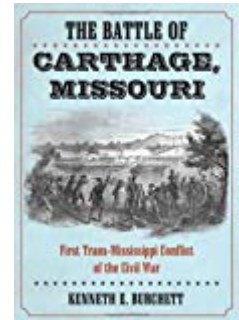


Kenneth E. Burchett. *The Battle of Carthage, Missouri: First Trans-Mississippi Conflict of the Civil War.* Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc., 2013. x + 230 pages \$35.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-7864-6959-8.



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In the early months of the Civil War, an obscure and overlooked battle fought on the prairies of southwest Missouri became the opening act of a much longer and more dramatic conflict to come. At the Battle of Carthage, author Kenneth E. Burchett argues, armies engaged each other for the first time in what was then the “largest full-scale land battle of the Civil War” (pp. 1-2). While the momentous and horrific battles that followed have often drawn the interest of historians away from the Battle of Carthage, Burchett believes the battle is worthy of attention in its own right. In his book, *The Battle of Carthage, Missouri*, Burchett attempts to correct this oversight by providing an account of the battle and demonstrating its importance to the Civil War in Missouri.

Burchett’s history of the Battle of Carthage is organized into four sections. The first two establish the social, political, and military context of Missouri at the time of the battle while the final two deal with the Battle of Carthage and its immediate aftermath. Burchett opens on a state in chaos. In the face of an advancing Union army,

the Southern-sympathizing faction of the state government evacuated the capital city and fled. Missouri governor Claiborne Fox Jackson marshaled the State Guard in his defense and, after fighting a couple of small battles, withdrew to the southwest corner of the state—a strategic corridor through which the exiled government could seek aid from the Confederate South. A contingent of the Union army under Colonel Franz Sigel moved to cut Jackson off, finally clashing with the State Guard at the Battle of Carthage on July 5, 1861. This, according to Burchett, was the first battle of the Civil War. His argument hinges on the fact that the battle immediately followed President Lincoln’s July 4, 1861 proclamation to Congress which Burchett insists “was a clear statement of war on behalf of the United States, and is popularly accepted as the official start of the war” (p. 70). Why this should stand as a definitive declaration of war over Lincoln’s previous proclamations or where this “popular acceptance” comes from, however, remains unclear. Nevertheless, the Battle of Carthage ended in victory for the State

Guard, despite the fact that “fragmented, uncoordinated, and generally ineffective” leadership hampered their effort (p. 88). On the other hand, Sigel’s ability to strategize saved the Union army from a catastrophic defeat. In the midst of retreat, Burchett argues, Sigel utilized his artillery to affect an orderly withdrawal and save his army. Still, pressure from the State Guard forced Sigel to abandon the field, leaving the way open for the State Guard to join forces with the Confederate army.

Burchett relishes in the details of the battle, sometimes pausing to add poetic or anecdotal detail. It can be disorienting, especially considering that it is not always clear what purpose such stories serve or how they contribute to his overall argument. Even so, they add interest to Burchett’s narrative and demonstrate the depth of his research. Not only did Burchett doggedly mine conflicting battlefield reports, eyewitness testimony, newspaper accounts, and secondary sources to piece together his account of the battle, but he also took the time to tell a compelling story. For example, Burchett’s history is filled with engaging personalities. From veterans of the Mexican War to German immigrants, college students, lawyers, and farmers, Burchett documents the personal experience of the soldiers who fought at Carthage—even including photographs for many of them. This is where Burchett is at his best. Without compromising the military history of the battle, Burchett provides the perspective of the individuals who fought it. “They were,” as Burchett puts it, “a part of the tapestry of the Civil War” and “form an important backdrop to the narrative” of the Battle of Carthage (p. 2).

Perhaps because Burchett is not a Civil War historian by trade, however, his work does not seem to be informed by important historiographical developments in the field, particularly regarding the role of slavery in the Civil War. In fact, Burchett dismisses slavery as an underlying cause of the Battle of Carthage. Instead, he emphasizes

popular dissatisfaction with the federal government. According to Burchett’s narrative, when the Union army forcibly ousted the duly elected, Southern-sympathizing state government “slavery fell aside, no longer the engine that drove the conflict; expulsion of the federal invaders and restoration of the right of the state to determine its own destiny became the larger purpose” (p. 10). Why it “fell aside” remains unexplained, although Burchett does suggest that southwest Missouri did not depend heavily on slave labor and that slave owners in this region were “less arduous” (p. 64). Therefore, he concludes, “slavery became almost completely incidental in the conflict to decide Missouri’s future in the Union” (p. 67). This seems unlikely, especially considering the reaction to Union major general John C. Frémont’s proposal to emancipate Missouri’s slaves a month later, which nearly drove Missouri into the Confederacy and ultimately cost Frémont his career. In short, the field is long past the point of considering whether slavery was at issue in this or any theater of the war. This dated argument stands out in stark contrast to an otherwise well-researched book.

Burchett’s treatment of slavery, however, is not necessarily a fatal flaw. If Burchett’s purpose is to draw attention to the Battle of Carthage, he has done his job well. *The Battle of Carthage, Missouri* meticulously documents the strategic objectives and maneuvers of the battle, but never loses sight of its human element. Through the eyes of his rich cast of characters, Burchett recalls a battle historians forgot, but one that never lost its significance to those who experienced it.

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