

Capitol

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Iowa's distinguished war record was still fresh in the minds of the leaders and citizens of Iowa when, in 1871, six years after the war's end, construction began on the gold-domed Capitol that remains Des Moines' grandest structure. In many ways, the building and its grounds commemorate the Union's triumph and the spirit that drove Iowa's participation in the war, which remains the bloodiest in American history.

As the United States prepares to mark its 250th year, here is the story of Iowa's role in the conflict that still shapes the nation and how it is memorialized in the halls and on the grounds of one of Des Moines', and Iowa's, most prominent landmarks.

Iowans despised slavery, treasured 'radical experiment'

Thirteen Iowans died and 141 were wounded in the rout of the Union forces at Wilson's Creek. Those numbers would soon seem paltry as the war, initially expected to be a brief campaign, raged on for almost four years from Virginia to the Arizona territory, claiming as many as 750,000 lives, military and civilian, on both sides.

While a few small contingents represented Iowa in the war's eastern theater, it was in the west where Iowans were mainly engaged. They were a bedrock part of Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's force as it fought its way through the South to the Mississippi River at Vicksburg, laying a siege that ultimately claimed the strategic city, securing Union control of the river and cutting off the Confederacy's west.

The familiar claim that Iowa sent more men per capita to serve in the Union cause than any other state is a myth born of an error that occurred when reenlistments were mistakenly counted as new sign-ups, says emeritus University of Northern Iowa history professor Kevin Lyftgoft.

But Lyftgoft, the author of a trilogy on Iowa's participation in the war and other Civil War volumes, says those reenlistments were an indication of Iowans' dedication to the Union cause.

As the war dragged on, Lincoln had to resort to a draft to maintain the strength of the Union forces, but very few Iowans were conscripted, with robust ranks of volunteers maintained throughout the war. Lyftgoft says one reason was Iowans' strong distaste for slavery and the Southern aristocracy that profited from the so-called "peculiar institution."

Iowans "could be as racist as anybody," he says, pointing to state laws enforcing racial segregation and disenfranchising Black voters that persisted until after the war. But Iowans were proud of the state's reputation as the initial non-slave state west of Mississippi — "the first free child of the Missouri Compromise," an 1820 measure that sought to stave off secession by maintaining parity between slave and free states as they were admitted to the Union.

Many in Iowa were aghast at the 1854 Kansas Nebraska Act that effectively nullified it. The law allowed new states under the theory of "popular sovereignty" to choose whether to be slave or free, bringing the prospect of slavery to the Great Plains. The issue was at the center of the famous debates between Lincoln and Democrat Stephen Douglas in the 1858 Illinois U.S. Senate campaign that would presage their presidential race to come.

Lyftgoft says the Iowans who signed up to fight in the Civil War were overwhelmingly smallholder farmers, laborers and tradesmen who saw the possibility of slavery spreading to their borders as a threat to their livelihoods. Once mainly Democrats, many had enthusiastically adopted Republicanism as the new party rose in the 1850s. They had their disagreements with the administration, but remained stalwarts of Lincoln even as he feared he might lose reelection in 1864 amid the grinding conflict.

Another Iowa Civil War scholar, former University of Iowa administrator Thomas R. Baker, wrote in "The Sacred Cause of Union: Iowa in the Civil War" that an equally deep motivation was the widely held view among Iowans that the ideals embodied by America, to which many had immigrated not only for opportunities but rights they held sacred, were in danger.

"For many," Baker writes, "maintaining unity in the face of internal turmoil would signal the continuing success of America's radical experiment in self-government."



The last sentence of the Gettysburg Address is painted along the walls of the rotunda at the Iowa State Capitol, Feb. 12, 2026. ZACH BOYDEN-HOLMES/THE REGISTER

Iowa still had a strong Democratic minority in its Legislature in 1861 that was skeptical of Lincoln, Baker points out. But called into a special legislative session, they worked with Republican Gov. Sam Kirkwood to provide training and military supplies for the fast-forming Iowa regiments.

The Davenport Daily Democrat and News on the day after the Sumter bombardment expressed its dissatisfaction with Lincoln's handling of the situation, but also wrote that the Union now had no choice but to fight. "Get your arms ready; get your own bodies and minds prepared for the contest. Blood is called for; blood alone can carry out the programme; prepare to spill it freely."

'Bravest of the brave': Assault on Tennessee fort wins Iowans acclaim

Despite a Union loss at Wilson's Creek, Iowans quickly established themselves as part of the bedrock of the federal forces. They were with Grant as he engaged in his first battle at Belmont, Missouri, and later fought at Pea Ridge in Arkansas, near the Missouri border, in an engagement that kept at bay Confederate resistance in the latter state for a crucial period.

But perhaps nowhere did Iowans serve more memorably than at the Battle of Fort Donelson in Tennessee. It was fought in February 1862 shortly after Union naval forces easily forced the surrender of Fort Henry, which guarded the Tennessee River. Donelson controlled the nearby Cumberland River, and its capture would enable the Union to lay claim to Nashville and push deeper into the South.

Accounts of the battle by Lyftgoft, Baker and other historians document that there would be nothing easy about the fort's capture. It stood high above the river, where its fearsome artillery was able to turn back the Union gunboats that had pounded low-lying Fort Henry into submission.

The job at Donelson would fall to ground troops, among them Iowa's 2nd Infantry Regiment.

Mustered at Keokuk, the 2nd had begun its war in Missouri, seeing little combat. Before the battle at Donelson it guarded a college turned military prison near St. Louis. A few miscreants among its ranks earned the unit the stern disapproval of the military leadership by pilfering some scientific specimens at the school.

When the unit was called to join Grant's Army of the Tennessee as it prepared to take Donelson, it received orders to march through St. Louis to waiting river transports in near silence, its regimental flag furled in a mark of disgrace.

The soldiers of the 2nd and their commander, Col. James Tuttle of Farmington, were well aware that their battlefield performance at Donelson would present an opportunity to regain their honor. When the first day of the battle on Feb. 14 went badly for the Union's right flank, Grant ordered divisional commander Gen. Charles F. Smith, an old Army hand who had been one of his instructors at West Point, to lead the Union left in an attack on the Confederate fortifications opposite them the following morning. Smith chose the motivated 2nd to head the assault.

The Confederate lines there had been thinned as troops were transferred to engage other Union forces. But the rebels who remained were dug into breastworks on high ground. The advance against them after a bitterly cold night would be over snow-covered, uneven ground full of fallen timber, capped by an uphill charge into withering fire.

Smith knew troops in the initial drive would not be able to stop and load their single-shot rifles to return fire because any loss of momentum could be fatal to the Union advance. As they lined up before dawn for the attack, he appeared before them on horseback to make their mission clear.

"Second Iowa, you must take the fort. Take the caps off your guns, fix bayonets and I will lead you," he told them before setting off at the head of the column.

The regimental flag furled in the march through St. Louis followed, borne by a six-member color guard. One by one its members fell as the 2nd picked its way through a brushy hollow, then started up the slope toward the breastworks.

The last member still standing, Cpl. Voltaire Twombly of Van Buren County, grabbed the bloodied and bullet-tattered flag. Despite being knocked down by a spent ball, then hit twice more, he carried it into the enemy's line. It was the first Union banner to be planted in the captured defenses and Twombly would later receive the Medal of Honor.

Once in the works, the 2nd opened fire and pushed back the Confederates. But encountering friendly fire by the Indiana troops who trailed them, they took shelter in a line of trenches abandoned by the Confederates, enduring another shivering night.

The following morning they were prepared to resume fighting before word came that the southerners had accepted Grant's ultimatum of "unconditional surrender" — a phrase that became his nickname. Grant gave the survivors from the 2nd the honor of being the first to parade into the captured fort with their colors.

The commander of the western forces, Maj. Gen. Henry Halleck, declared the unit, which saw more than a third of its roughly 600 men killed or wounded, "the bravest of the brave." Kirkland, the governor, visited them after the battle, returning to Des Moines with the banner. It was hung above the state House speaker's desk in the then-Capitol, a squat building known as "Old Brick."

Yet for the 2nd and Iowa's other regiments, the fight was only just beginning.

Iowans take outside losses, win glory at Shiloh

The Battle of Shiloh, a two-day engagement so bloody that its dead, wounded and missing in action would exceed those of the Revolution, War of 1812 and Mexican War combined, followed in April 1862. More than 6,600 Iowans in 11 regiments would serve there, with 2,409 casualties — nearly a quarter of the Union total.

In what Mark Mathis III, author of "Civil War Reenactment," described in the Cedar Rapids Gazette as "Iowa's Alamo," the first brigade of the war made up entirely of Iowa units — including the famous 2nd — would fight a brutal delaying action. The troops took up positions along a sunken wagon road and, admonished by Tuttle to "remember you are from Iowa," held off an overwhelming Confederate force until their line collapsed late in the day. So constant and deadly were their buzzing volleys that the advancing rebels dubbed the defensive position "The Hornet's Nest."

Though many of the Iowa troops there and in positions in the adjacent Peach Orchard ended up killed, wounded or captured, their stand bought Grant crucial time as he awaited the arrival of reinforcements who turned the tide of the fight.

Today, the Iowa units' key role in preventing a disaster is recognized with the largest state monument on the grounds of Shiloh National Military Park. Smaller monuments for individual Iowa regiments dot every corner of the field. A diorama at Camp Dodge's Gold Star Military Museum in Johnston recreates the scene.


Iowa units would go on to play prominent roles in the 1863 Vicksburg siege and the 1864 campaign to take Atlanta, led by Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman, elder brother of Hoyt Sherman, namesake of Des Moines' Sherman Hill neighborhood. The subsequent March to the Sea would seal Lincoln's reelection over an opponent who many suspected would seek peace with the Confederates at the risk of a permanently divided country.

In the waning days of the war, as Confederate Gen. John Bell Hood made a final, desperate effort to recapture Nashville in December 1864 and force Sherman from Georgia, Iowa cavalry played a prominent role in his defeat.

Individual Iowans also would feature in the Union victory, perhaps none more famously than Gen. Grenville Dodge of Council Bluffs — namesake of Camp Dodge — whose masterfully constructed spy network was invaluable to Grant and Sherman. Promoted to major general, he was considered the highest-ranking Iowan to serve in the war and went on to be instrumental in the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad.

Other Iowans overcame barriers to do their part in the war. Although the U.S. Census in 1860, the year before the war began, counted only 1,069 Black residents in Iowa, about 1,100, including volunteers from Missouri, were recruited to serve in Black Iowa units be-

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Happy 85th Birthday!
Linda Jensen
Linda L. Jensen (Madren) is turning 85 yrs young.
We invite family, friends and anyone lucky enough to know her to send her some love on her birthday April 2nd!! send cards to her at her home : 706 SE5th Court Ankeny IA 50021

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