses and men in the stream. Nothing daunted the cavalry resolutely forced its way through. Lieutenant-Colonel Crittenden had, in the meantime, effected a crossing, bore to the right, engaging the enemy fiercely. Kelly's cavalry gained the western bank and formed in Crittenden's rear, when the latter swung quickly to the left of the road, pressing hard upon the enemy in his front, Major Kelly making a similar move on the right. The enemy was driven back about 200 yards, where he occupied a range of hills, extending through an open field on our left and along a craggy bluff, covered with dense woods, on our right.

Tour Stop, "Byram's Ford, East Bank"

Directions

[Waypoint = 39.017316, -94.521089]

Continue walking down the Historic Byram's Ford Road until you reach the banks of the Big Blue River. The approximate path of the road is marked by yellow paint and flagging attached to the trees. As you approach the Big Blue River, look for another one of those temporary signs attached to a thin, orange fiberglass pole, about three feet tall.

Description

The path you walked on to reach the ford is an approximation of the route of the Historic Byram's Ford Road. At some point in the future the Monnett Battle of Westport Fund is planning to use Ground Penetrating Radar equipment to find the original roadbed. Look across to the other side of the river and you will see the sign for the west bank location of Byram's Ford. Wagons entered the river near here and stayed in the river for a bit before exiting the river near the sign on the opposite bank. The Byram's Ford Road headed in a north/south direction when it crossed the river.

In his book, *The Battle of Westport*, Paul B. Jenkins described Byram's Ford.

This point was the then widely-known Byram's Ford Crossing. Constantly in use at that day, on the main line of the road leading from Independence to the country south of Kansas City ... In 1864 ... it was an easy crossing at a point where the river was wide and shallow, bordered by thick woods through which the roads approaching the ford passed.

Self-Guided Tour to the Big Blue Battlefield

Now walk back to your car so you can drive over to the west side of the Big Blue River for the rest of the Big Blue Battlefield tour.

Tour Stop, "Big Blue Battlefield, West"

Directions

[Waypoint = 39.016654, -94.525265]

This tour stop is located at 5951 Manchester Trafficway in Kansas City, Missouri. Return to your car on Hardesty Avenue and drive south to E 63rd Street. Turn right (west) onto E 63rd Street. After 0.5 miles, turn right (north) at the traffic light onto Manchester Trafficway. Stay on Manchester Trafficway as it turns to the right (east) crossing the railroad tracks. Just after the tracks, the road turns to the north. Take the first right onto E 60th Street. Pull into the small parking lot located just a little ahead on the left. The building is part of the battlefield park and is scheduled for eventual demolition.

Description

This stop is a jumping off point for walking to other tour stops on this side of the river. The area covered by this part of the tour is also located on the Big Blue Battlefield Park and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. You are standing in the middle of what was a large open area. Look around and you can see this part of the battlefield is in varying states of restoration.

You are in the middle of an industrial park that was developed in the 1950s and 1960s. Some of the buildings have been acquired or are in the process of being acquired by the Monnett Battle of Westport Fund. Once a building is acquired, it is scheduled for demolition, followed by site restoration to battlefield conditions.

This area was part of a 600 acre farm owned by Peter and Augustus Byram. The Byram brothers were teenagers when they emigrated from Kentucky to western Missouri in 1839. Legend has it they wanted to get out from under their controlling step-mother. They were not present during the battle. The brothers had decided to abandon farming and had relocated to Nebraska City to work for the freighting company of Russell, Majors & Waddell.

Tour Stop, "Battle of the Big Blue Map Marker"

[Waypoint = 39.015437, -94.525911]

Directions and Description

You may want to walk over to the map marker located about 200 yards from the parking lot. It's an optional stop on the tour. The historical marker itself is in a state of disrepair and is scheduled for replacement.

The map on this marker shows where the positions of the opposing forces were around 11:00 a.m. on October 23, 1864.

Self-Guided Tour to the Big Blue Battlefield

Walk west down E 60th Street and turn left (south) on Manchester Trafficway. Just off the street where Manchester Trafficway makes a sharp turn to the right (west) is a brick pedestal on which there is a map of the battlefield.

Tour Stop, “Byram’s Ford, West Bank”

Directions

[Waypoint = 39.016928, -94.520392]

Now you will walk down to the west bank of the Big Blue River where Byram’s Ford crossed. It’s a relatively easy walk of about 0.4 miles. Only the last 100 yards or so might be considered moderate in difficulty. Once you leaved the paved streets, it can be muddy if there have been recent rains.

Return to E 60th Street and turn right (east). Head straight east down E 60th Street and continue walking east across the mowed field. If there is a chain link fence, you should be able to enter through the gate. If the gate is locked, there should be a break in the fence to the right. You should be able to see a small sign about 300 yards in the distance. Head for that sign. When you reach the wooded area, you should be able to see the path that goes into the woods. This is the stretch of the Historic Byram’s Ford Road on the west side of the Big Blue River. Follow the old road bed down to the Big Blue River until you get to the sign marking the location of Byram’s Ford.

Description

Back in the mid-19th century, the most common way to get across a small moving body of water was to use a ford. A ford was a naturally occurring shallow place on the stream with a gravelly or rocky bottom, which provided good footing. Byram’s Ford was no different. This crossing was called Byram’s Ford because it was the ford over the Big Blue River near the farm owned by Peter and Augustus Byram.

In his book, *The Battle of Westport*, Paul B. Jenkins described Byram’s Ford as “an easy crossing at a point where the river was wide and shallow.” Jenkins published his book over 100 years ago in 1906, so the river’s physical characteristics could have changed. But looking at the river today, you can see how much of a challenge it was to get one wagon, let alone 500 wagons, down and then up these steep river banks. There was a rocky bottom here in the river bed. And the river’s flow was typically low at this point in the late summer and early fall. But the steep river banks seem to make this location less than optimal as a place to ford the river. And surely you remember the steep descent down the Byram’s Ford Road on the other side of the river.

Because of the steep river banks, Byram’s Ford crossed the Big Blue River at an angle, from the northeast to the southwest. Look across to the far side of the river a 100 feet or so down river to see if you can find the area where the river bank is not as steep. Look for trees marked with two yellow paint dots. We are not absolutely certain, but believe the

Self-Guided Tour to the Big Blue Battlefield

Byram's Ford Road entered the ford near that location and exited the river near where you are standing.

Byram's Ford and the Byram's Ford Road had its origin as a convenient way for the freighting firm of Russell, Majors & Waddell to move their oxen from the Santa Fe Trail over to their pastureland just across the state line due west of here. It was shorter to cut across instead of continuing down the Santa Fe Trail to New Santa Fe and then up the Military Road to their pastureland. Between Independence and Kansas City or Westport, there were other better roads and ways to get across the Big Blue River.

Why did Major General Sterling Price decide to take his army and wagon train on the Byram's Ford Road? His objective was the border town of New Santa Fe. By selecting the Byram's Ford Road, the wagon train was going to have to cross the Big Blue River three times. If they had followed the main route of the Santa Fe Trail, the wagons would have faced only one river crossing between Independence and New Santa Fe. Price's decision was influenced largely because of the tactical situation facing the Confederates on October 22, 1864.

By the time he reached Independence, Price was concerned with getting his wagon train loaded with plunder safely away to Arkansas. He planned to leave the area through the eastern part of Kansas continuing his work of plunder and destruction. So his immediate objective was the border town of New Santa Fe.

On the surface, it seems the simplest route would have been to continue down the Santa Fe Trail, cross the Big Blue River at the Red Bridge and then on to New Santa Fe. When his wagon train was on the move, it stretched out for over five miles. Price knew this would make an easy target for the Federal cavalry under Major General Alfred Pleasonton. Likewise, going down river over the crossing on the Main Independence to Kansas City Road would leave his wagon train exposed to the Federal cavalry under Major General Samuel R. Curtis.

So Price decided to split the difference and use the Byram's Ford crossing. He would put the Big Blue River between his wagon trains and Pleasonton's cavalry. His wagon train would be exposed to Curtis' cavalry for a relatively short distance. In addition, while exposed on the east side of the river, Price would have the advantage of being able to defend interior lines. So Byram's Ford turned out to be the best option available.

Major General Sterling Price described the situation in his official report.

The enemy had fallen back to Big Blue, on the Kansas City road, to a position strong by nature and strengthened by fortifications ... I determined to advance on the Santa Fé road, which had been obstructed by felling trees, and did so, Brigadier-General [Jo] Shelby's division in front ... Brigadier-General Shelby crossed the Big Blue with the remainder of his division, meeting some opposition from the enemy, which was soon

Self-Guided Tour to the Big Blue Battlefield

overcome. After crossing the Big Blue he engaged the enemy to cover the crossing and the passage of the train ... On the morning of the 23d I took up my line of march, and in a short time discovered the enemy in position on the prairie. The train had been sent forward on the Fort Scott road. I had instructed Major-General [John S.] Marmaduke to resist the advance of the enemy, who was in his rear, if possible, as he was on the same road as the train.

Tour Stop, "Freeman's Skirmish Line"

Directions

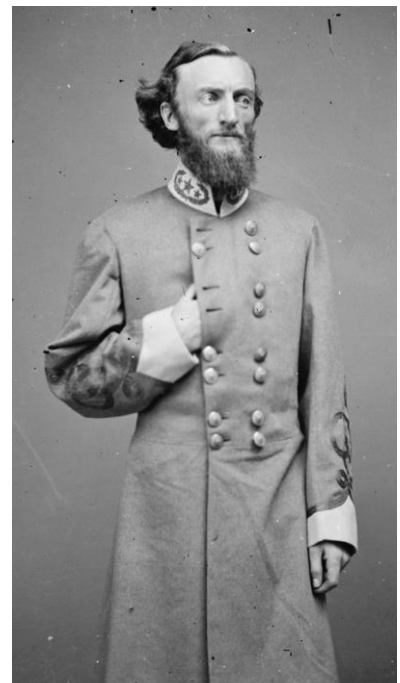
[Waypoint = 39.016633, -94.521721]

Leave Byram's Ford and walk back up the Byram's Ford Road. Just as you are leaving the trees and entering the open field, turn right (north) and follow the tree line for 50 feet or so until you find a place where you can look back down to the river. Look for another of those temporary signs on a thin, orange fiberglass pole.

Description

You are standing where a Confederate skirmisher from Freeman's Brigade shivered in the pre-dawn hour on Sunday morning, October 23. If you look carefully, you should be able to see across the river to the spot where the Byram's Ford Road approached the river. All along the west side of the river, Major General John S. Marmaduke deployed skirmishers as his first line of defense against the Federal advance down the Byram's Ford Road. The Confederates took advantage of the abatis constructed by the Federals in the days leading up to the first fight for Byram's Ford on October 22.

Place yourself back on that bitterly cold morning. You probably have a muzzle-loading, single shot, Enfield rifle-musket. It's cold and damp with a foggy haze clinging to the trees along the river. As the morning progresses, you begin to hear sounds across the river. Peering through the fog, you are able to make out the enemy moving towards the far bank of the river. Now Pratt's artillery located on the hill several hundred yards to your rear begins to shell the far side of the river. The enemy artillery answers in kind. You hunker down, reminding yourself to aim low. Just when the enemy gets within musket range, you and your comrades let loose with a volley of musket fire. This continues until the enemy stops their advances and pulls back to regroup. You have been successful and stopped their first attack.



John S. Marmaduke

Self-Guided Tour to the Big Blue Battlefield

Sometime later, the enemy makes another advance towards the river. You can see them better because the morning fog is beginning to disappear. Just as you are getting ready to send another volley towards the hated Federals, you hear rapid musket firing over to the left. The Federals must have gotten across the river somehow and are attacking the left flank. You hear the sergeant yelling to fall back to the main defense line. You begin running double-quick, stopping only long enough to fire your musket at the Federals.

They've gotten across the river. Now the men from Clark's brigade begin firing their muskets at the enemy. Pratt's artillery adjusts their aim and shells the enemy positions on the west side of the river. The Federals have gotten to the west side of river, but are stopped by withering Confederate fire.

Colonel Thomas R. Freeman, commanding Freeman's Brigade in Marmaduke's Division, wrote about the fighting at Byram's Ford in his memoirs.

Soon after sunrise on the morning of the 23rd, the sun was breaking above the tree line to the east when the enemy began their attacks. Just before sunrise I had posted Captain Johnson and his regiment on my right to face the east and south covering a bad portion of the front. He had advantage of height but lacked proper cover. To cover him I placed Col. Preston. Our object was to force the enemy to deploy and mount a heavy attack. I knew I could repulse his several attempts but once he gained advantage of my right and brought his guns to bear that it would be time to withdraw. That is precisely what happened. We repulsed their early attempts to cross the Big Blue but once they gained advantage of my right I had Preston cover while we pulled out of line. By 10 a.m. we had gained Clark's lines whereupon I was directed to escort the wagons south to the Santa Fe line road. For the remainder of the day we were engaged in little skirmishing as the enemy attempted to gain our flanks and cut our line of advance south.

Tour Stop, "Federal Advance to Bloody Hill"

Directions

[Waypoint = 39.01639, -94.522273]

Walk about 75 yards or so into the middle of the meadow to a point where you can look west down E 60th Street.

Description

You are still standing on or near the Historic Byram's Ford Road. It went due west for a few hundred yards before veering to the left (south) where it passed through a break in the rock outcroppings (as does present day Manchester Trafficway).

After Major General Alfred Pleasonton had straightened out his advance at Byram's Ford, he ordered Colonel Edward F. Winslow to take overall charge of the attack. Winslow ordered Colonel John F. Philips to take the First Brigade down the Byram's Ford

Self-Guided Tour to the Big Blue Battlefield

Road and attack across the river. Winslow sent Captain Edward Dee with the Third Battalion off to the right to cross the river. Winslow, himself, was going to lead the remainder of his brigade across the river to the right of the Byram's Ford Road.

As we discovered earlier in the tour, the First Brigade led by Philips got bogged down trying to cross the river. But Dee's Battalion did get across with little opposition. Once they opened fire on the left flank of the Confederate Skirmish line, the rebels quickly pulled back across the meadow. Now Philips' and Winslow's' Brigades were able to get across to the west side of the river.

So Philips' Brigade was across the river on the Federal left astride the Byram's Ford Road. To their right was Winslow's Brigade which had filled the gap between Philips' Brigade and Dee's Battalion from the Fourth Iowa Cavalry.

Look to the west. Just on the other side of the railroad tracks (not present in 1864) was another Confederate skirmish line. Today it's a thicket of trees and shrubs and screens our view of the Pepsi Beverages Co. buildings. But under all those trees and shrubs is a rock ledge rising 15 to 20 feet above the railroad tracks. Behind this natural defensive position were more Confederates.

The Federals were going to have to cross almost 500 yards of open ground to reach the Confederate position. Philips' Brigade advanced to the left of the road. Winslow's Brigade advanced to the right of the road, with Dee's Battalion further to the right. As they advanced, the Federals continually received volleys of small arms and artillery fire.

It was during the advance over this open ground that the men in the First Brigade began running low on ammunition. Colonel Philips sent word back to bring up more ammunition, after which the advance continued.

Now picture yourself as one of the Federal volunteers from Missouri fighting in Philips' Brigade. You just crossed the river by wading through the frigid water with your gun and ammunition held above your head. Next you scrambled up the slippery embankment and emerged from the trees into the open. You cheer as you see the backs of the enemy skirmishers running west. But now you realize it's a long ways across open ground to reach the next line of the enemy. The only cover for hundreds of yards are the tree stumps left behind after trees were felled to hinder the river crossing. Small arms and artillery fire continue to rain down on your position. You crawl on your belly to get behind one of those stumps. The explosions of artillery shells are deafening. A piece of shrapnel goes whizzing by your head. Now you hear somebody yell for everyone to get up and charge the enemy at the double-quick.

The men of Philips' Brigade had dismounted to get across the river. As the Federal advance bogged down, Colonel Winslow sent orders to Philips, telling him to charge the Confederate defense line. This Philips tried to do, but their attack was easily repulsed by

Self-Guided Tour to the Big Blue Battlefield

the Confederate small arms and artillery fire. Next Colonel Philips ordered their horses brought to the west side of the river. Philips and the First MSM Cavalry mounted and charged in a column of fours up the Byram's Ford Road against the enemy position. Twice they charged, Philips at the head, and twice they were repulsed by heavy enemy fire. Philips realized a cavalry charge was hopeless and told his men to dismount.

While this was occurring, Colonel Winslow led his brigade across the river and advanced forward just as Philips was falling back. Both Federal brigades tried again and were able to advance a couple of hundred yards to the west.

Years after the war, Colonel John F. Philips remembered how difficult it was for his men to advance towards the Confederate position from this point.

I saw that the hill must be taken and I called upon Colonel Crittenden, afterward, Governor of Missouri, and his men to storm it. I ordered him to get on all fours and crawl up. The field was full of stumps that afforded some protection and behind one of these you would see as many as five or six men strung out on their hands and knees, one behind the other in a straight line. They would rest there a minute and then break for another stump ahead.

Tour Stop, "Attack by Dee's Battalion"

Directions

[Waypoint = 39.020839, -94.522583]

Walk west to where the pavement for E 60th Street begins. Walk north on Colorado Avenue for one block. Turn right (east) onto E 59th Street and then take a quick left (north) on Cindy Avenue. Walk north about 0.2 miles, crossing E 58th Street, until you reach a wide gravel path going down to the Big Blue River. Follow the path all the way to the river. If you look a little upstream on the opposite bank, you should be able to see where the "Dee's Battalion" ravine drains into the river. You may also be able to make out the tree with two yellow paint dots marking the location of the Dee's Battalion River Crossing position.

Description

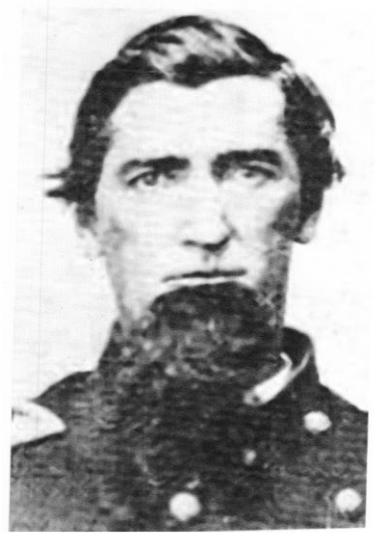
When the Federal attack began, Colonel Edward F. Winslow sent the Third Battalion, Fourth Iowa Cavalry, commanded by Captain Edward W. Dee, to the right to get across the Big Blue River. Captain Dee led the Third Battalion down a ravine to the river just opposite from where you are standing. The Third Battalion crossed the river and then swept around to the southwest to attack the Confederate left flank. Dee's Third Battalion was armed with the superior firepower of Spencer repeating rifles. The Spencer rifle used rim fire metal cartridges and could be fired 7 times before needing to be reloaded. Reloading was a simple matter of swapping tubes out of the rifle's stock. The Third Battalion's attack surprised the Confederates forcing them to withdraw across the open

Self-Guided Tour to the Big Blue Battlefield

ground to their main defense line. This took some of the pressure off the First and Fourth Brigades, who were able to get across the river.

Major Abial R. Pierce, commanding Fourth Iowa Cavalry, wrote about sending Dee's Battalion to the right.

The Third Battalion of the Fourth Iowa, under Captain Dee, which had been watching during the night, was concentrated and sent to the right, with orders to wade the stream and effect a lodgment on the other bank ... The third battalion, although considered relieved by General Brown's troops, were ordered by Colonel Winslow to make the charge across the river, which they did gallantly, using their Spencer carbines with great effect upon the enemy, who retreated precipitately to his main line.



Abial R. Pierce

Tour Stop, "Winslow's Brigade Assaults Bloody Hill"

Directions

[Waypoint = 39.016690, -94.527215]

Walk back up the gravel path and turn left (south) onto Cindy Avenue. Turn right (west) when you reach E 59th Street. Walk about one block towards and turn left (south) onto Denver Avenue. Walk about one block to E 60th Street and turn right (west) into the parking lot. Continue walking toward the railroad tracks, turning right (north) after you get around the copse of trees. Look for one of the temporary signs attached to a thin, orange pole.

Description

You are now standing in the area Winslow's Brigade advanced to before they assaulted the Confederate positions on Bloody Hill. The men in Winslow's Brigade had reached this position by crossing over several hundred yards of open ground, all while exposed to heavy small arms and artillery fire. Just across the railroad tracks to the west is the rocky ledge, which the Federals used for cover before launching their assault.

When the advance by the Philips' Brigade stalled, Winslow's Brigade move forward to support the attack on the right. At first, they were no more successful than the First Brigade had been. After the Confederates repulsed the first advance, Colonel Edward F. Winslow regrouped his men in this location. While his brigade advanced on foot, Winslow was on horseback while directing the attack. As they went up over the rocky ledge and continued towards the tree line, Winslow was hit in the leg by a Minié ball. The wound put Winslow out of action, command of the Fourth Brigade devolved to

Self-Guided Tour to the Big Blue Battlefield

Lieutenant Colonel Frederick W. Benteen, Tenth Missouri Cavalry. But the attack was successful as the Confederates pulled out of their defensive positions, retreating south down the Harrisonville Road.

In his official report, Colonel Edward F. Winslow wrote about reforming the Fourth Brigade for another attack following its initial repulse.

I directed the line to advance rapidly and drive them from the timber. This was well commenced only, when the whole line gave way under the fire of the enemy and retreated in disorder to the reserve, where I succeeded in reforming the broken detachment. I again ordered an advance with the Third and Fourth Iowa Regiments closely supporting. This time we reached the woods, and after a short, spirited resistance from the enemy drove them out of position with some loss. The retiring foe was followed by our troops through the skirt of timber about two miles, when, having been struck, just as we gained the edge of the timber, in the leg with a rifle-ball, and disabled thereby, I turned over the command to Lieut. Col. F. W. Benteen, Tenth Missouri Cavalry.

Tour Stop, “Philips’ Brigade Assaults Bloody Hill”

Directions

[Waypoint = 39.015248, -94.527273]

Walk south through the mowed field until you reach Manchester Trafficway. Cross the street and turn right to head west on Manchester Trafficway. Be careful crossing the railroad tracks. Stop anywhere in the mowed area near the historical marker.

Description

You are now standing on the edge of the ravine Philips’ Brigade used for cover as they prepared to assault Bloody Hill. After crossing the railroad tracks, you pass between the rock outcroppings, through which the Byram’s Ford Road ran. But back in 1864 the Byram’s Ford Road passage through the rock outcroppings was much narrower than it is now. The narrow passage made it difficult for Philips to assault the Confederate positions.

The men in Philips’ Brigade had reached this position by crossing over several hundred yards of open ground, all while exposed to heavy small arms and artillery fire. The Confederates held the high ground and were protected behind fence rails, entrenchments, and a few log houses, one of which was about 120 yards west of your current position. They had also posted sharpshooters up in the trees to pick off the Federal officers.

At the previous tour stop we learned about Winslow’s attempt to lead a charge against the Confederates that left Winslow wounded in the leg and out of action. After Winslow fell, the attack stalled and was repulsed. The Federals now realized a mounted

Self-Guided Tour to the Big Blue Battlefield

charge was not going to work. The Federal cavalrymen were ordered to dismount and make a concerted effort against the hill. Philips led his entire brigade up against the Confederates and succeeded in driving them further up the hill to their last line of defense. This assault occurred at the same time that Lieutenant Colonel Frederick W. Benteen led Winslow's Brigade on the Federal right against the Confederates on Bloody Hill.

Colonel Philips described the successful attack in his official report.

My command, then occupying the position from which the enemy had just been driven, began to advance across this field, where ensued one of the fiercest and most sanguinary conflicts of the engagement. The enemy occupied not only the ground but the very tree tops, their sharpshooters having climbed into these, singling out and shooting our officers and men with fearful success, no less than one field officer and seven line officers falling on this ground.

The persistent bravery of officers and men was here most admirable. Notwithstanding the ammunition of my command began to fail the position gained was held and the advance prosecuted. Re-enforcements were sent from Colonel Winslow's brigade, when the charge was pressed with increased vigor. The timber was gained and the enemy driven in confusion, leaving his dead and wounded and a large number of prisoners in our hands, the large number of these showing the stubbornness with which the enemy resisted and the desperation with which our men fought. My ammunition train was ordered up, and as soon as the boxes were replenished I moved rapidly forward.

Tour Stop, "Log House"

Directions

[Waypoint = 39.015171, -94.528455]

The next tour stop is located about 120 yards ahead at the base of Bloody Hill. Walk up Manchester Trafficway and turn into the first right as if you are going to walk to the Pepsi Beverages Co. parking lot. Just after turning to the right, look to the west for an opening leading into the woods. About fifty feet past the tree line, there is a large opening in the woods. You should see another one of those temporary signs attached to a thin, orange pole.

Description

You are standing on the approximate location of where the Byram's Ford Road began its ascent up Bloody Hill. Just to the south of this location was one of the log houses used for cover by the Confederates. During the battle, several Confederate sharpshooters occupied the log houses. The Confederate sharpshooters



Self-Guided Tour to the Big Blue Battlefield

targeted the Federal officers and were very successful. Among the casualties were Colonel Edward F. Winslow and Lieutenant Colonel Thomas T. Crittenden. The log houses became the scene of hand-to-hand fighting when the Federals were finally able to reach them late in the morning. Once the Confederates withdrew up the hill, the Federals began using the log houses for cover.

In his official report, Colonel John F. Philips described the Confederate defenses which included the log houses.

The enemy ... occupied a range of hills, extending through an open field on our left and along a craggy bluff, covered with dense woods, on our right. The enemy's position was strengthened by a string of fencing and two or three log houses, behind which he took shelter.

Tour Stop, "Bloody Hill"

Directions

[Waypoint = 39.015083, -94.52974]

The next tour stop is located at the top of Bloody Hill. This is an easy to moderate hike of about 30 yards with a change in elevation of about 70 feet. Start following the path, which follows the approximate route of the Byram's Ford Road, as it veers to the right (north). Follow the path for 50 yards or so until you notice another path heading up the hill to the west. Follow this path to the top of the hill and stop when you reach a small, open grassy area. You should see another one of the temporary tour markers, a thin, orange pole.

Description

You are standing at the right center of Marmaduke's main defense line. One day we hope to open the vista of the battlefield from this location. But until that day comes, you will have to use your imagination. This spot is about 100 feet higher in elevation than the Big Blue River at Byram's Ford.

Turn around and face east looking down the hill. You may have to move a little down the path to be able to see the eastern horizon. That tall communication tower off to the east is on an approximate line with Byram's Ford. Marmaduke's line extended about 0.25 miles or so to the right (south) and about 0.5 miles to the left (north) along this ridge. Marmaduke had deployed his artillery (next tour stop) on the right end of his line. The vegetation here was an open woodland of large oak trees. The Confederate sharpshooters climbed up into the trees to get a better look at their targets. It was one of these sharpshooters who wounded Lieutenant Colonel Thomas T. Crittenden. The Minié ball hit the ground in front of Crittenden and ricocheted into his belly. The ball was stopped by a wad of paper currency, but still had enough energy to knock him off his horse and out of action.

Self-Guided Tour to the Big Blue Battlefield

Clark's Brigade had begun the day along the rock ledge down the hill about 250 yards from where you are standing. But by late morning the Federals had pushed them and the rest of the confederates up to the top of the hill. But it was late morning when the Confederates realized their commanders had made a fatal mistake. The fighting since 8:00 a.m. had been fierce and constant and three hours later, they were running low on ammunition. The ammunition wagons were well down the Harrisonville Road on their way to New Santa Fé. The night before, Price had ordered Marmaduke to hold on long enough for the wagon train to get safely past New Santa Fé. Just as the Federals were making a big push up Bloody Hill, Marmaduke decided to pull out of this position and get down to the wagon train as quickly as possible. As the Confederates withdrew, Marmaduke established his rear guard about a block west on a line with present day Elmwood Avenue.

Historical Vignettes

Union Colonel John F. Philips wrote in his official reports about the deadly accuracy of the Confederate sharpshooters on Bloody Hill.

The enemy occupied not only the ground but the very tree tops, their sharpshooters having climbed into these, singling out and shooting our officers and men with fearful success, no less than one field officer and seven line officers falling on this ground.

Brigadier General John B. Clark, Jr. described these events in his official report.

The enemy came upon me in the full enthusiasm of pursuit, and though my brigade contended nobly with the foe for two hours and strewed the open field in our front with his dead, our ammunition exhausted, we were forced to leave the field again to the enemy, our dead in his hands. The booming of Fagan's and Shelby's guns were heard all this time in the direction of Westport heavily engaging the enemy. At this time I was directed by General Marmaduke to pass the train and protect its left flank from a threatened attack from cavalry.



John B. Clark, Jr.

Tour Stop, "Pratt's Artillery"

Directions

[Waypoint = 39.013571, -94.52985]

Turn around and walk west through the small, grassy area. You should be able to see the edge of the woodland just on the other side of the grassy area. After exiting the woods, turn left (south). About 150 yards to the southwest you should see the Kansas City Water

Self-Guided Tour to the Big Blue Battlefield

Department brick building. Its parking lot is just to your right (west). As you walk along the edge of the woods to the south, you should notice the artillery piece located near the southeast corner of the building. That's the next tour stop.

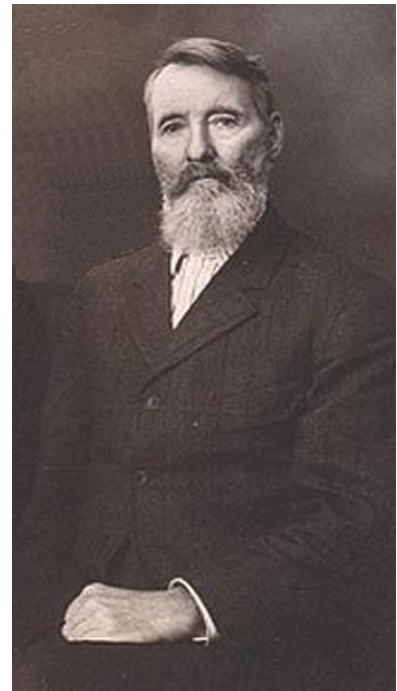
Description

When you reach the artillery piece, turn so you are looking east towards Byram's Ford. The trees obscure the view, so once again you have to use your imagination. Byram's Ford is on an approximate line with that tall communications tower off in the distance.

Near this spot, Marmaduke deployed his artillery so it commanded Byram's Ford, the Byram's Ford Road, and the meadow at the bottom of the hill. All he had were two "half" batteries under the command of Major Joseph H. Pratt. The two were Harris' Missouri Battery and Hynson's Texas Battery. In all they had four 10-pounder Parrott Guns and two smaller pieces. All morning the Confederate artillery wreaked havoc using shell and canister on the Federals.

The Confederate's advantage changed when they ran low on ammunition and began to pull out of their defenses. The Confederate battery scrambled to limber up their guns as the Federals advanced up Bloody Hill. If it wasn't for some quick thinking by Captain Benjamin S. Johnson, Third Missouri Cavalry (Confederate), the artillery would have been captured.

Union Colonel John F. Philips described the effectiveness of the Confederate artillery in his official report.



Benjamin S. Johnson

The enemy had so planted a heavy gun as to sweep this ford, and shelled us furiously, killing a number of horses and men in the stream ... [Once across the river] I was ordered to charge with the First Cavalry, [but] the situation of the ground was such as to confine the movements for the cavalry to the road, which rendered the immediate execution of this order, in any other formation than that of column of fours, an impossibility. The effort, in column, was twice made but failed, because the storm of bullets and shell sweeping from that hill down the road insured utter destruction to every horse and its rider that ascended its crest.

Tour Stop, "Byram's Ford Road"

Directions

[Waypoint = 39.016067, -94.529917]

Self-Guided Tour to the Big Blue Battlefield

Now you will walk along another section of the old Historic Byram's Ford Road and head over towards the main defense line on the Confederate center and left.

Walk north to retrace your steps to the Bloody Hill tour stop. Enter the woods and walk down the Bloody Hill path. When you get to the bottom of the hill, you want to turn left and follow the path up the hill to the north. After about 150 yards, the path turns to the left (west) right where you can see the back side of the Pepsi Bottling Plant. Shortly after turning west, you should see a 4x4 post painted blue. This post is Marker #9 from the original Big Blue Battlefield Walking Tour.

Description

When you turned left after walking down Bloody Hill, you began, once again, following the approximate route for the Historic Byram's Ford Road. At some point in the future, the Monnett Battle of Westport Fund plans to use Ground Penetrating Radar technology to locate the original road bed. When you turn left at the top of the hill, you will notice old asphalt pavement. This is the remnant of 60th Street that followed the route of the Byram's Ford Road.

In addition to being on the Byram's Ford Road, this is another location on Marmaduke's main defense line. There is just not a whole lot to see because of the Pepsi Beverages Co. bottling plant located down the hill from your location.

Tour Stop, "Marmaduke's Defense Line, Center"

Directions

[Waypoint = 39.016, -94.53075]

Follow the path west about 80 yards until you see another 4x4 post painted blue. This post is Marker #10 from the original Big Blue Battlefield Walking Tour. This post marks the approximate location of the center of Marmaduke's Defense Line.

Description

Granted, there is not much to see here because it is so overgrown. But this is the approximate center of Marmaduke's Main Defense Line. When the Confederates ran low on ammunition as the Federals attacked up Bloody Hill, the Confederates withdrew to the west, taking the Harrisonville road south. The Historic Byram's Ford Road continued due west from this point until it reached the Harrisonville Road (present day Prospect Avenue). We have plans to clear the brush away from the Byram's Ford Road all the way to Elmwood Avenue, about a couple of blocks west.

Tour Stop, "Log House and Defensive Line"

Directions

[Waypoint = 39.018306, -94.530153]

Self-Guided Tour to the Big Blue Battlefield

Turn around and walk back east along the Byram's Ford Road. After about 20 yards or so, look for a path leading to the north (left). It's marked with plastic yellow tape. This path goes downhill. You'll have found it because there are some old steps on the trail.

Walk down the hill and you should notice the path turns to the right (east) about 20 yards ahead. At the place where the path turns to the east, there is an old foundation. Walk along the path on the uphill side of the foundation. Just after passing the foundation, the path turns left (south). Follow this path down the hill where you should find a footbridge over a creek of sorts. Cross over the footbridge and take an immediate left (west). Follow the path for another 25 yards or so until it turns to the right (north). Keep following the trail (about 250 yards) until you reach E 59th Street. Turn right on E 59th Street and walk about 30 yards or so until you see the historical marker on the right hand side of the street.

Description

Now you have reached the left center of Marmaduke's Main Defense Line. Dee's Battalion and portions of Winslow's Brigade would have attacked this part of the Confederate line.

The historical marker's inscription:

This log house hiding Confederate snipers was in front of the defensive line to the south. Heavy fighting took place there on October 23, 1864 between Marmaduke's Confederates and Pleasonton's Cavalrymen. Clarke's Confederate Brigade was in line here, fortified with fence rails. It ran south to 63rd from the cliff which is a few rods to the north. Pleasonton drove them to the west at 11 A.M.

Tour Stop, "Confederate Entrenchments"

Directions

[Waypoint = 39.018606, -94.529008]

Cross to the other side of E 59th Street and walk to the east end of the mown area where there is a #12 blue post from the old walking tour.

Description

Some preliminary surveys indicate the slight mounds you see here are the remnants of entrenchments used by the Confederates on October 23. These earthworks were actually constructed by the Federals from the Department of Kansas and used by Jennison's Brigade on October 22. You are standing near the Confederate left flank.

Tour Stop, "Precipitous Rocky Ledge"

Directions

[Waypoint = 39.015700, -94.527466]

Self-Guided Tour to the Big Blue Battlefield

Cross to the south side of E 59th Street and walk down Manchester Trafficway Terrace. Be careful for this street is very busy because of trucks from the Pepsi Beverages Co. Walk about 0.2 miles or so until you see the #13 blue post from the old walking tour.

Description

In front of the Pepsi Beverages Co. bottling plant, Manchester Trafficway Terrace runs along the top of the rocky ledge used as a defensive position by the Confederate on Sunday October 23, 1864.

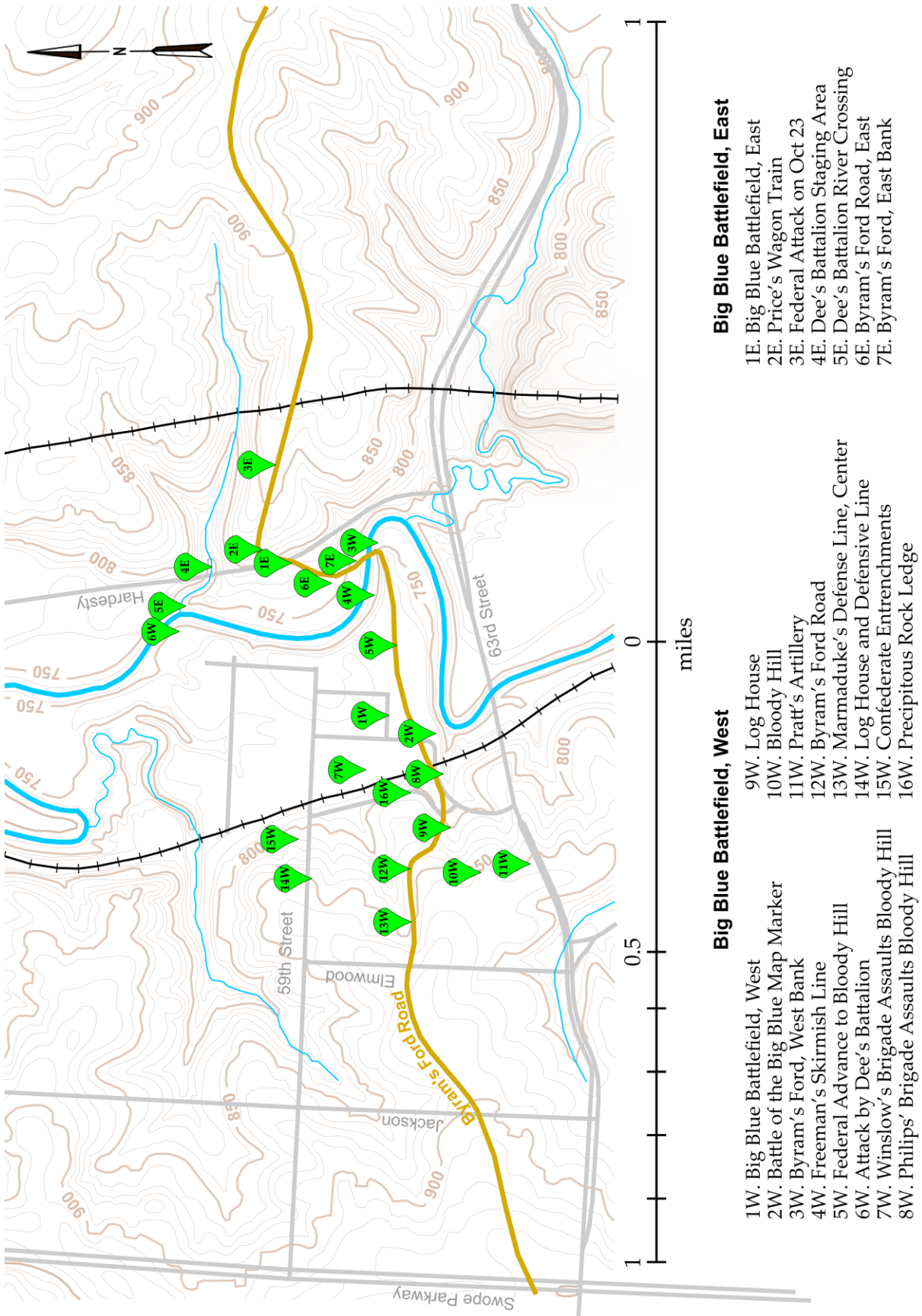
Look east towards Byram's Ford. Consider that you were a Confederate cavalryman with a single shot, muzzle loading Enfield rifle-musket. If you were very good, you might be able to get three shots off every minute. Coming towards you were hundreds of Federal cavalrymen, many of whom were armed with Spencer repeating rifles. The Spencer rifle used rim fire metal cartridges and could be fired 7 times before needing to be reloaded. Reloading was a simple matter of swapping tubes out of the rifle's stock. Even facing this disadvantage in firepower, the Confederates held on for over three hours. They only had to withdraw because they ran low on ammunition.

End of the Tour

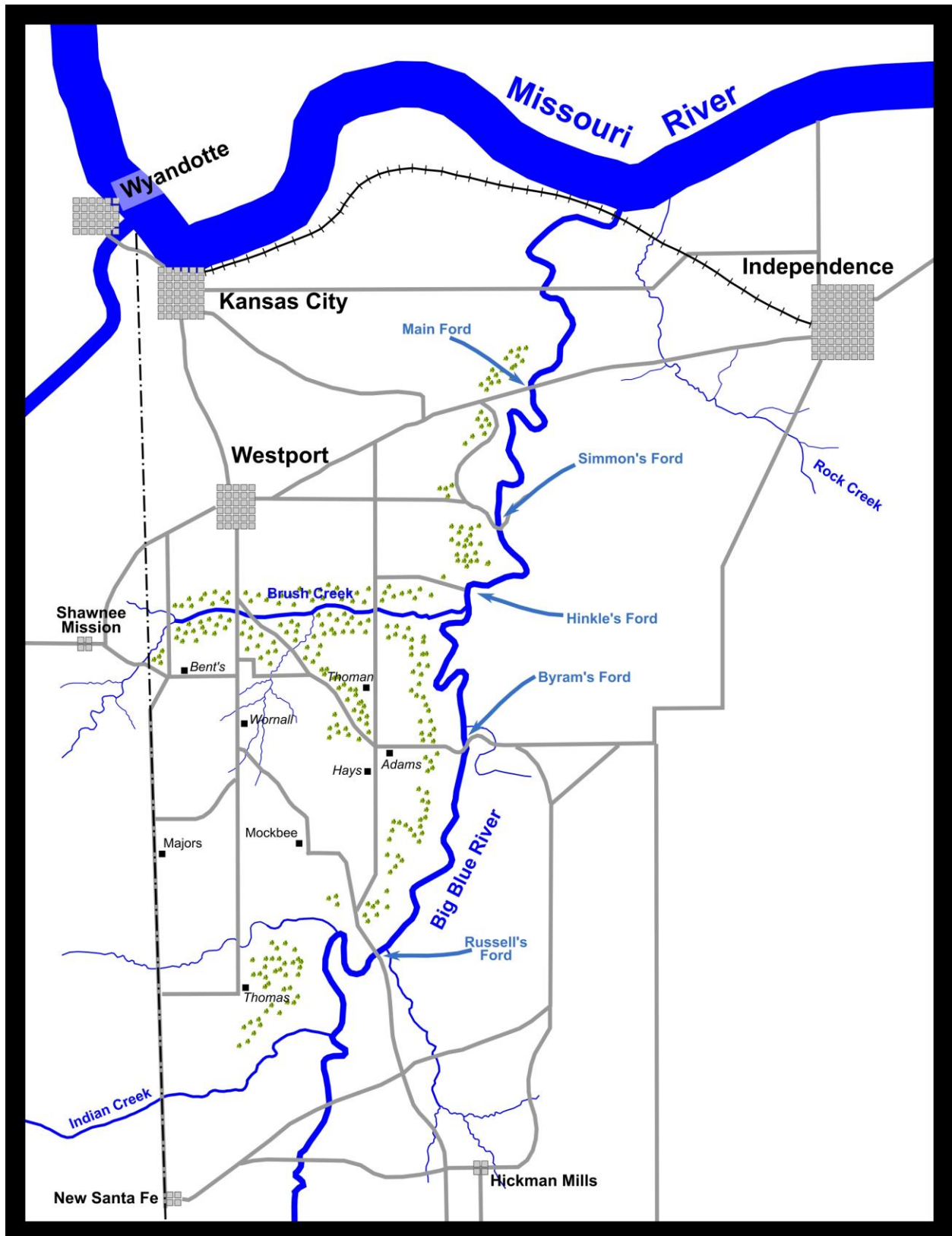
It's time to return to your car. The tour is over. You should be able to see your car. You can either walk around the rocky ledge, down the hill, and cross the railroad tracks at Manchester Trafficway. We certainly hope you enjoyed this tour!

Last update: July 22, 2016

Self-Guided Tour to the Big Blue Battlefield



Self-Guided Tour to the Big Blue Battlefield



Self-Guided Tour to the Big Blue Battlefield

Self-Guided Tour to the Big Blue Battlefield

Alternate Tour Route

The extension of the Blue River Trail north from Swope Park now provides an easier way to get to the spot where Dee's Battalion crossed the Big Blue River and the east bank where Byram's Ford crossed the Big Blue River. By taking this alternate route you will visit three tour stops in a different order-- *Byram's Ford, East Bank*, followed by *Byram's Ford Road, East*, and followed by *Dee's Battalion River Crossing*.

The section of the Blue River Trail crossing the Historic Byram's Ford Road has been completed. The trail in this area is a concrete paved hiking and biking path on the east side of the Blue River. The trail pops out onto Hardesty Avenue about 0.2 miles north of 63rd Street. From there it's about a 150 yard walk down to the point [Waypoint = 39.017675, -94.521361] on the Blue River Trail where you should be able to see the Byram's Ford sign located on the west bank of the Blue River. This is also the location where the Historic Byram's Ford Road crosses the Blue River Trail. Just north of the trail is a ravine and just north of the ravine is the path followed by the historic road. Plans are underway to install interpretive signs at this location in 2017.

If you continue walking north on the trail another 450 yards or so you reach the point where Dee's Battalion crossed the Big Blue River. You should be able to tell you have reached the spot because the trail passes over the big culvert that was installed when Hardesty Avenue was built. This culvert was placed in the ravine followed by Dee's Battalion to reach the river. You are also very close to the river and to Hardesty Avenue. Plans are underway to install an interpretive sign at this location in 2017.