

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

BATTLE OF MIDDLE CREEK

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

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National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: BATTLE OF MIDDLE CREEK
Other Name/Site Number: Middle Creek Battlefield

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 3 Miles West of Prestonsburg Not for publication:
at the Intersection of KY 114 (Mountain Parkway)
and KY 404
City/Town: Prestonsburg Vicinity: X
State: KY County: Floyd Code: 071 Zip Code: 41653

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property Private: X
Public-local:
Public-State:
Public-Federal:
Category of Property Building(s):
District:
Site: X
Structure:
Object:

Number of Resources within Property Contributing 1
Noncontributing 1 buildings, 8 structures, 1 objects, 10 Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 1

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A

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4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this _____ nomination _____ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property _____ meets _____ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

Signature of Certifying Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property _____ meets _____ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of Commenting or Other Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION

I, hereby certify that this property is:

- _____ Entered in the National Register _____
- _____ Determined eligible for the _____
National Register
- _____ Determined not eligible for the _____
National Register
- _____ Removed from the National Register _____
- _____ Other (explain): _____

Signature of Keeper

Date of Action

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6. FUNCTION OR USE

Historic: Defense

Sub: Battlesite

Current: Agriculture
Landscape

Sub: Agriculture Field
Woodlands

7. DESCRIPTION

Architectural Classification:
N/A

Materials:
Foundation:
Walls:
Roof:
Other Description:

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National Register of Historic Places Registration Form**Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.**

The Middle Creek Battlefield has excellent integrity of setting, feeling, association and location. The only major intrusions in the area are SR 114, SR 404, the railroad and power lines, which for the most part are confined to the creek bottoms. The ridges upon which the fighting occurred remain forested, as they were in the Winter of 1862. The land has not been scarred by timbering or surface mining, and, consequently, the upland slopes that surround the confluence of the Right and Left Forks of Middle Creek have outstanding character due to their unchanged appearance.

The Middle Creek Battlefield is located along a series of ridges that surround the confluence of the Right Fork of Middle Creek and the Left Fork of Middle Creek. The eastern part of the battlefield is a cemetery located on a sharp ridge, north of SR 114 and west of Ike Fitzpatrick Branch. This is the position from which Union Col. James A. Garfield observed the battle:

After a few shots from our scouts we advanced and occupied the ridge, whose termination is called Grave Yard Point. I immediately ran up Grave Yard Point to the rock (A), an isolated crag which gave me a splendid prospect of the plain and all the hills.¹

Here Garfield set up his headquarters and directed the Federal troops.

The western boundary of the battlefield is a ridge above what Confederate Brig. Gen. Humphrey Marshall described as "a gorge" above the mouth of the Left Fork of Middle Creek. The Confederate artillery was placed in the floodplain near the confluence of the two creeks, which is the area of land between the confluence and SR 404. To protect the guns, Marshall stationed infantry on the broad ridge that rises out of the floodplain to the west:

... you will see that my battery was at first placed in the gorge of the mouth of the Left Fork of Middle Creek. Trigg's regiment occupied the height covering the battery; Witcher's and Holliday's companies in reserve in the rear of the battery.²

¹ Frederick D. Williams, *The Wild Life of the Army: Civil War Letters of James A. Garfield*, p. 57. A letter from Garfield to his wife describing the battle. The letter refers to a crude map, with point (A) indicating his position, that he included and which is in the Williams book.

² *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Volume VII, p. 47 (hereafter abbreviated O.R.).

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North and east of the Confederate guns and on the opposite bank of Middle Creek, on a ridge which is set off by hollows on the east and west, Marshall had deployed several companies:

Thomas' and Clay's companies, dismounted with Belgian rifles, thrown forward on the opposite side of Middle Creek to the heights commanding the plain of main Middle Creek, and resisted any advance of skirmishers from the opposite heights.³

Also, south of Middle Creek, between the Left Fork and Spurlock Creek in a somewhat crescent shaped line, Marshall placed two regiments and a partial battalion: "Williams' regiment, Moore's regiment, and part of the mounted battalion, fighting on foot, occupied the spurs and heights upon my right."⁴

The land in the battlefield area, both where the combat occurred and that occupied by Union troops, is very steep uplands that rise to an elevation of more than 1200 feet after leaving the floodplain of the creek, which has an approximate elevation of 600 feet. The ridges are bisected by several named drainages, as described above, as well as several seasonal drainages. These areas of alluvial disturbance are the only level land features in the site area. The contours of the land, coupled with the deployment of the Confederate troops, dictated the nature of the battle. Troopers on both sides were forced to fire up or down at severe angles, causing many shots to miss. Untested troops tend to fire high; therefore, this occurrence and the natural configuration of the landscape kept the number of casualties to a minimum.

Middle Creek meanders northeasterly, cutting a broad swath that separates the two southern ridges from the northern ridge. The creek continues in a similar direction for about a mile east of the battlefield, where it takes a sharp northern turn near the intersection of SR 114 and US 23/460. The creek continues flowing north to Prestonsburg, where it flows into the Levisa Fork of the Big Sandy River. The floodplain of the creek is fairly broad and at the time of the battle the road paralleled the creek. SR 114 follows basically the same route as the historic road in the area of the battlefield, but the modern road is straighter than its nineteenth century predecessor. From Marshall's position, he could have followed the Right Fork of Middle Creek to Salyersville and on to West Liberty and Central Kentucky, or he could have retreated up the Left Fork of Middle Creek back to Pound Gap and to Virginia; he ultimately did the latter.

In addition to SR 114 and SR 404, there are other non-contributing features on the Middle Creek Battlefield. The CSX railroad was constructed in the early 1940's along the creek

³ O.R., Ser. I, Vol. VII, p. 47.

⁴ *Ibid.*

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bottoms. The line is solely a spur from the mainline at Prestonsburg. It comes up from the east along Main Middle Creek, turns south and parallels the Left Fork of Middle Creek, terminating about 5 miles at David. The railroad leaves the battlefield area roughly 825 feet south of the confluence of the Left Fork of Middle Creek and the Right Fork of Middle Creek. From this point it mirrors SR 114 along the creek bottom, hugging the ridge line south of Main Middle Creek. The railroad right of way is approximately 100 feet in width. A power line also crosses the battlefield site. It enters the battlefield area from the south, nearly 330 feet west of the CSX railroad. The power line crosses SR 404 as it enters the battlefield area and then crosses the Left Fork of Middle Creek and continues in a northeasterly direction, crossing the Right Fork of Middle Creek almost 525 feet north of where it crossed the Left Fork; about 550 feet further north, the power line crosses SR 114. The power line hugs the southwest face of the ridge. From the creek, the line makes a sharp eastern turn and runs along the lower edge of the ridge that culminates at Grave Yard Point. The power line crosses the ridge about 500 feet northwest of the cemetery on Grave Yard Point, and continues northerly as it leaves the battlefield area.

In the battlefield area, the USGS Prestonsburg Quadrangle shows four oil wells and two gas wells. These were actually all gas wells, which unlike oil wells, do not have concrete or other well pads and derricks. The one remaining gas well consists of a pipe that comes vertically out of the ground and is generally about eight inches in diameter, with a "christmas tree" at the top. This is a pipe structure about five feet high and four feet wide, used in conjunction with the recovery of natural gas. Of the six wells, this is the only one that remains within the battlefield. On the quad map just east of the confluence of the two creeks is the word "oil well"; this is the location of the above mentioned well. It was drilled in the 1920's. In addition, a meter house measures the natural gas and is located at the southwest side of the intersection of SR 404 and SR 114, just off the road.

Between the intersection of the SR 114 and SR 404, at the confluence of the creeks, and the intersection of SR 114 and old SR 114, is a small road that runs northwest into an unnamed hollow. West of this road is the position of a portion of the Confederate troops. Near the intersection of the dirt road and SR 114 are a wooden tool shed, a concrete block garage and two mobile homes; one is an office trailer and the other is a residential trailer.

SR 114, built in the early 1960's, infringed upon a small area of Grave Yard Point. The power line cuts through the forest, but does not severely damage the landscape. The railroad runs along the creek bottoms, which has historically been a transportation corridor. The historic road in the battlefield area followed the creek bottoms, as was the case throughout Eastern Kentucky. Stream beds often offered the only level ground.

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Overall, the Middle Creek Battlefield has excellent integrity. It remains forested and the land is utilized for some agriculture, mostly hay, much as it was in 1862. Other than the minor modern intrusions, the land upon which Garfield attacked Marshall is in such a state that a soldier who participated in the battle in the Winter of 1862 would recognize the battlefield today.

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8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties: Nationally: X Statewide: Locally:

Applicable National Register Criteria: A X B X C D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): A B C D E F G

NHL Criteria: 1

NHL Theme(s): V. The Civil War
 C. War in the West

Area(s) of Significance: Military/Politics
 Government

Period(s) of Significance: Winter 1862

Significant Date(s): January 10, 1862

Significant Person(s): Col. James A. Garfield
 Brig. Gen. Humphrey Marshall

Cultural Affiliation: N/A

Architect/Builder: N/A

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State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.**SUMMARY**

The site of the Battle of Middle Creek (January 10, 1862) is of national significance under National Historic Landmarks criterion 1 because it "is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to, and are identified with ... broad national patterns of United States history." This battle was an important early victory for the Union forces, because it brought hope to a disheartened Northern population. Although the battle was a milestone in the early career of James A. Garfield, who served briefly as President in 1881, it is presented for its military importance in U.S. history rather than for its association with the President.

HISTORY

On the surface, the Battle of Middle Creek would seem to be a relatively minor action fought in a less familiar theater of the war. However, control of Kentucky was very important to Abraham Lincoln. The President was reported to have said that he would like to have God on his side, but he must have Kentucky, if for no other reason than the state's size and strategic location. The 1860 population was over one million people, making it the ninth most populous state in the nation and the second most populous slave holding State. The President had been born there and he realized its strategic importance:

I think to lose Kentucky is nearly the same as to lose the whole game, Kentucky gone, we cannot hold Missouri, nor, as I think Maryland. These all against us, and the job on our hands is too large for us. We would as well consent to separation at once, including the surrender of this capital.¹

The Lincoln Administration also wished to control Eastern Kentucky and Eastern Tennessee for both political and military reasons. Politically, the region harbored a large Unionist population and the President wished to protect those people from molestation by the secessionists who were in the area. Military occupation of East Tennessee could sever the important railroad connection between Richmond and the Mississippi Valley. Control of Eastern Kentucky would open access routes to this vital

¹ James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*, p. 284 and Shelby Foote, *The Civil War: A Narrative, Fort Sumter to Perryville*, Volume I, p. 53.

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railroad. From these avenues, Federal troops could attack the line via Pound or Cumberland Gaps.²

The Eastern Kentucky campaign that resulted in the Battle of Middle Creek was part of the overall Union strategy to keep Kentucky within the fold. Even though the August 1861 election had given Kentucky Unionists a three to one majority in the state legislature, the issue of secession was not completely settled. By autumn, Confederate sympathizers had formed a government in Kentucky. Meeting in Russellville in November of 1861, delegates from 68 counties established a provisional government, declared Bowling Green the state capital, seceded from the Union, elected a governor and a council and also made a provision that the new government could meet anywhere that it deemed appropriate. This government was recognized by the Confederacy in December of 1861. Establishing a government, however, was one thing, holding a state was something else. Both the Union and Confederate commands in Kentucky understood its strategic importance to their respective causes.³

Maj. Gen. Don Carlos Buell was installed as commander of Union troops in Kentucky on November 15, 1861, replacing Maj. Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman, who had fallen into disfavor by his hesitancy to invade East Tennessee. Buell's plan was to clear the Bluegrass state of Confederates and open the door to Tennessee and the lower South. Both he and his Confederate counterpart, Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston, concentrated their attention on the Louisville-Bowling Green-Nashville corridor and the paralleling Louisville and Nashville Railroad, assigning the extreme southeastern region of the state a lower priority. Yet Lincoln's desire to invade East Tennessee required control of the mountainous southeast region of Kentucky. For even if the terrain of East Kentucky did not offer the proper avenue of invasion, it did present an excellent route to the major Confederate east-west artery, the Virginia and East Tennessee Railroad, linking Richmond with the Gulf states. The South needed a buffer zone in Eastern Kentucky to hold the area and guard its railroad and protect the vital King and Preston Saltworks at Saltville, Smythe County, Virginia and the Union

² Bruce Catton, *This Hallowed Ground: The Story of the Union Side of the Civil War*, p. 89 and Williams, *The Wild Life of the Army: Civil War Letters of James A. Garfield*, p. 3.

³ Lowell H. Harrison, *The Civil War in Kentucky*, pp. 9 and 20-23 and McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*, pp. 294-297.

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Lead Mining Company's lead mines at Austinville, Wythe County, Virginia. (see attached map #1)⁴

In the Fall of 1861, Gen. Buell planned an expedition to attack the defensive line that the Confederacy had established to protect its interests in Kentucky and to insulate Tennessee. (see attached map #2) Buell's plan was to weaken the Confederate position so that it would be untenable, thus opening a route to Tennessee and its main internal waterways, the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers. But before he could attempt such an operation, he had to remove the threats the Confederacy had thrown against his left flank in Eastern Kentucky. One of these threats was a column of Virginia and Kentucky troops that had marched from Abingdon, Virginia through Pound Gap into Eastern Kentucky. By late 1861, these troops had proceeded down the Big Sandy River Valley in the general direction of Prestonsburg and Paintsville. The commander of the Rebel forces, Brig. Gen. Humphrey Marshall, planned to "sweep down on the railroad from Lexington to Cincinnati and destroy it."⁵ Marshall did not have the force to accomplish his threat and perhaps Buell knew that, but his presence in the Big Sandy Valley and even the remote possibility of his joining forces with Gen. Felix Zollicoffer's forces in Central Kentucky could not be ignored. While the possibility of Zollicoffer and Marshall joining forces was remote, it must have been considered at the time.

Control of Eastern Kentucky required a show of strength and dependable supply lines, which meant a mastery of the waterways. Roads in the Appalachia area of Kentucky were generally very poor, becoming quagmires during the winter and spring months. The only railroad in the region, Ashland to Mt. Savage, was not a significant or extensive transportation network. Because East Kentucky did not have sufficient agricultural supplies to feed an army, a reliable supply link was vital to any military campaign. The North took advantage of the river for supplies and transportation. The South had to rely on unimproved roads over mountainous terrain. This fact alone was a great advantage to the North.

The Levisa Fork was the main north-south transportation corridor in Eastern Kentucky. The population centers of Eastern Kentucky were stretched out along this fork of the Big Sandy River from Paintsville to Prestonsburg to Pikeville. The Levisa Fork was navigable as far south as Pikeville during the wet months. This

⁴ Clarence C. Buel and Robert U. Johnson, eds., *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* Volume I, p. 393; Joseph D. Carr, "Garfield and Marshall in the Big Sandy Valley, 1861-1862," *Filson Club History Quarterly*, Volume 64, Number 2, p. 249; Harrison, *The Civil War in Kentucky*, p. 23; and Rockwell S. Boyle, "Virginia's Mineral Contribution to the Confederacy", *Virginia Geological Survey Bulletin* 46-K, 1935, p. 121.

⁵ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*, p. 305 and *O.R.*, Ser. I, Vol. VII, p.41.

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waterway was important for the movement of men and materiel, and while its command did not assure success, it went a long way in helping those who were trying to hold the region to succeed in that goal.

Meanwhile, in order to counter this threat to his extreme left, Buell sent Col. James A. Garfield and a contingent of Ohio and Kentucky troops to check the Confederate advance.

James Garfield was appointed colonel of the 42nd Ohio Volunteers in the Summer of 1861. Six months later, the 42nd and their colonel were on a steamboat bound for Eastern Kentucky. By the first week in January, Garfield had under his command in Eastern Kentucky the 42nd and 40th Ohio Regiments, portions of the 14th and 22nd Kentucky Regiments and a detachment of cavalry on loan from Gen. Jacob D. Cox who was operating in the Kanawha Valley, in what would become West Virginia. This combination brought his effective strength roughly up to Marshall's. Garfield led this force up the Levisa Fork toward the Confederate forces entrenched near Paintsville. Garfield forced Marshall to abandon the entrenchments. Marshall withdrew to a position on Middle Creek, west of Prestonsburg. The Confederates occupied two ridges north and south of Middle Creek, dug in, and awaited the Federal advance.⁶ It was here that the Battle of Middle Creek would take place.

Following Marshall's withdrawal from Paintsville, Garfield misjudged the whereabouts of the Confederate troops. He thought they had camped on Abbott Creek and hoped to cut off their retreat by marching up to the Forks of Middle Creek, the next watercourse upstream. About midday on January 10, 1862, as Garfield was moving his command into position to block the anticipated Confederate departure, his column was attacked by Marshall's cavalry on a wide plain near the Left Fork of Middle Creek. (see attached map #3) The Confederate forces were dispersed on three ridges that surround the confluence of the Left and Right Forks of Middle Creek. Following an attack by Confederate horsemen, Garfield ordered a small cavalry detachment to charge across an open plain in order to draw the Confederate fire and reveal their positions.

Marshall had placed his artillery on a ridge west of the confluence, where it could command access to the Forks. The Confederate general had also deployed his small army on ridges both north and south of Middle Creek, east of the confluence of the two creeks. The Ohioan sent the Kentuckians under his command forward against the Confederates. Having no room for any sort of military maneuver, the troops simply loaded and fired and made their way up the side of the ridge. The battle could be defined as a series of uncoordinated attacks and retreats that netted virtually nothing. The fighting, intense at times, raged on until dark. Finally, as nightfall brought an end to the

⁶ O.R., Ser. I, Vol. VII, p. 47.

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hostilities, Marshall still occupied the ridges that he had held all day.⁷

During the night, however, Marshall began the retreat that would take him back to Pound Gap and into the relatively safe confines of Virginia. But Marshall's reason for withdrawing was more due to a lack of food than to the Union troops. Regardless, Garfield's troopers occupied the ridges the next morning. When the battle was over, both sides claimed victory, but Marshall would have trouble justifying a victory that included burning his supplies and moving away from his professed objective, Central Kentucky. Garfield held the field, held the Big Sandy Valley, and for all intents and purposes, held Eastern Kentucky. He had accomplished his mission, for the threat to Buell's flank had been removed and the Big Sandy Valley was secure for the Union. The cost of the battle in terms of human life was small compared to later battles: Garfield claimed two dead and 25 wounded; Marshall gave 11 dead and 15 wounded as his casualty figures.⁸

In addition to its political and strategic value, the battle had a huge psychological impact on the home front in the Northern states. The Battle of Middle Creek reversed a pattern of Confederate victories that had continued for several months. On July 21, 1861, the Confederate Army humiliated a Union Army at the Battle of Bull Run near Manassas Junction, Virginia. This loss, coupled with subsequent setbacks at the Battle of Wilson's Creek, Missouri (August 10, 1861); the siege and subsequent surrender of Lexington, Missouri (September 20, 1861); and the Battle of Ball's Bluff (October 21, 1861), near Leesburg, Virginia, led to further deterioration of esteem on the Northern side.⁹

The Battle of Middle Creek was an omen of things to come; it began a series of Union victories that cleared the Confederate troops out of Kentucky, opened up Tennessee, and eventually led to the Battle of Shiloh. Middle Creek was hailed as a major victory in the Northern and international press. In a burst of patriotic fervor the newspapers jumped on the Garfield bandwagon. The accounts vary and often the facts are dubious, but the effect

⁷ Williams, *The Wild Life of the Army: Civil War Letters of James A. Garfield*, pp. 55-59 and Allen Peskin, "The Hero of the Sandy Valley: James A. Garfield's Kentucky Campaign of 1861-1862," *Ohio History* 72, p. 18.

⁸ Peskin, "The Hero of the Sandy Valley," pp. 16-20; *O.R.*, Ser. I, Vol. VII, pp. 30-32, 56-57. For the most in-depth account of the Battle of Middle Creek, see John David Preston, *The Civil War in the Big Sandy Valley of Kentucky*, pp. 32-48.

⁹ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*, p. 367. It should be noted that Wilson's Creek is a National Battlefield, Ball's Bluff has National Historic Landmark status, and the Lexington siege site is a State Historic Site in Missouri.

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was the same. Middle Creek was proclaimed as an undisputed Union triumph. The Northern papers savored the fact that the Union commander was not a professional and did not have an established military reputation. Nonetheless, he vanquished Humphrey Marshall, who was both of those things. The *Toronto Globe* summed up the feeling expressed in the papers very succinctly:

Marshall, who with his West Point training and Mexican War reputation was greatly relied upon by the Secessionists. By his recent display of "direction" has inflicted a blow upon the Rebels which will more than counterbalance all his achievements heretofore in their behalf.¹⁰

Following the Battle of Mill Springs, nine days later, newspapers reported that the two Union victories [Middle Creek and Mill Springs], combined, had opened the door to Eastern Tennessee. The *New York Tribune* acclaimed the battle as "the glorious triumph of Colonel Garfield."¹¹ In his home state of Ohio, the praise was pronounced and profound. The *Cincinnati Daily Gazette* declared:

Colonel Garfield's success is as brilliant and important as that of any movement on our side in this war, and he may say in the language of a greater general, that he has liberated Eastern Kentucky.¹²

This praise was not limited to the touting of a favorite son in Ohio. The New York papers also chimed in, the *New York Herald* and *New York Tribune*, among others, also cheering his accomplishments. In a piece taken from the *New York Times* and placed in the *Toronto Globe* on January 23, 1862, the paper reported:

... this victory [Mill Springs] following hard upon the heels of Colonel Garfield's squelching out of the obese Humphrey Marshall, has effectively destroyed the rebel strength in East Kentucky, and renders Eastern Tennessee immediately accessible to our army. There is no strength left to oppose the advance to Knoxville.¹³

The newspaper stories glorify the courage, tenacity, and dedication of Col. Garfield and his men, and the weakness of those who led the rebellion against the United States. The newspaper accounts were designed to give the general population hope and the opportunity to bask in the perceived righteousness

¹⁰ *Toronto Globe*, January 15, 1862.

¹¹ *New York Tribune*, January 23, 1862 and January 25, 1862.

¹² *Cincinnati Gazette*, January 15, 1862.

¹³ *Toronto Globe*, January 23, 1862.

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of the Union cause and the strength and moral character of the Army of the Republic.

In addition to being eligible under Criterion 1, the Battle of Middle Creek is also notable for its association with the participation of James Abram Garfield. Garfield's rise to national prominence, culminating in his election as President of the United States in 1880, began at Middle Creek.

Before the war, Garfield had been President of Western Reserve Eclectic Institute (now Hiram College) and also elected to a state senate seat in Ohio as a Republican. Once war came, he sought a regiment-level command with the Ohio volunteers. His political connections helped him secure the command of the 42nd Ohio Regiment. While Garfield was locally known in Ohio politics, he did not have a national reputation. The results and timing of the Battle of Middle Creek brought him national attention. The North had suddenly found a hero. Garfield, an obscure Republican politician from Hiram, Ohio, had defeated a well known Southern general.

While Garfield would rise to the level of a division commander and army chief of staff in the Union Army after the Middle Creek campaign, he would not be in an independent position to make decisions regarding future campaign policy. While the loss of life at Middle Creek was relatively small, especially if judged by post-Shiloh standards, its timing was important. Garfield's Eastern Kentucky triumph was the first in a string of Union victories in the West in early 1862: Mill Springs (January 19); Ft. Henry (February 6); Ft. Donelson (February 16); and Shiloh (April 6-7) followed. Middle Creek was first and the newspapers picked up on it.

Garfield's biographers made much of the Ohioan's exploits in the Big Sandy Valley. They note that the young colonel was praised not only by his Commanding General, Buell, but also General-in-Chief, George B. McClellan, as well as the Northern press for his victory in Kentucky. One of Garfield's biographers wrote:

For Garfield this victory was immensely significant. His promotion to brigadier general, which came in March [1862], also attracted considerable attention. Almost overnight Gen. Garfield became a name familiar to households across the North. For the man who bore that name probably no other event in his life shaped his political future as much as did his success in the Sandy Valley.¹⁴

In early 1862, this was big news. The Battle of Middle Creek provided a hero, not a martyr. Garfield's exploits in the Big Sandy Valley made news all over the North. The story ran for

¹⁴ Williams, *The Wild Life of the Army: Civil War Letters of James A. Garfield*, pp. 3-4. Garfield's promotion was effective and retroactive back to the date of the Battle of Middle Creek.

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over a month in New York and Ohio papers. He was news internationally, as well. Papers in Canada, and even the *Times* of London, found space to praise the victory in Kentucky. His exploits in early 1862 would be eclipsed by U.S. Grant and others, but Garfield would not be forgotten. He resigned his commission in the army in 1863 to take a seat in Congress. He ended his military career with the rank of major general and began his long career in politics, launched by a battle in Floyd County, Kentucky that had made him a household name in the winter of 1862.

While arguably his exploits during the Battle of Chickamauga in 1863 were the highlight of his military career, bringing promotion to major general, they were also at the end of it, and by then his name was already known to the Northern populace. The Battle of Middle Creek was featured prominently in campaign biographies in 1880 and in memorials following his assassination in 1881.¹⁵ Secretary of State James G. Blaine concluded in a memorial address, delivered to a Joint Session of Congress, with the President, Cabinet officials, Supreme Court Justices and other governmental officials in attendance, on February 27, 1882:

His immediate duty was to check the advance of Humphrey Marshall, who was marching down the Big Sandy with the intention of occupying in conjunction with other Confederate forces the entire territory of Kentucky, and precipitating the state into secession.¹⁶

On the other hand, Marshall had already served in the military and government before the outbreak of the Civil War. He was a West Point graduate and one of many who returned home as heroes from the Mexican War. An attorney by training, he served in the United States House of Representatives for four terms. Marshall had also served as President Millard Fillmore's Commissioner Plenipotentiary to the then newly opened China.

His experiences in the Big Sandy Valley of Eastern Kentucky left him disappointed and his military career ended in bitterness and humiliation. He resigned his command after being placed in a position subordinate to his old political foe, Gen. William Preston. Finished with the military, Marshall then moved to Richmond and was subsequently elected to the Confederate Congress by Kentucky soldiers in the field. His one term coincided with the last days of the Confederacy. In 1867, Marshall was pardoned

¹⁵ See: Charles Carleton Coffin, *The Life of James A. Garfield*, chapters 11, 12, and 13; John Clark Ridpath, *The Life and Work of James A. Garfield (Memorial Edition)*, chapter 4; William Ralston Balch, *The Life of James Abram Garfield*, chapters 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14; James D. McCabe, *The Life and Public Services of James A. Garfield*, chapter 3; Benson J. Lossing, *A Biography of James A. Garfield*, pp. 177-202.

¹⁶ James G. Blaine, *Memorial Address on the Life and Character of James A. Garfield*, p. 113.

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by President Andrew Johnson and reopened his old law office in Louisville. He died in 1872.

Marshall's best days had taken place before the Civil War; Garfield's were to follow the conflict.¹⁷

THE BATTLE OF MIDDLE CREEK - A NARRATIVE

Marshall had been placed in command of 2,800 troops in November 1861, with orders to proceed to Prestonsburg. He marched from Pound Gap, on the Virginia border, on December 1, with a force consisting of Kentuckians and Virginians. By December 10, he was close to Prestonsburg, with 1,250 men in his command. He moved on to Paintsville, and set up a camp there, to await the expected Union advance.

In early December, Col. Garfield had been placed in command of the 18th Brigade, consisting of two Ohio regiments and two Kentucky regiments, one of them being the 14th Kentucky Infantry, recruited mostly from the Big Sandy area. Garfield began moving his troops up river, arriving at the mouth of George's Creek, in Lawrence County, the day after Christmas.

The first skirmish between the two armies took place near Paintsville on January 4, 1862. The two armies began a series of maneuvers which led to a skirmish at Jenny's Creek on January 6. Brig. Gen. Marshall withdrew to what he believed to be safer ground near Prestonsburg, the trip taking two days.

Col. Garfield gave chase, marching toward Prestonsburg with 1,100 men. They arrived at the mouth of Abbott Creek on the evening of the 9th. The next morning, Garfield's troops crossed the ridge to Middle Creek at 8:00 A.M., about one mile from the river. Marshall had by this time positioned his troops at the Forks of Middle Creek. He placed his artillery in the gorge at the mouth of the Left Fork. On the ridge to his right, he placed a Kentucky regiment, a Virginia regiment, and part of a mounted battalion. Another regiment covered the heights near the artillery, and two companies of infantry were on the heights to Marshall's left. He kept two companies in reserve. He had 1,967 men present at the battleground.

Shooting actually began sometime in the morning, for Garfield reported skirmishing with Rebel cavalry for the two and one-half mile distance he travelled up Middle Creek. When he came within 1,000 yards of the Confederate position, he drew his force up on a semi-circular hill. Marshall reported that the enemy came into sight about 10:00 A.M. About noon, Garfield sent out twenty mounted men to draw Confederate fire and reveal their position.

The fighting then began in earnest. Garfield sent two Kentucky companies to attack the Confederates who had occupied the other

¹⁷ Carr, "Garfield and Marshall in the Big Sandy Valley, 1861-1865", pp. 247 and 262-263.

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end of the ridge on which he was posted. He sent a company from each of the Ohio regiments to attack the forces on the opposite ridge, wading Middle Creek in the way. These were the only troops at the time within range of the Confederate artillery. The Confederates opened fire with two cannons, although the shells were not exploding when they hit. As the engagement on Garfield's right became sharp, he sent two more Kentucky companies there to reinforce his men. Marshall withdrew one regiment and moved it to the left of the creek to reinforce his right. Garfield sent ninety men under Maj. Pardee to beef up his forces on his left, and at 2:00 P.M. sent Col. Cranor with one hundred fifty men to aid Pardee.

By this time, the Confederates had moved to the ridge directly to Garfield's right and were in a position to do damage to him. He ordered Lt. Col. George Monroe to take one hundred twenty men and sweep the Rebels from their position. On the other side of the field, Pardee and Cranor had succeeded in driving their opponents slowly up the ridge behind the Confederate position. The fight by this time was getting heavy. Garfield said, at the height of the action,

I have no doubt but that a thousand rifle bullets came within a foot of me. They cut the twigs, splintered the rock and cut a canteen which hung beside me ... Such terrific volleys I have never seen. The hill trembled under the recoil.

The battle had reached a crucial point. Garfield had engaged almost his entire force and had only been able to push the Rebels to the top of the ridges. To make matters worse for Garfield, Marshall had sent reserves to Marshall's right to reinforce that position. Of these crucial moments, Garfield later said:

My reserve was now reduced to a mere handful and the agony of the moment was terrible. The whole hill was enshrouded in such a column of smoke as rolls from the mouth of a volcano. Thousands of fire-flashes leaped like lightning from the cloud. Every minute the fight grew hotter. I was just ordering my whole reserves into line and was going to lead them up the hill myself when I saw the Hiram banner sweep up the hill. I shouted to our boys to look. They saw, and such a shout of joy now greeted my ears. The reinforcement, on double quick returned the wild shout and the fighters on the hills heard, saw and returned an answering shout.

The Hiram banner referred to by Garfield belonged to an Ohio regiment, a detachment of which, under Lt. Col. Sheldon, arrived from Paintsville about four o'clock. Garfield sent forward the rest of his reserve to attempt to capture the Confederate guns, although the guns had been effective only one shot in thirty. By 4:30 P.M., Marshall decided he had enough of the Federals for one day, and ordered a retreat. The arrival of fresh troops under Sheldon tipped the scale away from Marshall's favor, and he did

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not want further combat, especially with evening's shadows setting in. By five o'clock, the Confederates had been driven from the slopes at every point.

Garfield and his command spent the night on the battlefield. He reported that during the night, his troops observed a brilliant light coming from the Confederate camp. They later learned that the Confederates had burned many of their supplies before retreating.

Such was the course of the battle according to Garfield's account. Marshall's report told a rather different story. According to the Confederate general, Garfield retired down Middle Creek to Prestonsburg after dark and moved to Paintsville the next day. As to his own actions after the engagement, Marshall was not specific. From his lack of comment, one might assume he meant to leave the impression that he spent the night on the field. He did say that the day after the battle, he began his three-day trek to Martin's Mill on Beaver Creek.

Since the commanders did not agree as to who won the battle, (Marshall stoutly claiming a victory), it is hardly surprising that their reports of casualties and enemy strength disagreed. Garfield reported that twenty-five Confederate bodies were initially counted, and that sixty more bodies were found in a gorge. He also claimed twenty-five prisoners, among them a captain. He put his own loss at one killed and twenty wounded; two of whom died later. He claimed to have 900 men engaged in the action and estimated the Confederate force at no less than 3,500.

Humphrey Marshall, for his part, wrote of a much different battle. He put Confederate losses at eleven killed and fifteen wounded. The Union loss he surmised to be 250 killed and 300 wounded. Marshall estimated the Union strength to be 5,000 men.

The morning after the battle, cavalry under Lt. Col. Letcher arrived, and Garfield sent them in pursuit of Marshall. They followed the Confederates for six miles, but being exhausted and hungry, they returned, having picked up a few prisoners. On the morning of the 11th of January, he crossed the Levisa Fork and occupied Prestonsburg. He found very little there of any value, since the place had been almost completely stripped. Because he could find forage for his horses for only one day, he moved his command down the river to Paintsville on the 12th and 13th.

The Battle of Middle Creek established that the Union Army would control the Big Sandy Valley. Except for a few temporary incursions in force, the Confederates would be limited to raiding for the rest of the war. Military supremacy translated into civilian sympathy. Many people thereafter favored the Union cause because the Confederates, having no base of supplies in the

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Valley, alienated much of the local populace by relying on civilians as an involuntary source of supplies.¹⁸

¹⁸ Preston, *The Civil War in the Big Sandy Valley of Kentucky*, pp. 32-48. The preceding narrative was excerpted from Preston's book and was used with his permission.

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Louisville Daily Courier, January, 1862.

New York Tribune, January, 1862.

Times (London, UK), January and February, 1862.

Toronto Globe (Canada), January and February 1862.

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- Previously Listed in the National Register.
- Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.
- Designated a National Historic Landmark.
- Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: # _____
- Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: # _____

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State Historic Preservation Office: Kentucky Heritage Council
Other State Agency
- Federal Agency: National Register of Historic Places
- Local Government
- University
- Other (specify):

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10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreage of Property: Approximately 450 Acres.

Latitude: 37° 39' 02"
Longitude: 82° 48' 57"

UTM References: Prestonsburg Quadrangle

A) 17 - 341130 - 4168790
B) 17 - 341020 - 4168910
C) 17 - 339800 - 4168950
D) 17 - 339910 - 4168800
E) 17 - 339770 - 4168510
F) 17 - 339440 - 4168100
G) 17 - 340365 - 4167950
H) 17 - 340950 - 4168800

Verbal Boundary Description:

Beginning at a point where SR 114 right of way intersects with old SR 114 right of way, on the north side of said roads (Prestonsburg Quadrangle, UTM point A); proceed northwesterly with Grave Yard Point, approximately 2500 feet to a point (UTM point B); proceed southwesterly approximately 2500 feet, across an unnamed hollow to a point (UTM point C); proceed southeasterly approximately 650 feet to a point (UTM point D); proceed southwesterly down the ridge to SR 114 right of way, approximately 1150 feet to a point (UTM point E); proceed southwesterly across SR 114 right of way, approximately 1550 feet to a point (UTM point F); proceed east across SR 404 right of way, the Left Fork of Middle Creek and the CSX railroad right of way, approximately 3050 feet to a point (UTM point G); proceed northeasterly across the CSX railroad right of way, crossing SR 114 right of way, approximately 3350 feet to a point (UTM point H); following SR 114 right of way, approximately 325 feet, to the point of origin. (see attached map #4).

Boundary Justification:

The boundary includes the ridges, streams and floodplain of the Left and Right Forks and Main Middle Creek on and around which the Battle of Middle Creek took place. A recent inspection produced no earthworks or artifacts that would help determine the exact site limits. The boundary is based upon historic maps, manuscripts and other documentation both primary and secondary. (see attached map #5)

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11. FORM PREPARED BY

Name/Title: Franklin D. Fitzpatrick, President;
and edited by Historian James H. Charleton
of the National Park Service

Organization: Middle Creek Battlefield Foundation, Inc.

Street & Number: 37 South Lake Drive, Suite 200

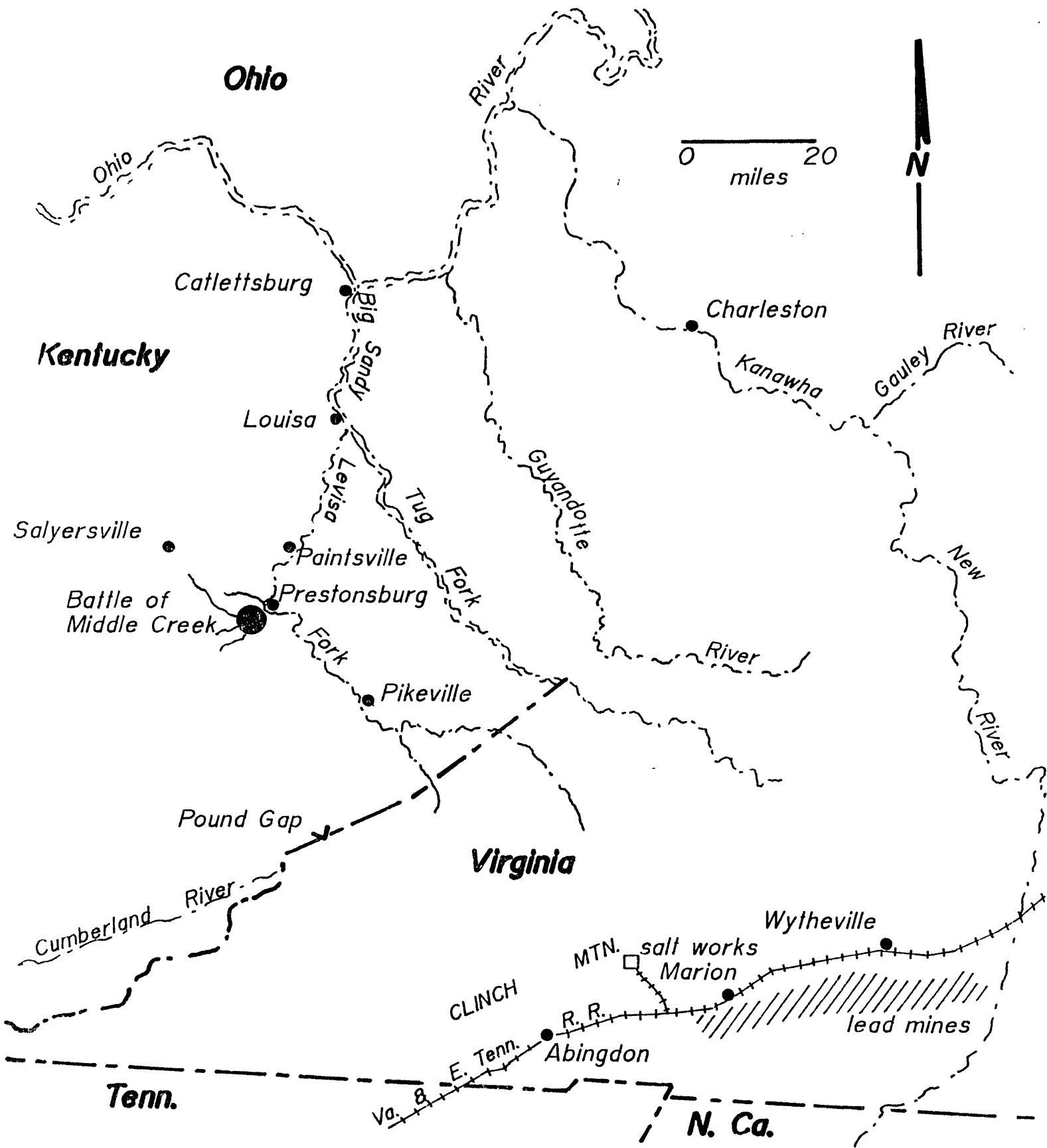
City or Town: Prestonsburg

State: Kentucky

ZIP: 41653-0326

Telephone: 606-886-1312

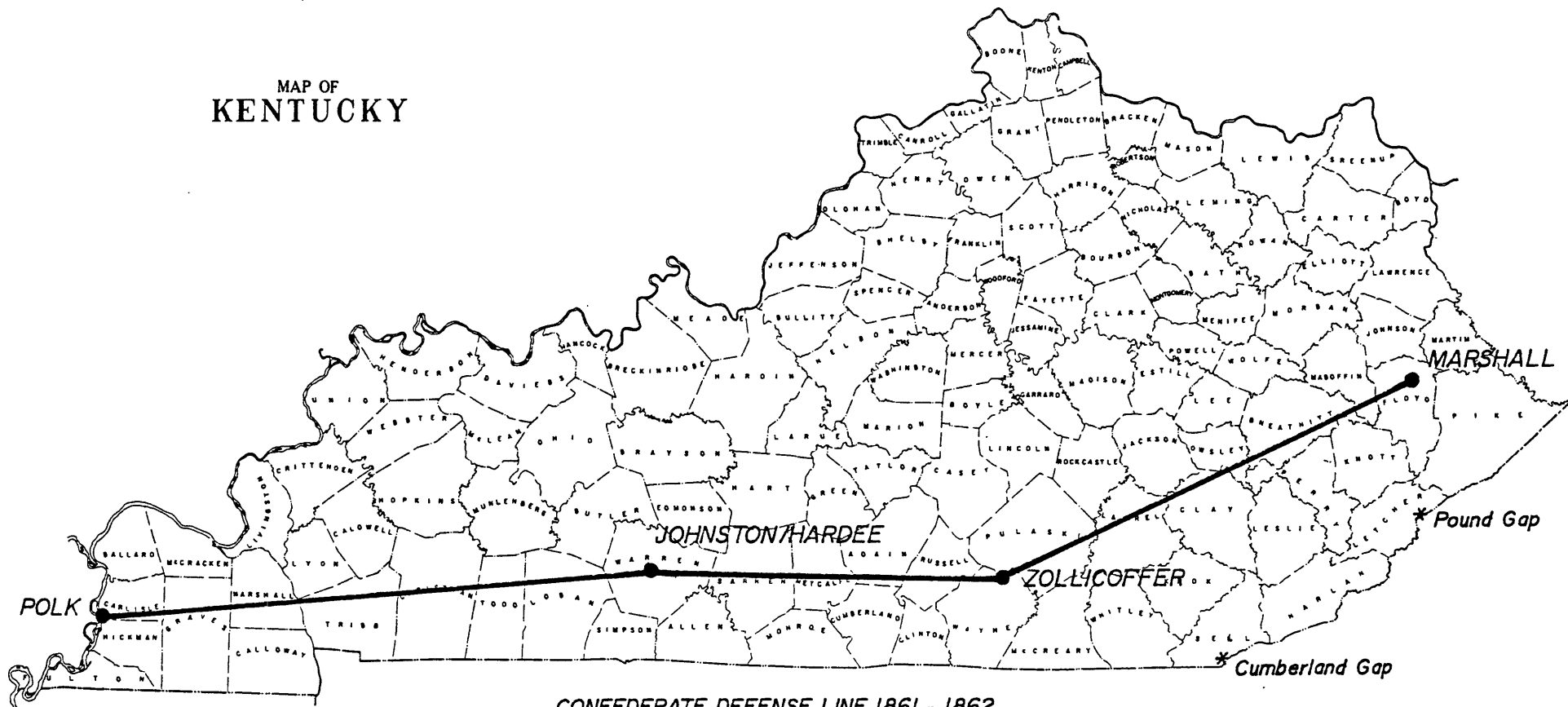
Date: May 4, 1991



Middle Creek Battlefield, Kentucky

MAP # 1

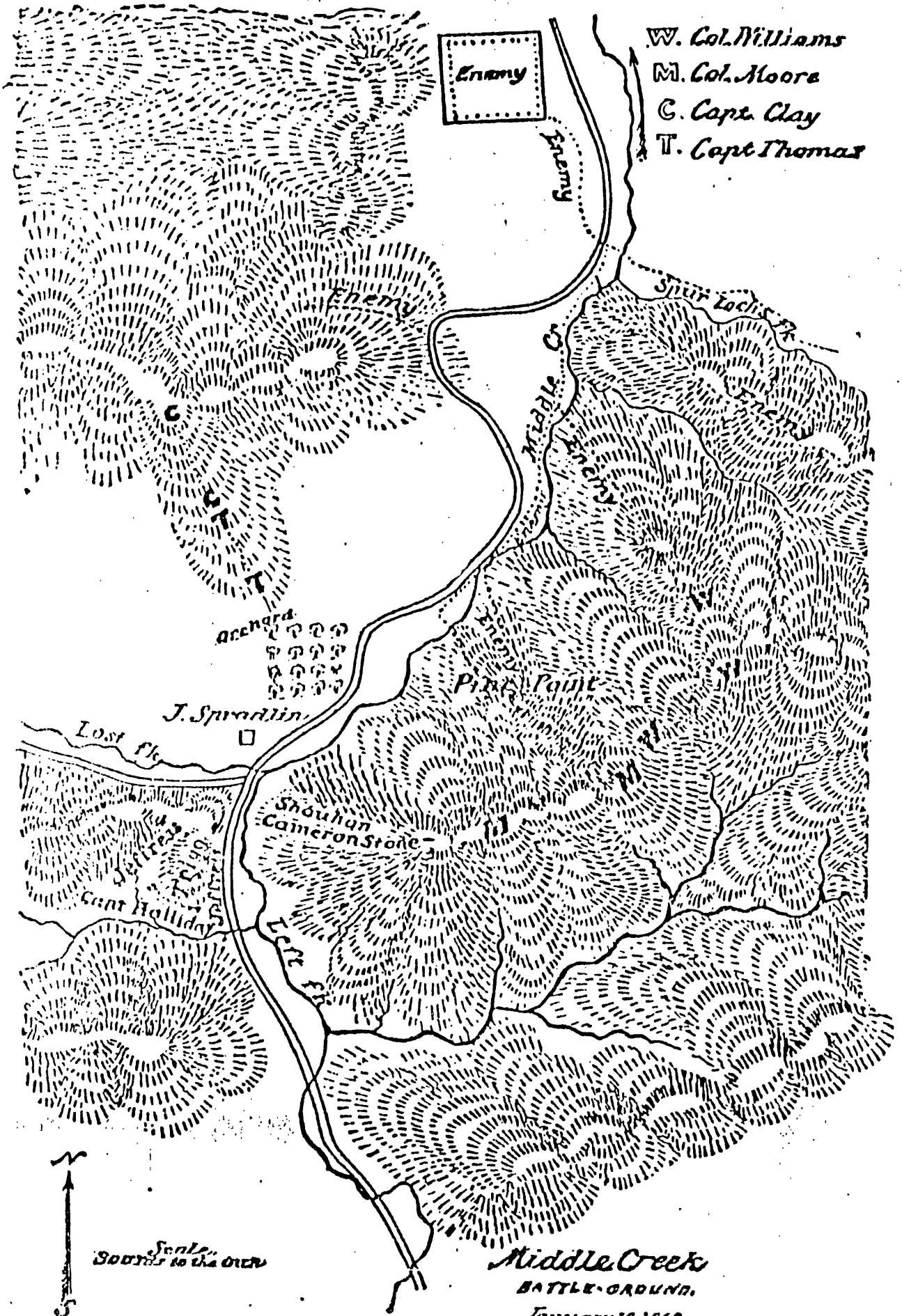
MAP OF
KENTUCKY



CONFEDERATE DEFENSE LINE 1861 - 1862

MAP # 2

Middle Creek Battlefield, Kentucky



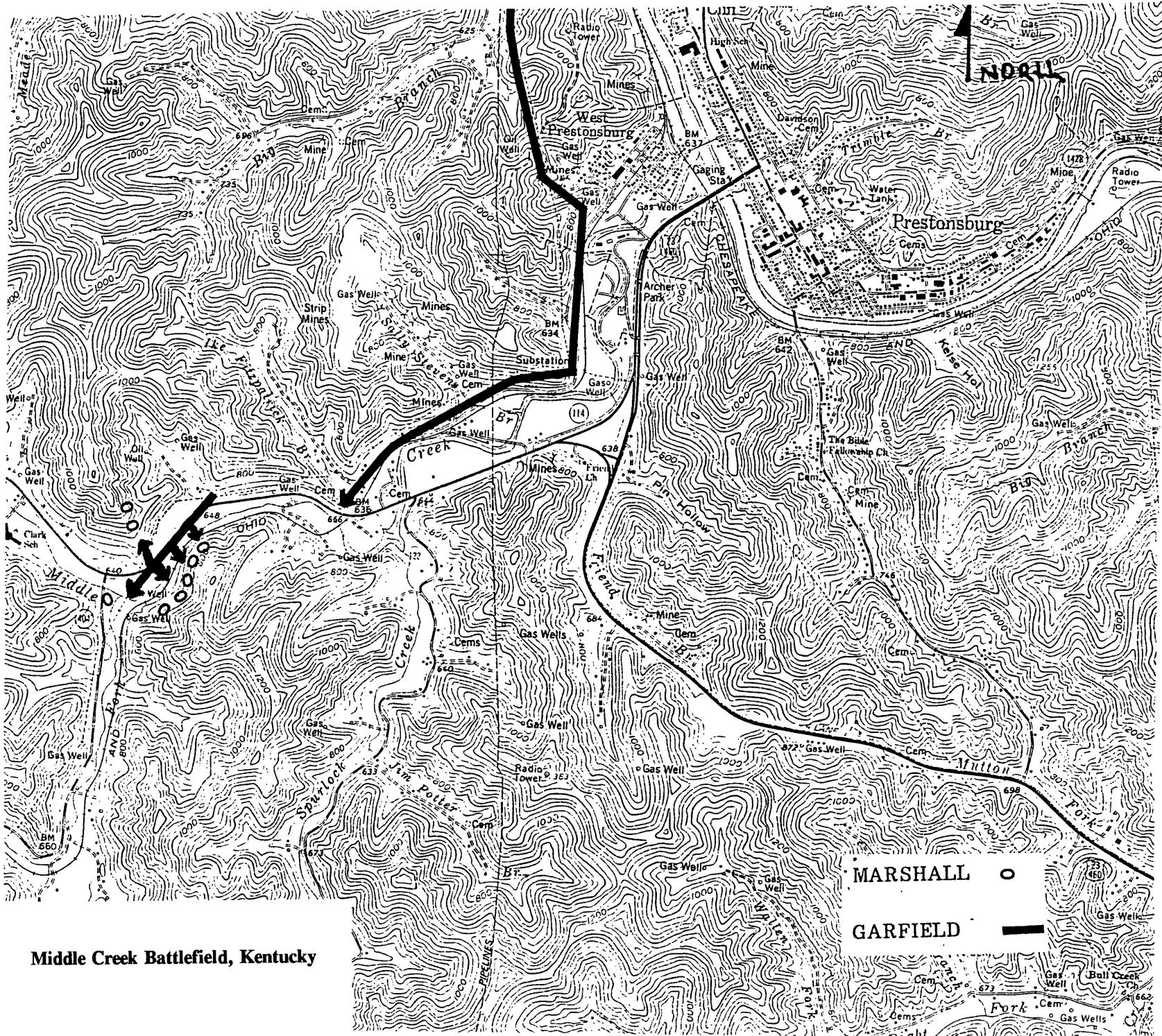
W. Col. Williams
 M. Col. Moore
 C. Capt. Clay
 T. Capt. Thomas

Enemy

Middle Creek
 BATTLE-GROUND,
 January 10, 1862.



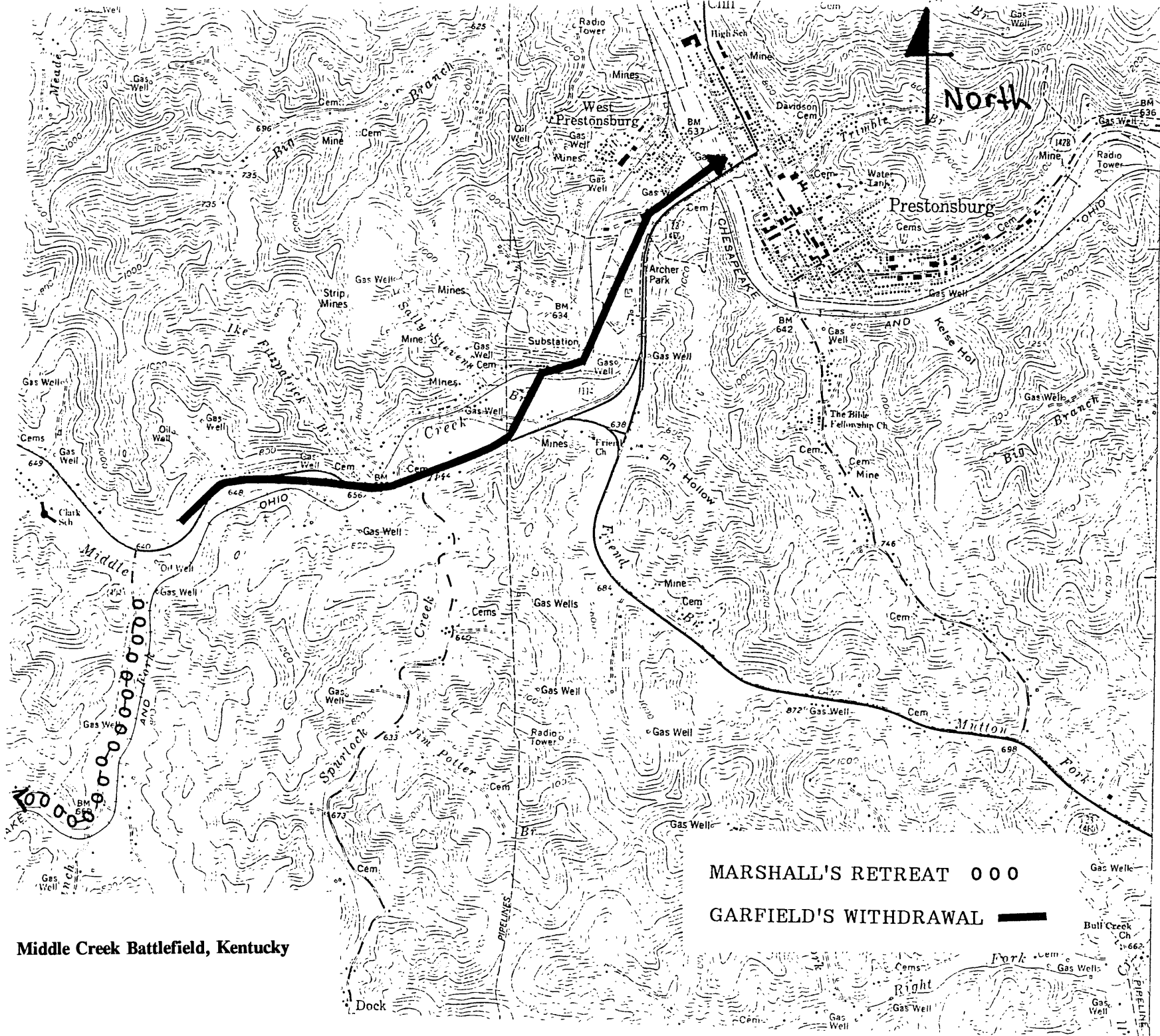
Scale 1000 yds



MAP # 6

Middle Creek Battlefield, Kentucky

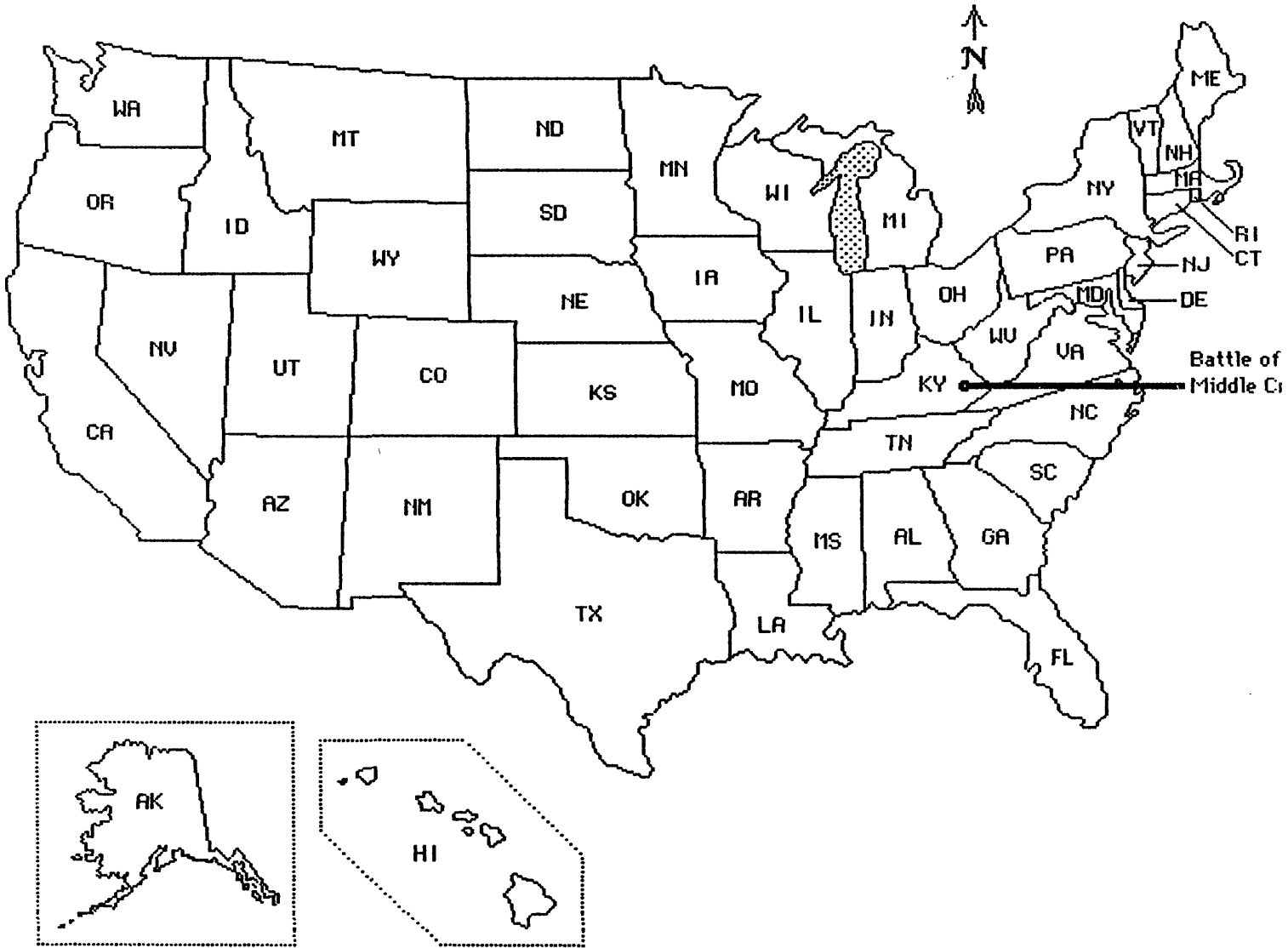
MARSHALL
GARFIELD



MAP # 7

Middle Creek Battlefield, Kentucky

MARSHALL'S RETREAT ○○○
 GARFIELD'S WITHDRAWAL ———



Middle Creek Battlefield, Kentucky