

Col. Joseph Porter and Colonel John McNeil at the Battle of Kirksville

Introduction

Born in Kentucky, Joseph Chrisman Porter moved with his family to Marion County, Missouri, around 1830. When the war broke out he joined the Missouri State Guard at Lexington, and he became part of the regular Confederate army fighting at the Battle of Pea Ridge. Meanwhile Colonel John McNeil, who had come to St. Louis in the mid-1800s, joined a Union regiment when the conflict began. He was quickly promoted to colonel. By 1862, he was commanding the 19th Missouri Volunteers. These two men's paths would cross in northeast Missouri, a battleground between secessionists and Union forces.

Event

In the summer of 1862 Joseph Porter was given the less than official task of recruiting guerrillas. He gathered disgruntled Southern sympathizers from Marion, Adair, and numerous other counties in the northeast part of Missouri. By joining forces with a band led by Bill Dunn he brought his total strength to 130–200 men. He engaged Union forces at Newark, Memphis, and Vasser Hill in Shelby County.

At the same time that Porter was wreaking havoc, McNeil found success restoring order. He had defeated Confederate forces under Gen. David B. Harris at Fulton, Missouri, and was determined to rid Missouri's northeast district of guerrilla activity.

In early August, Porter had over 1,000–2000 men, most of whom were unarmed and untrained. McNeil, who had a force of roughly 1,250 men, had been trailing Porter since July 29. On August 6 in Kirksville, Porter turned on the Union forces and attacked. They were outmatched, however; the Union forces completely routed the guerrilla band. The end result was six Union dead and 33 wounded compared to more than 100 dead guerrillas and 200 wounded. Alfred Warner, a Massachusetts native who moved to Missouri in the 1840s, wrote to his wife after the Battle of Kirksville, describing how Porter's forces were "scattered in all directions, many have gone home but I suppose will not be persuaded to remain long."

Aftermath

Porter's band did regroup, but the defeat at Kirksville was a wakeup call for Porter and his forces; from that point forward they avoided large-scale fights with Union forces, instead pursuing small groups for tactical advantage. McNeil came out of the Kirksville fight confident. He continued to have success driving guerrillas out of the northeast district, and would be promoted to brigadier general for his efforts. He ultimately went on to defeat General John Marmaduke's forces at Cape Girardeau.