



## The United States Colored Troops (USCT) at the Battle of Fort Blakeley

By Mike Bunn, July 10, 2020  
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Battle of Fort Blakeley | *Harper's Weekly*

The Battle of Fort Blakeley is remembered as the decisive fight in the combined-forces Campaign for Mobile in the spring of 1865. But many people are unaware that the battle featured one of the largest concentrations of African-American soldiers anywhere during the Civil War. Approximately 5,000 troops from nine different regiments—nearly a third of the entire Union force at Blakeley—took part in the siege and assault.

Officially designated at the time as United States Colored Troops, the USCT were regiments of the U.S. Army composed of African-American soldiers. While the majority of the men in the ranks of USCT regiments were former slaves, white officers commanded all units in combat. The Federal government had first authorized acceptance of small numbers black regiments in specific locations in the fall of 1862, but after the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect on January 1, 1863, it began actively recruiting African-American soldiers. Organization of these units was overseen by the Bureau of Colored Troops, formed later in 1863, which arranged for the enlistment, outfitting, and training of numerous new black regiments. By April 1865 there were over 180,000 USCT troops in the Federal army, which comprised about 10 percent of its total manpower. USCT regiments participated in most of the major campaigns of the final two years of the Civil War, often being relegated to service as supply and guard details or as manual labor. USCT units did take part in heavy fighting at several notable battles, however, including at Port Hudson, Louisiana; Petersburg, Virginia; and Nashville; in addition to Blakeley.

### TO COLORED MEN!

#### FREEDOM, Protection, Pay, and a Call to Military Duty!

On the 1st day of JANUARY, 1863, the President of the United States proclaimed FREE-  
DOM to over THREE MILLIONS OF SLAVES. This decree is to be enforced by all the power of  
the Nation. On the 21st of July last he issued the following order:

**PROTECTION OF COLORED TROOPS.**

"General Order," No. 22.

"The following order of the President is published for the 'Liberator' and government of all concerned—

EXECUTIVE MANDATE, WASHINGTON, July 25.

"It is the duty of every government to give protection to its citizens, of whatever class, color, or condition, and especially to those who are daily exposed to violence in the public service. The law of nations, and the usage and customs of war, as created and  
by civilized powers, permit no distinction as to color in the treatment of prisoners of war as public enemies. To sell or release any  
captured person on account of his color, is a violation of his rights, and a crime against the civilization of the age.

"The Government of the United States will give the same protection to all its soldiers, and if the enemy shall sell or release any  
one because of his color, the offense shall be punished by retaliation upon the enemy's prisoners in our possession. It is, therefore,  
ordered, for every soldier of the United States, killed in violation of the laws of war, a rebel soldier shall be executed; and for every  
one captured by the enemy, or sold into slavery, a rebel soldier shall be placed at hard labor on the public works, and continued at such  
labor until the other shall be released and receive the treatment due to prisoners of war.

"By order of the Secretary of War.

"E. B. TOWNSEND, Assistant Adjutant General."

That the President is in earnest the rebels soon began to find out, an witness the follow-  
ing order from his Secretary of War:

"WAR DEPARTMENT, WASHINGTON City, August 9, 1863.

"Sir: Your letter of the 2d inst., calling the attention of this Department to the case of Ohio H. Brown, William H. Johnson,  
and Wm. White, three colored men captured on the ground near Smith's, has received consideration. This Department has directed  
that these rebel prisoners of South Carolina, if there be any such in our possession, and if not, those others, be confined in close custody  
and held as long as Brown, Johnson and White, and that the fact be communicated to the rebel authorities at Richmond.

"Very respectfully your obedient servant,

EDWIN M. STANTON, Secretary of War.

"The Hon. Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy."

And retaliation will be our practice now—man for man—to the bitter end.

### LETTER OF CHARLES SUMNER,

Written with reference to the Convention held at Poughkeepsie, July 13th and 14th, 1862, to promote Colored Education.

BOSTON, July 15th, 1862.

"I doubt if, in times past, our country could have expected more colored men any patriotic service. Back within the years for  
protection. But now that protection has begun, the service should begin also. Now should colored rights and duties be weighed with  
white. It is enough that our country, instead of looking for a color of justice, looks to color and race among its difficulties.

"If my country could reach such progress, I would say, 'well at once. Now is the day and now is the hour. Help to overcome  
your evil enemies now battling against your country, and in this way you will surely overcome them either cowardly, badly, true, and  
have at hand, who will still seek to degrade you. This is not the time to hesitate or to flinch. Do your duty to our country, and you  
will see an example of generous self-sacrifice which will inspire people and men all around.

"Very faithfully yours,

CHARLES SUMNER."

Recruitmen Broadside | National Archives

progressed from April 1 to April 8, 1865, Hawkins' men advanced steadily closer to the Confederate position while under fire, ultimately digging multiple lines of trenches and advanced rifle pits where skirmishers could be posted. By the morning of Sunday, April 9, their lines lay within just a few hundred yards of the Confederates, close enough for an overwhelming assault that would end the siege. Federal commanders began planning such an operation that morning with a sense of urgency, as they feared the severely outnumbered garrison might attempt a stealthy withdrawal via the Tensaw River (some 3,500 Confederates were in the trenches at Blakeley attempting to hold off over 16,000 Federals). Such a move would lead to a hollow victory indeed, for it was the Rebel army, not the earthworks they stood behind, the Union army was after.

USCT officers volunteered to probe the Confederate left on the afternoon of April 9, 1865, to determine if an evacuation was underway and thereby provide invaluable information to army leadership. Small units became involved in heavy, prolonged skirmishing by early afternoon, not only confirming the Confederates planned to make as obstinate a defense as possible, but essentially forming the vanguard of the general assault undertaken by the entirety of the besieging army at 5:30 p.m. It was a short but bitter affair, featuring a grand, open-field charge through a storm of artillery and small arms fire and isolated pockets of fighting all across the 3-mile line. By 6:15 p.m. the last shots of the battle had been fired, and Fort Blakeley lay in the possession of the victorious Union Army. During the battle, USCT units captured over 200 men and several pieces of artillery and sustained some of the heaviest casualties of any unit engaged. Over 30 troops were killed and nearly 150 wounded in the assault. USCT units suffered nearly 400 casualties during the entirety of operations. Observers noted the black regiments performed bravely during the assault, with Brig. Gen. Christopher Columbus Andrews writing that "greater gallantry than was shown by officers and men could hardly be desired. The (troops) were burning with an impulse to do honor to their race, and rushed forward with intense enthusiasm, in face of a terrible fire."



Historic Blakeley State Park today | Library of Congress

While the overwhelming majority of USCT units rendered admirable service at Blakeley, rumors of the murder of surrendering Confederate prisoners by the men of Hawkins' division have swirled virtually since the last shots of the battle were fired. Available evidence does suggest that a few renegade individuals from USCT ranks attempted to shoot down some soldiers in the act of surrendering during the chaotic last moments of the fight. One Union officer was killed and another wounded by their own men as they attempted to prevent additional shootings. Order was quickly restored, however, and there was no coordinated or sanctioned massacre as some have later alleged.

The USCT's participation in the Battle of Fort Blakeley is an important aspect of this forgotten battle. It is also a poignant reminder of the remarkable transition from slavery to freedom made by millions of African-Americans as a result of the war. Historic Blakeley State Park, which preserves and interprets the story of Fort Blakeley, shares the story of the USCT with its visitors in its guided tours, cruises, and interpretive signage. It looks forward to developing more educational efforts helping people understand the USCT's pivotal role in the fighting of Alabama's largest open-field Civil War battle.

Adapted from Mike Bunn's forthcoming book, "The Thunder and Lightning of Battle," A Short History and Guide to the Battle of Fort Blakeley."



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