

THE BATTLE OF WATERLOO FALLS

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On June 18, 1815, a coalition army led by the English Duke of Wellington faced the French Emperor Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo, in modern Belgium. Napoleon had escaped from his island prison of Elba off the northwestern Italian coast in February, and had gathered the French army to attack the nations around him before they had time to invade France. Unfortunately for Napoleon and his dream of French dominance, Wellington's force was too strong, and the small Emperor was defeated for good.

Just over 63 years later, in 1878 (one account says that it was 1880), another Waterloo – this time at the Waterloo Falls 11 miles north of downtown Cookeville, on the line between Putnam and Overton counties. This area of the Upper Cumberland was known as "Little Putnam," and was the home base of moonshiners who carried on their brandy distilling in plain sight of neighbors and authorities alike. This distilling was, of course, illegal, since the moonshiners hadn't paid a licensing fee for their stills, and the people who purchased the alcohol were avoiding liquor taxes. The state did not like losing tax money, so when the crime was as notorious as it was near Waterloo Falls, something had to be done.

Thus on the morning of Aug. 23, 1878, 12 "revenuers" set out under the leadership of Collector Davis (another account says the leader was Joe Spurrier) toward Livingston. After investigating and destroying one illicit still, the group decided to spend the night by Spring Creek. They approached Mr. James Peek, a 102-year-old man who had been born three months before the signing of the Declaration of Independence. While a few of the men discussed with him the possibility of their party finding a shelter, Davis and Captain Phillips wandered away looking for a place to feed the horses. Davis was just about to shoot a partridge in a tree, when he saw a small group of armed men run down the hill. The two revenuers realized the situation was about to go south, and as they ran back toward the Peek house shots rang out. Phillips was struck in the side, and while Davis covered him, he was able to get back to the house. The other deputies outside joined in the fire-fight, but they were desperately outnumbered – a bout eight to one. Several more of their number were wounded, and eventually they were pushed into the Peek house.

That night they sent a messenger for help, and incredibly he made it to Cookeville through the moonshiners' siege. About 100 men, led by Campbell Morgan, surrounded the Peek house. When Saturday morning dawned the firing commenced. Commissioner Mathis, who later wrote an account of the whole siege, described the situation that day: "We had no water and very little to eat, but the family gave us all they had the means to cook. Our wounded men needed attention and we were glad to see Dr. Martin of Cookeville come up with two other gentlemen. He stayed half an hour and then returned. About sun down it seemed as though there were a thousand men around us, from the sound of bugles shouting and firing many of the balls penetrating the house and we

prepared ourselves to resist a charge. The whole night was pandemonium itself, and Sunday morning dawned with men in sight in every direction.” It was said that Mr. Peek crawled under the house when firing commenced and remained there throughout the fight.

Fortunately for the revenuers, respected men from the town of Livingston appeared Sunday morning to serve as mediators. Campbell Morgan told the revenuers that he would get their record cleared before the Federal Court; Davis responded that he could not affect the Courts, but that he had plenty of ammunition and that help was on its way. Therefore, in spite of their strategic advantage, Morgan and his men realized that the handwriting was on the wall. Rather than risking their lives again a much larger force from the state, the moonshiners listened to the appeals of the gentlemen from Livingston, and permitted the officers to leave in peace.

In this way the Battle of Waterloo Falls, a bloody affair, came to a peaceful end. Who knew that the Upper Cumberland had its own version of Chicago’s Eliot Ness versus Al Capone?

“Cumberland Tales,” created by Calvin Dickinson and Michael Birdwell and sponsored by the Cookeville History Museum, welcomes any tale of this region’s history. For more information, contact Calvin Dickinson at cdickinson@tntech.edu or Michael Birdwell at birdie@tntech.edu.

*Read more Cumberland Tales at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>