DEKALB COUNTY IN THE CIVIL WAR
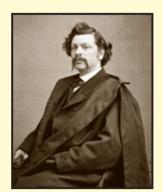
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A Country and a County Divided

DeKalb County differed from surrounding counties. A sizeable minority of its citizens opposed secession and voted against it in the June 8, 1861, referendum. Their champion was a slave owner, Congressman William B. Stokes. The majority followed former Congressman and Smithville attorney John H. Savage, who lost to Stokes in the 1859 election. The war intensified the already bitter rivalry between the men, who became colonels on opposite sides.

Savage commanded the 16th Tennessee Infantry (CS) while Stokes led the 5th Tennessee Cavalry (US). Stokes's followers became "scalawags" to the secessionists. Col. John F. Goodner, 7th Tennessee Infantry (CS), wrote that the county's Unionists were "thieves headed by the scum of all creation, Stokes' arabs."

After the Confederate Army of Tennessee withdrew from the county in the spring of 1863, Stokes and his Union cavalry played a large role in subduing local Confederate guerrilla activity. Frank Marchbanks, a young lawyer of Sparta, was chased down by Union troops near Sligo ferry and killed. His tombstone, erected by John H. Savage, reads "Murdered by Stokes Cavalry."

After the war, Stokes was reelected to Congress and supported Republican Reconstruction policies. Former Confederates hated him. In 1869, Stokes ran for governor as a Republican but failed to carry DeKalb County. Savage did not return here but reestablished his law practice in McMinnville, where he became a vocal Democrat defender of the Confederate Lost Cause in the Tennessee General Assembly in the 1870s.

Many DeKalb County residents held bitter feelings for years after the war and every election brought out renewed conflict.

DeKalb County Courthouse (demolished 1870s) and square during a public hanging – *Courtesy DeKalb County Historical Society*

William B. Stokes
Courtesy Library of Congress

John H. Savage
Courtesy Library of Congress