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The Battle of Pea Ridge

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Introduction:

The Battle of Pea Ridge was a Civil War battle that was fought in northwest Arkansas. The battle was the largest and most significant Civil War battle fought west of the Mississippi River. Despite the fact the battle involved a large number of forces on both sides, and the outcome of the battle greatly influenced which side controlled the states west of the Mississippi for the remainder of the Civil War the battle has been understudied by historians. There is a great story to be told regarding the Battle of Pea Ridge. The story is unique, because for many of the commanding officers the battle represents either the pinnacle of their career or a stain on their legacy that could not be washed away even in the years following the Civil War. The story of Pea Ridge should not be told solely for the military implications of the battle, while they are significant and cannot be ignored; the real significance of the Battle of Pea Ridge goes beyond the offensive and counter offensive maneuverers that took place on the battlefield, and rests in the legacy the battle left on the men who fought it, and the immediate and lasting effect the battle had on the landscape of the area near which it was fought.

The 'Saint Louis' Plan

The role that Pea Ridge played in shaping the lives and careers of many of the officers involved, and the effect the battle had on the cities, and the citizens of the nearby cities is of primary importance to this paper, however these issues cannot be addressed until the events leading up to Pea Ridge, the battle itself, and the military implications of the Pea Ridge have been addressed. In the months leading up Pea Ridge the Confederate Army experienced defeat throughout the state of Missouri. With the realization that the Union forces east of the Mississippi River would slowly advance westward and eventually eliminate any chance the

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Confederates had of controlling the states west of the Mississippi, the leaders of the Confederacy knew they had to devise a counter offensive plan. Confederate General Albert Sidney Johnston, did form a plan in the opening months of 1862 which called for the recapture of Saint Louis. "The man to whom Johnston entrusted the execution of this bold operation was Major General Earl Van Dorn"¹ Van Dorn was in charge of a district which consisted of several different officers controlling various armies throughout the southwest. Under Van Dorn's control where Brigadier General Benjamin McCullough of Arkansas, Major General Sterling Price of the Missouri State Guard, and Brigadier General Albert Pike in control of Native Americans from the Indian Territories who had agreed to fight alongside the Confederates. From Little Rock Arkansas Van Dorn began correspondence with Price, McCullough and Pike, he encouraged the men to bolster their regiments and prepare for an all-out offensive by March. The plan Van Dorn had formed called for McCullough's division based in Fort Smith to join with his own, which would advance north from Little Rock. As Van Dorn and McCullough's forces would join together so too would Price's forces (based out of Springfield Missouri) and Pike's regiment made up of Indians. Once the Confederate forces where securely in southern Missouri the army, led by Van Dorn himself would advance westwards toward Saint Louis.

Foiled Plans and an Eminent Battle

Unfortunately for Van Dorn and the confederates the plan they were working on would never come to fruition as the Union Army of Missouri controlled by Brigadier General Samuel Curtis

¹ Walter Brown, *Pea Ridge the Gettysburg of the West* (Arkansas Historical Quarterly: 1956),

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had a plan to drive Price out of Missouri altogether.² Curtis began his offensive plan while Van

Dorn and Price were still in correspondence. On February 9th Curtis and the divisions he commanded began to advance towards Springfield and three days later reached the city to find that Price had already retreated, having burned the city before he left. Franz Sigel, the commander of the 3rd Brigade of Missouri wrote, "the beautiful 'Garden City' of the Southwest looked desolate",³ upon his arrival to Springfield. Although Price had escaped catastrophe at Springfield Curtis was hot on his trail and it became immediately apparent that before the Confederate army could execute the plan to take St. Louis they would first have to engage Curtis, and the engagement was likely to occur in Arkansas. Once news of Price's retreat reached Van Dorn on February 22 he was forced to order McCullough to join Price in the Boston Mountains of Arkansas and prepare an offensive against Curtis and the Union forces. On February 24 Van Dorn and his regiments also headed north towards the Boston Mountains to meet up with Price, and hopefully McCullough. Meanwhile the Union forces decided to "entrench [in] a strong position near Bentonville"⁴

On the morning of March 3 Van Dorn arrived at Price's headquarters and quickly learned that Curtis had stopped at Sugar Creek and was awaiting reinforcements. Fearful that the Confederate forces might soon be outnumbered, Van Dorn decided it was in their best interest to prepare for an attack on Curtis immediately. The next morning the Confederate troops began the advance towards Curtis and the Confederate army. By March 5, the Confederate army lead

² Grenville Dodge, *The Battle of Atlanta and other Campaigns, Addresses Etc.*, 15-16

³ Stephan Engle. Franz Sigel at Pea Ridge (Arkansas Historical Quarterly, 1991), 254

⁴ Walter Brown, *Pea Ridge the Gettysburg of the West* (Arkansas Historical Quarterly: 1956), 7

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by Van Dorn had advanced through Fayetteville, and had reached the Elm Springs (30 miles south of Pea Ridge). Unbeknownst to Van Dorn, the Union army was well aware of the Confederate approach. By March 6 the four separate divisions of the Union army, totaling 10,500 men had reached Sugar Creek.

At this point a battle between the two sides was imminent. The only thing that was left to be determined was where the battle was to be fought. This was the closest both forces had been to each other since Price had retreated from Springfield. Both Van Dorn and Curtis had all their separate divisions close enough so that they could easily command their every move. Based on the location of each army, the only route either army to use to advance (assuming they would use a navigable road) was on the Telegraph Road, which ran north from Fayetteville to Springfield (and crossed the Sugar Creek five miles northeast of Bentonville) or the Bentonville Road which forked, the left hand fork, known as the Bentonville Detour ran north parallel to the Telegraph Road. The place where the two roads converged was at the head of the Pea Ridge Valley, on the left hand, or western side (the side of the Bentonville Detour) of the valley there was a plateau. Between the plateau, along which the Bentonville Detour ran, and the Telegraph Road which butted up the Valley of Pea Ridge, and beside which the Elkhorn Tavern lie the two forces would finally come to a head, and the battle that would ensue would aptly be named the Battle of Pea Ridge.

The hard march, through winter weather, that the Confederate forces had endured to catch up with Curtis undoubtedly played a role in the battle. At the onset of the conflict the Confederate forces outnumbered the Union forces 16,000 to 10,500.⁵ Before the battle began, on March 6 the

⁵ Dee Brown, *Dee Browns Civil War Anthology*, 22

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Union army was positioned as follows: Curtis's men were butted up to the Telegraph Road on top of the tall hill north of Sugar Creek, the army was position ran west to east along the road. With Asboth on the far western side of the line, Oster-Davis in the middle and Carr on the far eastern side of the line. Curtis hoped that Van Dorn would attack his armies head on at the base of the Telegraph Road. To help insure that Van Dorn did not take the Bentonville Detour he sent Colonel Greenville Dodge of the Fourth Iowa Infantry Division to cut trees down and block the Bentonville Detour⁶ in hopes that the troublesome route would force Van Dorn to attack him head on. Cutis's plan did not work. Van Dorn made a risky decision and decided to take the Bentonville Detour during the night of March 6 and double back down the Telegraph Road and attack Curtis from behind. In order for this plan to be successful the Confederate forces must march hastily, the fallen trees left by Dodge, combined with the already exhausted troops resulted in the march along the Bentonville Detour lagging and consequently unsuccessful. The last of McCullough's troops did not cross Sugar Creek (the southern end of the Bentonville Detour) until after sunrise on March 7, by this point the Union forces where aware of the Confederates whereabouts. With the Confederates half way up the Bentonville Detour the action was about to begin. The union forces headed north-west along the dirt roads that connected the Bentonville Detour and the Telegraph Road and soon the two forces where within striking distance. The two forces met in between the roads at a place known as Leetown, the forces began armed conflict and this was the beginning of the Battle of Pea Ridge. The battle would last well into March 8 and the Union forces although outnumbered would came away victorious. Mobility was of extreme importance during this battle and the Confederate forces

⁶ Greenville Dodge, The Battle of Atlanta, and Other Campaigns, Addresses Ect. 19

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likely worn-out from the hike lacked mobility. The Union forces were able to outmaneuver the Confederates, who were playing catch up for the majority of the battle. The Confederate forces were able to escape, however the battle was costly, as they lost McCullough and many other fine soldiers. Not only did the Confederates lose fine men that day, they lost any hope they might have had at successfully reaching Saint Louis, or winning the southwestern campaign. The outcome of Pea Ridge forced the Confederates to, “fight a defensive war in the West”⁷; the Battle was the largest offensive battle for the Confederacy west of the Mississippi, and due to the outcome the largest defeat as well.

Franz Sigel: perhaps the “Dammed Dutchmen”

Franz Sigel was a German who had built a reputation for himself as a military officer. Unfortunately for Sigel the reputation which often preceded him was one that he would have likely hope to avoid, Sigel had become synonymous with retreat. Civil War historians have shown that Sigel “proved incompetent and made serious military errors, indicating that too often his authority exceeded his ability.”⁸ Perhaps Sigel’s German ethnicity helped shape many of his colleagues opinions towards him, yet for as much as his ethnicity hurt his reputation among the rank of fellow officers it helped equally, if not more so with the thousands of German American’s throughout the Union. For this reason William Cullen Bryant wrote to, “President Lincoln conveying the convictions of some soldiers that Sigel’s readmission to the Union Army would be ‘equal to ten thousand men’”⁹

⁷ Walter Brown, *Pea Ridge the Gettysburg of the West* (Arkansas Historical Quarterly: 1956), 16

⁸ Stephan Engle. Franz Sigel at Pea Ridge (Arkansas Historical Quarterly, 1999), 251

⁹ Stephan Engle. Franz Sigel at Pea Ridge (Arkansas Historical Quarterly, 1999), 249

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Sigel had lost his position in 1861 while he was on leave, when he returned from leave he realized that General Henry W. Halleck had replaced Sigel with Samuel Curtis. This caused tensions within the German American community as the Sigel threatened to resign. The potential resignation created an uproar as Sigel had, “loyal admirers who followed him wherever he went”.¹⁰ Several German soldiers threatened to resign if Sigel was not reappointed as commander of a force. Sigel was given command of a force, yet the controversial course of events that led up to his reappointment caused many of his fellow officers to lose what little respect they had left for the man. Sigel realized he would have the chance to shine in the southwestern campaign as by now news of the Confederate plan to recapture Saint Louis had become common knowledge to the Union forces. This is how the story of Franz Sigel, begins he received his appointment to leader of the 3rd Brigade in a controversial manner, and could only hope that in time he could prove that he was worthy of his appointment.

It appeared he would have the opportunity to prove his worth right away, as in early February 1862 he began the march from Rolla, Missouri to Lebanon Missouri to join General Curtis’ troops. Sigel still answered to Curtis however and the orders that Curtis issued was a pursuit of Confederate General Price’s troops stationed in Springfield Missouri. As already discussed in this paper, by the time Sigel reached Springfield, Price’s Confederate forces were no gone, leaving the ashes of the city behind. The arrival in Springfield did produce some good news for Sigel, as once the Union troops reached Springfield Curtis Divided his army into two divisions, giving Sigel control of the right wing, made up of the 1st and 2nd Divisions. The Union forces immediately began to pursue Price, who had fled towards Arkansas. Sigel towards

10 Stephan Engle. Franz Sigel at Pea Ridge (Arkansas Historical Quarterly, 1999), 250

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Fayetteville on the Telegraph Road. Curtis and Sigel set up post at Cross Hollows twelve miles south of Sugar Creek. Once the army was stationed Curtis was unsure of his next move, this cause a bit of tension between Curtis and Sigel as Sigel was always a man, ready for action. By early March forces on both sides were located at various positions between Bentonville and Sugar Creek. Sigel had been ordered to advance north from Sugar Creek while Curtis and the rest of the troops stayed at Sugar Creek.

As Sigel advanced north from Sugar Creek, separate from the rest of the troops, on March 6th he quickly realized the Confederate forces heavily outnumbered his own and decided to retreat back to rejoin Curtis. Curtis must have surely wondered if Sigel would live up to his unfortunate namesake in the hours that preceded the eminent battle. However the orders to retreat towards Curtis had not been correctly understood by the two officers in command of the two divisions Sigel commanded. The result of the misunderstanding “left the German with only 600 troops.”¹¹ While Asboth and Osterhaus (the men in direct control of the 1st and 2nd Divisions) advanced towards Curtis, Sigel learned that the enemy forces where upon him. Heavily outnumbered and separated from the other forces, Sigel was forced to fight. He fought bravely and “deftly handled”¹² his artillery, but the sheer size of Van Dorn’s forces required Sigel to retreat. The men bravely fought as they retreated and although Sigel had been forced to fall back it likely helped the Union army that he was the first to come into contact with Confederate forces. Sigel’s actions had been beneficial because while he was warding of the enemy to the best of his ability Curtis was able to place his forces in strategic strongholds. It was

¹¹ Stephan Engle. Franz Sigel at Pea Ridge (Arkansas Historical Quarterly, 1999), 259

¹² Stephan Engle. Franz Sigel at Pea Ridge (Arkansas Historical Quarterly, 1999), 259

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also beneficial because in attempting to catch up with Sigel, and the remainder of the Union troops (whose exact position was still unknown to Van Dorn) the Confederates wore themselves out from marching so far.¹³ The only hope the Confederates had of winning the battle was to take the Bentonville Detour to the Telegraph Road, in hopes that they could attack the Union forces from the rear. This strategy required more marching by the Confederate forces, and Curtis aware that it was like Van Dorn would attempt to take the Bentonville Detour sent Greenville Dodge to fall trees along the trail making the march all the more difficult.

Sigel continued his military excellence and was the man who dispatched reconnaissance that located the Confederates. When the news that the Confederates had in fact taken the Bentonville Detour reached Curtis, any hope the Confederates had of a surprise attack was eliminated. When the fighting began the next day it was Sigel who always seemed to be in the midst of the chaos. Sigel's men were able to deliver a fatal wound to the Confederate General McCullough this left the soldiers previously under his command leaderless. Although Sigel was doing well for himself the troops under Carr's supervision were losing badly and Sigel was forced to retreat

After Sigel was able to regain his and his troop's composure he continued the fight the next day. Sigel and Osterhaus were the men who delivered the final blow to the Confederates. Having severely damaged the moral of the Arkansas troops by killing their leader, McCullough the day before Sigel, now focused his attention on the troops under the command of Van Dorn. The previous meeting between Van Dorn and Sigel three days earlier resulted in Sigel retreating

¹³Fransis Kennedy. The Civil War Battlefield Guide, 25

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as he was outnumbered. This time however Sigel had several regiments at his command and Van Dorn would quickly learn that Sigel was a worthy opponent. Sigel's forces initially forced the Confederates to retreat, but even in retreat the Confederates could not escape Sigel. Sigel continued to inflict casualties. The Confederate forces had no choice but to break rank and file and run south, away from Sigel's hot pursuit.

The Battle of Pea Ridge proved to be the pinnacle of Sigel's military career. The achievements he was able to make on the Battlefield that day proved to be his shining military accomplishment. Following the battle Sigel was promoted to Major General. The story has two sides. While the press was told that Curtis was on the verge of surrender until Sigel was able to pursue Van Dorn's troops, and force them to retreat, Curtis argues that he was the man who ordered Sigel to take haste in his pursuit of Van Dorn. Sigel nonetheless received the majority of the credit for the success the Union enjoyed. Sigel was pleased with the outcome of the battle as it freed Union forces to fight in the east under Grant and others. Unfortunately for Sigel he was not able to muster the success he had enjoyed at Pea Ridge in other military campaign. The success he did enjoy however at least rid him of some of the ridicule he had endured and provided him the opportunity to prove himself worthy of the authority he was given.

Albert Pike: And the Implications of Pea Ridge

The amount military success that Sigel enjoyed at Pea Ridge, which proved to be his shining accomplishment is equal, yet juxtaposed to the blemish the battle left on Albert Pike's reputation. Albert Pike was commander of the Confederate Department of Indian Territory. Pike commanded various Indians which had made treaties and agreed to fight for the Confederate cause on the condition that they would remain in the Indian Territory (modern day

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Oklahoma) Pike was a man, who much like Sigel, believed in himself and the causes he stood for even when others doubted him. Pike was adamant that the Native American could serve a valuable resource for the Confederate army, despite the widespread opinion that the “savages” couldn’t be trusted and that they would not agree to fight within the terms given to them by superiors. The Battle of Pea Ridge would serve as the trial run for the Indian’s that Pike commanded and after the Battle was complete no doubt was left as to the level of involvement the Indians would have for the remainder of the War.

During the battle the Indians seemed of little significance, they were not as efficient warriors as Pike had hoped, yet the situation had gone better than some would have expected. In the aftermath of the conflict, the true conduct of the Indians came to light, and implications of their conduct severely damaged Pike’s namesake. After the smoke had cleared from the battle and Pike was back in the Indian Territory news that scalped bodies of fallen Union soldiers reached him. In disbelief Pike consulted his surgeon Dr. Edward L. Massie who had been present at the battle to attend the wounded on both sides. “Massie reported finding ‘one body which had been scalped; that it had evidently been done after the life was extinct, probably late in the afternoon.’ ”¹⁴ Shameful of the actions of the troops under his command Pike issued a truce and apology to General Curtis, commander of the Union forces at Pea Ridge. In response to the apology Curtis argued that the Confederates had no business using Indian troops in the War. This hurt Pike who correctly pointed out that the United States had used Indians troops during war during every conflict that had occurred. Unfortunately for Pike the issue would not be resolved with merely an apology and a truce. The northern press got ahold of the story and,

¹⁴ Walter Brown. *Albert Pike and the Pea Ridge Atrocities* (Arkansas Historical Quarterly, 1979), 346

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“was making much ado over the Pea Ridge atrocities.”¹⁵ On March 14 the New York Herald published an article which claimed that eighteen Union soldiers were found scalped in the aftermath of the Battle¹⁶ Albert Pike's character was called into question by various articles published in newspapers throughout major northern cities including, Boston, New York, and Chicago. The problems did not stop there for Pike, on April 1, 1862, Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner called for a “joint committee on the conduct of war” to investigate the occurrences of Pea Ridge.¹⁷ The committee received various uncertified statements about the Indian Conduct during the battle. The northern press desired to make it appear that Pike was happy with the Indians actions, if he had not directly encouraged them. By this point Pike's reputation was clearly ruined. He resigned from the Confederate forces in the fall of 1862, and spent the majority of his remaining life in isolation. He feared arrest for the crime of treason after the Federals won the war. He was pardoned in April 1866 by President Johnson, but as afore mention his reputation was still ruined.

Ironically just as the press had helped to praise Sigel, perhaps more than he deserved it helped condemn Pike more than he deserved. The press got ahold of the story and exaggerated the events that occurred and linked Pike directly to actions he had not condoned. For this reason the battle of Pea Ridge served as a saving grace for one man, while an Achilles heel for another. The battle not only had implications for the Confederate and Union forces as a whole, it also directly affected the life of at least two men involved. The battle thereby has significance that goes far beyond the effect the outcome of the battle had on the war. It is thereby a battle that

¹⁵ Walter Brown. *Albert Pike and the Pea Ridge Atrocities* (Arkansas Historical Quarterly, 1979), 349

¹⁶ Walter Brown. *Albert Pike and the Pea Ridge Atrocities* (Arkansas Historical Quarterly, 1979), 349

¹⁷ Walter Brown. *Albert Pike and the Pea Ridge Atrocities* (Arkansas Historical Quarterly, 1979), 349

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should be studied and remembered.

Fayetteville: The City and the People Left in Ruins

When studying the Battle of Pea Ridge, much like any battle, there is more to be observed than the battle's immediate impact on the battlefield in which it is fought and the soldiers who fought the battle. That is to say, any significant confrontation will generally have a backlash of some sort on the nearby community. This principle certainly holds true for the Battle of Pea Ridge. As previously eluded to in this paper the town of Fayetteville, Arkansas plays a role in the story of Pea Ridge. At first glance, Fayetteville appears to be merely the town the Confederate forces lead by Van Dorn opted rest briefly in the days immediately before Pea Ridge. Closer examination reveals that for those living in Fayetteville and the for the town architecture of the town itself Pea Ridge meant so much more. At the time the battle took place Fayetteville was a shining beacon for Arkansas, the town had two large female seminaries and the first Arkansas institution of higher learning the aptly named Arkansas College¹⁸. Fayetteville was home to the best and brightest young adults in all of Arkansas. There were many churches in the city, and due to the geography of the region (which is rather mountainous) the area did not rely heavily on agriculture. Because the city did not rely heavily on agriculture many of the inhabitants prior to the war were not in absolute favor with the system of slavery as they had not built their livelihood around it. However, with the election of Lincoln and the start of the War the attitude of the public began to change in Fayetteville¹⁹.

The students began to question whether college was a worthy undertaking, men began to

¹⁸ William Baxter. Pea Ridge and Prairie Grove, Or, Scenes and Incidents of the War in Arkansas, 10

¹⁹ William Baxter. Pea Ridge and Prairie Grove, Or, Scenes and Incidents of the War in Arkansas, 16

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question the political alliances of their neighbors and the whole city was suddenly thrust into a state of confusion²⁰. Initially the city seemed to be removed from the cause and the attitude of neutrality seemed to prevail. The situation quickly deteriorated however and soon the attitude of the South as a whole seemed to prevail. That is to say a city that was once removed from the idea of a Civil War, as it served no vital interest to their livelihood had become caught in the moment and was suddenly consumed with the idea. All the while inhabitants of the city operated under the assumption that the Ozark Mountains would ensure they saw no actual military campaigns. Despite the general feeling that the town would be spared from any actual fighting Confederate propaganda was prevalent in the city. The “Hempstead Rifle” and the Third Louisiana Infantry, two of the most decorated and well regarded regiments in all the South could be seen throughout the city, with them an even heightened sense of nostalgia arose, along with the rise in nostalgia came a rise in enlistments. The college students who had at first questioned school had, early 1861 made the decision to enlist²¹.

The nostalgia and happy-go-lucky attitude did not last long, soon the residents of Fayetteville came to realize just how much they actually relied on the northern industry for their day to day products. If suddenly finding themselves, “destitute of all that civilization has made necessary for life²²”, the occupation of the town by Van Dorn’s troops would be. The confederates occupied the city prior to the Battle of Pea Ridge and many of the limited resources the town had left. As if this was not enough they burned many of the town’s buildings. Just as

20 William Baxter. Pea Ridge and Prairie Grove, Or, Scenes and Incidents of the War in Arkansas, 16-17

21 William Baxter. Pea Ridge and Prairie Grove, Or, Scenes and Incidents of the War in Arkansas, 38-39

22 William Baxter. Pea Ridge and Prairie Grove, Or, Scenes and Incidents of the War in Arkansas, 40

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the confederates had burned Springfield to the ground so too they burned Fayetteville. Leaving only the Arkansas College building, which they would burn on their escape route after Pea Ridge. The Battle of Pea Ridge, and the Civil War as a whole had left the town of Fayetteville in ruin. It had taken many of the best and brightest young adults from the classroom and placed them on the battlefield. Many of whom never returned. Pea Ridge left those who were unable or unwilling to fight, and chose to remain in Fayetteville miserable, and deprived of the everyday conveniences they had become accustomed to. Many of the inhabitants who vocalized their discontent found themselves in jail.

When examining the significance of the Battle of Pea Ridge on the nearby community and the men who fought the battle, it is easy to come to a consensus that the battle was significant. The Battle saw two men, Pike and Sigel, either relish in the glory or agonize in the conditions of defeat. The Battle accounted for the burning of the first college in Arkansas and the death of many of its' brightest pupils. The military significance of the battle ensured that the Union controlled the land west of the Mississippi. After studying Pea Ridge, these and other fact regarding the battle seem to jump of the page, yet the significance of the battle cannot be limited to these facts alone. For the battle was just as significant to those who were unable to leave behind documentation of their experiences as it was to those who were fortunate enough to have been able to do so. The battle is significant not just for the stories which have survived and been told, but for the stories which haven't and therefore won't be told.

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