



Marker at Okolona was installed April 2016

Historical Marker at Okolona

During the first week of April 1864, thousands of Union and Confederate troops passed through Clark County. A historical marker describing the military events in southwestern Clark County in the spring of 1864 stands in Okolona and tells the story of what happened during “Skirmishes at Okolona” and “Fighting at Elkins’ Ferry.”

The Civil War began in 1861. Arkansas seceded from the Union in May of that year, and created a new state constitution the following month. No battles were fought on Arkansas soil during calendar year 1861, but war soon came to the state. While most of the major fighting occurred east of the Mississippi River, a good deal of small-scale activity took place in the West, including Arkansas. The war brought with it financial hardship, as well as food and supply shortages, and these circumstances touched the lives of all citizens. Federal troops occupied Little Rock in September of 1863, and the Confederate state capital moved southwest to Washington (near Hope) with Arkadelphian Harris Flanagin as governor. Confederate control continued in southwest Arkansas, but the Union held most of the rest of the state. After almost three years of war, both sides were ready for an end to the conflict.

Early in 1864, Union leaders hatched a plan to defeat the Confederates in the Southwest. This Red River Campaign would deploy General Nathaniel Banks from west of New Orleans to link with Admiral David Porter’s Mississippi squad on the Red River and infantry troops from east of the Mississippi to move toward Shreveport. General Frederick Steele would simultaneously move south from Little Rock to join forces with Banks. After occupying Shreveport and the rest of Arkansas, the army intended to invade Texas and bring the war to an end in this region.

The new marker provides these details about the clash of troops at Okolona: *“General Frederick Steele’s Union army left Little Rock on March 23, 1864, for a planned invasion of Texas, but it was April 2 before they faced organized Confederate attacks. General Joseph Shelby attacked the Union wagon train at Terre Noire Creek on the 2nd, then hit Steele’s troops at Okolona the next day. Fighting raged for several hours amid a furious thunderstorm before Shelby broke away and fell back to Antoine. A post-war account by Shelby’s adjutant claims a Union shell hit a hive and it was bees, not gunfire, that drove the Confederates from the field.”*

The other side of the marker depicts the fighting at Elkins' Ferry this way: "*Union forces arrived at Elkins' Ferry on the Little Missouri River late on April 2, 1864, sending cavalry across to establish a picket line. Gen. John Marmaduke's Confederate cavalry skirmished with them on the 3rd, leading the Federals to send infantry and artillery reinforcements across the river. Marmaduke attacked in force with 1,600 horsemen on April 4 and drove the Federals back toward the river, but troops from Iowa and Wisconsin crossed the river to bolster the Union line. Marmaduke fell back toward defensive earthworks on Prairie D'Ane.*"

The Federals had gained control, and the Union Army constructed some bridges and corduroy roads across the river and bottoms. But, these were all afloat by April 7, due to heavy rains. By April 9, Federal troops from Fort Smith finally joined up with Steele, creating a large force estimated by some to be over 13,000 men. Steele skirmished with the Confederates for three days, before his Union troops turned eastward and occupied Camden, previously a Confederate stronghold in south Arkansas. Running very low on rations by this time, Steele felt it wise to go to Camden, since that town was rumored to have a good supply of food. The Union troops later made their way back to Little Rock.