A historical map of Kentucky with a red line tracing a path through the state. The path starts in the west, follows the Mississippi River, then moves inland through various counties, ending in the east. The map is overlaid with a grid and has a yellowish tint. The title "Ulysses Grant in Ballard County" is written in large, bold, blue letters across the center of the map.

Ulysses Grant in Ballard County

By Gregory H. Wolk

Colonel Ulysses Grant began his career as a Civil War commander on July 3, 1861, when he led his first regiment in a march west out of Springfield, Illinois. He was posted in a number of places in Missouri during the following two months, and rose to the rank of brigadier general. Grant first arrived in Kentucky on September 5, 1861, when he (with two regiments of Union soldiers) took possession of Paducah. That same day General Grant returned to his base at Cairo, Illinois. On November 7, 1861, Grant fought his first Civil War battle while in command in the field, at Belmont, Missouri. Although this battle was in the very shadow of the heights at Columbus, Kentucky, which had been fortified by the Confederates, Grant did not then enter Kentucky. His command was repulsed on the Missouri side of the Mississippi, and once again Grant returned to his Cairo base. The Confederates remained in control of the Columbus fortifications, and with them control of maritime traffic on the Mississippi. Grant visited Paducah from time to time, where General Charles F. Smith was in command of the Union garrison under Grant's authority. Ulysses Grant first stepped on the soil of inland Kentucky on January 15, 1862.

On January 27, 1862, Abraham Lincoln issued his General War Order Number 1, which said: "Ordered that the 22nd day of February 1862, be the day for a general movement of the Land and Naval forces of the United States against the insurgent forces." This order was born largely out of the President's frustration with his then General-in-Chief, George Brinton McClellan. After the Union disaster at Bull Run, July 21, 1861, McClellan obstinately failed to move his armies in the East. The Union armies in the western theatre of the War, however, did not need prodding.

Indeed, history records that on February 16, 1862, General Ulysses S. Grant captured an entire Confederate Army near the southern border of Kentucky, at the Battle of Fort Donelson, Tennessee. Six days before the date McClellan was to begin his general movement, Grant achieved this singular accomplishment, one that ended forever the years Grant lived in obscurity, years peppered with personal failures.

The campaign for Fort Donelson began on January 6, 1862, when orders reached Grant's headquarters in Cairo. On that day, Grant's superior officer, Maj. Gen. Henry Halleck, directed that Grant commence a reconnaissance in force, to probe in the direction of Mayfield and Murray and to test Confederate strength.

Lincoln's attention then was focused on Confederate troops in eastern Kentucky, and Lincoln (and McClelland, too) felt that a movement was needed in western Kentucky in order to freeze in place the Confederate troops there. Halleck was not enthused about sending troops to Kentucky which he needed to defend Missouri. To magnify the impact of what Halleck designed to be a limited mission, he directed that Grant make it known that his objective was "Dover." Halleck noted that Grant should let the newspapers know that he was moving on Nashville, and he went so far as to admonish Grant "to deceive your own men as well as the enemy." Auspiciously, Dover, Tennessee, was the location of Confederate Fort Donelson, where Confederates were working furiously with slave labor to finish a bulwark to protect Nashville.

Grant's commander in Paducah, C. F. Smith, marched off for Mayfield and Murray on January 14. Grant also placed a force of 6,000 men, commanded by Illinois General John A. McClernand, on the ground in Ballard County. McClernand occupied the site of old Fort Jefferson, just south of Wycliffe, Kentucky, a remnant of George Rogers Clark's western campaign during the Revolution. McClernand's force then moved eight miles east to the town of Blandville, the county seat of Ballard County.



Photo courtesy of Library Special Collections, WKU

General Grant's bodyguard and Union troops pass over the Mayfield Bridge headed toward Columbus, Kentucky.



Herman Cothe died in 1859 at the age of 43 while in Ballard County. He is buried at the Blandville Cemetery.

On January 15, 1862, a Wednesday, Grant arrived in person at Fort Jefferson, joining 2,000 Union soldiers that he had ordered there to relieve McClelland's troops. Grant's movements on the 15th are not entirely clear, but by the end of the day he appeared in Weston's Crossroads (now Bardwell) to review McClelland's troops, which had during the day moved from Blandville. Except for cavalry scouts, this is the closest that McClelland or Grant would approach the rear of the Confederate entrenchments at Columbus. General Grant proceeded to Blandville, and there established his headquarters "in the field," at a place on the north bank of Mayfield Creek known as Cothes Mill.¹ Consistent with the plan sketched out by Halleck, McClelland moved in the direction of Mayfield, stopping first at Milburn. McClelland then returned north to the neighborhood of Blandville, arriving there with most of his command on January 18, 1862.

Ulysses Grant spent much of Thursday, January 16, in the saddle. Together with his staff and a company of cavalry, he reconnoitered east and upstream along Mayfield Creek, clocking in his judgment 35 miles that day. Mayfield Creek was swollen that mid-January, and virtually unfordable as far as Grant would follow it upstream. Even where it could be forded, in Grant's words the water "[was] up to the saddle-skirts."² Also during his brief stay at Cothes Mill, Grant (on Friday the 17th) rode west to the mouth of Mayfield Creek, and may have obtained transportation by river steamer to Fort Jefferson at the end of that day. Grant arrived back at his permanent headquarters in Cairo on the evening of January 20, 1862.

When the intelligence gleaned from General Smith's expedition to Murray

arrived in Grant's hands a few days after he reached Cairo, Grant moved quickly to obtain Halleck's permission to mount an attack on Forts Henry and Donelson in Tennessee. The permission came on January 30; by the evening of February 3, 1862, Grant had 15,000 troops in Paducah, transport boats at the ready.

Postscript

New York Times correspondent Franc B. Wilkie was with the Union columns moving about Ballard County in January, 1862. On January 26, the *Times* published a curious



¹ Much of the chronology of Grant's days in Ballard County have been derived from his January 17 report to Army headquarters in St. Louis. There he described his destination on the 15th as "Coathe's Mill." The proper spelling is Cothe, from mill owner Herman Cothe, who passed away in 1859 and is buried in Blandville Cemetery. The place where Grant camped is south of Kentucky Route 121, about a mile southwest of Blandville.

² Grant reports that on Friday the 17th he reconnoitered roads south of Mayfield Creek to its mouth at the Mississippi River, which leads to a reasonable supposition that his route on the 16th was along the north side of the creek and east of Blandville. If so, his round trip upstream that day should have taken him to the vicinity of Melber in southern McCracken County.

story by Wilkie, concerning the fate of Cothes Mill near Blandville. Herman Cothe's widow, Ann, married a man named James O'Neill.³ In Wilkie's words, O'Neill was "a fellow of expensive habits and small sense," who was running through Ann's property at an alarming rate. O'Neill was suspected of furnishing lumber to the Confederates holding Columbus. As the last regiment of Union troops prepared to leave Blandville to return to Cairo, an aide to Grant wrote to General McClelland. He suggested that if square timber suitable for building artillery casements was found on site, McClelland's troops ought to burn the lumber and remove parts of the mill machinery "as will render it useless for the present." Instead, the Union troops burned Cothes Mill to the ground.

The *Times* article opens a window on the struggles of civilians who were "caught in the middle" in time of war. In 1884, the surviving children of Herman and Ann Cothe filed a claim against the government for loss of the mill, and for horses, mules, oxen, wagons, and so forth, appropriated during General Grant's occupation of the Cothe property. The heirs of Herman Cothe ranged in age from 11 to 16 when the mill burned. The matter was referred to the Quartermaster-General of the Army, who took testimony and issued a report in March, 1890. The evidence showed that James O'Neill might well have harbored southern

³ O'Neill's name is variously spelled O'Neal or Oneal in the official records of the War.

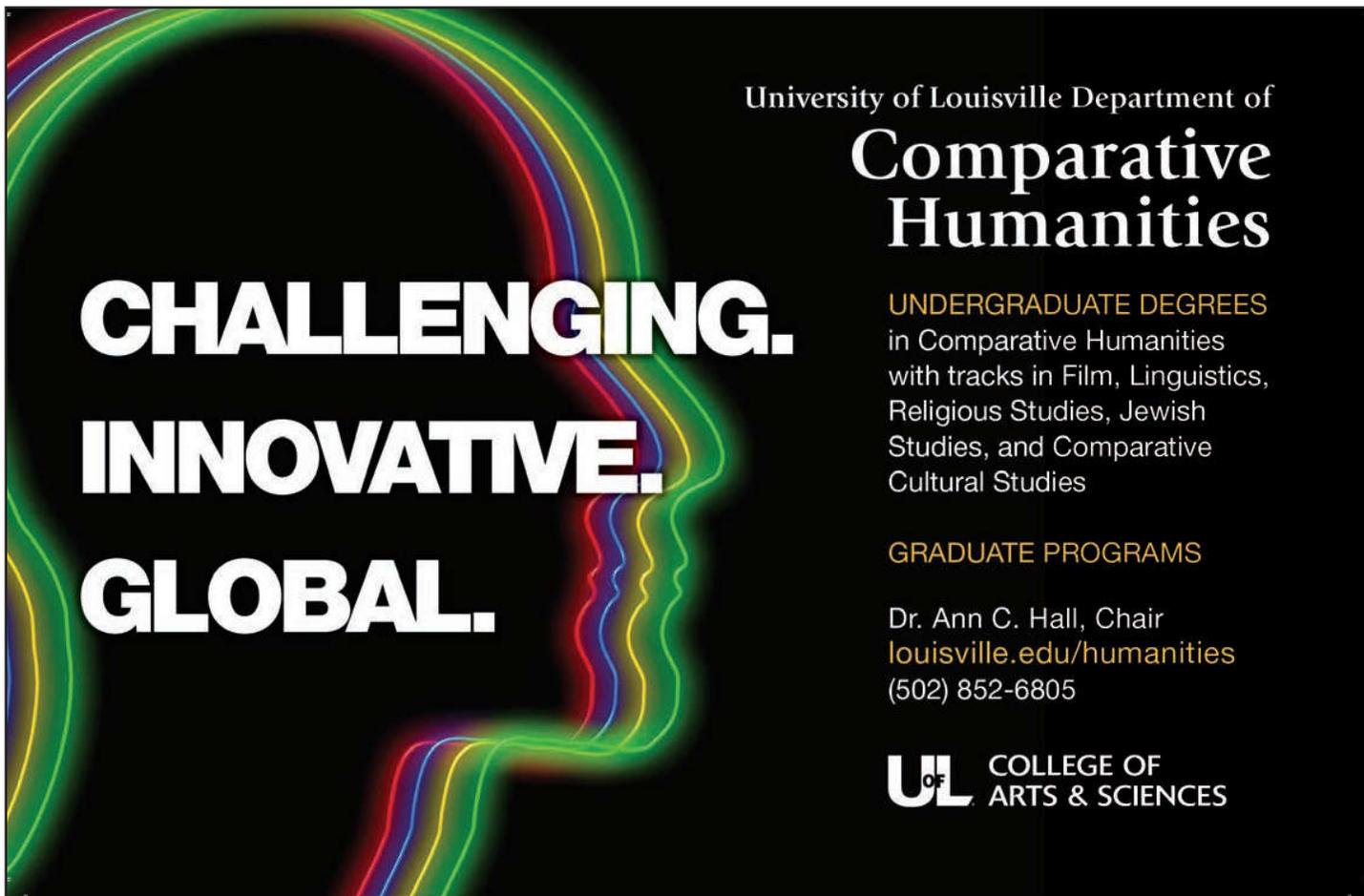
sympathies, but it was conceded that he was not a title owner to the property. It was also conceded that the children were not capable of forming political views in 1862. Herman Cothe died more than a year before the Civil War erupted and Ann O'Neill had died in 1871. In the last analysis, in the view of the Quartermaster-General's investigator, what the army took or destroyed on January 20, 1862, was neither quartermaster stores nor commissary supplies, and the law did not contain or contemplate a remedy for the Cothe children. Nearly 30 years after the Civil War visited Blandville, the Cothe family was still living with the War's consequences.

About the Author

Gregory H. Wolk of St. Louis is the Heritage Programs Coordinator for Missouri Humanities. A lawyer by profession, Greg has been involved in Civil War tourism ventures in Missouri since 2001. He is the author of *Friend and Foe Alike: A Tour Guide to Missouri's Civil War*, an exhaustive study of 235 sites in Missouri that was published in 2010 and is now in its second edition.

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