

John Hunt Morgan's Christmas Raid

By Tim Asher

In December 1862, the rebel army was back in Tennessee after the Confederate disappointment at Perryville, Kentucky. The Confederates found themselves under constant pressure from the growing Union presence in Tennessee commanded by Gen. William Rosecrans. All indications were that the Union General was planning a winter campaign as soon as adequate supplies were collected at Nashville. The Confederate commander of the Army of Tennessee General Braxton Bragg understood his situation and was determined to stop the flow of war materials into Nashville as best he could. To do this, he called upon his newly promoted brigadier general and Kentucky native John Hunt Morgan to break Rosecrans' L&N supply line somewhere in Kentucky.



Brigadier General John
Hunt Morgan, CSA

The L&N railroad carried food, forage, and supplies from Louisville through the uneven terrain of Kentucky to the Union army's depot at Nashville. Reports were that the L&N tracks were heavily guarded to prepare for the push on Bragg. But an ever confident Morgan believed that, regardless of the fortifications, a weakness could be found just north of Elizabethtown in an area know generally as Muldraugh's hill. Muldraugh's hill is an escarpment rising from the Ohio River to an elevation of over 400 feet in just five miles and crisscrossed by streams and gorges. Morgan's knowledge of the area probably came from the experience of his brother-in-law and second in command, Colonel Basil Duke who in 1861 had walked through the area avoiding Federal capture in Elizabethtown. In early

fall of 1861 Duke was in Elizabethtown and had just recruited two companies of Confederates. He was preparing to swear them in on the courthouse square when they were taken by surprised when the vanguard of General Wm. T. Sherman's men marched into town from Fort Duffield at West Point. The unfortunate timing of the arriving Federals resulted in the both companies of "would-be-Confederates" scattering like birds. Duke and an associate made their escape by walking up the L&N railroad out of Elizabethtown in hopes of catching a train that would eventually take them to Lexington. Instead of meeting a train, a handcar of Federal soldiers traveling south rolled into view. In spite of Duke's efforts to conceal his identity, a couple of the passengers recognized Duke as a Confederate. Basil Duke now found himself in real trouble because he was behind enemy lines dressed as a civilian. If captured, he could have been hanged as spy. But just as Duke was about to be apprehended, good fortune smiled his was because riding the handcar was his old friend and Transylvania schoolmate John Harlan who realized Duke's predicament and decided to lend a hand. As one of the Federals attempted to apply the brakes, Harlan placed his foot between the deck and the brake handle keeping it from being fully engaged. With Harlan's help, Duke made his getaway through a cornfield as the handcar rolled on disappearing into a tunnel. When it was obvious that no Federal pursuit was being made, Duke continued his trip through Muldraugh's hill no doubt noticing the two huge wooden trestles elevating the tracks

above deep gorges both about 90 ft. high and 500 ft. long. These trestles located in very difficult country became the primary targets of the Christmas Raid.

December 22, 1862 dawned bright and sunny in Alexandria, Tennessee where Morgan organized his force and prepared to depart. Bragg had approved the raid into Kentucky as more or less a last resort to try to disrupt Rosecrans' plans for a winter campaign. In fact before Morgan left one of Bragg's Lieutenants, Gen. William Hardee had told Morgan that it would be "impossible to burn the bridges." Regardless of the doubts and obvious risks, Morgan kissed Mattie, his 21 year old bride of eight days goodbye and after pausing to watch her carriage disappeared around a curve in the road he passed orders to Duke: *forward march!* Morgan moved the largest Confederate force he had



Morgan Reviewing his Troops

ever commanded, approximately 4,000 strong, toward Tompkinsville and reached that place by nightfall of the 23rd. As they camped that night, the men were glad to be on their native soil once again.

Approximately 90% of Morgan's command was Kentuckians who had not been home since they enlisted. One of Morgan's officers, Lt. McCreary put his emotions into words as he confided to his diary: "Tonight we are camped on the sacred soil of Kentucky, and it fills my heart with joy and pride." The next day was Christmas Eve and they continued to

Glasgow under gray clouds and a cold wind that cut through the men. They arrived at Glasgow about mid afternoon and dispatched the Federal garrison stationed there. They continued on across the Green River on Christmas day quickly moving Federal forces out of their way as they went. That night they camped in a cold rain just outside of Upton where a Union stockade and blockhouse guarded the track. The next morning in a move to keep the Federals from guessing his true objective, Morgan sent a detachment south to burn the Bacon Creek Bridge. About 100 men were fortified in a blockhouse and put up a brief but ferocious fight that resulted in the destruction of the bridge for the third time in the war. The men tore up track and burned crossties on their way back to their Upton camp. During this raid, protracted resistance was rare. Most of the stockades that were challenged quickly surrendered after Duke, "gave them a look down the barrel of his artillery."

In Upton, "Lightning" Ellsworth went to work by cutting into the telegraph line and began sending confusing information about Morgan's whereabouts, his troop strength, and intentions to all of the Federal officers in the area.

The morning of the 27th dawned cold but the sky was clearing as Morgan and his regiment rode toward Elizabethtown. Upon arriving, Morgan threw a cordon around the town and set his artillery on a hill commanding the entire area (*The Hill is now the city cemetery at US 31W and Nichols Street: a replica Parrott gun has been placed in the*

cemetery near where Morgan placed his artillery). The Federals had set up a strong resistance by fortifying a number of brick warehouses near the railroad complete with loopholes through which to fire their muskets. Stockades were under construction but not completed when Morgan arrived.

About 650 soldiers of the 91st Illinois Vol. Infantry commanded by Col. H.S. Smith were garrisoned in the town. Col. Smith knew the hopelessness of his situation but was determined to give Morgan his best effort by first attempting to fool the Confederate commander into believing that a huge Federal host occupied the town. He did this by marching his men in a “double file” loop across the brow of a hill in full view to give Morgan the impression that he commanded much greater numbers. Next he sent Morgan word that a Federal force had Morgan surrounded and he should surrender immediately. However, neither ruse worked and after repeated requests that Smith surrender, Morgan gave the town thirty minutes to evacuate the women and children and the battle of Elizabethtown was on.

Col. Smith was at a tactical disadvantage with his men scattered among the various warehouses and downtown buildings and could not affect much of a coordinated resistance. On the other hand, General Morgan used his 6 to 1 advantage of men and seven pieces of artillery to perfection overpowering the occupiers of the town in short order. With his

artillery commanding cemetery hill, he sent Col. Duke’s brigade to the right and Col. Breckenridge to the left where they would make, as Morgan phrased it, “a street fight out of it.” As the Confederates moved into town the artillery shells screamed over their heads. But before they could get to the fight they had to ford rain swollen Valley Creek that passed between their position and the Federals. They waded through the freezing waist deep water holding their muskets above their heads with the artillery keeping most of the Federals under cover. All Col. Smith could do was to attempt to delay the inevitable. Col. Palmer, Morgan’s head of artillery described the accuracy of the artillery fire as, “nearly every shot striking the houses occupied by the enemy.”

As the battle continued, many of the town’s people recognized that the buildings around the public square housing the 91st Illinois were receiving the “lion’s share” of the punishment. With this in mind, they began moving to a quieter part of town. They were seeking shelter up W. Poplar St. in the home of Samuel Beal Thomas. Mr. Thomas was the county’s first millionaire and a personal friend of Gen. Morgan. Many in town knew



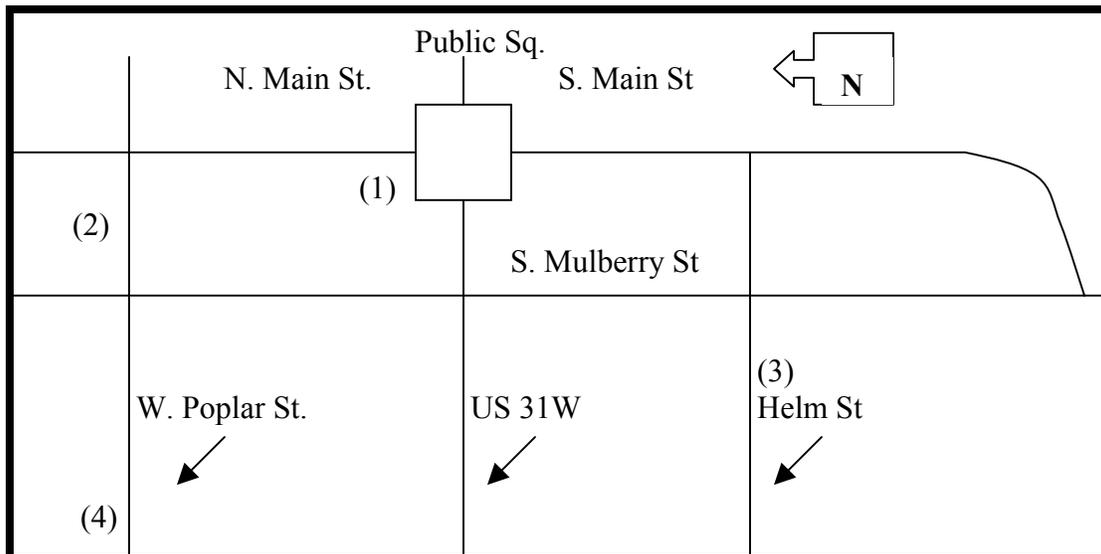
In April 2002, a Parrott Gun was placed in the Elizabethtown city cemetery where Morgan placed his artillery in 1862 as a memorial to Christmas Raid. The units of re-enactors participating in the ceremony are Union: 9th Michigan and Confederate: 2nd & 9th KY.

of their relationship and went there in hopes that Gen. Morgan would not level his guns at his old friend. This place sheltered a few briefly but then came under fire when Morgan saw a number of Union soldiers following the civilians to the home of his old friend.

With the missiles doing their deadly work and Duke and Breckenridge flushing out the isolated Federals in house to house fighting, soon handkerchiefs, bed cloths, and anything white began emerging from windows and doorways all over town. However before surrendering, Col. Smith was wounded when a shell struck the house he was in killing a man and sending razor-like splinters into his face. In spite of his wounds, his true rage was with his men who had participated in the unauthorized surrender of the town since he had not ordered it. As Duke recalled years later, “Smith was not ready to surrender, but his men were not going to wait on him and ran out of the houses and threw down their arms.”

In general, Confederate sympathies in Elizabethtown were strong and the residents were glad to throw off the yolk of Federal occupation, if only for a little while. The invaders were treated like conquering heroes and afforded whiskey, Christmas goodies, and entertainment.

Structures existing today hit by Morgan’s Cannon December 1862



Structures that received cannon fire in 1862 and have survived the battle and the two great downtown fires of 1869 and 1887 are as follow: (1) Eagle house (a.k.a. today Peck, Flannery, Gream, & Warren Architects: 112 N Main St.) at the corner of the Public Square and N. Main St. took seven shots killing two men; (2) Severns Valley Baptist Church (a.k.a. today Riasok Shrine Club: 112 Poplar Drive) took one shell; (3) The Jackie Helm House: 210 Helm St. took one shell, and (4) the Samuel Beal Thomas House: 337 W. Poplar St. took one shell.

On the morning of December 28, Morgan moved his men up the railroad wrecking the tracks as they went. Five miles from Elizabethtown, on Muldraugh's hill Morgan found the main objectives of the raid: two huge wooden structures over Sulphur Fork and Broad Run. The trestles were about a mile apart and the Federals were in the process of constructing defensive positions consisting of earthworks and artillery platforms. However at the time that Morgan arrived, the positions were not complete and the defenders had no artillery.

Lt. Col. Courtland Matson commanded both positions. When he saw the Confederates arriving in force he called all of his 560 men to Sulphur Fork in an effort to turn Morgan back. Matson held out for eight hours due primarily to the patience of Morgan.



Morgan repeatedly demanded Matson's surrender. On the second attempt, Morgan offered to take the Federal Commander out of his position to view the hopelessness of his situation. To this Matson replied, "it was his and his men's duty to fight and that they would do so until the last." At 3:00 pm Morgan began shelling the position and the surrender occurred about an hour later. Morgan then burned the trestles and the unfinished stockades.

To this point the raid was a brilliant success acted out with little opposition. However, things were about to change. Union General Rosecrans had an intuition that Morgan would strike into Kentucky and when he was certain that the raid was underway, he wired his commanders with an accurate estimate of Morgan's troop strength and promised, "We'll catch and kill those rascals yet."

Any experienced cavalry commander understands that once his position was determined behind enemy lines, he had only a certain number of days until the overwhelming numbers of the enemy closed off his retreat and cornered him. Needless to say at this time, General Morgan's work was not going unnoticed by the Federal Army commanders. On Christmas day, Union General Rosecrans took time out from planning his offensive against General Bragg to devise a trap for Morgan. In Murfreesboro, Rosecrans organized what is known as a "Hammer and Anvil" tactic. This operation called for a Union force (the "Hammer") to locate and chase Morgan onto waiting Union troops (the "Anvil") in southern Kentucky as he tried to retreat to the safety of Tennessee. For the "Hammer", Rosecrans selected Col. John Harlan and his 2,300-man infantry accompanied by a battery of artillery. This is the same John Harlan who let Duke escape his handcar of Federals just outside of Elizabethtown in September 1861. Harlan was the commander of the second brigade, first division of Gen. George H. Thomas' command. Before the war, Harlan was attorney in Louisville and a graduate of Centre College and Transylvania University where he had been a classmate of Duke in Law School. After the war, Harlan was destined to occupy a seat on the US Supreme Court. But for now, he was sent into Kentucky after Morgan and his old friend Basil Duke.

The “Anvil” in southern Kentucky was composed of two commands: one in Lebanon and the other in Glasgow. In Lebanon, Rosecrans called on Col. Wm. A. Hoskins and reinforced him with troops from Danville and Columbia bringing his strength to around 3,300 men. These reinforcements added an artillery battery and a small group of cavalry to Hoskins force. A little further to the west of Lebanon, the road to middle Tennessee ran through Glasgow and would be blocked there by Gen. Joseph J. Reynolds and his 5,000-man division sent from Thomas’ corps that including twelve pieces of artillery and 600 cavalry. The trap was set and Rosecrans was sure that Morgan would walk right into it.

Rosecrans believed that he had a perfect plan to capture or kill Morgan. However, not everyone shared Rosecrans’ optimism. Gen. Speed Fry was a division commander in Gallatin who after reviewing the plan spotted a flaw. Fry suggested that it would be better if cavalry were sent after Morgan. Rosecrans shrugged off this suggestion and replied that he wanted infantry to run Morgan down. History tells us that Speed Fry was right; sending infantry after cavalry would prove fatal to Rosecrans scheme.

On December 27 Rosecrans’ plan was put into motion as Harlan (the Hammer) boarded a train in Gallatin, Tennessee that took him to Munfordville as far as the track was clear. Here Harlan and his men left their transportation behind and began the long march to catch Morgan’s horsemen somewhere in Hardin County. After marching all day and night, Harlan arrived in Elizabethtown and found out that he was too late to save either the town or the trestles. However, he was elated when informed that Morgan was encamped a mere 10 miles up the Bardstown Road (*now US 62*) on the Hardin County side of the rain-swollen Rolling Fork River. Finally, it appeared that all of Harlan’s frustrating delays would be overcome and the hardships of a forced march would be rewarded by the capture of Morgan. Harlan knew that Morgan would not stay in one place for very long and determined that resting the men was out of the question as he pressed his bone weary soldiers on another ten miles to catch up with Morgan at the Rolling Fork.

In spite of Harlan’s haste, Morgan was one move ahead of his Union pursuer as he had already moved the main body of his force across the river and was up to mischief in Nelson County. Morgan had sent Cluke’s 8th KY to destroy the bridge over the Rolling Fork at Lebanon Junction and Stoner’s 9th KY to attack a garrison at New Haven with the main body moving to Boston to destroy the rail road and seize the town. These units carried artillery with them to make the work quick and easy as possible.



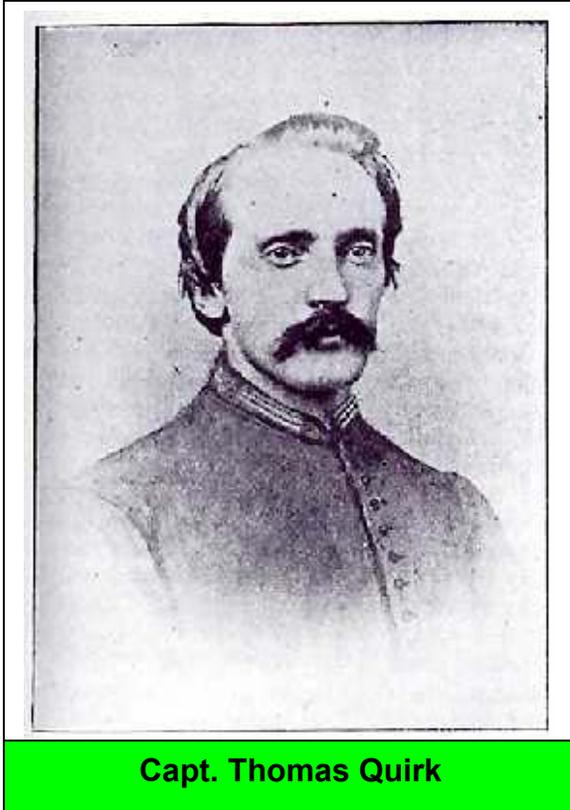
Hamilton Hall House

Only a couple hundred men remained before Harlan on the west side of the Rolling Fork River. In fact, Morgan's officers were assembled in the Hamilton Hall House to conduct the court marshal of Lt. Col. Huffman who was accused of violating the surrender terms established for the Federals at Bacon Creek. The proceedings concluded at about 11:00 o'clock in the morning acquitting Huffman, when Harlan's cannons surprised the Confederates. At this time, Morgan was operating on the other side of the river in Nelson County so Duke assumed command and quickly threw up three companies as a defense: one to the center, one to the right and one to the left. All were sheltered from Harlan's fire by a natural depression provided by the river and trees. With Harlan's guns giving notice of his arrival and his slow and deliberate probing of Morgan's force, Major Bullock and his five companies, who had been sent by Morgan to destroy the Rolling Fork River Bridge, had time to rejoin Duke at the river. The Confederates desperately wanted to dash though the ford just a few hundred feet before them leaving their foot sore pursuers at the river but, Harlan's guns had completely cut them off.

Duke now had approximately 800 men lodged between a bend in the river and Harlan's force. All hope of Duke's cornered troopers escaping began to evaporate as Harlan continued his assault of cannon and then ordered his infantry forward to press the Confederates hard. But then when it appeared that capture was inevitable, without reason, Harlan paused and pulled back. It seems that Harlan had reconsidered his aggressive tactics after assessing the situation and coming to the conclusion that Duke must possess an overwhelming force due to the fact that he was not using his artillery. The fact was that the artillery was scattered out among Morgan's various commands now working in Nelson County. This hesitation by Harlan was all that the quick thinking Duke needed to wiggle free from his trap. He immediately sent three companies to the right against a battery positioned on a small hill that was pouring a murderous fire on the Confederates. This silenced the Federal guns for about 15 minutes giving Duke time to send the balance of the Confederate force through a new ford just discovered. With the combination of the temporary capture of the battery to the right and the other federal batteries being forced to use precious time to redirect their fire to the new point of Confederate retreat, Harlan would watch his prize disappear through the swift running water of the Rolling Fork. However, just before the last Confederates crossed the river one of Harlan's cannon found its mark exploding a shell in a group of horses being held for the dismounted Confederates. Fragments of this shell killed several horses and struck Duke in the head rendering him unconscious. Private John Wyeth witnessed Duke being struck and later commented that, "I had no doubt that (Duke) had been instantly killed." The lifeless body of Duke was placed by some of his men astride



**17 Yr. Old
John Allan Wyeth**



Capt. Thomas Quirk

the pommel of Capt. Tom Quirk's saddle who dashed through the strong current to safety. The battle came to a close as the unconscious Duke was carried from the field followed by the remaining skirmishers and Pendleton's men who had occupied the federal battery all making their way through the ford and now racing toward Bardstown.

Morgan's rear guard had escaped certain capture or death at the hands of a Federal force three times its size with only three men wounded and none killed. After the battle Harlan's exhausted and demoralized men had planned to camp on the battlefield but when Harlan was made aware of the damage to the Rolling Fork Bridge, he marched his men there to set up a defensive position in case Morgan decided to double back to complete his work. From this point on, the "Hammer" was no longer a factor in Rosecrans' plans

to capture Morgan. It was now up to the "Anvil" in Lebanon or Glasgow.

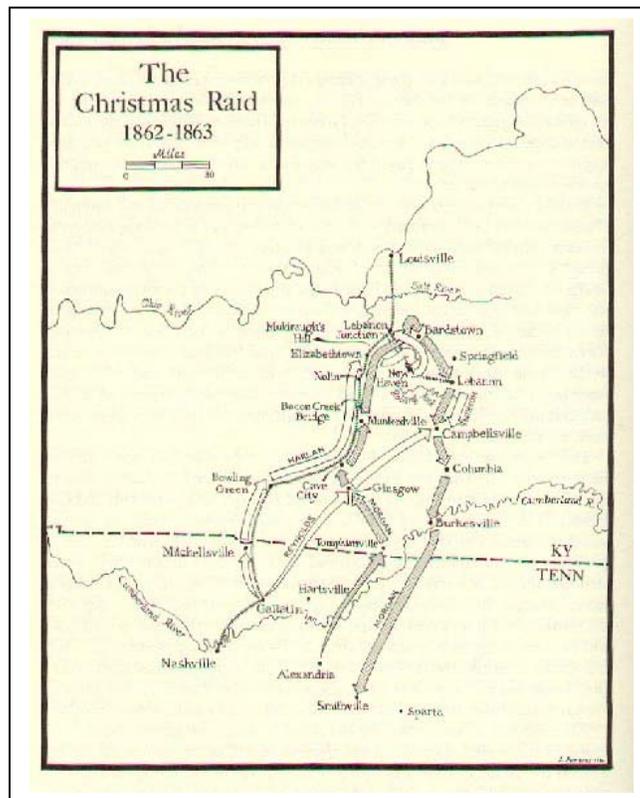
As Morgan's men collected at Bardstown the night of December 30th, each of them could feel the approaching Federals as if a noose were being tightened around their necks. The Union command's experiments of "trial and error" in locating and establishing Morgan's troop strength were finally yielding valuable information to help capture the Confederates. The Federals now wanted to block Morgan's return to Tennessee and bag his cold exhausted troopers. To add to Morgan's troubles, that night the temperature plummeted and a swirling snowstorm struck. To get home, Morgan would now have guide to his huge host of 4,000 troopers past the waiting Federal "Anvil," to the south or if that failed, fight the Union men head on in the forbidding winter weather.

The next day, Morgan's headed south out of Bardstown. He had become aware of the Federal stronghold at Lebanon so to buy some time he headed southeast toward Springfield. However not to disappoint the waiting Federals, he sent two companies toward Lebanon with instructions to drive the pickets back into town but to avoid a full engagement. This was accomplished by attacking too late in the day for Hoskins to offer battle. To keep the Federals in place, Morgan had instructed his men to build dozens of fires just outside of town to give the Federal defenders the impression that Morgan's entire command was assembled in their front ready to give battle at first light. All indications were that Hoskins had learned from Lt. Col. Smith's mistake at Elizabethtown who chose to stay in town and fight "house to house". It appeared that Hoskins was

determined to fight Morgan on open ground outside of town taking full advantage of his artillery.

While in Springfield, Morgan learned that Reynolds was moving from Glasgow toward Lebanon in hopes of intercepting the Confederates or combining forces with Hoskins to overwhelm Morgan. With a federal force in his immediate front and another on in route, Morgan knew that his position was hazardous and that he could not pause to rest his troops or become bogged down in a protracted battle. To make matters worse, the snow that began the night before had turned into rain and then frozen again into sleet. Morgan was in quite a dilemma: the weather had made the roads impassable and if he waited for them to dry he risked being overwhelmed by Hoskins before him or Reynolds arriving of from Glasgow or both. Just when all looked the most desperate, Morgan's most trusted ally – his luck - came to his aid.

With Hoskins waiting patiently in Lebanon for first light, Morgan had become acquainted with a local civilian who offered to show him a little know by-pass around town. Morgan's raiders under the cover of darkness began the long slow march bypassing Lebanon through ice and mud dragging their cannon through the quagmire. As they walked they were pelted by sleet that covered their horses and their oil coats in a sheet of ice to the point that they resembled ghost and not men. The command trudged though the slush depending on their horses for balance for it was too slick to ride. They made only eight miles all night. But that distance proved to be enough to separate



the Thunderbolt of the Confederacy and the largest force that he had ever commanded from the federal force still in Lebanon. The road was now clear all the way to Tennessee.

The Christmas raid was Morgan's most successful. He captured and paroled over 1,800 prisoners, inflicted 150 casualties, burned a total of 2,290 feet of railroad bridgework, destroyed 35 miles of track and telegraph line, and destroyed three depots, three water stations, several culverts and cattle guards, and large quantities of Federal stores. In doing this, Morgan suffered 26 casualties: 2 dead and 24 wounded. The railroad was closed for five weeks from December 26, when Morgan burned the bridge over Bacon Creek to February 1 when the damage was repaired and the tracks were reopened.

Sources for this article:

1. Rebel Raider, the life of General John Hunt Morgan, James Ramage, University of KY Press
2. The Raiders of 1862, James D. Brewer, Praeger
3. John Hunt Morgan and his Raiders, Edison H. Thomas, University of KY Press
4. The Civil War Reminiscences of Gen. Basil W. Duke, C.S.A., Cooper Square Press
5. The Civil War in Kentucky, Battle for the Bluegrass State, Kent Masterson Brown, Savas Publishing Co.
6. The History of Morgan's Cavalry, Basil W. Duke, Indiana University Press
7. The Civil War in Hardin County, Kentucky, Mary Jo Jones, Ancestral Trails Historical Society, Inc.
8. Elizabethtown and Hardin County, KY 1869-1921, H.A. Sommers, Hardin Co. Historical Society