



THE OLD LINER



The Bible That Stopped a Bullet

In 1863, a New Testament tucked in the pocket of Union soldier Charles W. Merrill prevented a musket ball from mortally wounding him

Robert Pushkar. Smithsonian Magazine, September 27, 2023



Charles W. Merrill Bible “Had it not been for the testament given [to] him by Mr. Foster, which received a second bullet, I doubt if you would have ever seen him again,” wrote journalist Benjamin Perley Poore in a letter to Merrill’s father. Illustration by Meilan Solly / Photos courtesy of Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Rowley, MA / Kathy Tarantola

On New Year’s Day in 1863, Private Charles W. Merrill hunkered down in his tent near Falmouth, Virginia, doing what soldiers do when not on duty: waiting. Outside, the weather was pleasant though cold; the wind blew raw.

A soldier in the 19th Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, Merrill sat alone, pen in hand, writing to his brother. “Our fireplace is one of the greatest luxuries imaginable,” he said. “It is both company and comfort.” The Union regiment had not moved in three days, and the men had only

three days of rations left. Merrill felt lonely, dreaming of home in West Newbury, Massachusetts, and wishing he could give each family member a “New Year’s present, even if it were a small one.”



Union soldiers camped on the banks of the Rappahannock River in May 1863 Public domain via Wikimedia Commons

Merrill’s coat pocket held a New Testament Bible given to him by his pastor, the Reverend Davis Foster, on August 12, 1862, the day he departed to join the Union Army. He didn’t know it at the time, but the Bible would literally save his life, stopping a bullet from striking him and earning him the admiration of President Abraham Lincoln.

Merrill was born in Newburyport, north of Boston, on November 20, 1837. His family later moved to West Newbury, where they made a living as farmers. Today, Merrill’s story survives through a collection of letters housed at the Peabody Essex Museum’s Phillips Library in the nearby town of Rowley. Featuring correspondence to and from the soldier’s family, the archive presents an intimate portrait of a new recruit, homesick but cautiously eager to help reunite his divided country.



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Merrill recorded his first impressions of the war in a September 1862 letter to his sister, painting a stark image of conditions in West Virginia. “There is a heavy dew every night,” he wrote, “and for the last few nights, I have had to wear two shirts, my blouse and great coat, then roll myself in my blankets, and by three o’clock, I have been so cold that I was glad to get up and walk around.” Still, Merrill tried to reassure his family of his well-being, noting, “If anyone wants to know how I get along, tell them first rate.”



The last known photograph of Charles W. Merrill Photo by Robert Pushkar / Collection of Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum

The soldier avoided discussing the “sad realities of a battlefield,” as he put it in an earlier letter to his brother Henry. Instead, in a letter to his younger brother Willie, he playfully teased, “If you were with me, I could show you some things that would

open those eyes of yours, but I have not any cat for you to play with, nor barn to sleep in, nor cows to milk, but if you will come out here and bring that kitten of yours, you shall have a part of my house which is just about high enough in the highest part for you to stand up in, and I have a large overcoat that is big enough to wrap both of us in and a noble blanket all to myself. We could sleep as warm as need be.”

By December 1862, Merrill was encamped near Fredericksburg, Virginia, on the eve of one of the deadliest battles of the Civil War. Nearly 200,000 soldiers fought in the Battle of Fredericksburg, making it the largest of any engagements between the Union and Confederate armies during the conflict.

Under pressure from Washington, D.C., Union Major General Ambrose E. Burnside hatched a plan to attack Confederate General Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia and advance on the Rebel capital of Richmond. Merrill’s regiment was among the Union troops assigned to cross the Rappahannock River from Falmouth to Fredericksburg.





An illustration of the Union Army crossing the Rappahannock during the Battle of Fredericksburg in December 1862 Public domain via Wikimedia Commons

As Merrill wrote in a letter to his friend Sarah, he and his four tentmates spent the days before the battle raising “our house a story so that it is just high enough for me to stand up in the highest part of it. Yesterday we built a fireplace to it.” During these “rather stirring times,” they waited for orders, hearing rumors that a fight with enemy troops was imminent. “It is different talking about spilling one’s blood at home and spilling it in rebellion,” Merrill observed.

Despite being drastically outnumbered, Lee outwitted Burnside and his men. After five days of fighting, the Union Army withdrew across the Rappahannock. It suffered heavy casualties, losing more than 12,500 troops to the Confederate’s 6,000. Lee, dejected by the carnage, bitterly exclaimed, “It is well that war is so terrible, [or] we should grow too fond of it.”

Five months later, the 19th Regiment clashed with the Confederates again at the Second Battle of Fredericksburg. On the morning of May 3, 1863, Merrill’s brigade formed a line of battle in front of Confederate rifle pits. “We lay under fire until the enemy’s center was broken when our brigade was withdrawn,” recalled fellow soldier Gorham Coffin in a letter to Merrill’s father, William Merrill.

Overhead, a roaring shell filled with musket balls exploded, raining shrapnel over the retreating troops. Merrill was severely wounded when a bullet grazed his right eye, traveled through his skull and lodged behind his ear. But a second bullet propelled at his chest was stopped by a small Bible in a coat



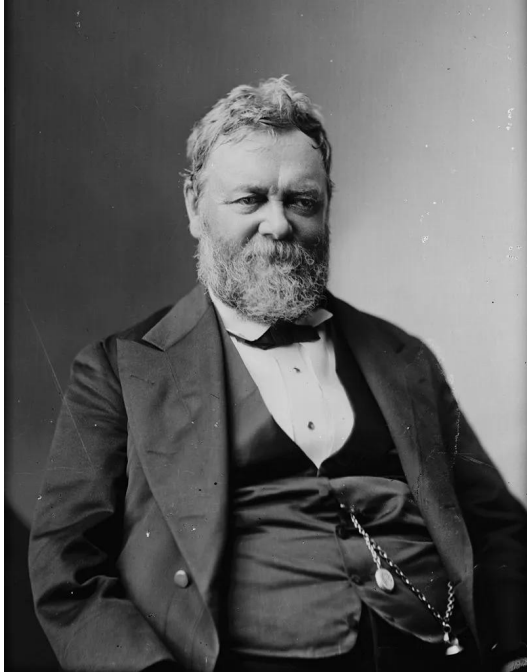
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pocket over his heart. He was taken to the Lacy House, a makeshift field hospital where surgeons removed the bullet and pronounced him out of danger, though they acknowledged that he might lose his right eye. The doctors gave Merrill the musket ball as a keepsake.

Shortly after Coffin wrote to William, Merrill was evacuated to a hospital in Washington’s Judiciary Square neighborhood. There, his story caught the attention of Benjamin Perley Poore, a journalist, diplomat and bon vivant Washington insider. Like Merrill, Poore was a native of Newburyport, and he felt a kinship with the young soldier and his family. Poore informed the Merrills that their son was under the best of care at one of the nation’s best hospitals. “My personal acquaintance with the surgeons—two of them Massachusetts men—enables me to assure you that they regarded him with no ordinary attention,” he wrote in a letter, noting that a nurse named Caroline Whippey offered the patient her particularly “devoted attentions.”



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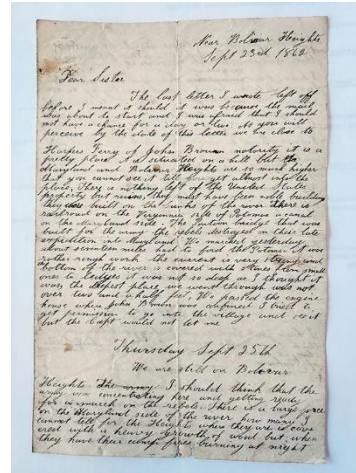
Benjamin Perley Poore Public domain via Wikimedia Commons

In an earlier telegram, Poore had vowed to “look after [Merrill] as if he were my brother” and try to “take him to West Newbury when I go next week.” In another letter, the journalist added, “Had it not been for the testament given [to] him by Mr. Foster, which received a second bullet, I doubt if you would have ever seen him again.”

Four days after he was injured, Merrill was lucid and in good spirits; he appeared to be on the path to recovery. With frank resignation, he accepted his condition in a letter to his parents: “Could you see me now unless someone told you, you would pass me by and say, ‘No, he belongs not to us.’” Yet his firm Christian faith kept him strong, and he attributed “all to the kind care of our Heavenly Father that I am gaining and hope that we may meet once more.”

Merrill gazed at the Bible with the musket ball embedded in its leaves and must have

sensed how fortunate he was to be alive. He closed with reassuring advice, writing, “Do not worry about me, for I am in good hands.” In a poignant postscript, he added, “Don’t let the little folks know that I have lost my right eye.”



A September 25, 1862, letter from Merrill to his sister Photo by Robert Pushkar / Collection of Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum

Meanwhile, word of Merrill’s narrow escape from death swirled around Washington circles. Among those who saw the bullet-ridden Bible was Lincoln. The 16th president was known to be deeply religious, once telling his son Tad, “Every educated person should know something about the Bible and the Bible stories.” As editor and historian Louis A. Warren wrote in 1940, the Bible was “the single most influential book that Abraham Lincoln read.”

Deeply moved by Merrill’s miraculous survival, the president sent a Bible to the soldier, inscribing a personal message inside: “For Charles W. Merrill, 19th Massachusetts, A. Lincoln, May 8, 1863.” This volume is preserved alongside Merrill’s New Testament at the Phillips Library.



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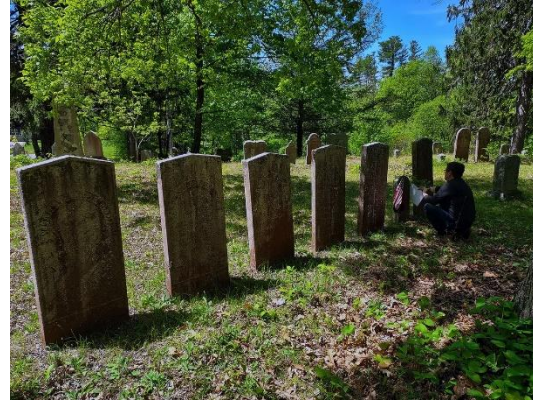
Dan Lipcan, director of the library, says, “Merrill was a native of Essex County, [so] ... it’s entirely appropriate that the Merrill papers came to reside in our library.”

On May 12, Poore sat at Merrill’s bedside, optimistic about his chances of recovery. Charles told him, “I like this barberry water better than anything else I have to drink, for it reminds me of my grandmother, who used to make it.” Poore left the hospital, promising to return later.

Around 2 p.m., Merrill was propped up in bed when he suddenly cried out to the patient next to him. “Speak to Miss Whippey,” he said. “I’m splitting blood.” These were his last words.

Immediately, surgeons reopened the head wound and frantically searched for the ruptured artery as “his lifeblood was gushing forth,” Poore recounted. “Internal hemorrhage had commenced, and science could not arrest it.” Twenty minutes later, Merrill died, “his soul [having] passed into another and a better world.”

In Massachusetts, the Merrills waited anxiously for their son’s much-anticipated return. Their firstborn was coming home, and they had prepared clothes for him to wear. His younger brothers and sisters even gathered toys to occupy his time as he convalesced.



*Merrill's grave in West Newbury, Massachusetts
Robert Pushkar*

William had gone to Newburyport in hopes that his son might arrive on the next train. While he was there, a messenger arrived with a telegram from Poore:

Send word to Wm. Merrill West Newbury that his son was unexpectedly seized with internal hemorrhage this afternoon, and, although the surgeons were with him at once, he breathed his last in 20 minutes without a pang. It was my sad privilege to be with him. I shall have his remains embalmed and sent to Boston tomorrow afternoon.

Merrill’s New Testament saved him from instant death on the battlefield, but it couldn’t stop the bullet to the head that ultimately took his life. Though it was temporary, Merrill’s reprieve offered him nine more precious days, which he used to connect with his beloved family.

Merrill was buried at Walnut Hill Cemetery in West Newbury. As the Newburyport Herald observed in its coverage of the tragedy, “Mysterious are the ways of providence, and in an hour and in a way they thought not of, he departed to his eternal home and eternal friends in the heavens. He was a brave, high-minded and intelligent young man, beloved of all.”



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Abraham Lincoln Birthplace and Camp Nelson receive funding to replace fence lines through the Great American Outdoors Act

Stacy Humphreys, NPS, October 12, 2023

HODGENVILLE – A project to restore split rail fencing at Abraham Lincoln Birthplace National Historical Park and Camp Nelson National Monument will begin on October 23, 2023. The project, funded by the Great American Outdoors Act National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund (GAOA LRF), will team young people with experienced mentors to replace fence lines in and around the parks to help preserve the historic landscape and designate property lines and boundaries.

“Utilizing Great American Outdoors Act funding to address a needed maintenance project while helping youth learn historic preservation trade skills will be a positive experience for all of us,” said Acting Superintendent Scott Powell.

The work will be completed by a National Park Service (NPS) Maintenance Action Team (MAT) in partnership with the American Conservation Experience (ACE). MATs are composed of NPS employees trained in historic restoration and preservation techniques who travel to national parks to complete small, but critical, maintenance rehabilitation and repair projects on historic structures. ACE is a nonprofit organization that provides young people with opportunities to work on meaningful conservation projects on public lands. A five-person crew from ACE will gain valuable hands-on experience in

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traditional trades from the skilled craftspeople of the MAT.

Together, they will spend approximately two weeks at the Lincoln Birthplace replacing 2,000 linear feet of split rail fencing. They will then relocate to Camp Nelson for about seven weeks to replace 3,400 linear feet of split rail fencing and perform maintenance on approximately 475 linear feet of stone wall.

GAOA LRF is part of a concerted effort to address extensive deferred maintenance and repair needs in national parks. Supported by revenue from energy development, GAOA LRF provides NPS with up to \$1.3 billion per year for five years to make significant enhancements in national parks to ensure their preservation and provide opportunities for recreation, education, and enjoyment for current and future visitors. GAOA LRF is funding almost 300 MAT historic preservation activities in national parks throughout the country.

For more information about the Abraham Lincoln Birthplace National Historical Park, visit the park’s Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/LincolnBirthplaceNPS> or visit the park’s website at www.nps.gov/abli.

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American Battlefield Trust Secures Opportunity to Save Critical Part of Gettysburg First Day Battlefield

Nonprofit working to complete preservation campaign begun nearly 15 years ago

Mary Koik, Jim Campi, ABT, October 5, 2023



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(Gettysburg, Pa.) — The American Battlefield Trust has launched a \$3 million national fundraising campaign to acquire the remainder of the former Gettysburg Country Club and remove modern structures, continuing a preservation process begun nearly 15 years ago in partnership with The Conservation Fund and National Park Service. Thanks to a generous major donor and other considerations extending the window for payment, the Trust seeks to raise \$375,000 in private gifts by November 20, when it takes ownership of the property.

Located along the Chambersburg Pike between McPherson Ridge and Herr's Ridge, and just past Willoughby's Run, this 15-acre property saw intense fighting in the opening phase of battle on July 1, 1863. More recently, this vestige of the Emmanuel Harman Farm was proposed for intensive residential development last summer but won a reprieve following significant local advocacy to save the site. Denied permits for a sprawling apartment complex, the landowner appealed the decision but gave preservation groups an opportunity to purchase the property.

"I am pleased that we were able to reach an agreement with the landowner, a regional development firm, especially given the community support for the addition of this acreage to the battlefield footprint," said Trust President David Duncan. "This is a significant milestone, but much remains to be done before we can declare 'victory' and deem the entirety of the former Country Club property protected forever."

The site's preservation journey began in mid-2008, when the Gettysburg Country Club declared bankruptcy after decades in operation. The site was identified as a top acquisition priority for the park and preservationists due to its historic significance: where Union cavalry slowed the initial Confederate advance and later fought over by the famed Union Iron Brigade and Confederate General James Archer's Brigade of Tennessee and Alabama troops. The first true bloodletting at Gettysburg occurred along the banks of Willoughby's Run, on and around the Country Club land. After the fighting moved off to the east, a field hospital was established on the banks of Willoughby's Run and at least 23 combatants were buried on what became the Country Club.



The Trust has launched a national fundraising campaign to acquire the remainder of the former Gettysburg Country Club. American Battlefield Trust

"This is one of the most historically significant properties on the Gettysburg Battlefield," said Andrew Dalton, executive director of the Adams County Historical Society and author of *Beyond the Run*, a history of actions on this part of the battlefield. "Between two Confederate attacks passing over the land and the remarkable post-battle history of a nearby mineral spring and resort, the potential for



restoring and interpreting this tract is immense.”

An initial sheriff’s sale failed to find a buyer and the entire site was acquired by a housing developer. However, preservationists continued to negotiate behind the scenes and, in March 2011, The Conservation Fund, assisted by the Trust and other allied organizations, successfully transferred 95 acres of former golf course to the National Park Service during an event headlined by then-Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar.

However, the portion of the property fronting the road, including modern clubhouses, tennis courts and swimming pool had been subdivided out and was not included in the acquisition. Those amenities have gone unused for several years and the site remained vulnerable to development. The looming threat came to a head last summer, when Cumberland Township considered approving development plans for a large-scale apartment complex. Local residents and preservation advocates came out in force to oppose the plan, and the local Board of Supervisors denied permit approval. Although the developer appealed that ruling and worked to address the specific issues raised in the process, the door was open for preservation discussions.

Through a series of good-faith negotiations, the Trust and the developer were able to reach mutually agreeable terms for the Trust’s purchase of the land in collaboration with other preservation allies. After taking ownership of the property in November, the Trust will also begin envisioning a landscape restoration plan that removes intrusive 21st century elements but retains the original clubhouse currently leased by

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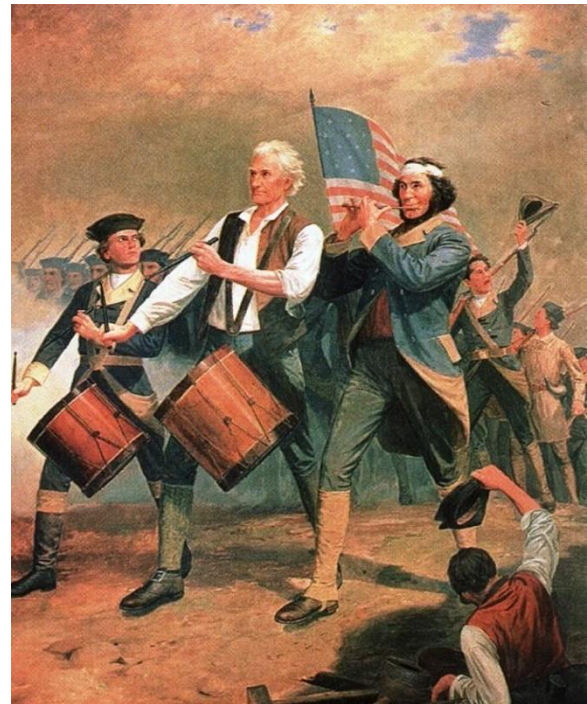
the Gettysburg Day Spa, which will continue operating as normal for the foreseeable future.

Over the past two-plus decades, the Trust has helped protect nearly 1,240 acres across the Gettysburg Battlefield. Further, it has made significant investments in landscape restoration across the battlefield — both on its own properties and assisting our partners. Through innovative GPS-enabled and augmented reality components, we have advanced place-based interpretive efforts and brought the battle to life in new ways. Learn more about these projects and initiatives on the Trust website.

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The 4th of July from a Southern Perspective

W. Michael Hurley, October 13, 2023, blueandgrayeducation.org





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Originally entitled "Yankee Doodle," this is one of several versions of a scene painted by A. M. Willard that came to be known as The Spirit of '76. Often imitated or parodied, it is a familiar symbol of American patriotism. | public domain

The men and women who lived in the Southern states before 1861 had always enjoyed a grand celebration of the 4th of July. Considering the Southern contribution to the cause of liberty, it seemed only natural to do so. The colonial states from the South had furnished some of the most outstanding leaders of the War for Independence. The guerrilla-fighting Scotch Irish of Appalachia turned the tide of the war at the Battle of King's Mountain. The Southern state of Virginia gave America the author of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson. Virginia also contributed the most outstanding leader in the history of the United States, Gen. George Washington.

On Southern soil, the victory over British general Charles Cornwallis occurred when he surrendered to General Washington at Yorktown on October 19, 1781. After the war, the South contributed the nation's first president, George Washington, and went on to provide nine of the first 12 Presidents of the United States: Jefferson (VA), Madison (VA), Monroe (VA), Jackson (SC), Harrison (VA), Tyler (VA), Polk (NC), and Taylor (VA).

When secession came in 1861, the Southern people were proud of their contributions to the struggle for American self-government. As an expression of that perspective, as the two nations began to move toward hostilities, most Southerners felt they would be fighting a second war for independence; against an oppressive United States, that no longer represented their values and rights. Their attitude was no different than that of their

brave colonial forefathers who had stood against the King of England for many of the same reasons. This feeling was so strong concerning the principles of the American Revolution that the Confederacy's first national flag closely resembled that of their former countrymen to the North. They, too, loved the red, white, and blue.

When the War Between the States began, the Confederacy continued to celebrate the 4th of July in many cities and towns across Dixie. To the South, the feeling was that the day brought a time to stress the Founding Fathers' principles and less about its current relationship with the United States. As the years went by and the cost of the war came to bear on the homes, the treasury, and the blood which was sacrificed to defend against the Yankees, many Southern communities reduced or eliminated celebrations on July 4th. The 1863 battlefield losses at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and specifically at Vicksburg—where the defending Confederate Army surrendered on July 4th—all but eliminated the annual celebration. It would be 81 long years before the city of Vicksburg, Mississippi, would celebrate the 4th of July again. It took the end of World War II in Europe to finally bring about the holiday celebration again on the 4th of July 1945.

It is well documented that throughout American history, Southerners have had a proud heritage of fighting for freedom, the right to self-determination, and to be left alone to establish an individual's pursuit of happiness; principles that were reflected in the original purposes for the celebration of the 4th of July and remain cherished by Southerners to this day.



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Painted Canteens During the Civil War and One Artist Who Painted Them

Shannon Pritchard, October 9, 2023,
blueandgrayeducation.org

The canteen, typically made up of two pieces of wood or tin with a pewter spout and cork, was part of every Civil War soldier's kit. They were carried over the shoulder using a leather or cloth strap. And, they became popular surfaces for artists to create works of art, both during and after the Civil War.



The front of the canteen, depicting a Confederate cavalryman and his weary infantry companion



The reverse of the canteen

This oil-painted Confederate canteen depicts a Confederate cavalryman wearing a gray kepi, an oilcloth raincoat, yellow pants, and knee-high riding boots. He is supporting his weary infantry companion, who is wearing a gray jacket and dark pants under a full-length gray greatcoat. The weary horse, rider, and infantryman are traveling through a war-torn area in the rain, and the sun is setting on the Confederacy in the background.

I believe the artist was depicting the road from Appomattox, as both are unarmed and both have despairing countenances. The painting is outlined in gold, which is still brilliant. The spout is also painted gold.

The lettering on the reverse, “Souvenir of the trip to RICHMOND Va Oct. 1881,” gives great insight into the history of painted canteens. Just above the date, lightly written in pencil, is “Yorktown Centennial.”

October 1881 was the centennial of Cornwallis’ surrender at Yorktown. In 1881, meetings of Confederate veterans were still



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very much frowned upon by the Federal Government and evidently the veterans gathered in Richmond under the auspices of celebrating the Yorktown centennial.

At that gathering, two prominent Confederate artists donated work to the ladies' bazaar; one was Alan Shepard, and the other John Adams Elder. Elder painted the canteens shown here, and later, it would be the model for one of his most famous works, "After Appomattox" in 1886.

Author and historian Michael Aubrecht says, "Elder remains the most coveted of pre- and post-Civil War artists and is considered one of the most celebrated artists ever to come out of the Civil War era."

And, in 2008, Christopher O. Uebelhor wrote, "Elder's work played a significant role in postwar America, helping to perpetuate the idea of the glorious Old South and the 'Southern mystique,' which is still very much alive today."



A note describing the canteen's subject matter

The second painted canteen appears to depict the view from Bellona Arsenal toward the hills of Richmond overlooking heavy artillery and a prisoner of war camp at Belle Isle. Both canteens were painted by the same artist in Richmond, which lends credence to my impression that the artillery scene is indeed Bellona.

The discovery of the dated and addressed canteen sheds light on other painted canteens. Since both of these were painted and sold as souvenirs of the trip to Richmond, it stands to reason that a large portion of the few surviving painted canteens with a military scene were painted at the same time by the same artist.

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The Occoquan, Virginia, Flag Incident in July 1860

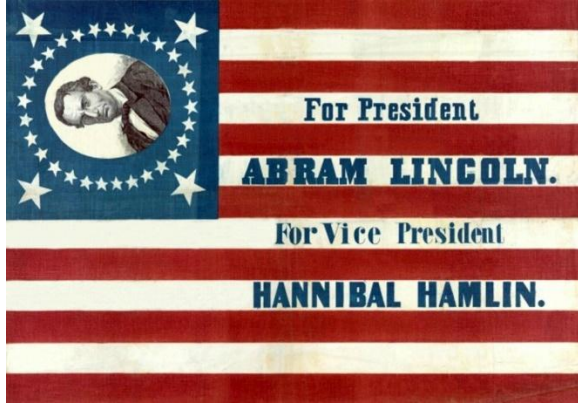
William Connery, October 2, 2023,
blueandgrayeducation.org



The front of the canteen, depicting what is believed to be Bellona Arsenal



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The political banner that ignited the incident | courtesy of author

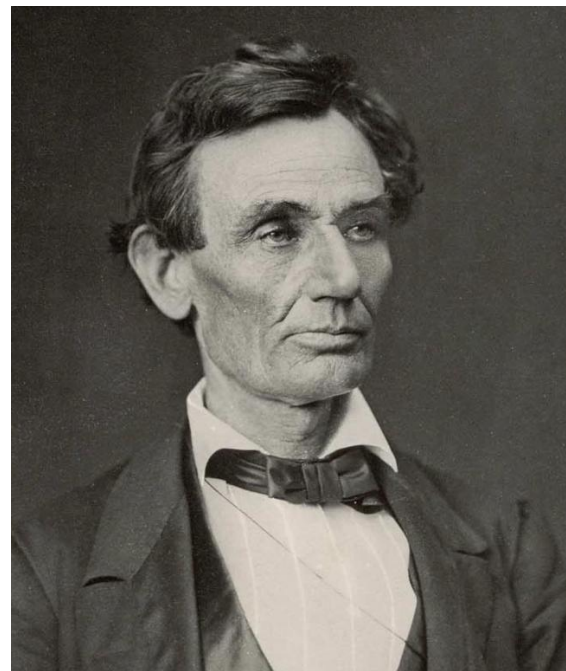
An introduction to the heated emotions of the antebellum era can be found in the village of Occoquan, just within Prince William County, Virginia. On July 4, 1860, as the November elections were drawing closer, a group of Republicans got together on the Rockledge property and raised a political banner embossed with the names of Abraham (Abram) Lincoln and Hannibal Hamlin. The group paraded with their muskets and threatened anyone who voiced disapproval of their Liberty Pole.

When the Prince William County officials next met in Brentsville at the County Courthouse, it was decided the flag and pole were an insult to the people of Virginia; therefore, the offensive banner should be removed. The decision was made to send troops to Occoquan on July 27 to guarantee the Liberty Pole and Lincoln Banner were destroyed. One of the Republicans, William Athey, when he heard of the intended flagpole destruction, wired Governor Letcher for protection of the property and people of Occoquan. He pleaded that the good people of the village were about to be descended upon by a mob of 300 men from a distant part of the County at noon on

Friday the 27th because of their political opinions.

Athey's request was not well received in Richmond, and the governor's office said the entreaty by Athey to protect the traitors who raised the Lincoln Banner was "about the most consummate piece of impudence and audacity that has ever come under our notice."

In order to have some protection, the Prince William Militia led by Capt. William W. Thornton arrived at 3:30 p.m. on the 27th, arranged themselves silently around the Liberty Pole and remained so during the events. Along with the Lincoln Banner, the pole flew the U.S. flag. But the hopes of protecting their freedom with the Stars and Stripes were dashed. As warned, a company of 40 soldiers led by Captain Fitzhugh soon followed the militia. The soldiers formed in a square around the pole, seemingly ignoring the militia from Brentsville.





Abraham Lincoln | LOC



Hannibal Hamlin | LOC

Joseph Janney, a local miller and merchant, stepped forward from the assembled crowd and asked that his property be protected. Janney argued that he did not hold the same opinions as the Republicans but insisted he had approved the use of his property. A number of people had signed a petition requesting the protection of the flagpole and presented it to the commander of the Prince William Militia. The request was ignored.

When Captain Fitzhugh gave the order, James W. Jackson of Fairfax came forward from the troop formation and gave the first ax blow to the pole. The Republicans stood around and jeered the soldiers, and when the destruction of the banner and pole was complete, the Prince William Militia departed, taking the U.S. flag, Lincoln campaign banner, and pole pieces with them

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to Brentsville. Some in the crowd displaying Southern sentiment applauded the removal of the flagpole and standards.

The crowd went home as night approached, but the village of Occoquan had gained a reputation as a home for Republicans and abolitionists. In the November 1860 presidential election, only 55 votes were for Lincoln, out of 1,042 total votes in Prince William County. All of those Lincoln votes were cast in Occoquan. In comparison, Lincoln had received 2 votes in Alexandria County, 24 votes in Fairfax County, and 11 votes in Loudoun County. Other Virginia localities, such as Clarke, Culpeper, Frederick, Madison, Orange, and Stafford Counties, had cast 0 votes for Lincoln!

This BGES Dispatch is excerpted from Civil War Northern Virginia 1861 by William Connery, a.k.a. The History Guy. He is also the author of Mosby's Raids in Civil War Northern Virginia.

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The Atlanta Appeal Justifies Fort Pillow

by Stephen Davis Mar 10, 2023 Civil War News

At the time of the war, Memphis's four leading newspapers were the Appeal, Argus, Avalanche and Bulletin.

After Federal forces captured Memphis in June 1862, the Avalanche continued operation, absorbing the Bulletin three months later. The Avalanche sometimes ran afoul of the occupiers, but managed to last through the war. The owners of the Argus also made it, as one historian has written, "by being very circumspect in their editorial policy."



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The Appeal, however, pulled up stakes. Owners and editors were John R. McClanahan and Benjamin F. Dill, who refused to accept the prospect of being censored and controlled by Yankees. On June 6, 1862, even as a big naval battle raged offshore, McClanahan and Dill packed up and took off. They had already announced their intentions:

Lincoln's hireling minions would deprive us of the privilege of expressing at all times our earnest God-speed to the progress of Southern independence.... Sooner would we sink our type, press and establishment in the bottom of the Mississippi river, and be wanderers and exiles from our homes.

Wanderers and exiles, indeed. As the Confederacy shrank under Union conquest, the Appeal was forced to migrate further: first, to Grenada, Mississippi (June-November 1862); to Jackson (December 1862-May 1863); then to Meridian (one week); and on to Atlanta, where the Appeal resumed publication on June 6, 1863. All of this relocating by the paper led wags to start calling it the "Moving Appeal."

By midpoint in the war, Atlanta had become home to five newspapers. The Intelligencer had been founded in 1842 in Madison, Georgia; it moved to Atlanta five years later, locating downtown on Whitehall Street. It became a daily in 1854. The Southern Confederacy had been founded in 1857 as the National American; it got its new name on March 4, 1861 (the day of Lincoln's inauguration). A third paper, the Commonwealth, limped behind the other two and folded in August 1863. Then came two more papers, refugees from Yankee conquerors: first the Appeal, then the

Knoxville Register, which arrived in late August 1863.

The Appeal was the quintessential Confederate newspaper. As such it celebrated Confederate victories, like that at Chickamauga, usually hyperbolically.⁶ It shrugged off Southern reverses, such as the fall of Vicksburg: "Come what may, we shall not despond, or despair of the Republic," McClanahan vowed. "We have an abiding faith in the success of the South," it proclaimed, as it pledged "a continued resistance to the tyranny which a haughty foe are endeavoring to establish over us." Prominent in wartime propaganda was vilification of the enemy, and the Appeal did this, too, at one point calling Yankee bluebellies "azure-stomached miscegnators."

Events of April 12, 1864

Especially when the Northern press condemned Confederate actions, the Appeal always took up for the South. Such was the case with Fort Pillow.

Maj. Gen. Bedford Forrest and his cavalry had already conducted two raids into west Tennessee, when on March 15, 1864 he set forth once more from north Mississippi.⁹ Detachments were sent out to gobble up Union garrisons along the way while Forrest pressed ahead, reaching Paducah, Kentucky on March 25.¹⁰ He kept part of his forces, under Brig. Gen. James R. Chalmers, in west Tennessee to watch possible enemy advances from Memphis or Fort Pillow. By April 13-14, Confederates were still threatening Columbus and gathering horses at Paducah. Detachments kept Federals at Memphis while Forrest and Chalmers planned to move against Fort Pillow.



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The place had been constructed by Confederates in 1861 on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi forty miles north of Memphis. Federals occupying it in the spring of 1862 modified the earthwork; two years later it was garrisoned by 557 officers and men—half white, half colored—under Maj. Lionel F. Booth. Most of the whites were Tennessee Tories, tales of whose depredations on the local citizenry reached Forrest. Not surprisingly, the Saddle Wizard pledged to “attend to” the Fort Pillow garrison.

Chalmers and some 1,500 troopers arrived before Fort Pillow at dawn on April 12. The Confederates drove in the outside skirmish line and surrounded the fort. Then from high ground and tree stumps they started picking off the garrison, zeroing in on officers. “We suffered pretty severely in the loss of commissioned officers by the unerring aim of the rebel sharpshooters,” one Federal stated. Major Booth was killed around 9 a.m.; his adjutant fell shortly after. “From that time on” Forrest biographer Robert Selph Henry writes, “the defense of the place was hopeless.”

And so it was. As the Confederates kept up a steady fire on targets inside the fort, Forrest arrived at 10 o’clock to direct the final deployment of his men. A few hours later he sent in a demand for surrender, with his usual threat: “Should my demand be refused, I cannot be responsible for the fate of your command.” Maj. William F. Bradford, who had succeeded Booth, consulted with his officers, then sent back a note: “I will not surrender.”

Upon receiving it around 3:15, Forrest ordered his bugler, Jacob Gaus, to sound the charge. Some 1,200 Southerners quickly

covered the distance to the fort, jumped into the ditch, climbed up the parapet, and poured into the fort.

With most of their officers gone, the overwhelmed Federals, white and black, fought as best they could, but most started fleeing out of the fort and down the riverbank. Forrest’s men continued firing as the Yankees plunged into the water. “The victory was complete,” Forrest wrote afterward; “the river was dyed with the blood of the slaughtered for 200 yards.” When it was all over, toward sundown, 41% of the Federals—231 of 557—were dead. Many drowned; others surrendered—or tried to. “There can be no doubt,” admits Forrest biographer Robert Selph Henry, “nor has it been denied, that some men—perhaps a considerable number—were shot after they, as individuals, were seeking to surrender.” Forrest’s casualties totaled 14 killed and 86 wounded.

Talk of a massacre

The next day, with Confederates still holding the fort, two Northern vessels appeared offshore. A truce was arranged for the Federals to bury their dead and gather their wounded in and around the fort. These were put onboard one of the transports, the *Platte Valley*, which steamed upriver to the army hospital at Mound City, Illinois.

The survivors spoke of a deliberate and wholesale massacre by Forrest’s men. The Federal commander at Cairo, Brig. Gen. Mason Brayman, sent to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton lengthy written and sworn testimony he had received alleging wholesale bloodshed. One black private claimed he saw a Federal soldier stabbed



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after he had surrendered. A store clerk in the fort stated he heard Rebel officers say that “they would never recognize negroes as prisoners of war but would kill them whenever taken.” One Federal cavalryman responded in a question-and-answer setting that he heard Rebels shouting, “Give them no quarter; kill them; kill them; it is General Forrest’s orders.”

A Memphis newspaper and the Associated Press quickly picked up on the story, which then spread throughout the Northern press. The Cincinnati Gazette called the bloody battle “one of the most horrible that has disgraced the history of modern warfare.” The New York Tribune asserted, “the Rebel leaders meant to impress upon this struggle every possible feature of cruelty.” On April 30, 1864, Harper’s Weekly rushed into its pages a woodcut illustration that showed “Rebels shooting fallen black soldiers and bayoneting others; one unfortunate Negro is seen lying on the ground helpless as he is about to be stabbed in the back.”

So the Yankees claimed that there was “no quarter” shown by Forrest’s men at Fort Pillow. The allegation infuriated Southerners, even as they owned up to the bloodshed. The Mobile Advertiser and Register was one of the first Confederate newspapers to report the “indiscriminate slaughter,” and that “the fort ran with blood; many jumped into the river and drowned or [were] shot.” The Memphis/Atlanta Appeal spoke of the “unprecedented slaughter of five-sevenths of the garrison.”

The Appeal’s take

Even acknowledging the bloodshed, the Confederate press sought to absolve Forrest

of the Yankee libel that he had ordered a massacre, and took up all lines of counterargument. Many of them can be seen in the following editorial of the Memphis/Atlanta Appeal.

“THE MURDER OF NEGRO TROOPS. OKOLONA, MISSISSIPPI, June 14, 1864.

There is but one fact significant above all others in connection with the recent victory of General Forrest—it is the first which has been won by the smaller over the larger force, where the inequality in numbers was so great that every participant in the struggle must have been conscious of the relative strength of the combatants. Strategy, Forrest’s name, and confidence in their leader, won the day. The Yankees and negroes opposed Forrest in Middle Tennessee, and came forth simply to slaughter the helpless, to plunder and desolate the country.

Forrest’s strength in the contest was about three thousand five hundred men. The number of negroes and whites is not accurately ascertained. Prisoners say that their force was twelve or fifteen thousand. Telegraphic despatches have given the general result of the battle, but many days must elapse before the details are known. Prisoners are constantly brought in by the country people. Very few negroes it seems have been captured. Perhaps not more than forty and fifty have appeared at headquarters. Most of them fled as soon as it was known that Forrest was on the battlefield. Those that were taken escaped. (?) The soldiers say that they “lost them.”

You must know that most of Forrest’s men are from Western Tennessee. Before the battle fugitives from the counties through



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which Sturgis and his troops were advancing, came into camp detailing incidents which made men shudder who are accustomed to scenes of violence and bloodshed. I cannot relate the stories of these poor frightened people. Robbery, rapine, and the assassination of men and women, were the least of crimes committed, while the “Avengers of Fort Pillow” overran and desolated the country. Rude unlettered men who had fought at Shiloh, and in many subsequent battles, wept like children when they heard of the enormities to which their mothers, sisters, and wives had been subjected by the negro mercenaries of Sturgis. The mildest, most peaceable of our soldiers became madmen when they heard how the persons of their kinswomen were violated. The negroes were [killed] regardless of the age, condition, sex, or entreaties of their victims. In one instance, the grandmother, daughter, and granddaughter, were each, in the same room, held by the drunken brutes, and subjected to outrages by the bare recital of which humanity is appalled. A young wife, enciente, taken to a negro encampment, and tied to stakes driven in the ground, was made to minister to the hell-born passions of a dozen fiends. Death, in his mercy came to her relief. A little boy, who sought to defend his mother, was brutally bayoneted. When their savage lusts were gratified, the victims here and there were burned in their dwellings. Insanity, in some cases, came to the relief of sufferings such as never before were inflicted upon human creatures by remorseless fiends in human shape. Terror, and the agony of hopeless shame, and famine, and fire, and blood, and the assassination of the helpless and unoffending, marked the progress of the “Avengers of Fort Pillow.” It is not strange

that negro prisoners were “lost.” The whites who led them on and incited them to these damnable deeds deserve a more terrible punishment. Yet we have sent three thousand of those white men to prison to be exchanged. Simple justice demands their instant execution by the hangman’s rope.

You have heard that our soldiers buried negroes alive at Fort Pillow. This is true. At the first fire after Forrest’s men scaled the walls, many of the negroes threw down their arms and fell as if they were dead. They perished in the pretence, and could only be restored at the point of the bayonet. To resuscitate some of them, more terrified than the rest, they were rolled into the trenches made as receptacles for the fallen. Vitality was not restored till breathing was obstructed, and then the resurrection began. On these facts is based the pretext for the crimes committed by Sturgis, Grierson, and their followers. You must remember, too, that in the extremity of their terror, or for other reasons, the Yankees and negroes at Fort Pillow neglected to haul down their flag. In truth relying upon their gunboats, the offices expected to annihilate our forces after we had entered the fortifications. They did not intend to surrender.

A terrible retribution, in any event, has befallen the ignorant, deluded Africans.”

So therein lay the Southern argument. Fort Pillow’s garrison of white Tennessee traitors and black recruits/former slaves had wreaked vengeance on the defenseless citizenry in the nearby area through murder, rape and robbery. They apparently called themselves the “Avengers of Fort Pillow,” part of the Union force based at Memphis under the command of Brig. Gen. Samuel D.



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Sturgis. Rape was a term not commonly used in Victorian America, but the Appeal's reference to "the hell-born passions of a dozen fiends" would have been unmistakable by its readers; today a newspaper would simply refer to the gang rape of a young pregnant woman. It was this set of men who needed "attending to."

Forrest was credited with a great victory because the Appeal got the numbers all wrong; The Union troops numbered a little over 500, not 12,000-15,000; Forrest and Chalmers had 1,500 men, not 3,500.

Losin' 'em

Then there was the fate of the prisoners, whom Confederates claimed "escaped." Even the Appeal had to insert a question mark after that claim.

Truer was the statement that Forrest's men had "lost them." "Lost them" was a euphemistic phrase used by Confederate when they executed Union prisoners. In *The War-Time Journal of a Georgia Girl* (1908), Eliza Frances Andrews describes her conversation in late 1864 with a Southern soldier, Sam Weller, who told her how, after capturing some of Sherman's men, they "just took 'em out in the woods and lost 'em."

"Ever heard o' losin' men, lady?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered.

"What was the process of losing?" another inquired. "Did they manage the business with firearms?"

"Sometimes, when they was in a hurry," Weller answered; "the guns would go off an' shoot 'em, in spite of all that our folks could do."

"It is not strange that negro prisoners were "lost," the Appeal judged, and suggested that the black troops had been egged on by white officers, who deserved the same fate.

Regardless of cause or context, the Appeal's conclusion was unassailable: a terrible retribution had befallen the Federal garrison of Fort Pillow.

Northerners' outrage led Washington to order a Congressional inquiry. Two Republicans, Senator Benjamin F. Wade of Ohio and Representative Daniel W. Gooch, from Massachusetts, traveled to Cairo in late April to interview survivors.

The interrogations and testimony were carefully transcribed during Wade and Gooch's time west, April 22-May 2, during which they held interviews at Cairo and Mound City, Illinois, Columbus, Kentucky, as well as at Fort Pillow and Memphis. When they returned to Washington, they submitted their findings. Congress viewed the whole thing so explosive that it authorized sixty thousand copies to be printed and distributed.

To judge from the tone of their questions, Wade and Gooch were out to skewer the Rebels—and they succeeded. They concluded that there was definitely a massacre at Fort Pillow, and that it was a product of malignant Rebel policy not to recognize blacks as soldiers. The report accused Forrest's men of stealthily advancing during the truce; that when the Rebels charged they yelled out "no quarter." When the garrison troops started running for the river, "the rebels commenced an indiscriminate slaughter," even of women and children in the fort. Cries of "Kill the damned niggers; shoot them down" were heard. "All who asked for mercy were



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answered by the most cruel taunts and sneers." Tents containing wounded were set on fire. One man, they claimed, was nailed to an outbuilding which was then torched. The next morning, April 13, the report continued, Rebels roamed about looking for wounded men, whom they then shot. When they began burying the dead, Rebels threw into the ditch some wounded men, still living. Major Bradford had survived the fight, but Wade and Gooch claimed that he was shot the next day as a "home-made Yankee," detested by Forrest's Tennesseans.

Forrest's riposte

The arguing stretched for decades after the war. A central Southern allegation was that the black troops had been given whisky to strengthen their nerves against the impending assault. "The negroes were drunk," claimed one former Confederate, "and, when Forrest's men got into the fort, the negroes continued to fight until they were overpowered." "Many of the prisoners were drunk," wrote James Dinkins as late as 1925; "a number of barrels of whisky were found at convenient points in the fort with tin dippers for use of the Federal soldiers."

Defenders of Forrest put forth various other arguments. The Southern Historical Society Papers in 1879 took satisfaction in printing a letter from Dr. Charles Fitch, fort surgeon, to General Chalmers, refuting the outrageous story that he had killed a baby in the fort battle.

William Witherspoon served in the 7th Tennessee Cavalry, and in 1906 published *Tishomingo Creek or Bryce's Cross Roads*, which included a passage on Pillow. "The Fort Pillow affair is not, by long odds, what it is reported to be by the Yankee side of the

house, and our own (Southern) make too many apologies," he began. "It needs none."

"The negroes had blue buckets (the common water bucket at that time) filled with whiskey and tin dippers (to drink with) passed around on their line on the breastworks and were drinking and making sport and contumely remarks of our boys lying in line and in front and near them, while the first flag of truce was pending. The fact (about the whiskey) was reported to General Forrest; he said, "I will give them time to get drunk," and sent the second flag.

The object was accomplished—the negroes got drunk. Major Booth, the commander, the only soldier and gentleman in the fort, was killed at the first of the fight, left the negroes without a head. The white element were all Tennessee home-made Yanks—who had joined the Federals not through any sense of patriotism, but for booty and plunder, and as bad as the worst Yank could do in their line, and they were pretty adept, the home-made Yank could beat him two to one."

Another able advocate was Maj. Charles W. Anderson, Forrest's adjutant and inspector-general, who prepared a detailed account of the events at Fort Pillow published in *Confederate Veteran* in 1895, a generation after the war (showing that the controversy was still red-hot). Anderson essentially put the blame on the Federals, Major Bradford particularly, for refusing Forrest's surrender demand and failing to have the garrison flag lowered after the fort was overrun.

According to Anderson's argument, this entitled Forrest's men to keep firing even as individual garrison members sought to surrender. As soon as the Stars and Stripes was lowered, "firing was promptly stopped." His conclusion was pointed:



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“The charges against Gen. Forrest and his men of massacre and butchery at fort Pillow are outrageously unjust and unfounded. He did everything in his power to induce a surrender and avoid an assault. Thrice was a surrender demanded, and as often refused. There never was any surrender, therefore no massacre after surrender, as has been so erroneously and widely charged.”

What Forrest’s biographers say

Surprise, surprise: Forrest’s life-chroniclers take his side, and without subtlety. First, from Jordan and Pryor (1868):

“We submit to the candid and those who are capable of accepting the truth that, in what occurred after the Confederates stormed the trenches, there was neither cruel purpose nor cruel negligence of duty, neither intention nor inadvertence, on the part of General Forrest, whose course, therefore, stands utterly devoid of the essence of outrage or wrong.”

Dr. Wyeth (1899) sifted through all the testimony, and concluded “no cruelties were practiced by Forrest’s men upon any prisoner, wounded or unwounded.”

Former Confederate infantry captain J. Harvey Mathes wrote a Forrest biography for Appleton’s “Great Commanders” Series (1902). Remember the My Lai massacre? Reading Mathes’ efforts to contextualize Fort Pillow reminds me of the American press’ efforts to explain the conduct of Captain Calley’s men. Forrest’s men had ridden all night, and were on the move all morning as they approached the fort. During the truce, the blacks inside “were very defiant and insulting in language and grimaces.” Finally, the enemy’s

determination to make an “insane defense of a fort which they knew they could take,” was a further irritant, especially as the assault of any fort, regardless of the number of assailants, meant that some of them would fall. Thus the ensuing battle was “a terrific slaughter”—but no premeditated massacre, certainly not one ordered by the Confederate commander.

H. J. Eckenrodewrote a biography for young readers that appeared in 1918. In it he points to the Federal’s garrison’s failure to surrender after the fort had been overrun, and to the continued shooting by black soldiers; “most of these foolhardy men were killed by enraged cavalymen.” But there was no ordered massacre.

The Englishman Eric Sheppard (1930) concluded, “a dispassionate consideration of the whole controversy leads one to conclude that while no organized massacre or measures of barbarity or severity were ordered by Forrest or any of his subordinate officers,” he blamed the general and his subordinates for having taken no steps to shield the garrison from “the manifestations of the very natural feelings of personal hatred and desire for vengeance which animated many of their men.”

Andrew Nelson Lytle is without doubt the most literary of Forrest’s biographers. A Tennessean, he was a novelist, editor and critic, as judged by a 1984 essay in *The Southern Review*, “‘Three Ways of Making a Saint’: A Reading of Gustave Flaubert’s Three Tales.” Lytle was one of the Nashville Agrarians, the Fugitives who collaborated on *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930). As the group began planning their critique of American society, Donald Davidson wrote to John Crowe Ransom, “Andrew Lytle is



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terrifically interested, but he has to get his Forrest biography out of the way before all else.”

In his biography of Forrest, (1931), Lytle builds up the circumstances for a bloodletting.

Approaching Fort Pillow, Chalmers’ troopers had ridden all Sunday night (April 10), Monday and Monday night, before arriving at the fort around dawn on Tuesday, the twelfth. So the attackers were exhausted, and had reason to be vengeful. Writing of the Yankee garrison, Lytle declares, “many of the troops were known to be deserters from the Confederate armies, and they all had been a menace to West Tennessee”—an oblique reference to the depredations upon the people that the Atlanta Appeal referred to.

Robert Selph Henry’s “First With the Most” Forrest (1944) is the first modern, thorough biography of the general, and to some it remains the best. His judgment on the matter is therefore important. “There can be no doubt, nor has it ever been denied,” he concludes, “that some men—perhaps a considerable number—were shot after they, as individuals, were seeking to surrender.” But Forrest did not order any sort of massacre; in fact, when he saw the Federal flag fall, he “promptly ordered all firing to cease.”

Then there are three recent works. Brian Steel Wills, in *A Battle from the Start: The Life of Nathan Bedford Forrest* (1992), concludes that at Fort Pillow “people died who were attempting to surrender and should have been spared.” But he exonerates Forrest on the charge of ordering wholesale or premeditated massacre: “had Bedford Forrest wanted to annihilate the garrison, he

could have easily done so and would certainly have supervised the operation personally.”

In *Nathan Bedford Forrest: A Biography* (1993), Jack Hurst cites pro and con as to Forrest’s culpability. He quotes a letter from Sgt. Achilles Clark of the 20th Tennessee Cavalry to his sisters, dated April 14, in which Clark claimed the general “ordered them shot down like dogs.” In truth, the sergeant had written, “I with several others tried to stop the butchery and at one time had partially succeeded. But Gen. Forrest ordered them shot down like dogs—and the carnage continued. Finally our men became sick of blood and the firing ceased.” Yet Hurst also quotes Confederate Samuel H. Caldwell, who wrote his wife that the enemy “refused to surrender—which incensed our men & if General Forrest had not run between our men and the Yanks with his pistol and sabre drawn not a man would have been spared.”

Davison and Foxx are unequivocal. “There is no evidence that anything vaguely resembling a massacre of surrendering troops had ever been perpetrated upon Forrest’s orders,” they declare; “there is no record that he gave such orders or made any plans to exterminate these troops.”

Fort Pillow just won’t go away; I count six books on the battle in the last generation: Gregory J. Macaluso, *The Fort Pillow Massacre: The Reason Why* (1989); Richard L. Fuchs, *An Unerring Fire: The Massacre at Fort Pillow* (1994); John Gauss, *Black Flag! Black Flag!* (2003); John Cimprich, *Fort Pillow* (2005); Andrew Ward, *River Run Red* (2005); and Brian Steel Wills, *The River Was Dyed with Blood* (2014). There



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are even novels: Perry Lentz, *The Falling Hills* (1967), James Sherburne, *The Way to Fort Pillow* (1972) and *Fort Pillow* (2006) by the redoubtable Harry Turtledove.

Among the tons of articles on the subject, my favorite is still Albert Castel's in *Civil War History* (March 1958). In it he quotes Dudley Cornish's *The Sable Arm* (1956), in which the historian declares, "It has been asserted again and again that Forrest did not order a massacre." Given the enemy garrison he faced—half Tennesseans-turned-traitor, the other half ex-slaves fighting their former masters—Cornish dismisses the whole thing by concluding, "he did not need to."

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