

## AFFAIR AT MADISON STATION

May 17, 1864

(A Vintage Vignette by John P. Rankin, December 23, 2010)

Both Civil War engagements fought in and around Madison occurred during unusual weather. The one of December 23, 1864, at Indian Creek where Old Madison Pike crosses the water and along the campus of Madison Academy at Slaughter Road, was fought on one of the coldest days of a severely cold winter. It was so cold that not only did the creek freeze over, but guns were of little use because nobody could use their fingers adequately to reload after firing. It was largely a saber fight. However, artillery and guns were the weapons of the day when much warmer weather prevailed for the conflict that occurred on May 17, 1864. Both engagements began at dawn as surprise attacks on the entrenched forces. The December Union attack started near the Indian Creek railroad bridge and continued west toward the town. The May Confederate attack began in the town and continued east along the tracks to the Indian Creek railroad bridge. May brought a Confederate rout of Federal forces, whereas the December struggle was a Union rout of rebel forces. The December fight involved frozen water as a factor. The May fight involved liquid water as a factor, because it was raining so hard that the combatants could barely see their opposition. The Union accounts described the December event as a “grand victory”, reportedly involving far more rebels than could possibly have been present. Some of the official reports claimed that 200 Union troops attacked a rebel force of 600, whereas more realistic descriptions show that a maximum of 150 rebels were surprised by over 300 Federals. Yet, the official Union accounts of the May event term it as simply as an “affair” -- not even worthy of being called a battle. However, the May attack by the rebel forces included four artillery pieces and over 1000 troops against a force of about 350 Federals who occupied the town of Madison.

Confederate reports are sparse from those last months of the war, but there are numerous documents of the engagement preserved in Union accounts. The most descriptive Union reports were filed by Colonel Gorgas of the 13<sup>th</sup> Illinois Infantry. He first told that a cavalry force of about 1,000 with four artillery pieces attacked on May 17 about 8 o'clock in the morning. When General John Smith reported the engagement a day later, he stated that Madison Station had been attacked at 8 a.m. from all directions by a large force, numbering about 1,000 to 3,000 men with four pieces of artillery. Gorgas recounted that “...we were obliged to fall back, after a severe fight, and, being completely surrounded, we cut our way through their lines, and fell back to the bridge and water tank, about three miles east. We formed and returned to this place (Madison), and, after skirmishing, drove them from the town. They captured several of our men, what number we are not able to say. Our camp and garrison equipage, together with all the regimental and company papers, are either destroyed or carried off. The depot buildings are burned, together with about 50 bales of cotton. (He said 70 bales in a later report.) The railroad is all right, telegraph lines cut. We are left here without rations, and but little ammunition.”

A much more detailed account of the engagement was filed by Gorgas a day or so later. In it, he specified that the artillery consisted of “four 12-pounder howitzers”. He wrote that the attacking force was under the command of Colonel Josiah Patterson and included “two regiments of mounted infantry”. He blamed the successful surprise upon local citizens guiding the rebels to the locations of his five pickets, who were then overwhelmed before they could sound the alarm. In fact, subsequently the Union occupiers arrested Madison residents Dr. Richard Matthew Fletcher, Edward Betts, and James Harvey Pride. They were taken into Huntsville to be tried and hanged as spies for complicity in the event. After a gallows was

constructed, a recently-transferred and remotely-located but friendly senior Union officer who knew that Dr. Fletcher had compassionately treated Federal soldiers during the occupation years came to Huntsville and had the men released.