

**From Civil War Fort to State Park:
A History of Fort Pillow**

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Located along the Mississippi River in Lauderdale County, Tennessee, is one of the most controversial battlefields of the American Civil War. On April 12, 1864, 1,500 Confederate troops under General Nathan B. Forrest seized control of the fort from 600 Union soldiers, under the command of Major Lionel F. Booth, in one of the bloodiest assaults of the war. Nearly half of the Union force perished, including the fort's two ranking officers. Soldiers of the United States Colored Troops (USCT) suffered a stunning casualty rate of 64 percent.

The Confederates won the battle that day, but the controversy over what happened and why began almost immediately—and has continued to this day.¹ In 1865, Confederate supporters defended the actions of their soldiers. Unionists termed the assault a massacre and Northern Republican politicians successfully cited the massacre as another reason that the United States should take harsher military action against the Confederacy. For newly emancipated African Americans, the words Fort Pillow became a rallying cry for enlistment and raised their determination to fight even more doggedly against the Confederate foe. The U. S. Army even implemented fairer treatment of its black troops in reaction to the deaths and heroism of its soldiers at Fort Pillow.

The controversy also impacted the preservation of the battlefield, which was abandoned and forgotten for decades. Fort Pillow State Historical Area is a recent park, dedicated in 1971, and only in our generation has a search for the whole story of Fort Pillow become a goal for both historians and visitors to the site. This booklet is designed

¹ Marcus A. Hill, "Fort Pillow and Its History: A Study of Subjectivity," MA Thesis, Memphis State University, 1990; John Cimprich and Robert C. Mainfort, Jr., "The Fort Pillow Massacre: A Statistical Note," *Journal of American History* 76(1989): 830-837 and "Fort Pillow Revisited: New Evidence About an Old Controversy," *Civil War History* 28(1982): 293-306; for the entire story of Fort Pillow, see John Cimprich, *Fort Pillow, A Civil War Massacre, And Public Memory* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005).

to meet today's needs for an accurate and complete history of Fort Pillow and its significance during the American Civil War.

The Deeper History of the Fort Pillow Area

Fort Pillow sits atop the First Chickasaw Bluff along the Mississippi River in Lauderdale County, Tennessee. This bluff has played a significant role in the military history of the Lower Mississippi Valley since the time of the first Native American inhabitants. Its proximity to the river and high elevation made it a prime location for surveying wild game and to look for any river traffic. Four hundred years ago, the Chickasaws occupied the region stretching from the Mississippi River to the Tennessee-Cumberland divide and from the Ohio River to northern Alabama. Chickasaw men were expert hunters, swimmers, and warriors who shaved the sides of their heads so as to have a crest of hair left on the top. Women cleared land, raised crops, and gathered firewood and food for the community, while men hunted or fought.²

During the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, European expansion into the New World brought military expeditions and traders into increasingly regular contact with the Chickasaws. Hernando De Soto's Spanish expedition came in the 1540s. In early 1682, Robert Cavalier de la Salle's French expedition came upon the Chickasaw Bluffs, established a crude stockade at an undetermined spot on the Chickasaw Bluffs, near the confluence of the Hatchie and Mississippi rivers, and named it Fort Prudhomme after one of La Salle's men who went missing for several days.

The Chickasaws proved to be adept negotiators and good traders, traits that became handy once they had to deal with the American government in the late eighteenth

²Arrell M. Gibson, *The Chickasaw* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 6-7.

century. In 1785 Congress passed a resolution providing for the appointment of commissioners to negotiate treaties with the Indian tribes. On January 10, 1786, at Hopewell, South Carolina, American commissioners met with representatives of the Chickasaw Nation and drafted the Treaty of Hopewell, which allied the Chickasaws with the United States during its continuing struggle with Spain for control of the lower Mississippi Valley. By the end of 1795, the U.S. had prevailed over Spain, and government officials turned their attention to the Chickasaws' vast landholdings in Tennessee. Economic coercion and intimidation forced the Chickasaws to cede all of their remaining Tennessee lands in 1818. The land grab did not end there. The Chickasaw era on the First Bluff came to an end in 1837 when the U.S. claimed all the land once owned by the Chickasaw Nation and forced the remaining members of the tribe onto reservations west of the Mississippi River.³

Fulton's Early History and the Coming of the Civil War

The first town of the First Chickasaw Bluff was Fulton, created by land speculators in 1827. With 760 acres of land, the speculators divided Fulton into lots and sold them at auction.⁴ Fulton's population reached 600 inhabitants by the summer of 1829 and farmers established cotton plantations nearby to take advantage of Fulton's river location.⁵ An epidemic of either cholera or yellow fever struck in the autumn of 1829, and the town slowly faded away over the next two years, with about 200

³Gibson, *The Chickasaws*, 75-80, 102-106.

⁴*The Goodspeed History of Tennessee: Lauderdale, Tipton, Haywood, and Crockett Counties*, (Nashville: The Goodspeed Publishing Company, 1887), 804.

⁵Kate Johnston Peters, ed., *Lauderdale County From Earliest Times* (Ripley: Sugar Hill Lauderdale County Library, 1957), 4.

inhabitants dying from disease and another 200 abandoning the village due to the lack of commercial activity.⁶

As a river-oriented commercial center, Fulton had some serious challenges: the river channel near the town was difficult to navigate, and two islands split the flow of the Mississippi directly across from Fulton, so that pilots were advised to steer a westward course around them to avoid running aground, further diverting river traffic from the town.⁷ Due to this unfortunate natural barrier and the epidemic which claimed two-thirds of its population, Fulton would remain small and unimportant compared to its competitors, Randolph and Memphis, to the south. The shifting course of the Mississippi River has claimed most of historic Fulton, but scattered residences, churches, and an old cemetery remain.

The specter of Civil War haunted the First Chickasaw Bluff, as well as the entire state, as secessionist rhetoric heated up in 1860-1861.⁸ On June 8, 1861, Tennessee held a popular referendum to support the May 6 declaration of secession made by Governor Isham G. Harris and the General Assembly. Two-thirds of those who voted favored secession and joining the Confederacy; the percentage was even higher in Lauderdale County, where the vote was 763 to 7 in favor of secession.⁹

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷Edward F. Williams, "Early Memphis and Its River Rivals: Fulton, Randolph, and Fort Pickering," *West Tennessee Historical Society Papers* 22 (1968), 14. Flour Island is also known as Island No. 34, named by Zadock Cramer in his early nineteenth-century guide for travelers on the Mississippi River entitled *The Navigator*.

⁸Charles L. Lufkin, *Secession and West Tennessee Unionism 1860-1861* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1988), 57.

⁹Mary Emily Campbell, *The Attitude of Tennesseans Toward the Union: 1847-1861* (New York: Vantage Press, 1961), 294. In 1860, Lauderdale County had a population of 7559, 2854 of whom (about

The Confederate Fort, 1861-1862

Following Tennessee's secession from the United States, Confederate officials quickly looked for good locations to fortify the Mississippi River against the federal navy. During May and June of 1861, Colonel Patrick Cleburne of the 1st Arkansas State Troops constructed a small fortification on the First Chickasaw Bluff.¹⁰ Confederate Brigadier General Gideon J. Pillow next ordered the construction of a much larger bluff fort. A large sandbar in the middle of the river forced all traffic to pass within close proximity to the Tennessee shore at this point, so all river traffic could be regulated from this position on the bluff. Fulton, just downriver, served as an important center for receiving goods to be used at the fort.

Pillow's fort, built largely by slave labor, was an earthen structure with three lines of defense against an attack by land, designed to be defended by a garrison of 15,000 troops. The most exterior line of defense stretched from the bank of Cold Creek (a stream that empties into the river half a mile north of the fort) to the Mississippi itself, creating nearly two miles of trench with a ditch in front. A second earthwork, right in front of the fort on the land side, was situated along the crest of a hill and covered about two acres of land. Finally, closest to the river, the fort itself stretched in an irregular semicircle from the Cold Creek river bluff to the Mississippi River bluff. The distance between the two ends of the horseshoe was about seventy yards, while the length of the horseshoe itself was about 120 yards. The earthen wall, or parapet, of the fort measured

38%) were slaves. U.S. Census Office, *A Compendium of the Ninth Census* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1872; repr., N.Y.: Arno Press, 1976), 90-91.

¹⁰ Robert C. Mainfort, Jr., *Archaeological Investigations at Fort Pillow State Historical Area: 1976-1978* (Nashville: Division of Archaeology, Tennessee Department of Conservation, 1980), 2.

six feet high and six feet thick with a flat top.¹¹

Slave laborers created another ditch twelve feet wide and eight feet deep in front of the parapet. East of this parapet, along the bank of Cold Creek, the land gradually descended into the crescent-shaped Cold Creek Ravine. Yet another ravine existed to the south of the fort, with the deepest portion located about 450 feet from the parapet. It contained a series of irregular knolls with varying elevations, some as high as the walls of the fort itself, which would prove to be one of its tragic flaws. Workers cut down all trees in the immediate vicinity to provide clear views of all approaches. Above and below the face of the bluff, around seventy-five yards from each end of the embankment, the Confederates constructed rifle pits for defending the fort from attacks on either side and for providing cover for sharpshooters to fire upon the enemy.¹²

When work on the fort was completed in early 1862, Confederates named it after General Pillow. Born in Williamson County, Tennessee, in 1806, Pillow graduated from Nashville University in 1827 and began practicing law in Columbia, Tennessee. At the outbreak of the Mexican War, President James K. Polk commissioned Pillow a brigadier general in charge of a brigade of Tennesseans. Later promoted to major general, he contributed to the capture of Mexico City and returned to the United States as a renowned soldier and military leader. Confederate President Jefferson Davis commissioned him a brigadier general at the outbreak of the Civil War.¹³

¹¹ John Allen Wyeth, *That Devil Forrest: Life of General Nathan Bedford Forrest* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959), 309-312.

¹² *Ibid.*, 309-312.

¹³ Ed Frank, "Pillow, Gideon Johnson," *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, Carroll Van West, et al, eds., (Nashville: Tennessee Historical Society, 1998), 735; Nathaniel C. Hughes, Jr., and Roy P. Stonesifer, *The Life and Wars of Gideon J. Pillow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993.)

On March 25, 1862, the Confederate high command ordered John B. Villepigue, an officer praised for “industry, ability, and professional skill,”¹⁴ to assume control over Fort Pillow. These orders required him to make a detailed report on the condition of the fort. He observed that the river battery was in a prime location for firing upon Union naval traffic on the Mississippi for two to three miles in either direction, making the fort useful in disrupting such traffic. The topography on the other side of the fort proved to be much more problematic. Brig. General Villepigue found it impossible to construct any line of entrenchments that would enable a small force of men to defend the fort against a large number of attackers. The already existing trenches were so poorly located and constructed that it would take a large number of guns, in addition to the recommended 15,000 troops, to man it properly.¹⁵

In response to General Villepigue’s report, Major Jeremy F. Gilmer, head of the Confederate States Engineer Corps, visited Fort Pillow during the last week of March 1862. Gilmer designed a smaller fort, designed to require a minimum of 5,000 soldiers for its defense. General Villepigue ordered its construction,¹⁶ but he argued that fewer troops would be insufficient to defend the fort. He also recommended that at least twenty guns be installed on this line of defense and two additional companies of cavalry be sent to the fort to aid in its defense. Along with these requests, he petitioned for another 15,000 pounds of powder to be used in the fort’s cannons: twenty-eight 32-pounders, four

¹⁴U.S. Government, *War of the Rebellion, A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1880-1901, Vol. 10, Series I, Part II, 363. (All future reference to the *Official Records* will be cited as *O.R.*)

¹⁵O.R., Vol. 10, Series I, Part II, 394-396.

¹⁶Mainfort, 2.

10-inch columbiads, and three 8-inch columbiads. Villepigue also created a thorough report of each regiment and battalion stationed at the fort, including their training, discipline, arms, and needs.¹⁷

The Battle for the Mississippi River and Plum Point Bend

The Mississippi River was a major transportation artery during the Civil War; controlling the river was a strategic goal for both sides. In early 1862, the Union command set out to capture important Confederate river strongholds. Their victories at Forts Henry and Donelson on the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers in February 1862, as well as preparations for the Shiloh campaign, caused the Confederates to abandon their Mississippi River fortifications at Columbus, Kentucky. On April 7, 1862, Union gunboats captured 7,000 Confederates on Island No. 10, an island fortress in the middle of the Mississippi River near New Madrid, Missouri. This important victory opened the Mississippi River for Union gunboats to travel south toward Fort Pillow, the last Confederate stronghold separating the Union navy from Memphis, which had become a thriving commercial center of great importance.¹⁸

At the same time, the Union navy began to press from the south. Union Admiral David Farragut also led a massive attack on New Orleans at the mouth of the Mississippi River during April 1862. By April 29, 1862, New Orleans, the Confederacy's largest city and gateway to the Mississippi River, lay in Union hands. With the exception of Mobile Bay, the Union navy now controlled the Gulf of Mexico from Key West to the

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Howard P. Nash, Jr., *A Naval History of the Civil War* (Cranbury, N.J.: A. S. Barnes and Company, 1972), 116-118; Larry .J. Daniel and Lynn N. Brock, *Island No. 10: Struggle for the Mississippi Valley* (Tuscaloosa: University Press of Alabama, 1996).

Mississippi River, effectively ending any Confederate hope of supplying their troops from the water.¹⁹ The dual raids on Island No. 10 and New Orleans during April of 1862 revealed President Abraham Lincoln's policy of attacking various Confederate outposts along the Mississippi River simultaneously, stretching the Confederate river defenses out across hundreds of river miles, making it impossible to defend their largest outposts.²⁰

By early May 1862, Union gunboats regularly bombarded Fort Pillow, where the Confederate River Defense Fleet was stationed. While General Villepigue hurriedly tried to improve the fortifications at Fort Pillow, the Confederate and Union navies engaged each other for the first time during the Civil War on May 10, 1862, at Plum Point Bend, a mere four miles upriver from Fort Pillow. The fleet, headed by Captain James E. Montgomery, set out to destroy the Union ironclad *Cincinnati*, under Commander Roger N. Stembel, which protected the gunboats while they were attacking Fort Pillow. The Confederate vessels that took part in the attack included the *General Bragg*, the *General Sterling Price*, the *Sumter*, the *General Earl Van Dorn*, the *General Jeff Thompson*, the *Colonel Lovell*, the *General Beauregard*, and the *Little Rebel*.²¹ All had been commercial vessels before the war and had been converted into steam rams with the addition of iron and timber to their bows.²²

As soon as the *Cincinnati* sighted the Confederate fleet sailing her way, she

¹⁹H. Allen Gosnell, *Guns on the Western Waters: The Story of River Gunboats in the Civil War* (Baton Rouge.: Louisiana State University Press, 1949), 83-84.

²⁰James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 415-421.

²¹Thomas J. Scharf, *History of the Confederate States Navy* (New York: Rogers & Sherwood, 1887), 252.

²²John D. Milligan, *Gunboats Down the Mississippi* (Annapolis, Md.: United States Naval Institute, 1965), 65.

opened fire upon it, while the gunboats shelling Fort Pillow did the same. The *General Bragg* rammed the *Cincinnati* on the starboard bow, and one of the *General Bragg's* sharpshooters also and wounded Commander Stembel on board the *Cincinnati*. Soon thereafter, Union gunfire shot out the *General Bragg's* tiller ropes, and she drifted downriver. The *General Sterling Price* quickly rammed the *Cincinnati* aft of the starboard midship, dismantling her rudder, which allowed the *General Sumter* to ram the *Cincinnati* for a third time. Meanwhile, the *Mound City* closed in to assist the *Cincinnati*, but she was rammed by the *General Earl Van Dorn*. This collision bore a hole four feet deep into the *Mound City's* starboard forward quarter. As more Union gunboats with superior cannonry approached, Captain James Montgomery retreated to Fort Pillow.²³

Union gunboat commanders claimed to have inflicted heavy damage on the Confederate vessels, but Commander Montgomery reported no serious damage. Two Confederate sailors were killed and one wounded, compared to five wounded for the Union. The *Cincinnati* and *Mound City* sustained significant damage and were sent upriver for repairs, putting them out of commission for a few valuable weeks. The Plum Point Bend engagement thus temporarily stalled the Union advance down the Mississippi River. It would prove to be a mere delay, however, as a new Union plan to capture Fort Pillow and advance downriver to Memphis had already been drafted.²⁴

Union reconnaissance after the Battle of Plum Point Bend found that a combined assault of infantry and gunboats approaching Fort Pillow from Cold Creek would render guns from the Confederate river battery useless and provide a window for taking the fort.

²³*O. R.*, Vol. 23, Series I, 55-57.

²⁴Bern Anderson, *By Sea and By River: The Naval History of the Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 1962), 107-110.

Union forces planned to attack on June 5, 1862. In the meantime, General G. T. Beauregard, Commanding General of Confederate forces in West Tennessee, ordered the evacuation of the fort by May 30, completely unaware of the Union plan to attack a week later. Writing from Corinth on May 28, 1862, Beauregard ordered Brigadier General J. B. Villepigue to dismantle the river battery, destroy all government property including guns, cannon, and ammunition, and move his forces to Grenada, Mississippi. Beauregard wished to bring the Union forces into the interior where the distance between them and supply lines would be greatest, and he viewed the evacuation of Fort Pillow as bait to draw the troops in. When Union forces arrived at Fort Pillow on June 5, they found the place deserted and the river battery completely dismantled.²⁵ The retreating Confederates abandoned nineteen pieces of artillery, including two 128-pounders, in their haste.²⁶

Once Island No. 10, New Orleans, and Fort Pillow had been captured, the Union navy steamed upriver and downriver simultaneously to trap the Confederate navy and capture additional outposts. On June 6, 1862, five Union ironclads and four rams met the remaining vessels of the Confederate River Defense Fleet from Fort Pillow on the Mississippi River outside of Memphis. Confederate supporters from Memphis lined the fourth Chickasaw Bluff to watch the battle and cheer on their side, but they were soon silenced when all but one Confederate vessel was destroyed or captured. The battle for Memphis lasted less than two hours, and a Union detachment soon marched into the city to raise the stars and stripes. An important center for distribution and communication, Memphis became one of the Union's main outposts for future naval operations on the

²⁵*O.R.*, Vol. 10, Series I, Part I, 900-903.

²⁶Robert. C. Mainfort, Jr., "A Folk Art Map of Fort Pillow," *West Tennessee Historical Society Papers* 40 (1986): 73-81.

Mississippi River.

The remaining Confederate river stronghold was Vicksburg, Mississippi, which the Union navy failed to capture during the summer of 1862. The Union's gains from February to May had been many, however, as the Union navy to conquered 50,000 square miles of territory, 1,000 miles of navigable rivers, two state capitals, and the Confederacy's largest city. Southern morale declined with the fall of every Mississippi River outpost, and on July 4, 1863, Vicksburg finally fell after a year-long Union siege, effectively ending the Confederacy's use of the Mississippi River and completing what has been called "the most important northern strategic victory of the war."²⁷

The Emancipation Proclamation and African-American Soldiers

As soon as the Civil War began, slaves and free blacks recognized that the conflict had the potential to disrupt slavery and possibly bring about its downfall. Slaves who lived near Union lines in the Confederacy provided essential information to the Union army about the lay of the land, the location of roads, the loyalties of local whites, and the preparations and movements of nearby Confederate forces. Some slaves escaped to Union lines, and many of those with Confederate owners were put to work for the Union as contraband of war.

Some African Americans wanted to fight for the Union, and abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass persistently pushed for black enlistment. Rhode Island raised the first African-American artillery regiment in the North on August 4, 1862, but they were

²⁷McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 421-422, 637-638.

not officially recognized by Washington.²⁸ In the South and West, black regiments organized in Kansas, Louisiana, and the South Carolina Sea Islands during the summer of 1862, but the government also refused to acknowledge them.

Aware of the manifold contributions of African Americans to the Union war effort, President Abraham Lincoln nonetheless proceeded cautiously, wary of alienating slaveholding Unionists in the Border States and in Union-occupied areas. On January 1, 1863, he issued the Emancipation Proclamation freeing all slaves in states or parts of states in rebellion against the Union and paving the way for the formal abolition of slavery after the war. The proclamation did not apply to Border States that had remained loyal to the Union or to areas within the Confederacy that were already under Union control. In an agreement with Tennessee's Unionist military governor, Andrew Johnson, Lincoln exempted Tennessee, most of which was under Union control, from the Proclamation.

Regarding the issue of black military service, the Emancipation Proclamation stated that former slaves were to be received into the armed service, and thus began the enlistment of African-American troops into the Federal army and navy.²⁹ African Americans were often relegated to labor battalions so as to free up white soldiers for combat duty. During 1863, President Lincoln realized the need for these soldiers to fight on the front lines alongside white soldiers, as the Union ranks were dwindling.³⁰ In May 1863 the War Department created the Bureau of Colored Troops to help raise black

²⁸Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Civil War*, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1953), 185.

²⁹John Hope Franklin, *The Emancipation Proclamation* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc.,1963), 104, 138,150.

³⁰McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 563-564.

troops and secure officers for their regiments. Officers were usually white and appointed based on personal proficiency and demonstrated ability.³¹ Competition for these officer positions was stiff, as nine thousand men applied for commissions and only 2,400 were granted.³²

African Americans proved their ability and dedication as soldiers from 1863 until the end of the Civil War in 1865, fighting alongside their white counterparts. Despite their success on the battlefield, many in the North opposed the inclusion of African Americans in the armed forces.³³ During this time African Americans not only struggled for equal combat duty but also for equal pay. This goal was realized on June 15, 1864, when Congress finally enacted legislation granting equal pay to African-American soldiers, spurred in part by the outcry over the atrocities committed against black soldiers at Fort Pillow.³⁴

The Confederate States of America refused to acknowledge African Americans in the Union army as soldiers. Stated policy recognized black prisoners of war as rebellious slaves who would be returned to their masters, put to work in military camps, sold into slavery, or even executed. President Jefferson Davis had the power to put captured white officers of black regiments on trial before military tribunals with execution standing as

³¹Dudley Taylor Cornish, *The Sable Arm: Negro Troops in the Union Army, 1861-1865* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1956), 226-228.

³²Joseph T. Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* (London: The Free Press, 1990), 39.

³³Hondon B. Hargrove, *Black Union Soldiers in the Civil War* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1988), 161-162.

³⁴James M. McPherson, *The Negro's Civil War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965), 200-202; Derek W. Frisby, "'Remember Fort Pillow!' Politics, Atrocity Propaganda, and the Evolution of Hard War" in Gregory J. Urwin, ed., *Black Flag Over Dixie: Racial Atrocities and Reprisals in the Civil War* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), 123.

the most severe punishment.³⁵ Many white southerners feared that armed African Americans would incite slave rebellions in the Confederacy and despised the idea of fighting against their former slaves. This Confederate view of African-American soldiers would manifest itself at Fort Pillow on April 12, 1864.

The Union Fort, 1862-1864

After the Confederates abandoned Fort Pillow in May of 1862, Union troops did not immediately occupy it. Their primary concern was launching a full-scale assault on Memphis. After Union forces took Memphis, they returned to Fort Pillow, posting some patrol boats to make sure Confederate forces did not reoccupy the fort. In September 1862, the 52nd Indiana Volunteers occupied Fort Pillow and would remain until January 1864. During this one and one-half year assigned, the Indiana volunteers were joined by the 32nd Iowa, the 178th New York, and various companies of the 2nd Illinois Cavalry.³⁶

These regiments sought to use Fort Pillow as a recruiting station for Tennessee Unionists and runaway slaves interested in taking up arms for the Federal cause. The Union army also used the fort as a port for trading cotton in West Tennessee. Cotton commanded a high price during the war, and local residents traded cotton with the Union military for goods impossible to find locally. Union soldiers also confiscated horses, pigs, food, and other goods from the local population to prevent their use by guerilla forces in the interior of West Tennessee. These raids enraged those sympathetic to the

³⁵James D. Lockett, "The Lynching Massacre of Black and White Soldiers at Fort Pillow, Tennessee, April 12, 1864," *Western Journal of Black Studies*, 22 (1998): 84-93, 85.

³⁶Robert C Mainfort and Patricia E. Coats, eds., "Soldiering at Fort Pillow, 1862- 1864: An Excerpt From the Civil War Memoirs of Addison Sleeth," *West Tennessee Historical Society Papers* 36 (1982): 72-90, 72.

Confederate cause and the local Confederate population had little good will toward the garrison at Fort Pillow. Union soldiers also fought off Confederate conscription forces and scouts in the area trying to recruit soldiers and supplies. The nearby town of Fulton regained some importance as the 52nd Indiana Volunteers moved there for a period of a month in the fall of 1862. While in Fulton, they lived in private homes, confiscated supplies, and led expeditions to break up guerilla fighters in the area.³⁷

In January 1864, after two years of occupying Fort Pillow, the 52nd Indiana Volunteers, the 178th New York, and the 32nd Iowa received orders to rejoin the 16th Army Corps at Vicksburg, Mississippi. General William T. Sherman directed that Fort Pillow be abandoned so its troops could join his campaign in Mississippi. Major General Stephen A. Hurlbut, commander of the Memphis District, however, found the site too important to abandon. After transferring the garrison, Hurlbut assigned the 13th Tennessee Cavalry, commanded by Major William F. Bradford, to the fort on February 8, 1864.³⁸ Bradford used Fort Pillow to try to recruit Unionist Tennesseans to bring his force to full strength while disrupting Confederate guerilla bands in the area. Described by Hurlbut, as “a good officer, though not of much experience,” Bradford was a native Tennessean who could convince neutral or Unionist West Tennesseans to take up arms for the Federal cause.³⁹ Many of these men were deserters from the Confederate army and found that they would be safer fighting for the Union than being caught by

³⁷Lonnie E. Maness, “Fort Pillow Under Confederate and Union Control,” *West Tennessee Historical Society Papers* 38 (1984): 84-98, 91-93.

³⁸Frisby, 104-131, 107.

³⁹*O.R.*, Vol. 32, Series I, Part I, 556.

Confederates searching for deserters.⁴⁰

While recruiting, the 13th also earned a poor reputation among Confederate supporters, who viewed federal troops as traitors to their state and to the Confederate cause at large. Throughout West Tennessee, tensions between Union and Confederate supporters ran high, often resulting in violent confrontations.⁴¹

Responding to pleas for help from the pro-Confederate population in West Tennessee, Major General Nathan B. Forrest, the Confederate cavalry commander for West Tennessee and North Mississippi, returned to Jackson, Tennessee, to reorganize his command. A superb cavalry officer and military strategist, Forrest was known to be unflinching under fire. Born in Chapel Hill, Tennessee in 1821, Forrest as a young man gained wealth and notoriety as a slavetrader; on the eve of the Civil War he had become a prominent Memphis citizen and city alderman. Forrest feared that ex-slaves who fought for the Union army would instigate rebellions throughout the South, causing chaos and anarchy.⁴² His view of Tennessee Unionists was equally harsh, as he thought of these “Home-Made Yankees” as traitorous. By arming African Americans, Tennessee Unionists were contributing to an all-out attack on the South, in Forrest’s view.

Moved by stories of plunder at the hands of the “renegade Tennesseans,” he decided to attack Fort Pillow, not solely for revenge but also to acquire needed horses and supplies. He planned to break his command into two parts to attack supply depots at

⁴⁰Maness, 84-98, 93.

⁴¹Charles L. Lufkin, “‘Not Heard From Since April 12, 1864’ [the Fort Pillow Massacre]: The Thirteenth Tennessee Cavalry, U.S.A.,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (1986): 133-151.

⁴²Frisby, 108; Lockett, 84-93, 85; Court Carney, “The Contested Image of Nathan Bedford Forrest,” *Journal of Southern History* 67 (2001): 602.

Paducah, Kentucky, and Union City, Tennessee, before moving toward Fort Pillow. He personally led 2,500 men from Colonel Abraham Buford's division into Paducah on March 25, 1864, where they raided the supply depot, burned docks and the railyard, and obtained needed horses, food, and medical supplies. A small force attacked the Union forces at nearby Fort Anderson, but were driven back with heavy casualties. Forrest ordered no other attack on the stronghold. The other group, consisting of 475 men from the 7th Tennessee Cavalry, arrived at Union City on March 24, 1864, led by Colonel W. L. Duckworth. The Union forces initially repulsed their attack, but after Duckworth sent a flag of truce and used deception to inflate the size of his force, Colonel Isaac Hawkins, the Union commander, surrendered. He quickly realized his mistake, as his forces were superior in number and reinforcements were merely six hours away in the nearby Union stronghold at Cairo, Illinois.⁴³

On March 28, 1864, General Hurlbut, responding to Forrest's campaign in West Tennessee, placed Major Lionel F. Booth, commander of the First Battalion, First Alabama Siege Artillery (an African American command), in charge of Fort Pillow. His second in command, Major William F. Bradford of the 13th Tennessee Cavalry, was to "confer freely" with Booth regarding any major decisions. This contradictory order, which required Booth to consult with a lower-ranking officer, created confusion at Fort Pillow that would have dire consequences. Hurlbut, unconvinced that Forrest would attack, stated, "I think Forrest's check at Paducah will not dispose him to try the river again....Nevertheless, act promptly in putting the work in perfect order and the post into

⁴³Frisby, 108.

its strongest defense.”⁴⁴ General William T. Sherman, well aware of Forrest’s goal of distracting Union forces in West Tennessee to prevent them from attacking Generals Joseph Johnston and Robert E. Lee in the East, wrote Hurlbut on April 9, “The object of Forrest’s move is to prevent our concentration as against Johnston, but we must not permit it.”⁴⁵ Clearly, a unified consensus as to Forrest’s plans for Fort Pillow did not exist among Union leaders in the region.

On April 3, 1864, Major Booth reported to General Hurlbut, “Everything seems to be very quiet within a radius of from 30 to 40 miles around, and I do not think any apprehensions need be felt or fears entertained in reference to this place being attacked or even threatened. I think it perfectly safe.”⁴⁶ The garrison at the fort then consisted of the First Battalion, Sixth United States Heavy Artillery (African American), one section of Company D, Second United States Light Artillery (African American), and the First Battalion, Thirteenth Tennessee Cavalry. Fort Pillow had a total of between 585 and 605 troops, about equally divided between whites and blacks.⁴⁷ Six fieldpieces existed at the fort: two six-pounders, two twelve-pounder howitzers, and two ten-pounder Parrotts. The *New Era*, a 157-ton, wooden-hulled steamer was stationed on the Mississippi River near the fort. A converted river ferry 137 feet long and 30 feet wide, it contained three 24-pound howitzers on both the port and starboard sides. This boat could provide cover fire

⁴⁴*O.R.*, Vol. 32, Series I, Part I, 556.

⁴⁵Brian Steel Wills, *The Confederacy’s Greatest Cavalryman: Nathan Bedford Forrest* (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 178.

⁴⁶*O.R.*, Vol. 32, Series I, Part I, 557.

⁴⁷Wyeth, 313; Cimprich and Mainfort, 830-837.

in the event of a Confederate attack.⁴⁸

Responding to orders from Major General Nathan B. Forrest, General James R. Chalmers with a force consisting of Colonel Robert McCulloch's brigade and Colonel T. H. Bell's brigade moved on the night of April 11, 1864, toward Fort Pillow. The Confederates marched through the night from Brownsville, Tennessee, a distance of more than forty miles, so as to arrive at Fort Pillow by daybreak on April 12, where they would be met by General Forrest. They managed to secure a guide, W. J. Shaw, who had recently been arrested and held prisoner at Fort Pillow. Shaw had escaped the night of the 11th and, having knowledge of the inner works at the fort, aided McCulloch's brigade in securing dominant positions for its attack.⁴⁹

The Battle of Fort Pillow: April 12, 1864

Col. Robert McCulloch's brigade arrived at the outskirts of Fort Pillow around 6 a.m. on the morning of April 12, 1864. The main garrison at the fort had only been awake a short time, and the men were preparing for roll call and breakfast when they heard the first sounds of muskets firing. The Confederates captured the entire outer line of defense with little resistance, as the Federals quickly abandoned the trenches and fell back to the main fortification. Still waiting on General Forrest's arrival, the Confederate forces sought to gain strategic locations for attacking the fort. As reported by Brigadier General James R. Chalmers, commanding the First Division of Forrest's Cavalry, "McCulloch's brigade moved down the Fulton road to Gaines' farm; thence north to the

⁴⁸Richard L. Fuchs, *An Unerring Fire: The Massacre at Fort Pillow* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2002), 49.

⁴⁹Wyeth, 314.

fort on a road running parallel with the Mississippi River; Wilson's regiment, of Bell's brigade, moved on the direct road from Brownsville to Fort Pillow, and Colonel Bell with Barteau's and Russell's regiments moved down Coal Creek to attack the fort in the rear."⁵⁰

Companies D and E of the Union's Thirteenth Tennessee Cavalry engaged the Confederate forces quickly surrounding Fort Pillow. By about 8 a.m., the men of the Thirteenth retreated to the innermost fortification along with the rest of the Union garrison. Confederate sharpshooters took advantage of the hilly terrain littered with logs and stumps and unleashed a barrage of fire on the fort. The Union soldiers had to expose their heads and shoulders to fire out into the woods toward the Confederates, so they made easy targets for the sharpshooters, who focused their fire on Union officers.

Adjutant Mack J. Leaming of the Thirteenth Tennessee Cavalry reported, "We suffered pretty severely in the loss of commissioned officers by the unerring aim of the rebel sharpshooters, and among this loss I have to record our post commander, Major L. F. Booth, who was killed almost instantly by a musket-ball through the breast."⁵¹

At 9 a.m., immediately after Major Booth's death, Major Bradford took command of the fort. A group of non-combatants, including women and children, boarded the steamer *Liberty* at this time and left. Meanwhile, the Confederate advance toward the fort continued. Despite continuous lobbing of five-inch shells by the Union *New Era* on the Mississippi River, the Confederates managed to come within 250 yards of the fort and hold their position. At 11 a.m., General Forrest arrived on the scene with a detachment of troops, bringing the total Confederate force to 1,500. Forrest reported:

⁵⁰ *O.R.*, Vol. 32, Series I, Part I, 620-621.

⁵¹ *O.R.*, Vol. 32, Series I, Part I, 559.

Assuming command, I ordered General Chalmers to advance his lines and gain position on the slope, where our men would be perfectly protected from the heavy fire of artillery and musketry, as the enemy could not depress their pieces so as to rake the slopes, nor could they fire on them with small-arms except by mounting the breast-works and exposing themselves to the fire of our sharpshooters, who, under cover of stumps and logs, forced them to keep down inside the works. After several hours' hard fighting the desired position was gained, not, however, without considerable loss. Our main line was now within an average distance of 100 yards from the fort, and extended from Coal [Cold] Creek on the right to the bluff, or bank, of the Mississippi River on the left.⁵²

Adjutant Leaming, inside the Union fort, reported this Confederate advance:

At about 11 a.m. the rebels made a second determined assault on our works, and were again successfully repulsed with severe loss. They succeeded, however, in getting possession of two rows of barracks running parallel to the south side of the fort and distant about one hundred and fifty yards. The barracks had previously been ordered to be destroyed, but after severe loss on our part in the attempt to execute the order our men were compelled to retire without accomplishing the desired end, save only to the row nearest to the fort. From these barracks the enemy kept up a murderous fire on our men despite all our efforts to dislodge him. Owing to the close proximity of these buildings to the fort, and to the fact that they were on considerably lower ground, our artillery could not be sufficiently depressed to destroy them or even render them untenable for the enemy.⁵³

After the Confederates gained this position, General Forrest surveyed the area around the fort. While assessing the situation, federal fire killed his horse, and Forrest was badly bruised in the fall. Captain Charles W. Anderson, adjutant general on the staff, advised General Forrest to dismount and survey the enemy's position on foot, but Forrest merely replied that he was "just as apt to be hit one way as another, and that he could see better where he was." His reconnaissance complete, Forrest decided to concentrate his troops in the ravines, where they would be protected from Federal fire, and along the high

⁵²*O.R.*, Vol. 32, Series I, Part I, 614.

⁵³*O.R.*, Vol. 32, Series I, Part I, 559.

ground surrounding the fort, where their “unerring fire” could continue its deadly toll.⁵⁴

Taking control of the ravine on the Cold Creek side of the fort, about seventy-five yards from the innermost fortification, would not be easy. The Confederates would have to make a two-to-three-hundred-yard rush to get into the ravine, exposing themselves to severe danger, as numerous hilltops and depressions would slow their advance. Artillery and small arms from the east and north faces of the parapet would have a clear shot at them for the duration of their advance. Despite the risk, Forrest ordered Colonel C. R. Barteau and Colonel T. H. Bell to advance their troops into the ravine. Protected by sharpshooters, Barteau and Bell’s men managed to take this position, with a small number of casualties inflicted by the Union artillery.⁵⁵ This advance completely surrounded the fort, with Barteau’s and Bell’s troops in the ravine, and three companies of McCulloch’s command in the old rifle pits to the left and rear. Confederate Captain Anderson reported that the Confederate line:

...formed extending from Coal [Col] Creek on the right to the landing on the bank of the Mississippi River on the left, varying in distance from 50 yards to 150 yards of the works....Our heaviest loss was in gaining this position, and when gained it was perfectly apparent to any man endowed with the smallest amount of common sense, that to all intents and purposes the fort was ours.⁵⁶

General Forrest shared this confidence and sent Captain Walter A. Goodman of General Chalmers’s staff at 3:30 p.m. with a flag of truce to the fort. Recognizing the flag of truce, firing immediately stopped and Captains Bradford and Young, along with Lieutenant Leaming, received the following message from General Forrest:

Headquarters Forrest’s Cavalry
Before Fort Pillow, April 12, 1864

⁵⁴Wyeth, 317-318; Wills, 181.

⁵⁵Wyeth, 318; Wills, 181-182.

⁵⁶Fuchs, *An Unerring Fire*, 55; *O.R.*, Vol. 32, Series I, Part I, 621.

Major Booth, Commanding United States Forces, Fort Pillow:

Major—The conduct of the officers and men garrisoning Fort Pillow has been such as to entitle them to being treated as prisoners of war. I demand the unconditional surrender of this garrison, promising you that you shall be treated as prisoners of war. My men have received a fresh supply of ammunition, and from their present position can easily assault and capture the fort. Should my demand be refused, I cannot be responsible for the fate of your command.

Respectfully,

N. B. Forrest
Major-General Commanding⁵⁷

Major Bradford, wishing to conceal the death of Major Booth, replied to General

Forrest's demand in the following manner:

Headquarters U.S. Forces,
Fort Pillow, Tenn., April 12, 1864

Major General N. B. Forrest,
Commanding Confederate Cavalry:

General: Yours of this instant is received, and in reply I have to ask one hour for consultation and consideration with my officers and the officers of the gun-boat. In the meantime no preparations to be made on either side.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant.

L. F. Booth
Major, Commanding U.S. Forces⁵⁸

During the exchange of these two communiqués, Confederate scouts observed a steamer approaching the fort on the Mississippi River. They notified General Forrest of the approaching steamer, which they observed was loaded with Federal reinforcements headed for the landing behind Fort Pillow. General Forrest immediately rode over to the river to see for himself, and he witnessed an approaching steamer that did not seem to acknowledge the flag of truce, as it did not veer to the Arkansas shore while negotiations were underway. Fearing the steamer did not understand a flag of truce was in effect, General Forrest sent two hundred men from McCulloch's brigade to a position under the bluff, along the riverbank, to prevent any landing of reinforcements. He also sent men from Barteau's regiment of Bell's brigade to take a position near the mouth of Cold

⁵⁷*O.R.*, Vol. 32, Series I, Part I, 596.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*

Creek to prevent a landing of Federal troops there. The Confederate soldiers had orders to fire into the steamer if any effort to make a landing were to occur.⁵⁹

This movement of Confederate troops under the flag of truce has caused much controversy since the day of the battle. Union-friendly interpretations of this troop movement accuse General Forrest of taking advantage of the flag of truce to gain advantageous locations for assaulting the fort. Adjutant Leaming reported:

During the cessation of firing on both sides in consequence of the flag of truce offered by the enemy, and while the attention of both officers and men were naturally attracted to the south end of the fort, where the communications were being received and answered, Forrest had resorted to means the most foul and infamous ever adopted in the most barbarous ages of the world for the accomplishment of his design. Here he took occasion to move his troops partially under cover of a ravine and thick underbrush into the very position he had been fighting to obtain throughout the entire engagement up to 3:30 p.m.⁶⁰

Confederate accounts of this troop movement claim that these positions along the river were already under Confederate control and that the ravine Adjutant Leaming claims the Confederates occupied under the flag of truce was indeed already occupied. In the Confederate view, the movement of troops to the banks of the Mississippi River and Cold Creek was made to prevent a Union break of the truce by landing troops behind the fort. The later testimony of Union Brigadier General George F. Shepley supports the Confederate claim that the Union steamer *Olive Branch*, with two batteries of the Seventeenth Corps and a detachment of artillerists on board was not notified of the truce and was ordered to procure ammunition to aid the garrison at Fort Pillow:

The *Olive Branch* kept on, to report to the gunboat at the station. An officer came off from the gunboat [*New Era*] in a smaller boat and said he did not want any boat to stop; ordered us to go to Cairo and tell Captain ----- to send him immediately four hundred rounds of ammunition. There was no firing at the fort

⁵⁹Wyeth, 319-320; Wills, 183.

⁶⁰*O.R.*, Vol. 32, Series I, Part I, 561

at this time. The Union flag was flying, and after we had passed the fort we could see a flag of truce outside the fortifications. No signal of any kind was made to the boat from the fort or from the shore. No intimation was given us from the gunboat which had the right to order a steamer of this description, other than the order to proceed to Cairo and send down the ammunition.⁶¹

Seeking to prevent a possible Union landing, General Forrest refused Major Bradford's request for an hour of consultation and delivered the following message himself:

Headquarters Forrest's Cavalry
Before Fort Pillow, April 12, 1864

Major L. F. Booth,
Commanding U. S. Forces, Fort Pillow:

Sir: I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of your note, asking one hour to consider my demand for your surrender. Your request cannot be granted. I will allow you twenty minutes from the receipt of this note for consideration: if at the expiration of that time the fort is not surrendered, I shall assault it. I do not demand the surrender of the gun boat.

Very Respectfully,
N. B. Forrest
Major-General⁶²

For several reasons, the officers present inside the fort decided unanimously to reject General Forrest's request for surrender. Adjutant Leaming wrote and delivered the following message to General Forrest: "General---I will not surrender. Very respectfully, your obedient servant. L. F. Booth, Commanding U. S. Forces, Fort Pillow."⁶³ Evidence gathered after the war helps explain why the officers decided not to surrender in the face of certain defeat. Captain Marshall, commander of the Union gunboat *New Era*, testified: "We (Major Bradford and Captain Marshall) had agreed on a signal that if they (Bradford's Troops) had to leave the fort they would drop down under

⁶¹Sworn testimony of General George F. Shepley to the Committee on the Conduct of War, cited in Wyeth, 587.

⁶²O.R., Vol. 32, Series I, Part I, 560.

⁶³Fuchs, *An Unerring Fire*, 57.

the bank, and I was to give the rebels canister.”⁶⁴ The notion that the troops could retreat under cover of the *New Era*, along with six cases of ammunition and 275 guns stored near the riverbank for use during the retreat, gave the Union garrison at Fort Pillow a false sense of security.

Debate also exists over whether Major Bradford distributed alcohol to his troops during the truce negotiations—although no evidence exists that any of the soldiers were intoxicated--in order to boost his men’s morale. Confederate accounts of the battle describe the black troops inside the fort taunting them during the negotiations and making lewd gestures. A report from a Confederate soldier present at the battle claimed, “The enemy announced their determination not to surrender and were accordingly defiant and insolent in their demeanor. They ridiculed taking the fort, and intimated that the last man would die before surrendering.”⁶⁵ These exchanges greatly angered the Confederates, who already harbored resentment against the Fort Pillow garrison, as it consisted of former slaves and Tennessee Unionists.⁶⁶ Significantly, General Forrest’s men had never before faced black troops.

Satisfied that the negotiations were over, General Forrest ordered his bugler to sound the charge, and Forrest’s men attacked amidst a deafening noise of musket fire and rebel yells. Confederate troops scaled the ravine outside the fort, climbing through standing mud and water. Their sharpshooters made every effort to hit each Union soldier who emerged over the parapet to fire down on the advancing troops. When the storming

⁶⁴Wyeth, 323; *Rebellion Record*, Vol. 8, 55.

⁶⁵Cimprich and Mainfort, 293-306, 301.

⁶⁶Lufkin, “Not Heard From,” 133-151, 144.

Confederates reached the top of the ravine, they were met with a volley of grapeshot from the Union line. This inflicted damage on the first wave of Confederate assailants, but before the Union troops could reload, a wave of Confederates swept into the fort and unloaded their muskets and six-shooters into the nearest Union troops. After the Confederates had breached the fort's walls, Major Bradford looked to the Mississippi River to make sure the *New Era* was in place to cover his retreating troops. Much to his dismay, the ceaseless firing of the *New Era* during the day had rendered its guns useless, and she had been forced to sail upriver. Panicking, Major Bradford yelled, "Boys, save your lives...It is of no use anymore!"⁶⁷ Lieutenant Peter Bischoff, ranking officer of the Sixth U.S. Heavy Artillery, stood next to Major Bradford at the fort's flagpole, where he kept the flag raised and urged his black troops to keep fighting. Some followed his orders and continued fighting; others fled toward the river according to the original plan. Captain Andersen's regiment met these unfortunate souls at the bank of the river and fired a volley into the retreating troops. The Union soldiers then fled in the direction of Cold Creek, only to be met by Barteau's regiment, which also fired into the panic-stricken men. From here the Union troops either jumped into the river and attempted to swim to safety, only to drown or be shot by Confederate sharpshooters, or fled back toward the fort that they had just abandoned. All of these events occurred within a span of twenty to thirty minutes.⁶⁸

Confederate soldiers, confused by the surrender of some Union soldiers and the fierce resistance of others, shot scores of Union troops, black and white, who were

⁶⁷ *O.R.*, Vol. 32, Series I, Part I, 566.

⁶⁸ *O.R.*, Vol. 32, Series I, Part I, 566-568.

frantically running about in a scene of mass chaos. Many eyewitness testimonies given after the battle stated that Confederates gunned down Union troops who were begging for mercy at the hands of their captors. Numerous troops were shot while actively resisting, while many others were gunned down after making attempts to surrender. General Forrest ordered a cease-fire when he witnessed his men taking the Union flag flying inside the fort. His officers tried to enforce this order, but some Confederates continued the slaughter. General Chalmers arrested one soldier whom he witnessed shooting an unarmed, unresisting Union soldier. General Forrest's account of the battle paints an atrocious scene: "The River was dyed with the blood of the slaughtered for 200 yards."⁶⁹

When the shooting was over, between 277 to 297 Union troops had lost their lives, or from 47% to 49% of the total garrison (exact figures are not available). The percentage of troops killed in action was much higher than most Civil War battles. In addition to this high overall casualty rate, the casualty rate of black Union soldiers at the fort was nearly twice that of white Union soldiers. One hundred and ninety-five of those killed were African-American, 64% of the black forces at Fort Pillow, a statistic that would forever shroud this battle in controversy.⁷⁰ Confederate losses numbered 14 killed and 86 wounded.

Colonel McCulloch ordered the surviving Union troops to bury their dead in a mass grave near the fort. While this work commenced, Captain Anderson took a Union prisoner of war, Captain John T. Young of the Twenty-Fourth Missouri Infantry, to deliver a message from General Forrest to Captain Marshall of the *New Era*:

⁶⁹ *O.R.*, Vol. 32, Series I, Part I, 610.

⁷⁰ Cimprich and Mainfort, 837.

Captain Marshall, Commanding Gunboat No. 7, United States Navy:

Sir: My aide-de-camp, Captain Charles W. Anderson, is fully authorized to negotiate with you for the delivery of the wounded of the garrison at this place on board your vessel.

I am, very respectfully yours, etc.
N. B. Forrest, Major-General⁷¹

Not until the morning of April 13 would the Union gunboat *Silver Cloud* accept this offer and landed at the fort to retrieve the wounded Union soldiers. Acting Master William Ferguson landed his vessel at 8 a.m. and loaded all the wounded, white and black, onto his boat. He also hailed the *Platte Valley* to assist him in this effort. By 4 p.m. the wounded had boarded the ships, and they set off for a Union hospital at Cairo, Illinois. The Confederates finished gathering their bounty of ammunition, horses, and firearms at the fort and burned the remaining barracks and buildings.⁷²

Aftermath of the Battle: “Remember Fort Pillow”

After the smoke had cleared at Fort Pillow, two versions of what actually occurred there emerged. One version of the events, espoused mostly by northerners, accused General Forrest and his men of perpetrating an intentional massacre of Union troops, particularly African American troops. The other version, which circulated throughout the South, insisted that Forrest and his men fought a fair fight and that the Union’s botched plan of retreat was to blame for the large number of casualties. Both sides of this argument are bitterly argued to this day, although most modern interpretations of the battle agree that some of the Confederates carried out extralegal

⁷¹Wyeth, 330.

⁷²*O.R.*, Vol. 32, Series I, Part I, 598.

violence at Fort Pillow.⁷³

Almost immediately after the battle, stories of Confederate atrocities began to circulate among Union soldiers and in northern newspapers. Survivors interviewed in the hospital at Cairo gave numerous accounts of the events that had transpired. The accusations included the Confederates showing no quarter to African-American troops, shooting down Union soldiers after they had surrendered, burying wounded Union soldiers alive, and torturing and burning African-American troops.

Among northern newspapers, the *New York Evening Post* and the *New York Times* and led the way in calling for outright retaliation for the Confederate massacre at Fort Pillow. The *Post* on April 15, 1864 reported the battle in gory terms:

Enraged by the stubborn resistance offered to them by its heroic defenders, when they were enabled to seize it at last by overwhelming numbers, they fell upon the victims without mercy or quarter. Our brave troops, white and black, were put to death in cold blood, tender women and little children were bayoneted; neither age nor sex were a protection against the bloodthirsty fury of these savages and out of a noble garrison of six hundred men scarcely one-third remain alive.⁷⁴

The following account of the battle ran in the April 24, 1864, issue of the *New York Times*:

No quarter was intended for them. The blacks and their officers were shot down, bayoneted and put to the sword in cold blood---the helpless victims of the perfidy by which they were overpowered, and of the savage, barbarous, brutal, devilish blood-thirstiness that burned in the hearts and impelled the arm of their victors reveling in their fraudulently gotten victory.⁷⁵

In Washington, D.C., such accounts immediately prompted Radical Republicans

⁷³ Cimprich and Mainfort, "The Fort Pillow Massacre: A Statistical Note," 830, 833; Cimprich, *Fort Pillow, A Civil War Massacre*.

⁷⁴*New York Evening Post*, 15 April 1864.

⁷⁵Fuchs, *An Unerring Fire*, 84; *New York Times*, 24 April 1864.

to take the Senate floor and demand an explanation. On April 18, 1864, the Joint Committee on the Conduct and Expenditures of the War decided to investigate the occurrences at Fort Pillow. Senator Benjamin F. Wade and Representative Daniel W. Gooch of Massachusetts, both Radical Republicans, headed the inquiry. They traveled to Cairo and Mound City, Illinois; Columbus, Kentucky; and Fort Pillow and Memphis to interview survivors and record their accounts of the tragedy, which northern newspapers had dubbed “The Fort Pillow Massacre.”⁷⁶

Dr. Charles Fitch, a Union surgeon present at the battle, gave his testimony on April 30, 1864. He claimed that when Union troops threw down their weapons and cried for quarter, none was shown: “...the Rebs paying no attention to their cries except to reply if you Damm scoundrels surrender, fall into line, there were over 20 who fell into one line, near the edge of the River, when there was a volley fired into them bringing them all down but two.” Also according to Fitch, after the battle was over, “some drunken Rebel soldiers came up and fired in among the Prisoners with their Revolvers, wounding some four or five.”⁷⁷

James R. Bingham, a clerk in the store at Fort Pillow, claimed that “the Federals threw down their arms in token of surrender, but...an indiscriminate massacre commenced.” He also claims he heard “officers say they would never recognize negroes as prisoners of war, but would kill them whenever taken.” Finally, when returning to the fort the next day, he said he saw “Lieutenant Ackerstrom nailed to a house, and supposed burned alive.” He also testified that the bodies of two African-American soldiers were

⁷⁶ Frisby, “Remember Fort Pillow,” 112.

⁷⁷ Cimprich, “Dr. Fitch’s Report,” 27-39, 36-37.

also present in the house, apparently nailed to the floor. Finally, he claimed to have “found a negro partially buried with his head out of the ground alive. I went for assistance and water for him...I cannot recount but a small part of the barbarities I saw on that fatal day, when hundreds of loyal soldiers were murdered in cold blood.”⁷⁸

According to accounts collected by Wade and Gooch, the Confederate soldiers targeted both African-American soldiers and native Tennesseans of the 13th Tennessee Cavalry. Daniel Stamps, a private in this regiment, reported that Confederate soldiers showed no quarter to their Unionist Tennessean counterparts or the African-American soldiers they fought beside. He heard one soldier yell, “Kill ‘em, kill ‘em; God damn ‘em; that’s Forrest’s orders, not to leave one alive!” Another called out, “Damn you, I have nothing for you fellows; you Tennesseans pretend to be men, and you fight side by side with niggers; I have nothing for you.” When one of Stamps’s comrades in the 13th Tennessee Cavalry begged for quarter, a Confederate soldier answered him, “God damn you, you fight with the niggers, and we will kill every last one of you!”⁷⁹

William Dickey of the 13th Tennessee Cavalry, Company B, testified that African-American troops were thrown in the river and shot while struggling to swim for safety. He claimed to have been “shot while I had my hands up begging for mercy.” Elias Falls, of the same company, testified that Union soldiers were fired upon while marching as prisoners of war. Testimonies from numerous members of the 13th Tennessee Cavalry corroborated these accusations, including reports from William Mays, James Taylor, William Walker, and others. Stamps gave perhaps the most chilling

⁷⁸*O.R.*, Vol. 32, Series I, Part I, 520-522.

⁷⁹Bruce Tap, “These Devils Are Not Fit to Live on God’s Earth,” *Civil War History* 42 (1996): 116-132, 123.

account: “They said they had orders from Forrest to show no quarter, but to ‘kill the last God damn one of [the fort’s defenders]’...I heard a rebel officer shout out an order....seeming crazy with rage that he had not been obeyed....I was myself also shot some two hours after I had surrendered.”⁸⁰

Along with nearly ninety sworn testimonies from soldiers, white and black, involved in the battle, the surgeons at Union hospitals offered their version of the events, judging from the wounded they received from the battle. Chief Surgeon Horace Wardner of the Mound City Hospital testified, “They were the worst butchered men I have ever seen...Nearly all were attacked after they had thrown down their arms, surrendered, and asked for quarter.”⁸¹

Finally, Wade and Gooch received testimony that Major Bradford, taken prisoner at the battle, was shot and killed on the march to Brownsville, Tennessee, with General Forrest’s regiment. W. R. McLagan, a recent Confederate conscript who had escaped from Forrest’s forces in Jackson, Tennessee, and made it to Memphis, gave the following account of the incident:

Five guards took Major Bradford out about fifty yards from the road. He seemed to understand what they were going to do with him. He asked for mercy, and said that he had fought them manfully, and wished to be treated as a prisoner of war. Three of the five guards shot him... They said that he was a Tennessean, and had joined the Yankee army, and they showed them no quarter. I think myself that the order for shooting Major Bradford was given by Colonel Duckworth.⁸²

Having ample evidence that a massacre did indeed occur at Fort Pillow on April 12, 1864, Wade and Gooch returned to Washington to report their findings to the Senate

⁸⁰*O.R.*, Vol. 32, Series I, Part I, 520-531.

⁸¹Frisby, 113.

⁸²*O.R.*, Vol. 32, Series I, Part I, 557.

and President Lincoln. While the congressmen had been interrogating survivors, President Lincoln had given a speech in Baltimore, where he responded to questions of the Union response to such events:

There seems to be some anxiety in the public mind whether the government is doing its duty to the colored soldier... We do not today know that a colored soldier...has been massacred... We fear it, believe it, I may say, but we do not know it. We are having the Fort Pillow affair thoroughly investigated... If there has been the massacre of three hundred there, or even the tenth part of three hundred, it will be conclusively proved; and being so proved, retribution shall surely come.⁸³

Lincoln never did order any retaliation for Fort Pillow, although he did suspend the prisoner exchange system in the aftermath of the battle, because Confederates would not exchange African-American soldiers.⁸⁴

Copies of Wade and Gooch's report for the Joint Committee on the Conduct and Expenditures of the War circulated throughout political circles in the North. This report contained some exaggerated descriptions of the battle, based on interviews with twenty-six army or navy officers, fifty enlisted men, and sixteen civilians.⁸⁵ The following excerpt appeared in the report:

Then followed a scene of cruelty and murder without a parallel in civilized warfare, which needed but the tomahawk and scalping-knife to exceed the worst atrocities ever committed by savages. The rebels commenced an indiscriminate slaughter, sparing neither age nor sex, white or black, soldier or civilian. The officers and men seemed to vie with each other in the devilish work; men, women, and even children, wherever found, were deliberately shot down, beaten, and hacked with sabers;... All around heard cries of "No quarter!" "No quarter!" "Kill the damned niggers; shoot them down!"... No cruelty which the most

⁸³Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 8 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953-1955), 7:301-303, as quoted in Frisby, 113.

⁸⁴ Frisby, 121.

⁸⁵John L. Jordan, "Was There a Massacre at Fort Pillow?" *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 6 (1947): 99-133, 101.

fiendish malignity could devise was omitted by these murderers.⁸⁶

Northern press coverage about the Battle of Fort Pillow portrayed General Forrest and his troops as sub-human perpetrators of vicious acts of violence against an innocent Union garrison. The Congressional report and newspaper stories, while based on fact, clearly aimed to convince the public that southern society and culture bred monsters capable of such acts. The desired end was to enrage abolitionists, politicians, and military men of the North so they would do whatever necessary to bring about Union victory and restructure southern society after the war with a radical plan of Reconstruction. Soldiers in the field responded to the Congressional report and the attention it brought to the atrocities committed at Fort Pillow. Some Union troops committed atrocities against Confederate soldiers in retaliation. “Remember Fort Pillow!” became a battle cry of Union soldiers throughout the South for the remainder of the war and then became a salvo for Radical Republicans during Reconstruction.⁸⁷

The Confederacy never acknowledged that anything untoward took place at Fort Pillow. Contemporary Confederate newspaper accounts described the battle as a great victory and argued that the garrison got what it deserved. After receiving General Forrest’s report on the battle and others in his West Tennessee campaign, Confederate President Jefferson Davis and Secretary of War James A. Seddon approved of General Forrest’s actions at Fort Pillow. On May 23, 1864, the Congress of the Confederate States of America adopted a resolution expressing its appreciation for Forrest and his

⁸⁶U.S. Government. House Reports, no. 65, 38th Congress, 1st Session, Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, *Fort Pillow Massacre*. Washington, D.C.: 1864.

⁸⁷Frisby, 118-119.

“brilliant and successful campaign” in Mississippi, Kentucky, and West Tennessee.⁸⁸

After the Battle of Fort Pillow, Forrest reported, “It is hoped that these facts will demonstrate to the Northern people that negro soldiers cannot cope with Southerners.”⁸⁹ Still, while he defended himself against accusations that a massacre had taken place at Fort Pillow, he also indicated that these accusations weighed heavily on him. He next fought against black troops at the Battle of Brice’s Crossroads in Mississippi. When some of the Union soldiers were captured, Forrest assured them that they would be safe in the hands of his officers.⁹⁰

General Forrest’s defenders argue that what occurred at Fort Pillow was a botched Union retreat that turned catastrophic when poorly trained soldiers received conflicting orders from their superior officers. In this Confederate version, the alleged drunken state of some of the Federal troops also played a significant role in their chaotic defense of the fort and subsequent retreat. Pro-Confederate interpretations of the battle often cite Forrest’s “superior strength and tactics” as the reason Fort Pillow fell so easily to the Confederate invaders, and, they contend, while some Federal soldiers may have been killed while trying to surrender, no intentional massacre occurred.⁹¹ Furthermore, Forrest’s defenders claim, the findings in the Congressional Report drafted by Wade and Gooch included large amounts of hearsay evidence that was intentionally exaggerated to further the Radical Republican plan for Reconstruction after the war. One historian notes

⁸⁸ Fuchs, *An Unerring Fire*, 75.

⁸⁹ *O.R.*, Vol. 32, Series I, Part I, 610.

⁹⁰ Cimprich and Mainfort, 837.

⁹¹ Maness, 287-315, 315.

that thirty-one of the people who testified in this document were not present at Fort Pillow on the day of the engagement.⁹² Wade and Gooch sought to convince Congress that southern society needed to be revolutionized, and the events that occurred at Fort Pillow gave them a scapegoat in Forrest, argue his defenders.⁹³

Until his death in 1877, Forrest never escaped the controversy associated with Fort Pillow, and historians today continue to debate the degree of his involvement in the carnage that took place that day in 1864.

Fort Pillow Historic Area

After the battle of April 12, 1864, the Fort Pillow site slowly sank into obscurity. Once the Civil War ended, the land reverted back to private owners for just over a century. Local residents in Lauderdale County farmed portions of the land, but the majority of it lay unused until the late 1960s when residents expressed an interest in creating a state park in their county. Hoping to increase tourism and provide facilities for outdoor recreation in Lauderdale County, in 1971 the Tennessee Department of Conservation acquired 1,628 acres along the Mississippi River at the Fort Pillow site. The Fort Pillow State Historic Area became a state park for historical interpretation and outdoor recreation. Before any serious work could be done to preserve and interpret the site, it needed to be placed on the National Register of Historic Places, which took place on April 11, 1974; later study raised its listing to national significance and the site is now classified as a National Historic Landmark.

⁹²Jordan, "Was There a Massacre at Fort Pillow?" 99-133, 101.

⁹³Ibid., 99-133, 132-133.

Federal support provided the means for archaeological investigations at the site. The Tennessee Department of Conservation, Division of Archaeology, received \$20,466.22 for excavations from July 15 through September 30, 1976. During this field session, archaeologists found artifacts related to the small Confederate fort constructed before General Gideon Pillow ordered a larger fort in July of 1861. The excavation also produced numerous artifacts, including bullets, glass and ceramic shards, and twelve alcoholic beverage vessels. Three of these vessels were patent medicine bottles for Dr. J. Hostetter's Stomach Bitters, a 94-proof tonic issued to Union troops as "an invigorant before dangerous battles." This is the only physical evidence that Union troops had access to alcohol products—but when the soldiers drank the elixirs is unknown.⁹⁴

Archaeological excavations continued during the next field session from August 1 to September 9, 1977. Archaeologists conducted an extensive metal detector survey of the park, attempting to locate campsites and other areas of wartime activity. They located the site of an 1866 memorial cemetery, where the bodies of troops killed in action during the battle were buried before being moved to the National Cemetery in Memphis a year later. Researchers also collected and archived additional artifacts, such as bullets, cooking utensils, and glass shards.⁹⁵ At the same time of the excavations, the state park service began work on an interpretive center, ranger station, and camping area, which brought the site to the status of a functioning state park.⁹⁶

The third and final phase of archaeological investigations ran from April 17 to

⁹⁴Mainfort, *Archaeological Investigations*, 2, 36-38.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, 77-88.

⁹⁶Author interview with N. Kent Moran, 30 June 2004, Memphis, Tenn. Moran served as a seasonal interpreter at the park from 1991-1996.

September 15, 1978. In November 1977, the federal Economic Development Administration awarded the state \$1,837,000 for implementing additional construction, including \$45,844.22 for more archaeological investigations and expanded research. During this field session, final artifacts were collected and archived.⁹⁷

Reconstruction of the fortification commenced in June 1979. The Tennessee Department of Conservation, Division of Archaeology, provided the plans for the reconstructed fort based on observations from field work conducted during the 1976-1978 field sessions. Modifications had to be made to the original fort's plans in order to make the reconstruction a longer-lasting structure, as the Civil War fort was only intended for temporary use. While rebuilding the fort, the construction team, following an erroneous map of the fort's location made by a consulting engineer, stopped recreating the southernmost end of the restoration forty feet short of where they should have ended. The team also destroyed portions of the original earthwork during a period when a full-time archaeologist was not on site.⁹⁸

Fort Pillow State Historic Area contains a rich and diverse history from its first Chickasaw inhabitants through the events of April 12, 1864. Early European explorers settled here, the nearby town of Fulton witnessed debates between Unionists and secessionists, the first naval engagement of the Civil War occurred upriver at Plum Point Bend, both the Confederacy and the Union used the site for defense of the strategically significant Mississippi River, and untold suffering took place here during a bloody

⁹⁷*Ibid.*, 132.

⁹⁸*Ibid.*, 191. The possibility exists that the reconstruction of the earthworks is inaccurate in another way. The earthworks may actually be taller than they were at the time of the battle, making them historically inaccurate. The slope behind the inner fort has also eroded, so the area inside the fort was larger at the time of the battle.

confrontation between Union and Confederate troops. Fort Pillow State Historic Area is a testament to the importance of preserving and telling the whole story of the Civil War and Reconstruction, even the parts that painfully expose that era's deep hostilities.

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