

FIRST KANSAS COLORED VOLUNTEERS: CONTRIBUTIONS OF
BLACK UNION SOLDIERS IN THE TRANS-MISSISSIPPI WEST

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Military History

by

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ABSTRACT

FIRST KANSAS COLORED VOLUNTEERS: CONTRIBUTIONS OF BLACK UNION SOLDIERS IN THE TRANS-MISSISSIPPI WEST, by MAJ Michael E. Carter, 128 pages.

Over one hundred and eighty thousand black men fought for the Union during America's Civil War. From infantrymen, to artillerist and cavalry soldiers, these soldiers combined to form one hundred and sixty-six Union regiments. On 29 October 1862 at Island Mound, Missouri, the First Kansas Colored Volunteers, an infantry regiment comprised mainly of blacks from Kansas and Missouri, became the first black regiment to experience combat during the Civil War. Their courage and outstanding performance in battle, as recorded, are unquestioned. What have been omitted from research thus far are their contributions to overall Union successes in the Trans-Mississippi West. Their accomplishments are remarkable, for they came in the face of extreme obstacles of prejudice and hatred. "No Quarter" was ever given and "No Quarter" was asked of the regiment's black soldiers. The contributions of the First Kansas Colored Volunteers, in conjunction with those of the many regiments they served along side of, resulted in a resounding Union victory in the Trans-Mississippi West.

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Figure 1. 6 August 1862 advertisement posted in Leavenworth's Daily Conservative..20

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

From the moment shells began falling on Fort Sumter in April of 1862, to the surrender of Confederate General Stand Waite in June 1865, black Americans played a pivotal role in the outcome of the Civil War. All told, some 180,000 black Americans served as Union soldiers from as far north as Maine to Florida and over to the western plains of Kansas. These soldiers gallantly fought for their country and for the principles of freedom and justice. We know much of their history. We are familiar with the courageous men of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Volunteer Regiment. Their assault of Battery Wagner, well chronicled in the movie *Glory*, introduced us to their bravery, dedication, and commitment to the principles of honor and freedom. Yet, their story has not been told in full. That story includes some one hundred sixty-six black regiments who fought to unite a nation. One such regiment came into existence in the western state of Kansas, far from the battles of Bull Run, Vicksburg and Gettysburg. This regiment of black soldiers participated in some of the fiercest fighting of the war, fighting loyal Confederate forces as well as groups of pro-slavery renegade bandits. They fought and defeated an intense and deeply divisive force of prejudice, a force of such magnitude it literally split the nation and threatened its very existence. Their accomplishments helped ensure Union control and ultimate victory in the Trans-Mississippi West. This is the history of a once relatively obscure group of soldiers known as the First Kansas Colored Volunteer Infantry Regiment.

Though overshadowed by operations in the east, the Trans-Mississippi West greatly influenced the outcome of the Civil War. From the majestic mountains of the

Rocky Mountain and Sierra Nevada ranges, the Union received the lead and cooper used in making weapons and ammunition, and gold to help finance the war. Louisiana provided the Confederacy cotton for sale to international markets through Mexico. Texas not only fueled a large portion of the cotton industry, but also supplied Southern forces in the east with cattle. Throughout the entire region, from the Gulf States to North Dakota, Union soldiers battled their Confederate counterparts for resources to sustain their armies. In addition to resources, the Trans-Mississippi West supplied both armies with soldiers who fought in both eastern and western theaters.

Of particular importance to both sides was the state of Missouri. A border state, Missouri contained substantial numbers of Unionist and Pro-Southerners during the summer of 1861. In June of that year, Governor Jackson politically divided Missouri by issuing a proclamation calling for fifty thousand of the state's militia to enter active service to protect pro-Southern Missourians from a Union invasion. As Wiley Britton explains in *Civil War on the Border*, "This proclamation of Governor Jackson threw down the gauntlet of open rebellion, and the Government was obliged to meet the issue or confess its weakness by abdicating its rightful authority."¹ Governor Jackson's action began the movement toward civil war within Missouri. Confederate and Union forces soon found themselves embroiled in battle within the state at Wilson's Creek and Pea Ridge.

For the Confederacy, Missouri was placed under the command of the Trans-Mississippi Department, established on 26 May 1862 by General Order No. 39.² In July 1862, President Lincoln placed General John Charles Fremont in command of the Department of the West, which included Missouri. The mission given to General Fremont

was to secure Missouri for the Union. Along with the mission, President Lincoln gave General Fremont carte blanche authority to do what was necessary to ensure Missouri's security.³ On 24 October 1864, President Lincoln advised Major General David Hunter to occupy and secure the towns of Sedalia and Rolla. President Lincoln wrote "From these two points, Sedalia and Rolla, and especially in judicious co-operation with Lane on the Kansas border, it would be so easy to concentrate and repel any army of the enemy returning on Missouri from the southwest, that it is not probable any such attempt to return will be made before or during the approaching cold weather."⁴ Federal authorities continued to stress the importance of Missouri when Major General McClellan, Commander of the U.S. Army, instructed the newly appointed Commander of the Department of Missouri

With respect to military operations, it is probable, from the best information in my possession, that the interest of the government will be best served by fortifying and holding in considerable strength Rolla, Sedalia, and other interior points, keeping strong patrols constantly moving from the terminal stations, and concentration the mass of the troops on or near the Mississippi, prepared for such ulterior operations as the public interests may demand.⁵

Thus Union commanders of the Trans-Mississippi West fought to maintain strategic control over Missouri. Likewise, Union soldiers in the west sought to exercise tactical control of Missouri by keeping Confederate forces in Arkansas. The hard fought battles to keep control of Missouri were fought by dedicated and courageous men from within the state, as well as soldiers from adjoining states and territories. Soldiers of the First Kansas Colored Volunteers were among the many that protected Missouri, and ultimately defeated the Confederacy in the west.

The First Kansas Colored was formed in August 1862, at a time when black men were not officially accepted into the Union Army. President's Lincoln's policy regarding

the arming of black troops at the time was equivocally clear: black men were not allowed to serve as armed soldiers in the Army. This message was definitive and had been communicated several times during the year to various political leaders and military generals who desired to raise Negro regiments. As an example, on 6 August 1862, Brigadier General C.P. Buckingham, Assistant Adjutant General writing on behalf of the War Department, informed the Governor of Wisconsin “The President declines to receive Indians or negroes as troops.”⁶ Though clearly articulated, President Lincoln’s policy was constantly challenged. Acting as Commander of the Department of the South, General David Hunter had gone as far as issuing a personal emancipation proclamation to slaves in his department. He had organized an entire regiment of black men and had the men drilling before Lincoln’s administration forced him to abandon his efforts. In Louisiana, three regiments of black soldiers originally raised to serve the Confederacy instead enlisted and served for Union General Benjamin Butler. These would be the first black troops mustered into the Union Army. New York, Pennsylvania, Michigan and others also requested permission to raise regiments of colored soldiers. All across the Union states, political leaders were advocating the use of African Americans as soldiers under arms. Kansas was no exception, and its political figure leading the charge was Senator James Henry Lane.

The First Kansas Colored was recruited under the direction of Senator Lane. Appointed Commissioner for Recruiting in the Department of Kansas by President Lincoln, Senator Lane commissioned Captain James Williams of the state’s Fifth Cavalry to recruit north of the Kansas River. Captain H.C. Seward, also from the Fifth Cavalry, was assigned recruiting duties in the south. The majority of Lane’s recruits were fugitive

slaves, mostly from the border state of Missouri. Other recruits were literally confiscated from Missouri's plantations, much to the chagrin of their slave owners. With the assistance of fellow avid abolitionist, Lane continually "displayed an easy disregard for the feelings and property rights of their 'neighbors' across the Missouri border. Not only were fugitive slaves encouraged to seek sanctuary in the free state of Kansas; the Jayhawkers took peculiar delight in expeditions of liberation into the slaveholding state lying conveniently along the eastern flank."⁷ Ethan Earle, a Leavenworth citizen and active abolitionist, made repeated trips across the Missouri River to emancipate slaves and recruit for the black regiment. In a memorandum book written in 1873, he describes his first trip:

The first lot of colored people which I got across the river numbered only 161 fourteen men, a boy aged 16, his sister aged 14 years. The owner of these missed them in the morning, went immediately to the river to take a steamer for Leavenworth, supposing they had gone there early in the morning. I had them provided with food, enlisted all the men, and got ready to get on a boat coming up that day, in the employment of the U.S. I hailed the steamer, it came to the shore and took my party on board. On this steamer we met the owner of these colored people, you can imagine their surprise and disappointment on seeing their Slaves transformed into United States soldiers. They had the satisfaction of seeing them landed in Leavenworth and marched to camp.⁸

Ethan Earle shortly thereafter was commissioned a Captain and became Commander, Company F of the First Kansas Colored Infantry Regiment.

Senator Lane made light of such recruiting tactics during a speech given in New York in June 1862. Addressing the city's Emancipation League, Lane received a hearty peal of laughter when he stated "Four thousand slaves have recently *emigrated* from Arkansas and Missouri into Kansas." To another round of laughter, Lane stated "I have aided two thousand five hundred slaves to emigrate this year (laughter) and it has not been a very good year for negroes either (laughter)."⁹

After only two months of training and drill, the unit saw its first combat action on 29 October 1862, at Island Mound, Missouri, and in the process, became the first black regiment to fight in the Civil War. The regiment fought once more in 1862. On 28 November, soldiers of the First Kansas Colored engaged rebel forces near Butler, MO. Though the troops fought these battles under the banner of the United States flag, they fought strictly as Kansas state militia. It was not until 13 January 1863, two weeks after the Emancipation Proclamation was announced, that the unit became the fourth black regiment mustered into the Union Army. Soldiers of the First Kansas Colored engaged rebel soldiers throughout the remainder of the year at locations such as Cabin Creek and Honey Springs, both in Indian Territory. In 1864, the soldiers advanced into Arkansas and fought at Prairie D' Ane, Poison Springs and Jenkins Ferry. On 13 December, 1864, the regiment was re-designated the Seventy-Ninth United States Colored Infantry Regiment.¹⁰ Activity in 1865 was limited to skirmishes fought within Arkansas. The regiment completed their service stationed at Pine Bluff, Arkansas on 1 October 1865 and was mustered out of service at Fort Leavenworth later that month.

For members of the First Kansas Colored, life as a Union soldier was difficult. The soldiers worked for \$10 per month, minus \$3 automatically withheld to pay for uniforms. This salary was \$3 below that received by fellow white soldiers, who also received their uniforms for free. For many soldiers, the salary fell short of that required to support their families. Further aggravating their financial outlook, black soldiers of the First Kansas Colored waited ten months before receiving their first paychecks. And while many of the men enlisted to escape the brutalities of slavery, the discrimination and hatred they encountered in the Army did not diminish, but in many ways intensified in

scope and magnitude. The hardships of battle, common to all soldiers, included for the black soldiers the added burden of racial hatred heaped upon them by Confederate forces. This intense hatred was no more evident than in the Confederate's treatment of black soldiers captured in battle. Instead of affording them the humanity entitled to prisoners of war (POW), rebel soldiers committed atrocious acts of violence against them. As disturbing as the issue of POW treatment was, more damaging was the understanding that Confederate soldiers often gave black units "no quarter", meaning black soldiers and their officers were murdered vice being taken prisoner.

The purpose of this research project is to identify the contributions of the First Kansas Colored Volunteers to Union success in the Trans-Mississippi West. In doing so, I will introduce into the literature of American History a chronicled history of the First Kansas Colored Volunteer Regiment. As of today, there has not been a single work published devoted entirely to the unit's unique history and contributions to the Union Army. A possible explanation for this omission may lie in the tumultuous political environment of the time. To address this climate, chapter two serves to illustrate the political and social context that existed in Kansas immediately prior to and during the Civil War. Political affiliations, especially in respect to slavery and the social climate of Kansas created an environment conducive to the creation of a black regiment. It is equally important to discuss the political personalities of the era, for they literally created and sustained the driving forces that necessitated the enlistment of black soldiers into the Union. Chapter three describes the formation of the First Kansas Colored Volunteers. It highlights the efforts recruiters made in enlisting black citizens and will describe where the pool of available recruits came from. In chapter four, the partially formed regiment

takes to the field and participates in the first military engagement of a black unit in the Civil War. In this chapter, the unit is mustered in at Fort Scott, Kansas and eventually makes its way through Baxter Springs, Kansas to Fort Gibson, Indian Territory. Chapter five focuses on the regiment's actions in Arkansas, to include their contributions during the Camden Expedition. In chapter six, the black soldiers return to Indian Territory where they are gainfully employed at Fort Smith, Arkansas and Fort Gibson. The regiment ended its service in Little Rock where it was mustered out of the United States Army in 1865.

To provide the reader a clear picture of Kansas from 1861 to 1865, mention must also be given to the following key congressional mandates that helped shape the makeup of the United States and set in motion secession forces. The Missouri Compromise of 1820, by designating Missouri a slave state, maintained the balance of slave versus free-states at twelve each. It also designated territory settled west and north of Missouri free from the institution of slavery. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 created the Kansas and Nebraska Territories. This act repealed the legitimacy of the Missouri Compromise by allowing citizens of both territories the authority to decide their territory's slave orientation autonomously. These acts which existed prior to the formation of the First Kansas Colored Volunteers, molded the nation and helped develop the divisive precursors to the Civil War. During the war, two additional acts helped widen the divide between North and South. The First Confiscation Act of 1861 declared, in effect, that captured slaves from Confederate states should be confiscated by order of the President of the United States. The Second Confiscation Act of 1862 declared free all slaves belonging to individuals found guilty of treason (those in support of the rebellion). These

federal acts formed the foundations of deep hatred and intense mistrust between citizens of proslavery states like Missouri and those of free-states such as Kansas.

It was on 29 January 1861 that Kansas gained statehood. The majority of its settlers lived in the eastern third of the state along the Missouri and Kansas Rivers. Numerous Indian Nations roamed Kansas and Indian Territory (presently Oklahoma) with minimal contact with early white settlers. In 1861, there were only 10 towns with more than 500 residents.¹¹ Leavenworth, located in the northeastern portion of the state was the largest town, with a population of approximately 5,000 citizens.¹² Politically, Kansas was a state in transition. With the advent of statehood, citizens replaced the territorial government with representatives of both Republican and Democratic parties. Political parties were generally aligned with respect to slavery; proslavery advocates sided with Democrats, while free-state supporters aligned themselves with Republicans. The Free State Party was further divided in half. Governor Charles Robinson represented the party's conservative members. Governor Robinson gained local prominence during the 1850s by opposing Missourians bent on seeing Kansas admitted into the Union as a proslavery state. In 1855, he helped Kansas overcome fraudulent election results during the establishment of the first Kansas Territorial Government. It was Robinson who "following the Bogus Elections of 1855, in which the Missourians invaded Kansas and stuffed the ballot boxes to gain control of the first territorial legislature, sent for the famous Sharps rifles and helped organize the 'Topeka Movement' to make Kansas a Free State."¹³ James Lane, leader of the radical Republican faction, opposed Governor Robinson. Senator Lane, a Colonel during the Mexican-American War, established himself by protecting Kansas Territory from Missouri's "Border

Ruffians”(Bushwhackers), proslavery guerilla forces bent on the destruction of anti-slave Kansas. Many citizens credited Lane with saving the state from Confederate General Price, whose forces threatened Southern Kansas in September 1861, before turning back south into Arkansas. Both were men of extreme influence in Kansas, and both had large followings. Due mainly to a majority Free State Party population and Lincoln’s recent Presidential victory, Kansas Republicans held an overwhelming advantage in 1861. The Senate race of 1861 fell to the state’s Republican Party, and Governor Robinson and his adversary Lane met head on. In a hotly contested legislative session held in Topeka, James Lane and his radical Free State supporters defeated Governor Robinson for the southern Senate seat. Throughout the next several years, Lane and Robinson wrestled for control of Kansas, politically and militarily. Both had aspirations of achieving military fame which they felt was the missing element necessary in propelling them into the national political spotlight. The lost Senatorial bid for Governor Robinson proved his political undoing, and Senator James Lane would maintain political control over Kansas for the remainder of the Civil War.

In 1861, half of Kansas’ militia was serving the Union Army throughout the Trans-Mississippi area. Its remaining troops were thought inadequate in numbers to defend the state. Acting as Commissioner of Recruiting for the Department of Kansas, Senator Lane proposed to raise four additional regiments to help protect his citizens from guerillas and Confederate troops. In the summer of 1862, Senator Lane called Kansas’ citizens, including its black population, to volunteer for military service. Regarding this latter group, Lane’s recruiting tactics, well renowned throughout the area, were less than conventional. With the help of fellow radical Republicans such as James Montgomery,

future leader of the Second South Carolina Colored Volunteer Regiment, and Charles Jennison, Commander of the Seventh Kansas Cavalry Volunteers, Lane repeatedly raided Missouri plantations to acquire additional “volunteer” black men for military service. To this end, Lane referred to Southern slaves as contraband and believed “confiscation [of contrabands] must follow treason as thunder follows the lightning’s flash.”¹⁴ Tensions between residents of the two states escalated as guerillas crossed back and forth across the border, murdering citizens and destroying their towns. Bushwhackers from Missouri routinely crossed the Missouri River to pillage and lay siege to Kansas towns. Jayhawkers, Kansans engaged in guerilla fighting, rallied in defense of their territory and plundered towns in Missouri. Overall, Kansas citizens generally approved of Lane’s tactics and most considered him a local savior.

Though generally opposed to the institution of slavery, public sentiment in Kansas towards blacks was nonetheless discriminatory. Many felt blacks were not intelligent or disciplined enough to soldier and would crumble in the face of battlefield stress. Others simply refused, out of prejudice, to give the black soldier an opportunity to come to the aid of their country. In Fort Scott, Kansas, public sentiment echoed these thoughts as recorded in the Fort Scott Bulletin:

While white men are so ready to fight for their country, why will abolitionist continue to insult our brave soldiers by their efforts to place them side by side with Negroes. If slaves of rebel masters can be used to build roads or dig entrenchments, we say alright, go ahead; but we will never agree to their being armed and employed as soldiers.¹⁵

These negative attitudes coursing throughout citizens of Kansas and northern states effectively kept blacks from participating as armed combatants. It wasn’t until the Union Army began to suffer heavy casualties that the Free states, Kansas included, began to

consider employing blacks for service in the Army. On 10 August 1861, Kansas regiments suffered heavy casualties at the Battle of Wilson's Creek, Missouri. In the fighting, two hundred and forty-eight out of eight hundred First Kansas soldiers were casualties. The Second Kansas Regiment suffered an additional seventy casualties.¹⁶ As a result, Kansas citizens deeply resented the loss of its white soldiers on the battlefield while its growing black population remained relatively unaffected by the brutalities of war. Many Kansas citizens shared the views of Senator Lane, who in addressing a public forum in Leavenworth, Kansas stated:

How about the nigger? Well, I have always believed that a descent (sic) white man was as good as any nigger. And the negroes are mistaken if they think white men can fight for them while they stay at home. We have opened the pathway. We don't threaten, but we have been saying you would fight, and if you won't fight, we will make you.¹⁷

During the same public meeting, General Blunt indicated "We have in Kansas at least negroes enough for two complete regiments." His question to the audience, "Is it policy to let these negroes remain idle, or shall we arm them?" was answered with a resounding "Arm them."¹⁸ It was within this tumultuous context that the First Kansas Colored Volunteer Regiment was formed.

¹Wiley Britton, *Civil War on the Border*, Vol II. (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1898),21.

² United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Washington Government Printing Office, 1880-1901, Series 1, vol 3, 713. Cited hereafter as *Official Records*

³ Curt Anders, *Henry Halleck's War: A Fresh Look at Lincoln's Controversial General-in-Chief* (Indian: Guild Press of Indiana, 1999).

⁴ *Official Records*, (1) 3:554.

⁵ *Ibid.*

- ⁶ Official Records, (3) 2:314.
- ⁷ Dudley T. Cornish, *The Sable Arm* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 70.
- ⁸ Captain Ethan Earle Memorandum Book, Kansas State Historical Society.17-18.
- ⁹ Leavenworth (Kansas) *Daily Conservative*, 12 June 1862.
- ¹⁰ Frederick H. Dyer, *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion* (Des Moines: Dyer Publishing Company, 1908), 1187.
- ¹¹ Albert Castel, *Civil War Kansas: Reaping the Whirlwind* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 8.
- ¹² Ibid., 8.
- ¹³ Ibid.,18.
- ¹⁴ Leavenworth *Daily Conservative*, 10 October 1861.
- ¹⁵ *Fort Scott* (Kansas) *Bulletin*, 26 July 1862.
- ¹⁶ Official Records, (1) 3:72.
- ¹⁷ Leavenworth *Daily Conservative*, 6 August 1862.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.

CHAPTER 2

FERTILE GROUND FOR CHANGE

For many reasons, the First Kansas Colored Infantry Regiment was destined to become the first unit to employ black soldiers against the South. This destiny was firmly rooted in time and place, for in 1862, Kansas possessed the conditions needed to establish and arm black soldiers. The first was a need for additional troops. In 1862, federal military obligations far exceeded the state's militia capabilities. The growing War of the Rebellion, combined with the ongoing border war with Missouri, demanded more soldiers than Kansas presently had. What gave Kansas the ability to respond to the growing need for volunteers was a large pool of black recruits. From Kansas and Arkansas, but mostly from Missouri's western counties, these recruits quickly filled the ranks of the regiment and were in the field within two months of volunteering. A third condition, one found lacking in many Northern states, was unwavering political support and leadership that challenged national sentiments and spurred its citizens into action. A fourth condition was public approval for arming blacks. Kansans, for utilitarian reasons, felt the time was right to place blacks into the ranks along with their white soldiers. Finally, Kansas needed federal government approval to officially form a regiment of black soldiers. Throughout 1862, many Union states tried to enlist blacks into their militias, yet it was Kansas that was the first to have its Negro soldiers fight the rebels. Within Kansas, there existed all the necessary ingredients for the successful establishment of a regiment of black soldiers.

In the months preceding hostilities at Fort Sumter, the Regular Army was severely undermanned. On 31 December 1861, "the strength of the U.S. Army stood at 16,367

officers and men, present and absent”¹ In January of 1862, militia rosters listed more than three million officers and men. Unfortunately all of these soldiers were not available to fill Union regiments. Of those listed, 350,729 belonged to Confederate states.

Determining accurate troop strength was further complicated because the majority of states possessed outdated rosters, the worst offender being the 1827 report from Delaware.² Unable to accurately determine the numbers of available troops, Union generals tried to anticipate how many soldiers they would need to fight the Confederacy. General in Chief of the U.S. Army, Brevet. Lieutenant General Winfield Scott initially estimated “he needed a land force of about twenty-five thousand regulars and sixty thousand three-year volunteers”³ These numbers proved drastically low in the face of early Confederate successes and the realization that war would not be quick. As casualty reports arrived from the field, Union officials recognized the need for more federal soldiers and volunteers to maintain the ranks of its depleted armies.

To provide these needed troops for the Union Army, and to reinforce state militias for self-protection, several northern states called for the establishment of black regiments. Throughout 1861 and 1862, these states sought permission from the War Department to raise regiments of black soldiers. On 30 October 1861, a request from Dr. Miller of Battle Creek, Michigan to Secretary of War Simon Cameron stated:

Dear Sir: Having learned that in your instructions to General Sherman you authorized the enrollment of colored person, I wish to solicit the privilege of raising from 5,000 to 10,000 freemen to report in sixty days to take any position that may be assigned us (sharpshooters preferred) ... We are all anxious to fight for the maintenance of the Union and the preservation of the principles promulgated by President Lincoln, and we are sure of success if allowed an opportunity.⁴

A similar request from New York stated “There is no doubt that a black regiment from this city could be put into the field in thirty days. Efficient and accomplished white officers are waiting to lead.”⁵ Similar letters from across the North flooded Secretary Cameron’s office. In the South, Major General David Hunter, Commanding General of the Department of the South, further forced the issue by actually establishing a regiment of black soldiers. Upon assumption of command, General Hunter realized his limited number of white troops could not adequately patrol his assigned area of Sea Island plantations. As Noah Trudeau states in *Like Men of War*, Hunter, “had little prospect of being sent reinforcements, but there was one source of manpower that he could tap: escaped slaves.”⁶ In April 1862, General Hunter began enlisting black recruits to fill at least one regiment. On 13 April, two days after his forces destroyed Fort Pulaski, General Hunter declared:

All persons of color lately held to involuntary service by the enemies of the United States in Fort Pulaski and on Cockspur Island, Georgia, are hereby confiscated and declared free, in conformity with law, and shall hereafter receive the fruits of their own labor.⁷

On 8 May, he furthered his declaration by declaring all slaves of Georgia, Florida and South Carolina free. As indicated by his 8 May 1862 correspondence to General Isaac Stevens, Commander of Beaufort, Port Royal Island, Hunter felt he had obtained permission from the Lincoln administration for his actions. In this letter to General Stevens he stated “I am authorized by the War Department to form the negroes into squads, companies, or otherwise, as I may deem most beneficial to the public service.”⁸ Such approval, however, never materialized and President Lincoln immediately annulled Hunter’s emancipation proclamation. Lacking approval and financial support from Washington, his experiment withered on the vine, and The First South Carolina

Volunteer Regiment was disbanded. In Louisiana, Union officials echoed the call for more troops and like General Hunter, General Benjamin Butler was forced to rely on the black population for recruits.

Major General Butler commanded the Union Army at New Orleans. Following his success at the Battle of Baton Rouge, he became concerned further Confederate advances south would threaten his forces. Though his forces held key positions across his front, his fortifications were not manned to hold in the face of heavy Confederate pressure. Looking to increase the size of his command, General Hunter requested reinforcements from Washington, “but they replied that they could not give me any, though they wrote that I must hold New Orleans at all cost.”⁹ General Butler differed from General Hunter in that initially, he was bitterly opposed to enlisting black men into his ranks. He felt so strongly on the issue, he forced the resignation of Brigadier General Phelps, an able leader, for his insistence on using black men as Union soldiers. Yet shortly after accepting Phelps’ resignation, General Hunter realized the only way to increase his numbers, and ward off potential Confederate advances, was to add black recruits to his regiments. General Butler, “anticipating a grave threat to New Orleans, decided on the basis of military necessity, that it was time to raise and arm some black regiments, with or without approval.”¹⁰ He then formed three regiments of black soldiers, many of which were members of the disbanded Louisiana Guards. These three units became the first colored regiments officially mustered into the U.S. Army, the last entering service on 24 November 1862.

Kansas politicians similarly concluded black soldiers were needed to help defend its borders. The ongoing border war between neighboring Missouri had been raging since

the creation of the Kansas Territory in 1854. From the outset, pro-slavery and free-soilers attempted in every way to establish a Kansas government amenable to their causes. Pro-slavers from Missouri feared an anti-slave oriented Kansas would negatively tip the congressional balance against them. Likewise, free-soil supporters of the North looked to exert control over the administration by introducing both Nebraska and Kansas into the Union as Free states. Members of the emerging Emigrant Aid Society, acting on positive reports from Charles Robinson's excursion through Kansas, were determined to finance the settlement of Northern abolitionists in the newly opened territory. The travelers, led by James Lane, eventually settled north of the Kansas River and established the town of Lawrence. During the inaugural territorial election, in an effort to counter these encroachments, citizens of Missouri crossed the border in throngs to stuff the ballot boxes with pro-slavery votes. So concerted was the scandalous effort, a follow-on investigation revealed over four thousand pro-slavery votes with a Kansas population of only a few hundred citizens. These bogus elections, however, were initially successful and resulted in the election of a proslavery Kansas Territorial government. To add support to the fledgling government, "Gangs of Missouri 'Border Ruffians' (also called bushwhackers), backed by a pro-Southern federal government, patrolled the roads and rivers of Kansas, harassing free-soilers, shielding their own and ensuring that the proslavery laws were obeyed."¹¹ Intense hatred over the issue of slavery resulted in continual raids and attacks against both states. Hundreds of border citizens lost their lives to Missouri bushwhackers who brought the pressures of proslavery to bear on the newly formed territory.

Adding to the complexity of the situation, Kansas regiments in 1862 were heavily involved in the Civil War, fighting most of their engagements outside state borders.

Kansas needed more troops to help defend itself against further bushwhacker attacks, especially those led by the infamous rebel William Quantrill. *The New York Times* reported one such attack on 10 September 1862:

Saturday night, Quantrill, with a force variously estimated at from 200 to 1,000, entered Olathe, Johnson County, Kansas. At last accounts, they still held the place. Several stores were robbed, the office of the Mirror newspaper demolished, and 50 recruits for Kansas regiments captured.¹²

An additional threat to Kansas was the existence of Confederate-aligned Indian tribes south of the border. Factions of Cherokees, Creeks and Seminoles, along with the Choctaw and Chickasaw tribes, positioned themselves within easy striking range of their neighbors to the north. With these threats in mind, on 7 September 1861, Governor Robinson issued a proclamation calling for Kansas citizens to enlist in the militia. His proclamation stated:

One half of the enrolled militia of the State have entered the United States service, leaving their families to the protection of those who remain. In view of these considerations it becomes the duty of every citizen of Kansas able to bear arms, to qualify himself for the duties of a soldier and to be in a condition to defend the National and State Governments from foes of every description.¹³

The call to arms not only referred to the state's white citizens, but was extended to its citizens of color. Senator Lane ran an advertisement in the 6 August 1862 edition of the *Leavenworth Daily Conservative* aimed at the city's black population. (figure 1)

Advertising for black recruits in Leavenworth, Kansas proved effective. The black population in eastern Kansas was rapidly expanding, and all along the state's border ex-slaves were looking to guarantee their basic right of freedom.

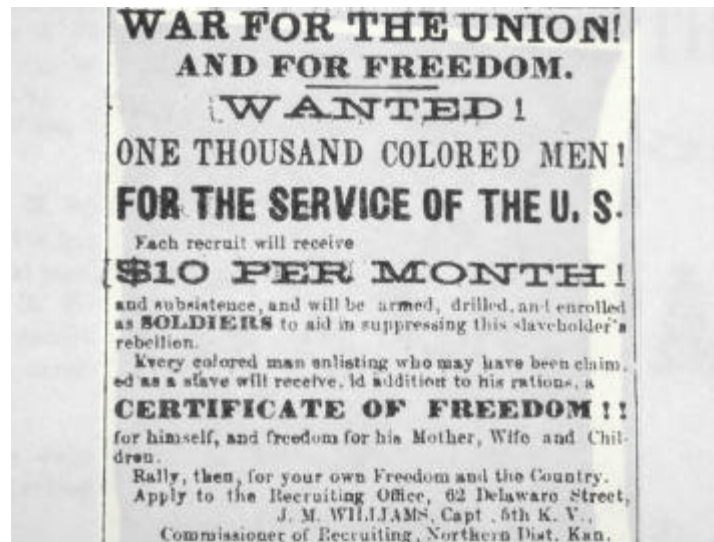


Figure 1. 6 August 1862 advertisement posted in Leavenworth's Daily Conservative

The pool of Negro recruits in Kansas and Missouri was large. While the black population in Kansas in 1860 was relatively small, the situation in neighboring Missouri was dramatically different. The 1860 Federal Census Slave Schedule for Missouri listed a total of 114,931 slaves. Of this number, approximately 15% lived within the 14 counties directly bordering Kansas. Platte, Clay, and Jackson counties, located in northwest Missouri adjacent to Leavenworth, contained more than 100,000 slaves alone. These counties were frequent targets of Jayhawk raids. Jayhawkers conducted repeated excursions across the Missouri River, raiding plantations of their slave populations and delivering them across the Kansas border to freedom. Senator Lane particularly was known to “emancipate” hundreds of slaves during his raids, using less than hospitable tactics. Writing for *Kansas History*, Richard Sheridan notes

There is evidence that not all of the black recruited into the regiment entered voluntarily. One Missourian wrote to President Lincoln, complaining that a party of some fifteen Kansans had entered Missouri to ‘recruit Negroes for

General Lane's Negro brigade.' They forcibly took possession of some twenty-five blacks and about forty horses.¹⁴

The numbers of slaves acquired during these raiding parties were so large, they became known as Lane's Black Brigades. In November 1861, the *Leavenworth Daily Conservative* reported "Lane's last Black Brigade, which reached Fort Scott a few days ago, numbered two hundred and fifty-six contrabands."¹⁵ This same Black Brigade received further attention a few days latter when the same paper published a report from Major Fisher, chaplain of the Kansas Fifth Regiment, who had accompanied Lane on his latest raid. Charged with delivering the brigade of black families to Fort Scott, Kansas, General Fisher reported:

Nothing of interest occurred until we crossed the Kansan line. Here we drew up our cavalry opposite the line of our train, and announced that we were in Kansas; at this men, women and children WERE FREE! – and such cheering you never heard. "Three times three" were given for Kansas and for Jim Lane the liberator.¹⁶

The political environment of early Kansas further paved the way for black soldiers in active service. In January of 1861, Kansas entered the Union a Free State. The Republican Party, largely comprised of abolitionists and Free-Soilers, dominated politics. Governor Charles Robinson and Senator James Lane, arguably the two most influential men in Kansas, were not only staunch Republicans, but leaders of that party's radical element. Though bitter rivals, constantly fighting for control of state politics and the militia, together they fostered positive sentiments towards arming Kansas' blacks. Of the two, Senator Lane emerged the state's leader and was regarded in Washington as the state's political spokesman.

More than any other person, Senator Lane contributed the most to establishing the First Kansas Colored Infantry Regiment. His prior military experience, combined with

political savvy and an infectious, charismatic spirit, proved an undefeatable combination. James Henry Lane started his meteoric rise to power on the frontlines in the Mexican War. As citizen of Indiana, “he volunteered as a private and raised a company of men, of which he was selected captain.”¹⁷ Through gallantry and bravery exhibited on the battlefield, Lane was again promoted, this time to Colonel. Returning home after the war, Indiana citizens voted him State Attorney General, and later Congressman of the Thirty-fourth district. As a Democrat, Lane rapidly rose to prominence within Congress. In Indiana, however, Lane’s opportunities to lead his established Party were limited. It was in the unsettled West that Lane saw endless political opportunities and he set his sights on the newly opened Kansas Territory. In Kansas, Lane changed political parties and strove to become the Republican Party leader in the fledging territorial government.

Congressman Lane set to work early, establishing himself an icon in the history of the Kansas Territory. Possessing a confident, pioneering spirit, Lane led northern settlers south through Iowa and Nebraska Territory, then south along the Missouri River. This initial group settled in the central plains and established the town of Lawrence. Lane would lead others along the path southward that became known as the “Lane Trail”. The newly arrived northern settlers, many whose journeys were funded by the Emigrant Aid Society, were greeted with expansive open lands possessing unheralded opportunity. They were also greeted by hundreds of pro-slavery squatters from Missouri and Arkansas. These cross-border neighbors, intent on spreading slavery westward, met the emigrants head on.

Senator Lane enjoyed a personal relationship with President Lincoln which he leveraged at every opportunity. When Lincoln entered Washington as the newly elected

president, Lane offered to protect him against rumored assassination threats from loyal Southerners. To provide this protection, Lane formed “The Frontier Guards”, a group of 120 Kansans that “posted themselves around the Capitol and the President, to protect him and the government buildings from harm”.¹⁸ His services ultimately refused, Lane nonetheless won Lincoln’s allegiance and gratification. Senator Lane used this influence to receive Lincoln’s tacit approval to launch his recruitment of blacks in the summer of 1862. Whereas General David Hunter’s personality and abrasive approach alienated his cause, Lane won the admiration and support of political elites in Washington, who quickly regarded him an upcoming political force to be reckoned with. Always in tune with Washington politics, Senator Lane must have recognized the shifting momentum in regards to slavery and the possible use of colored soldiers. A vacillating War Department and President were relenting from their earlier stance on not allowing blacks to fight. In the summer of 1862, President Lincoln promoted his policy of graduated emancipation to members of Congress. Change was not far off. Congressional approval of the president’s Emancipation Proclamation ushered in the day the administration would allow blacks to serve in the Union Army. The impetuous Lane however, did not wait for official permission to recruit black soldiers in Kansas, and Washington looked the other way.

The First Kansas Colored Regiment ultimately came into existence because of an overwhelming public acceptance of using blacks as soldiers. Kansas political leaders and the state’s general public, over time, believed that black soldiers would prove decisive against the Confederacy. These positive attitudes did, however, take some time to evolve, for initial sentiments towards blacks paralleled those found throughout the country. The main obstacle was the pervasive belief that black men were incapable of fighting as

soldiers. Other obstacles included the pro-slavery element who felt slaves belonged only on plantations in servitude. Many feared armed blacks would revolt, and possibly attack those who employed them in arms.

These sentiments reverberated throughout Kansas society, from its political leaders, to the general population. Senator Lane himself clearly displayed these prejudicial attitudes in a speech given to the Leavenworth Mercantile Library Association in November 1861. Referring to the black population, Lane stated “The Negroes are much more intelligent than I had ever supposed... They are the most affectionate, impulsive, domestic beings in the world... they take to drill as a child takes to its mother’s milk.”¹⁹ Regarding the public’s sentiments, Lane informed the Senate “that it required four months of propaganda to prepare the “anti-slavery” people of his state for the great innovation of armed Negroes and that the prejudice against the colored troops was so intense that they had to be kept out of sight and drilled in seclusion.”²⁰ It might surprise some to find public acceptance for arming Negroes amid these negative attitudes. Most likely, these attitudes stemmed from the fact Kansas citizens wholeheartedly agreed that liberating slaves adversely affected the Confederate’s ability to successfully wage war and ultimately, they were unwilling to allow its emancipated slaves to remain idle while white soldiers were dying at the hands of rebels. William Alt claims “Even the white public came to believe that blacks should not be exempt from the right to fight and die, but should bear the same burden of military service as white men.”²¹ These two reasons formed the foundation for public support for arming the blacks of Kansas.

The final obstacle to fielding a black regiment in Kansas was federal approval. From the outset of civil war through the beginning of 1862, President Lincoln strictly

forbade the practice of arming slaves. Cautious about politically alienating the Union border states of Missouri, Kentucky and Maryland, President Lincoln aimed to keep the “peculiar institution” off the discussion table. Allowing blacks to become soldiers he felt, “would turn 50,000 bayonets from the loyal border states against the North.”²² The acceptance of slavery in Southern states, however, came at a price. From the outset of war, Confederate forces derived great benefits from its black population with respect to the war effort. Whether through direct or indirect efforts, slavery in the South provided Confederate states a marked advantage over their northern opponents. Confederate forces openly used slaves to establish and fortify strongholds for its soldiers. Those remaining on plantations sustained the Southern army by producing food and war supplies. Many Northerners were also convinced Confederate forces were using blacks on the front line as soldiers. The cover of an early 1863 edition of *Harper's Weekly* pictured two rebel Negro pickets, armed and uniformed, as seen through the field glasses of a Union officer at Fredericksburg. The paper reported “It has long been known to military men that the insurgents affect no scruples about the employment of their slaves in any capacity in which they may be found useful.”²³ This report and numerous others fueled the debate in the north to enlist its black population in the service of the army as soldiers.

In the summer of 1862, President Lincoln and the War Department softened their stance and eventually reversed course. An amendment to the Militia Act and a Second Confiscation Act, both approved and signed on 17 July, paved the road for using blacks as soldiers. Specifically, the Second Confiscation Act authorized the president to “employ as many persons of African descent as he may deem necessary and proper for the suppression of this rebellion” and further to “organize and use them in such manner

as he may judge best for the public welfare.”²⁴ Senator Lane viewed the recent acts as implicit permission to raise a Kansas regiment of black soldiers. On 4 August, Lane opened a recruiting office in Leavenworth, Kansas. The following day he reported to Secretary of War Stanton that the “recruiting opens up beautifully. Good for four regiments of whites and two of blacks.”²⁵ On 6 August, Lane again corresponded to Stanton saying “I am receiving negroes under the late act of Congress. Is there any objection? Answer by telegraph. Soon have an army.”²⁶ On the same day, Senator Lane issued General Order No. 2 from his Office of Recruiting Commission, Department of Kansas. With this order referencing the recently passed Confiscation Act, Lane authorized his recruiting officers to receive blacks into the service of Kansas. Several weeks elapsed before Senator Lane received a reply from Washington. On 23 August, Secretary Stanton wrote:

In regard, however, to that portion of your communication which contemplates the raising of two regiments of persons of African descent, you are informed that regiments of persons of African descent can only be raised upon express and special authority of the President. He has not given authority to raise such troops in Kansas, and it is not comprehended in the authority issued to you. Such regiments cannot be accepted into the service.²⁷

The message from Stanton was not enough to deter Senator Lane from recruiting black men. He and his recruiters continued working to fill the ranks of the black regiments. The establishment of the First Kansas Colored Regiment was underway.

¹ United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Washington Government Printing Office, 1880-1901, Series 3, vol 1, 22. Cited hereafter as *Official Records*.

² Charles E. Heller and William A. Stofft, *America's First Battles: 1776-1965* (Lawrence: Kansas, Univeristy Press of Kansas), 83.

³ Ibid., 84.

⁴ Official Records, (3),1:609-610.

⁵ Ibid., 524.

⁶ Noah A. Trudeau, *Like Men of War* (Edison, New Jersey: Castle books, 2002), 14-15.

⁷ Official Records, (1)14:333.

⁸ Official Records, (3)1:30.

⁹ Trudeau, 25.

¹⁰ Hondon B. Hargrove, *Black Union Soldiers in the Civil War* (Jefferson, North Carolina:McFarland and Company, Inc,1916), 6.

¹⁰ Ibid., 5.

¹¹ Thomas Goodrich, *Black Flag: Guerrilla Warfare on the Western Border, 1861-1865*, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995), 7.

¹² *New York Times*; 10 September 1862.

¹³ Ibid., 15 September 1862.

¹⁴ Richard B. Sheridan, *From Slavery in Missouri to Freedom in Kansas: The Influx of Black Fugitives and Contrabands into Kansas, 1854-1865*, (Kansas History, Spring 1989), 44.

¹⁵ Leavenworth *Daily Conservative.*, 19 September 1861.

¹⁶ Ibid., 21 November 1861.

¹⁷ *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Kansas*, (Chicago: Goodspeed Publishing Company), 124.

¹⁸ Hargrove, 53.

¹⁹ Leavenworth *Daily Conservative*, 29 January 1862.

²⁰ Albert Castel, *Civil War Kansas: Reaping the Whirlwind* (Lawrence, Kansas: Kansas Heritage Press), 91.

²¹ William Alt and Betty L. Alt, *Black Soldiers, White Wars: Black Warriors from Antiquity to the Present* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishing), 37.

²² Ibid., 36.

²³ *Harpers Weekly: A Journal of Civilization*, 10 January 1863.

²⁴ Official Records, (3), 2:276.

²⁵ Ibid., 2:294.

²⁶ Ibid., 2:311.

²⁷ Official Records, (3), 1:445.

CHAPTER 3

RECRUITING OPENS UP BEAUTIFULLY: THE FORMATION AND TRAINING OF THE FIRST KANSAS COLORED VOLUNTEERS

With the opening of the Leavenworth recruiting office, efforts to fill the ranks of the First Kansas Colored Regiment began without delay. Senator Lane commissioned two cavalry soldiers from the Fifth Kansas Volunteers, Captains James Williams and Henry C. Seaman, as recruiting officers. Both men were pronounced abolitionists. Captain Williams was assigned recruiting duties north of the Kaw (Kansas) River, which included the towns Leavenworth, Lawrence, Topeka, Atchison and the areas within Wyandotte County. Williams selected Leavenworth as his recruiting headquarters. Captain Seaman on the other hand was charged with recruiting south of the Kansas River. Seaman's assignment as a recruiter was a special duty assignment, initially set for six months. His recruiting detachment was stationed at Fort Scott. He selected Mound City, located approximately one hundred miles due south of Leavenworth, for his base of recruiting operations.

The locations of these recruiting offices were strategic in nature, for they centered on those regions within Kansas that contained the majority of its black population. According to 1865 census data, of the 12,527 black citizens of Kansas, 2,455 lived in Leavenworth. Another 933 lived in Lawrence, 1504 lived in Wyandotte County while 432 lived in the northern city of Atchison. In the south, Mound City was centrally located between Fort Scott, which contained 359 blacks, and Osawatomie, which had a black population of 138. Mound City itself contained 270 of Kansas' black citizens. The

numbers represented a mixed black population, comprised mainly of freemen, fugitive slaves from Missouri's western counties and the northwest region of Arkansas, and black men living among the Indian Tribes of Kansas. Of the three groups, scholars have given the black population residing within Indian tribes minimal attention, yet they contributed greatly to the formation of the First Kansas Colored. It was common practice among the Creeks and Cherokees to own black slaves. Many slaves had accompanied the Indians during their displacement from the Southeast. Others had fled Missouri and Arkansas plantations, preferring to cast their lot among the more accepting Creeks, Cherokees and Seminoles. In early 1862, many of these slaves enlisted in the First Indian Home Guards. According to Wiley Britton, "Nearly all the negro men fit for the military service who had belonged to the Cherokees and Creeks joined the Indian regiments".¹ Joseph Wilson, author of the *Black Phalanx*, writes "In the Kansas Home Guard, comprising two regiments of Indians, were over 400 Negroes."²

These black soldiers, along with their Indian counterparts, were organized to protect the hundreds of Indian refugees in Kansas and to later escort them back to Indian Territory. They were also organized to protect Kansas against anticipated rebel incursions from Confederate forces and guerillas operating out of Missouri and Arkansas. At the inception of the First Kansas Colored, many of these black soldiers, as well as Indians, left the Indian Home Guards and enlisted with the newly formed black regiment. These recruits were battle tested. As part of the "Indian Expedition", they had participated in the Union's southern offensive into Indian Territory and helped capture Cherokee leader John Ross, providing a devastating blow to the Confederate Indian alliance. These soldiers infused the First Kansas Colored with combat experience not

only against Indian rebels, but also against bushwhackers and Confederate soldiers. Britton goes on to explain that there were also blacks residing with the Cherokee and Creeks that had recently escaped slavery from white slave owners. These blacks did not join the Indian Home Guards, but were periodically transported to Fort Scott where many of them enlisted into the colored regiments.

Free black citizens of Kansas also enthusiastically joined the ranks of the First Kansas Colored. Hargrove explains that at the inception of statehood, the majority of the state's black population was free.³ Many of these free citizens found the employment opportunity offered by military service enticing, and were some of the first volunteers to fill the ranks of the First Kansas Colored Regiment.

In addition to Captains Williams and Seaman, Senator Lane used others to help recruit his new black troops. In the summer of 1862, William Dominick Matthews, a prominent citizen of Leavenworth, provided Lane a number of blacks who enlisted in Company D of the First Kansas Colored. Of the senator's recruiting officers, Matthews' appointment as a Lieutenant was particularly significant, for like his recruits, Matthews was black. A freeman from birth, Matthews was active not only within the black community, but was a respected businessman among Leavenworth's prominent whites. After arriving in Leavenworth in 1856, William Matthews "opened the Waverly House, a boarding establishment on Main Street between Shawnee and Seneca Streets that soon became a station on the Underground Railroad."⁴ Active among the city's abolitionists, such as Daniel R. Anthony, brother of Susan B. Anthony, Matthews helped slaves from Missouri and Arkansas escape bondage and establish themselves citizens of Leavenworth and other Free-Soil cities.

Matthew's authority to recruit for the new regiment did not come easily. Shortly after being promised a company to command in exchange for his recruiting efforts, Matthews learned the regiment had been assembled without him. Coming to his aide, Captain Ethan Earle, recruiter and friend of Lane, informed the senator

Without the aid and influence of Mr. Matthews, he could not get the Colored men to enlist in Leavenworth. He authorized me to offer Mr. Matthews a Situation in the Quartermaster or Commissary departments. I replied that is of no use, Mr. Matthews must have the authority to raise a company and command it, or, neither he or I should go into it. After much talk and equivocation Mr. Mathews was permitted to raise a Company.⁵

By special order issued on 18 August 1862, Senator Lane gave Matthews permission "to raise one company of free Colored men for the First Kansas colored Volunteers to be officered by men of color."⁶ After months of successful recruiting, Senator Lane appointed William Matthews commander of these recruits, and consolidated the new soldiers into Company D. The formation of Company D was also unique in that Lieutenant Matthews was not the unit's only black officer. Also working within Company D were Lieutenants Henry Copeland and Patrick Minor, both black men. Many black recruits signed up to serve in Lieutenant Matthews' company. Between the months of August and November, Lieutenant Matthews recruited a company of 81 men⁷. Unfortunately for Matthews, the War Department was not as committed as Senator Lane in commissioning black officers. Without Congressional support, Lane's special order to Matthews became an empty promise. Denied their commission, Lieutenants Matthews, Copeland and Minor never mustered into the unit.

Richard J. Hinton, a respected journalist and correspondent for several northern newspapers, became another of Senator Lane's recruiters. A dedicated abolitionist and close associate of abolitionist John Brown, Hinton was intimately connected with

Leavenworth's anti-slavery movement. Richard Hinton arrived in Leavenworth in 1855, and from that time, worked tirelessly on behalf of freedmen and ex-slaves. He was well known for his work on the Underground Railroad, and his support for the city's black population must have endeared him to many potential recruits. In the summer of 1862, Senator Lane commissioned Hinton a First Lieutenant to recruit and drill black troops. Hinton would later become the regiment's adjutant, a position he held for one year. In 1863, he received a promotion to the rank of Captain, and took command of Company B, Second Kansas Colored Infantry.

Not all of the early recruits of the First Kansas Colored came from east of the Missouri River. Through a conversation with Benjamin Van Horn, a past acquaintance from Indiana, Senator Lane learned of a group of approximately one hundred blacks living with refugee Indians on the Sac and Fox Agency, located in southern Kansas. The Indians, loyal to the Union, had been forced from Indian Territory and were seeking refuge in southern Kansas, relying on government aid for sustenance. Van Horn explained the black slaves of these Indians did not receive government food allowances and thus were on very short rations, living off what the Indians could afford to spare. In recounting a conversation he had with Senator Lane and General Blunt in Leavenworth, Van Horn wrote:

I told them of these colored men with the Indians and asked them why they didn't send a man out there and enlist them, they had not learned that there were any colored men there, they were on their heads at once to have them enlisted, and they decided that it must be done quickly. They consulted together awhile then come back to me and said "See here, those men must be enlisted just as quick as possible, and with your knowledge of the situation you can do it quicker and make cleaner work of it than any other man, and you must do it."⁸

Benjamin Van Horn was a staunch Union supporter and had recently been elected representative of Kansas' Madison County. Possibly due to his recent election, he was not overly excited about the recruiting position offered by Senator Lane. He grudgingly accepted Lane's request and was mustered in as a recruiting lieutenant. Assigned a drill master and supplied with camp provisions and equipment, Van Horn traveled to the Indian Agency, and within twenty-five days, marched eighty new black recruits into Fort Scott, ready for Union service. Van Horn was later promoted to Captain, and his unit mustered in as Company I, the ninth company of the First Kansas Colored Regiment.

In addition to his commissioned recruiting officers, Senate Lane's campaign to raise a black regiment was greatly aided by individuals eager to see the black citizen's lot in life improve. In this regard, many of the states' abolitionists were influential in recruiting large numbers of blacks for military service. Perhaps the most famous self-appointed recruiter was Charles Henry Langston. Charles Langston was a black educator and politician from Ohio. A freeman born in Virginia, he relocated to Ohio after the death of his father, a wealthy, slave-owning white citizen of Louisa County. Along with his brother John, Charles attended Oberlin College. He was a leader in Ohio's anti-slavery movement and for a time served as executive secretary of the Ohio State Anti-Slavery Society⁹. Langston gained fame in Ohio largely for his role in the successful rescue of John Price, a fugitive slave kidnapped with the intent of returning him to bondage. For his participation in the rescue, Langston was arrested and sentenced to twenty days in prison. In the spring of 1859, while serving his sentence, he received a personal visit from abolitionist John Brown shortly before he led his fateful raid on Harpers Ferry. Many believe this encounter with Brown was instrumental in convincing Langston to move his

anti-slavery efforts to Kansas. In April of 1862, he relocated to Leavenworth and immediately began working for the betterment of the city's black population.

Upon his arrival in Leavenworth, Langston encouraged the city's black, able men to enlist in the Union Army. The 4 September 1862 edition of the *Leavenworth Daily Conservative* published a letter from Langston stating his desire to see "every able bodied colored man aiding to put down the slave holders rebellion. I therefore appeal to the loyal people of this district to provide for the necessities of their families while they are fighting the battles of their country" ¹⁰

Recruiting black soldiers in Kansas was often met with resistance. In the north, local law authorities jailed new recruits for insignificant infractions, many of which were fabrications of the truth. Recruiting officers too encountered substantial opposition. They received frequent harassment from local authorities who objected to their recruiting efforts. Captain Williams believed opposition to his recruiting efforts came from Kansans who either sympathized with the Confederate's cause, possessed an intolerant prejudice against blacks, believed the attempt to enlist colored soldiers would not win War Department approval or believed the Negro lacked the necessary qualifications to make efficient soldiers.¹¹ Irregardless of the origin of opposition, "Captain Williams, acting under the orders of his military superiors, felt that it was no part of his duty to take counsel of any or all of these classes" of Kansas citizens.¹² He continued his recruiting efforts in the face of this determined resistance. In the south, Captain Seaman encountered problems of his own. On one occasion, regular troops from Fort Leavenworth traveling the military road south to Fort Scott, camped near Mound City and clashed with his black recruits. The officers of these regular soldiers declared "it

would be a disgrace to wear the uniform of an American soldier if the Government was going to put it on the backs of a lot of niggers.”¹³

Resistance from the black population further complicated efforts to fill Senator Lane’s black regiment. Most black citizens were aware of the Confederate’s policy regarding their status as soldiers. They believed that if captured, they would not be granted the rights white prisoners of war were afforded. Perhaps even more foreboding was the possibility of being captured and returned to their previous slave owners. Additionally, many black citizens of Kansas were gainfully employed during the summer of 1862. These citizens may have been satisfied with their income and lifestyle, both of which were considerably better than that provided to them as slaves. A look at the 1862-1863 Leavenworth City Directory shows numerous black citizens employed as laborers, teamsters, and seamstresses. Samuel Jordan, Dudley Moorehead and George Peterson were business partners operating a black barber shop. Other more affluent black citizens were proprietors, like William Matthews, owner of the Waverly boarding house. Thus, as Thomas Goodrich points out, many ex-slaves were “understandably in no mood to exchange one form of bondage for another so soon, especially for one vastly more dangerous.”¹⁴ Charles Langston’s letter in the *Leavenworth Daily Conservative* as previously cited provides insight into another concern of the city’s black citizens. Langston wrote, “Many colored men whom I have asked to enlist, told me that they would enter the service at once, but that their daily labor provided their wives and children with daily bread, and as soon as they go into the army their families must suffer.”¹⁵

The aggressive and determined Senator Lane did not confine recruiting to within Kansas' borders. His political influence in Washington and his prior political career in the North provided opportunities for Senator Lane to recruit black citizens from Northern states. This action, consistent with Lane's flair for the dramatic, created much controversy. In the north, Lane's recruiting tactics negatively impacted the enlistment of white recruits, those men who refused to serve alongside Negroes. A recruiting officer of Pennsylvania put this complaint on paper in a letter written to the Adjutant General of the Army in August. In his letter, the disgruntled agent wrote:

Persons calling themselves recruiting officers for Genl James Lanes Colored Regiments are putting out hand bills and calling meetings of colored men offering the same inducements to enlist as are granted White soldiers. This is producing the worst effect on Enlistment of Whites."¹⁶

In an effort to curb Senator Lane's recruiting zeal, Secretary of War Stanton kindly reminded him "Officers in one State cannot recruit in any other, nor receive companies or squads of recruits from another State."¹⁷ Complaints poured into the Secretary of War's office from Missouri, as Lane's soldiers marched throughout the western counties liberating slaves and securing their passage to Kansas. Along with Lane's national recruiters, abolitionists throughout the North preached the message of enlisting blacks into the Army. Printed in newspapers throughout the country, their message touched on the lives of Kansas' black population and persuaded many to join blacks across the nation in fighting for slavery's demise. Great orators like Frederick Douglass infused black citizens with a sense of togetherness and righteousness of cause. The fight to end slavery reached beyond the border wars in the West. Black Kansans were able to join with blacks across the nation, fighting to end slavery forever.

Recruiting for the First Kansas Colored Regiment continued throughout the summer of 1862. On 21 August, Senator Lane issued General Order No. 5 which extended enlistments within the Department of Kansas until 10 September¹⁸ At the end the month, Senator Lane issued General Order No. 7 which designated assembly areas for those recruited. Section II of the order stated:

Those recruiting persons of African descent, will, on or before September Tenth Prox., report with the men enrolled at Camp Jim Lane, to be established at or near Wyandott Bridge, to be selected b Captains J.M. Williams and N.C. Seaman, under command of Captain J.M. Williams.”¹⁹

Camp Jim Lane was located approximately thirty miles south of Leavenworth. The recruits of Companies A and B, both of Leavenworth, arrived at Wyandotte on the second and third of September respectfully. Designated Company C, recruits from the northern part of the state initially assembled at Camp Atchison around 9 August. On 19 August, they marched to Leavenworth and joined the regiment at Camp Lane two days later. They reached Wyandott on 3 September. On 16 August, Captain Mathews’s recruits arrived at Camp Lane. They reached Wyandotte on 3 September. Company G arrived at Camp Wyandotte on 12 September.

As recruiting and training continued into the fall, Capt William’s recruits received a favorable assessment while encamped near Wyandott. Informing his readers of the newly formed First Kansas Colored, a *New York Times* correspondent reported on 22 September:

The regiment encamped at this point is progressing finely. There are seven nearly full companies upon the ground, and the aptitude of the men for acquiring the drill has already made their progress more than equal any body of white men so new to the service. Apart from this aptitude for acquiring the manual, the negroes are decidedly the easiest managed, most willing, and good-humored people it has been my fortune to see massed since this war began.”²⁰

According to the correspondent, life in camp was orderly and disciplined. Soldiers drilled every morning from 0830 to 1100 and in the afternoon from 1500 to 1730, followed by daily dress rehearsals. At the time of his report, he estimated about six hundred soldiers, with new recruits arriving daily.

Company E consisted of enlistments from the middle of the state, near Topeka and Lawrence. These recruits left Lawrence on 23 August and arrived in Mound City, Kansas three days later, a march of about seventy-five miles. Instead of joining the regiment at Camp Lane, Company E stayed in Mound City, where they drilled under the command of Captain Seaman. On 20 September, Company E departed Mound City for Fort Lincoln, Kansas.

The entire regiment consolidated at Fort Lincoln in the middle of October. Fort Lincoln was approximately eighty miles south of Fort Leavenworth, located on the Military Road between Leavenworth and Fort Scott. Recruits encamped near Wyandotte departed there on 7 October, and most arrived on 13 October. At Fort Lincoln, the troops continued drilling and recruiters continued their efforts at filling the regiment with black soldiers.

On 16 October, the regiment received a visit from Colonel N.P. Chipman, Chief of Staff, Department of Missouri. Colonel Chipman was impressed with his tour of the camp. His report to General Curtis, Commander Department of Missouri, on the disposition of the black regiment sang praises of their accomplishments. To the general, Colonel Chipman wrote:

Laying aside the question as to the policy or propriety of making soldiers of the Negroe and viewing them as machines of war, I must say that the inspection was highly satisfactory—They exhibit a proficiency in the manual and in the company

evolutions truly surprising and the best company is the one officered by black men...I know I have seen very many Regts longer in the service than these which would appear badly beside them.²¹

During the visit, Colonel Williams took the opportunity to discuss what would soon become a major issue for his regiment. Two month into their service for their country and not one soldier had been paid. Adding to the frustration was the Government's waffling conviction to using blacks as soldiers. This created great apprehension within the regiment as to the outcome of the commitment and hard work thus far invested in the practice of soldiering. Fearing the mounting distrust and frustration among his troops, Colonel Williams expressed his belief to Colonel Chapman that if the unit was not soon mustered, they would be disbanded.

Near the end of the month, orders for the First Kansas Colored arrived from Major Henning, Commander of Fort Scott. Captain Seaman was ordered to Island Mound, Missouri to breakup a band of Rebel bushwhackers firmly established in the area. On 27 October, Captain Seaman departed Fort Lincoln with a force of about two hundred and fifty soldiers of the First Kansas Colored. The force consisted of soldiers under his command along with soldiers belonging to Captain Williams, under the command of Major Richard Ward. It would be this group of soldiers, acting on orders from Fort Scott, which would be the first black unit to fight in the Civil War.

Recruitment for the black regiment progressed rapidly. Within sixty days, five hundred recruits had joined the ranks of the First Kansas Colored.²² Soon after their enlistments, First Kansas Colored Volunteers quickly found themselves in the midst of the border war between Kansas and its neighbor to the east. Arguable, the war waged across the Missouri/Kansas border had been raging since the opening of the Territory in

1855. When members of the First Kansas Colored marched from Fort Lincoln towards the Missouri border, they marched into an epic struggle that would occupy them for the remainder of the Civil War.

¹ Wiley Britton, *The Union Indian Brigade in the Civil War* (Kansas City:Franklin Hudson Publishing Company, 1922), 178-179.

² Joseph T. Wilson, *The Black Phalanx* (New York: De Capo Press, 1994),111.

³ Hondon B. Hargrove, *Black Union Soldiers in the Civil War* (Jefferson, North Carolina:McFarland and Company, Inc,1916), 52.

⁴ Roger D. Cunningham, “*Douglas’s Battery at Fort Leavenworth*” (Kansas History, Winter 2000-2001. Vol 23, no. 4), 204.

⁵ Captain Ethan Earle Memorandum Book, (Kansas State Historical Society), 18-19.

⁶ Cunningham, 204.

⁷ Ibid., 206.

⁸ Van Horn Manuscripts, (Kansas State Historical Society), 21.

⁹ Richard Sheridan, “*Charles Henry Langston and the African American Struggle in Kansas*” (Kansas History, Vol 22, Winter 1999/2000), 269.

¹⁰ Leavenworth *Daily Conservative*, 4 September 1862.

¹¹ W.S. Burke, *Official Military History of Kansas Regiments* (Leavenworth: Kansas: Kansas Heritage Press), 408.

¹² Ibid., 408.

¹³ *Linn County Republic*, 31 Jan 1902. J.H. Stearns

¹⁴ Thomas Goodrich, *Black Flag: Guerrilla Warfare on the Western Border, 1861-1865*, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995), 58.

¹⁵ Leavenworth *Daily Conservative*, 4 September 1862.

¹⁶ Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy and Leslie S. Rowland, *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1865*, Series II: The Black Military Experience (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 67.

¹⁷ United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Washington Government Printing Office, 1880-1901, Series 3, vol 2, 333.

¹⁸ Leavenworth *Daily Conservative*, 4 September 1862.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ *New York Times*, 12 Oct 1862.

²¹ Berlin, 71.

²² A. T. Andreas, *History of the State of Kansas* (Chicago, 1883), 200.

CHAPTER 4

WILL THEY FIGHT?

Captain H. C Seaman and Captain Richard G. Ward departed Fort Lincoln on Sunday 26 October 1862 with a force of two hundred and twenty-four members of the First Kansas Colored Regiment. Captain Seaman acted as overall commander. With him were sixty-four black soldiers from his detachment, a small contingent of cavalry from the Fifth Kansas Cavalry Volunteers, and one hundred sixty black troopers from Colonel Williams' detachment, under command of Company B Commander Captain Richard Ward. Captain Seaman's orders instructed him to march to Island Mound, Missouri to "break up a party of Rebel guerrillas reportedly operating along the Osage River, in Bates County, Missouri".¹ Island Mound was located in the Marais des Cygenes River. The island "was about three miles long and up to a mile wide in places. The river ran on the north side of the island, and the south side was bounded by a deep and muddy slough. The Interior of the island was comprised of dense thickets and swamps that were all but impenetrable, except to those very familiar with the area."² The command marched north to Mound City, Kansas, then east towards Camp Defiance and on to Dickey's Crossing on the Osage River where they arrived on Monday afternoon. They approached Island Mound from the north and upon their arrival, spotted a group of mounted soldiers who quickly disappeared in the direction of the island. In his official report Captain Ward stated:

Shortly after crossing the stream, we were made aware of the presence of the enemy in force by their scouts and by information from citizens, who stated the Cockrell, Campbell, Hancock, and Turman had concentrated their forces on Osage Island, and that their combined force amounted to some 700 or 800 men, all splendidly mounted.³

Many of these Southern soldiers were irregular Confederate troops, Partisan Rangers and State Guardsmen from Missouri and Arkansas. Instead of facing a few hastily-organized bushwhackers, the black soldiers now faced hundreds of battle-tested Confederate soldiers and notorious guerilla gangs.

The First Kansas Colored encamped approximately two miles north of the river at the house of a notorious rebel guerrilla named John Toothman who at the time was under guard at Fort Scott. As recorded by Chris Tabor, “The Toothman home was commandeered, and the farm’s split rail fences were torn down to erect a hasty barricade around the house. Pickets were placed out and someone ran up the flag of the United States over the makeshift defenses, which the African-American troops dubbed Fort Africa.”⁴ For the remainder of the day, rebel scouts and pickets tried to entice the black troops near the river’s edge while soldiers of the First Kansas Colored attempted to draw them off the island. Fighting on Tuesday remained light as both sides tried to determine their opposition’s strength and disposition. Based upon information received from local citizens, Captain Seaman and Captain Ward concluded their numbers were inadequate to mount an effective offensive against the enemy. That evening, they sent a runner to Fort Scott to request cavalry reinforcements from Post Commander Major Henning. A second runner was sent to Fort Lincoln, where the remainder of the First Kansas Colored remained encamped under command of Colonel Williams. A final runner was sent to Paola, Kansas to request the assistance of the recently mustered Twelfth Kansas Infantry Volunteers, commanded by Colonel Charles Adams. According to a correspondent writing for the *New York Times*, Captains Seaman and Ward planned to avoid a major engagement until reinforcements arrived. Captain Seaman requested Major Henning to

send his reinforcements south of the Osage River, to the rear of the enemy camp. Once the two forces were in place, Captain Seaman intended to attack the enemy stronghold simultaneously from the north and south.⁵

By Wednesday morning, Captain Seaman's black soldiers were running low on food. Along with Captain Thrasher and Lieutenant Huddleston, he assembled a group of fifty soldiers and departed camp on a foraging expedition. A diversionary force (under the command of Captains Armstrong and Crew) engaged the enemy to facilitate safe passage of Captain Seaman's force. This small force skirmished briefly with the rebels and recorded seven enemy casualties without sustaining a single loss. The fighting intensified as evening approached. During the dinner meal, rebel soldiers pressured the black pickets, drove them back towards camp and then withdrew. In response, Captain Seaman "threw out a small party of skirmishers to feel toward them and ascertain their force and retake our picket ground".⁶ This small force consisted of eight Cherokee blacks led by their leader and former master Cherokee John Six Killer. The force quickly disappeared over a mound and commenced firing on the enemy. As the skirmishing intensified, Lieutenant Gardner was ordered to assist with a small force of twenty men. Lieutenant Gardner's force rallied the skirmishers and pressed forward against the enemy some eight hundred yards, where they were forced to take cover. As the fighting continued, Captain Ward placed Captain Armstrong's force under arms and positioned them behind the mound Lieutenant Gardner had just assaulted. Captain Seaman placed the remaining troops in camp under arms, ordering them to prepare for immediate action. While the reinforcements were preparing for battle, time ran out on Lieutenant Gardner's stranded command. Rebel cavalry in overwhelming numbers (estimated at over one

hundred mounted soldiers) rushed Lieutenant Gardner's force which now comprised twenty-five men. Captain Ward watched as Gardner's force withdrew from their stronghold and retreated under attack. He observed:

The boys took the double-quick over the mound in order to gain a small ravine on the north side, but while they were on the north slope the enemy came upon them. Nothing dismayed, the little band turned upon their foes, and as their guns racked many a riderless [horse] swung off to one side. The enemy cried out to the men to surrender, but they told them never. I have witnessed some hard fights, but I never saw a braver sight than that handful of brave men fighting 117 men who were all around and in amongst them. Not one surrendered or gave up a weapon.⁷

Captain Armstrong and Captain Thrasher both entered the fight in force. Shortly thereafter, Lieutenants Minor and Dickerson leading the remaining black soldiers, outflanked the rebel cavalry and forced their hasty retreat. In an attempt to regain the momentum, rebel soldiers set the brush ablaze and tried to advance under cover of the intense smoke. Immediately the black troops were ordered to "Fix Bayonets, Charge", and through the smoke and blazing prairie fire, Captain Armstrong's troops charged and forced the enemy's final retreat. The satisfaction of the day clearly echoed in the words of Captain Ward: "They had tested the niggers and had received an answer to the often mooted question of 'will they fight'".⁸ Colonel Bill Turman, one of the Confederate leaders at Island Mound, commented a few days after the battle to residents of nearby Butler stating "the black devils fought like tigers, and that the white officers had got them so trained that not one would surrender."⁹

Quite surprisingly, this border engagement was won against a numerically superior force, against an enemy far more capable than the force initially believed to be in the area. One estimate numbered the rebel force between seven and eight hundred

soldiers. Another more conservative estimated reported the enemy at four to five hundred. This gave Confederate forces a worst case two to one advantage over the First Kansas Colored Regiment. In addition to being severely outnumbered, the First Kansas Colored fought a fully mounted opponent. Cavalry forces accompanying the black soldiers amounted to only a handful of mounted scouts. The Confederate forces, a combination of irregular groups from Missouri and Arkansas, were led by Colonel Jeremiah V. Cockrell, commander of a group of Missouri Partisan Rangers. These soldiers were usually well-armed and well-mounted men committed to the Confederate cause. They were combat veterans, most having recently participated in the August struggle at Lone Jack, Missouri. They lived as Southern citizens until called upon for military operations. The other rebel soldiers under Turman, Campbell and Hancock more than likely consisted of Missouri bushwhackers and Arkansas irregulars.

Of the requests for reinforcements, none arrived in time to participate in the fighting. Major Hennings ordered scout J.H. Stearns to Fort Lincoln “to take the rest of the recruits there—about 150 in number, all that could be spared from guard duty, and proceed back by way of Trading Post, on the north side of the river, and that a force of Ohio cavalry with a section of artillery would be sent along the south side”.¹⁰ Upon receiving the request for help, Colonel Williams immediately led his remaining soldiers towards the action, though unfortunately he arrived after the fighting ended. His small command pursued the rebel forces “ten or twelve miles down the river but without coming in sight of them again.”¹¹ The cavalry force intended to attack south of the Osage River also did not arrive during the skirmish, though it was reported the rebel force was

aware of their presence. Colonel Adams at Paola was unable to support the fighting, his infantry troops being spread thinly along the entire Kansas-Missouri border.

During the skirmish, the First Kansas Colored lost eight men killed and suffered eleven injured. Of those killed was Cherokee John Six Killer, who “fell with six wounds after shooting two men, bayoneting a third, and laying a fourth hors du combat with the butt of his gun”¹² The only officer killed was Captain Crew, who died during the rescue attempt of Lieutenant Gardner’s besieged force. Captain Crew died valiantly, fighting the rebels to the end and encouraging the black troops to never surrender. Also killed in the fighting were Corporal Joseph Talbot, Privates Thomas Lane, Marion Barber Allen Rhodes and Henry Gash, all of company F. One officer, Lieutenant Gardner of company F was wounded. The black wounded soldiers included Privates Thomas Knight, George Dudley, and Lazarus Johnston, all of company F. From Captain Seaman’s detachment, wounded soldiers included Sergeant Edward Lowery, Sergeant Shelley Banning, Corporal Andy Hytower, Corporal Anderson Riley and Private Edward Curtis. Corporal Jacob Edwards from company E was also wounded.

The fight at Island Mound, Missouri was a success for the First Kansas Colored Regiment in many respects, and provided both immediate and far reaching implications. First and foremost, it marked the first time a unit of black soldiers had fought in the Civil War. It instantly validated the worth of each member of the First Kansas Colored as a soldier, including the white officers. Their impressive performance against a battle-tested, organized opponent confirmed their ability and will to fight and win on the battlefield. Their performance quickly dispelled the myth believed by many Confederate soldiers that black men were inferior soldiers. For the citizens of Mound City, Kansas, the victory at

Island Mound quite possibly saved them from disaster. Private J.H. Stearns of the Fifth Kansas Cavalry learned from prisoners taken during the fight the purpose of the rebel force. As quoted in the 31 January 1862 edition of the *Linn County Republic*:

Col Cockrell had been in the northern part of the state (Missouri) recruiting for the Confederate service, that with some five or six hundred recruits he had camped on the island a few days and that in connection with the bushwhacking squads of Bates and Vernon counties a raid upon Mound City and vicinity had been planned for the night we so fortunately came upon the scene, thus giving them other work to do.¹³

Mound City provided an enticing target for the rebels, for it was the hometown of such well-known Jayhawkers as Charles Jennison and James Montgomery, both feared throughout Missouri for their ruthless tactics employed while raiding Missouri plantations of their contrabands and livestock. In dramatic fashion, the First Kansas Colored informed Mound City residents, along with the entire nation, that not only would black men fight, they would also win.

The long term effects of the Battle of Island Mound were just as significant. For Unionist who advocated arming blacks, the victory at Island Mound not only silenced their boisterous critics, but increased the rate at which Northern black units were formed. Recruiting within Kansas gained momentum as blacks sought to join their victorious brothers in the fight for freedom. Quite understandably, the War Department, Union military leaders and Northern politicians reviewed the resulting reports with excitement. A defeat in the first engagement of black troops or a poor demonstration of fighting aptitude would most likely have curtailed further advocacy for black soldiers. Victory, on the other hand, ensured the movement's continued success.

The First Kansas Colored Regiment remained in the vicinity of Island Mound a few more days, scouting for signs of Confederate and bushwhackers activity. Colonel

Williams received orders to return to Fort Lincoln and within the first week of November, his entire regiment was back in camp. During the winter months, guerilla activity within Southwestern Missouri and Northwestern Arkansas slowed, but still warranted attention. In order to protect the valuable quartermaster depot at Fort Scott, Major Hennings maintained a steady watch to his east. On 4 November 1862, he ordered the First Kansas Colored Regiment ten miles to the east to Barnesville, Kansas to picket the border. After a week of duty on the border, the regiment was recalled back to Fort Scott for guard duty. Here the regiment remained throughout the winter and into the spring of 1863.

On 1 January 1863, Fort Scott held a ceremony in honor of President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, complete with a magnificent dress parade performed by members of the First Kansas Colored Regiment. "Three cheers and a tiger" for President Lincoln echoed throughout the crowd.¹⁴ Of the official speakers were the commander of Fort Leavenworth and Colonel James Williams, commander of the First Kansas Colored. Colonel Williams emphasized the efforts of his black soldiers would "be no mere struggle for conquest, but a struggle for their own freedom, a determined and, as I believe, irresistible struggle for the disenthralment [sic] of a people who have long suffered oppression and wrong at the hands of our enemies."¹⁵ Perhaps the most inspiring speech of the day was delivered by the regiment's highest ranking black officer, Captain William Matthews, commander of Company D. Speaking to the historic importance of the day, Captain Matthews stated:

Today is a great day for great rejoicing with us. As a thinking man I never doubted this day would come...Now is our time to strike. Our own exertions and

our own muscle must make us men. If we fight we shall be respected. I see that a well-licked man respects the one who thrashes him.¹⁶

On 13 January, the First Kansas Colored Regiment officially joined the Union ranks when they were mustered in at Fort Scott. Ironically, the eloquent Captain Matthews was refused the commission Senator James Lane promised him. The United States War Department, though willing to accept black soldiers on the battlefield, was not quite ready to accept them as officers. The decision to deny Matthew's commission meet stiff resistance throughout the regiment and many of its officers came forward to assist Matthews in his cause. On 9 January, twenty-one regimental officers endorsed a memo to Senator Lane in support of Captain Matthews. The memo stated, among other accolades,

we each of us feel justified in declaring Captain Wm D. Matthews, commanding said company, to be among the most thorough and efficient officers in our organization; a soldier in every sense of the term, drilled, disciplined and capable...We give it as our conviction, that to Captain Matthews, among the most prominent, is due a large share of our success in maintaining this organization intact through the trials and difficulties of the last five months¹⁷

Regimental adjutant Richard J. Tilton also submitted a letter to Lane requesting fair treatment for Captain Matthews and professing "I for one shall work earnestly, with all the power I can, to secure that fair play for Capt Matthews which I demand for myself"¹⁸. On 12 January, Captain Matthews personally wrote Senator Lane reminding him of his promised commission and enclosed a courtesy copy of the signed order which stated

W. D. Matthews. Sir you have permission to raise one company of free Colored men for the 1st Kansas Colored Volunteers to be officered by men of Colour and all Commanders of Companies and Battalions in said Regiment will regard the same as regularly officered and will issue rations and equipment accordingly.¹⁹

An angry Matthews further stated "If I can be mustered to recruit I can be to fight".²⁰

Unfortunately for Captain Matthews, Senator Lane never possessed the authority to issue

his initial promise and did not have the power to circumvent the War Department.

Lieutenant Minor, who led Company D into the units' first combat at Island Mound, and Lieutenant Copeland were also denied commissions. All three refused to be mustered as enlisted soldiers and shortly thereafter left the command. Interestingly enough, Captain Matthews eventually received a commission serving with the Independent Battery U.S. Colored Artillery (light) at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

During their stay at Fort Scott, the regiment was beset with desertions and at times its soldiers exhibited poor discipline. The majority of these problems were connected to the issue of payment, or the lack thereof. Since their enlistment into the First Kansas Colored back in August 1862, none of the black soldiers had received their monthly entitlement of ten dollars. As many of the soldiers enlisted as a means to provide for their families, they were understandably frustrated at working for ten months without pay. In April, the mounting frustration peaked, and Colonel Williams was forced to intervene. On 21 April 1863, Colonel Williams informed headquarters of his intentions to pull his regiment from fortification detail for the purpose of committing time for the disciplining of his troops. As explained in his letter

I feel that this Step though irregular and unauthorized nevertheless is absolutely necessary to restrain the mutinous and insubordinate Spirit which has all along manifested itself in a Small degree in the Command (Growing out of the treatment from the Government in regard to pay) from Culminating in open anarchy and perhaps mutiny. My men feel sorely troubled and grieved about their pay and I feel that this course taken at this Stage of the proceedings is really necessary for the interest of the General Service.²¹

From his service in the Fifth Kansas Volunteer Cavalry, Colonel Williams understood the importance of good discipline when soldiers were in the line of battle. No other single factor would keep them united against the enemy during battle as shot, canister and rifle

fire ripped through their ranks. The action of Colonel Williams would prove invaluable during the regiment's next engagement, a little over a month ahead.

The First Kansas Colored Volunteers spent the remainder of the spring stationed at Fort Scott. While there, soldiers of the regiment performed garrison duties, improved defensive fortifications, guarded prisoners and drilled continuously. Recruiting efforts continued amongst the growing population of black refugees surging into the town from Missouri and Northwestern Arkansas. By April, four additional companies of black soldiers were added, bringing the regiment to ten companies and over 1,000 men.

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¹ Noah A. Trudeau, *Like Men of War* (Edison, New Jersey: Castle books, 2002), 3.

² Chris Tabor, *The Skirmish at Island Mound, Mo.* (Independence, Missouri: Blue and Grey Book Shoope, 2001), 2.

³ United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Washington Government Printing Office, 1880-1901, Series 3, vol 1, 455. Cited hereafter as *Official Records*.

⁴ Tabor, 11.

⁵ *New York Times*, 19 November 1862.

⁶ *Official Reports*, (1), 53:456.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 457.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *New York Times*, 19 November 1862.

¹⁰ *Linn County (Kansas) Republic*, 31 January 1902.

¹¹ *Ibid*

¹² *New York Times*, 19 November 1862.

¹³ *Linn County Republic*, 31 January 1862.

¹⁴ Trudeau, 19.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 20

¹⁷ Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy and Leslie S. Rowland, *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1865*, Series II: The Black Military Experience (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 334-335.

¹⁸ Ibid., 335

¹⁹ Ibid., 69

²⁰ Ibid., 70

²¹ Ibid., 72

CHAPTER 5

OPERATIONS IN INDIAN TERRITORY

In the spring of 1863, General Blunt assumed command of the Department of Kansas which included the areas of Kansas, Colorado, Nebraska and the Indian Territory. His department worked in unison with the Department of Missouri to counter Confederate activity within Missouri and along the southern Kansas border. In March 1863, several regiments belonging to the Department of Missouri were relocated to the east, to aid in General Grant's march across the Mississippi River to Vicksburg. This removal of federal troops opened the Western Theater to Confederate activity and Southern generals took immediate advantage of the void. Control of the area of Northwestern Arkansas, Southwestern Missouri and Indian Territory had changed hands several times since the beginning of the war. In early 1863, Union forces under Colonel Phillips were established at Fort Gibson, Indian Territory, but their position was constantly challenged by the Confederate forces of Colonel Cooper and Colonel Stand Waite in Indian Territory, and General Cabell operating along Colonel Phillips eastern flank in Arkansas. The consolidation of Confederate forces, along with the ever present bushwhacker activity, threatened to interdict supply trains running south from Fort Scott. At Fort Gibson, Colonel Phillips requested assistance to dissuade the increasingly aggressive Colonel Cooper from harassing his precarious position nestled alongside the Arkansas and Grand Rivers.

Colonel Cooper was well acquainted with Indian Territory and intimately familiar with its inhabitants. A native of Mississippi and veteran of the Mexican-American War, Douglas H. Cooper had previously served as the U.S. government agent to the Choctaw

tribe.¹ Colonel Cooper commanded all Confederate soldiers in Indian Territory, which included members of all Five Civilized Tribes (Cherokee, Creek, Seminole, Choctaw, and Chickasaw). From the outset, the Choctaw and Chickasaw tribes overwhelmingly sided with the Confederacy. Portions of Cherokees, Creeks and Seminoles however, remained loyal to the Union. As these divisions destroyed tribal unity, hostilities erupted within the fractured tribes. The two sides fought three battles in November and December of 1861. Confederate Indians “inflicted heavy casualties and scattered the loyalist, bereft of their stock, wagons, and other possessions, across a frozen, snow covered land.”² The loyalist settled in southern Kansas, where they lived in squalid camps, living off government assistance. In Indian Territory, the victors signed treaties with the South and formed three Choctaw-Chickasaw regiments, a Creek regiment, a Creek-Seminole regiment, and two Cherokee regiments.³ By the summer of 1863, these soldiers had gained valuable combat experience in the battles of Wilson Creek and Pea Ridge, Missouri. They presented a serious treat to the small Union outpost at Fort Gibson

In an effort to protect the critical flow of supplies south to Fort Gibson and beyond, General James G. Blunt established a post at Baxter Springs, located sixty miles south of Fort Scott on the Military Road. On 30 April, the general informed Colonel Phillips “I have ordered the negro regiment to Baxter Springs; they are intended to support you; are 1,000 strong.”⁴ On 4 May 1863, the regiment departed Fort Scott and headed south. Two days into the march, the regiment received word of bushwhacker activity within ten miles of their location at Cow Creek, some twenty miles north of Baxter Springs. A patrol sent in pursuit apprehended three enemy soldiers and imprisoned them upon their arrival at Baxter Springs on 7 May. On 9 May, a small

scouting party of fifty black soldiers reconnoitered the falls of Sholes Creek and Sherwood, Missouri and returned the following day.⁵ During scouting missions the black regiment suffered greatly by not having cavalry attached to their command. The lack of mounted scouts placed the black soldiers at risk from sudden bushwhacker attacks which often materialized with no prior warning. Such a disaster struck the regiment on 18 May, when a detachment of forty-five men from the First Kansas Colored Infantry and Second Kansas Battery was attacked by Major T. R. Livingston while foraging near Sherwood, Missouri.

The foraging party consisted of twenty-five members of the First Kansas Colored Infantry and twenty members of the Second Kansas Battery, under the command of Major Richard Ward. They departed Baxter Springs on the morning of 18 May and once upon the Center Creek prairie, the small detachment stopped to procure supplies from a farm belonging to Mrs. Rader, wife of a known guerrilla operating with Livingston's gang. While many of the enlisted soldiers were searching the house, the notorious Livingston with a force of 200 bushwhackers attacked and surprised the federal party, soundly defeating them. Upon Livingston's arrival at Rader's farm, "about twenty of the black troops had stacked their arms in the yard and were in the home rummaging for provisions, with some of them upstairs tossing corn into the wagons below."⁶ As described in Livingston's official report, "I charged them at the house, flanking them on the right, routed them, and pursued them about 8 miles, to the crossing of the Spring River."⁷ The mounted officers of the First Kansas Colored and the mounted troops of the Second Kansas Battery escaped the brunt of the attack and suffered only a few wounded. The infantry soldiers however meet a different fate. Livingston's rebels killed fifteen

black soldiers and three soldiers from the Second Kansas Battery. In addition to those killed, two black soldiers and three of the Second Kansas Battery were taken prisoner. After the attack, Livingston acquired five mule trains, assorted weapons and stacks of ammunition. The following morning, Colonel Williams led a detachment of 200 black soldiers back to Sherwood. After surveying the battleground, Colonel Williams reported the horrific sight of his dead soldiers having been brutally killed stating “Men were found with their brains beaten out with clubs, and the bloody weapons left by their sides and their bodies most horribly mutilated.”⁸

Though the loss of life at Rader’s farm was devastating for Colonel William’s regiment, the significant part of the engagement involved the treatment of the five Union prisoners. Shortly after the skirmish concluded, Major Livingston and Colonel Williams agreed to exchange two white soldiers belonging to the Second Kansas Battery with two white rebel prisoners. When asked to exchange the black prisoners, Major Livingston refused, stating “as for the Negrows (sic) I cannot recognize them as Soldiers (sic) and In consequence (sic) I will hev (sic) to hold them as contrabands of ware (sic).”⁹ This position was in concert with orders of the Confederate War Department. On 21 May, a day after receiving Major Livingston’s reply, Colonel Williams wrote “In regard to the Colored men, prisoners, belonging to my Regiment, I have this to say, that it rests with you to treat them as prisoners of war or not, but be assured that I shall keep a like number of your men as prisoners until these colored men are accounted for.”¹⁰ Shortly after Livingston’s refusal, word reached Colonel Williams that one of his black prisoners had been murdered. Under the flag of truce, Colonel Williams demanded the immediate handover of the guilty party. When Major Livingston again refused to comply, Colonel

Williams “determined to convince the rebel commander that that was a game at which two could play, and directed that one of the prisoners in his possession be shot, and within thirty minutes the order was executed.”¹¹ Word of the murder was hastily reported to Major Livingston. Whether Colonel Williams’ actions spared the lives of the remaining black prisoner is unknown. What is known is that Colonel Williams made his intentions concerning the treatment of his black troops clearly known to Major Livingston and all other commanders who would face the First Kansas Colored Infantry Regiment on the battlefield. Learning also that several civilians of Sherwood assisted Major Livingston in the raid at Rader’s farm, Colonel Williams directed his regiment to destroy the surrounding area within five miles of the farm.

While the First Kansas Colored tangled with bushwhackers near the Kansas-Missouri border, Colonel Phillips was equally busy confronting Confederate forces along the Kansas-Indian Territory border. Confederate activity in that area had increased to a point that Colonel Phillips’ position at Fort Gibson “was getting to be a state of siege”¹² The majority of his stock had been run off by Confederate raids, and his men were literally “living on boiled wheat as best as they could”¹³ By the beginning of May, he reported his men were existing on half rations and urged General Blunt “with the deepest earnestness” to secure a food for his command.¹⁴ He urged General Blunt to send reinforcements at once to help defend his position and launch an offensive south into Indian Territory to unseat Colonel Cooper.

Understanding the precarious situation along the border, General Blunt ordered the First Kansas Colored Infantry Regiment to Fort Gibson. As the regiment prepared to relocate south, Colonel Cooper, commanding Confederate forces in northeastern Indian

Territory, continued to pressure the fort. In late April 1863, he moved his troops to within five miles of Fort Gibson, on the southern side of the Arkansas River, where he presented a constant threat to the Union troops stationed at the fort. His forces harassed the southern picket line daily, and often attacked the Union herds as they foraged outside the fort's protective walls. He realized the Union troops stationed at Fort Gibson represented the only Union presence in the area. Once removed, his Confederate forces could control the entire Indian Territory and be able to attack with seeming impunity southern Kansas and southwestern Missouri.

Colonel Cooper kept well apprised of the number and disposition of forces at Fort Gibson. He was also aware of the pending transfer of the First Kansas Colored Volunteers to reinforce Colonel Phillips Union forces. In late May, a black laborer working at Fort Gibson was captured and upon interrogation, informed the Confederate leader of the presence of the black soldiers now at Baxter Springs, Kansas. Colonel Cooper and his Southern officers showed great interest in hearing of the black Union soldiers. They wondered how white officers treated their black enlisted troops and whether they received the same pay as whites. The Confederates were informed "colored men were eager to enlist in the army and fight for the Government and their freedom; that they were enthusiastic about their service and took great pride in it, and were asking to be sent to the front, to Fort Gibson, as early as possible."¹⁵

The key to a continued Union presence at Fort Gibson was a steady flow of supplies from Fort Scott, the quartermaster depot responsible for distributing rations, feed, horses, wagons and equipment for troops in the area. Supply trains regularly delivered these goods along the north-south military road between Fort Scott and Fort

Gibson. Armed escorts accompanied the supply trains south but did not pose a significant enough deterrent to preclude attack. Due to his proximity to Fort Gibson and the efforts of his scouts, Colonel Cooper obtained valuable information as to the timing and disposition of all supply trains inbound to Fort Gibson and passed the intelligence to Major General William M. Steele. In June 1863, General Steele, Confederate Commander of the Department of the Indian Territory, decided to move his forces against the next supply train from Fort Scott. He directed Brigadier General Cabell, with a force of fifteen hundred men, up the east side of the Grand River to help Colonel Cooper intercept the supplies moving south. On 16 June, General Steele directed General Cabell to

Bring together, as soon as you can, all the dedicated battalions and companies that can be made available, and, by spies or small parties, try to ascertain when a train will be going down; then move upon it, capture it, and destroy it if there is any risk of a recapture. It is believed that Phillips cannot stay a long time at Gibson, unless he receives supplies.¹⁶

While General Cabell assembled his force east of the Grand River, General Cooper moved his force of five hundred men under command of Colonel Staid Waite northward to meet the incoming supply train near Cabin Creek. On 25 June, General Cooper dispatched reinforcements, numbering about one thousand mounted men, “up the west side of Grand River to intercept and capture the anticipated train, should it come down that side of the river.”¹⁷ As previously mentioned, Confederate scouts maintained great intelligence on General Blunt’s forces. They knew the supply train leaving Fort Scott would be accompanied with armed soldiers, but initially believed the escort party would be relatively small. In correspondence to Cooper sent on 29 June, General Steele wrote “I don’t think the force coming down with the train is as large as is represented. The fact of

sending out a force to meet it is evidence that the escort is not considered by them as of sufficient strength to protect it.”¹⁸ Colonel Waite’s Creek and Cherokee Indians, along with Cabell’s force from Arkansas were believed more than sufficient to attack the federal train. In actuality, the escort now approaching Colonel Waite’s troop strength consisted of “2,000 men, including the regiment of negroes, and four pieces of artillery”¹⁹. The black regiment referred to was the First Kansas Colored Infantry.

On 25 June, under the escort of Lieutenant Colonel Dodd commanding the Second Colorado Infantry Regiment, the supply train departed Fort Scott. The escort was formidable: it consisted of six companies of the Second Colorado Infantry, one company each of the Third Wisconsin Cavalry, Ninth Kansas Cavalry Regiment, Fourteenth Kansas Cavalry Regiment and the Second Kansas Battery. An additional detachment of members from the Kansas Third Indian Regiment and Sixth Kansas Cavalry rounded out the escort. At Baxter Springs, Colonel Williams learned of the impending attack on Lieutenant Dodd’s escort and informed Dodd. He further “volunteered to move his regiment in such a manner as would be serviceable in case the expected attack should be made.”²⁰ Colonel Williams, already under orders to relocate to Fort Gibson, pulled the First Kansas Colored out of Baxter Springs on 26 June and rendezvoused with Lieutenant Colonel Dodd near the Neosho River.

The growing entourage moved south and on 26 June, Lieutenant Colonel Dodd dispatched Lieutenant Luke F. Parson, commander Company C, Third Indian Regiment, with twenty Cherokee Indians to scout forward to check the position of Colonel Waite. Lieutenant Parson engaged the forward portion of Confederate Indians and pushed them back towards Cabin Creek where they rejoined Colonel Waite’s main force on the south

bank. On 28 June, six hundred mounted reinforcements from Fort Gibson under command of Major Foreman traveled north and joined the federal escort. The supply train continued down the Military Road and encamped short of the Cabin Creek.

On arriving at Cabin Creek on July 1st, 1863, the rebels were met in force—about twenty-two hundred strong—under command of General Cooper. Some skirmishing occurred on that day when it was ascertained that the enemy occupied a strong position on the south bank of the Creek, and upon trial it was found that the stream was not then fordable for infantry, on account of a recent shower; but it was supposed that the swollen current would have sufficiently subsided by the next morning to allow the infantry to cross.²¹

Colonel Waite formed his command of Southern Indians south of the creek, desperately awaiting reinforcements from General Cabell and Colonel Cooper. General Cabell's Arkansas soldiers and Colonel Cooper's mounted reinforcements, however, found themselves stranded east of the Grand River, unable to cross the swollen and rapidly flowing tributary. Thus on the morning of 2 July, Colonel Stand Waite faced the federal escort without the overwhelming numerical superiority he had hoped to enjoy. He would fight at Cabin Creek alone.

As the Union troops prepared for battle, Colonel Williams assumed command over the federal escort and passed command of the First Kansas Colored Infantry to Lieutenant Colonel Bowles. With the supply wagons secured by three companies of the Second Colorado and a detachment of one hundred black soldiers, Colonel Williams marched the remaining nine hundred soldiers towards Cabin Creek in column formation. Major Foreman's Indian Home Guards led the column, followed by the First Kansas Colored Infantry and a battalion of the Second Colorado Infantry. A battalion of three companies of cavalry formed the column's rear. With two artillery guns positioned on both the extreme right and left flanks, and two howitzers located in the center, Colonel

Williams formed line of battle and “opened a brisk cannonade, with shell and canister, upon the enemy’s position, which was continued for forty minutes without interruption.”²² At the completion of the initial artillery barrage, Major Foreman led his mounted troops to the water’s edge, where they immediately came under enemy fire. Within minutes, Major Foreman was shot off his horse. As the mounted troops staggered back, Colonel Williams ordered the black infantry forward and filed the three leading companies to the right of the Military Road. The First Kansas Colored poured musket fire across the river into enemy position along the south bank. Their burst provided Colonel Williams time to once again deploy the field artillery for a second cannonade which lasted twenty minutes. Members of Company C, Ninth Kansas Cavalry quickly replaced Major Foreman’s retired force, and Colonel Williams ordered the advance at the double quick. During the cavalry exchange, black soldiers continued their raking fire across the river. The second cavalry charge succeeded in crossing the creek, followed immediately by wading black infantrymen. The black soldiers of Company I, led by Lieutenant Van Horn, were some of the first across the creek. As Lieutenant Van Horn recounts the scene:

We run our two howitzers up on to the highest point and we shelled the brush on the other side for all that was out, and while they was still throwing shells we made for the creek and crossed on the double quick, the water came to about the top of our pants we took up that lane through the brush at the top of our speed expecting every second that it would be swept with grape and canister, most of the rebs that were there were mounted, they made some show of a stand and fired a few shots but when they saw us come out of the brush on the double quick with bayonets fixed they broke for their horses.²³

Once established on the south side of Cabin Creek, Colonel Williams routed Colonel Waite’s fleeing Indians, many of them jumping into the Grand River while trying to escape. Colonel Williams withheld his command from pursuing the enemy outright so as

not to leave the wagon trains unprotected. On 5 July, a dejected General Steele informed the District of Arkansas' Adjutant General office

I am today in receipt of intelligence of the failure of our troops to take a train which was approaching Fort Gibson. Col Stand Waite fought them on the evening of the 1st and the morning of the 2nd instant. General Cabell had not reached the road, and probably will not, on account of Grand River, which, with all the streams in that region, is very high. Part of the re-enforcements sent to Colonel Waite did not reach him for the same reason. I have not heard directly from General Cabell.²⁴

The Confederate defeat at Cabin Creek was decisive. It would become their last sizeable attempt during the summer of 1863 to capture federal supplies en-route to Fort Gibson.²⁵ General Steele again alluded to the significance of the defeat in correspondence from Headquarters, Department of Indian Territory dated 7 July 1863. In this memo to Brigadier General Boggs, Chief of Staff, Trans-Mississippi Department, Steele concludes "The enemy's position is now better than it has been—stronger, and fortified in a position from which he can move either down the Arkansas River into the state of Arkansas, or down the road to Texas."²⁶ It would be down the Texas Road that Colonel Williams and the First Kansas Colored Infantry would once again confront General Steele's demoralized troops.

During the battle of Cabin Creek, the performance of the First Kansas Colored was exceptional. They reacted quickly to the initial setback and maintained the momentum by exchanging volley after volley with the Confederate Indians across the creek. Commenting on the conduct of his entire command in his official report, Colonel Williams wrote "I cannot close this communication without referring to the chivalrous and soldierly conduct of the entire command during the engagement; the whole command crossing this difficult ford, and forming in the face of the enemy, with as much ease and

little confusion as if upon parade.”²⁷ Indeed, the command lost only three killed and suffered twenty-five wounded, including Captain Ethan Earl of the First Kansas Colored Regiment, who sustained a severe head injury. Colonel Phillips, in his official report made specific mention of the black soldiers when he stated

I regret the wound of Major Foreman in the late affair, but hope he will recover. I learn that the other troops behaved very well. The Ninth Kansas made a gallant charge, sustaining some loss, and the negro regiment fought well and managed their two guns well.²⁸

What made the performance of the black regiment even more astounding was that for many of the unit’s soldiers, including those of Lieutenant Van Horn’s Company I, Cabin Creek was their first actual combat experience. According to Colonel Williams, Cabin Creek “was also the first action in which the whole of my regiment was engaged, and here they evinced a coolness and true soldierly conduct which inspired me with that confidence in their bravery and fortitude which subsequent battle scenes proved was not ill-founded.”²⁹ Colonel Phillips, commander of Fort Gibson and the recipient of the services provided by the First Kansas Colored during his time of siege, was greatly appreciative of the black soldier. He experienced first hand the tremendous military capability the black Kansans brought to the battlefield. His confidence in their fighting ability high, he immediately began preparations to send them south into Indian Territory, to strike at the heart of Colonel Cooper’s weakened forces.

Despite repeated failures to sever the supply line from Fort Scott to Fort Gibson, General Steele was determined to rid Indian Territory of Union forces. A mere five days following the Confederate debacle at Cabin Creek, General Steele informed Brigadier General W. R. Boggs, Chief of Staff, Headquarters Trans Mississippi Department, “I think the present a favorable time, if a few more regiments can be spared, to carry the war

to Kansas...Such a movement would disconcert any arrangements that are being made for operations in this direction this fall or winter”³⁰ Further prompting General Steele to action were the recent Confederate defeats at Gettysburg and Vicksburg. He believed the outcome of these battles “pointed to the conclusion that Federal operations in the Department of Missouri would in a short time assume an aggressiveness that had not been displayed in the earlier part of the season.”³¹ Sensing his window of opportunity closing, General Steele requested additional units from North Texas, and ordered General Cabell’s force of three thousand men to join Colonel Cooper’s six thousand soldiers at Honey Springs with the aim of attacking Fort Gibson.

Confederate intentions against Fort Gibson came as no surprise to General Blunt. He knew Colonel Cooper had withdrawn to Elk Creek, twenty-five miles south of Fort Gibson. He was also aware General Cabell had been ordered to Honey Springs in an effort to consolidate Confederate forces against Fort Gibson. Determined to meet Colonel Cooper in battle prior to the arrival of General Cabell’s reinforcements, General Blunt

collected such cavalry and light artillery as could be spared from Southern Kansas, consisting of a battalion of the Sixth Kansas Cavalry and two mountain howitzers and a section of Captain E. A. Smith’s Second Kansas Battery, and leaving Fort Scott July 6th, by rapid marching arrived at Fort Gibson on the 11th.³²

On 16 July, the general led a portion of the Sixth Kansas Cavalry along the Arkansas River looking for a suitable crossing point. He crossed the river twelve miles above Fort Gibson and marched back down the south side, displacing Confederate pickets positioned along the river’s bank. Using hastily constructed flatboats, his remaining force crossed the river and by 2200, were completely across. Three soldiers from the Indian Regiment lost their lives during the perilous river crossing and one black soldier was wounded.

The soldiers marched throughout the night, arriving a few miles north of Elk Creek at daybreak. General Blunt formed his command into two brigades, the first commanded by Colonel William R. Judson, and the second under the command of Colonel William Phillips. The First Brigade consisted of the First Kansas Colored Infantry, commanded by Colonel Williams; the Second Indian Regiment, dismounted; a battalion of the Third Wisconsin; and four guns of the Second Kansas Battery. The units under Colonel Phillips command consisted of six companies of the Second Colorado Infantry, the First Indian Regiment, dismounted; and Hopkin's Kansas Battery. The two brigades marched down the Texas Road until the advance force of cavalry met Confederate skirmishers five miles north of Elk Creek. As his infantry had force marched the entire evening, General Blunt held his command behind a small ridge and for two hours allowed his men to rest, eat, and re-fill their canteens.

His troops refreshed, General Blunt resumed the attack at 1000. He deployed Colonel Judson's brigade to the right of the Texas Road while Colonel Phillips deployed his forces to the left. Once in position, Colonel Williams addressed the First Kansas Colored Volunteers:

Attention. This is the day we have been patiently waiting for; the enemy at Cabin Creek did not wait to give you an opportunity of showing them what men can do fighting for the natural rights and for their recently acquired freedom and for the freedom of their children and their children's children... You know it is common report that the Confederate troops boast that they will not give quarter to colored troops and their officers... Show the enemy this day that you are not asking for quarter, and that you know how and are eager to fight for your freedom.³³

Following Colonel Williams' remarks, the black soldiers "moved in column, by company, to the position assigned us, and formed in the line of battle, when the engagement was opened by the battery."³⁴ For close to an hour, four Confederate and

twelve Federal guns poured shot, shell and canister into each other's ranks. This marked the first time soldiers of the First Kansas Colored faced the devastating effects of field artillery. Throughout the barrage, the black soldiers held their positions and readied themselves for the attack. As the big guns boomed, General Blunt personally charged Colonel Williams to move his regiment to the front and to "keep an eye to those guns of the enemy, and take them at the point of the bayonet, if an opportunity offers."³⁵ To this end, the First Kansas Colored was ordered to fix bayonets, and they moved forward to support the four guns belonging to Captain Smith of the Second Kansas Battery. When Colonel Williams gave the command to step forward, "every man stepped promptly and firmly in his place, advancing in good order until within forty paces of the concealed foe."³⁶ Once in position along side the Second Colorado, the black soldiers entered the fight, firing an effective volley of shot into the dismounted Twentieth Texas Cavalry, positioned directly in front of the First Kansas Colored. Early in the fighting, Confederate musket fire struck Colonel Williams forcing him to retire to the rear. Lieutenant Colonel Bowles assumed command of the black soldiers and seamlessly continued to press the fight to the enemy. Unfortunately for the regiment, the order to capture the rebel howitzer battery was never relayed to Lieutenant Colonel Bowles and subsequently the rebels retreated with all but one of their guns.

Fighting to the right of the First Kansas Colored was the Second Indian Regiment. Commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Schuarte, the Indians of this regiment fought the entire engagement as skirmishers, as ordered by General Blunt. In one instance, mounted members of the Indian regiment became disoriented and inadvertently crossed in front of the First Kansas Colored's line of fire. Sensing the impending disaster,

Lieutenant Colonel Bowles ordered the Indians to fall back and reform in their proper position. Colonel Thomas C. Bass, commanding the dismounted Twentieth Texas Cavalry, heard the federal command to withdraw and seizing the opportunity to advance, ordered his troops forward. His dismounted soldiers left their concealed positions along the river bank and “came up within twenty-five yards of the colored regiment, who gave them a volley of musketry, shooting down their color bearer, besides killing and wounding a number of other men and quickly sending the others back in considerable confusion.”³⁷ The Texans rallied twice but were forced to retreat across the creek and in the process lost their colors a third and final time. The First Kansas Colored pursued the fleeing Confederate soldiers until ordered to halt.

On the left side of the Texas Road, the fighting was just as fierce. The Second Colorado Infantry, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Dodd, sent volley after volley into the ranks of the Twenty-Ninth Texas Cavalry, commanded by Colonel Charles De Morse. As the Union line advanced toward Elk Creek, they maneuvered right to clear an almost impassable ditch, then reformed left into line of battle. In the process, they inadvertently by-passed a group of Confederate soldiers hiding in the brush near the gulley. As the rebel soldiers rose to fire on the Second Colorado,

The colored regiment was almost instantly ordered to oblique to the left, and coming up within less than fifty yards of the Confederates poured several well-directed volleys of musketry into them, which caused them to break, and they ran back in the direction of the Colorado men, who, now realizing the situation and seeing the enemy in confusion, turned and opened fire upon them only a few yards distant, killing and wounding a good many and capturing a few.³⁸

Captain Ethan Earle, commanding company F described the above situation as follows:

During the fight one Company of the Colorado Regiment was gobbled up as they call it by the Rebels and they supposed lost, two companies of our Colored regiment were sent to their relief which they very quickly effected. When the

Colored Regiment was at Fort Scott and on the way to the fight they treated us with contempt but after this fight and rescue of their men they would say, 'if we are going into a fight give us the niggers'".³⁹

As fighting along the Texas Road continued, federal cavalry on General Blunt's extreme right intercepted and repelled an attempted flanking movement by Southern Indians. On General Blunt's left flank, his soldiers had successfully crossed the creek and were turning the Confederate right flank inward. Their battle line broken, General Cooper ordered a retreat through the Honey Springs depot. Here a final but effective stand was made mainly by reserve Choctaw and Texas units, giving the Confederates time to evacuate virtually all their forces, artillery, and baggage train."⁴⁰ Confederate troops set the depot on fire to prevent remaining supplies from falling into enemy hands, but Blunt's men were able to extinguish some of the flames in time to salvage bacon, dried beef and salt.

As for General Cabell, his 3,000 reinforcements once again never arrived on the battlefield. His force rendezvoused with a retreating General Cooper some fifty miles east of Honey Springs but further battle was ill-advised on account of the exhausted state of Cooper's soldiers. The Confederates withdrew south of the Canadian River, leaving the Indian Territory largely unmanned for the remainder of the War. The Battle of Honey Springs was a decisive Union victory in the West. Not only did it force the Confederates from Indian Territory, but it opened the western door to Arkansas and indeed, it would not be long before Fort Smith, Arkansas, the border Confederate stronghold, would fall into Union hands.

Union casualties for the four hour engagement at Honey Springs were light. General Blunt reported thirteen killed in action, sixty enlisted men and one officer

wounded. Two members of the First Kansas Colored Infantry died at Honey Springs. Due in part to the regiment's prominent position in the center of the battlefield, they sustained the largest number of wounded soldiers of all Federal units engaged; one officer and twenty-nine enlisted men were wounded during the battle.⁴¹ Confederate forces fared far worse in terms of casualties. General Blunt reported burying one hundred and fifty rebel soldiers though General Cooper reported only one hundred and thirty-four killed in action. Hundreds of other Confederate men were wounded and between forty-seven and seventy-seven reported captured. The Confederate force also lost one of its four howitzers and fifteen wagons.

The performance of the First Kansas Colored Infantry Regiment at Honey Springs was pivotal in the decisive victory. The engagement marked the first time the regiment faced field artillery fire. Located directly across from the Confederate's light howitzer battery, the regiment not only held fast their lines, but prevented the Second Colorado from being outmaneuvered and overrun. Though possessing three times as many artillery pieces as the Confederates, it was nonetheless the hand-to-hand combat of the infantry that prevailed against Colonel Cooper's force of nearly six thousand men. The composure and resolve of the First Kansas Colored was also tested when Colonel Williams was wounded and forced from the battlefield. Without wavering, the black soldiers continued fighting and responded well to the leadership of Lieutenant Colonel Bowles. In his official report, General Blunt praised the black soldiers for outstanding service:

The First Kansas (colored) particularly distinguished itself; they fought like veterans, and preserved their line unbroken throughout the engagement. Their coolness and bravery I have never seen surpassed; they were in the hottest of the fight, and opposed to Texas troops twice their number, whom they completely

routed. One Texas regiment (the Twentieth Cavalry) that fought against them went into the fight with 300 men and came out with only 60.⁴²

Lieutenant Colonel Bowles ended his official report by stating

In conclusion, I feel it but justice and my duty to state that the officers and men throughout the entire regiment behaved nobly, and with the coolness of veterans. Each seemed to vie wit the other in the performance of his duty, and it was with the greatest gratification that I witnessed their gallant and determined resistance under the most galling fire.⁴³

Not only did the black soldiers impress their commanding officers, but their performance made believers out of the white soldiers fighting at their side. In true complimentary fashion, the simply stated words from an officer of the Third Wisconsin Cavalry must have echoed the thoughts of many on the battlefield at Honey Springs: “I never believed in niggers before, but by Jasus, they are hell for fighting.”⁴⁴

¹ G.W. Grayson, *A Creek Warrior for the Confederacy: The Autobiography of Chief G.W. Grayson*. Edited by W. David Baird. (University of Oklahoma Press: Oklahoma, 1988), 60

² Robert M. Utley, *The Indian Frontier of the American West 1846-1890*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1929), 73-75.

³ Ibid, 75.

⁴ United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Washington Government Printing Office, 1880-1901, Series 1, vol 22, 262. Cited hereafter as *Official Records*.

⁵ Supplement to the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Part II, vol 78, 619.

⁶ *The Civil War on the Lower Kansas-Missouri Border*, 78.

⁷ Ibid., 322

⁸ W.S. Burke, *Official Military History of Kansas Regiments* (Leavenworth, Kansas: Kansas Heritage Press), 410.

⁹ Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy and Leslie S. Rowland. *Freedom: Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867*. Series II: The Black Military Experience. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.1982), 574

¹⁰ Ibid., 575

¹¹ Ibid., 410

¹² Wiley Britton, *The Civil War on the Border*. Vol II. (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1898), 92.

¹³ Benjamin Van Horn Autobiographical letter to Mr. George Martin, Secretary (Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka Kansas), p.21.

¹⁴ Official Records, (1), 22:227.

¹⁵ Wiley Britton, *The Union Indian Brigade in the Civil War* (Kansas City: Franklin Hudson Publishing Company, 1922), 242-243.

¹⁶ Official Records, (1), 22:874.

¹⁷ Ibid., 22:885

¹⁸ Ibid., 22:894

¹⁹ Ibid., 22:895

²⁰ Burke, 410

²¹ Ibid., 411

²² Official Records, (1), 22:380.

²³ Lieutenant Van Dorn files, (Kansas State Historical Society), 24.

²⁴ Official Records, (1), 22 (Part 2):905.

²⁵ Official Records (1), 22 (Part 2):285.

²⁶ Official Records, (1), 22 (Part 2):910.

²⁷ Official Records, (1), 22:381.

²⁸ Official Records, (1), 22:379.

²⁹ Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Kansas, 1861-1865.

³⁰ Official Records, (1), 22 (Part 2):910.

- ³¹ Britton, *Civil War on the Border*, 114
- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ Britton, *The Union Indian Brigade in the Civil War*, 267-277.
- ³⁴ Official Records, (1), 22:449
- ³⁵ Ibid., 22:449
- ³⁶ Ibid., 22:450
- ³⁷ Britton, *Civil War on the Border*, 121.
- ³⁸ Ibid., 122
- ³⁹ Captain Ethan Earle files (Kansas State Historical Society), 43.
- ⁴⁰ LeRoy H. Fischer, "Indian Territory's Gettysburg: The Battle of Honey Springs" (Oklahoma Today, Winter 1970), 18.
- ⁴¹ Official Record, (1), 22:449
- ⁴² Official Records, (1), 22:448
- ⁴³ Official Records (1), 22:451
- ⁴⁴ Dudley Taylor Cornish, *Kansas Negro Regiments in the Civil War* (Topeka, Kansas: Kansas Commission on Civil Rights, 1969), 426.

CHAPTER 6

OPERATIONS INTO ARKANSAS

With the Honey Springs depot completely destroyed, General Cooper and General Cabell moved further south into Indian Territory. While awaiting the arrival of reinforcements from north Texas, the Confederate leaders developed plans to once again make a movement against General Blunt and his forces at Fort Gibson. In the meantime, the First Kansas Colored Volunteers headed back to Fort Gibson on 18 July 1863 and reached camp at noon the following day. The week was spent performing regular guard detail and improving fortifications.

On 21 August, William Quantrill and over four hundred followers raced across the Missouri-Kansas border and sacked the town of Lawrence. Citizens of Lawrence were totally surprised and suffered greatly. In less than four hours, Quantrill's band killed an estimated one hundred and fifty men and wounded many others. Albert Castel describes the damage in *Civil War Kansas*:

The business center along Massachusetts street was destroyed, a hundred homes were burned, and another hundred damaged by fire. Dead lay scattered along the streets, 'some of them so charred that they could not be recognized, and could scarcely be taken up.' Bones were visible among the embers, and the sickening odor of burning flesh was oppressive."¹

At the time of the raid, the First Kansas Colored Regiment was garrisoned far south of Lawrence at Fort Gibson. Though not in a position to respond in force, they did send a small detachment of black soldiers to aid in chasing Quantrill out of the state. On 29 July, by special order the regiment relocated to Fort Davis, one-time Confederate outpost south of the Arkansas River near its junction with Grand River. The First Kansas Colored soldiers participated in another skirmish near Sherwood, Missouri on 14 August.

For the remainder of July through the early portion of August, Confederate General William Steele prepared to advance on Fort Gibson. Being heavily outnumbered and outgunned, General Steele attempted to combine the forces of General Cabell and Colonel Cooper with reinforcements from north Texas under command of Brigadier General Smith P. Bankhead. Hoping to avoid a defeat similar to the one experienced at Honey Springs, General Steele also sought to acquire additional artillery pieces and improved gunpowder, the poor quality of the latter being a major contributor to their recent loss. Through the summer of 1863, a confident General Steele slowly advanced his troops closer to Fort Gibson. On 24 July he encamped at Prairie Springs, a mere fifteen miles south of the fort. By 29 July though, he had fallen back to Honey Springs. In August, his determined attempts to mass forces against Fort Gibson ended in frustration. Desertions plagued General Cabell's dispirited Arkansas regiments and in Texas, General Bankhead experienced difficulties recruiting men for his command and was ordered not to reinforce General Steele until he could mass two thousand soldiers. These difficulties forced General Steele to abandon offensive operations in favor of a more defensive stance. Lack of soldiers and artillery disappointed General Steele for he had hoped his presence would prevent General Blunt from moving down the Texas Road and threatening the critical supply depots at Perryville and Boggy Depot. General Steele also feared that without a Confederate force in the area, many of the disheartened Creek Indians would cross the Arkansas with the view of joining their more successful brethren in General Blunt's army. Additionally, with so many Union troops now stationed at Fort Gibson, the Confederate position at Fort Smith, Arkansas lay vulnerable to attack.

As the Confederates postured in the south, Major General John McNeil, Commanding Southwestern District of Missouri, ordered General Blunt along with Colonel Cloud, Commanding Second Kansas Cavalry, south to defeat General Steele's growing Confederate forces. After gathering forces at Fort Gibson, General Blunt reported:

On the evening of the 22nd instant, I crossed the Arkansas River with a force of near 4,500, for the purpose of attacking Steele, who had concentrated all the forces of Cabell, Cooper and Stand Waite, numbering about 9,000, on the south side of the Canadian, 60 miles from Fort Blunt.²

The Federal force heading south consisted of the Second Kansas Cavalry, Sixth Missouri Cavalry, and First Kansas Colored Infantry. The black regiment, along with General Blunt's cavalry, pushed the Confederates south towards Perryville, Choctaw Nation with battle confined to skirmishes with General Steele's rear guard. On 26 August, the command entered Perryville and discontinued the pursuit. Of the town of Perryville, General Blunt reported "This was a regular military post and an important depot, being the only point between Boggy Depot and North Fork Town. As nearly every building contained Government stores, I directed the burning of the whole place."³ A portion of General Blunt's force under Colonel Judson was sent west after a fleeing Confederate Colonel McIntosh and his brigade of Creeks and Cherokees. The remainder of his force turned around and preceded northeast towards Fort Smith to decisively engage General Cabell, whom it was learned had departed the fleeing Confederates days prior. Colonel Cloud reported, "After dispersing Cooper's forces, we turned upon Cabell. General Blunt took with him only my brigade, disposing of his own troops at Fort Gibson and Webber's Falls."⁴ As General Blunt continued east to oust General Cabell from Fort Smith, the First Kansas Colored Infantry retired to Fort Gibson, arriving there on 31 August 1863. The

black soldiers spent the next two weeks stationed at Camp Williams, near Fort Davis in Indian Territory until they received orders to join Union forces at the newly acquired Fort Smith, General Cabell having been forced out on 1 September. The First Kansas Colored left Camp Williams on 17 September and after a few days march, arrived at Fort Smith, Arkansas on 21 September.⁵

As Fort Smith fell into Union hands, a great political struggle developed as to which Union general would control it. As political infighting intensified between General Blunt and Brigadier General John McNeil, newly assigned Commander of the Department of Arkansas, First Kansas Colored troops went about their business shoring up the fort's defenses. Approach posts at Clarksville, Van Buren and Roseville, all located in Arkansas along the Arkansas River, were established to extend the defensive perimeter.⁶ During the last week of October, General McNeil reviewed the units at Fort Smith and reported

On Saturday I reviewed the First Arkansas Infantry Volunteers, First Colored Infantry Kansas Volunteers, and Rabb's Battery. The negro regiment is a triumph of drill and discipline, and reflects great honor on Col. Williams, in command. Few volunteer regiments that I have seen make a better appearance. I regard them as first-rate infantry.⁷

Near the end of October, the black regiment was sent to Roseville, forty-five miles east of Fort Smith, where it manned the outpost for the month of November. On 2 December, the regiment marched fifty miles back to Fort Smith and performed garrison duties there for a week. On 11 December, the soldiers again departed for Roseville, arriving there the following day.⁸ This time, the First Kansas Colored regiment established their headquarters in Roseville and went into winter quarters. Lieutenant Van Horn,

Commanding Company K, provides a vivid description of the town and some of the regiment's duties while stationed there:

When we got there [Roseville] we found very little town but one of the finest farms of 400 acres, well cultivated, a considerable amount of cotton and a cotton gin and 200 acres of as fine corn as you ever saw stand on the ground and 150 fine fat hogs running in it, and a corn mill and a large number of nigger quarters, two of the biggest of them was stored as full as they could jam with farming utensils and tools, and a very large substantial well built and furnished dwelling house with the rooms all furnished just as they were when the family lived in them...We proceeded to appropriate the rooms and furniture to our uses as suited us best and we could agree, by doubling up two in a room all of the officers could well be supplied, we remained there until spring.⁹

Lieutenant Van Horn also explained the soldiers picked and ginned the cotton and helped look after the corn fields. The cotton and corn were delivered to Fort Smith where corn made its way to units stationed throughout the area and cotton was shipped down the Arkansas, eventually landing in northern ports.

As the First Kansas Colored Infantry Volunteers waited out the winter in Roseville, Major General Henry W. Halleck, Union General-in-Chief, busied himself with planning a large scale expedition deep in Confederate territory that would unfortunately prove disastrous for the black soldiers. The expedition actually involved two separate campaigns; a decisive operation along the Red River and a supporting operation through Arkansas, both designed to converge at and capture the Confederate stronghold of Shreveport, Louisiana. Shreveport would then be the springboard for operations into Texas, Halleck's ultimate objective. The reasons for General Halleck's fascination with the Red River Campaign are many. First was a desire to counter the French invasion of Mexico in the middle of 1863. Forsyth writes "Lincoln's personal secretary recalled that the president was 'very anxious that Texas should be occupied and firmly held in view of French possibilities.'"¹⁰ Secondly, 1864 was an election year and

President Lincoln wanted to extend his influence into Arkansas. The third reason centered on economics. Texas offered the North unlimited supplies of cotton to be used in the struggling northern textile industry. For these primary reasons, Generals Banks and Thayer assembled their commands for action along the Red River. The subsequent battles would soon bring the men of the First Kansas Colored Infantry face to face with many of their previously vanquished foes, all determined to exact revenge for their losses. In time, southern Arkansas became the location for the regiment's worst losses during the entire war.

Commanding the Army of the Gulf, Union General Nathan P. Banks arrayed an impressive number of troops for his march east along the Red River. With reinforcements from General Sherman (XVI and XVII army corps) and assistance from Rear Admiral David Dixon Porter's Mississippi Squadron, Banks amassed a force of about thirty-five thousand troops for the advance on Shreveport. Efficient cooperation between Banks and Porter was essential for success of the operation. Concerned with satisfying logistical requirements, General Banks planned to use the Red River as his main logistical supply route. Admiral Porter's mission was to secure this supply lane east to the Mississippi River and to supply General Banks' army with supporting fires. With Porter's ships moving up the river, The Red River Expedition commenced on 12 March 1864 when General Banks departed Simmesport, Louisiana and headed west for Shreveport.

In the north, Major General Frederick Steele began preparations to move his Army south. Similar to the Army of the Gulf, General Steele correctly identified logistical support as his command's critical vulnerability. He understood the importance of ensuring continual supplies of foodstuff and ammunition for his forces as they

marched south of the Arkansas River, a territory teeming with Confederate forces. Adequate forage was non-existent south of the river, as the Confederate forces had stripped the area bare during their recent occupation of the area. General Steele, therefore, designed his route of march with an eye towards the rear, intent on keeping his supply line to Little Rock open. He also saw advantages to using either the Saline or Ouachita Rivers for re-supplying his army while on the move.

On 17 March, General Steele issued orders to begin assembling the troops he needed to march through Arkansas. Once consolidated, his Seventh Army consisted of Third Division commanded by Brigadier General Frederick Salomon; Cavalry Division commanded by Brigadier General Eugene Carr; Third Brigade (Cavalry) commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Owen Bassett; and Frontier Division, commanded by Brigadier General John M. Thayer.¹¹ All except Thayer's command began the trek south from Little Rock. General Thayer's headquarters was located in Fort Smith, along the Indian Territory border. His Frontier Division consisted of soldiers from Arkansas, Iowa, Indiana and Kansas. The division's second brigade, commanded by Colonel Adams of the Twelfth Kansas Infantry Regiment, included the black soldiers of the First Kansas Colored.

On 25 March, First Kansas Colored Volunteers departed Roseville alongside members of the Sixth Kansas Cavalry and marched south to affect a linkup with General Thayer's Frontier Division. They caught up with them two days later and together, continued south to meet General Steele's Seventh Army which was quickly approaching Arkadelphia, the proposed linkup site. From the outset, lack of forage, rugged terrain and muddy roads slowed the division's advance. Instead of meeting General Steele at

Arkadelphia on 1 April as planned, it would be another week before the two generals joined forces at the Little Missouri River. As the combined command continued south, Confederate resistance that had harassed General Steele since his departure from Little Rock intensified. The black soldiers had thus far marched virtually unopposed, but since joining the larger force, now skirmished daily with rebel soldiers. Confederate Major General Sterling Price, Commanding District of Arkansas, continuously monitored the Union advance south. Armed with ten thousand soldiers from Arkansas, Missouri Texas and Indian Territory, General Price determined not only to slow the advancing Union column, but to also ascertain their direction of march.

Through the use of extensive reconnaissance, both he and overall Confederate Commander Lieutenant General Kirby Smith, Commander, Trans-Mississippi Department, believed General Steele intended on moving from Arkadelphia through the town of Washington to Shreveport. As such, they established strong defensive positions along the Washington road. General Steele, however, still suffering from lack of forage, turned east and headed for Camden, a once-heavily fortified Confederate town now largely abandoned. Controlling Camden promised to provide General Steele supply routes on the Ouachita River and to Pine Bluff to his rear. Under cover of heavy skirmishing, Union forces turned away from Washington and proceeded to Camden. General Price reacted to the sudden change of direction by sending a portion of his force to harass the Union column while another portion was sent ahead to Camden, hoping to arrive prior to General Steele. Near Prairie D' Ane, the First Kansas Colored Volunteers skirmished with rebels attacking the rear of the Union forces. Light skirmishing continued throughout the remainder of the march to Camden where Union forces entered

the town un-opposed on 15 Apr. The First Kansas Colored, bringing up the rear, entered the town the following afternoon.

Once within the fortifications of Camden, General Steele turned his attention to re-supplying his hungry soldiers. His quartermaster, Captain Henry, purchased a small amount of corn from local citizens. On 16 April, the Ouachita River provided an unexpected, but welcome supply of additional corn when Union soldiers intercepted a cargo-laden Confederate transport. Early that morning, a detachment of Union cavalry captured the large steamer *Homer* and confiscated four thousand bushels of corn.¹²

Still critically short of food and supplies, General Steele directed General Thayer to conduct a foraging mission to acquire large stockpiles of grain and meat known to exist approximately twenty miles west of the city, near Poison Springs. Thayer selected Colonel Williams to command the expedition and in addition to his black soldiers, placed under his command detachments of Second, Sixth and Fourteenth Kansas Cavalry, along with one section of the Second Indiana Battery. Major Ward commanded the black soldiers in the absence of their commander. Though close to full regimental strength, only four hundred thirty-eight men of the First Kansas Colored Volunteers accompanied Major Ward on the mission. As reported by Colonel Williams, “the excessive fatigue of the preceding day, coming as it did at the close of a toilsome march of twenty-four days without halting, had so worn upon the infantry that fully 100 of the First Kansas (colored) were rendered unfit for duty.”¹³ On 17 April, Colonel Williams departed Camden with “695 men and two guns, with a forage train of 198 wagons”¹⁴ and headed west along the Washington Road. Eighteen miles west of Camden, Colonel Williams stopped and

dispatched soldiers throughout Poison Springs with orders to load their wagons with as much corn as could be carried.

The area of Poison Springs teemed with Confederate soldiers intent on prying General Steele out of Camden. As described in historian Michael Forsyth's account of the Camden Expedition:

Colonel Williams knew that sizeable contingents of Rebel cavalry lurked nearby and that they would pounce on his small detachment as a lucrative target as soon as they could gather strength. Therefore, rather than allow the men to encamp he decided to press on with gathering food in order to get back to Camden before the Confederates could strike.¹⁵

For the remainder of the day, groups of soldiers scoured surrounding farms for food.

With wagons filled with corn, the small detachments returned to the Washington Road, the last arriving around midnight. The following morning, Major Ward's soldiers provided rear guard security for the train as it broke camp around 0700 and headed back to Camden. Concerned with possible Confederate intervention, General Thayer sent reinforcements to Colonel Williams that same morning. The group consisted of an additional forty-five soldiers from the Second Kansas Cavalry, twenty-five soldiers from the Sixth Kansas Cavalry, twenty-four soldiers of the Fourteenth Kansas Cavalry, three-hundred eighty-five infantry troops of the Eighteenth Iowa and two mountain howitzers. Eight hundred seventy-five infantry and two hundred eighty five cavalry now guarded the forage train as it began the slow journey back to Camden.

Confederate General John Sappington Marmaduke waited with anticipation as the federal train traveled west towards Poison Springs. General Marmaduke understood the importance of Colonel Williams' mission and knew he could strike a deadly blow against General Steele by capturing the supply train. After consultation with General Price,

Marmaduke received additional troops and clearance to attack the federal train. His plan was simple: he and General Cabell would lead their cavalry divisions down the Washington Road, separating Colonel Williams from potential reinforcements from Camden. Both divisions possessed four guns. As soon as Marmaduke and Cabell were positioned in front of the approaching wagon train, General Maxey's cavalry division with an additional four guns would attack the Union right flank and rear. The only possibly avenue of escape for the Union soldiers would be north, through the swamps. Twelve miles west of Camden, Confederate and Union forces meet in what would be referred to as the Battle of Poison Springs.

General Cabell's official report stated "After marching up that road [Washington road] to the vicinity of Poison Springs my advance was fired on by the enemy's advance guard."¹⁶ As the initial skirmishing developed, Colonel Williams "halted the train, formed a line of the small force I then had in advance, and ordered that portion of the First Kansas Colored Volunteers which had previously been guarding the rear of the train to the front, and gave orders for the train to be parked as closely as the nature of the ground would permit."¹⁷ For the next several minutes, Colonel Williams scrambled to get his men into position while trying to determine the strength and disposition of the rebel force. As the Second Indiana Battery, supported by companies A, B, E and H of the First Kansas Colored Volunteers, opened upon the line of Confederate skirmishers, Colonel Williams spotted movement through thick brush on his right flank. What Williams saw was General Maxey's division of Texans and Indians, old rivals from Cabin Creek and Honey Springs. Colonel Williams immediately ordered members of the Second and Sixth Kansas Cavalry forward to halt the advancing Southerners. Lieutenants Henderson and

Mitchell advanced the cavalry four hundred yards before they were forced back. As the cavalry returned to their original positions, “the batteries of Marmaduke’s and Cabell’s divisions in the Federal front and the battery of Maxey’s division on the right of the Federal position opened a heavy crossfire of shot and shell upon the Federal line, lasting perhaps half an hour.”¹⁸ In the face of the relentless barrage, Colonel Williams wasted no time shoring up his right flank with five companies of First Kansas Colored Volunteers, led by Major Ward. Due to intense fighting in the rear of the column, the Eighteenth Iowa Infantry was unavailable to send forward reinforcements as requested by Colonel Williams. It would be up to the First Kansas Colored to hold the front and right flank against superior numbers of Confederate soldiers bent on exacting revenge for their previous losses.

Major Ward continued to orchestrate the battle on the Union column’s right. As the Second and Sixth Kansas Cavalry were pushed back and dispersed under intense Confederate artillery and musket fire, he filled the gaps with companies G and K of his First Kansas Colored. The newly formed line held and checked the Confederate attack. In his official report submitted to Colonel Williams, Ward stated, “three different times the enemy was thus repulsed and as they were massing for the fourth charge, I informed you that I believed it would be impossible to hold my position without more men on my right and center.”¹⁹ As fighting intensified, Major Ward and the black soldiers held the line while Colonel Williams searched for more replacements. Before Colonel Williams returned, Major Ward encountered the fourth and final charge of which he reported

My right succeeded in checking the advance, but my left being outflanked at the same time that my left center was sustaining the attack of ten times their number, I ordered to fall back slowly toward the train, changing front toward the left to

prevent the enemy from coming up in my rear. We here made a stand of about ten minutes, when I perceived that the enemy had succeeded in flanking my extreme right, and that I was placed in a position to receive a cross-fire from their two lines. I was then compelled, in order to save even a fragment of the gallant regiment which for nearly two hours had, unaided, sustained itself against Price's whole army, to order a retreat.²⁰

With few exceptions, the First Kansas Colored retreated in an orderly fashion, maintaining a continual fire until it reached the rear of the train. Here, Major Ward formed his men alongside the Eighteenth Iowa. A small group of black soldiers were ordered to assist in removing Union guns from the battlefield, to prevent them from falling into enemy hands. At 1400, four hours after the engagement commenced, Colonel Williams conceded defeat and retired with his remaining force. In his last action of the battle, he "succeeded in forming a portion of the cavalry, which I kept in line in order to give the infantry time to reach the swamp which lay in our front, which they succeeded in doing, and by this means nearly all except the badly wounded were enable to reach camp."²¹

Unfortunately for members of the First Kansas Colored Volunteers, the end of the battle marked the beginning of a massacre. Witnesses reported the inhumane manner at which Confederate soldiers pursued and murdered wounded and fleeing black soldiers. Lieutenant Richard Phillips, commanding a detachment of Sixth Kansas Cavalry reported that during the retreat, "the enemy were following the negroes and pouring a heavy fire into their ranks until sheltered by the timber."²² Major Ward recorded "We were obliged to bring our wounded away the best we could, as the rebels were seen shooting those that fell into their hands."²³ Colonel Williams noted "Many wounded men belonging to the First Kansas Colored Volunteers fell into the hands of the enemy, and I have the most positive assurances from eye-witnesses that they were murdered on the spot."²⁴ Wounded

black soldiers fortunate to make it back to Camden recounted first hand the horrible plight of their lost brethren.

One of the colored soldiers who was wounded and lay on the field until night feigning death, and then crawled off and made his way into camp, stated that he saw the Confederates shooting the wounded colored soldiers who were left on the field after the battle, calling out and answering each other, “Where is the First Nigger now?” “All cut to pieces and gone to hell by bad management.”²⁵

There were many reasons for the harsh treatment afforded black soldiers at Poison Springs, though probably none as strong as an intense hatred for black people. From the outset of war, Confederate soldiers repeatedly threatened to fight under the Black Flag, offering no quarter to black soldiers on the battlefield. The actions of Confederate soldiers at Poison Springs turned this threat into reality. Revenge, like hatred, strongly compelled Rebel troops to massacre wounded black soldiers. In 1863, the First Kansas Colored Volunteers had been among the Union soldiers to commandingly defeat Colonel Gano’s Twenty-ninth Texas Cavalry Regiment and Colonel Walker’s Choctaws and Chickasaws Regiment, both present at Poison Springs. One hundred and twelve of the four hundred and thirty-eight black members of the First Kansas Colored Volunteers at Poison Springs died, fully one quarter of their force. Additionally, the regiment lost five of its officers. On 7 May, the *Leavenworth Daily Conservative* ran a story titled “Bad News From Below—Our Boys Beaten—Loss of Property”. The following day, the storyline read “Severe losses in the First Kansas Colored”. The latter reference, a letter written from Lieutenant McFarland of Company D to his brother, included the following passage:

We were attacked about 10 o’clock, A.M., and fought for about three hours, when our regiment was surrounded and we had to cut our way out. We were fighting against ten thousand rebels. The niggers fought like hell”²⁶

General Steele tried several more times to secure food and supplies to sustain his troops for the planned march into Louisiana. On 25 April, Confederate forces again captured a Union supply train, this time north of Camden at Marks' Mill. Two hundred and forty Union wagons on their way from Camden to Pine Bluff, Arkansas were lost to the Rebels. Lacking a logistical supply base, and upon hearing of General Bank's failure along the Red River, General Steele abandoned his expedition and ordered a retreat to Little Rock. On 26 April, under a heavy cover of deception, Union forces departed Camden. It took a few hours before General Price learned of General Steele's evacuation of the city, and immediately he planned to pursue and defeat his enemy. The Confederates caught and attacked the Union rear guard as it crossed Saline River at Jenkins Ferry. As had occurred at Marks' Mill, the First Kansas Colored Volunteers were not positioned to meet the attacking rebel forces and were among the few Union units that did not see battle. The Second Kansas Colored Volunteers did, however, fight at Jenkins Ferry and in a display of camaraderie and unity, shouted at the Rebels to "remember Poison Springs". Once safely across the Sabine River, General Steele retreated to Little Rock. Marching without further resistance, they reached the Union stronghold on 3 May, the First Kansas Colored Volunteers encamping approximately eight miles outside of town. Here the soldiers were greeted to a wondrous sight, a supply train from Little Rock "hailed with joy, as we had been without rations for three days."²⁷ The First Kansas Colored Volunteers left Little Rock on 7 May to begin the long march back to Fort Smith, where they arrived on 16 May 1864.

For Union soldiers, the Camden Expedition was both a failure and a success. In terms of tactical achievements, there were few. Beset with logistical shortfalls from the

time he left Little Rock, General Steele never had much of a chance of reaching the Red River in time to assist General Banks. Confederate successes in capturing federal supply trains at Poison Springs and Marks Mill practically rendered the entire Union force ineffective. The expedition did, however, succeed in saving General Bank's Army of the Gulf from being destroyed. Had it not been for Steele's deep push into Arkansas, General Edmund Kirby Smith, Commander, Trans-Mississippi Department would have combined General Price's army with Major General Richard Taylor's along the Red River and together attacked General Bank's thirty-thousand soldiers. As Michael Forsyth writes in *The Camden Expedition*, "Smith's decision to pursue Steele drew a sizeable Rebel force away from Louisiana and Nathaniel P. Banks' imperiled army. This gave the Army of the Gulf and the Mississippi River Squadron invaluable time to escape the grip of a frustrated and angry Richard Taylor".²⁸ A Confederate defeat over Banks would have retained Confederate control over the lower Trans-Mississippi region and more importantly would have prevented these veteran soldiers from re-deploying back east to participate "in the successful actions at Mobile, Atlanta, and Cedar Creek."²⁹ Through their actions during the Camden Expedition, the First Kansas Colored Volunteers directly influenced the Union's ability hold an area that proved critical to defeating the Confederacy. They also indirectly assisted Union offensives in the western theater by providing for the eventual return to General Sherman thousands of borrowed veteran soldiers.

¹ Albert Castel, *Civil War Kansas: Reaping the Whirlwind*. (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 132.

² United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Washington Government Printing Office, 1880-1901, Series 1, vol 22, 597. Cited hereafter as *Official Records*.

³ *Official Records*, (1) 22:597-598.

⁴ *Official Records*, (1) 22:598.

⁵ *Supplement to the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Part II, vol 78, 624

⁶ Edwin C. Bears and Arrell M. Gibson, *Fort Smith: Little Gibraltar on the Arkansas* (University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, Oklahoma, 1979), 270.

⁷ *Kansas Biographical Pamphlets*, vol. 3

⁸ *Supplement to the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Part II, vol 78, 620.

⁹ Lieutenant Van Horn personal files, 25.

¹⁰ Michael J. Forsyth, *The Camden Expedition of 1864 and the Opportunity Lost by the Confederates to Change the Civil War* (McFarland & Company, Inc., Jefferson, North Carolina, 2002), 60.

¹¹ *Official Records*, (1) 34:638.

¹² Wiley Britton, *The Union Brigade in the Civil War* (New York: Franklin Hudson Publishing Company, 1922), 362.

¹³ *Official Records*, (1), 34:744.

¹⁴ *Official Records*, (1), 34:743.

¹⁵ Forsyth, 109.

¹⁶ *Official Records*, (1), 34:791.

¹⁷ *Official Records*, (1), 34:744.

¹⁸ Britton, 366

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 752.

²⁰ *Official Records* (1), 34:753.

²¹ *Official Records* (1), 34:745-746.

- ²² Official Records (1), 34:748.
- ²³ Official Records (1), 34:754.
- ²⁴ Official Records, (1), 34:746.
- ²⁵ Wiley Briton, *Civil War on the Border, Vol II*. (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1898), 291.
- ²⁶ *Leavenworth Daily Conservative*, 8 May 1864..
- ²⁷ Supplement to the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Part II, vol 78, 617.
- ²⁸ Forsyth, 170-171.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 184.

CHAPTER 7

BACK TO THE WEST

With the Camden Expedition complete, First Kansas Colored Volunteers spent the next two months at Fort Smith where they worked at improving its fortifications. For the remainder of the year, the unit served between Fort Smith and Fort Gibson in piecemeal fashion. In July 1864, a brief Confederate attack on Fort Smith was quickly repulsed with cavalry units and members of the First Kansas Colored Volunteers firing from within the fort's fire pits. In August, companies A, B, F, H, and I garrisoned Fort Gibson, while the others remained at Fort Smith. The location a company was stationed proved immaterial to the black soldiers, for they all shared the duties of escorting supply trains, guarding hay camps and improving fortifications. In an area surrounded with by Confederate activity, these duties posed great hazards. Supply steam boats traveling between Little Rock and Fort Smith, and those leaving Fort Smith for Fort Gibson received constant harassing fire from the banks of the Arkansas. It shortly became standard practice to outfit each ship with supporting infantry and one or two howitzers. First Kansas Colored Volunteers provided many of these escorts. Travel by land was also difficult and required a large military escort. One such escort in late August required five entire companies of the First Kansas Colored Infantry to protect a train traveling from Fort Smith to Fort Gibson.¹ Once at Fort Gibson, escort duty to Fort Scott was transferred to members of the Second, Sixth and Fourteenth Kansas Cavalry. The black escort returned to Fort Smith, minus company K which stayed at Fort Gibson to conduct another of the dangerous duties, guarding hay camps. On 1 September 1864, six companies of the

black soldiers were conducting post guard duties at Fort Gibson while the remaining four were guarding haymakers.²

Working hay camps was an extremely important duty for Union forts located in areas devoid of forage, such as Fort Gibson. With three regiments of cavalry stationed in or around the fort, it was essential to maintain large stores of hay to keep the horses in good condition. Recently promoted Brigadier General Cooper knew the importance of these camps to Fort Gibson's troops. Without adequate supplies of hay, the health of Union horses would quickly deteriorate and render a large portion of the fort's fighting power ineffective. It was, therefore, General Cooper's intention in the summer of 1864 to "use his large mounted force to burn the hay, capture and break up the hay stations, and if possible capture or destroy some of the trains en route to or from Fort Scott to Fort Smith."³ Raids on Union hay camps near Fort Gibson began in early July and continued throughout the summer. On 24 August, five hundred Confederate Indians under newly appointed Brigadier General Stand Waite raided a hay camp north of Fort Smith, Arkansas, capturing fourteen prisoners, taking one hundred and fifty horses and burning a large quantity of hay.⁴ Throughout the summer, the harassing raids increased in intensity and destructiveness. In September, a combined force of General Stand Waite's Indians and General Richard M. Gano's Texans chanced upon and completely destroyed a Federal hay camp north of Fort Gibson.

General Waite and Gano's primary objective was actually to capture a supply train scheduled to depart Fort Scott for Forts Gibson and Smith. For the mission, Generals Gano and Waite assembled a force consisting of Creek, Seminole and Cherokee Indians, along with a detachment of Texans. The entire force numbered over two

thousand soldiers accompanied by a battery of pieces of artillery.⁵ To avoid detection, the Confederates crossed the Arkansas and Verdigris Rivers well west of Fort Gibson. During their march north, the Confederate force happened upon a Union hay camp numbering one hundred and twenty-five soldiers of the First Kansas Colored Volunteers and Second Kansas Cavalry commanded by Captain E.A. Barker, Second Kansas Cavalry. In the afternoon of 16 September, “a colored man rode into camp apparently much frightened, and reported a large body of rebels within one mile of camp.”⁶ Captain Barker gathered his cavalry and the black soldiers and “formed them on a ravine in the rear of his camp, and taking a small mounted detachment, rode forward in the direction of the Verdigris about two miles to reconnoiter and ascertain the strength and designs of the enemy.”⁷ What he saw was astounding. Advancing toward his scouting party were over two thousand Confederates with six pieces of artillery. Returning to camp, Captain Barker dismounted his cavalry and joined the black soldiers waiting in the ravine. Generals Gano and Waite pressed the camp hard, attacking from several directions simultaneously. After fighting for half an hour and courageously repulsing three cavalry charges, Confederate numerical superiority threatened to overwhelm the small Union detachment. In a desperate escape attempt, Captain Barker rallied his mounted cavalry and charged against the weakest portion of the Confederate line, hoping to break through. He did manage to escape, but with only fifteen men, the others being quickly surrounded and captured.

Captain Barker’s daring escape left the black soldiers to fend for themselves, which they did successfully for some time. Under the leadership of Lieutenant Thomas B. Sutherland, First Kansas Colored Infantry, the black volunteers of company K held off

General Gano's Texans and General Waite's Indians for over two hours. Black soldier George Duval later reported "the only way he and his comrades could hold the Confederates off was to fire a volley into them when they came up within range, and then reload and be prepared for them when they came up again."⁸ Once the Union soldiers had expended their ammunition, the ferocious battle turned into a massacre. Few black soldiers escaped Flat Rock Creek alive and those that did relied on determination and creativity to do so. A few soldiers submerged themselves in lagoons with only their noses above water, hiding among willows and water-lilies. As described in Wiley Britton's *The Civil War on the Border*, "These soldiers who thus secreted themselves heard the Confederates all around them, frequently only a few yards distant, pursuing and shooting down their comrades in the most heartless manner."⁹ A day after the fighting, Second Kansas Cavalry officers described the battlefield:

There were no dead rebels or white federal soldiers found in camp – they had evidently been buried. But the colored boys, who had fought so gallantly, were shot, their throats cut, and stripped of their clothing, and many of them thrown into the creek.¹⁰

A Confederate description of the massacre also bears reporting. Describing the scene at Flat Rock Creek after their successful cavalry charge, Chief Grayson reported in his autobiography

Presently, however, some of our men discovered a negro hiding in the high weeds near the creek and shot and killed him. At another point another one was found and shot, and it now appearing that these were to be found hid in the weeds, the men proceeded to hunt them out much as sportsmen do quails. Some of the negroes finding they were about to be discovered, would spring up from the brush and cry out, O! master spare me. But the men were in no spirit to spare the wretched unfortunates and shot them down without mercy...Some of them were found lying in hiding in the creek with barely their noses out of the water and were shot and dragged and thrown out on the bank.¹¹

As to Grayson's thoughts on the killing, he reported "I confess this was sickening to me, but the men were like wild beasts and I was powerless to stop them from this unnecessary butchery."¹² Asked by his troops whether a captured white soldier should be killed, Grayson spared his life stating "that it was negroes that we were killing now and not white men."¹³

Similar to the outcome at Poison Springs, First Kansas Colored Volunteers found themselves victims not only of the brutalities of war, but of the brutalities of racial hatred. Of the thirty-seven black soldiers at Flat Rock, only four survived.¹⁴ Fifteen soldiers of the Second Kansas Cavalry escaped along with Captain Barker, the rest were reported as either missing or captured. Also captured during the fighting were twenty-five horses, ammunition, twelve mules and two six-mule wagons. Captain Barker reported "one thousand tons of hay were burned, together with all the mowing machines, wagons, &c., belonging to the hay contractors."¹⁵

Generals Gano and Waite continued north and intercepted the supply train traveling south to Fort Gibson. At Cabin Creek, the scene of General Waite's initial defeat at the hands of the First Kansas Colored Volunteers, Confederate forces completely routed the Union escort, capturing the entire train. During their return to Indian Territory, the Confederates meet Colonel Williams and his black soldiers as they rushed to meet the retreating Southerners in an effort to recover lost Union supplies. The two sides met at Pryor's Creek, due north of Fort Gibson and west of the Grand River. Colonel Williams commanded his regiment and a few artillery pieces. Having forced marched from Fort Gibson, his infantry soldiers were too exhausted to fight without first resting. Light skirmishing developed and continued for the remainder of the afternoon.

As darkness fell, Generals Waite and Gano covered their withdrawal from the area by creating the impression of heavy activity within the wagon train. In what proved an exceptional deception ploy, “Gano’s Texans ran an empty wagon noisily over the rocks for two hours, creating the illusion that the entire train was being parked there for the night.”¹⁶ The ploy worked and Confederate forces stole away undetected during the night. To his amazement, Colonel Williams and his First Kansas Colored Volunteers awoke the following morning without an enemy to fight. They remained in the area of Cabin Creek a few days and escorted a supply train south to Fort Gibson during the last week of September.

Shortly after the engagement with Generals Gano and Waite, Colonel Williams assumed command of the Second Brigade, District of the Frontier. His brigade consisted of two artillery batteries and four colored infantry regiments: the Eleventh and Fifty-fourth U.S. Colored Troops and the First and Second Kansas Colored Volunteers. Command of the First Kansas Colored Volunteers was temporarily passed to Captain John R. Graton.¹⁷

In September 1864, Confederate General Sterling Price advanced into northern Missouri with the intent of capturing the Federal arsenal at Springfield. Denied an unopposed entry into the city, his army turned west and headed to the Kansas-Missouri border. After several engagements with Union forces culminating in defeat at the Battle of Westport, General Price turned south and headed back into Arkansas. At this time, General Thayer, commanding the Frontier Division from Fort Smith, Arkansas, feared for the welfare of his scattered command posted along the Arkansas-Indian Territory border.

Anticipating an upcoming engagement with General Price at Fort Smith, he wrote Colonel Wattles, the commander of Fort Gibson, requesting additional troops:

Sir: I have just received information from Cassville, via Fayetteville (sic), to the effect that Price is marching on Springfield, and I am informed also that he contemplates coming via Fayetteville. You will therefore, upon receipt of this, without a moment's delay, send Colonel Williams with his command, viz, First Kansas Colored, Fifty-fourth U.S. Colored, and the section of First Arkansas Battery to this place.¹⁸

On 20 October, the First Kansas Colored Regiment marched to Fort Smith with Colonel Williams, but the engagement with General Price never occurred. While stationed at Fort Smith, the regiment performed escort duties for the numerous supply trains transiting between Little Rock and Fort Smith. On 15 November, twenty-five men from Company F were detailed to escort the steamer *Green Durbin* from Fort Smith to Little Rock. They escorted the *Carrie Jacobs* back to Fort Smith on 22 December.¹⁹ From 27 November to 6 December, the regiment escorted a forage train from Fort Smith to Cane Hill, Arkansas and back. On 16 December, the First Kansas Colored escorted a train consisting of one hundred wagons from Fort Smith to Clarksville. The regiment's mission was to salvage cargo from the wrecked steamer *Doane*.²⁰ They reached the wrecked ship on 17 December and returned to Fort Smith with the *Doane*'s provisions on 27 December.

During the final months of 1864, command of the First Kansas Colored transferred to newly promoted Lieutenant Colonel Richard Ward. On 13 December, the Bureau of Colored Troops renamed the First Kansas Colored Infantry Regiment the Seventy-ninth United States Colored Troops (USCT) in accordance with General Order No. 143.²¹ The Bureau, established on 22 May 1863 by the Adjutant General's Office, provided official recognition of black soldiers in the United States Army through this re-designation process.

Soldiers of the Seventy-ninth USCT began 1865 heavily engaged in escorting steamers and wagon trains between Little Rock and Fort Smith. As with the previous year, escort duty proved a dangerous mission as Confederate forces operating along the banks of the Arkansas River constantly sought to disrupt Union logistical re-supply efforts. In the afternoon of 17 January 1865, Confederate Colonel Brooks attacked Union steamers *Chippewa*, *Annie Jacobs*, *Lotus* and *Ad Hines* near Ivey's Ford, eighteen miles up the Arkansas River from Clarksville. All four steam boats carried passengers, Union soldiers and sixty days supplies for Fort Smith. During the attack, the *Chippewa* was fired upon from the south bank, captured and burned. The *Annie Jacobs* and *Lotus* were also damaged but managed a landing on the northern bank. Having recently received transfer orders to Little Rock, the Seventy-ninth USCT, along with two other black regiments, was ordered east to keep the river surrounding the damaged *Annie Jacobs* clear of enemy forces while it underwent repairs. The regiment departed Fort Smith on 19 January, marched south of the Arkansas River and arrived at Ivey's Ford the following afternoon. By the time the black soldiers arrived, Colonel Brooks and his rebel force had retired south. The Seventy-ninth USCT moved further down the river the following morning, clearing a path to Patterson's Bluff. The two able transports, *Lotus* and *Ad Hines*, having returned from successfully offloading their cargo at Fort Smith, followed the black regiment down the river. On 22 January, the two black regiments and transports moved further down to Dardanelle. As the river from Dardanelle to Little Rock was reported clear of enemy activity, the steamers continued the remainder of the journey without escort. The Seventy-ninth USCT crossed to the north side of the Arkansas River and continued their journey to Little Rock, arriving there on 31 January.

The Seventy-ninth USCT remained at Little Rock until July 1865. Their primary duty remained escorting steamers and wagon trains along the Arkansas River. In the evening of 6 May, two hundred-fifty members of the regiment along with seventy-five men of the Fourth Arkansas Cavalry, all under command of Lieutenant Richard Ward, departed south on the steamer *Rose Hambleton*. They arrived at Pine Bluff the morning of 7 May and were ordered to scout along the river's northern bank. As recounted in Lieutenant Colonel's Ward official report "Ascertaining from good authority that they [rebel forces] were above the mouth of Little Bayou, I moved to that point and made several scouts at different points where it was practicable to move infantry. I found their outposts at General Williams' plantation and ascertained from a citizen that the enemy belonged to a Texas regiment."²² On 9 May, the detachment of black soldiers met Major Davis of the Thirteenth Illinois Cavalry whose scouting party had just secured the surrender of all rebel forces in the area. Lieutenant Colonel Ward returned to Pine Bluff, reported the capture of the rebels, and marched back to Little Rock.

In July, Lieutenant Colonel Ward led his regiment back to Pine Bluff, where they stayed for the remainder of their service. Their work at Pine Bluff included garrison and escort duty. On 1 October, the regiment was mustered out of service. On 30 October 1865, the black soldiers of the First Kansas Colored Volunteers (Seventy-ninth USCT) received their final pay and were discharged at Fort Leavenworth.²³

¹ Wiley Britton, *The Civil War on the Border: 1863-1865*, (The Knickerbocker Press, New York), 1898, 244.

², Ibid.

³ Ibid., 243.

⁴ G.W. Grayson, *A Creek Warrior for the Confederacy: The Autobiography of Chief G.W. Grayson*. Edited by W. David Baird. (University of Oklahoma Press: Oklahoma, 1988), 93.

⁵ Grayson, 94-95.

⁶ *Leavenworth Daily Conservative*, 29 September 1864

⁷ Britton, 245.

⁸ Ibid., 246.

⁹ Ibid., 247.

¹⁰ *Leavenworth Daily Conservative*, 29 September 1864.

¹¹ Grayson, 96.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Official Records, (1), 43:772.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Wilfred Knight, *Red Fox: Stand Waite's Civil War Years* (Glendale: California, Arthur H. Clark Company, 1988), 255.

¹⁷ Official Records, (1), 41 (Part 4):374.

¹⁸ Official Records, (1), 41 (Part 4):107.

¹⁹ Supplement to the Official Records, 635.

²⁰ Official Records, (1), 41 (Part 4):838.

²¹ Frederick H. Dyer, *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion*, vol 1 (Des Moines: Dyer Publishing Company. 1908), 251.

²² Official Records, (1), 48:258.

²³ Dyer, 1735.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

War in the Trans-Mississippi West continued months after General Robert E. Lee surrendered his army on 9 April 1865 at Appomattox, Virginia. On 21 April, Confederate General Edmund Kirby Smith issued a proclamation “to all military personnel of the Trans-Mississippi Department, advising of Lee’s surrender, but urging the Trans-Mississippi army to stand by the colors and maintain discipline.”¹ Union forces in the west also remained poised for operations against the South. In early May, Colonel Phillips, commander of Fort Gibson, busied his command with preparations for a final offensive against General Stand Waite’s Confederate Indian Brigade. General Waite, his forces in defensive positions anticipating a Union expedition south, was busy with his own preparations for offensive actions against Fort Gibson. The impending clash, however, never occurred. On 26 May, Lieutenant General Simon Buckner, Chief of Staff of the Trans-Mississippi Department, surrendered the forces and all public property held by his command. One month later, on 23 June, Union forces claimed final victory as General Stand Waite surrendered his Confederate Indians, officially ending the Civil War.

The accomplishments of the First Kansas Colored Volunteer Infantry Regiment helped propel the Union Army to success in the Trans-Mississippi West. Their primary mission to maintain control of Missouri, as enumerated by President Lincoln and his Department commanders, was accomplished. From the time General Price was ousted from the state in 1861, Union soldiers kept the Confederates south of the Arkansas River. The First Kansas Colored regiment was instrumental in this success. Their determined

efforts on the battlefield checked Confederate advances in southern Kansas. The regiment's untiring escort duty maintained security along the military road from Fort Scott to Fort Gibson. Their campaigns in Indian Territory sustained the once beleaguered Union forces at Fort Gibson. Their victory at Honey Springs, Indian Territory opened the way for Union control of western Arkansas, unseating a once dominant Confederate stronghold. Inadvertently, their efforts during the Camden Expedition into southern Arkansas saved General Banks' Army of the Gulf from defeat at the hands of General Kirby Smith. Off the battlefield, the black regiment's accomplishments are equally important. Routine fatigue duty sustained the Union Army's presence in the West. From the building and strengthening of fortifications in Kansas, to operating and protecting hay encampments in Indian Territory, to guarding and working cotton fields in Roseville, Arkansas, no task was too miniscule or too dangerous for these black soldiers to perform. Collectively, the efforts of the First Kansas Colored Volunteers helped establish Union dominance from 1863 to the end of the war and paved the way for Union success west of the Mississippi.

The First Kansas Colored Regiment made their impact on Union efforts early in their existence. Looking to curtail bushwhacker predations along the Kansas-Missouri border, Kansas sent its black soldiers to Island Mound, Missouri where they routed a numerically superior rebel force and temporarily cleared the area of bushwhacker activity. Their actions averted an impending bushwhacker attack on the town of Mound City. Their success also cleared the surrounding area of guerilla activity, thus allowing Federal soldiers and resources to concentrate on Confederate forces threatening Fort Gibson. During this battle, they became the first black regiment to engage in combat

during the Civil War. The fight at Island Mound in October 1862 did much to advance the cause of black men throughout the nation. As reflected by the Fifty-first Congress in 1890, “The discipline acquired and the courage displayed by the First Kansas Colored Volunteers in camp and on the field during the last months of 1862, influenced the action of President Lincoln in issuing his proclamation of New Year’s Day, 1863, which put in force the provisions of the act of July 17, 1862, and forecasted the freedom and citizenship of persons of African descent”.² Throughout the remainder of the year, they were called upon to disperse rebel guerilla forces belonging to the most notorious of bushwhackers. Repeatedly, they cleared pockets of guerilla activity in Missouri and Kansas. They protected supply trains from these same rebel forces, ensuring critical supplies reached Union soldiers at Fort Gibson.

As the regiment marched south from Kansas, their accomplishments began to take on national significance. Their struggle to rid Kansas of pesky bushwhackers paled in comparison to their responsibility to check Confederate soldiers bent on securing its independence from the north. At Cabin Creek, the black soldiers fought for the first time as a regiment. Once again, their purpose was to ensure needed supplies reached Fort Gibson and once again they accomplished the task. At Cabin Creek, Confederate soldiers fighting for Colonel Stand Waite felt the fury of blacks fighting for their individual freedoms and the reunification of the Union. At Honey Springs, the First Kansas Colored Volunteers delivered a deadly blow to Colonel Cooper’s Confederate forces that effectively ended all organized attempts to capture Fort Gibson. In describing the battle, Leroy Fischer writes

The Battle of Honey Springs was in both size and importance the Gettysburg of the Civil War in Indian Territory, for it marked the climax of massed Confederate military resistance and opened the way for capture of Fort Smith and much of Arkansas. Perhaps in terms of results, Honey Springs was the Gettysburg of the trans-Mississippi West.³

Within a few weeks of the Battle at Honey Springs, Union troops occupied Fort Smith, Arkansas. This post offered Union commanders great advantages. It reestablished a Union presence in the area, a presence missing since May 1861 when the Army abandoned the fort to the encroaching Confederacy. Fort Smith quickly became a Union recruiting station, as many black and white residents looked to the Union forces for protection against Confederates. As described by Edwin Bearrs, “Hundreds of Arkansas citizens, some of them from as far away as eighty miles, came to Fort Smith to assert that they had been pro-Union all along but had supported the Confederate cause only because they had been forced to do so. Confederate deserters came in too, many of them volunteering to serve in the Union Army.”⁴ Control of Fort Smith also opened the vital Arkansas River for use in ferrying supplies from Little Rock to Fort Smith and Fort Gibson. Finally, Fort Smith offered a point of departure for Union forces operating deep into southern Arkansas. General Thayer’s Frontier Division began its participation in General Steele’s Camden expedition from Fort Smith.

The accomplishments of the First Kansas Colored Volunteers during the combined Camden and Red River expeditions are somewhat overshadowed by the tactical failures of both operations. Yet the efforts of Colonel Williams’ black soldiers helped prevent Confederate forces in Arkansas and Louisiana from massing on General Bank’s Army of the Gulf, a move that could easily have resulted in the defeat and surrender of over thirty thousand Union soldiers. The Union move into southern

Arkansas effectively occupied Confederate General Sterling Price's entire Arkansas Department, over ten thousand strong, leaving General Taylor in Louisiana to tend to General Banks single-handedly.

Following the Camden Expedition, First Kansas Colored Volunteers returned to western Arkansas and Indian Territory where once again, their presence kept Confederate forces at bay. Garrison duties and escort service performed throughout the frontier maintained Union dominance and kept General Cooper's Confederate soldiers and General Waite's Indian Brigade south of the Canadian River.

The importance of the Trans-Mississippi West cannot be understated. For the Confederacy, defeat west of the Mississippi severely crippled attempts to garner international support for the fledgling government. Union control of Missouri allowed General Grant to march his army along the western bank of the Mississippi River en-route to victory at Vicksburg.. By pushing General Smith's Confederates into southern Arkansas, Union forces were able to use the Arkansas River to transport food and supplies to Fort Smith and Fort Gibson. General Blunt, with assistance from the black soldiers under his command, expelled General Cooper and his Confederate Indians from Fort Gibson and forced them to retire south of the Canadian River. Success west of the Mississippi also allowed General Halleck, Commander-in-Chief, the luxury of transporting reinforcements to General Grant in 1863, and General Sherman in 1864. Though the Red River and Camden Expeditions failed miserably for the Union, Confederate forces were unable to capitalize on the opportunity to reclaim northern Arkansas and Missouri. Soldiers of the First Kansas Colored Volunteers participated in each of these endeavors.

The tremendous accomplishments of the First Kansas Colored Volunteers came at a high price. Throughout the course of the war, the regiment lost one hundred and eighty-three enlisted men and five officers killed in action. Additionally, one hundred sixty-five enlisted soldiers and one officer died of diseases. Tribute has never been afforded the fallen soldiers of the First Kansas Colored Volunteers. Had they received that honor, the tribute may have resembled a ceremony in the summer of 1862, where family members of the regiment's black soldiers presented them their first regimental flag in the city of Leavenworth:

When the presentation was made, the donors approached the company with timed step and trembling hand, the flag was placed in the hands of the color bearer, no word was Spoken Save in the language of the eye, tears responded to tears, and the donors retired.⁵

¹ Wilfred Knight, *Red Fox: Stand Waite' Civil War Years* (Glendale, California: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1988), 268.

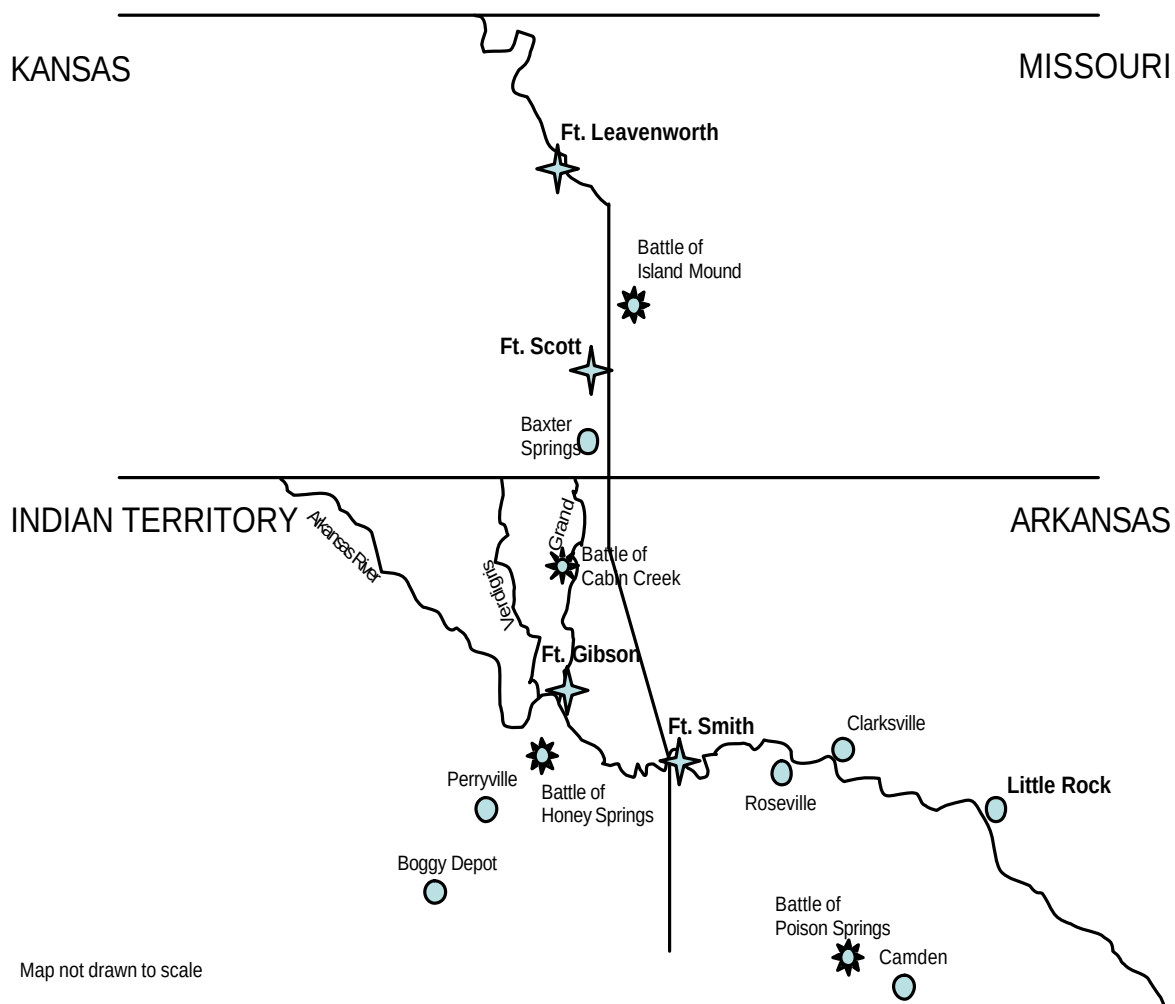
² U.S. 51st Congress, 1st Session, 1890, House Committee on War Claims, Report on bill for the Relief of Certain officers and Enlisted Men of the 1st Kansas Colored Volunteers, Report 3157, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1980)

³ Leroy Fischer, *Indian Territory's Gettysburg: The Battle of Honey Springs. Oklahoma Today* (Winter 1970), 15-18

⁴ Edwin C. Bearss and Arrell M. Gibson, *Fort Smith: Little Gibraltar on the Arkansas*, 2 ed.,(University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, Oklahoma,1979), 270.

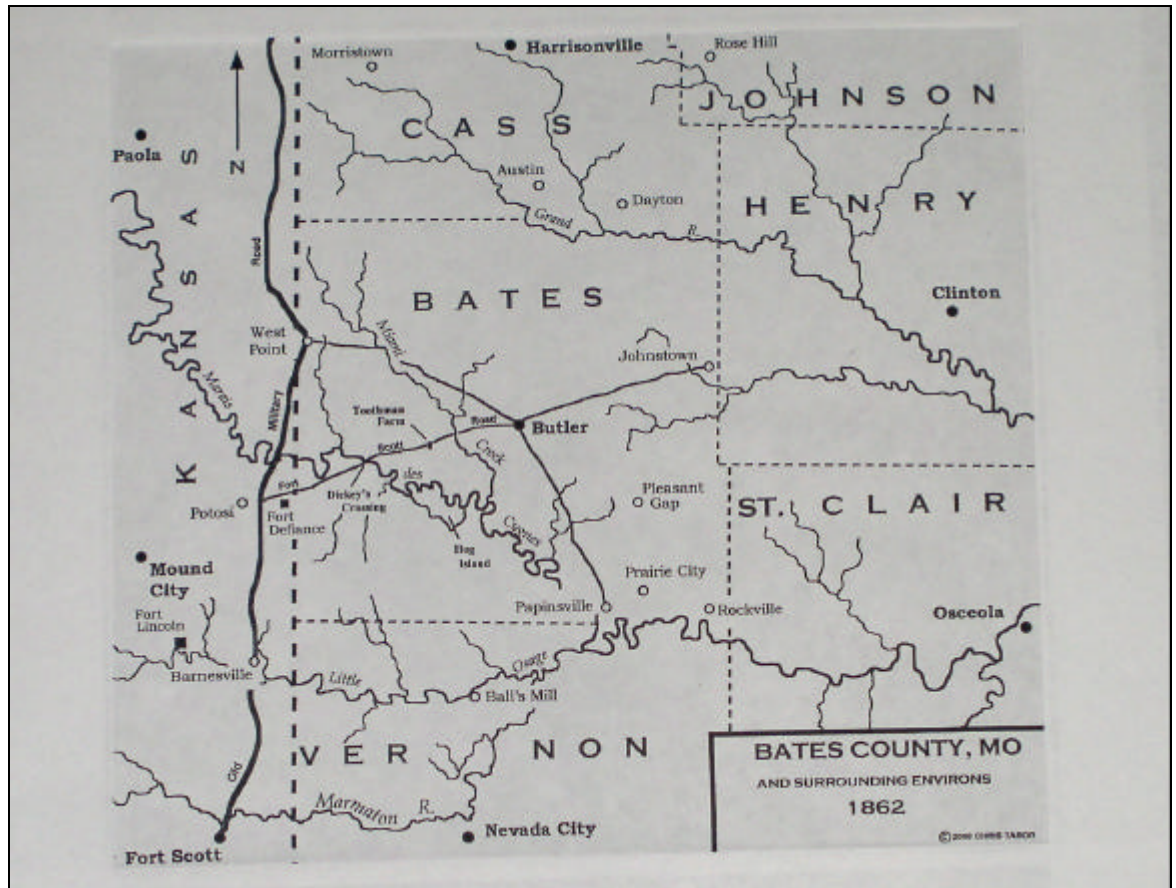
⁵ Captain Ethan Earle Memorandum Book, (Kansas State Historical Society), 12.

APPENDIX A
FRONTIER MAP



APPENDIX B

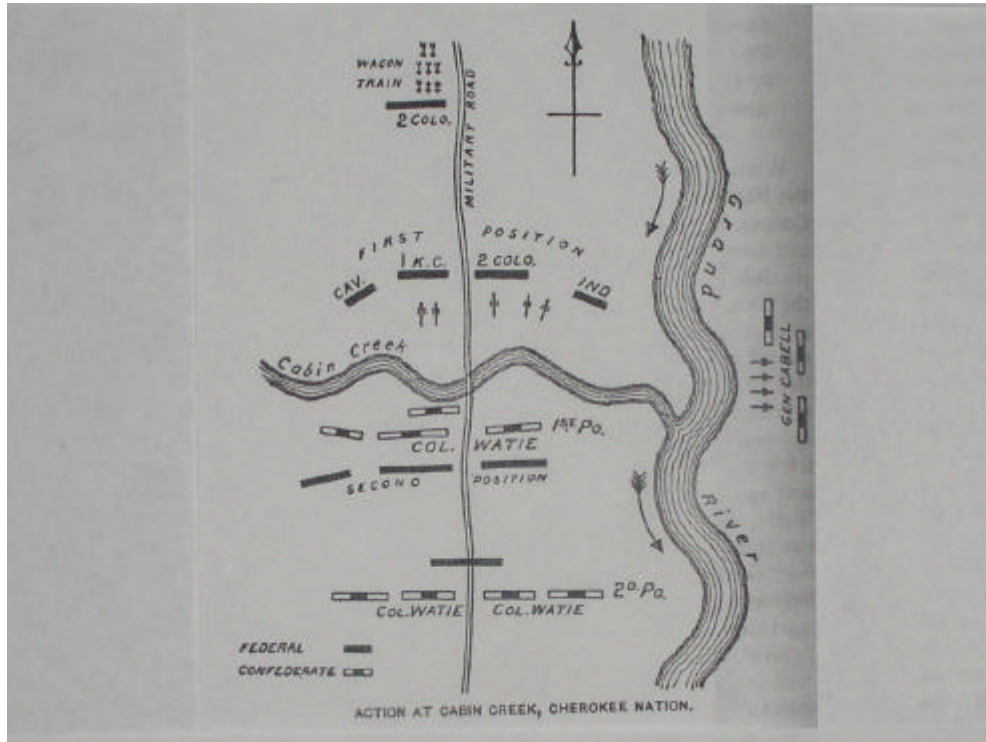
ISLAND MOUND, MISSOURI



The Battle of Island Mound was fought just east of the Kansas border, in Bates County, Missouri. Island Mound, also referred to as Hog Island, is located southwest of Butler, Missouri..

APPENDIX C

BATTLE OF CABIN CREEK



• UNION

Colonel James Williams

- First Kansas Colored Infantry Regiment
- Second Colorado Infantry (3 Companies)
- Third Wisconsin Cavalry (1 Company)
- Ninth Kansas Cavalry (2 Companies)
- Fourteenth Kansas Cavalry (1 Company)
- Second Kansas Battery
- Indian Home Guard Battalion *

900 Union soldiers
5 guns

• CONFEDERATE

Colonel Stand Waite

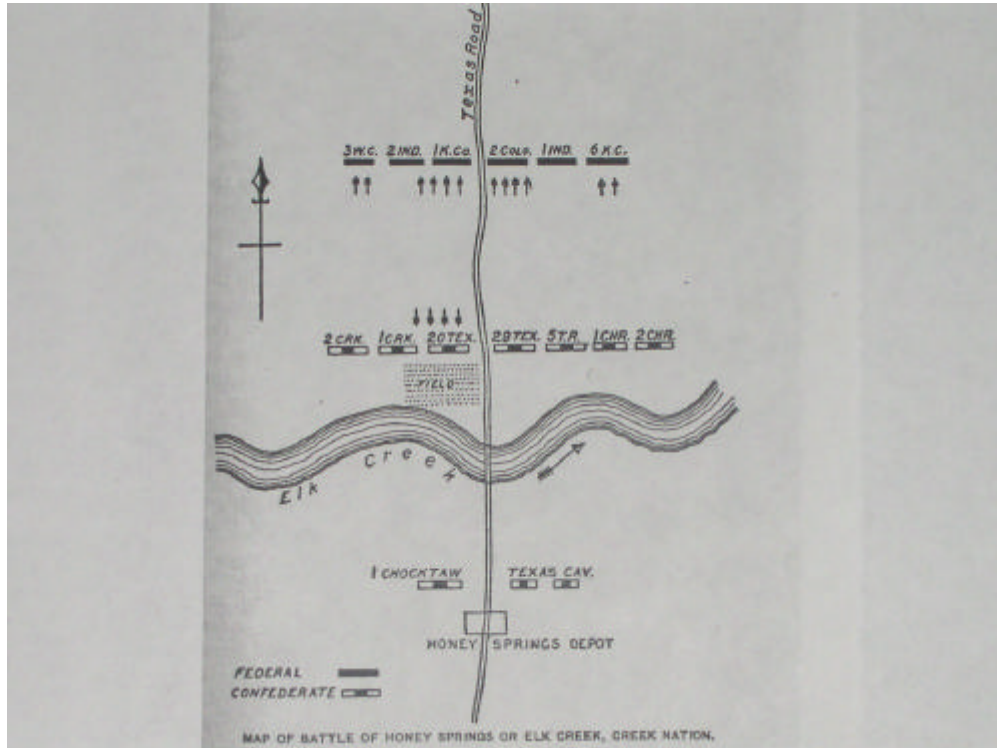
- First Cherokee Regiment
- First Creek Regiment
- Twenty-seventh Texas Cavalry Detachment
- Twenty-ninth Texas Cavalry Detachment

1,600 Confederate soldiers
0 guns

* Contained soldiers from First, Second and Third Indian Regiments

APPENDIX D

BATTLE OF HONEY SPRINGS



• UNION

General James Blunt

- First Kansas Colored Infantry
- First Indian Regiment
- Second Indian Regiment
- Third Indian Regiment
- Sixth Kansas Cavalry Detachment
- Third Wisconsin Detachment
- Second Colorado Infantry Detachment
- Second Kansas Battery
- Captain Hopkin's Kansas Battery

3,000 Union soldiers
12 guns

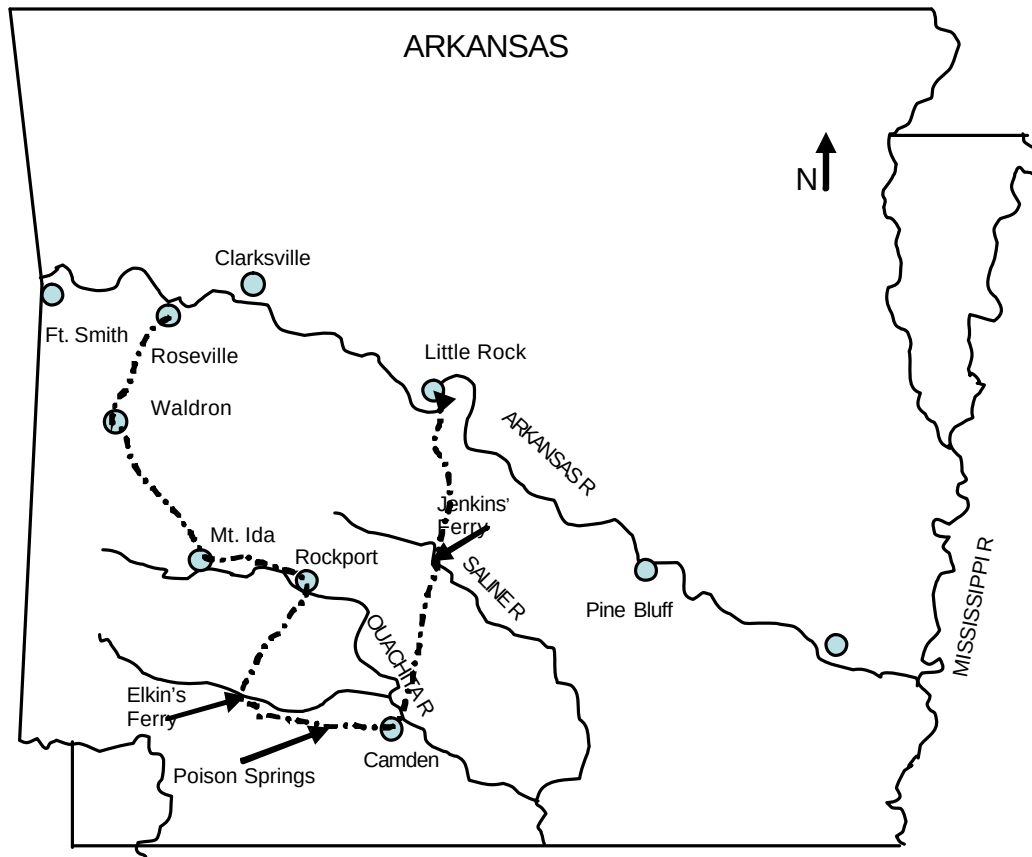
• CONFEDERATE

General Douglas Cooper

- Twentieth Texas Cavalry
- Twentieth-Ninth Texas Cavalry
- Fifth Texas Partisan Rangers
- First Cherokee Regiment
- Second Cherokee Regiment
- First Creek Regiment
- Second Creek Regiment
- Choctaw/Chickasaw Regiment
- Captain Lee's light battery

5,700 Confederate soldiers
4 guns

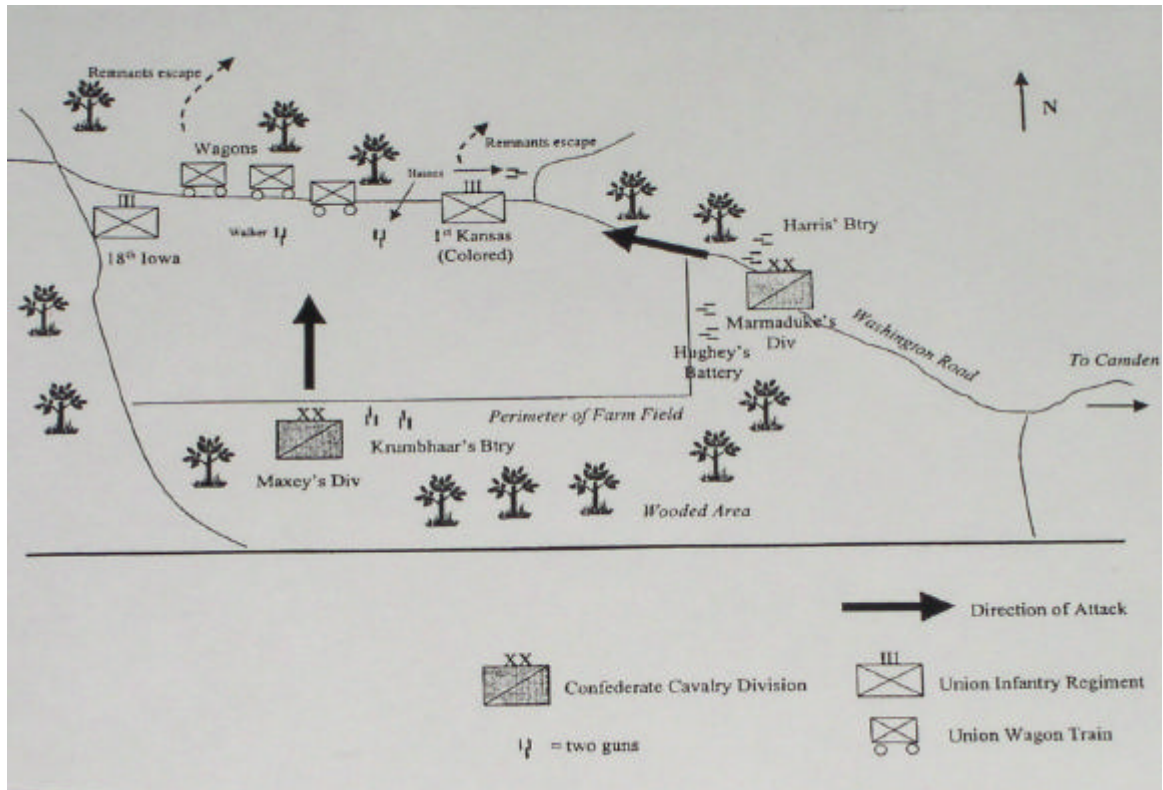
APPENDIX E
CAMDEN EXPEDITION



The First Kansas Colored Volunteers departed Roseville, Arkansas and joined the Frontier Division near Waldron. The consolidated division continued their march through Mt. Ida and Rockport. They rendezvoused with General Steele's Army at Elkins' Ferry. Here General Steele turned east and passed through Prairie D' Anne and Poison Springs before arriving at Camden. During their withdrawal, Union forces crossed the Saline River at Jenkins' Ferry and proceeded north to Little Rock.

APPENDIX F

POISON SPRINGS



• UNION

Colonel James Williams

- First Kansas Colored Infantry Regiment
- Eighteenth Iowa Infantry Detachment
- Second Kansas Cavalry Detachment
- Sixth Kansas Cavalry Detachment
- Fourteenth Kansas Cavalry Detachment
- Second Indiana Battery

1,200 Union soldiers
4 guns

• CONFEDERATE

Brigadier General Samuel Maxey

- General Samuel Maxey's Division
 - Colonel Gano Texas Cavalry Brigade *
 - Colonel Tandy Walker Choctaw Indian Brigade
- General John Marmaduke's Division
 - Colonel Cabell Arkansas Cavalry Brigade **
 - Colonel Green Missouri Cavalry Brigade
 - Colonel Crawford Arkansas Cavalry Brigade**

3,500 Confederate soldiers
12 guns

* Led by Colonel Charles DeMorse

** Attached from General James Fagan's Division

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