

'Perryville' shines light on forgotten battle in Civil War

"On October 8, 1862, more than 7,500 Union and Confederate troops were killed and wounded outside of Perryville, Kentucky," Stuart W. Sanders explains in his new book, "Perryville Under Fire: The Aftermath of Kentucky's Largest Civil War Battle." "This battle proved to be the Bluegrass State's largest, and many veterans remarked that it was the most intense fight that they ever encountered.

"For many Union soldiers, Perryville was their baptism of fire," Sanders continues. "It was also the first time that these troops saw mass suffering. The Confederates were similarly disillusioned at Bragg's failures and with Kentuckians' refusal to join the Confederate army."

It is apparent from the introduction that the author knows his subject matter intimately. The masterful way Sanders weaves multiple accounts of events that transpired almost 150 years ago into a single narrative is one of the most appealing features of the book and serves to set it apart from similar efforts to capture the historical significance of the Battle of Perryville. There is a richness and depth to Sanders' prose that gives readers the sense that they are vicariously reliving the drama as it plays out page after page. I often found it difficult to find a suitable "stopping place" when other priorities inevitably required my attention.

In addition to telling a story that a lot of people don't know — including many Kentuckians — "Perryville" also serves as a stark reminder of the horrors of war that sometime elude us in the modern era.

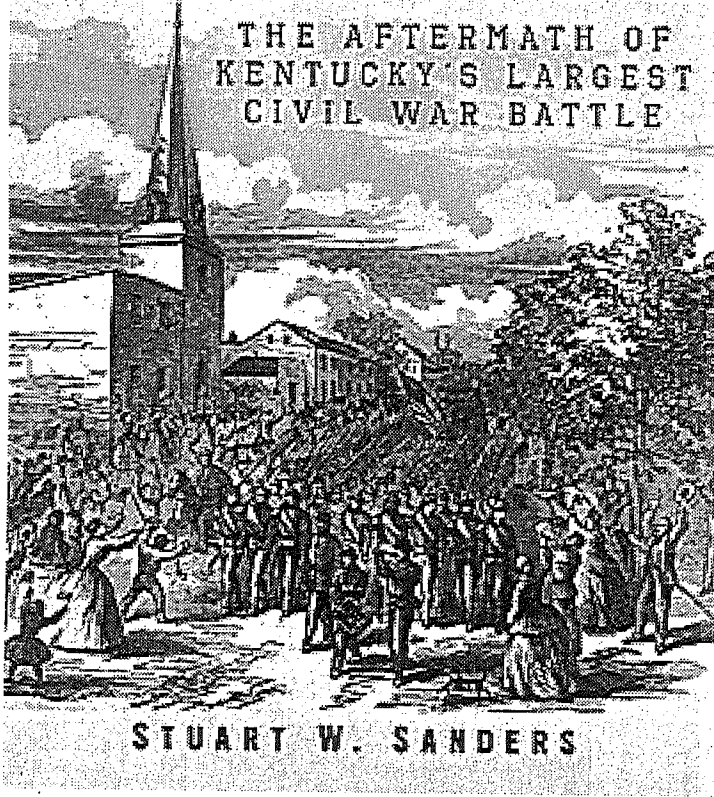
"In addition to the wounded and sick, Perryville residents contended with scores of dead soldiers who lay scattered over hundreds of acres," Sanders notes. "The Union army buried its own dead in regimented plots, digging the graves near where the men had fallen. Rebel corpses remained on the field for days after the battle. The Union soldiers refused to bury the dead Southerners because Confederate troops had stripped the Northern corpses."

"Perryville has long been the 'forgotten' battle in Civil War history," observes Ken Noe, author of "Perryville: This Grand Havoc of Battle." "Perryville was in many ways a classic soldier's battle. The battle began at two in the afternoon, which meant that the Confederates were desperate to achieve a breakthrough before dark even as Union soldiers hoped to just hang on until night. That desperation added to the intensity. The end result was a battle that many Shiloh veterans described as the more severe. Indeed Sam Watkins famously declared it his worst battle of the war."

Sanders was obviously meticulous in researching "Perryville," as evidenced by the 23 pages of chapter notes at the conclusion of the 11 chapters that make up the main text. As alluded to previously, the book has the feel of someone providing a firsthand account of events that transpired in a

PERRYVILLE UNDER FIRE

THE AFTERMATH OF KENTUCKY'S LARGEST CIVIL WAR BATTLE



STUART W. SANDERS

"Perryville Under Fire: The Aftermath of Kentucky's Largest Civil War Battle" by Stuart W. Sanders. Charleston, S.C.: The History Press, 2012, 160 pages, \$19.99.

bygone era. Moreover, the numerous vintage photographs liberally scattered throughout the volume serve to bring the words to life in a way that would not have been possible otherwise.

Although Sanders gives a concise yet surprisingly compelling account of the actual Battle of Perryville — also known as the Battle of Chaplin Hills — the book is really about its repercussions on the people who lived in the region. Indeed, Sanders seems driven to tell a story that desperately yearns to be told — to shed just a little light on the forgotten victims of an epic conflict. Witness his depiction of the fate of one prominent citizen:

"While hundreds of residents suffered from the battle, perhaps no one lost more than Henry P. Bottom, a local cabinet maker and justice of the peace," Sanders writes. "The forty-seven-year-old Bottom, who owned most of the land upon which the battle was fought, could never have foreseen the carnage that struck his farm ... Bottom never recovered, either economically or psychologically, from the horrors and destruction of the Battle of Perryville."

Or his description of the battle's impact on Lewis Warner Green, the president of Centre College: "During the nineteenth century, Green was one of the Bluegrass State's preeminent intellectuals," Sanders explains. "While nursing sick Northern soldiers at the college, Green contracted an illness, suffered for five days and died on May 26, 1863,

more than seven months after the battle. The civilian caregivers who died of illnesses contracted from the soldiers remain the forgotten casualties of the battle."

For the record, Sanders has written for Civil War Times Illustrated, America's Civil War, Military History Quarterly, The Journal of America's Military Past, and Blue and Gray. He has contributed to several books on the American Civil War, including "Kentuckians in Gray: Confederate Generals and Field Officers of the Bluegrass State," "Confederate Generals in the Western Theater" and "Confederate Generals of the Trans-Mississippi." Sanders is also former executive director of the Perryville Battlefield Preservation Association.

As many of you know, this is not the kind of book I typically review; there are those who are infinitely more qualified to provide an informed opinion on military history than I am or will ever be. At the same time, I found "Perryville Under Fire" to be exceptionally interesting and even intriguing. I now know much more about an important chapter in our state's history that I was almost completely oblivious to before reading this account.

My prediction is that you would feel the same after reading "Perryville Under Fire." I recommend it highly.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.