

Dissidents of Rebellion: The Hidden Stand and Sacrifice of the East Tennessee Bridge Burners

Tate Greene

Junior Division Individual Documentary

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“Taking a Stand in History” lends itself to almost any topic, I consulted a friend, Dan MacDonald a photographer and local historian. Using his suggestions for an “obscure” East Tennessee topic, it came to light that my teacher was a direct descendant of one of the bridge burner families. While the Civil War had not previously been an area of historical interest to me, my teacher’s connection and the close proximity of this story to my home made it an obvious choice for me.

Initially I met Mr. MacDonald at the East Tennessee Historical Society to study their exhibit on the Bridge Burners. Next, I located sources at my local library which led me to sources at the McClung Historical Collection including primary sources such as Parson Brownlow’s book, *Sketches of the Rise, Progress, and Decline of Secession*, from 1862. I contacted and scheduled interviews with: Mr. Donahue Bible, an author and long standing expert on the topic; Dr. Aaron Astor, an author, professor of history, lecturer, and Civil War expert; and Dr. Michael Toomey, history professor and Civil War expert. Mr. Bible led me through an extensive tour of Greene County where he pointed out the actual bridge, the site of the Harmon home and burial sites for four of the five hanged men. During two additional trips to Greene County, I photographed the area for a seasonal effect. A local bridge inspector, Aaron Blake, piloted a drone for aerial footage for my documentary. I made another trip to the Historical Society to search through the microfilm archives. I found primary source articles from *Brownlow’s Knoxville Whig* an old newspaper that reflected the political ideas and leanings of the East Tennessee Unionists. Finally, I spent hours searching through online archives and databases for newspaper articles, images, and resources.

Choosing to create a documentary was a given choice as I have done so before. I had access to Final Cut Pro X, a highly regarded editing software. I consider myself to be a good storyteller, and creating a documentary is a rewarding way to tell a story through images, interviews, and music. I wrote and edited the script numerous times; looked for music to match the mood and time period; searched for relevant images; and sorted through the interviews for the appropriate clips. I used music recorded especially for my documentary being played on the mountain dulcimer, an instrument native to East Tennessee.

The men involved in the bridge burnings, although not well known in history for their actions, took a stand that reflected the sentiments of the people of East Tennessee during the Civil War. This story illustrates the importance of taking a stand and sticking to your convictions no matter how dear the price. Participating in National History Day has given me the opportunity to explore a story from history that was almost forgotten. The Bridge Burners' stand and sacrifice needs to be remembered both here in East Tennessee and within the national light of the Civil War.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

Books

Brownlow, William G. *Sketches of the Rise, Progress, and Decline of Secession*. Philadelphia: Applegate, 1862. Print.

This book written by a famous Unionist from East Tennessee tells the story of the region's struggle against the Confederacy and gives a detailed and personal account of the Bridge Burners' story. This gave me a first hand understanding of what life in East Tennessee was like during the Civil War.

Microfilm

Brownlow, William G. "Malicious Arrests." *Brownlow's Weekly Whig* [Knoxville] 19 Oct. 1861: 2. Microform. *Brownlow's Whig 1858 - 1864* 12 (1861): n. pag.

After reading this newspaper article it became much more clear to me the suppression and hardship of living in East Tennessee whilst under Confederate control. I also saw more clearly the importance of the Bridge Burner's stand. This source was essential to the development of my project.

Brownlow, William Gannaway. "Inaugural Address of Mr. Lincoln." *Brownlow's Knoxville Whig* 9 Mar. 1861: 2. Microform. *Brownlow's Whig 1858 - 1864* 32 (1861): n. pag.

The transcript of President Lincoln's inaugural address, published for East Tennesseans to read for themselves, was useful for understanding Lincoln's positions on issues of the day.

Brownlow, William Gannaway. "Let Union Men Stand Up." *Brownlow's Knoxville Whig* 2 Feb. 1861: 2. Microform. *Brownlow's Whig 1858 - 1864* XxII (1861): n. pag.

This small article was a call for loyalty. I researched and knew that Loyalist sentiments ran deep during this time period, but this was a first hand "call to action" for the people. I used this to emphasize the depth of the sentiments of East Tennesseans.

Brownlow, William Gannaway. "Let Us Remain One People: Speech of Hon. Horace Maynard." *Brownlow's Knoxville Whig* 23 Mar. 1861: 1. Microform. *Brownlow's Whig 1858 - 1864* 34 (1861): n. Pag.

This speech was very powerful in its cry for the people of East Tennessee to stand together even though the outside pressures were telling them otherwise. This helped me to develop the idea of the East Tennessee identity through my project.

Brownlow, William Gannaway. "Secession Coercion." *Brownlow's Knoxville Whig* 12 Jan. 1861: 1. Microform. *Brownlow's Whig 1858 - 1864* XxII (1861): n. pag.

This article from Brownlow's Whig addressed the constitutionality of the act of secession. Reading pieces written in the 1860's was helpful to put me in the mindset of someone living and making decisions during the time. This framed the complex challenge that East Tennessee faced while the rest of the state started to welcome secession.

Brownlow, William Gannaway. "Whittier on the Union." *Brownlow's Knoxville Whig* 2 Mar. 1861: 1. Microform. *Brownlow's Whig 1858 - 1864* 21 (1861): n. pag.

I enjoyed the poetic and artistic writing posed by Whittier challenging citizens to be loyal to the Union. I was able to see clear bias in Brownlow's papers, but he was reflecting the political leanings of the area.

Newspapers

"Daily Nashville Union. (Nashville, Tenn.) 1862-1862, April 25, 1862, Image 1." *News about Chronicling America* RSS. S.C. Mercer, n.d. Web. 12 Oct. 2016.

This article that appeared in the *Daily Nashville Union* in April 1862 provided an understanding of how the rest of the state reacted to the bridge burnings, since the story was very discrete it wasn't widely known in other parts of the state.

"Hanging of Bridge Burners at Greeneville." *Fayetteville Observer* 19 Dec. 1861: 1. *Chronicling America*. Web. 2 Feb. 2017.

This article from a newspaper that sympathised with the Confederacy demonstrated the hatred of Unionists particularly the Bridge Burners. This article was extremely helpful in developing the impact that was felt by the families. From a more historical perspective it was helpful to understand both sides of the conflict and to see how the confederates felt and ultimately the importance of their stand in the area.

McCallum, D. C. *United States Military Railroads: Report of Bvt. Brig. Gen. D.C. McCallum, Director and General Manager, from 1861 to 1866*. Washington, D.C.: Publisher Not Identified, 1866. Print.

This newspaper report details and explains the importance of railroads during the Civil War. I used it mainly for understanding, but it also helped to develop the connection between the stand of the Bridge Burners and the impact.

Photographs

"Home | Library of Congress." *The Library of Congress*. N.p., n.d. Web. 15 Jan. 2017.

I used various Civil War images from this collection. I had a challenging time finding images about the actual individuals involved in the Bridge Burnings, so this sight provided images from the time period.

National Archives and Records Administration. National Archives and Records Administration, n.d. Web. 31 Jan. 2017.

This was my best source for images for the time period along with the Library of Congress collection. I wanted every piece to be and feel authentic. Here I located the letter from William Blount Carter to President Lincoln.

Website

"War of the Rebellion: Serial 114 Page 0841 UNION REBELLION IN EAST TENNESSEE." *War of the Rebellion: Serial 114 Page 0841 UNION REBELLION IN EAST TENNESSEE*. / *EHISTORY*. Ohio State University, n.d. Web. 17 Feb. 2017.

This website has a number of primary source quotes from confederate officials to Jefferson Davis in regards to the events in East Tennessee Including a telegraph from Tennessee Governor Isham G. Harris. It was very helpful to see the reaction from a Confederate point of view.

Secondary Sources

Books

Astor, Aaron. *The Civil War along Tennessee's Cumberland Plateau*. Charleston, SC: History, 2015. Print.

After interviewing Dr. Astor, I used his book to get a more thorough understanding of how the geography of the state influenced the various acts of guerilla warfare being carried out.

Bible, Donahue. *Broken Vessels: The Story of the Hanging of the "Pottertown" Bridge-burners, November-December, 1861*. Mohawk, TN: Dodson Creek, 1996. Print.

This book contained several primary source letters and images Mr. Bible uncovered during his research. The most enlightening piece included was a letter from one of the Bridge Burners that only came forward with his story on his 70th birthday. This letter cements the point in my documentary that this story was almost lost.

Bryan, Charles Faulkner. *The Civil War in East Tennessee: A Social, Political, and Economic Study*. N.p.: n.p., 1978. Print.

This report provided a detailed and insightful report as to the social, political, and economic conditions in East Tennessee during the Civil War, as well as the motivations behind the people of East Tennessee in their beliefs. I was able to better understand and develop the historical understanding of this project.

Fisher, Noel C. *War at Every Door: Partisan Politics and Guerrilla Violence in East Tennessee, 1860-1869*. Chapel Hill, NC: U of North Carolina, 1997. Print.

This book quite accurately summed up what life was like in East Tennessee and why loyalties were so divided. I was able to imagine how everyday life was taking a stand while being a Unionist in East Tennessee.

Judd, Cameron. *The Bridge Burners: A True Adventure of East Tennessee's Underground Civil War*. Johnson City, TN: Overmountain, 1996. Print.

This informative piece contained facts but read as a novel. This helped me to imagine the adventure of the night of the bridge burnings from a fictional viewpoint. It was incredibly helpful in understanding the courage that it took for these men to act as well as the consequences they suffered for their stand.

McKenzie, Robert Tracy. *Lincolmites and Rebels: A Divided Town in the American Civil War*. New York: Oxford UP, 2009. Print.

The story that is told in this book is quite helpful in understanding the social conditions and ferocity of the divisions in loyalties in East Tennessee. This definitely helped me to understand from a historical perspective why people were so intensely divided.

Parish, Peter J. *The American Civil War*. New York: Holmes & Meier, 1975. Print.

This book provided background information that helped to put the events of the Bridge Burners into perspective in relation to the national condition and the state of the Civil War. I personally derived a great deal of understanding and appreciation for the men and women who took their stands during the civil war.

Seymour, Digby Gordon. *Divided Loyalties; Fort Sanders and the Civil War in East Tennessee*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee, 1963. Print.

I purchased this book from the East Tennessee Historical Society. It contains detailed information about the region and the political divisions. I used information specifically from the chapter of the Bridge Burners. I am grateful that this easily accessible contains the almost forgotten story.

Tennessee Ancestors. Vol. 21. Knoxville, TN: Tennessee Ancestors, 2000. Print.

I used this booklet for further fact gathering and for the copies of the primary source documents showing the five soldiers being hanged for treason. It also helped me to develop the impact of the stand especially in the local community.

Footage

Blake, Aaron. *Lick Creek Bridge Drone Footage*. 2017. Greene County.

This present day drone footage was not only helpful for creating the desired mood in my documentary, but also helped me understand what the bridge looked like and how it functioned. Seeing the landscape from an aerial view gave me the perspective that local residents would have had while travelling on foot in such rural areas in 1861.

Footage of landscape, Greene County Tennessee. Personal footage by author. 2017.

On a trip to Greene County I collected a great deal of footage that helped to create the mood and the seasonal setting. The reading of the C.A. Haun letter over the cedar trees and grass swaying in the wind is especially moving. The landscape itself helped me to understand that life in Greene County wasn't black and white it would have looked similar to what I can see today.

Interviews

Astor, Aaron. Personal interview. 27 Sept. 2016.

I met and interviewed Dr. Astor on the Maryville College Campus. His interview specifically helped me to understand the importance of the use of railroads in the Civil War, and the strategic location of the railroads running through East Tennessee. I also came to understand more about the social and geographic conditions of the area as well as East Tennessee's unique identity.

Bible, Donahue. Personal interview. 21 Sept. 2016

My interview with Mr. Bible took place at the Harmon Family Cemetery. He helped me to understand the personal side of the Bridge Burner story. I took note of his perseverance throughout so many years of research and kept that in mind while putting together my documentary.

Toomey, Michael. Personal interview. 16 Dec. 2016.

Dr. Toomey met me at the East Tennessee Historical Society (where my project began) for this interview. His interview gave me further and deeper insight into the social, political, and economic climate of the region during the time prior to and during Tennessee's vote for secession.

Journal Article

Bible, Donahue. "The Complete Story of Jacob Harmon, Jr. and the Burning of the Lick Creek Bridge." *The Greene County Pioneer* (2012): n. pag. Web.

This article presents Mr. Bible's summary of his research from 1958-2012. This piece gives an account of the extensive length and depth of the research to uncover this almost lost story. As well, this helped me to understand Mr. Bible as an individual and his commitment to the story.

Madden, David. "Union Resistance to Confederate Occupation: The Bridge Burners of East Tennessee." *East Tennessee Historical Society's Publications* 52 (1980): 22-39. Print.

David Madden was one of the early historians to write about the East Tennessee Bridge Burners and their stand. This article recounted the story of the entire "Bridge Burning" attempt and the various personalities involved giving me an understanding of the story in general.

Music

Burns, Ken. *The Civil War: Original Soundtrack Recording*. Elektra Nonesuch, 1990. MP3.

This soundtrack was emotional and moving as I watched the documentary series for background information on the Civil War.

O'Connor, Mark, perf. *Ashokan Farewell*. Mark O'Connor. Mark O'Connor, 2009. MP3.

Mark O'Connor possibly one of the best fiddle players in the world performed this classic song a while back and it contributed to the emotion felt in the C.A. Haun letter and the ending.

Thompson, Robin, perf. *There Is a Fountain (Filled with Blood)*. Robin Thompson. Robin Thompson, 2017. MP3.

Ms. Thompson, a local mountain dulcimer player, recorded this Civil War era tune and it matched up aesthetically with parts of my documentary. The strum and drone of the mountain dulcimer really helps to capture the essence of East Tennessee during the Civil War and is quite historically accurate.

Turner, Dusty, perf. *Lincoln and Liberty Too*. Hutchinson Family Singers. 1860. MP3.

I used this audio for period music. The song was originally a campaign song for

the 1860 election. A musician recorded this for my documentary on a mountain dulcimer, an instrument native to the region of East Tennessee.

Newspapers

Brown, Fred. "Man Proves It's Never Too Late to Honor Heroes." *News Sentinel* [Knoxville] 2008: n. pag. Print.

This article about the Bridge Burners and Mr. Bible's efforts to preserve and uncover parts of the story was moving in the fact that hundreds of years later we could still remember the stand they took and provided context for their legacy.

McCrary, Amy. "A Plot Foiled." *News Sentinel* [Knoxville] 6 Nov. 2011, sec. E: n. pag. Print.

This article described mainly the effect that the Bridge Burners stand had both on their families but also the community around them. It brought to light the tremendous sacrifice both from the men themselves but also the devastation that their families felt.

Pamphlet

Bible, Donahue. *A Short Sketch of the Tragedy at "Pottertown"*. N.p.: Greene County Heritage Trust, 2000. Print.

This booklet is a brief overview of the events from November-December 1861 regarding the Bridge Burners, as well it contains rare images and letters I was able to read primary source letters and documents from family members to better understand the impact on the families.

Photographs

Harmon Family Homeplace and Captain David Fry. N.d. Donahue Bible Collection, Mohawk, TN.

I used a couple of photographs with Mr. Bible's permission from his collection. Images from this event are rare and of the few that exist they are helpful in communicating the atmosphere of the time period.

MacDonald, Dan. *Jugs by C.A. Haun*. 2011. East Tennessee Historical Society, Knoxville.

This is one of only a few available photographs documenting the pottery of C.A. Haun. Taken during a temporary exhibit at the East Tennessee Historical Society, this photo is very useful for understanding that C.A. Haun was possibly one of the best potters in the United States. I realized through this picture that not only was a father being lost but also a great talent.

Several photographs of bridges, graves, etc., Greene County Tennessee. Personal photograph by author. 2017.

On one of my trips to Greene County I took several pictures of the graves of the men, the bridge that they burned, scenery, and the Bridge Burners monument. These images were extremely helpful especially because of the lack of images. It was especially interesting to go to the actual places where this story took place and think about how it was then and what exactly it took to take such a monumental stand.

Press Release

Greene County Heritage Trust. "*BRIDGE-BURNER*" *MONUMENT DEDICATION*. N.p.: n.p., 2002. Print.

In this Press release from the dedication of the monument there is a great deal of information about the surviving families and descendants of the bridge burners. Congressman William Jenkins the first official of the U.S. government (and I believe the only one) was the speaker, his story and connection is quite an important one as it speaks volumes to how little recognition this story has received.

Websites

"HANGING THE BRIDGE-BURNERS." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 29 Mar. 1862. Web. 1 Dec. 2016.

This online article gave details from an uncommon perspective about the hanging of the bridge burners and the impact it had on their families. It also helped to confirm and strengthen the information of other sources.

"Inside the Civil War Bridge Burners' Mission: Guerrilla Action Was at Lincoln's Request." *Timesfreepress.com*. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Dec. 2016.

This website was critical to putting the events of the bridge burnings into national context, detailing the fact that Lincoln had given his approval and consent to carry out these actions. It also made sense of the fact that in East Tennessee it was indeed a guerrilla war between neighbors, families, and even churches it showed how in that region sometimes the actions of common people are the ones we forget even though they are just as important to our history.

"Unionists Tried to Burn Bridges, Take Tennessee in 1861." *Unionists Tried to Burn Bridges, Take Tennessee in 1861*. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Sept. 2016.

This News Sentinel article in their archives was definitely useful, and as one of the first sources that I found it helped to establish a knowledge base as well as create the foundations of the project.