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Major General Lew Wallace at Shiloh

Lucas Somers

During the course of his life, Lew Wallace became a very accomplished man in the nineteenth century. He became the youngest major general in the United States Army in 1862 at the age of 35, served as governor of New Mexico, as U.S. minister to Turkey, and later wrote one of the greatest novels of his century, *Ben Hur*. Despite these impressive achievements, Wallace's reputation is blemished by the events of the first day of the Battle of Shiloh, where the division under his command, which was ordered to arrive on the battlefield near Pittsburg Landing midday, did not arrive until after sunset and after the day's fighting had ceased. This first day of the battle, April 6, 1862, proved near disastrous for the Union Army and many, including General Ulysses S. Grant, blamed Wallace's absence for their losses. With his Third Division of the Army of the District of West Tennessee, the Union forces were able push back and handily defeat the Confederates on April 7, the second and final day of the battle. This was the bloodiest battle in American history up to that point in time. The Union losses were so great that Grant was removed from his command, and he continued to blame Wallace, accusing him of getting lost and disobeying orders on that devastating first day. The march of Lew Wallace and his division on April 6, 1862 was the center of much debate in the aftermath of Shiloh, and the question of how much his absence affected the Union forces still remains.

Lewis Wallace was born on April 10, 1827 to David Wallace, a graduate of the United States Military Academy, and Esther French Test in Brookville, Indiana. David Wallace left the army after a year and studied and practiced law in Brookville. He was elected lieutenant governor of Indiana in 1831, governor of Indiana in 1837, and elected to Congress in 1841. He went back to practicing law as a judge in Indianapolis after losing the congressional election of 1842.

¹ Lew's background, especially his father being a prominent politician, made it possible for him to become a military leader during the Civil War.

Lew Wallace didn't accept discipline at school as a boy, but he was not uninterested in learning. At the age of nineteen, he decided to choose his career and went to study law with his father, but not long after Lew was elected second lieutenant in the Marion Volunteers, which served for a year in the First Indiana Volunteer Infantry in the Mexican War.² After the war, Wallace received a license to practice law and became a prosecuting attorney in the early 1850s. He married Susan Elston in May 1848, and according to his description of her in his autobiography, they had a very happy marriage: "What success has come of me, all that I am, in fact, is owing to her, the girl of whom I am speaking. The admission is broad, yet it leaves justice but half done."³ In the 1850s, Wallace formed a local militia and became involved in politics, which led to his election to the Indiana State Senate from 1856 to 1860. With the opening of the Civil War in 1861, Lew Wallace saw his career in politics shift somewhat as he would join the Union war effort and became a military leader, where he would earn a reputation that stuck with him the rest of his life.

Following the battle of Fort Sumter, the opening battle of the Civil War, both the Union and Confederacy relied on volunteers to enlist to fight. The governor of Indiana, Oliver P. Morton, made Wallace the state's adjutant general and relied on him to attract men to enlist, as he was Indiana's most prominent military man. After raising Indiana's troops, Wallace insisted on leading his men into battle himself and became a colonel in the Eleventh Indiana Volunteer

¹ Gail Stephens, *Shadow of Shiloh: Major General Lew Wallace in the Civil War*, (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2010), 2.

² Stephens, 4.

³ Lew Wallace, *Lew Wallace; an Autobiography*, (New York, London: Harper & Brothers, 1906), 208.

Infantry Regiment.⁴ By the beginning of September 1861, after a short time leading his regiment in the war, Wallace was promoted to brigadier general and, following the significant Union victories at Forts Henry and Donelson in February 1862, Wallace was made a major general. Following his promotion, Wallace was given command of the Third Division of the Army of the District of West Tennessee – a recently formed western army under the charge of the hero of the victories at Fort Henry and Donelson: Ulysses S. Grant. By March 12, 1862, Wallace was stationed with his division at Crump's Landing, roughly five miles north of Pittsburg Landing the location of the Battle of Shiloh.⁵

An awareness of the location of Wallace's headquarters is critical in terms of understanding how and when Wallace's Third Division arrived on the battlefield on April 6th. General Lew Wallace's Third Division was made up of three brigades commanded by Colonel Morgan L. Smith, Colonel John M. Thayer, and Colonel Charles Whittlesey, respectively. Smith's first brigade included the Eleventh Indiana (Wallace's first regiment), the Eighth Missouri, and the Twenty-fourth Indiana. Thayer's second contained the First Nebraska, Twenty-third Indiana, Fifty-eighth Ohio, and Fifty-sixth Ohio. Lastly, Whittlesey commanded the Twentieth Ohio, Seventy-sixth Ohio, and Sixty-eighth Ohio regiments in the third brigade.⁶ The official report of the division's involvement in the Battle of Shiloh, written by Wallace on April 12th, gives his account of their movements and actions on both days of the battle. When the sun rose on Sunday April 6, 1862, the three brigades were stationed in three separate locations: the first brigade at Crump's Landing, the second two miles away at Stony Lonesome,

⁴ Stephens, 17-19.

⁵ Stephens, 63.

⁶ Lew Wallace, April 12, 1862, "Reports of Maj. Gen. Lewis Wallace, U. S. Army, commanding Third Division, with communications in reference thereto," *The war of the rebellion: a compilation of the official records of the Union and Confederate armies* Series 1 - Volume 16 (Part I), (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Library, 1886), 169.

and the third at Adamsville another two miles out toward the town called Purdy.⁷ These distances were probably not exact, rather the general's approximation. That his division was spread out as it was suggests the route Wallace intended to take to get to Pittsburg Landing and that the Union army was not sure where the Confederates would attack, believing it possible that it could come from the direction of Purdy.⁸

The troops at Crump's Landing woke Sunday morning to the sound of gunfire in the direction of Pittsburg Landing, where the majority of the Union Army was camped. General Grant was stationed north of Wallace on the Tennessee River at Savanna. Grant reminisced about the early morning of April 6th in the famous "Battle and Leaders of the Civil War" published by *The Century* in 1885:

While I was at breakfast...heavy firing was heard in the direction of Pittsburg Landing, and I hastened there...on the way up the river I directed the dispatch-boat to run in close to Crump's Landing, so that I could communicate with General Lew Wallace...I directed him to get his troops in line ready to execute any orders he might receive. He replied that his troops were already under arms and prepared to move.⁹

The time of this encounter on Grant's way up the river to Shiloh was part of the debate between the two generals' camps surrounding Wallace's march. In response to Wallace's official report of the battle, Grant made some corrections to the course of events. In the letter sent to the headquarters of the Army of the Tennessee, dated April 25, 1862, Grant states that, "I directed this division at about 8 o'clock a. m. to be held in readiness to move at a moments warning in

⁷ Wallace, April 12, 1862, "Reports of Maj. Gen. Lewis Wallace," 169.

⁸ See Map 1.

⁹ U.S. Grant, "Battles and Leaders of the Civil War: The Battle of Shiloh," *The Century* Volume 0029 Issue 4(February 1885), (New York: The Century Company), 595.

any direction it might be ordered.”¹⁰ This is the closest account to the battle from either general about the time of their meeting, and it may be the most credible.

Almost a year after the battle, Wallace wrote to General Henry W. Halleck at the headquarters of the army challenging Grant’s accusations concerning his absence from the first day of Shiloh. Wallace offers a more detailed account of the first day including the time of his meeting with Grant that morning: “About 9 o’clock General Grant passed up the river. Instead of an order to march, he merely left me a direction to hold myself in readiness for orders.”¹¹ It would be hard to believe that Wallace could be completely objective at the time he was writing to Halleck because this was when men were coming out with reports supporting one general over the other. Major William Rowley, aide to Grant, wrote on April 4, 1863 that the encounter occurred between 7:00 a.m. and 8:00 a.m.¹² As Rowley’s statement was also made during the debate between the camps of Wallace and Grant, it is similarly doubtful whether or not his report was completely objective. Therefore, it can be inferred that Grant most likely passed by Crump’s Landing at around 8:00 a.m., gave initial orders to Wallace that he should await further instructions, and continued up the river to Shiloh.

After receiving orders to gather his forces and be ready for any forthcoming orders, Wallace moved his first and third brigades to Stony Lonesome, the location of his second. This move was made so that the army could take, according to Wallace, “the nearest and most practicable road to the scene of battle.”¹³ This gives some insight to Wallace’s intended route to join the main union body. The most direct road from Crump’s Landing to Pittsburg Landing was the River Road that went along the Tennessee River. This road went across Snake Creek, near

¹⁰ U.S. Grant, April 25, 1862, “Reports of Maj. Gen. Lewis Wallace,” 174.

¹¹ Wallace, March 14, 1863, “Reports of Maj. Gen. Lewis Wallace,” 175.

¹² W.R. Rowley, April 4, 1863, “Reports of Maj. Gen. Lewis Wallace,” 178.

¹³ Wallace, April 12, 1862, “Reports of Maj. Gen. Lewis Wallace,” 170.

Pittsburg Landing, using a bridge called “Wallace’s Bridge,” but named for a man who lived in the area, not the general. If the River Road was selected, Wallace’s men would have a short march of approximately six miles from Crump’s Landing to their destination near Pittsburg Landing. Yet, according to his battlefield reports and later in his autobiography, Wallace intended on taking another road if and when battle broke out at Shiloh. The River Road ran close to the river, which made it difficult to cross since it held backed up water. Additionally, after the six-mile march, Wallace’s men would have met up with the rear of union forces, as it existed before the battle. The front was another two-mile march to the southwest.¹⁴

A second road, called Shunpike, led from Stony Lonesome to the location of General Sherman’s Fifth Division, the right flank of the union forces. Shunpike led southwest from Stony Lonesome, while the River Road led southeast. In the weeks before the battle, Wallace ordered Major Charles S. Hayes of the Fifth Ohio Cavalry to oversee the restoration of the Shunpike Road, as this was part of the general’s strategy. Wallace explained in his autobiography that if his brigades were driven back to Crump’s, this road allowed him to expose his enemy’s flank and rear, and he stated, “I had a feeling that with the road repaired my command would not be molested.”¹⁵ The restoration included corduroying, or placing logs across a road, and rebuilding bridges so that Wallace could bring or send his artillery as needed.¹⁶ Wallace also writes that by the end of March, he rode with Hayes and one of his companies from Stony Lonesome to Pittsburg Landing and back using the Shunpike, which verified that the road was ready for use. It is now apparent that Wallace had been planning to use the Shunpike to reach the rest of the union forces, while Grant believed he would arrive

¹⁴ Stephens, 74; See map 2.

¹⁵ Wallace, *Lew Wallace, an autobiography*, 452-453.

¹⁶ Stephens, 74.

using the River Road. With his destination and route decided, Wallace waited at Stony Lonesome for orders.

Wallace made the decision that he would depart Stony Lonesome at noon if no orders arrived by then. Between 11:00 a.m. and 11:30 a.m., Wallace received orders from Captain Baxter, Grant's quartermaster, to march his division to the battlefield, but the exact location to which he was ordered was at the center of debate. Wallace's official reports say that he was ordered to the right of the army, while Grant's claim he was ordered to Pittsburg Landing.¹⁷ As the union forces existed before the battle, the right of the army was west of Pittsburg Landing, near Owl Creek, which is closer to where The Shunpike ends than where the River Road comes out at Wallace's Bridge (See Map). However, had he been commanded to Pittsburg Landing, the River Road would have been the more direct route, despite its condition. The orders brought by Baxter were unsigned because they were given by grant orally and recorded on the way to Wallace's division at Crump's. Wallace comments a year later on the informality of this order, and perhaps because of this he decided to give his men half of an hour for lunch before departing along the Shunpike at noon, which was his plan even if he received no orders at all.¹⁸ Wallace's division was finally en route for the battle, taking the Shunpike Road, destined for the right of the union forces during this first day of the Battle of Shiloh.

Between noon and 1:00 p.m. Grant sent Rowley to find Wallace, Grant having expected Wallace's division to already have deployed on the field. One of Grant's later letters even states when he expected the division to be in battle:

Had General Wallace been relieved from duty in the morning, and the same orders communicated to Brig. Gen. Morgan L. Smith (who would have been his successor), I do

¹⁷ "Reports of Maj. Gen. Lewis Wallace," 175-180.

¹⁸ Wallace, March 14, 1863, "Reports of Maj. Gen. Lewis Wallace," 175.

not doubt but the division would have been on the field of battle and in the engagement before 10 o'clock of that eventful 6th of April.¹⁹

Rowley met up with Wallace's division between 2:00 p.m. and 2:30 p.m. at a location probably just past Clear Creek on the Shunpike Road. This was between 4.5 and 5 miles from their starting point at Stony Lonesome.²⁰ Rowley informed Wallace that the Confederate forces had driven back Sherman's forces and continuing on the Shunpike would lead to the rear of the enemy's line. At this point Wallace ordered a countermarch to get back to the River Road as soon as possible. They learned of a crossroad that led from Shunpike to the River Road, which was then taken by the Third Division, now joined by Rowley.²¹

At around the time Rowley met up with Wallace, Grant sent Lieutenant-Colonel John Rawlins and Lieutenant-Colonel James B. McPherson to find and hurry Wallace into position on the battlefield. Having expected Wallace to already be on the River Road, Rawlins and McPherson were surprised to find Wallace still on the crossroad at 3:30 pm. Rawlins and McPherson's accounts, which were written almost a year after the battle, mention that Wallace told them he had been lost and that he was very slow getting to the battle.²² Wallace's claims that he had been lost however, cannot be heavily substantiated as a large amount of evidence, some from Wallace's own hand, support the fact that Wallace intentionally directed his troops down the Shunpike Road. The reason for his countermarch was that the Confederate forces had pushed back the Union in the morning of April 6th, and he would have come out at the rear of the enemy line. It is clear that Grant intended the Third Division to be at Pittsburg Landing that

¹⁹ Grant, April 13, 1863, "Reports of Maj. Gen. Lewis Wallace," 178.

²⁰ Stephens, 87.

²¹ See Map 3.

²² McPherson, Rawlins, March 26, 1863, and April 1, 1863, "Reports of Maj. Gen. Lewis Wallace," 180-188.

morning and not where the Shunpike ends and crosses Owl Creek, which was where Wallace led his troops. This lack of communication proved devastating for the Union army on this first day of Shiloh. Rawlins and McPherson seem to be writing in support of Grant, who continued to blame Wallace for the losses of the North.

Wallace's division continued on this crossroad, and the "wet and muddy road conditions further slowed the division's march to the battle."²³ Arriving on the battlefield just after sunset at 6:30 p.m., Wallace's men were too late to take part in the first day of the battle. In a letter from Wallace to Halleck, attempting to defend his actions on that day, Wallace states that he was not wasting time on his march:

"At no time during that afternoons march was my column halted longer than to allow it to be closed up; the column was brought in in perfect order and without a straggler; the length of its march in the time (from 12 m. to a little after sunset) was nearly 15 miles; certainly there could have been no idling on the way."²⁴

The division marched from noon until after sunset on April 6th and covered a total of at least fifteen miles. Gail Stephens, author of *Shadow of Shiloh: Major General Lew Wallace in the Civil War*, took the same route as Wallace's troops, and using GPS measurements, discovered that it was 16.75 miles total.²⁵ The General even underestimated the distance traveled when further explaining his march to Halleck. It seems clear that Wallace did not waste time nor did he get lost. His absence ultimately appears to be the result of a lack of communication between Grant and Wallace. Regardless, the Third Division had arrived and would undoubtedly have an

²³ Ray E. Boomhower, *The Sword and the Pen: A Life of Lew Wallace*, (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2005), 61.

²⁴ Wallace, March 14, 1863, "Reports of Maj. Gen. Lewis Wallace," 176.

²⁵ Stephens, 91.

impact on the second and final day of the Battle of Shiloh.

After all of the regiments and artillery of the Third Division arrived Sunday night, they were arranged on the far right of the army. Shortly after daybreak on Monday, April 7 about 5:30 a.m., Wallace's batteries opened fire on the enemy. These two batteries were the Ninth Indiana Battery, commanded by Lieutenant George Brown located in Perry Field, and General Buell's battery commanded by Lieutenant Charles Thurber was to the north in Russian Tenant Field. The point of attack was a Confederate battery, the Alabama Battery, commanded by Captain William H. Ketchum.²⁶ Wallace intended to take out this Confederate battery before ordering his troops to advance. This artillery duel lasted until about 6:30 a.m. when Ketchum retreated. Wallace's men then moved forward, opposing the brigade commanded by Colonel Preston Pond, who was just southeast of Owl Creek and in Jones Field.²⁷ After carefully crossing the Tilghman Creek, Wallace moved his three brigades into position at the edge of Jones Field. Wallace was very cautious on this second day of the battle, and he waited for support from Sherman before moving against the Confederate line. Wallace describes the crossing of the Tilghman in his autobiography: "This was not later than six-thirty o'clock. Down the hill into the hollow and across it, splashing into the swollen creek, crashing through the brush, the perfect order lost because it could not be helped, the regiments went."²⁸ With this obstacle cleared, Wallace's troops were ready to attack the opposition as Sherman moved to join him in support.²⁹

Sherman crossed Tilghman at about 10:00 a.m. while Wallace's men were engaged in battle. They were under fire from a Ketchum's battery, which had been pushed through Jones

²⁶ Stephens, 93-94.

²⁷ Stephens, 96.

²⁸ Wallace, *Lew Wallace*, 547.

²⁹ Stephens, 96-97.

Field, where he set up on its southern edge. Brown was ordered onto the opposite edge of the field to shell the enemy in the woods, and an artillery duel ensued, which Thurber would take over when Brown ran out of ammunition. When Sherman joined the Third Division, Wallace was able to move Thurber into the center of the field to duel with Ketchum, and then lead his First Brigade against the Confederate line. Led by the First Brigade, Wallace's division moved through Jones Field but ran into enemy fire in the woods near Sowell Field, to the immediate right of the Jones Field. Soon however, they were able to push through and advance to Sowell Field. All three brigades advanced, with Smith on the left and Whittlesey on the right.³⁰ Third Division's advancement against the Confederate left flank forced it to fall back.³¹ At this point, Wallace describes the movements of his men:

“It was now noon, and, the enemy having been driven so far back, the idea of flanking them further had to be given up. Not wishing to interfere with the line of operations of the division to my left, but relying upon it for support, my front was again changed the movement beginning with the First Brigade, taking the course of attack precisely as it had been in the outset.”³²

It now being after noon, the division shifted more to the southwest, forward and right, and moved into Crescent Field. This advancement would continue for Wallace's division as well as for the rest of the Union line.

At Crescent Field Wallace's men met resistance, but they were able to push through with help from the left side of the line, recently reinforced by General Buell's arrival with 40,000 men. All three brigades pushed through Crescent Field and faced the main Confederate line with

³⁰ See Map 4.

³¹ Stephens, 98.

³² Wallace, April 12, 1862, “Reports of Maj. Gen. Lewis Wallace,” 172.

Sherman and Buell on their left. From roughly noon until 2:00 p.m., the Union and Confederate lines battled with rifles and artillery. It was becoming clear that the Confederates were outmatched and at about 2:00 p.m., Beauregard, the commanding general of Confederate forces, ordered retreat to begin, with the last line, commanded by John C. Breckinridge, made to cover that retreat at 3:00 p.m.³³ After the reinforced union army pushed the Confederate line back to the Shiloh church, for which the battle was named, essentially ended the battle in the afternoon of April 7th. At the end of his official report, Wallace praised his men for their performance in the battle:

“Of my regiments I find it impossible to say enough...this was a greater battle than Donelson, and consequently a more terrible ordeal in which to test what may be a thing of glory or shame the courage of an untried regiment, how well they all behaved I sum up in the boast, Not one man, officer or soldier, flinched.”³⁴

Wallace stated that he believed the Battle of Shiloh to be a greater victory than at Fort Donelson. It is clear that Wallace’s Third Division was critical in Union victory on April 7, 1862. Despite his contributions to Union victory, Wallace will always be remembered for his absence on April 6th.

Major General Lew Wallace was undoubtedly important in the Union victory at Shiloh on April 7, 1862. The major debate is over how big of an impact his absence had on the huge Union losses during the first day of the battle. General Ulysses S. Grant accused Wallace of disobeying orders and wasting time on his march to Pittsburg Landing. Grant continued to blame him for the devastating losses of Union troops at Shiloh. Many of the reports that came

³³ Stephens, 100-101.

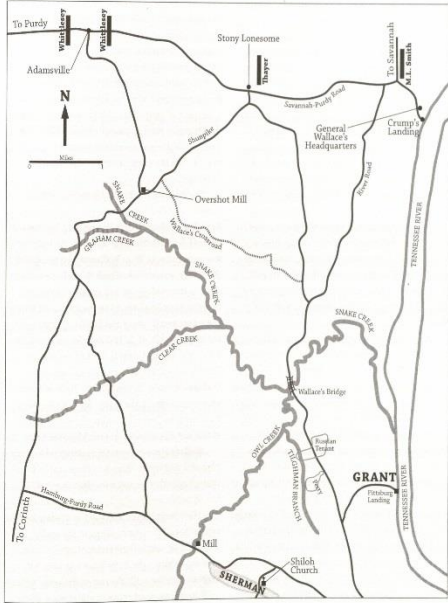
³⁴ Wallace, April 12, 1862, “Reports of Maj. Gen. Lewis Wallace,” 173.

out from men such as Rowley, Rawlins, and McPherson, all Grant's men, were written nearly a year after the battle and were most likely prejudiced in Grant's favor – who was removed from command following Shiloh. The evidence supports that Grant had intended for Wallace to take the River Road to Pittsburg Landing, but that order was never clearly communicated to him.

Wallace had spent the weeks leading up to the battle tending to the Shunpike Road as his planned route to join Sherman's camp on the right of the army. The fifteen-mile or more march on Sunday was due to lack of communication between the two generals and some bad luck that Sherman had been pushed back and Wallace forced to turn back and take the crossroad to the River Road. Regardless of whether Grant's accusations were true or not, Wallace's presence on the first day of Shiloh could have saved countless lives, and for that reason he will always be remembered for not being at the Battle of Shiloh on April 6, 1862.

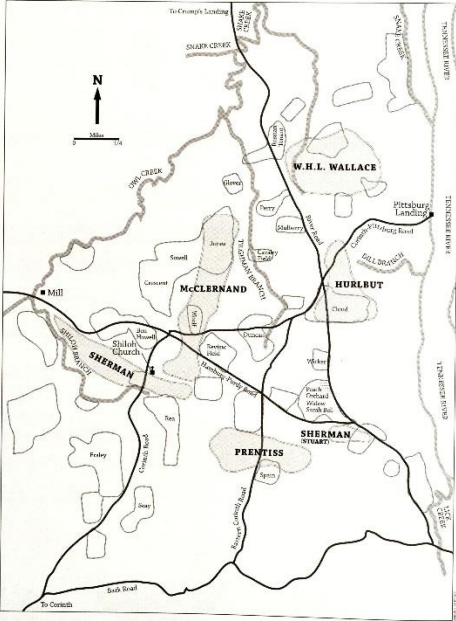
Map 1

CAMPS OF LEW WALLACE'S DIVISION BEFORE THE BATTLE OF SHILOH

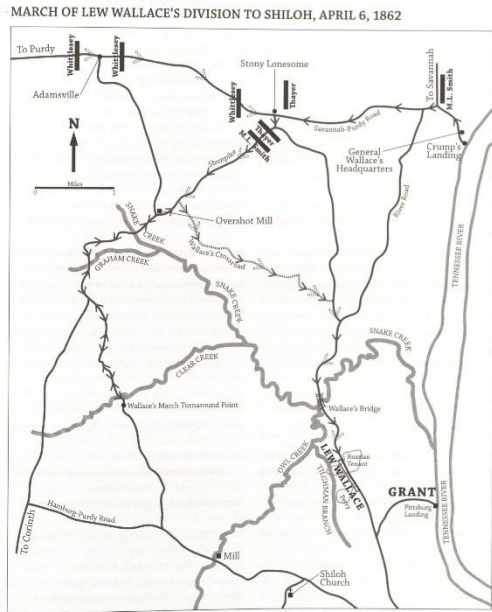


Map 2

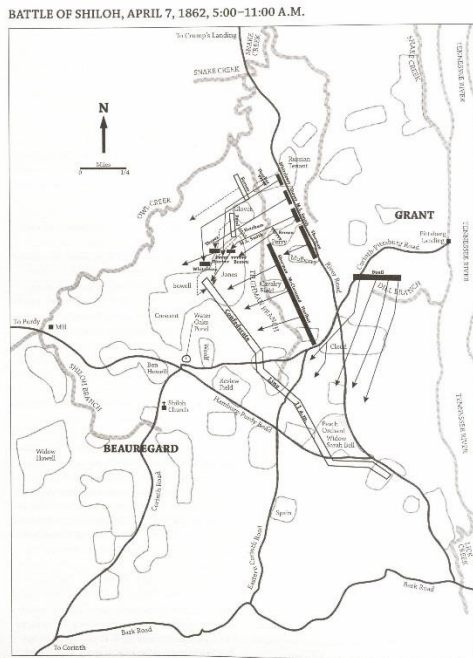
UNION CAMPS AT SHILOH, EARLY APRIL 1862



Map 3



Map 4



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Maps:

Stephens, Gail. *Shadow of Shiloh: Major General Lew Wallace in the Civil War*. Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2010.