Anticipating an invasion by Federal troops, at the outset of the war in May 1861 the Missouri legislature reconfigured the militia as the Missouri State Guard. Almost immediately eight companies enlisted volunteers from strongly pro-Southern Callaway County.

The first company was the Callaway Guards, pledged to help protect Jefferson City. Two graduating seniors, Daniel H. McIntyre and Joseph S. Laurie, were elected captain commanding and commissary sergeant respectively. A month before commencement, the young men reportedly had completed course work and oral exams and were writing their graduation speeches.

According to lore, as they were lunching in old Westminster Hall above, word came that the Guards were mustering. Sympathetic college historian Charles F. Lamkin reported, “Without closing their books or finishing their lunch these two chivalrous young men hurried from the college and rode away to war.” They never returned, razing their first combat at the Battle of Carthage, Missouri, July 5.

By late-June’s commencement, secessionist Governor Claiborne Fox Jackson and the Missouri legislature reconfigured the militia as the Missouri State Guard under Brigadier General Thomas B. Harris — the same brigade briefly manning Samuel Clemens (“Mark Twain”).

Traveling north on the Old Jefferson City Road, the Unionists camped overnight north of New Bloomfield before being ambushed at Middle River by local Southern sympathizers and a contingent of Missourians under Colonel John McNellis at the Overton farm. From there they attacked with a substantial part of Harris’ large force and then were routed. At least 15 Home Guards were wounded, three mortally. A Fulton Southern contingent reconfigured the militia as the Missouri State Guard. Almost immediately eight companies enlisted volunteers from strongly pro-Southern Callaway County.

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The old Overton farm about 2 mi. southwest of here saw the final action in a running fight July 17, 1861, that was the first significant Civil War combat in Callaway County. Seven companies (about 550 men) of U.S. Reserve Corps infantry (German Home Guards from St. Louis) under Colonel John McNellis entered the county from Jefferson City to interdict east-west passage through the county’s northern timberland under Brigadier General Thomas B. Harris — the same brigade briefly manning Samuel Clemens (“Mark Twain”).

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By late-June’s commencement, secessionist Governor Claiborne Fox Jackson and the legislature had fled the state capital pursued by Federal troops. Missouri was in turmoil. Meanwhile the faculty certified the two absent seniors eligible to receive their degrees. The commencement audience was divided in sentiments, however, and Unionists among them bristled when President Samuel S. Laws conferred the last two of nine diplomas “in absentia.”

In Latin he announced what translates as “These two diplomas are conferred on Lieutenant [sic] Joseph Scott Laurie and Captain Daniel H. McIntyre, absent in the field crowded with tents.” This act and these words were responsible in part for landing President Laws in St. Louis’ Gratiot Street Prison as a presumed Southern sympathizer. He spent two months in Federal confinement and then was exiled to Europe for much of the war.

The war later affected Westminster in various other ways. Faculty and enrollment were both drastically reduced. As Fulton was occupied by Union troops, there was tension between the soldiers and generally pro-Southern college and town; there was sporadic militia and guerrilla violence and even the July 28, 1862, battle of Moore’s Mill seven miles northeast of Fulton. In fall 1863, Rev. W.W. Wallace became professor of English, the fifth faculty member. The Wallace family had fled its home at Independence as a result of Union General Thomas R. Ewing’s notorious Order No. 11 sweeping almost all civilians from the counties south of Kansas City; these people were presumed to be aiding and abetting guerrillas like Colonel William C. Quantrell.

Many of these soldiers survived the Union cause with distinction. Callaway County was the birthplace of Union soldiers, 29 died of disease, especially cholera, and four died of unreported causes — an astounding 35 percent total death rate. Fighting for emancipation, all gave the last full measure of devotion.