

# THE LONGEST CALVARY RAID

By Steven Garrett

What calvary leader led the longest raid during the Civil War? Was it Stuart's ride around the Union Army prior to Gettysburg? Was it Grierson's raid into Mississippi? Was Sheridan or Custer involved? Many books have been published and movies made about each of these officers. All famous cavalrymen, but no, none of the above. If you had been raised in Indiana or Ohio, you would know the answer because the calvary raid included the only Civil War battles fought in those states and, setting aside the event in St. Albans, Vermont, it was the most northern penetration by Confederate forces. As an elementary student, I remember reading of General John Hunt Morgan's Raid into Indiana in our Indiana history textbook—much like young Maine students who are introduced to General Joshua L. Chamberlain, General Hiram Berry, the 20th Maine, and the proud history of the many Maine participants in the Civil War. It amazed this farm boy and it was one of the events that led to my interest in Civil War history. My family history and the McClellan saddle, bridle, and old shotgun hanging on pegs in our neighbor's barn piqued my curiosity. Studying the raid introduces you to some very interesting facts. But first, how long was it and why was it ordered?



*Morgan's Raid Map.* Map courtesy Indiana Historical Society (<https://images.indianahistory.org/digital/collection/dc008/id/412/rec/2>)

## How long was the raid?

General John Hunt Morgan's Raid began in McMinnville, Tennessee, and ended two miles west of West Point, Ohio, just seventy miles south of Lake Erie (the real high-water mark for the Confederacy), very near the Ohio-Pennsylvania state line. They easily covered over one-thousand miles in less than a month while being pursued by home guards, militia, Union army, calvary, and navy gunboats. All of this occurred behind enemy lines without the benefit of GPS, radios,

communication with their superiors, or any supply system for food, forage, or replacement horses. Communications involved “borrowing” newspapers, mail, and “listening” to telegraph messages.

Then there was Captain George “Lightning” Elsworth. Lightning was General Morgan’s talented telegrapher who would tap into the telegraph lines to gain intelligence and mimic a local telegrapher to mislead the locals as to where Morgan was and where he was headed. Lightning was one of the true characters of the war. (See the bibliography below).

Food and forage involved the raiders inviting themselves to dinner at farms and businesses along their route. Imagine 35 to 50 heavily armed, very dirty and nervous men arriving and asking you to cook them “dinner.” In most cases only a mother and children were home. They made bread, flapjacks, and similar items. Horse “trading” of worn-out for fresh animals was nearly continuous. This was done to replenish mounts and to deprive the Union forces following them. The raid, which preceded Sherman’s march, was proof it could be done without bringing a train of wagons.



*John Hunt Morgan.* (National Park Service website)

**\$1,000!**  
**REWARD.**

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**Head Quarters U. S. Forces,**  
*Columbus, O., Nov. 28, 1863.*

**GEN. JOHN H. MORGAN**  
**Captains J. C. Bennett, L. B. Taylor, L. D. Hockersmith, Sheldon T. H. Haines, and G. S. Magee,**

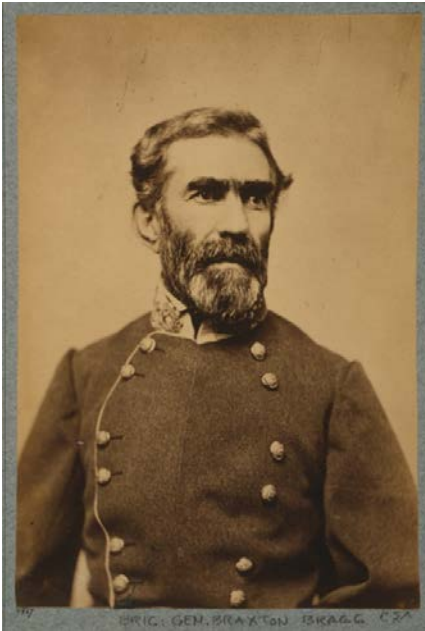
Escaped from the Ohio Penitentiary on the night of the 27th instant.

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**A Reward of \$1,000!**  
Will be paid for the apprehension and arrest of John Morgan, and a suitable reward for the apprehension and arrest of the others.

**WM. WALLACE,**  
Colonel 15th O. V. I. Commanding.

## Why was the raid ordered and by whom?



General Braxton Bragg. (Library of Congress)

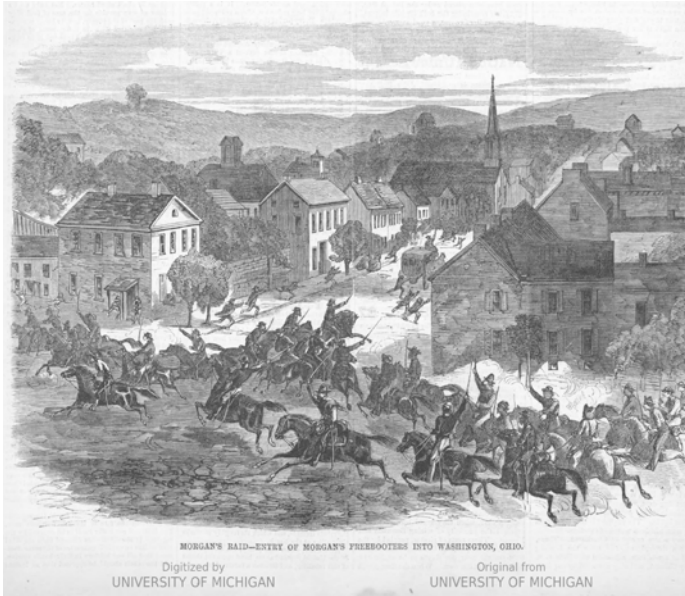
Morgan's superior officer was General Braxton Bragg. Bragg needed a diversion as Union General William Rosecrans was beginning to move toward Bragg. General Bragg wanted to divert Rosecrans and disrupt his planning and supplies from moving into East Tennessee. In addition, General Ulysses Grant was in the middle of the Vicksburg Campaign in the west, and General Robert E. Lee was moving north on the Gettysburg Campaign. General John H. Morgan, who had followed Grierson's raid into Mississippi and seen its impact, proposed a raid into Kentucky toward the Ohio River. The plan was to divert Union forces not just from Bragg, but away from Vicksburg and Pennsylvania, while threatening a move into the north. General Bragg ordered Morgan not to cross the Ohio

River, but Morgan had other ideas. Prior to his proposal to Bragg, Morgan had trusted scouts seek crossing points across the river into Indiana. General Bragg never forgave him and Bragg was a man who could hold a grudge, as many of his officers would acknowledge.

Morgan's method was to send scouts in various directions in order to find the best route, find supplies (food, forage, horses, money, good camping areas, guides, etc.), and to mislead enemy forces following or trying to track them. Morgan and his raiders lived off the land. Bummers before Bummers! It is nearly impossible to record the actual number of miles traveled by Morgan's raiders as units went various routes, reforming at preselected points.

## What battles were fought?

There were numerous skirmishes, but only two battles as such. General Morgan did not want, nor did he plan, to get involved in a standup battle where he would be forced to use his supplies. However, the Battle of Corydon, Indiana, and the Battle of Buffington Island, Ohio, were fought for two very different reasons.



“Morgan’s Raid – Entry of Morgan’s Freebooters in Washington, Ohio.”  
Harper’s Weekly 7, No. 346 (August 15, 1863): 513. Courtesy HathiTrust,  
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015022644960&view=1up&seq=480&skin=2021>.

After capturing two Ohio River boats used to transport his 2500 troops across the river, Morgan’s raiders turned north away from the river and the gunboats that patrolled it. Directly to their north was Corydon, the first capitol of Indiana. Word had spread of Morgan’s crossing the Ohio so the local home guard and militias rallied to defend their town. Faced with Morgan’s veterans and greatly outnumbered (approximately 450 to 2500), the Union men were flanked and confronted

with artillery for the first time. There was a parlay and a quick retreat. Amateurs armed with squirrel rifles and shotguns were no match for the veteran raiders. The raiders resupplied themselves at Corydon’s expense and moved on.

The Battle of Buffington Island was very different. Morgan and the raiders were looking for a good ford to cross into West Virginia and head back south. Unfortunately for the raiders, the river was higher than expected due to prolonged rains and the Union gunboats which were able to navigate around the island providing the Union forces with their firepower, cutting off Morgan from crossing. Also, regular Union cavalry units were following Morgan and closing in. Numbers and firepower favored the Union forces (4 to 1). General Morgan lost half of his command here; killed, wounded, and captured, and fled north. It was a Northern victory. It now was only a matter of time until Morgan and his remaining men were captured or killed.

General John Hunt Morgan surrendered near West Point, Ohio, on Sunday, July 26, 1863, after nineteen days of constant movement. The raiders had traveled over 1000 miles on horseback since July 7. There were only 364 men left with General Morgan. In all, Morgan’s men raided 6476 homes and businesses north of the Mason-Dixon line in Indiana (2201) and Ohio (4375).

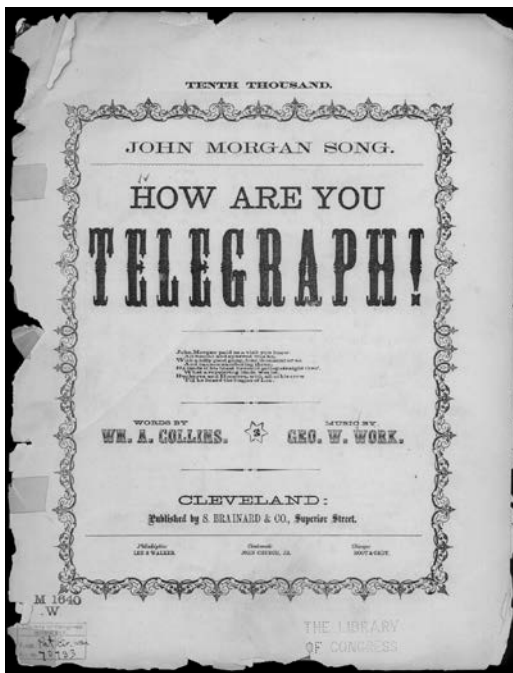
## What happened to General Morgan and the raiders?

The enlisted men captured were held locally and eventually taken to prisoner of war camps across the north. General Morgan and many of his officers were taken to the Ohio State Penitentiary where General Morgan and seven other raiders escaped by tunneling out. The eight men split up into pairs. General Morgan and Captain Thomas Hines walked to the train station and bought tickets to Cincinnati. After arriving in Cincinnati, they paid a young ferry boat operator to row them across the river to complete their escape. Because they were being hunted it took a number of months for General Morgan to rejoin his wife in Danville, Virginia.

On January 7, 1864, General Morgan and Mattie were treated to a heroes' welcome in the Confederate capitol, Richmond. Even if Morgan's Raid was technically a defeat, it made General Morgan and his raiders heroes in the South, both feared and famous in the North. One song written in Cleveland about the raid was titled: "How Are You, Telegraph!"

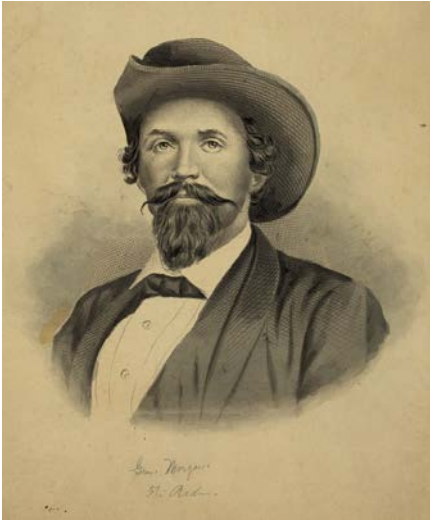


John H. Morgan & wife, C.S.A. (Library of Congress)



*How are you, telegraph!* [Geo. W. Work, composer; Wm. A. Collins, lyricist; S. Brainard & Co., publisher]. (Library of Congress, Music Division)

*John Morgan paid us a visit you know,  
All booted and spurred was he,  
With a jolly good gang, four thousand or so,  
And cannon numbering three.  
He made it his boast he could gallop straight thro',  
What a roystering blade was he,  
Buckeyes and Hoosiers, with all of his crew  
Till he heard the bugles of Lee.*



Gen. Morgan the Raider. (Library of Congress)

General John Hunt Morgan did not survive the war. His magic ended in Greeneville, Tennessee, on September 4, 1864. General Morgan had chosen to stay in the home of Dr. Alexander Williams' widow, a distant relative of his wife, away from his troops who were camped outside of town. Unknown to the troops, Union forces were near and a Union supporter told them where he was. The home was surrounded in the early hours and Morgan was killed trying to escape.

### **Tidbits:**

Four future presidents participated in the chase of Morgan and his raiders:

- Rutherford B. Hayes
- William McKinley, Jr.
- Benjamin Harrison
- James A. Garfield

General John H. Morgan's brother-in-law was Confederate General A. P. Hill.

Bennett H. Young was a young lieutenant on "The Raid" with Morgan. He later organized and led the raid from Canada on St. Albans, Vermont.

Captain Thomas Hines was sent to Chicago to organize "Copperhead" support to release the prisoners held at Camp Douglas. We know nothing came of that effort as the "Copperheads" were good talkers, but poor soldiers.

The Confederate government proposed an exchange; General Neal Dow for General John Hunt Morgan. The U.S. government refused.

John Hunt Morgan was expelled from Transylvania College in Lexington, Kentucky, in 1844 for fighting a duel; yet he considered himself an alum and gave the college assistance during his lifetime.

### **Another Character:**

Adam “Stove Pipe” Johnson won his nickname as he and twelve other raiders fashioned two cannons from “borrowed” stove pipe. Near dusk and under a flag of truce, he negotiated with the local militia that he would not bombard their town, Newburgh, Indiana, if they surrendered. The militia seeing the “cannon” pointed in their direction agreed. Blinded by a wound later in the war, Johnson was captured and held in a prisoner of war camp. After the war he moved to Texas, founded the town of Marble Falls, and wrote a colorful memoir of his exploits.



*Oil painting "Morgan's Raiders" at Federal Building & U.S. Courthouse, Gainesville, Georgia. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, photograph by Carol M. Highsmith, reproduction number LC-DIG-highsm-11017.*

## **Bibliography:**

Lester V. Horwitz. *The Longest Raid of the Civil War*. Farmcourt Publishing, Inc., Cincinnati, Ohio, 2001. (Mr. Horwitz became interested in Morgan's Raid after he purchased a home whose history involved a visit from General Morgan. His home is now considered suburbs of Cincinnati, but in 1863 was north of the city where Morgan raiders skirted around Cincinnati.)

Basil W. Duke. *A History of Morgan's Calvary*. Reprint. Palala Press, 2015. Kindle available. (Brig. Gen. Basil W. Duke was Morgan's second in command and assumed command of the raiders after Morgan's death. He founded the Morgan's Men Association and commanded it until his death. The association remains active and can be searched online much more on Morgan.

Dr. Robert O. Neff and Edith Elizabeth Politz. *"The Bride and the Bandit", a biography of Martha Ready Morgan, wartime bride of General John Hunt Morgan*. Privately published by authors. See Morgan's Men Association website for information.

David G. Edwards. *Captain George A "Lightning" Elsworth: General Morgan's Amazing Telegrapher*". Reprint available on Amazon.com books. (Lightning was born in Canada, immigrated to the old Midwest, Illinois, and Indiana, but threw his lot with the Confederacy by joining the Confederate Army. He was promoted to captain due to his being a trained telegrapher.