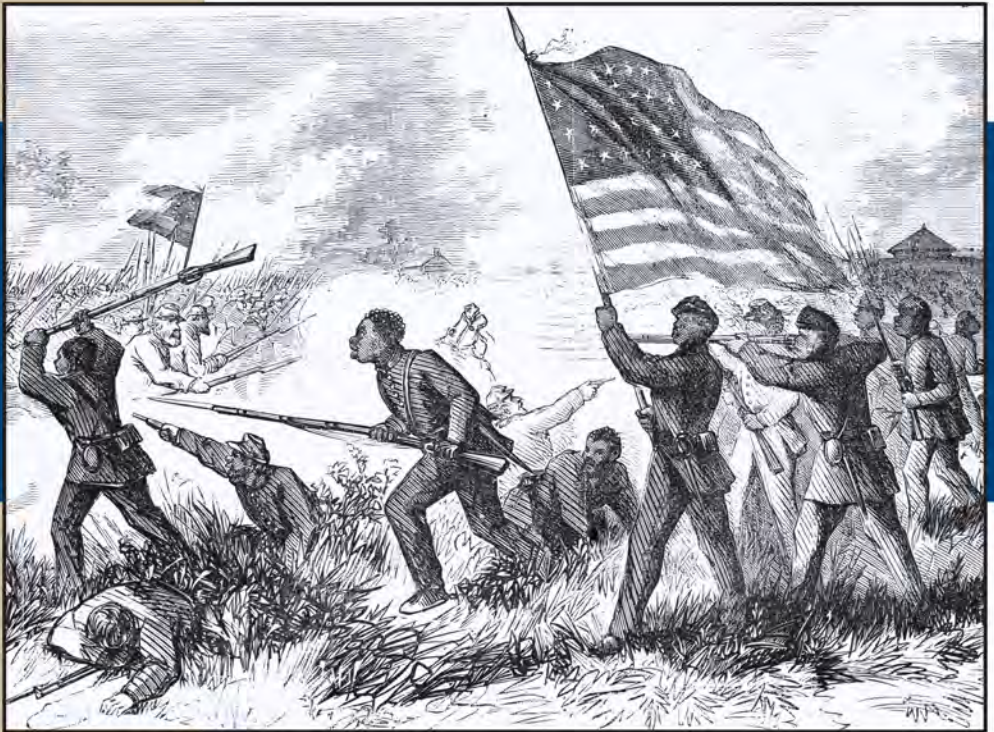


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## ***Slaves into Soldiers: Forging the African Brigade in Northeast Louisiana***

By GARY A. O'DELL\*

On April 30, 1863, Union Gen. Ulysses S. Grant began moving more than 20,000 troops under his command in northeastern Louisiana across the Mississippi River in what has been called the greatest amphibious operation in American history prior to the World War II invasion of Normandy. Grant's objective was the strongly fortified city of Vicksburg, Mississippi, which, along with the guns at Port Hudson, fifteen miles north of Baton Rouge, remained the only significant obstacles to Union control of the great river. Situated on bluffs high above the river, the batteries of these Confederate bastions could devastate any enemy vessels that attempted to pass. More of Grant's troops soon followed the initial wave, and from the landing point at Bruinsburg, about twenty-eight miles southwest of Vicksburg, Grant marched east to Jackson, cutting off Vicksburg's supply line, and returned on May 18 to lay siege to the river city from its rear. After six long weeks of privation and constant bombardment, Vicksburg surrendered on July 4. With the capture of Port Hudson on July 9 by Gen. Nathaniel Banks, the Union achieved dominance over the Mississippi River and its major tributaries, splitting the Confederacy in half and

\*Gary A. O'Dell is a recently retired professor of geography at Morehead State University, now emeritus professor. He is a former Kentucky State Geographer, and in 2020 received the Distinguished Researcher award from MSU and the Peter M. Hauer award in history from the National Speleological Society.

dealing a tremendous blow to southern morale.<sup>1</sup>

Fighting had not ended in northeastern Louisiana when Grant moved the main body of his army into Mississippi. As Grant began to execute his land campaign against Vicksburg, among those left behind to guard the captured territory were some of the greenest troops in the Union army. Northeast Louisiana would be defended, in large part, by African Americans in uniform, eager volunteers recently enlisted from among the formerly enslaved persons of the plantations along the Mississippi. This was a new kind of soldier. Although thousands of Black patriots fought for America during the Revolutionary War, the Militia Act of 1792 limited service in the militia or army to “free able-bodied white male” citizens, a dictum conveniently ignored by Andrew Jackson, who enlisted two battalions of Black troops for the defense of New Orleans during the War of 1812. At the onset of the Civil War half a century later, many northern abolitionists advocated immediate emancipation and enlistment of Black troops to suppress the rebellion, but Pres. Abraham Lincoln was concerned that such a move might provoke border states such as Kentucky and Missouri to secession. Instead, both Congress and the President adopted a more gradual approach. By late 1862, however, the Union and Confederate armies were locked in a stalemate, and Lincoln became convinced that emancipation and recruitment of Black soldiers was now essential to the war effort—to fill the depleted ranks of the army, to obtain employment for many of the thousands of “contrabands” who had entered Federal lines, and to deprive the Confederacy of the enslaved manpower that allowed so many southern whites to serve in the military.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>U.S. War Department, *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, hereafter cited as *O.R.* (Washington, DC, 1880-1901), Ser. 1, Vol. 14, Pt. 3, 246; George Crooke, *The Twenty-First Regiment of Iowa Volunteer Infantry* (Milwaukee, 1891), 53-55; Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*, vol. 1 (New York, 1885), 468-487; Michael B. Ballard, *Vicksburg: The Campaign That Opened the Mississippi* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004), 221-413; Lawrence L. Hewitt, *Port Hudson: Confederate Bastion on the Mississippi* (Baton Rouge, 1987), 126-172.

<sup>2</sup>*An Act to More Effectually Provide for the National Defence by Establishing an Uniform Militia Through the United States*, (Philadelphia, 1792), Library of Congress, Printed Ephemera Collection, Portfolio 218, Folder 12a (quotation);

The first steps toward Black enlistment were taken during the summer of 1861, beginning with the decision of Gen. Benjamin F. Butler, in command at Fortress Monroe in Virginia, that formerly enslaved persons who came to him for refuge were “contraband of war” and could thus be used to labor in support of the Union. Writing to Sec. of War Simon Cameron on July 30, Butler justified his action on the basis that, since Virginia had seceded from the Union, he was no longer legally obligated to honor the fugitive slave law and return them to their masters. In his view, the refugees were not property, but men, women, and children entitled to freedom. In his reply, Cameron supported Butler’s “contraband” reasoning, provided that formerly enslaved persons had been directly employed by the Confederate military, but he dodged the issue of freedom. Shortly thereafter, in August, Congress passed the First Confiscation Act, which authorized the government to seize any property of the Confederacy, including enslaved persons, who had been “employed in hostile service.” Union commanders were quick to take advantage of this legislation and during the course of the war put many of the estimated 500,000-700,000 “contrabands” to work supporting the army in a variety of ways: digging trenches, building fortifications, herding cattle, driving wagons, and, as in northeastern Louisiana, picking cotton on confiscated plantations.<sup>3</sup>

The path to freedom and military service was greatly advanced on July 17, 1862, by the simultaneous passage of the Second Confiscation Act and a revision of the Militia Acts of 1792 and 1795.

John D. Smith, “Let Us All Be Grateful That We Have Colored Troops That Will Fight,” in *Black Soldiers in Blue: African American Troops in the Civil War Era*, ed. John D. Smith (Chapel Hill, NC, 2002), 1-23; William E. Alt and Betty L. Alt, *Black Soldiers, White Wars: Black Warriors from Antiquity to the Present* (Westport, CT, 2002), 17-30.

<sup>3</sup>Benjamin F. Butler to Simon Cameron, July 30, 1861, in *Private and Official Correspondence of Gen. Benjamin F. Butler During the Period of the Civil War*, vol. 1, ed. Jessie M. Marshall (Norwood, MA, 1917), 185-188 (first quotation, 186), Cameron to Butler, Aug. 8, 1861, 201-203; “An Act to Confiscate Property Used for Insurrectionary Purposes,” Aug. 6, 1861, in *U. S. Statutes at Large*, vol. 12, 319 (second quotation); John Syrett, *The Civil War Confiscation Acts: Failing to Reconstruct the South* (New York, 2005), 2-6; Smith, “Let Us All Be Grateful,” 11-23.

Whereas the First Confiscation Act allowed confiscation only of enslaved persons directly engaged in supporting Confederate military operations, the second act was much broader, emancipating all slaves belonging to persons involved in the rebellion. The Second Confiscation Act was a compromise resulting from a long and heated Congressional debate over the legality of seizing property in the Confederate states. Radicals championed a bill that allowed confiscation of any property belonging to persons participating in the rebellion, whereas conservatives believed such actions would violate the Constitution's prohibition of bills of attainder, legislative acts that single out individuals or groups for punishment without due process of law, or the Fifth Amendment, which prohibited seizure of property under the same circumstances. The compromise required judicial proceedings in Federal courts to allow confiscation, which satisfied the moderates in Congress but proved unenforceable, given that the contrabands were flocking to Union armies advancing through war zones deep in the Confederacy where such courts did not exist. Nevertheless, the act allowed the president to "employ as many persons of African descent as he may deem necessary and proper for the suppression of this rebellion" and thus paved the way for the Emancipation Proclamation and enlistment of Black soldiers.<sup>4</sup>

The Militia Act of 1862 more directly addressed the issue by declaring that militias would be constituted of "all able-bodied male citizens between the ages of eighteen and forty-five," without stipulating that such persons must be white, thus opening the door to African Americans. Specifically, the act provided for formerly enslaved persons to "be received into the service of the United States, for the purpose of constructing intrenchments [sic], or performing camp service, or any other labor, or any military or naval service for which they may be found competent," and to receive wages for so doing. Lincoln signed both bills into law amid deep misgivings that the time was not yet right to place arms in the hands of Black soldiers. Accordingly, as historian John D. Smith observed, for the time being "they continued to wield pick and

<sup>4</sup>"An Act to Suppress Insurrection, to Punish Treason and Rebellion, to Seize and Confiscate the Property of Rebels, and for Other Purposes," July 17, 1863, in *U. S. Statutes at Large*, vol. 12, 589-592, (quotation, 592); Syrett, *Confiscation Acts*, 2-54.



shovel, not muskets and swords.”<sup>5</sup>

The right moment soon arrived. On September 22, 1862, carefully timed to capitalize on a narrow but morale-boosting Union victory at Antietam, Maryland, five days beforehand, Lincoln issued a preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, which would not become law until ratified on January 1, 1863. The Proclamation declared that all persons held in slavery in the states then in rebellion against the United States “henceforward shall be free.” Determined to save the Union by any means, Lincoln’s decision to issue the proclamation was made from both military expediency and humanitarian concerns. This marked a turning point in the character of the conflict, now transformed by the stroke of a pen from a constitutional struggle to restore the Union to a war of Black liberation, in the process swelling the ranks of the army with formerly enslaved soldiers. Toward this end, a key provision of the Proclamation directed that freed slaves “will be received into the armed service of the United States to garrison forts, positions, stations, and other places, and to man vessels of all sorts in said service.”<sup>6</sup>

Southerners were both appalled and infuriated by Lincoln’s action. In his January 23, 1863, address to the Confederate Congress, Pres. Jefferson Davis referred to the proclamation as “the most execrable measure recorded in the history of guilty man” and warned that the provision in the Proclamation that enslaved persons “abstain from violence unless in necessary self-defense” would lead to a general uprising and encourage a slaughter of whites. Davis recommended that any commissioned officers leading Black troops, if captured, should be delivered over to the authorities of the states for punishment accorded to “criminals engaged in exciting servile insurrection.” In October

<sup>5</sup>“An Act to Amend the Act Calling Forth the Militia to Execute the Laws of the Union, Suppress Insurrections, and Repel Invasions,” in *U. S. Statutes at Large*, vol. 12, 597-600, (first quotation, 597; second quotation, 599); Smith, “Let Us All Be Grateful,” 14 (third quotation).

<sup>6</sup>“Emancipation Proclamation,” January 1, 1863, in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler, vol. 6 (New Brunswick, NJ, 1953), 28-30 (first quotation, 29-30; second quotation, 30); Smith, “Let Us All Be Grateful,” 18-19; Burrus M. Carnahan, *Act of Justice: Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation and the Law of War* (Lexington, KY, 2007), 93-116.

1862, reacting to the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation issued by Lincoln on September 22, the Confederate Congress passed a bill directing that captured former slaves were to be delivered back to their masters.<sup>7</sup>

Harsher measures were aimed at those found bearing arms. In the view of the Confederate government, formerly enslaved persons wearing Union blue constituted insurrection against the state, and insurrection was a crime punishable by death. On November 14, Confederate Gen. Hugh W. Mercer wrote to Sec. of War James A. Seddon, informing him that several enslaved persons “with arms in hand against their masters and wearing abolitionist uniforms” had been captured near Savannah, Georgia. He recommended that “some swift and terrible punishment should be inflicted so that their fellows may be deterred from following their example.” Informed of the situation, President Davis agreed, approving summary execution for former enslaved persons captured in armed insurrection. On December 23, 1862, Davis issued a proclamation indicating that he had given more careful consideration to the issue, directing instead that such persons be “delivered over to the executive authorities of the respective States to which they belong to be dealt with according to the laws of said States,” which meant execution. The Confederate Congress shared Davis’s hostility toward the Proclamation, passing a retaliatory bill on May 1, 1863, which directed that any captured white officers commanding or training Black troops, or otherwise contributing to “servile insurrection” should be put to death, and Blacks found to be in arms against the Confederacy, would be delivered to the respective state governments for sentencing. The sticky question of what to do with armed free Black men from Northern states was, however, left unaddressed.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup>*Journal of the Congress of the Confederate States of America, 1861-1865*, 58th Cong., 2d Sess., Sen. Doc. 234, Vol. 3 (Washington, DC, 1904), 13-14 (first and second quotations, 13), Vol. 5, 537-538; Basler, “Emancipation Proclamation,” (second quotation, 30).

<sup>8</sup>O.R. Ser. 2, Vol. 4, Hugh W. Mercer to Thomas Jordan, Nov. 14, 1862, 945-946 (first two quotations, 946), 954; O.R. Ser. 2, Vol. 5, “General Orders No. 111: A Proclamation by the President of the Confederate States, December 24, 1862, 795-797 (third quotation, 797), “Joint Resolutions Adopted by the Confederate Congress on the Subject of Retaliation,” approved May 1, 1863,

In actual practice, however, the Confederate government and military authorities backed away from systematic execution of captured white officers who had commanded Black troops, out of concern for Union reprisals. Confederates, however, maintained a special animosity for Blacks in uniform, fueled both by a sense of betrayal by their former servants and outrage at having to fight members of a race they considered to be little more than animals. Captured Black soldiers were neither treated with the consideration due prisoners of war nor paroled or returned in prisoner exchanges. African Americans in Federal uniforms were enslaved, whether they had been enslaved persons originally or were free Blacks from the North and put to work for the Confederacy in forced-labor battalions, returned to their masters, or used as personal servants by southern officers. Many were killed outright on capture, and during three 1864 engagements—Fort Pillow in Tennessee and Petersburg and Saltville in Virginia—Confederate forces slaughtered wounded or surrendering Black troops.<sup>9</sup>

Reactions in the North and among Union troops in the field to the Emancipation Proclamation were mixed. Abolitionists and free Black people were jubilant, although some were openly critical of the President for not having eliminated slavery in the border states and everywhere else in the nation. Racial prejudice was as widespread through the North as in the South, and even white abolitionists did not envision racial equality as a desirable outcome of emancipation. Conventional wisdom has long held that Union troops vehemently opposed emancipation, but a recent analysis of letters written by soldiers suggests instead that opposition to slavery among the rank and file was prominent by late 1861, well before the Proclamation. Many of these Northern soldiers had

940-941 (fourth quotation, 940); Howard C. Westwood, "Captive Black Soldiers in Charleston: What to Do?" In *Black Flag Over Dixie: Racial Atrocities and Reprisals in the Civil War*, ed. Gregory J.W. Urwin (Carbondale, IL, 2004), 34-51.

<sup>9</sup>James G. Hollandsworth Jr., "The Execution of White Officers from Black Units by Confederate Forces During the Civil War," *Louisiana History* 35 (1994), 475-489; George S. Burkhardt, *Confederate Rage, Yankee Wrath: No Quarter in the Civil War* (Carbondale, IL, 2007), 1-11; Smith, "Let Us All Be Grateful," 43-49.



never seen a Black person before they were marched south into Dixie, where firsthand observation of the grim realities of slavery hardened their resolve against the institution. Most soon became convinced that slavery was the root cause of the war and that the only certain way to end the war and avoid future conflicts with the rebellious states was to eradicate slavery altogether. Enlistment of Black soldiers was more controversial, since Union soldiers were just as racist as most whites during the era, but by the close of 1862 the discouraging progress of the war had made it clear to most that the status quo was insufficient to achieve victory and more radical measures would be needed. Although there were doubts as to whether African Americans possessed sufficient discipline and courage to be effective soldiers, most Union troops took the pragmatic view that sending in Black combatants would at least reduce white casualties. As Sgt. Cyrus F. Boyd of the Fifteenth Iowa Infantry, stationed at Lake Providence, Louisiana, in early February 1863, observed, "If any African will stand between me and a rebel bullet he is welcome to the honor and the bullet too."<sup>10</sup>

On February 19, 1863, Lark S. Livermore, superintendent of contrabands at Lake Providence, wrote to George B. Field, who was then in the Mississippi Valley serving as eyes and ears for the secretary of war, concerning the growing numbers of Black refugees and their eagerness to join in the fight against their former masters. The men, he informed Field, "would gladly take arms & often beg the privilege. I have often tried to intimidate them with Davis' threat, if found in arms, but the right men have no fear of it. I see no reason why they wo'd not become the best of soldiers for these times & this region." Field reached the same conclusion and came back to Washington in late March with a detailed report to Stanton, based on "personal observation during the last six weeks." Many of the officers he met favored enlistment of Black soldiers, and from southeastern Arkansas and the parishes of Carroll and Madison in Louisiana, he had "very little doubt that a force or eight or ten thousand able bodied men could be mustered

<sup>10</sup>Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (New York, 2007), 75-95; Mildred Throne, ed., *The Civil War Diary of Cyrus F. Boyd, Fifteenth Iowa Infantry 1861-1863* (1953; reprint, Baton Rouge, 1998), 119 (quotation); Burkhardt, *Confederate Rage, Yankee Wrath*, 18-26; Smith, "Let Us All be Grateful," 10.

into service within the next forty days which would afford ample protection for the region.” Stanton was already leaning in this direction; on March 16 he created the American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission and sent a team of commissioners south into the war zone to investigate the condition of the contrabands swarming to Federal lines and to recommend “practical measures for placing them in a state of self-support and self-defense.”<sup>11</sup>

With Field’s report now in hand, on March 25 Stanton issued orders to U.S. Adjutant Gen. Lorenzo Thomas, directing him to travel south to the Mississippi Valley, assessing treatment of contrabands at military posts along the way, and meet with Grant and his officers. Thomas was to make it clear to officers he encountered that it was their duty to implement government policy by actively encouraging the cooperation of Black refugees to labor in aid of military operations and to enlist as soldiers in the army. More directly, Thomas was to organize new military units composed of Black troops, appointing such officers to command them as were willing, and was even authorized to promote enlisted men up from the ranks to take charge of these troops. He undertook this mission for Stanton with considerable energy and enthusiasm.<sup>12</sup>

Thomas arrived at the Union outpost at Helena, Arkansas on April 6. Helena was Arkansas’s most significant port on the Mississippi and had been captured by Maj. Gen. Samuel R. Curtis in July 1862. Thousands of freed enslaved persons had followed the Federal army through Arkansas to Helena, and with many more swarming in from the countryside, camps for the contrabands were quickly established. The adjutant general met with Maj. Gen. Benjamin M. Prentiss, who had recently taken charge of the post.

<sup>11</sup>Lark S. Livermore to George B. Field, February 19, 1863 (first quotation); George B. Field to Edwin M. Stanton, March 20, 1863, (second and third quotations); Edwin M. Stanton to commissioners Robert D. Owen, James McKaye, and Samuel G. Howe, March 16, 1863, 73-74 (fourth quotation, 73); all in L-89-1863, Record Group 94, Records of the Adjutant General’s Office, Entry 360, Colored Troops Division, Letters Received 1863-1888, National Archives and Records Administration; “Conversations with Gen. Thomas,” *New York Times*, July 20, 1863.

<sup>12</sup>O.R. Ser. 3, Vol. 3, 100-101, 117; “Conversations with Gen. Thomas.”

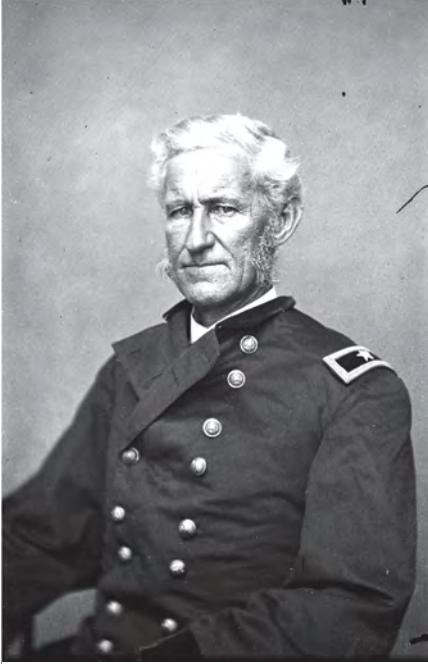


Figure One. U. S. Adjutant General Lorenzo Thomas. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C.

So many liberated Black people had come in that Prentiss had been shipping them by boatloads upriver to St. Louis, where an exasperated Curtis, who had “more of these than I know what to do with,” had threatened to begin turning them back. That afternoon, Thomas addressed a crowd of more than seven thousand troops, informing them that able-bodied contrabands were to be put to work in service of the army and enlisted as soldiers. “The policy of the Administration must be carried out,” he warned, “and no opposition on the part of officers and soldiers will be allowed.” Heartily endorsing the government’s policy,

Prentiss spoke next. Turning to Thomas, he exclaimed, “Tell the President for me, I will receive them [contrabands] into the lines; I will beg them to come in; I will make them come in! And if any officer in my command, high or low, neglects to receive them friendly, and treat them kindly, I will put them outside the lines.” The gathered troops responded with enthusiastic applause, and there was no lack of volunteers willing to take advantage of the offer to be promoted to command Black troops. Recruiting began the very next day for the First Arkansas Volunteer Infantry, African Descent (A.D.), which was sent down to Lake Providence in May. Before leaving Helena, Thomas began organizing a second freed Black regiment, and authorized the creation of as many as five more as the formerly enslaved came in.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup>“Conversations with Gen. Thomas”; Mark K. Christ, “‘They Will be Armed’: Lorenzo Thomas Recruits Black Troops in Helena, Apr. 6, 1863,”

Early in the morning on April 8, General Thomas came downriver to Lake Providence in Carroll Parish, Louisiana, to address the divisions of James B. McPherson's XVII Army Corps. After an enthusiastic introduction by General McPherson, he began almost immediately speaking to four thousand troops of John McArthur's division gathered informally in a large field around "a large platform built on top of a few army wagons" to inform them of the government's new policies regarding freed Black soldiers. The performance was repeated at two o'clock in the afternoon for about seven thousand soldiers commanded by John A. Logan. First Lt. Allen Geer of the Twentieth Illinois was in the afternoon audience and described Thomas as "an old grey haired roman nosed patriot [who spoke] in a slow, solemn, imposing manner." The administration was determined to take Black labor away from the Confederacy, Thomas informed them, to force rebel soldiers back to the farms to take their place. Any Black people that should make their way to Union lines should not be turned away, he urged, but should be treated kindly. "I am authorized to raise as many regiments of blacks as I can. I am authorized to give commissions from the highest to the lowest. I desire only those whose hearts are in it, and to them alone will I give commissions. I don't care who they are, or what their present rank may be, I do not hesitate to say that all proper persons will receive commissions." Despite his ponderous manner, the troops responded to Thomas with loud applause, and

*Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 72 (Winter 2013), 368-370; O.R. Ser. 1, Vol. 22, Pt. 2, 39, Samuel R. Curtis to Benjamin M. Prentiss, March 9, 1863, 147 (first quotation); "The Negroes: Adj. Gen. Thomas Declares the Intentions of the Government," *New York Times*, Apr. 19, 1863 (second quotation); R. Tompkins, "Letter from Helena," *Wisconsin State Journal*, Apr. 14, 1863 (third quotation); "Arming the Negroes - What the Soldiers Say About It," *Douglass' Monthly* 5 (June 1863), 843-844; Frederick H. Dyer, *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion*, vol 1 (1908; reprint, Dayton, OH: Morningside Press, 1994), 113, Vol. 2, 999.

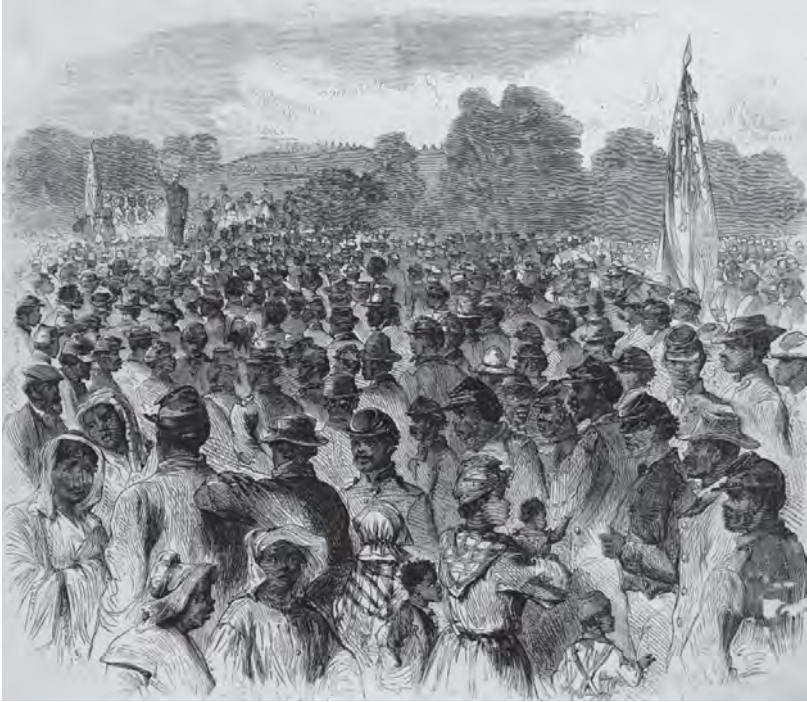


Figure Two. "Adjutant-General Thomas Addressing the Negroes in Louisiana on the Duties of Freedom." *Harper's Weekly* 7 (Nov. 14, 1863), 721.

only a few skeptics were heard to express their doubts.<sup>14</sup>

Thomas told the assembled troops that he would like to raise twenty regiments from along the Mississippi before he returned to Washington. He authorized McPherson to organize three regiments, to be termed Louisiana Volunteers of African Descent, and to commission officers from his corps to command them. In the days following Thomas's visit, Geer noted that there was "great

<sup>14</sup>O.R. Ser. 3, Vol. 3, 121; David Cornwell, *The Cornwell Chronicles: Tales of an American Life on the Erie Canal, Building Chicago, in the Volunteer Civil War Western Army, on the Farm, in a Country Store*, ed. John Wearmouth (Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, 1998), 186 (first quotation); Allen M. Geer, *The Civil War Diary of Allen Morgan Geer, Twentieth Regiment Illinois Volunteers*, ed. Mary A. Anderson (Denver, 1977), 88 (second quotation); "The Arming of Negroes: Speech of Adjutant-General Lorenzo Thomas at Lake Providence, Louisiana," *The Liberator* (Boston), May 1, 1863 (third quotation).

excitement in the 3d Division over the Negro soldier question. There is much speculation in regard to who will get the commissions among all the applicants for the two regiments to be formed in this Div. It is reported that 400 applications were made for commissions." A little later, he observed with considerable satisfaction that "men who have bitterly denounced the policy of arming negroes and denounced the men who would be an officer over them now bending every energy to get a commission." Each contraband would be enlisted for a period of five years, unless sooner discharged, and was to receive an issue of clothing and equipment and the same pay as white soldiers. Two regiments were quickly formed: the Eighth Volunteer Infantry (African Descent), commanded by Col. Hiram Scofield, and the Tenth (A.D.), with Col. John C. Klinck in charge. The captains in each regiment were promoted from worthy privates, non-commissioned officers, and first lieutenants.<sup>15</sup>

From Lake Providence, Thomas next traveled to Grant's field headquarters at Milliken's Bend, just upriver from Vicksburg, and meeting with the commanding general on April 12, found him to be very supportive of Black recruitment. Lake Providence was selected as a gathering point for contrabands prior to being organized into military units; all suitable men who were presently within Union lines would be enlisted, those not volunteering to be

<sup>15</sup>"The Siege of Vicksburg," *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, Apr. 22, 1863; Geer, *Civil War Diary*, 88-89 (quotations, 89); Dyer, *Compendium*, vol. 1, 150, vol. 2, 1214. Because of the large number of Black troops being recruited, in May 1863 the Secretary of War created the Bureau of Colored Troops within the Adjutant General's Office to coordinate recruiting efforts, systematize existing Black units, and establish procedures for recruiting and training white officers for Black regiments. During the following year, the Bureau was to replace state unit designations with numbered federal designations in the newly formed United States Colored Troops (USCT). For example, the Tenth Louisiana Regiment Infantry (African Descent) was reorganized as the Forty-Eighth Regiment Infantry, USCT, in March 1864. See Bob Luke and John D. Smith, *Soldiering for Freedom: How the Union Army Recruited, Trained, and Deployed the U.S. Colored Troops* (Baltimore, 2014), 38. For individual unit designations, original and USCT, see Dyer, *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion*, vols. 1 and 2.



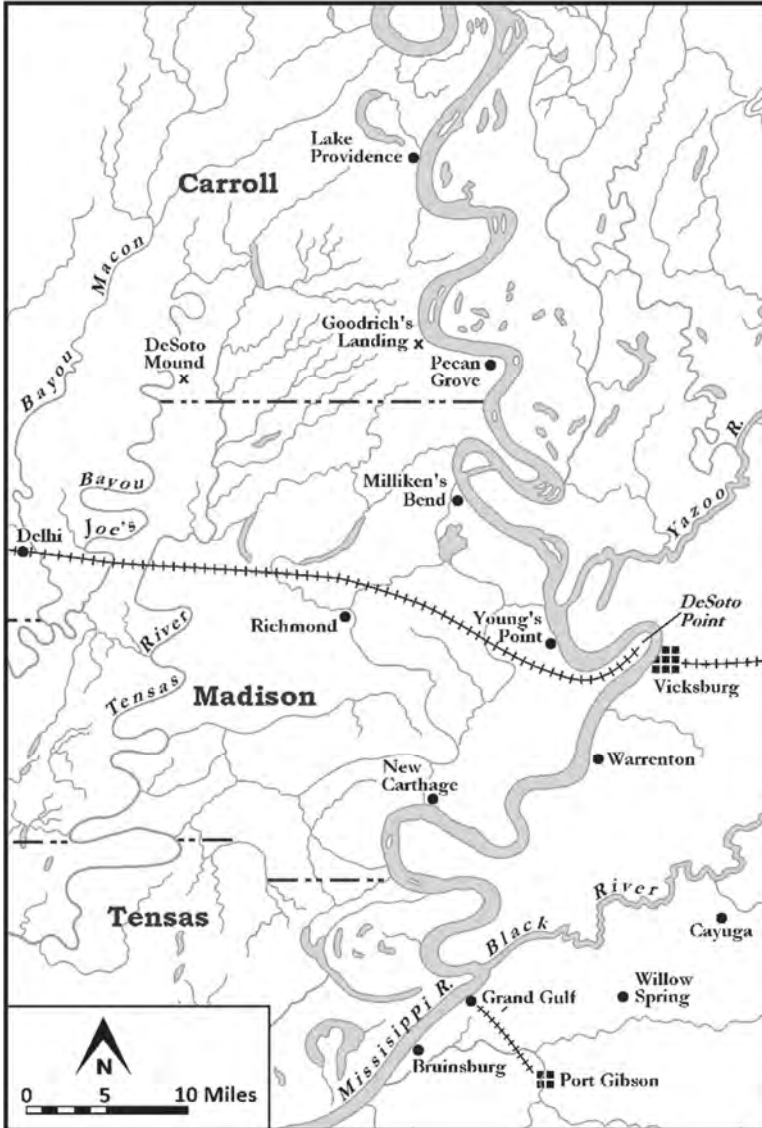


Figure Three: Map of Northeast Louisiana and Western Mississippi. Adapted from Helmuth Holmes (1864). Library of Congress. Cartography by Gary A. O'Dell. Note that the courses of the Mississippi River and many other regional streams have shifted, sometimes significantly, since the Civil War.

conscripted regardless. Steamboats were to be sent up the Mississippi as far as Helena to visit the different plantations and gather potential recruits. Despite good intentions, however, Grant was unable to make good on the latter promise, as he would soon be moving the bulk of his army across the river to begin the siege of Vicksburg, leaving insufficient manpower on the river to carry out Thomas's wish to bring in more plantation Black men. Nevertheless, Thomas was able to raise five more African regiments from the vicinity of Milliken's Bend and was a constant companion of General Grant for several weeks, viewing the naval bombardment on April 29 and the river crossing on the following day. In ill health and exhausted from his grueling schedule, Thomas returned briefly to Washington, but was soon back recruiting in the Mississippi Valley. By the end of 1863, his efforts had resulted in the organization of twenty Black regiments, and many more would be created during the following year.<sup>16</sup>

In his Lake Providence address, Thomas reminded the soldiers that, "for every regiment of blacks I raise, I release a regiment of whites to face the foe in the field." As African American soldiers were as yet of an unknown quality, the Emancipation Proclamation had specifically instructed that enlisted Black men were to be used to garrison military posts rather than as combat troops. Grant also chose to deploy the new Black recruits in this manner. When he crossed the Mississippi in early May to begin the siege of Vicksburg, he took none of the "African Descent" regiments with him but instead left them behind to garrison the posts on the west side of the river. On April 18, when Grant ordered McPherson to begin moving his corps south preparatory to the crossing, one regiment of white soldiers was detailed to protect the plantations between Lake Providence and Milliken's Bend, "until such time as they can be relieved by the regiments of African descent, now forming." A few weeks later, concerned about increasing Confederate incursions into northeastern Louisiana, Grant sent orders to Brig. Gen. Elias S. Dennis, newly appointed to command in the district. To protect military supplies, Dennis was to fortify three strategic locations along the river, including Lake Providence and Milliken's

<sup>16</sup>O.R. Ser. 3, Vol. 3, 121; "The Siege of Vicksburg," *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, Apr. 22, 1863; "Conversations with Gen. Thomas."

Bend. "All the black troops should be got as much to themselves as possible, and required to fortify," he wrote. "Milliken's Bend will be the proper place for them." Although Grant left the Black soldiers behind in Louisiana, as the siege of Vicksburg began several Black regiments were organized in Mississippi as contrabands there flocked to Union lines.<sup>17</sup>

The mettle of the Black regiments left in Louisiana, collectively known as the African Brigade, would soon be tested by the enemy, and they responded with valor and determination, although their training had just begun. In January 1863, the Confederate War Department transferred Edmund Kirby Smith to command of the Trans-Mississippi Department, with responsibility for operations in Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Missouri. Arriving at Alexandria in mid-March, Smith sent for Maj. Gen. Richard S. Taylor, commander of Confederate military forces in western Louisiana. President Davis, Smith informed Taylor, was concerned about the Union operations against Vicksburg, and desired that "something should be done on our side of the river." To accomplish this rather vaguely defined goal, Davis had ordered that Maj. Gen. John G. Walker's Texas Infantry Division be sent from Arkansas to northeastern Louisiana in order to disrupt Federal operations supporting the Vicksburg offensive. Earl Van Dorn's cavalry raid against the Union supply depot at Holly Springs during November of the previous year had forced a four-month postponement of Grant's offensive, and perhaps a Confederate expedition against the Federal outposts opposite Vicksburg could achieve a similar result by cutting the Union supply line. Capture of the posts at Milliken's Bend and Young's Point would give Confederates control of the west bank of the Mississippi and perhaps allow them to ferry supplies across the river to the besieged city. At the very least, a raid into the region could break up some of the Union-occupied plantations growing cotton to finance the Northern war effort and capture many of the formerly enslaved persons now working on

<sup>17</sup>"Arming of Negroes," *The Liberator* (Boston), May 1, 1863 (first quotation); O.R. Ser. 1, Vol. 14, Pt. 3, Ulysses S. Grant, Special Orders No. 108, Apr. 18, 1863, 205-206 (second quotation, 206), 403-404.

the leased properties.<sup>18</sup>

The operation would be delayed by the unexpected Union invasion of the Red River region by General Nathaniel P. Banks, who pushed his army slowly northward from New Orleans into central Louisiana while Taylor stubbornly attempted to check his advance. During the early weeks of this campaign, Walker's troops remained stationed in Arkansas, but on the evening of April 23, as Banks neared Alexandria, Walker was ordered to take his division into central Louisiana and meet with Kirby Smith. As the Texas infantry moved southward in stages, the Federal army continued to drive Taylor north and occupied Alexandria on May 9. Within a few

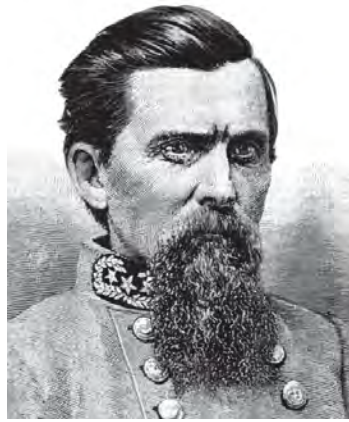


Figure Four. In 1863, Confederate Maj.-Gen. John G. Walker, commander of a division of Texas troops, was assigned to Richard Taylor's command in Louisiana. *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War: People's Pictorial Edition* (New York, 1894), 140.

days, however, Banks decided to abandon his Red River campaign to assist Grant in capturing Port Hudson which, like Vicksburg, posed a formidable obstacle to Union control of the river. The Union troops began pulling out of Alexandria and the region on May 14, and two weeks later, Walker's men arrived at the town.<sup>19</sup>

After meeting with Taylor at Alexandria (Kirby Smith having moved his headquarters to Arkansas) on May 28 Walker led his troops toward northeastern Louisiana accompanied by Taylor and his staff. The Texas division, now numbering about 3,600 men fit

<sup>18</sup>Jeffery S. Prushankin, *A Crisis in Confederate Command: Edmund Kirby Smith, Richard Taylor, and the Army of the Trans-Mississippi* (Baton Rouge, 2005), 15, 22-24; O.R. Ser. 1, Vol. 15, 789, 791; Vol. 22, Pt. 2, 802-803; William R. Boggs, *Military Reminiscences of Gen. Wm. R. Boggs, C.S.A.* (Durham, NC, 1913), 54 (quotation).

<sup>19</sup>Prushankin, *Crisis in Confederate Command*, 108-121; Stephen A. Dupree, *Planting the Union Flag in Texas: The Campaigns of Major General Nathaniel P. Banks in the West* (College Station, TX, 2008), 32-47; Joseph P. Blessington, *The Campaigns of Walker's Texas Division* (New York, 1875), 78-84.

for duty, was composed of three brigades, commanded by Henry E. McCulloch, James M. Hawes, and Horace Randal. Although the division had been in service for more than a year, they had not yet seen combat. Unknown to the Confederate command, however, by the time Walker and his men arrived in the vicinity of Milliken's Bend, the primary rationale behind the expedition was no longer valid, since Grant no longer depended on supplies brought across the river from the western shore to maintain the siege. He was instead being supported by boats coming up the Yazoo River.<sup>20</sup>

Walker's division ascended the Tensas River on transport boats and, during the evening of May 30, debarked at Buck's Plantation, about twenty-five miles southwest of Vicksburg and the farthest navigable point on the river. Their first objective was the Union post at Perkins' Landing, about twelve miles to the east on the Mississippi opposite Grand Gulf and supposed to be a heavily defended "camp of instruction and insurrection" for Black troops. At about 9:00 p.m., Walker and Taylor led McCulloch's brigade, numbering about 1,500 men, to attack the post, which proved not to be a training camp but a staging area for shipment of cotton collected from nearby plantations and, until recently, a supply depot for Grant's army. The camp was defended by a single regiment, the all-white Sixtieth Indiana Infantry, with about three hundred Black workers. The attacking Confederates took the garrison completely by surprise and drove them out of their camp and onto a transport boat on the river. Losses were light on both sides, and after plundering the former depot, McCulloch's men marched back to their temporary camp on the Tensas River, jubilant with an easy victory in their first taste of combat.<sup>21</sup>

Walker's division spent the next day moving their wagons, artillery, and horses across the Tensas River, and on June 2 began an arduous, fifty-mile march northward through the swamps toward the little village of Richmond, located twenty miles due

<sup>20</sup>O.R. Ser. 1, Vol. 22, Pt. 2, 851; Blessington, *Campaigns of Walker's Texas Division*, 83; Richard G. Lowe, *Walker's Texas Division, C.S.A.: Greyhounds of the Trans-Mississippi* (Baton Rouge, 2004), 80-82.

<sup>21</sup>Blessington, *Campaigns of Walker's Texas Division*, 86-92, 119-120 (quotation, 119); Linda Barnickel, *Milliken's Bend: A Civil War Battle in History and Memory* (Baton Rouge, 2013), 83-85; Lowe, *Walker's Texas Division*, 83-86.

west of Vicksburg. As they began their trek, a company of Maj. Isaac F. Harrison's Fifteenth Louisiana Cavalry Battalion, who were acting as scouts, swept in and captured Richmond, which was occupied at sunset on the fourth by an advance party of two hundred infantry troops sent ahead by Walker. General Taylor arrived at Richmond on the following day, ahead of the main army, and began planning his attack as he received reports from the cavalry scouts. In his assessment of the enemy's forces, however, Harrison greatly underestimated the strength of the Union posts along the river, and Walker assumed that his men could easily break up the Federal camps with a series of more-or-less simultaneous strikes by separate brigades. The presence of Confederate forces in the area had not gone unnoticed, especially after word of the attack on Perkins' Landing began to spread, and about 2:00 on the morning of June 6, a few hours before the main body of Walker's troops reached Richmond, Col. Herman Leib, commander of the troops stationed at Milliken's Bend, led a reconnaissance toward Richmond.<sup>22</sup>

The African Brigade had recently been subject to some abrupt changes in its command structure. Although most white soldiers acknowledged the need to augment Union forces by Black enlistment, there had remained a constant state of tension between white and Black troops ever since the Black regiments had been formed. Brigade commander Isaac F. Shepherd, an ardent supporter of Black recruitment, was outraged by numerous complaints of abuses by white soldiers against Black soldiers and their civilian dependents, and in late May he ordered the whipping of a white private by Black troops. Shepherd was subsequently arrested on June 1, and Colonel Leib was placed in temporary command of the brigade pending the outcome of the investigation. At the same time, Gen. Jeremiah C. Sullivan was replaced by Elias S. Dennis as commander of the district of northeastern Louisiana. The court of inquiry ultimately exonerated Shepherd, noting that the larger problem was the failure to protect Black soldiers and

<sup>22</sup>O.R. Ser. 1, Vol. 24, Pt. 2, 447, 457-458; Blessington, *Campaigns of Walker's Texas Division*, 93-94; Lowe, *Walker's Texas Division*, 86-87; Barnickel, *Milliken's Bend*, 85.



their families from abuse by their fellows.<sup>23</sup>

By early June, Union posts along the Mississippi River were being guarded primarily by the Black troopers of the African Brigade. Milliken's Bend was occupied by about 1,200 men, comprised of four Black regiments commanded by Col. Hiram Scofield, the Ninth, Eleventh, and Thirteenth Louisiana (AD) and the First Mississippi (AD), though all were as yet under strength. Below Milliken's Bend, the district headquarters at Young's Point, just upriver from Vicksburg, was defended by four white infantry regiments and a large number of soldiers attached to the supply depot, totaling about 1,400 men. Twelve miles north of the Bend, and about four miles south of Transylvania Plantation, was the supply post referred to as Goodrich's Landing, and eight miles due west was an enormous Indian mound. Stationed at the DeSoto Mound, as it was known, were two companies of the First Arkansas (AD), under the command of Col. William F. Wood, who had erected extensive fortifications atop and surrounding the mound. At the time of Walker's incursion, the post was occupied only by a little over one hundred Black soldiers. Further north, at Lake Providence, Brig. Gen. Hugh T. Reid commanded the white First Kansas Mounted Infantry and the Sixteenth Wisconsin Infantry, supplemented by three hundred African Americans of the Eighth Louisiana (AD), totaling about eight hundred. The men of the new Black regiments had just commenced their training, and many were unsure how to load and fire their weapons.<sup>24</sup>

One day before his arrest, on May 31, Shepherd placed Leib in charge of the pickets at Milliken's Bend, made of men selected from the all-Black Ninth and Eleventh Louisiana regiments. Thus, it was Leib, in the early hours of morning on June 6, who General Dennis directed to probe westward out the Richmond Road with the men of the Ninth Louisiana (AD) in support of two companies of the Tenth Illinois Cavalry. Encountering Confederate pickets at the railroad depot three miles east of Richmond, Leib retired back

<sup>23</sup>Barnickel, *Milliken's Bend*, 72-79; U.S. Grant Papers, Series 5, Headquarters Records 1861-1869, Vol. 26-28, Special Orders No. 148, June 2, 1863, Library of Congress.

<sup>24</sup>O.R. Ser. 1, Vol. 24, Pt. 2, 156, 158, 448-449; Wearmouth, *Cornwell Chronicles*, 211, 217; Lowe, *Walker's Texas Division*, 87; Barnickel, *Milliken's Bend*, 90.

toward Milliken's Bend while the Illinois cavalry clashed with a troop of Harrison's Louisiana cavalry, retreating in disorder back through the men of the Ninth with the southern horsemen in hot pursuit. Leib quickly formed his men into a line of battle and halted the Confederate charge with a single volley. Back at the Bend, after hearing Leib's report, General Dennis immediately ordered a detachment of the Twenty-Third Iowa Infantry up from Young's Point and contacted Adm. David D. Porter, who sent the gunboat *Choctaw* steaming upriver to his aid.<sup>25</sup>

At the Confederate camp at Richmond, General Taylor reacted quickly and decisively on hearing of the engagement. Although he had just learned that Grant no longer depended on the river posts for his supply line, his force could still create havoc in the region. If the Yankees were as yet unaware of his presence and thought they were only threatened by a small force of Confederate cavalry raiders, a sudden simultaneous attack by his army on the river posts might be able to overwhelm the defenders before they could make more effective preparations. At three a.m. the next morning, to spare his troops the sweltering bayou heat, Walker ordered his men to move out against the Union strongholds. McCulloch's brigade would assault Milliken's Bend, the most heavily defended post, while Hawes would lead his brigade in an attack against Young's Point. Randal would position his men as a reserve at the fork in the road three miles outside Richmond, ready to lend support as needed. The final objective was Lake Providence. Shortly after arriving in the vicinity, Walker had contacted Brig. Gen. Paul O. Hebert, commander of the subdistrict of north Louisiana and stationed at Monroe, for assistance in destroying the Union camp at Lake Providence. Hebert delegated this to Col. Frank A. Bartlett, who was given temporary command of the Thirteenth Louisiana Battalion Partisan Rangers, a group of irregulars recruited from Carroll Parish who had been harassing Lake Providence for months but lacked sufficient numbers to take the post. The approximately 250 guerrilla fighters of Bartlett's command, supplemented by about six hundred men of the Thirteenth Texas Cavalry, part of Walker's division who had been

<sup>25</sup>O.R. Ser. 1, Vol. 24, Pt. 2, 447, 458; Wearmouth, *Cornwell Chronicles*, 207-209, 216; Barnickel, *Milliken's Bend*, 85-86.

transported with their horses by freight cars rather than by barge up the Tensas River, set out from Delhi for Lake Providence on June 2.<sup>26</sup>

Marching down the Richmond Road through the predawn darkness on June 6, McCulloch's column drew within a half-mile of the Federal camp by 2:30 a.m. Shortly before their arrival, Colonel Leib ordered the men of the African brigade into a line of battle behind the levee. Five regiments, none at full strength, were poised behind the ten-foot-high earthworks to receive the expected Confederate attack. The largest contingent, with about five hundred men, was the Eleventh Louisiana (AD), stationed on the Union right. The opposite end was anchored by the Ninth Louisiana (AD), about three hundred strong. The middle of the line was occupied by about 250 men of the First Mississippi (AD) and Thirteenth Louisiana (AD), along with approximately 125 white soldiers of the Twenty-Third Iowa, the only men in the line with combat experience; the latter, who were still aboard a transport vessel when the first shots were fired, were hastily roused and rushed into the defensive line. The battle began when a detachment of Harrison's cavalry sent ahead to flush out Union pickets was fired on and retreated in confusion, and McCulloch sent skirmishers forward to drive the pickets back, followed by the rest of the brigade formed into a line of battle. The approach to the Federal position was a veritable obstacle course, with ditches and tall, thick, hedges creating bottlenecks as the Texas troops fought their way against heavy fire from ditch to ditch, hedge to hedge, to the base of the levee, the most formidable obstacle of all, ten feet high and topped in places with cotton bales.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup>O.R. Ser. 1, Vol. 24, Pt. 2, 458,460; Winters, *Civil War in Louisiana*, 198, 202; Blessington, *Campaigns of Walker's Texas Division*, 94; Thomas Reid, *Spartan Band: Burnett's 13th Texas Cavalry in the Civil War* (Denton, TX, 2005), 94, 96. Hebert was governor of Louisiana between 1853-1856 and the president of the Metairie Race Course in New Orleans just prior to commencement of the war. Most historians ascribe the battle of Milliken's Bend as being Hebert's only combat experience, but Barnickel (*Milliken's Bend*, 2013, 188) found no evidence that he was present.

<sup>27</sup>O.R. Ser. 1, Vol. 24, Pt. 2, 459, 467; Blessington, *Campaigns of Walker's Texas Division*, 95-96; Wearmouth, *Cornwell Chronicles*, 216-217; Barnickel, *Milliken's Bend*, 87-89.

As they cleared the last of the hedges and began to reform their battle line, the Confederates were met with withering volleys from the Federal troops positioned behind the top of the levee. Momentarily staggered, the Texans quickly recovered and charged up the slope, many without stopping to reload. Swarming over the crest, they fired into the defenders and plunged down among them, jabbing with their bayonets. The fighting quickly turned into a vicious hand-to-hand melee of bayonets and clubbed muskets; the Union defenders put up a fierce and stubborn resistance but were quickly overwhelmed by the furious assault, taking heavy casualties. The Yankees “stampeded pell-mell over the levee, in great terror and confusion,” Joseph P. Blessington of the Sixteenth Texas Infantry recalled. “Our troops followed after them, bayoneting them by hundreds.” After several minutes of ferocious combat, the Texans broke through the Ninth Louisiana on the far left of the Federal line and began a murderous enfilading fire, targeting the white officers. The Union line broke, beginning on the Union left and running all down the line to the Eleventh Louisiana on the far right, the men falling back in panicked flight to the Mississippi, where, with no place left to go, many of them regrouped behind a second levee along the riverbank and began to fight back again. At approximately 3:30 a.m., the ironclad *Choctaw*, which had just arrived, began firing its heavy guns toward the Confederates. Although the gunboat had to fire blindly over the high riverbank, the big naval guns, aided by spotters on shore, persuaded the Texas troops to retreat behind the cover of the first levee, about 150 yards from the river, where they continued to exchange fire with the trapped Federals for several hours until the stifling heat and arrival of more gunboats at mid-morning convinced McCulloch to withdraw his force back to Richmond.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup>O.R. Ser. 1, Vol. 24, Pt. 2, 447-448, 467-468; *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, hereafter cited as ORN (Washington: 1894-1922), Ser. 1, Vol. 25, 163; Wearmouth, *Cornwell Chronicles*, 212-214; 217-218; Blessington, *Campaigns of Walker's Texas Division*, 96-100 (quotation, 96); Barnickel, *Milliken's Bend*, 90-99; Lowe, *Walker's Texas Division*, 91-96. As reported, the *Choctaw* began firing at 3:35 a.m. At this hour, the sky was still dark; civil twilight, when the sun was not yet above the horizon, but sufficient dawning light was present to provide minimum visibility,

As McCulloch retreated from the Bend, James Hawes's infantry brigade, supplemented by a detachment of Harrison's cavalry, tardily reached the vicinity of Young's Point. They had been delayed by a lengthy search for a way across the Walnut Bayou ten miles short of their objective, the anticipated bridge having been destroyed and the cavalry scouts unaware of any alternative crossing. Hawes eventually located another bridge, and by 10:30 his men were nearing the Mississippi River. The cavalry scouts assured him that the Federal camp at Young's Point was nearby, and the infantry could approach unseen through the cover of the thick woodlands. When the Confederate troops emerged from the trees, Hawes was astonished to discover that, instead of surprising a few Federal defenders in their camp, they had come out into a substantial clearing, more than a mile short of the outpost, in full view of a large body of Union troops who were forming into battle lines. He quickly deployed his regiments and began to advance across the field, driving back Union skirmishers, but on seeing several menacing gunboats in the river behind the enemy infantry, Hawes called for a withdrawal and retreated back toward Richmond without engaging the Federal force.<sup>29</sup>

Bartlett's Rangers and the Thirteenth Texas Cavalry fared little better in their expedition against Lake Providence. Although Delhi was only about thirty miles southwest from Lake Providence, Bartlett spent the better part of a week tramping northward through the heavy timber and dense canebrakes along Bayou Macon, searching for the best point to cross the stream. By the time Walker's brigades were carrying out their attacks at Milliken's Bend and Young's Point on June 7, Bartlett was no further than the hamlet of Caledonia, ten miles due west of Lake Providence, and all possibility of surprise had been lost. The next day, a group of the Texans were detailed to begin building a floating log bridge across the bayou while their comrades rested in camp. Bartlett roused his men early on the morning of June 9 and

would not occur until about 5:30. The gunboat was essentially firing blindly, save for some general directions provided by troops on shore.

<sup>29</sup>O.R. Ser. 1, Vol. 24, Pt. 2, 449-450, 471-472; Lowe, *Walker's Texas Division*, 99-101.



Figure Five. "Battle of Milliken's Bend." *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* 7 (January 16, 1864), 264-265.

began the final march to Lake Providence. While skirting the western edge of the lake, about six miles from the town, his troops ran into two companies of the First Kansas Mounted Infantry, on picket duty, and drove them in. The retreating Union troops attempted to stall the pursuing Confederates, first by setting fire to the wooden bridge over Bayou Baxter, and then, as they continued to withdraw to the Tensas River, about a mile from town, they hastily tore up the planks of the bridge and threw them into the stream. As Bartlett's force deployed along the west bank of the Tensas, the First Kansas was reinforced by the entire garrison of Lake Providence brought out by Gen. Hugh T. Reid, about eight hundred men including three hundred members of the Eighth Louisiana (AD). For more than an hour, the two forces carried out a brisk exchange of fire across the narrow river, until, at sundown, the Confederates began to retreat, leaving a few skirmishers under cover along the bank. Reid sent his white soldiers to the rear and brought the Eighth Louisiana up into a battle line. "They fired four volleys into the rebels," Reid reported,



“which cleaned them out, and greatly encouraged the darkies.”<sup>30</sup>

None of the Confederate actions against the Federals in northeastern Louisiana had achieved their objectives. Seeing no real prospect of hindering the Union campaign against Vicksburg, Taylor departed for Alexandria on June 9, leaving Walker's division temporarily in place at Richmond, greatly weakened by sickness and incapable of further threatening the outposts along the river. Across the Mississippi, laying siege to Vicksburg, Ulysses S. Grant was concerned about the rebel incursions into northeastern Louisiana. On June 8, Grant ordered Gen. Joseph A. Mower to move his command from Haines Bluff, on the Yazoo River north of Vicksburg, across the river to reinforce General Dennis and drive the Confederates out of Richmond. On the morning of June 14, the twelve hundred men of Mower's brigade, joined by Gen. Alfred Ellet and 1,300 Mississippi Marines, marched out of Young's Point. As the Federal column approached Richmond, Walker received reports from his scouts that greatly exaggerated the size of the Union force. Quickly, he began evacuating the town, sending his supply wagons and ambulances west while deploying the remainder of his command as a rear guard to protect his retreat. A brisk battle ensued that delayed the Federals sufficiently to allow Walker's force to escape, retreating twenty miles west to Delhi. The punitive Union expedition burned the town of Richmond to the ground but did not pursue the Confederates further.<sup>31</sup>

It was unfortunate that Mower and Ellet did not press their advantage and chase the Confederate troops out of northeastern Louisiana, for Walker subsequently embarked on a scorched earth campaign between the Tensas and Mississippi rivers, intended to deny the resources of the region to the Federals. Before departing from Delhi, Taylor first ordered Walker to take his troops to Monroe, about thirty-five miles west of Delhi, where steamers

<sup>30</sup>Reid, *Spartan Band*, 94, 96; Winters, *Civil War in Louisiana*, 202; O.R. Ser. 1, Vol. 24, Pt. 2, Hugh T. Reid, report, June 10, 1863, 449-450, (quotation, 449); Napier Bartlett, *Military Record of Louisiana* (New Orleans, 1875), 35.

<sup>31</sup>Lowe, *Walker's Texas Division*, 104-106; John Y. Simon, ed., *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, Vol. 8, Apr. 1-July 6, 1863 (Carbondale, IL, 1979), 326; Blessington, *Campaigns of Walker's Texas Division*, 110-112, 124 (Walker's report); O.R. Ser. 1, Vol. 24, Pt. 2, 451-455.

would take his command down the Ouachita to the Red River and then to Alexandria. Although Taylor no longer believed that Walker's division would be able to carry out any actions that could relieve Vicksburg, he almost immediately countermanded this order and rather vaguely instructed Walker to remain in the region "until the enemy's movements and the condition of affairs around Vicksburg are more fully developed." Kirby Smith concurred, informing Taylor that he thought it a good idea to keep Walker in place for the time being. In fact, reinforcements were already on the way to northeastern Louisiana. On June 4, Smith directed Theophilus H. Holmes, commander of the District of Arkansas, to send a force of cavalry and artillery to the vicinity of Lake Providence, given the mission of destroying the river plantations being cultivated, breaking up "the Federal system of planting," and capturing the Black workers for re-enslavement. For this purpose, Holmes detached James C. Tappan's Arkansas infantry brigade along with most of a brigade of Texas mounted troops, the Twelfth and Nineteenth Texas Cavalry, seasoned veterans commanded by Col. William H. Parsons, and a battery of field artillery.<sup>32</sup>

Tappan marched his troops quickly southward and encountered Walker's men on the road to Richmond as they slowly retreated toward Delhi. Together, the two commands reached Delhi a day later, on June 17, and camped "near a spring of fine water" northeast of town. Walker's division now numbered about 2,500 men fit for duty; nearly a thousand of his troops had been sickened by the sweltering summer heat and malarial swamps of the region. With Tappan's force at his disposal, Walker could now muster about 4,200 men to plague the Yankees, seeking, as he later recalled, "every opportunity to strike an effective blow." The weary soldiers rested in camp for five more days, and early on the twenty-third, Walker took his combined force northward up Bayou

<sup>32</sup>Richard Taylor, *Destruction and Reconstruction: Personal Experiences of the Late War* (New York, 1883), 139; O.R. Ser. 1, Vol. 22, Pt. 2, 857, 864, 866, 868, Kirby Smith to Jefferson Davis, June 16, 1863, 873, (second quotation), 904, 915, Vol. 24, Pt. 2, 460, Richard Taylor to William R. Boggs, June 11, 1863, 461-462 (first quotation, 461); Anne J. Bailey, "A Texas Cavalry Raid: Reaction to Black Soldiers and Contrabands," in Gregory J.W. Urwin, ed., *Black Flag Over Dixie: Racial Atrocities and Reprisals in the Civil War* (Carbondale, IL, 2005), 20-21.

Macon to the hamlet of Monticello, about ten miles from Lake Providence, from where he planned to launch another strike against the outpost at Milliken's Bend. From here, he marched his men southeast to the Tensas River, and on the morning of June 26, Walker sent Tappan's brigade forward to conceal themselves in ambush about four miles from the river. Harrison's cavalry trotted toward the Bend to show themselves and draw the enemy out, pursuing and capturing contrabands within a few hundred yards of the fortifications. The Union officers, however, refused the bait, and instead, gunboats on the river began to hurl shells at the Confederates until, finally, Walker gave up in disgust and ordered his men back to Monticello.<sup>33</sup>

Thwarted in this enterprise, Walker selected another target: the fortified DeSoto Mound west of Goodrich's Landing, garrisoned by Black troops of the First Arkansas. Before sunrise on the morning of June 29, the commander sent Randal and Tappan's infantry brigades, along with Harrison's cavalry, eastward toward the Union post located only about six miles from their camp at Monticello. About four miles out, the Confederate troops were overtaken by Parson's Texas cavalry, who had arrived at Walker's camp shortly after the departure of the expedition and wasted little time in moving out to join them. Joseph P. Blessington, a private in the Sixteenth Texas Infantry, described the cavalrymen in admiring terms: "They all appeared to be excellent horsemen. . . . Their uniform contained as many colors as the rainbow; their arms consisted mostly of Enfield rifles, slung to their saddles, while around the waist of each was buckled a heavy cavalry sword, which clattered at every movement of their horses. A pair of holster pistols attached to the pommels of their saddles completed their equipment." The commanders conferred quickly as the day began to dawn, the Confederate force still concealed by a dense cover of trees and underbrush. Tappan was new to the area, but Harrison's cavalry had been roving the region for some time, and Parsons had

<sup>33</sup>Blessington, *Campaigns of Walker's Texas Division*, 112-113 (first quotation, 112); Junius N. Bragg to Josephine Bragg, July 1, 1863, in T. J. Gaughan, ed., *Letters of a Confederate Surgeon* (Camden, AR, 1960), 141-142; O.R. Ser. 1, Vol. 22, Pt. 2, 915, Vol. 24, Pt. 3., John G. Walker to Edwin K. Smith, July 10, 1863, 999-1000 (second quotation, 999). Blessington mistakenly dated these actions as being in May instead of June.

personally scouted the vicinity even before his troops followed him into Louisiana. Just ahead, the tangled vegetation gave way to the open fields of the cotton plantations, and the fortified mound was only a mile or so beyond.<sup>34</sup>

Leaving the infantry behind and temporarily under cover, the cavalry plunged through the brush and out into the open, with the artillery following immediately behind. Harrison's cavalry and one of the batteries veered off to the right, heading for Goodrich's Landing, while Parson's troopers charged through the cotton fields toward DeSoto Mound, spreading out into a battle line with the artillery in the center and flanked on either side by the mounted troops. About a half-mile from the mound, Parsons halted his men and sent a team of sharpshooters to occupy one of the smaller mounds, while the battery opened up with a few rounds in the direction of the fort. There was a brief exchange of rifle fire, in which three men of the Nineteenth Texas were killed and one wounded. After this exchange, Colonel Parsons sent up a flag demanding unconditional surrender of the garrison, even as, by prearrangement, the infantry came out of the woods and deployed for battle behind the cavalry.<sup>35</sup>

The Union garrison of DeSoto Mound had only been at this post for a few weeks, but the Black recruits had labored mightily to transform the simple hill into a heavily fortified position. Confederate observers reported the mound as being between fifty and one hundred feet in height, covering about an acre of ground, with a level top of about forty square feet upon which a strong fort was in the process of being constructed. Two smaller fortifications were located near the base of the larger structure, and all around the perimeter of the top a trench, or rifle pit, had been dug, about three feet deep, with the earth thrown up on the outside to form a

<sup>34</sup>Blessington, *Campaigns of Walker's Texas Division*, 113-114 (quotation, 114); Bragg, *Letters of a Confederate Surgeon*, 142; Soldat, "Col. Parsons' Cavalry Raid in the Valley of the Mississippi Nearly Opposite Vicksburg," *Houston Weekly Telegraph*, Aug. 4, 1863. Bailey (2005) identifies "Soldat" or "Soldat" as a member of the Twelfth Texas and a frequent correspondent to the *Telegraph*, whose letters "have proved quite accurate."

<sup>35</sup>Bragg, *Letters of a Confederate Surgeon*, 142; Soldat, "Col. Parsons' Cavalry Raid"; J.E.T., "Letter from Burford's Regiment," *Dallas Herald*, Aug. 5, 1863.

breastwork. A number of heavy logs had been placed on the outside of the rifle pit that could be rolled down on any assailants who tried to climb the mound. Such an assault was deemed an impossible task, according to Confederate soldiers who viewed the works; not only was the slope precipitously steep, but the earth below the rifle pits had been dug up to create difficult footing, and the only access to the hilltop was by way of a narrow pathway. No artillery had yet been provided to the garrison, but the men had attempted to create the illusion of cannon by mounting and painting a large log, into the end of which had been drilled a three-inch hole, and this subterfuge appeared quite threatening from a distance.<sup>36</sup>

The defenders of the mound were absurdly outnumbered, two

<sup>36</sup>Soldat, "Col. Parsons' Cavalry Raid"; J.E.T., "Letter from Burford's Regiment," *Dallas Herald*, Aug. 5, 1863; Bragg, *Letters of a Confederate Soldier*, 142-143; Oram M. Roberts, "Prehistoric Races in Texas" *Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association* 1 (Jan. 1898), 146-147." Prehistoric mounds are abundant in the Mississippi Valley, some of which have been dated back thousands of years (See Mark A. Rees, ed., *Archaeology of Louisiana*, Baton Rouge, 2010). Carroll Parish contains several notable mound clusters, including a grouping just north of Lake Providence, and the former Transylvania Plantation still hosts a group of relatively recent mounds, located about two miles back from the river, which date to around 1550 A.D., in the late Mississippian period. These were described in 1887: "The temple, which is the central figure of twelve mounds, looms up grandly from the level of the alluvial plain. Arrow-heads [sic] and pottery have always been abundantly found on these mounds. One of them is used as a cemetery for the colored population of the plantation" (J. M. Foster, *Pre-Historic Races of the United States of America*, 6th. ed., Chicago, S.C. Griggs, 1887). The DeSoto Mound (not to be confused with the better-known mound of the same name in Desha County, Arkansas) west of Goodrich Landing was leveled sometime after the Civil War; it was no longer in existence when surveys by professional archaeologists began in the 1940s. According to Charles R. "Chip" McGimsey, Louisiana State Archaeologist, some 80-90 percent of Louisiana's prehistoric earthworks have been eradicated (personal communication to Gary O'Dell, December 11, 2017). This affair is indexed in the Official Records of the War of the Rebellion as having taken place at the Mounds Plantation or, alternatively, Goodrich's Landing, but, in fact, was in neither location. Mounds Plantation, owned by Wallis Bodein Keene and leased to the federal government by Horace Tebbetts, was located about six miles north of the DeSoto Mound, and Goodrich's Landing about six miles due east.

companies of Black soldiers and their white officers, little more than a hundred men with Enfield rifles, facing several thousand Confederates supported by artillery. Each of the African companies was commanded by two white officers, and after a brief conference among themselves, they responded to Parsons's demands by offering to surrender the Black people unconditionally if the officers would be, instead, treated as prisoners of war with the attendant rights and privileges. The two companies of the First Arkansas were marched down to the base of the mound, disarmed, and turned over to the Confederate infantry. The partly completed fortifications were set afire and then, as the infantry made a temporary camp in the vicinity prior to moving back to Delhi, Colonel Parsons led his men, along with Harrison's cavalry troop, on a rampage of destruction through northeastern Louisiana.<sup>37</sup>

The Texas cavalry burned nearly every structure they came across for a distance of ten miles along the Tensas River from DeSoto Mound to Lake Providence: slave cabins, cotton gin buildings, outbuildings of all kinds, and even the elegant plantation houses, including one house within sight of the town. They also captured hundreds of Black field hands. Taking particular pleasure in destroying the property of alleged Union sympathizers, plantations leased to the Federals, the raiders spared only two of the mansions in their path, which "sheltered ladies who had not left their homes." Even on these properties, however, all other buildings were set afire. One of the Confederate soldiers who remained at the mound, surgeon Junius N. Bragg, recalled, "Their course and progress was distinctly marked by clouds of black smoke ascending and curling above the tops of the trees." General Alfred W. Ellet was appalled by the destruction he observed on the following morning. "In passing by the negro quarters on three of the burning plantations," he wrote in his report,

we were shocked by the sight of the charred remains of human beings who had been burned in the general conflagration. No doubt they were the sick negroes whom the unscrupulous enemy were too indifferent to remove. I witnessed five such spectacles

<sup>37</sup>Soldat, "Col. Parsons' Cavalry Raid"; J.E.T., "Letter from Burford's Regiment"; Blessington, *Campaigns of Walker's Texas Division*, 114-115.



myself in passing the remains of three plantations that lay in our line of march and do not doubt there were many others on the 20 or more other plantations that I did not visit which were burned in like manner.

At Lake Providence, the Confederates ran into a hastily arranged ambush set by Colonel Reid and his men, who had received word of the rebels' advance, but Parsons's outfit proved too strong for the Federals and chased them back into the town. As they began their return to the main infantry force camped at the mound, their march paced by gunboats whose fire was deemed "harmless," the cavalry, according to one participant, passed through what "was once the garden spot of the great Mississippi valley, now reduced almost to a wilderness."<sup>38</sup>

The raiders did not arrive back at DeSoto Mound until nearly midnight. Early the next morning, they broke camp and, along with the infantry troops, set out on the march back to their temporary headquarters at Delhi, about fifteen miles to the southwest, where Walker awaited their return. Jubilant over the destruction they had wrought on the Yankee holdings, the Texas troops were accompanied by a sorrowful train of nearly 1,500 Black men and women captured from the plantations where they had worked, the officers and men of the First Arkansas, and hundreds of confiscated horses and mules, along with several wagons filled with Federal arms. Alfred Ellet, who set out again with his Marines to pursue the retreating Confederates as far as the Tensas River, found the road littered with broken carts and discarded plunder, "splendid furniture, pianos, pictures, etc." Federal records indicate that the DeSoto post had been garrisoned by 128 Black troops, yet General Walker's report to Taylor (then at Alexandria) a few days after the raid stated that 113 "armed negroes" had been captured at the mound. Writing to his wife, Pvt. John Simmons of the Twenty-Second Texas Infantry mentioned that "12 or 15" of the Black captives had died on the march to Delhi, which suggests that they may have been summarily executed by vengeful Confederate

<sup>38</sup>Bragg, *Letters of a Confederate Surgeon*, 143 (second quotation); Soldat, "Col. Parsons' Cavalry Raid," (first, fourth, and fifth quotations); *ORN*, Ser. 1, Vol. 25, Alfred W. Ellet to David D. Porter, July 3, 1863, 415-416 (third quotation, 416).

soldiers for the supposed crime of being rebellious slaves. All four of the white officers captured at the mound were released later in the year, despite recent threats by the Confederate government to execute white officers found in charge of Black troops. Walker's force remained at Delhi until, hearing of the fall of Vicksburg to Grant's Army on July 4, they broke camp three days later and marched west to Monroe, Louisiana, and thence to Alexandria. In the end, the entire expedition had accomplished little of military value to the Confederacy.<sup>39</sup>

During the weeks and months following Walker's expedition into northeastern Louisiana, rumors and innuendo fed inflammatory stories in northern newspapers, which accused the Confederates of having committed numerous atrocities against Black soldiers and their white officers. Racial atrocities had certainly been committed by the southern troops, but the reports that reached the northern press were garbled and the number and barbarity of such incidents were grossly exaggerated, portraying the rebels as inhuman fiends. Since most of the attention was focused on the battle that had taken place at Milliken's Bend in early June, reports of incidents were, rightly or wrongly, generally associated with that action and its aftermath. Two days after the battle at the Bend, Charles Dana, assistant secretary of war, reported to Stanton that Black troops taken prisoner by the Confederates had been murdered in cold blood. Dana was not present at the battle and retracted this assertion in a second report a week later; none of the Union officers who were actually present at the Bend made any

<sup>39</sup>Bragg, *Letters of a Confederate Surgeon*, 143; Soldat, "Col. Parsons' Cavalry Raid"; J.E.T., "Letter from Burford's Regiment"; *ORN*, Ser. 1, Vol. 25, David D. Porter to Gideon Welles, July 2, 1863, 212-214 (first quotation, 213); *OR* Ser. 1, Vol. 24, Pt. 2, John G. Walker to Eustace Surget, July 10, 1863, 466 (second quotation); John Simmons to Nancy Simmons, July 2, 1863, in Jon Harrison, ed., "The Confederate Letters of John Simmons," *Chronicles of Smith County, Texas* 14 (Summer 1975), 33-34 (third quotation, 34); *Official Army Register of the Volunteer Force of the United States Army for the Years 1861, '62, '63, '64, '65*, Part 8 (Washington, D.C.: Adjutant General's Office, 1865), 219; Janet B. Hewett, ed., *Supplement to the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Pt. II, Vol. 78 (Wilmington, NC: Broadfoot Publishing, 1998), 48, 50; Barnickel, *Milliken's Bend*, 123-124; Blessington, *Walker's Texas Division*, 116-118, 127.



Figure Six. Brigadier General Herman Lieb of Co. B, 8th Illinois Infantry Regiment and 5th U.S. Colored Troops Heavy Artillery Regiment (USCT) in uniform]/Joslyn & Smith, Washington Gallery, Vicksburg and Jackson, Miss. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C.

similar observation as to the fate of captured Black soldiers. Several of the officers reported that McCulloch's men had carried black flags and of hearing shouts of "no quarter" during the battle, both indicating that no prisoners were to be taken and that any of their opponents who attempted to surrender would be immediately killed. Colonel Leib, commander of the African Brigade during the attack, stated that these war cries were, however, directed specifically against the white officers commanding the Black troops. Many of the Black soldiers were indeed slain by the Confederates as they surged over the levee. Although McCulloch's Texas

troops may have killed African American defenders with enthusiasm, given the repugnance with which Southerners regarded armed Black men, these appear to have been casualties resulting from the intensity of the conflict rather than deliberate murder. Rumors of white officers being executed after the battle, however, persisted during the remainder of 1863.<sup>40</sup>

Confederate policy toward Black soldiers and their officers was inconsistent, at least in actual application. On May 1, a month before the battle at Milliken's Bend, the Confederate Congress passed a bill stipulating that captured white officers in command of Black troops should be executed, and Black soldiers bearing arms were to be turned over to state authorities for trial as insurrectionists, for which the penalty was death. In the weeks after the battle, on learning that Black soldiers had been captured,

<sup>40</sup>Barnickel, *Milliken's Bend*, 110-114; OR Ser. 1, Vol. 24, Pt. 1, 95-96; Wearmouth, *Cornwell Chronicles*, 217.

Kirby Smith made it clear to his subordinate generals that “no quarter” was the best solution during battle against African units; take no prisoners, white or Black, but cut them down without mercy. As to the prisoners on hand, they should be handed over to the state of Louisiana for criminal trial. When Col. William H. Parsons informed his commander, Maj. Gen. John G. Walker, that a large number of armed Black men had been taken prisoner at the battle of DeSoto Mound, Walker responded with a mild rebuke, considering it “an unfortunate circumstance that any armed negroes were captured.” Despite his “no quarter” instructions, Smith evidently felt a need to obtain clarification from the Confederate government at Richmond and sent a query on this matter in mid-June. The response from the secretary of war suggested a more moderate approach, concerned that a “no quarter” policy would simply encourage Black soldiers to fight harder. Instead, formerly enslaved persons captured under arms should be considered “deluded victims” and thus “treated with mercy and returned to their owners.”<sup>41</sup>

There remains to this day a great deal of uncertainty among historians concerning the fates of prisoners, white and Black, taken from the African Brigade in northeastern Louisiana. The evidence nevertheless indicates that a number of Black soldiers were executed summarily by Confederate troops in the field, as in the case of the DeSoto Mound captives, and that at least some white officers were killed for the alleged crime of commanding armed Black men. In mid-June 1863, Ulysses S. Grant received reports that a captured white sergeant in command of Black troops had been hung at Perkins Landing shortly before the battle of Milliken’s Bend and that a white officer and several Black soldiers were hanged at Richmond, Louisiana, after the battle. Furious, Grant dispatched a message to General Taylor on June 22, inquiring if these incidents had occurred and informing him that all captive soldiers, regardless of race or regimental affiliation, had the right to be treated as prisoners of war. If it was indeed Taylor’s policy to execute prisoners, Grant warned, he might become inclined to

<sup>41</sup>Barnickel, *Milliken’s Bend*, 115-117; OR Ser. 2, Vol. 6, Edwin K. Smith to Richard Taylor, June 13, 1863, 21-22 (first quotation, 22), Hugh L. Clay to Edwin K. Smith, July 13, 1863, 115 (third quotation); OR Ser. 1, Vol. 24, Pt. 2, John G. Walker to Eustace Surget, July 10, 1863, 466 (second quotation).

retaliate in kind. There was something of a delay before this communication arrived in Taylor's hands, because he had returned to Alexandria two weeks earlier, and John Walker was, at the time, not in Delhi but was in the field harassing Union outposts. When Taylor did receive Grant's message, he sent an immediate response on June 27 denying any knowledge of such executions and assuring his opposite number that "should I discover evidence of such acts having been perpetuated the parties shall meet with summary punishment." Grant chose to take Taylor at his word, and to the present day these particular executions have not been verified. Later in the year, however, Grant learned that two officers on Confederate General Hebert's staff were being charged with the murder of two white Union officers captured near Lake Providence who, after being briefly held prisoner at Monroe, had been taken out into the woods and either hung or shot. The two murdered men, Capt. Corydon Heath and 2nd Lt. George L. Conn, are, however, the only verifiable cases from northeastern Louisiana of the execution of white officers associated with African American troops.<sup>42</sup>

On August 4, 1863, the *Daily Missouri Democrat* ran a story titled "Rebel Barbarism" that depicted an event which allegedly occurred the day after the battle of Milliken's Bend, and that was so sensational and horrifying to readers that it was quickly picked up by many other northern newspapers and published as evidence of rebel inhumanity. The account was based on a report made to the *Democrat* by Lt. Stephen S. Cole of Ellet's Mississippi Marines. According to Cole, the day after the battle at Milliken's Bend the marines, in pursuit of the retreating Confederates, came across the "skeletons of white officers commanding negro regiments, who

<sup>42</sup>James G. Hollandsworth Jr., "The Execution of White Officers," 475-489; Barnickel, *Milliken's Bend*, 114-135; *OR Ser. 1*, Vol. 24, Pt. 3, 425-426, Richard Taylor to Ulysses S. Grant, June 27, 1863, 443-444 (quotation, 444), 469. Hollandsworth's analysis of the military records of nearly eight thousand Union officers from black units found that only eleven of these officers were apparently executed after being captured by Confederate troops (476-477), concluding that, while the "Confederate government did not officially carry out its threat to execute white officers who volunteered to command black troops in the Union army" (485), in a number of cases individuals took it upon themselves to do so.

had been captured by the rebels at Milliken's Bend. In many cases these officers had been nailed to the trees—and crucified. In this situation a fire was built around the tree, and they suffered a slow death from broiling.” Cole stated that other, similar skeletons had been found which had been nailed to planks set against a house, which was then set afire. A careful analysis of the evidence by Linda Barnickel, author of *Milliken's Bend*, concluded that this was almost certainly a garbled and grossly distorted rendering of the discovery by General Ellet and his men of charred human remains in burned cabins following Parsons's destructive raid across northeastern Louisiana nearly a month after the battle at the Bend. Barnickel correctly notes that, in any case, it would be rather difficult to ascertain either the rank or race of an individual from a charred corpse or skeleton. No accounts of tortured officers appear in any official reports, and as noted, all the white officers captured at Milliken's Bend or from DeSoto Mound can be accounted for in other ways. When informed of the *Democrat* article, Grant gave it no credibility, calling it “entirely sensational.”<sup>43</sup>

Whether the charred remains found in the cabins of slave quarters on several plantations were accidental casualties of the swift movement of Parsons's troops carrying out a scorched earth campaign, or as believed by most of the Federal officers and soldiers who viewed the remains, the result of deliberate rebel savagery, is unclear. Parsons and his men were certainly capable of such acts, having already earned a reputation for brutality during Arkansas engagements in 1862 when they murdered many Black refugees captured in a raid on a Federal supply train. There was a general lack of discipline among both Parsons and Harrison's cavalry troops, such that men from these commands were accused of committing “thefts and depredations” throughout central and northeastern Louisiana later in the year, provoking Kirby Smith to issue orders to have the guilty parties shot. Parsons's command remained in Louisiana through the summer, mainly carrying out scouting duties and tracking down deserters and draft dodgers,

<sup>43</sup>“Rebel Barbarism,” *Daily Missouri Democrat*, Aug. 4, 1863 (first quotation); Barnickel, *Milliken's Bend*, 126-129; *OR Ser. 1*, Vol. 24, Pt. 3, Ulysses S. Grant to Henry W. Halleck, Aug. 29, 1863, 590 (second quotation).



until November 1863 when they returned briefly to Arkansas. In April 1864, after being joined by the Thirtieth Texas Cavalry, Parsons's Brigade carried out a widely publicized massacre of hundreds of Black soldiers in Federal uniforms captured at Poison Spring, Arkansas.<sup>44</sup>

The engagements in northeastern Louisiana during the spring and summer of 1863 served to convince a skeptical public, both civilian and military, that Black men in military service were good for more than just garrison duty or as cannon fodder to spare white men from injury—that men who, mere weeks before the battles, had been enslaved on plantations could perform in combat roles with courage and discipline. At camp in Baton Rouge in March 1863, Pvt. Henry M. Cross of the Forty-Eighth Massachusetts observed Black soldiers at drill and was impressed by their proficiency, writing to his parents that “Negro haters *here* have to acknowledge they will make good soldiers.” His belief was later confirmed on May 27 during the assault on Port Hudson, where he witnessed the Black troops of the First and Third Louisiana Native Guards advancing fearlessly against Confederate fortifications under withering fire. “Let no one speak against the colored soldiers,” Cross wrote on June 1. “They have mingled their blood with ours on the battlefield.” He returned to this theme a few weeks later, informing Enoch and Charlotte Cross that the negro troops were a “magnificent success. In *every respect* they are fully equal to any troops, and in many respects . . . *superior* to all.” Shortly after the battle of Milliken's Bend, 2nd Lt. Matthew M. Miller, in command of Company I of the Ninth Louisiana (AD), wrote to his aunt, “I never more wish to hear the expression, ‘The niggers won't fight.’” He concluded by observing, “I never saw a braver company of men in my life.”<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup>Barnickel, *Milliken's Bend*, 135-137; Samuel S. Anderson to Paul O. Herbert, October 31, 1863, OR Ser. 1, Vol. 26, Pt. 2, 375 (quotation); Anne J. Bailey, ed., *In the Saddle with the Texans: Day-by-Day with Parsons's Cavalry Brigade, 1862-1865* (Abilene, TX, 2004), 20-21; Bailey, “Texas Cavalry Raid,” 29-30; OR Ser. 1, Vol. 41, Pt. 1, 294-295. Among the northern papers that reprinted the crucifixion story were the *Chicago Tribune*, *Boston Liberator*, *Pittsburgh Gazette*, *Springfield (MA) Republican*, and the *Cleveland Daily Leader*.

<sup>45</sup>Smith, “Let Us all be Grateful,” 46, 54-55; Henry M. Cross to parents, March 29, June 1, 22, in William Cullen Bryant II, ed., “A Yankee Soldier

Even Confederate soldiers were impressed by their Black opponents. In his after-action report, Gen. Henry McCulloch, who led the attack against Milliken's Bend, praised the tenacity of the Black regiments who resisted the charge up the levee "with considerable obstinacy." At the DeSoto Mound engagement, a Confederate participant observed that the Black troops were "well drilled, and used their guns with a precision equal with any troops." Most Southerners, especially those who had not seen Black soldiers in action, were less willing to accept that former enslaved persons could perform credibly as soldiers. On June 10, Kate Stone of Madison Parish, learning that Walker's men were retreating toward Delhi after the battle at the Bend, wrote "It is hard to believe that Southern soldiers—and Texans at that—have been whipped by a mongrel crew of white and black Yankees." Ardently denying the possibility, she declared, "There must be some mistake. It is said that the Negro regiments fought there like mad demons, but we cannot believe that. We know from long experience they are cowards."<sup>46</sup>

If the Confederate military incursions into northeastern Louisiana during the early summer of 1863 did little to advance the Southern cause, they proved ironically to be of great value to the North. The reports, exaggerated as they were, of atrocities committed by Southern troops against Black soldiers generated a considerable amount of sympathy among Northern readers for formerly enslaved persons who chose to don Union uniforms and helped to motivate both free and enslaved African Americans to join the army. More significantly, as Charles A. Dana, the former assistant secretary of war, observed in his war memoir, the courage exhibited by Black troops at Milliken's Bend and other battles

Looks at the Negro," *Civil War History* 7 (1961), 141 (first quotation), 146 (second quotation), 147 (third quotation); Miller to Dear Aunt, June 10, 1863, reprinted in the *Galena [IL] Daily Advertiser* and later in *OR Ser. 3, Vol. 3*, 452 (fourth quotation), 453 (fifth quotation).

<sup>46</sup>Henry E. McCulloch, Report, June 8, 1863, *OR Ser. 1, Vol. 24, Pt. 2*, 467 (first quotation); Soldat, "Col. Parsons' Cavalry Raid" (second quotation); John Q. Anderson, ed., *Brokenburn: The Journal of Kate Stone 1861-1868* (Baton Rouge, 1995), 218 (third quotation), 219 (fourth quotation); The 1st and 3rd Louisiana Native Guards had been raised at New Orleans in September and November 1862, respectively.

“completely revolutionized the sentiment of the army with regard to the employment of negro troops.” The rumors of executions of Black soldiers and their white officers led to a suspension of prisoner exchanges for the remainder of the war since the Union’s position was that all prisoners should receive fair and equal treatment. More cynically, this development also deprived the Confederacy of a significant source of veteran soldiers; although thousands of prisoners languished in the squalid conditions of prison camps during the war, the more populous North could easily replace their numbers whereas the South could not. By the end of the Civil War, nearly 180,000 African Americans had served in the Union Army, representing nearly ten percent of all Union troops. About 85 percent of the Black soldiers were formerly enslaved persons. From among their ranks came sixteen recipients of the Congressional Medal of Honor, which was first awarded to soldiers in 1863.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>47</sup>Barnickel, *Milliken’s Bend*, 142-148; Charles A. Dana, *Recollections of the Civil War* (New York, 1902), 86 (quotation); Smith, *Let Us All be Grateful*, 8; Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, *Freedom’s Soldiers: The Black Military Experience in the Civil War* (New York, 1998), 16-21.