

Flags of the Rock City Guards

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The Rock City Guards were a Nashville militia organization, whose existence covered the turbulent period from 1860 to 1865. The name of the organization is the ancient nickname of the capital city of Tennessee, a name used by Nashvillians long before the tourist attraction of the same name opened near Chattanooga. The name is said to have derived from the layer of rock underlying all of Davidson County very near the surface of the soil. While it is no longer a common reference for "Music City," a half-dozen Nashville business concerns still carry the name "Rock City."

The Rock City Guards began their corporate existence on March 8, 1860, when the General Assembly of Tennessee enacted Chapter 96 of the Public Acts of 1859-60, entitled "An Act to incorporate the Rock City Guards Military Company."¹ The act named as the organizing officers of the company, Nashville lawyer Robert C. Foster, III, bookkeeper Frank Sevier, hardware merchant James B. Craighead, salesman Joseph Vaulx, and Joseph L. Woods, whose prewar occupation is unknown. This middle-class character among its incorporators was reflected in the membership of the Rock City Guards, and carried over as the organization's numbers multiplied with the outbreak of war.

Two weeks after Fort Sumter had been fired upon, the Rock City Guards had recruited so many men that it had become a battalion of three companies, each numbering about 110 officers and men. The headquarters of the Guards was located in the law offices of Malone & Howell, at No. 6, Cedar Street (now Charlotte Avenue).² Company A, the original Rock City Guards, was equipped by means of a \$10,000 subscription donated by the people of Nashville.³ By April 21, the men were fully equipped and armed with Enfield rifles and sabre bayonets.⁴

By the end of April, the three companies had been fully organized and their officers elected. Company A was commanded by Captain T. F. Sevier, with Joseph Vaulx, Jr., T. H. Malone and W. D. Kelly as lieutenants. Sevier was a bookkeeper and Malone a lawyer. Both Vaulx and Kelly were salesmen. Among the non-commissioned officers were also a lawyer, a salesman, and two clerks.⁵

The captain of Company B was the hardware merchant, James B. Craighead. His first lieutenant was John Patterson, who was a partner in a furniture store on College Street (now Third Avenue North). The second and third lieutenants were John H. Vaulces and William J. Porter. Company B counted among its sergeants and corporals a merchant of shoes and boots, three salesmen, and the periodicals clerk of the Southern Methodist Publishing House.

Company C had originally elected as their captain, C. W. Kelly, proprietor of the City Omnibus Line (forerunner of the Metropolitan Transit Authority).⁶ He was forced to resign, for business reasons, and was replaced as company commander by Dr. Robert C. Foster, IV, a noted Davidson County physician and editor of the Nashville Journal of Surgery and Medicine. The lieutenants of Company C were B. B. Snowden, a grocer, T. B. Eastland, occupation unknown, and banker John F. Wheless. Wheless had formerly been with the Bank of Tennessee, and had just the previous year opened his own banking firm on College Street. His offices would serve as the headquarters of Company C. Among the noncoms of this company were two merchants, a bookkeeper, a bank clerk, a carpenter, a salesman, and a wagon maker.

Since the companies of the Rock City Guards were recruited almost exclusively from within the City of Nashville, among the city's businessmen and their sons, it is possible to get a good picture of the kind of

men who made up this battalion. Of the total of 327 men whose names appear on the original muster rolls of the three companies, 117, or over 36 percent, have occupations listed in the Nashville City & Business Directory for 1860-61. The trades most represented in the Rock City Guards were salesmen and clerks; the former numbering 36, and the latter, 23. Following in number were bookkeepers and merchants, with eight each, and lawyers, doctors, and carpenters, each of these callings having five members among the Guards. There were four tinsmiths, three finishers, and two each of grocers, manufacturers, and printers. Trades and professions which were represented by at least one recruit included artist, auctioneer, banker, brakeman, confectioner, engineer, fisherman, huckster, machinist, marble cutter, moulder, paper hanger, and ticket agent. The chaplain of the battalion was the Rev. C. T. Quintard, rector of the Episcopal Church of the Advent. He would become famous as chaplain of the First Tennessee regiment, and after the war would serve as Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Tennessee.

The first flag under which the Rock City Guards served and paraded in the street of Nashville was the "Stars and Stripes" of the United States of America, which, at the time, bore thirty-three stars. The exact design and star arrangement of this flag is unknown. Indeed, it is unknown whether the Guards actually used a flag in this period. In that election year of 1860, however, a military march was commissioned and dedicated to the Rock City Guards. The cover of the sheet music of this march is festooned with the flag of the union. (See Figure 1.)

The service to the old flag would soon be interrupted. In the election of 1860, the presidential candidate of a sectional party, whose electors were not even on the ballot in Tennessee and other southern states, was elected to the presidency of the union. Many Tennesseans, and most people in the deep South, saw this sectional victory as the end of hope for peace within the union. Therefore, before the year was out, South Carolina left the old troubled union. She was shortly followed by six other States and a new Southern nation was formed under the style "Confederate States of America."

The people of Tennessee, in a wait-and-see mood, rejected the call for a secession convention at the referendum of February 9, 1861.⁷ With the attempted reinforcement and subsequent bombardment of Fort Sumter, it became clear that Lincoln would allow no peaceful dissolution of the union. On April 15, 1861,

U.S. Secretary of War Simon Cameron called upon Governor Isham G. Harris to provide two regiments of Tennesseans for the conquest of the Confederate States. The governor's response was that "Tennessee will not furnish a Single Man for purposes of Coercion but 50,000 if necessary for the defence of our rights and those of our southern brothers."⁸

On the evening before Harris sent his response to Cameron, Nashvillians turned out to celebrate Tennessee's alliance with the Confederate States, an alliance that would not be formal for some months yet. As part of that celebration, the Rock City Guards paraded through several of the principal streets of the city behind the flag of the Confederate States of America.⁹

From this account it is clear that the Rock City Guards were in possession of the "Stars and Bars" of the Confederate States shortly after the firing upon Fort Sumter, if, indeed, they did not have it before that event. One can only guess that it was the official version of the day, with seven stars in a circle representing the seven States then members of the Confederacy.¹⁰

At least two other versions of the "Stars and Bars" were presented to the Rock City Guards. The first of these was made by M. A. Kitch, Fannie E. Claiborne, Laura V. Claiborne, Cattie Cain and Imogen Cain. On April 23, 1861, amid great ceremony, Fannie Claiborne presented this flag to Captain James B. Craighead, the commander of Company B of the Rock City Guards.¹¹

A few days after Miss Claiborne presented this flag, the three companies of the Rock City Guards, along with the Tennessee Rifles and the Railroad Boys, also Nashville companies, the Maury Greys and Brown Guards of Maury County, the Franklin Rifles or Williamson Greys from Williamson County, the Rutherford Rifles, and the Martin Rifles or Martin Guards of Giles County, were mustered into the service of the State by Colonel Bushrod R. Johnson of the Military Department of Nashville University, and designated the First Regiment of Tennessee Volunteers.¹² Companies A, B, and C of the Rock City Guards became companies A, B, and C of the First Regiment.¹³

A majority of the regiment went into their first camp of instruction at Camp Harris near Allisonia on the 6 and 7 of May, 1861.¹⁴ Company B of the Rock City Guards, however, was still in Nashville on May 8.¹⁵ That evening, before a large number of citizens at the home of lawyer Daniel E. Carter, on High Street (now Sixth Avenue), another flag was presented to the

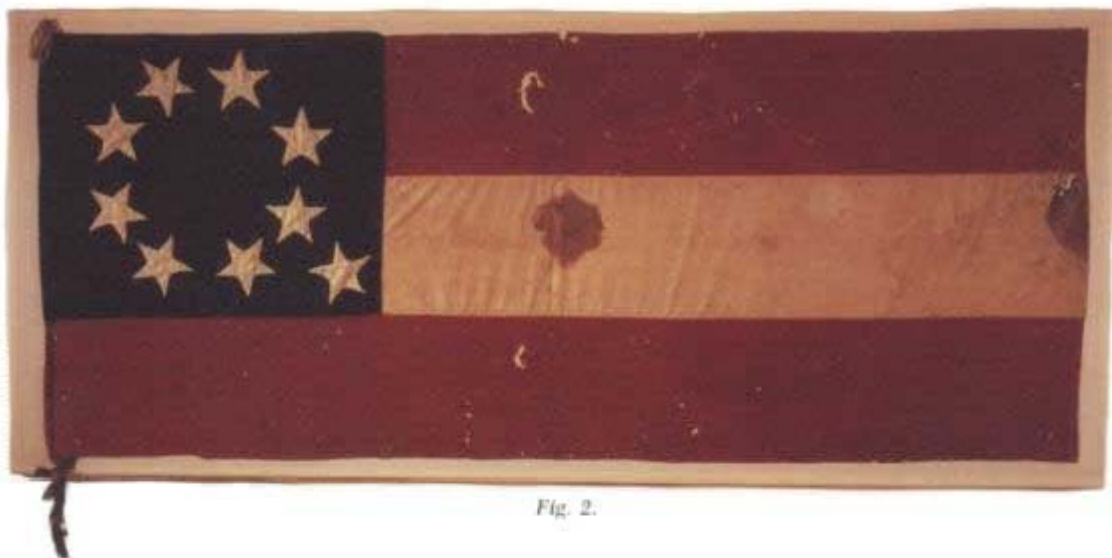


Fig. 2.

company by Georgina Foster. This flag was accepted by Dr. D. F. Wright on behalf of the company. The company left for the camp at Allisonia at 8:00 o'clock on the morning of May 10.¹⁶

A flag identified as that of the Rock City Guards is among the collection of the Tennessee State Museum. (See Figure 2.) It is the design of the flag of the Confederate States adopted by the Congress on March 4, 1861, and displays in its canton nine stars, like the flag described as having been presented by Fannie Claiborne on April 23. Unlike that flag, how-

ever, the one illustrated is made of cotton cloth rather than silk. Furthermore, rather than a neat circle of nine stars, the flag on display at the State Museum has a circle of eight stars, with the ninth in the lower right hand corner. It gives the impression of a flag intended to have a star in each corner (a total of twelve stars) that was presented before it could be completed. Inasmuch as the flag made by Georgina Foster was presented little more than a day before the last of the Rock City Guards left Nashville, it is likely that her flag is the one now on display, just a few blocks from



Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.

where it was presented 127 years ago.

Shortly after going into camp near Allisonia, the soldiers of the First Tennessee Regiment were moved to Camp Cheatham in Robertson County where they received military instruction for the next two months. When news arrived in July that the Northern army was moving into Virginia, the regiment was ordered to Manassas Junction.¹⁷ The men arrived at that junction on the evening after the battle was fought. The first fight for the Rock City Guards was the ill-fated Cheat Mountain campaign under General Lee in September. There the regiment was surprised by a Yankee ambush,¹⁸ and, while they were able to put the invaders to flight, they lost the flag which is now preserved in the Tennessee State Museum.

In February, 1862, the First Regiment was ordered to return to Tennessee. At Knoxville the Rock City Guards, with companies D and E, were dispatched to Cumberland Gap, while the rest of the regiment was forwarded to General A. S. Johnston's army at Corinth, Mississippi. From Corinth Johnston's army moved into Tennessee and defeated Grant's army at Shiloh on April 6, only to lose the fruits of victory by the arrival of Buell's fresh union army during the night. On April 7, the detached portion of the First Regiment, including the Rock City Guards, arrived at Corinth, too late to take part in the battle.¹⁹

At about this time the regiment received its new flag. (See Figure 3.) The regiment was assigned to the First Corps under the command of General Leonidas

Polk, the Episcopal Bishop of Louisiana. General Polk had designed a distinctive battle flag for use by his troops, and a flag of this pattern was issued to the First Tennessee.²⁰ This flag was used by the regiment throughout 1862, until the battle of Perryville, Kentucky, on October 8, 1862. At Perryville the Rock City Guards had about fifty men killed and nearly twice that number wounded.²¹ The First Regiment suffered more than 50 percent casualties,²² including the death of Sergeant James T. Mitchell, the colour bearer.²³ His flag was captured by the First Wisconsin Infantry, and is now in the collection of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.²⁴

After Perryville the regiment obtained a new flag. (See Figure 4.) This flag, like the old one, was made of wool bunting and white cotton. It was also based generally on the "St. George" pattern flag of Polk's Corps. Added to the flag at the top of the cross is a white label with the unit designation "1st REGT TENN" painted in black and edged in gold. The most interesting addition to the flag are two white cotton "waves." These waves begin under the two outer-most stars (the one on the fly end of the flag being missing now), arch up and over clusters of three stars, and then bend down, almost meeting below the center star. The significance of these "waves" is unknown, and this writer is unaware of any other Polk's Corps flag being similarly decorated. It was under this flag that the First Tennessee fought the battles of Murfreesboro, Chickamauga, and Missionary Ridge.

It was retired in the spring of 1864 and is now in the collection of the Tennessee State Museum.²⁵

In December, 1863, General Joseph E. Johnston replaced General Braxton Bragg as commander of the Army of Tennessee. Johnston immediately began reorganization to strengthen the morale and efficiency of the army.²⁶ Among his efforts was that of issuing a uniform battle flag to the regiments of the army to replace the half-dozen or more different designs being used.²⁷ The new flags, issued in the early spring of 1864, were similar in design to that used by the Army of Northern Virginia, except that they were oblong rather than square and did not have the white border found on the eastern flags. The flag issued to the First Tennessee at that time can not now be located. However, a similar flag issued to the 41st Tennessee Infantry at the same time is in the collection of the Tennessee State Museum. (See Figure 5.) All of the flags of this issue are of similar size and construction, and it may be assumed that the flags of these two regiments, both of which served in Cheatham's Division, would have been nearly identical.

Beneath these colors the men of the Rock City Guards fought the almost constant battle against Sherman from Resaca to Atlanta. Among the battles fought during this time was that at Kennesaw Mountain, where the First Tennessee held the "Dead Angle." It has been written that at the "Dead Angle" the dead of the Rock City Guards and the Maury Greys "were almost piled in heaps."²⁸ From Atlanta to Rock City Guards followed this flag back home to Tennessee, to fight and die valiantly at Franklin in November and their home city of Nashville in December, 1864.

After the defeat at Nashville came the great march

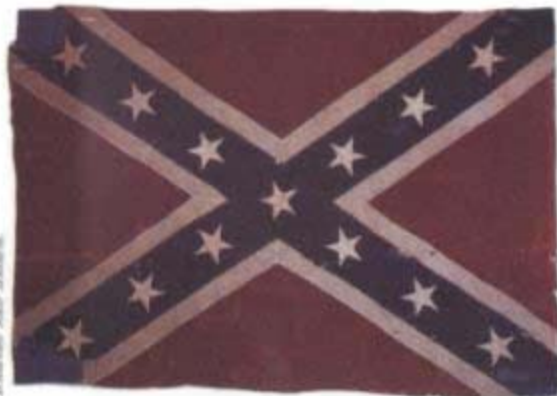


Fig. 5.

south and east, fighting Sherman through the Carolinas, with the hope of joining Lee and combining the two main Confederate armies. With the news of Lee's surrender at Appomattox Court House there was little hope left for the Army of Tennessee. The entire army had been decimated and regiments were little stronger than companies originally had been. Of the 327 men who started with the Rock City Guards in April, 1861, only about ten percent remained in April, 1865. In the final reorganization of the army by General Johnston in April nine units, the 1st, 6th, 8th, 9th, 16th, 27th, 28th, and 34th Tennessee Regiments and the 24th Battalion of Sharpshooters, were consolidated to form a single regiment: the First Consolidated Regiment of Tennessee infantry.²⁹ Finally, on April 26, 1865, General Johnston surrendered the Army of Tennessee. At Greensboro, North Carolina the Rock City Guards stacked their arms for the last time, and with them their flag, "so bullet-riddled and torn that it was but a few blue and red shreds."³⁰

²⁵*Public Acts of the State of Tennessee, 1859-60* (Nashville: 1860), ch. 96, pp. 205-6.

²⁶*Nashville Union and American*, April 17, 1861.

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸*Ibid.*, April 21, 1861.

²⁹The information on the trades and professions of the officers and men of the Rock City Guards was compiled by comparing the organizational muster rolls of the three companies of the Rock City Guards with the *Nashville City & Business Directory* (Nashville: 1860).

³⁰*Nashville Union and American*, April 23, 1861.

³¹White, Robert H., *Messages of the Governors of Tennessee* (Nashville: 1959), vol. V, pg. 272.

³²*Ibid.*, 273.

³³*Nashville Union and American*, April 17, 1861.

³⁴The first national flag of the Confederate States of America, known as the "Stars and Bars," was adopted by the Confederate States Congress on March 4, 1861. It served as the Confederate flag until May 1, 1863. This flag is officially described as:

[A] red field with a white space extending horizontally through the center, equal in width to one-third the width of the flag. The red spaces above and below to be of the same width as the white. The union blue extending down through the white space and stopping at the lower red space. In the center of the union a circle of white stars corresponding in number with the States in the Confederacy.

When the flag was adopted, there were seven States in the Confederacy, therefore, a proper and officially-made flag would have had a circle of seven stars. As new States were admitted into the Confederacy new stars would have been added to the circle. The seven star flag was official from March 4 to May 7, 1861, when Congress admitted Virginia as the eighth State. The official version of the flag had its circle of stars increase rapidly as Arkansas became the ninth State on May 21, and North Carolina and Tennessee became official members of the Confederate States on July 2, 1861.

The eleven star flag was official from July 2 until Missouri was admitted to the C. S. A. on November 28. The admission of the Provisional Government of Kentucky to the Confederacy on December 10, 1861, gave the flag its final form with thirteen stars. Technically proper Confederate flags from December 10, 1861, until the second national flag was adopted on May 1, 1863, would have had a circle of 13 stars.

There was much variation in flags actually made. Many had the stars arranged in patterns other than a circle. A number had stars arranged in a circle, only to have additional stars added in other locations as new States joined. Some went on to include stars for Maryland and Delaware, even

though these States never had the opportunity to form secessionist governments.

¹¹*Nashville Union and American*, April 25, 1861.

¹²*Ibid.*, May 3, 1861.

¹³*Tennesseans in the Civil War*, (Nashville: 1964), vol. 1, Pg. 172.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵*Nashville Union and American*, May 9, 1861.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, May 10, 1861.

¹⁷*Tennesseans in the Civil War*, I, 172.

¹⁸Sam R. Watkins, *Co. Aytch* (New York 1962), 29.

¹⁹*Tennesseans in the Civil War*, I, 172.

²⁰H. Michael Madans and Robert D. Needham, *Battle Flags of the Confederate Army of Tennessee* (Milwaukee: 1976), 24.

²¹Watkins, *Co. Aytch*, 64.

²²*Tennesseans in the Civil War*, I, 173.

²³Watkins, *Co. Aytch*, 63.

²⁴State Historical Society of Wisconsin, collection no. 51-207. This flag is currently on display in the G.A.R. Memorial Hall in the Wisconsin State Capitol.

²⁵Tennessee State Museum, collection no. 73.22.

²⁶Watkins, *Co. Aytch*, 125-9.

²⁷Madans, *Battle Flags*, 63.

²⁸Watkins, *Co. Aytch*, 160.

²⁹*Tennesseans in the Civil War*, I, 174.

³⁰Watkins, *Co. Aytch*, 244.