

# Deadly mistake

**Battling poor visibility, nearsightedness and the confusion of the battlefiel, Confederate Gen. Felix Zollicoffer accidentally rode up to the wrong troops**

*Photographs courtesy of the Mill Springs Battlefield Association*

The next time you are in Nashville, take time to visit the City Cemetery. There you will find the graves of no fewer than four Civil War generals. One of them is Felix Zollicoffer, who met his fate in one of the most bizarre stories in the Civil War.

Zollicoffer was of Swiss descent, but he was very much an American; his grandfather had fought in the American Revolution and received a land grant as a result. Felix Zollicoffer was born in Columbia and was trained to be a newspaperman. At various times in the 1830s and 1840s, he worked for newspapers in Paris, Columbia, Knoxville and Nashville, where he was editor of the *Republican Banner* from 1843 until 1845. Zollicoffer's career then shifted to public service and the Whig party; he served a term as the Tennessee comptroller and three terms in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Nashville, during this era, still exhibited many of the qualities of the "Wild West;" newspaper editors and politicians still settled disputes Andrew Jackson's way. In 1852, Zollicoffer still used the *Banner* to voice his opinions. That year, he got into a duel with John Marling, editor of the rival Union.

The argument had to do with the location of a planned bridge across the Cumberland River, intended to replace

a covered bridge that had been demolished in 1818. Marling's Union wanted the bridge to be along Broad Street, while Zollicoffer's *Banner* wanted it next to the Public Square. In the heated editorializing, Marling accused Zollicoffer of being motivated by financial self-interest — fighting words in 1852 Nashville. "The story is told that on the night before the encounter, Mrs. Zollicoffer molded the bullets for her husband's pistol on her nursery hearth," a newspaper article about the incident said years later.

The next day — Aug. 20, 1852 — the two men exchanged insults and bul-

**As the Battle of Mill Springs raged, Gen. Zollicoffer became disoriented and rode up to Union Col. Speed Fry, who shot and killed the general.**



Gen. Felix Zollicoffer



Confederate Gen. Felix Zollicoffer is one of four Civil War generals buried in Nashville's history-rich City Cemetery. Photograph by Bill Carey

lets in front of the Union office at the corner of Cherry and Cedar (today the corner of Fourth and Charlotte). Zollicoffer ended up with a bullet wound in the hand, while Marling was shot in the face. Both men survived, however, and apparently exchanged civil words years later.

By the way, the bridge was built next to the Public Square and has been rebuilt twice since. Today the connector at that location is referred to as the Woodland Street Bridge.

Unlike many political leaders of that era, Zollicoffer was not in favor of war in the late 1850s, supporting John Bell as a compromise candidate for president. But after Tennessee seceded, Gov. Isham Harris appointed Zollicoffer to the rank of brigadier general. The former newspaper editor soon found himself head of a Confederate army in East Tennessee, where loyal Unionists abounded (a tough assignment for a man who had limited military experience in the Seminole War of 1836).

After a few months, Maj. Gen. George Crittenden took command of the East Tennessee Confederate army. Zollicoffer remained in the field, head of a small army that Crittenden (unwisely) ordered to march west and then north toward Somerset, Ky., where they knew a Union army under Gen. George Thomas was headed.

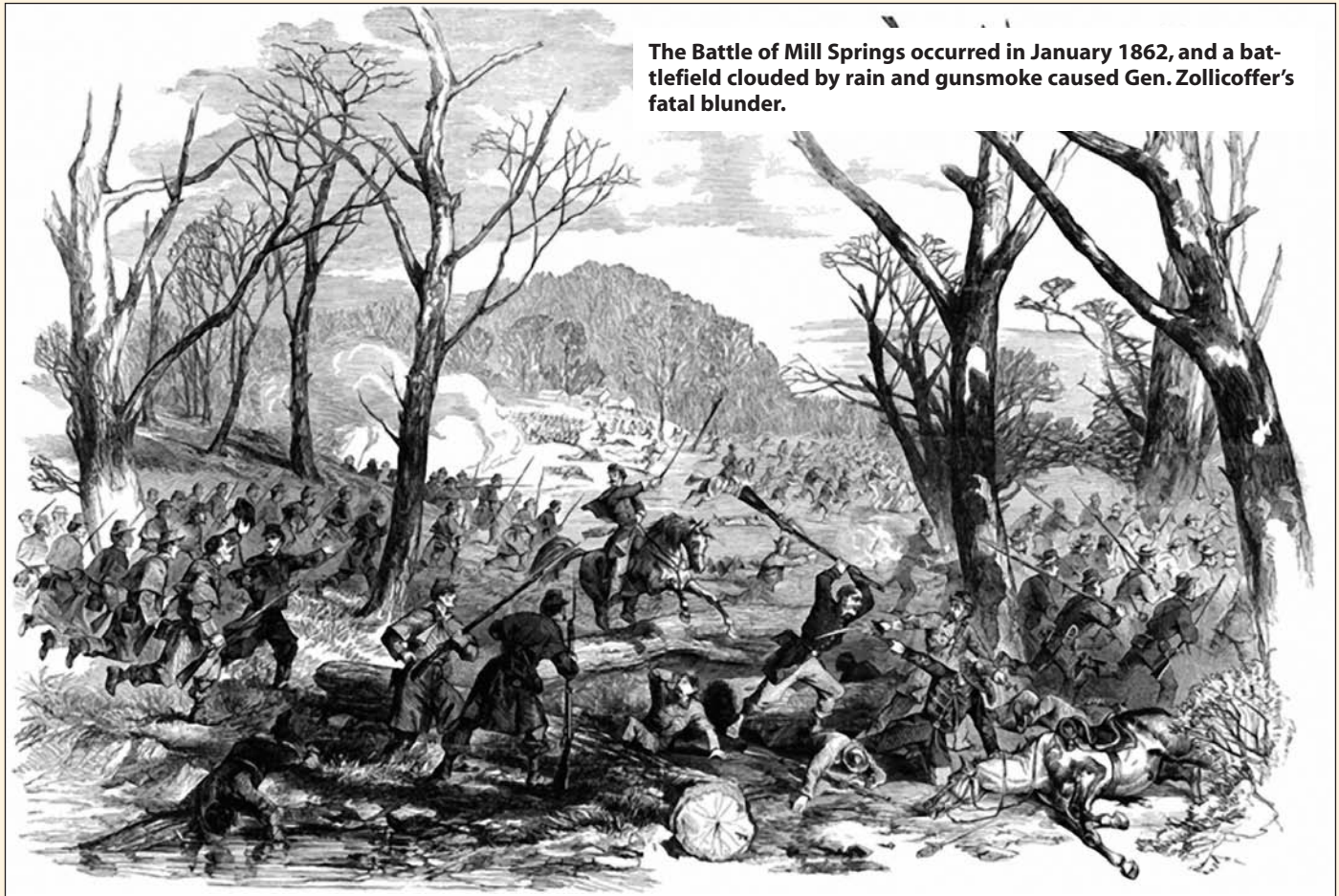
On Jan. 19, 1862, Zollicoffer's 4,000 troops met the Union army in present-

day Nancy, Ky. The battle was a disaster from the start for the poorly deployed Confederate troops. "It was foggy and rainy, and there was so much smoke that you could hardly see 20 paces in front of you," says Gilbert Wilson, administrator of the Mill Springs Battlefield Association, which operates a visitor's center on the site today.

In the confusion of battle, Zollicoffer did something that earned him a permanent spot in books about strange Civil War anecdotes. According to some accounts of the battle, Zollicoffer rode up to a group of soldiers and ordered their colonel to stop firing on his own men. Colonel Speed Fry — a Union officer — stared back at the enemy general in disbelief, then shot Zollicoffer in the chest, killing him.

home, thousands came to view it while it lay in state in the Capitol building. His funeral and procession were among the most memorable in Nashville history. "Wounded in the ear, his horse recovered to walk in the funeral procession from the Capitol to the cemetery along with Zollicoffer's six daughters, the youngest only 5," according to "The Nashville City Cemetery: History Carved in Stone" by Carole Bucy and Carol Kaplan.

Want to learn more about Gen. Felix Zollicoffer and the Battle of Mill Springs? Check out the Web site of the Mill Springs Battlefield Association at [www.millsprings.net](http://www.millsprings.net). Better yet, take a trip to the visitor's center in Nancy, Ky. Also, you can visit the grave of Zollicoffer at the Nashville City Cemetery.



The Battle of Mill Springs occurred in January 1862, and a battlefield clouded by rain and gunsmoke caused Gen. Zollicoffer's fatal blunder.

The Battle of Mill Springs was a mere skirmish compared to the bigger military engagements that occurred later in the Civil War. But in January 1862, Zollicoffer's death was no joke. "Today people have forgotten about Gen. Zollicoffer, but he was well known at the time," Wilson says. "People in the North were very concerned about him. In fact, I would say he was better known at that time than Robert E. Lee."

Nashville's newspapers mourned his passing; the general was universally declared to be a hero, one of the first high-ranking Confederate deaths of the war. After his body was returned



### Tennessee History for Kids

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