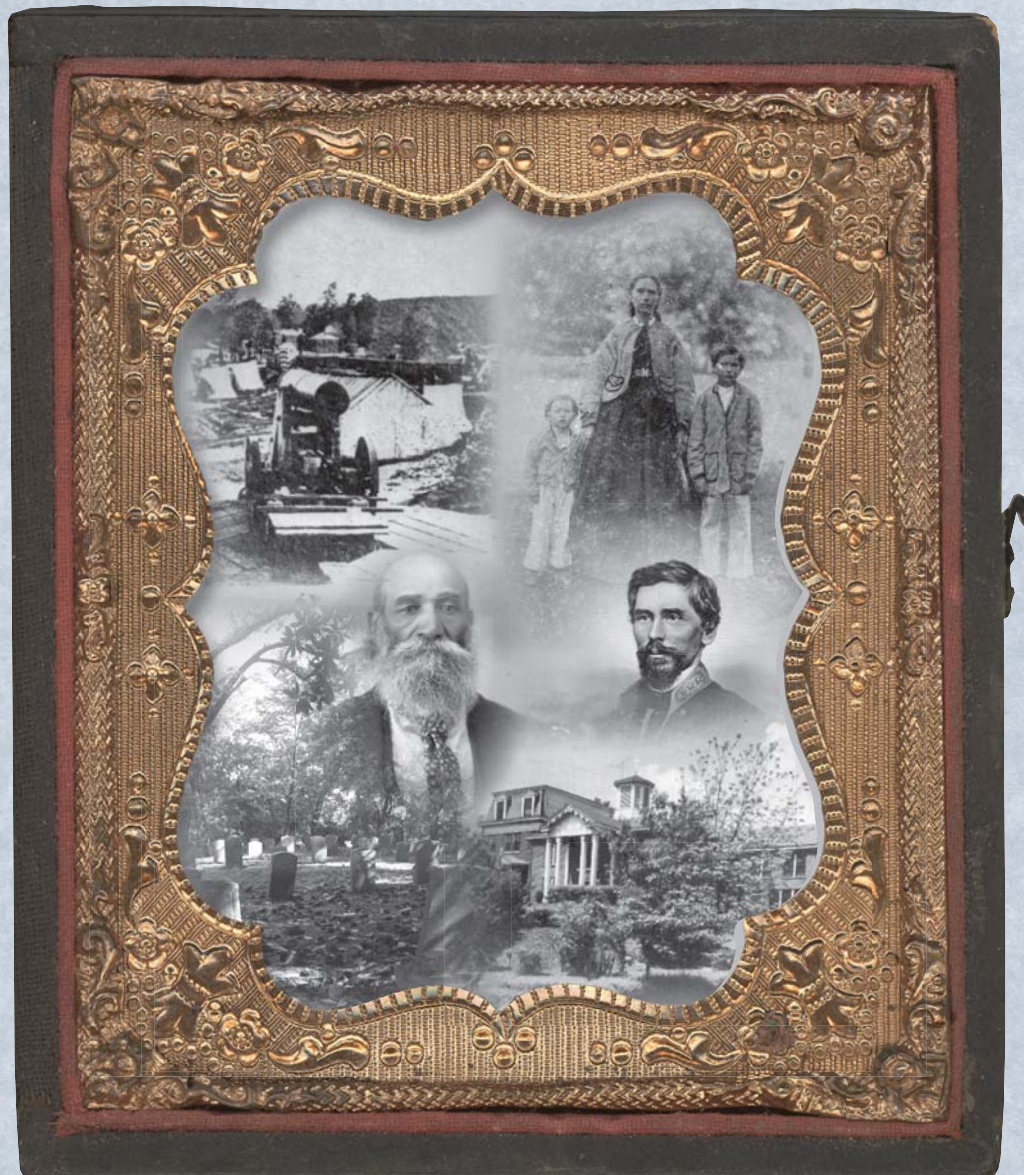


CIVIL WAR HELENA
A RESEARCH PROJECT AND INTERPRETIVE PLAN

PART II
HELENA AND PHILLIPS COUNTY, ARKANSAS, 1861-1868



MUDPUPPY & WATERDOG, INC.
VERSAILLES, KENTUCKY
APRIL 30, 2009

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A RESEARCH PROJECT

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PART II HELENA AND PHILLIPS COUNTY, ARKANSAS, 1861-1868

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INTRODUCTION

In order to interpret a historic site its history must be understood. As the scope of the project grew, research became a major component of the planning project. Research began in Helena. Unfortunately, no single history of Phillips County has been compiled. However, over the years the Phillips County Historical Society has published hundreds of articles on the Civil War. The *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* proved an invaluable resource; the articles often indicating where further efforts should be directed.

Identifying the Union regiments that spent time in Helena was the first task. Ultimately, regiments from eight different states were identified. Research was then conducted at the Allen County Public Library in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, which houses one of the largest local history collections in the United States. Regimental histories and articles from local and state publications led to searches of the manuscript collections of a number of state repositories.

Letters, diaries and other primary materials as well as secondary sources were located at the University of Arkansas, Indiana Historical Society, University of Kentucky, Ohio Historical Society, the Cincinnati Historical Society and the Cincinnati Public Library. Letters and diary entries provide an unfiltered version of the story that printed sources often lack. Soldiers expressed their raw feelings in letters home and in their diaries, capturing a moment in time. The grueling march from Missouri, the horrors of the July 4, 1863 battle, and the sorrow of "Hell in Arkansas" as they watched their friends and comrades become ill and die were recorded as they happened, revealing more emotion and a greater sense of time and place than recollections written long after the fact.

Collections at the National Archives provided the official record of the Union army in Helena. Documents addressed topics as diverse as the Sisters of Mercy asking General Curtis to remove Contraband from their barn; orders sending Union "scouts" into the countryside around Helena to take forage, food, guns, horses and mules from Confederates sympathizers, and the reports of those scouting expeditions. There were inspection reports and general and special orders. A list of 444 men enrolled in the Department of East Arkansas included the name, place of birth, residence, age, physical characteristics and remarks about each man. It was, in essence, a census of the men living in and around Helena in 1865. Pension records of some of the men who served in the United States Colored Troops were also examined. These records are a treasure trove of information concerning events, the men and their families.

The research conducted for this planning project only scratched the surface. There is much more to discover and research should be an ongoing part of the continued development and evolution of the interpretive program. The short history of Civil War Helena that follows is by no means the definitive story, but it is a beginning.



**A HISTORY OF HELENA AND PHILLIPS
COUNTY, ARKANSAS, 1861-1868**

Over the years, the story told of the Civil War in Helena has revolved principally around the seven Confederate generals and the July 4, 1863, battle. The story of Helena in the Civil War is, however, much more complex. It begins with the secession crisis and the rush of patriotic young men taking up arms in the sectional conflict. The Confederacy never defended Helena. The city's soldiers left, many crossing the Mississippi River to fight on battlefields far away.

The Union army marched into the city on a hot, dusty July day in 1862 and never left. The presence of thousands of Union soldiers altered the history of Helena and Phillips County. The army brought with it thousands of slaves who had left their homes seeking freedom. This is their story. It is also the story of the people left behind, civilians loyal to the Confederacy facing an army of occupation. It is the story of sickness and death visited upon Northern soldiers. It is a story about people; good people, brave people, ordinary people and vicious people caught up in the most cataclysmic event in the short history of the United States. It is the story of how they coped, lived and died trying to do their best for themselves and their families.

CONFEDERATE HELENA

On the eve of the Civil War Phillips County was one of the wealthiest counties in Arkansas. It had over 83,000 acres of improved land valued at over eight million dollars. Some 224 plantations were over one hundred acres. Forty plantations had more than five hundred acres and four had holdings of one thousand acres or more. In 1860, Phillips County had a population of just under 15,000, of that number nearly 9,000 were slaves. Phillips County had the largest slave population in Arkansas. It was a very wealthy county and Helena, the county seat, was a thriving Mississippi River port.¹

Helena's early years were typical of river towns, filled with traders, adventurers, gamblers, boatmen and all of the vices and virtues that characterized river towns on the frontier.² The river was and always has been a mixed blessing to Helena. It brought prosperity and it brought flood and pestilence; it is the reason the city exists.

Helena became the county seat of Phillips County in 1830 and was incorporated in 1833. The town depended on the river for transportation. In 1860 there was no railroad and only a few roads led west from the city to Little Rock. Helena's wealth was tied to the land, and to slaves. The area was wealthy but that wealth was held by a small number of people. In 1860, just twenty-five people owned 57% of the real estate; 37% was owned by seven people. The wealth, tied up in land and slaves, was real but it was not liquid. Helena was the center of the

1. *Agriculture of the United States in 1860; Compiled from the Original Records of the Eighth Census*, Washington, DC, US Government Printing Office, p. 6 and *Population of the United States in 1860; Compiled from the Original Records of the Eighth Census*, Washington, DC, US Government Printing Office, p. 18.

2. Ted R. Worley, "Helena on the Mississippi," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. XIII No. 1, Spring 1954, pp. 1-5.

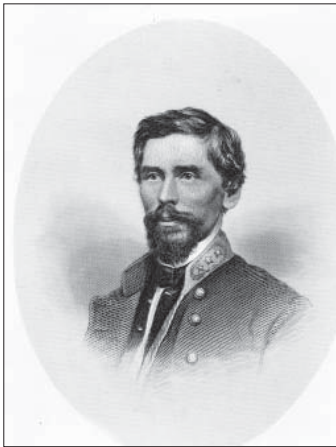
wealth and power the plantation system made possible.³

As the national political situation worsened, Arkansas, like other southern states, prepared for the worst. John Brown's raid in Virginia in late 1859 only added to an already volatile situation; 1860 witnessed the fracturing of the Democratic Party and the election of Abraham Lincoln as president in November. On December 20, 1860, South Carolina seceded from the Union. A few days earlier Henry C. Lay, Missionary Bishop of the Southwest, wrote a letter to the Episcopal clergy under his charge, "After agitation which has reached every hearth and home among us, a crisis has arrived. The solemn future just before us cannot be as the past. It must bring to us either a return to peace and brotherhood, or a wider estrangement and an angrier strife."⁴



Flag of the Phillips Guards, in the collection of the Phillips County Museum.

Lay's words could not have been more prophetic. People in Helena and Phillips County began to prepare for war. Two companies of militia were formed just before the 1860 election, the Yell Rifles, commanded by Patrick Cleburne, and the Phillips Guards, commanded by W. S. Otey. During the early days of Arkansas' secession crisis both companies went to Little Rock and helped the state secure the Federal arsenal. After returning to Phillips County the men continued to drill. In the early spring of 1861 more militia companies were organized in Helena including the Tappan Guards, commanded by Capt. James. C. Tappan; the Pat Cleburne Guards, commanded by Capt. Thomas Quinlin; the LaGrange Guards, commanded by Capt. Daniel C. Govan; and the Trenton Guards, commanded by Capt. J. W. Scaife.⁵



Gen. Patrick Cleburne, CS

Patrick Cleburne, who was discouraged by the events of the fall and winter of 1860-61, spent a bleak Christmas in Helena. An Irish immigrant, he felt loyalty to the state and to the people who had become his friends. He wrote to his brother, Robert, in January 1861, professing his loyalty to Arkansas and his fears for the future "My own opinion is that the first blood shed on

3. *Helena World*, "Early History of Helena told by member of Historic Commission," February 26, 1979 and Worley, "Helena on the Mississippi," p. 10.

4. Phillips County Historical Society, "Excerpts from the Diaries and Letters of Reverend Otis Hackett," *Phillips County Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 1 No. 1, Summer 1962, p. 32, hereafter cited as *PCHQ*.

5. Craig L. Symonds, *Stonewall of the West: Patrick Cleburne and the Civil War*, University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, 1997, pp. 46-47 and Goodspeed Publishing Company, *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Eastern Arkansas*, The Goodspeed Publishing Company, Chicago, Illinois, 1890, p. 745.

Southern soil in a collision between the Federal troops and state authorities of any Southern state will be a signal for civil war.”⁶

In the spring of 1861, Cleburne demonstrated his loyalty. The shy, soft spoken Cleburne made a brief speech as part of a ceremony held at the Methodist Church. After the blessing of the troops the Yell Rifles and the Phillips Guards departed Helena for Camp Rector. Upon reaching Camp Rector, on the west bank of the Mississippi River just south of Memphis, the militiamen were mustered in as the 1st Arkansas [later 15th] Infantry; Patrick Cleburne was elected their colonel. Though Arkansas would not leave the Union officially until the sixth of May, the young men of Helena had cast their lot with the Confederacy. In the spring of 1861, 400 young men from Phillips County marched off to war. Few would return.⁷

For a time, it seemed that the war had left Helena with those young men. For the first year life probably went on without much change, except that the river was closed by the Union blockade. With so many young men gone, older men and women were left to mind the farms and plantations. Some simply could not make ends meet. To aid women and children whose husbands, fathers and sons had gone to war, the Phillips County Court ordered that an ad valorem tax of one tenth of one per cent be assessed on all taxable property, the revenue to be used for the aid of indigent women and children. The war fund also set aside money for burial services for soldiers. The Phillips County Court records show that the fund was established in the spring of 1861 and was disbursed until the summer of 1862. It is likely that the Union occupation of Helena put an end to the fund.⁸

Traditionally, Helena’s Confederate legacy includes seven Confederate generals. Two of those generals, Patrick Cleburne and Lucius Polk, left the city on April 23, 1861, with the Yell Rifles. Polk fought with Cleburne in Tennessee and Kentucky. Patrick Cleburne is without a doubt the best known of Helena’s seven generals. Cleburne immigrated to Helena in the 1850s. He worked as an apothecary in a shop and later bought the business. He became active in Democratic politics and the Episcopal Church. Cleburne served in the Army of Tennessee in all of its campaigns. He was an excellent combat officer and rose to the rank of major general. Cleburne was also a leading advocate for freeing and arming slaves for service in Confederate army. Patrick Ronayne Cleburne was killed in the assault on the Carter House in the Battle of Franklin on November 30, 1864.⁹

Lucius E. Polk, son of a wealthy Tennessee family, also came to Helena in the 1850s. His uncle, Leonidas Polk, was also a Confederate general. Lucius joined the Yell Rifles and left

6. Symonds, *Patrick Cleburne*, p. 43.

7. Carolyn H. Curtis, “History of the First Methodist Episcopal Church, South, of Helena, Arkansas,” *PCHQ*, Vol. 1 No. 1, Summer 1962, p. 24; Symonds, *Patrick Cleburne*, pp. 48-49 and Jeannie M. Whayne, Thomas A. DeBlack, George Sabo III and Morris S. Arnold, *Arkansas: A Narrative History*, University of Arkansas Press, Fayetteville, Arkansas, 2002, pp. 164-165.

8. Tri-County Genealogical Society, “Benefits to Families of Civil War Soldiers,” *Tri-County Genealogical Society*, Vol. 13 No. 1, Spring 1998, pp. 26-29.

9. Ezra J. Warner, *General in Gray: Lives of the Confederate Commanders*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1987, pp. 53-54 and Symonds, *Patrick Cleburne*.

the Trans-Mississippi with his company in April 1861. He fought at Shiloh and in the Kentucky campaign. Polk fought well and was wounded four times over the course of the war. The last time, at Kennesaw Mountain, left him unfit for duty. After the war he returned to Tennessee where he entered politics. He died there in 1892.¹⁰



Thomas C. Hindman, ca. 1860.

Thomas Hindman was a politician, planter and lawyer who played an important role in the secession of Arkansas. A man of wealth and influence, he was elected colonel of the 2nd Arkansas Infantry. He quickly rose to the rank of major general, at one time commanding the Department of the Trans-Mississippi. Hindman fled to Mexico after the war but returned to Helena in 1868, where he was assassinated in his home in September of that year.¹¹

James C. Tappan joined the Confederate army in May 1861, and was commissioned colonel of 13th Arkansas. This regiment fought at Belmont in Missouri and later at Shiloh. The regiment also participated in the Kentucky Campaign, seeing action at Richmond and Perryville. Tappan became a general in November 1862 and was transferred back to the Trans-Mississippi where he spent the remainder of the war. Tappan participated in the Red River campaign and Price's last raid into Missouri. He returned to Helena after the war and resumed the practice of law.¹²

Daniel C. Govan was a planter in Phillips County prior to the war. He entered service in the spring of 1861 and became the colonel of the 2nd Arkansas Infantry. He fought at Shiloh and participated in the Kentucky Campaign, seeing action at Richmond and Perryville. He became a general in 1863 and was captured during the Atlanta campaign. He survived the engagement at Franklin, Tennessee, and was with the Army of Tennessee when it surrendered in North Carolina. He returned to Arkansas and lived in the state until the 1890s, when he left to reside at various times in Tennessee and Mississippi with his children.¹³

Charles W. Adams was a Whig politician and planter living in Helena when the war began. He served as a federal judge from 1852-54 and he, too, played an important role in leading Arkansas out of the Union. Adams recruited and was elected colonel of the 23rd Arkansas Infantry, which participated in the Battle of Shiloh. Adams served briefly on Gen. Thomas Hindman's staff before he was given command of the Northern Sub-District of Arkansas. It was in this command that he obtained the rank of "acting brigadier general." Adams, the

10. Dale P. Kirkman, "Whatever Happened to the Seven Generals? Brigadier General Lucius E. Polk," *PCHQ*, Vol. 22 Nos. 3 & 4, June & September 1984, pp. 69-75 and Warner, *Generals in Gray*, pp. 243-244.

11. Warner, *Generals in Gray*, pp. 137-138.

12. Warner, *Generals in Gray*, pp. 298-299.

13. Warner, *Generals in Gray*, pp. 112-113.

grandfather of Helen Keller, died in a yellow fever epidemic in Memphis in 1878.¹⁴

Archibald S. Dobbins, a wealthy planter, spent the first year of the war on his Phillips County plantation growing food for the Confederate army. In 1862, he joined Thomas Hindman in Mississippi where he was promoted to colonel. Dobbins accompanied Hindman back to Arkansas where he recruited the 1st (Dobbins) Arkansas Cavalry. Dobbins' command participated in the Battle of Helena and, in 1864, the Battle of Big Creek in Phillips County. He followed Adams as commander of the Northern Sub-District of Arkansas. It is unclear if Dobbins ever obtained the rank of general, though he did command a brigade. After the war he immigrated to Brazil, where he died.¹⁵

Three of Phillips County's Confederate generals are buried in Helena, Patrick Cleburne, Thomas Hindman and James C. Tappan. Cleburne is buried in the Confederate Cemetery; Hindman and Tappan are buried in Maple Hill Cemetery.

JULY 1862: THE UNION ARMY OCCUPIES HELENA

There was no bloodshed in Arkansas until February 16, 1862, when elements of Gen. Samuel Curtis' army skirmished with Gen. Sterling Price's rear guard at Big Sugar Creek near Pott's Hill in northwest Arkansas. In March 1862, Curtis' Union army defeated Gen. Earl Van Dorn's Confederates at the Battle of Pea Ridge, a devastating defeat for the Confederates in Arkansas. After the battle, Van Dorn took his army and most of the supplies and accoutrements with him when he crossed the Mississippi.¹⁶

After Pea Ridge, Curtis withdrew to Missouri where he remained until April 29, 1862. He then marched south through Salem, arriving in Batesville on May 2. Curtis planned to take Little Rock. As the Federals, now called the Army of the Southwest, moved south, the Confederate government fled to Hot Springs. The outlook for Confederate Arkansas seemed dire until the arrival of Gen. Thomas Hindman and some Texas cavalry and the fact that a lack of supplies forced Curtis to rethink his plan. With Confederate cavalry and partisans dogging him, Curtis retreated back to Batesville. He decided to cut his reliance on the land based supply line and march south. Curtis arranged to have a supply boat steam down the Mississippi and up the White River to Clarendon, where his army would take on supplies. Encounters with Confederate cavalry slowed Curtis' progress and he reached Clarendon on July 9 only to find that the supply boat had left the day before. Curtis gave up



Gen. Samuel R. Curtis, US

14. Bruce S. Allardice, *More Generals in Gray: A Companion Volume to Generals in Gray*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1995, pp. 15-16.

15. Allardice, *More Generals in Gray*, pp. 79-80.

16. Wayne, et al, *Arkansas: A Narrative History*, pp. 174-175.

any notion of capturing Little Rock, turned his army east, and marched toward Helena.¹⁷

Curtis' army marched into Helena without opposition on July 12, 1862. As the army marched through Arkansas hundreds of slaves abandoned plantations and joined the Yankee soldiers. "On our march the negroes fairly swarmed around us, coming from every mansion, log cabin and habitable place in the whole region" wrote one soldier.¹⁸ Though the Emancipation Proclamation was months away, these enslaved people saw an opportunity for freedom and they took it.



Thousands of slaves followed the Union army to Helena.

Gen. Curtis, unlike many Union commanders in the early part of the Civil War, was not inclined to return runaway slaves to their masters. In fact, as his army had been impeded by obstacles built by slaves, he declared any slave that entered his lines to be "contraband of war." He even went as far as issuing free papers to them. Curtis practiced total war as he marched to Helena, burning anything that could aid the Confederate army or its supporters. No doubt he saw freeing slaves as another tool. For whatever reason, Helena became an oasis of freedom for Arkansas slaves.¹⁹

When the Union army arrived in Helena it had few provisions and thousands of Contraband (escaped slaves) who required shelter and food. He also had sick and wounded soldiers. In spite of these hardships, the men who had marched through mud and summer heat were glad to be in Helena. A soldier in the 13th Illinois Infantry described their entrance into the city, "With three rousing cheers, such cheers as the Thirteenth only can give, we close our columns, and with firm and steady step to the music of our band, pass through the streets of Helena, the strongest and healthiest regiment in the grand Army of the Southwest."²⁰

Once in Helena, the army had to be settled in and the thousands of animals fed. Three days later Curtis issued *Special Order #150*, which sent Union troops into the countryside around Helena on a foraging expedition. That is, they were sent to obtain forage for animals and

17. Thomas DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword: Arkansas, 1861-1874*, University of Arkansas Press, Fayetteville, Arkansas, 2003, pp. 58-60.

18. DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, p. 60.

19. Mark K. Christ, editor, *Rugged and Sublime: The Civil War in Arkansas*, University of Arkansas Press, Fayetteville, Arkansas, 1994, pp. 42-43.

20. Committee of the Thirteenth Illinois Infantry Regiment, *Military History and Reminiscences of the Thirteenth Regiment Illinois Volunteer Infantry in the Civil War in the United States, 1861-1865*, Woman's Temperance Publishing Company, Chicago, Illinois, 1892, p. 214.

provisions for the troops.²¹

The report of Lt. Col. Phillip I. Brimmer, 1st Missouri Infantry (US), offers a glimpse of the size of the expedition and the chaotic situation. Brimmer, the expedition commander, was ordered to take 115 wagons, 230 infantry and three companies of cavalry and to go into the countryside and collect forage and provisions. The soldiers did not arrive on time and the wagons were sent ahead. By the time Brimmer caught up with the teams three miles out of town some of his wagons, and a second group of wagons that had been ordered out by Gen. Frederick Steele, were loading provisions.²²

As the day progressed, Brimmer's wagons traveled fourteen miles out from Helena, visiting the plantation of Mrs. Roberts and other houses and plantations along the way. As he went along, Brimmer posted guards at the houses to protect civilians and their belongings. Unfortunately, he was often not the first soldier to arrive at the house and the Union foragers stirred up a hornet's nest. Lt. Col. Brimmer reported that the Roberts women were somewhat agitated and "nothing on my part could bring them back to quietude." The Roberts weren't the only ones. A Mrs. Craig apparently "grossly insulted" the Union officer who gave her a receipt for the forage taken.²³

Brimmer reported that he saw Union cavalry in groups of three to five men riding down the road to Helena with chickens, geese and other items on their rifles. The scorched earth policy established during the march to Helena was probably partly to blame for the unauthorized confiscation of poultry and other goods. Brimmer tried to make it very clear in his report that it was not his men who had committed the depredations.²⁴

Brimmer's expedition was the first of hundreds of expeditions sent into the interior west of Helena. Over the next four years, Union scouting expeditions and foraging parties would repeat this process many times. As time went on these expeditions became smaller, better organized, and more focused.

The Army of the Southwest made themselves at home in Helena. Gen. Curtis took over Gen. Thomas Hindman's house for use as his headquarters. Other houses, including Robert Moore's, were commandeered as officers' quarters and administrative offices and hospitals. Thousands of soldiers were encamped in and around town.²⁵

As the army settled in encampments were laid out. An Illinois soldier described his camp,

21. "Report of Expedition sent out July 15, 1862," *District of Southwestern Missouri, Army of the Southwest, Letters Received December 1861-June 1862*, Record Group 393, United States Army Continental Commands, 1821-1917, Part II, Entry 4676, Box 2.

22. *Ibid.*

23. "Report of Expedition sent out July 15, 1862," *District of Southwestern Missouri, Army of the Southwest, Letters Received December 1861-June 1862*, RG 393, Part II, Entry 4676, Box 2.

24. *Ibid.*

25. James W. Wheaton, editor, *Surgeon on Horseback: The Missouri and Arkansas Journal and Letters of Dr. Charles Brackett of Rochester, Indiana, 1861-1863*, Guild Press of Indiana, Carmel, Indiana, 1998, p. 155.

“Got a first rate camp-ground on the sandy side of a hill where it is impossible to get muddy. We have good spring water and are in every respect comfortably situated.”²⁶ An Iowa soldier had similar praise for his regiment’s location in Helena, “The first camp of the regiment at Helena was on a very fine site, a piece of dry and gently rolling upland, covered by open wood, mostly of splendid spreading beech trees. There could hardly have been a better place in the region.”²⁷

Providing for the Contraband that had followed the army into Helena proved a more daunting task. Initially, Gen. Curtis seems to have lodged the Contraband wherever he could find room. One group was put in a barn that belonged to St. Catherine’s Convent. The sisters apparently did not wish to have the Contraband in their barn and were “. . . compelled to solicit once more the kindness of Major Gen. Curtis for the preservation of their property.” It is not known if Gen. Curtis granted the Sisters’ request.²⁸

George Flanders, a private in Co. H 5th Kansas Cavalry arrived in Helena on July 15, 1862. A few days later he sent his parents a letters describing events in Helena. The Contraband situation was a central part of his letter, “The Negroes are flocking to the army from every direction, there are about fifty, big and little in our company. They appear to enjoy themselves at present, but what is to be done with them, when the army moves again, is more than I can say.”²⁹

On July 18, 1862, Lieut. B. O. Carr, the acting assistant quartermaster, sent a letter to General Curtis seeking help with his situation. Carr described “a perfect cloud of negroes being thrown upon him for subsistence and support.” Most of the people seeking assistance were women and children. Carr suggested that a competent person be placed in charge of the Contraband. According to the endorsement on the letter the general’s adjutant agreed.³⁰

Carr again wrote the general in early August. This time the lieutenant was concerned with the health of the Freedmen. By August, exposure and lack of medical attention was taking its toll. Carr somewhat sarcastically wrote, “I am willing to do what I can for them but with my limited knowledge of medicine I don’t like to take the responsibility of dosing them unless a priest is at hand.” After receiving Carr’s letter, Gen. Curtis sent a letter to his superior in Memphis requesting a hospital for the Contraband in Helena. Whether Curtis’ letter was responsible is unclear, but we do know that there was a hospital for Freedmen in Helena in

26. Wilson E. Chapel, *The Civil War Journals of Wilson E. Chapel: March, 1861 to January, 1863, Company “F,” 13th Regiment Illinois Infantry Volunteers from Courtland, Malta and DeKalb County, Illinois, DeKalb County Historical and Genealogical Society, Sycamore, Illinois, 1998, p. 65.*

27. William Forse Scott, *The Story of a Cavalry Regiment: The Career of the Fourth Iowa Veteran Volunteers from Kansas to Georgia, 1861-1865, G. P. Putnam’s Sons, New York, 1893, p. 47.*

28. “Sisters of Mercy to Major Gen. Curtis, July 20, 1862,” *District of Southwestern Missouri, Army of the Southwest, Letters Received December 1861-June 1862, RG 393, Part II, Entry 4676, Box 2.*

29. Alice L. Fry, editor, *Following the Fifth Kansas Cavalry: The Letters, Blue & Grey Book Shoppe Press, Independence, Missouri, 1998, p. 153.*

30. “B. O. Carr to Gen. S. Curtis, July 24, 1862,” *District of Southwestern Missouri, Army of the Southwest, Letters Received December 1861-June 1862, RG 393, Part II, Entry 4676, Box 2.*

1863.³¹

By September many of the Contraband had found work in Helena. Men and women were serving as cooks and nurses in hospitals; many found work with the quartermaster as mechanics, teamsters and laborers; others worked as regimental cooks. Each officer was allowed one servant to clean, cook and assist the officer and a number of Contraband found work as servants.³² In August 1862, Dr. Charles Brackett briefly described the work of his servant, "The old negro Curtis is putting things 'to rights' in the tent, sweeping in front with a few twigs tied together with string and with this he makes things look neat."³³



Many of the Contraband men took jobs as officers' servants.

The escaped slaves were looking for more than work, however. Most wanted to be educated and wanted their children receive an education. Members of the American Missionary Association and other Freeman's aid groups wrote often of the slaves' desire to learn. In Helena, Dr. Brackett wrote his wife, "The hundreds of negroes who have been deserted by their masters are using all means to improve their condition, enquiring diligently after spelling books, etc."³⁴

The Union command decided that it was advantageous for the Army of the Southwest to remain in Helena. The city on the banks of the Mississippi provided the army with a base of operations with a dependable flow of supplies down the river from Memphis. Curtis began to fortify Helena to secure the city from Confederate attacks.

THE UNION ARMY FORTIFIES HELENA

Fort Curtis was the first of the defensive works built in Helena. The fort, built just inside the city grid, was constructed mostly by conscripted Contraband laborers. The way in which the Contraband were recruited to work on the fort caused quite a stir. Gen. Eugene A. Carr complained to General Curtis that many of the Contraband were employed and that to simply round them up and put them to work up with no regard for what else they might be doing undermined the notion of freedom and security with the army.³⁵

31. "B. O. Carr to Gen. S. Curtis, August 7, 1862," *District of Southwestern Missouri, Army of the Southwest, Letters Received December 1861-June 1862*, RG 393, Part II, Entry 4676, Box 2.

32. "E. A. Carr to Gen. S. Curtis, September 19, 1862," *District of Southwestern Missouri, Army of the Southwest, Letters Received December 1861-June 1862*, RG 393, Part II, Entry 4676, Box 2.

33. Wheaton, *Surgeon on Horseback*, p. 177.

34. Wheaton, *Surgeon on Horseback*, p. 164.

35. "E. A. Carr to Gen. S. Curtis, September 19, 1862," *District of Southwestern Missouri, Army of the Southwest, Letters Received December 1861-June 1862*, RG 393, Part II, Entry 4676, Box 2.



Fort Curtis

Construction began in the summer of 1862. Some of the fort's guns arrived on board the *USS Tyler* in August and Fort Curtis was completed that fall. By that time, General Curtis had been replaced by Gen. Benjamin M. Prentiss. The fort was dedicated on October 30, 1862, in a ceremony that included drill and a parade of the troops. The artillery in the fort fired a salute that was returned by the fleet anchored in the river. Fort Curtis covered a square

block and was armed with both large and small caliber artillery.³⁶

By the time Fort Curtis was dedicated plans were underway to construct batteries on Crowley's Ridge. By the end of April 1863, two more forts, probably two of the batteries, were finished. By June 1863, batteries A, B, C and D were completed and manned. Indiana soldier Minos Miller described the defenses of the city in a letter to his mother, ". . . west of the town is a [?] of high bluffs and deep gorges and east of these bluffs is breastworks and on four of the highest [bluffs] batteries just below these bluffs is Ft. Curtis between the river and the bluffs is a level plain about a half mile wide south of town there is a breastwork thrown up across [the plain] the batteries and about twenty yards in front of the breastworks is cavalry pits [a ditch and abatis] in the river lies the gunboat Tyler. . ."³⁷

Helena was fortified; the defenses of the city were complete. Infantry would man the guns in the batteries. A gunboat assigned to duty at Helena supported the land-based artillery as needed. The streets of the city were barricaded; earthworks extended to the river on both the northern and southern approaches. Cavalry patrols were sent out daily. Finally, each cannon was to be supplied with 200 rounds of ammunition and each soldier was also to be issued 200 rounds. The army at Helena was prepared for a Confederate attack.³⁸

After the Battle of Helena in July 1863, the Union army faced a smaller more mobile Confederate threat. Small groups of Confederate cavalry hit picket posts, attacked foragers, and sought to break up the plantation lease system and generally terrify the Freedmen. To augment the safety of the free people working the plantations, Gen. Napoleon B. Buford

36. Committee of the Thirteenth Illinois Infantry Regiment, *Military History and Reminiscences*, p. 218 and Joshua W. Underhill, *Helena to Vicksburg: A Civil War Odyssey: The Personal Diary of Joshua Whittington Underhill, Surgeon 46th Regiment, Indiana Volunteer Infantry*, Heritage House Publishers, Lincoln Center, Massachusetts, 2000, pp. 8-9 & 17.

37. "Minos Miller to his mother June [July] 6, 1863," *Minos Miller Papers*, University of Arkansas Libraries Special Collections and "Diary of Private Edmund Holt, Co. F 28th Wisconsin, Wisconsin Troops At Helena IX," *PCHQ*, Vol. 15, No. 1 December 1976, pp. 8-9.

38. "Elihu Martin to Beall, April 22, 1863," *Martin, Elihu G., Civil War Collection*, University of Arkansas Libraries Special Collections and *Department of East Arkansas - Special Orders 1863*, RG 393, Part IV, Entry 546, Volume 108, p. 205.

ordered in 1864 the construction of forts with blockhouses near the plantations. One was constructed three and another about eleven miles below Helena. These were the last defensive works built by the Federals.³⁹

THE EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION

Abraham Lincoln issued the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation on September 22, 1862, after the Union victory at Antietam. The edict, however, would not take effect until January 1, 1863. Slaves in Arkansas sought freedom behind Union lines well before the September decree. Thousands of slaves left the plantations and followed Curtis' army as it marched across Arkansas. The escaped slaves, called Contraband by the Union authorities, were given work and many men eventually enlisted in the Union army.

The Emancipation Proclamation only affected states that were in rebellion against the United States. It read, in part, "all persons held as slaves within said designated States, and parts of States are, and henceforward shall be free." Slave owners in Arkansas were well aware of what the proclamation said and what it meant. Some tried to persuade their slaves to go to Kentucky, telling them that it was a northern state, but they would not go. By whatever means, these slaves realized that there would be no freedom in Kentucky, which as a Union slaveholding state was exempt from the proclamation.⁴⁰

Many soldiers in the Union army who had not initially opposed slavery began to change their minds after they came face to face with the "peculiar institution." One Illinois soldier wrote, "I am not quite an Abolitionist, but I am fast becoming one."⁴¹ Upon reading the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in December 1862, an Indiana soldier wrote, "Received the President's message today, it is just the thing to suit me."⁴²

Dr. Charles Brackett witnessed a celebration held by Freedmen in Helena on New Years Eve, 1862. He witnessed the joy of the people as 1863 dawned and he seemed moved by what he saw. "The long wished for "Year of Jubilee" has now come for the negroes, and their joy is great thereat."⁴³

RECRUITING UNITED STATES COLORED TROOPS IN HELENA

The Emancipation Proclamation brought a flood of men, women and children into the Union lines at Helena. The growing population of Freedmen strained the army's limited resources; the military was simply not designed to cope with the needs of individuals with no means of support. The situation in Helena was repeated across the South as Freedmen sought protection within Union lines. Their care and treatment was left up to the local commanders.

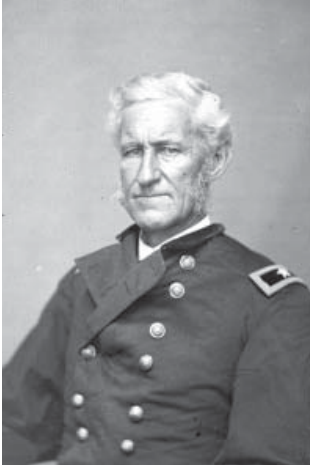
39. "Office of the Acting Assistant Inspector General to Maj. J. B. Rogers, April 23, 1864," *Department of East Arkansas – Special Orders 1863*, RG 393, Part IV, Entry 546, Volume 116.5, p. 27.

40. John S. Bowman, *The Civil War Almanac*, World Almanac Publications, New York, 1983, p. 124 and Wheaton, *Surgeon on Horseback*, p. 206.

41. DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, p. 60.

42. Jerry Voorhis, Sr., editor, *The Life and Times of Aurelius Lyman Voorhis*, Vantage Press, New York, 1976, p. 82.

43. Wheaton, *Surgeon on Horseback*, p. 206.



US Adjutant General
Lorenzo Thomas

Needless to say, some people fared better than others.

On March 25, 1863, the War Department ordered Adjutant General Lorenzo Thomas to the Mississippi Valley. The original intent of the order was for Thomas to initiate the recruitment of black soldiers. He was also to inspect the condition of the refugees within Union lines. Secretary of War Edwin Stanton had given Thomas the authority to insure “humane and proper treatment in respect to food, clothing, compensation for their services, and what ever is necessary to enable them to support themselves and to furnish useful service in any capacity to the Government.”⁴⁴ Thomas did just that.

Thomas began his tour in Cairo, Illinois, and preceded downriver, ending at Gen. Ulysses S. Grant’s headquarters at Milliken’s Bend, Louisiana. Thomas arrived in Helena on April 6, 1863.

Some 4,000 soldiers and civilians gathered at Fort Curtis to hear the adjutant general speak. Thomas explained that he was in Helena to arrange for the recruitment of Freedmen into the Union army. According to one witness he was cheered enthusiastically. Thomas was followed by Generals Benjamin Prentiss, the commander at Helena; Alvin Hovey, brigade commander and Cadwallader C. Washburn, the commander of the District of West Tennessee. US Congressman William Mitchell of Indiana concluded the program.⁴⁵

Private George Flanders was also at Fort Curtis that day. Flanders wrote to his mother that the idea of recruiting Freedmen for the army had the approval of the men at the fort. He wrote on April 10 that one regiment was already full. According to Flanders’ account, General Prentiss told the soldiers to bring in any slaves still outside of town. “Recruiting,” according to Flanders, “is going on very brisk.” Several men in his regiment had applied for positions as officers with the new United States Colored regiment.⁴⁶

Perhaps the most exhaustive account was written by Minos Miller a week or so after Thomas gave his speech. In a letter to his mother he described a ceremony of sorts after the official remarks were concluded, “After the speaking was over General Prentiss got up and told the boys that he wanted them to give some demonstration in favor of the policy that had been advocated for Gen. Thomas to carry back to President Lincoln he told them that was in favor of arming the negroes to pull off their hats and in a second every head (that I could see and I was where I could as the most of the crowd) was bare he then told them to give three cheers and such yelling you never heard. I reckon he told them that would do he then told them that if there was any that was opposed to it to pull off their hats but not a man dared to raise his

44. John David Smith, editor, *Black Soldiers in Blue: African American Troops in the Civil War Era*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 2002, p. 252.

45. Underhill, *Helena to Vicksburg*, pp. 65-66.

46. Fry, *Fifth Kansas Cavalry*, p. 171.

hat.”⁴⁷

Miller told his parents that since the speech one regiment had been filled and another was nearly full. He also asked his parents how they would like for their son to be a captain in a colored regiment. Miller, a private at the time, underlined that passage. He later became a lieutenant in the 2nd Arkansas Infantry of African Descent, later designated the 54th United States Colored Infantry. At the end of the war Miller was a major in that regiment.⁴⁸

UNITED STATES COLORED TROOPS IN HELENA

Lorenzo Thomas’ recruiting trip proved highly successful. Evidence indicates that three or parts of three regiments were recruited in Helena. However, the official dates listed do not correspond with some of the known facts. For instance, the official organization date for the 2nd Arkansas Infantry of African Descent is September 1863, and the 2nd was definitely engaged in the Battle of Helena fought on July 4, 1863.⁴⁹

Regardless of the exact date of the regiment’s organization and its muster date, the 2nd Arkansas Infantry of African Descent was organized in Helena. Other records indicate that the 4th Arkansas Infantry of African Descent and the 69th United States Colored Infantry were also organized in Helena.⁵⁰

The black regiments recruited in the spring of 1863 were initially given state designations. In 1864 the Bureau for Colored Troops was created and a uniform nomenclature for African American regiments was instituted, giving them all United States Colored Troops (USCT) designations. Thus, the 2nd Arkansas Infantry of African Descent became the 54th United States Colored Infantry and the 4th Arkansas Infantry of African Descent became the 57th United States Colored Infantry.⁵¹

Over the course of the war, a number of USCT regiments recruited in other states spent time stationed in Helena. In 1863 and 1864, the 56th and 60th U.S. Colored Infantries were in Helena. These two regiments, along with Battery E, 2nd United States Colored Light Artillery, portions of the 15th Illinois Cavalry, 35th Missouri Infantry, 6th Tennessee Cavalry (US), and 4th Arkansas Cavalry (US) garrisoned the city and patrolled the countryside surrounding Helena. The three USCT organizations were engaged at the Battle of Big Creek in the summer of 1864.⁵²

47. “Minos Miller to his mother April 18, 1863,” *Minos Miller Papers*, University of Arkansas Libraries Special Collections.

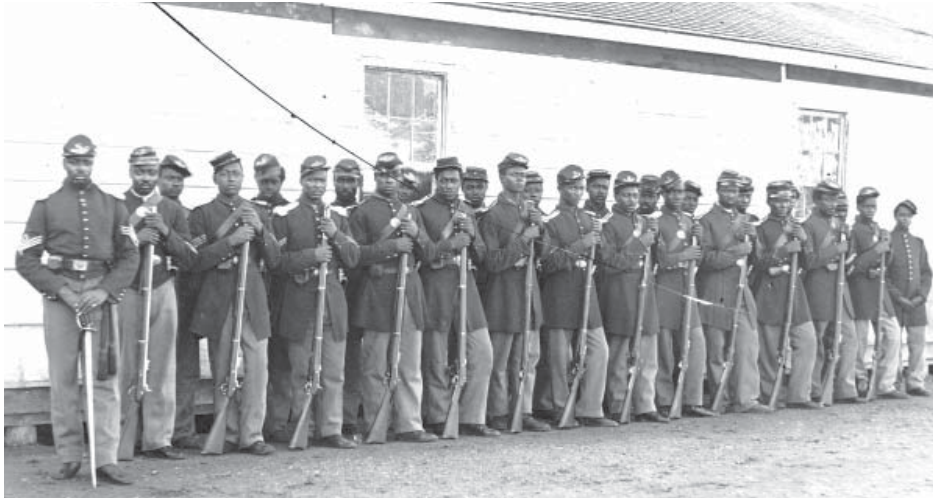
48. *Ibid.*

49. Frederick H. Dyer, *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion, Volume III Regimental Histories*, reprint edition, Thomas Yoseloff, New York, 1959, p. 1000.

50. Dyer, *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion, Volume III*, pp. 1000 & 1734 and Janet B. Hewett, editor, *Supplement to the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Part II – Record of Events Volume 78 Serial No. 90, Broadfoot Publishing Company, Wilmington, NC, 1994, pp. 325 & 496.

51. Smith, *Black Soldiers in Blue*, p. 259.

52. *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, US Government Printing Office, 1884, Vol. XXXIV/3, p. 481, hereafter cited as *OR*.



Many men from Phillips County joined the USCT.

The 56th and 60th U.S. Colored Infantry regiments spent the longest time in Helena of any of the USCT regiments. Both saw service in the city from August 31, 1863, until June 1865. The regiments guarded quartermaster and commissary stores, built huts for winter quarters, guarded wood choppers, and carried out other routine garrison duties. As noted above, these regiments were engaged at Big Creek and also took part in smaller actions including scouting expeditions into the interior of Arkansas and into Mississippi. The scouts were armed patrols that gathered intelligence on the location of Confederate soldiers and other topics of interest, and obtained forage and provisions.⁵³

The 2nd Arkansas Infantry of African Descent, organized and mustered into service in Helena, served in the city throughout 1863. The regiment participated in the Battle of Helena on July 4, 1863. After the battle it performed guard and garrison duty. The regiment was ordered to Little Rock in January 1864.⁵⁴

The 4th Arkansas Infantry of African Descent was at least partially recruited from men in and around Helena. A portion of this regiment was in Helena until April 1864, by which time its designation had been changed to the 57th U.S. Colored Infantry. The Liberian Guards, an independent company of African American soldiers recruited in Cairo, Illinois, were mustered into the 4th in October 1863. In May 1864, these men were also ordered to Little Rock.⁵⁵

The 69th United States Colored Infantry was at least partially recruited from Helena and Phillips County. The regiment mostly performed guard duty and was stationed at Ft. Pinney eleven miles south of Helena from January to June 1865.⁵⁶

53. Hewett, *Supplement to the Official Records*, Volume 78 Serial No. 90, pp. 306-321 & 345-369.

54. Dyer, *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion, Volume III*, pp. 999-1000.

55. Dyer, *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion, Volume III*, p. 1000 and Hewett, *Supplement to the Official Records*, Volume 78 Serial No. 90, pp. 322-325.

56. Hewett, *Supplement to the Official Records*, Volume 78 Serial No. 90, pp. 495-496.

In August 1865, after the war had ended, the 5th and 6th United States Colored Cavalry arrived in Helena. These regiments or parts of the regiments remained in the area until April 1866 and were mustered out of service in Helena.⁵⁷

It is very possible other USCT regiments may have been assigned to Helena. Additional research will be required to identify the regiments and the men from Helena who served in the Union army.

“HELL IN ARKANSAS”

In the regimental history of the 33rd Iowa Volunteer Infantry the author notes that some of the boys nicknamed Helena “Hell-in-Arkansas.” The author went on to say “a name more intimate acquaintance, inclined to justify. . .” On the day that the boys from Iowa christened Helena with its nickname they got off of a boat in the rain and mud and pitched their tents in an abandoned garden somewhere in town. In 1861, Helena had 1,500 residents. Four or five hundred men had left to join the Confederate army. Some civilians had fled when news of the Union army’s approach reached Helena. Just how many residents remained in town when the first Union troops arrived is unknown. Gen. Samuel Curtis arrived in Helena with at least 12,000 Union troops and at least 2,000 Contraband. The little river port town was simply not ready for such an influx.⁵⁸

The hell actually began before the Union soldiers got to Helena. They fought heat, thirst, insects, reptiles and partisans on the march through Arkansas. Many soldiers became ill soon after they arrived in Helena. Some were wounded fighting their way across Arkansas; others got sick due to unsanitary conditions and were made worse by the lack of proper hospital facilities.

In early August 1862, Dr. Charles Brackett wrote to his wife telling her that he had visited patients at several hospitals. “. . . by the time I had finished was thoroughly used up. It was the hottest day of the season when even the acclimated citizens kept [to] the house.”⁵⁹ The heat in the summer months generated insects and dust. Contaminated water caused diarrhea. When the rains began, the dust turned to mud.

Two accounts from the winter of 1862-63 paint a grim picture of the streets of Helena. Annie Wittenmyer, a nurse, visited Helena in December 1862 to inspect the hospitals. A four mule wagon was sent to take Mrs. Wittenmyer from the dock into town. The wagon had not gone far before the mules began to sink in the mud. After a great deal of struggle and with the help of soldiers, the mules were rescued. The wagon was abandoned and a placard placed on it that read – *no bottom*. An Indiana regiment reported a similar event in February, only they

57. Dyer, *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion, Volume III*, p. 999.

58. A. F. Sperry, *History of the 33D Iowa Infantry Volunteer Regiment 1863-6*, reprint edition, University of Arkansas Press, Fayetteville, Arkansas, 1999, p. 14.

59. Wheaton, *Surgeon on Horseback*, pp. 165-166.



Thousands of men in Helena died from disease.

reported that “a mule and a horse drowned near the center of town.”⁶⁰

An Iowa soldier wrote to his father in February 1863, “There are about 30 thousand troops encamped in and around Helena, and I can say without exaggerating that there is buried forty men every day and sometimes more.” An inspector from the Medical Directors Office concurred. George Hammond wrote to district headquarters, “I am fully impressed with the idea that Helena is no fit place for a General Hospital and that no sick should be left here that could be moved to a more northern Hospital.”

Hammond felt that all of the hospitals in Helena should be shut down and the patients sent elsewhere.⁶¹

Hammond’s suggestion was ignored. A garrisoned city could not exist without a hospital. In fact, the general hospital at Helena did not close until 1866. At the time of the inspection there were four major hospitals in Helena, Hindman House, Rightor House, Convalescent Camp [on the river bank] and the Pest House/Small Pox barracks. In addition, each regiment had its own small hospital tent or building.⁶²

The July 4, 1863, Battle of Helena resulted in hundreds of casualties. The resulting wounded quickly overwhelmed the four hospitals and the medical staff. Most of the houses in town, the churches, and St. Catherine’s convent and school were pressed into service as hospitals. A little over a month after the battle, Mrs. Wittenmyer returned to Helena to deliver medical supplies. When she inspected the hospitals she was appalled. The Baptist and Methodist churches were crowded with sick and wounded. The men were on the cots and pews were covered in flies. It was hot and the only water available had been taken from the river and was being stored in old pickled meat barrels. Mrs. Wittenmyer bought some ice from a boat at the dock so that the men had cool water if nothing else.⁶³

After proceeding from one hospital to the next she finally determined that the only way to

60. Mrs. Anne Wittenmyer, “A Woman’s Reminiscences of the Civil War,” *PCHQ*, Vol. 17 No. 4, September 1979, p. 2 and Order of the Regimental Association, *History of the Forty-sixth Regiment Indiana Volunteer Infantry*, Press of Wilson, Humphreys, Logansport, Indiana, 1888, p. 46.

61. Barry Popchock, editor, *Soldier Boy: The Civil War Letters of Charles O. Musser, 29th Iowa*, University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, Iowa, 1995, p. 22 and “George Hammond to General commanding Army of Southwest, April 23, 1863,” *Department of East Arkansas – Letters Received 1864-1865*, RG 393, Part II, Entry 299, Box 2.

62. “George Hammond to General commanding Army of Southwest, April 23, 1863,” *Department of East Arkansas – Letters Received 1864-1865*, RG 393, Part II, Entry 299, Box 2 and Jo Clarie, editor, “Civil War Post and General Hospital, Helena, Arkansas,” *Tri-County Genealogical Society*, Vol. 7 No. 3 Fall 1993, p. 105.

63. Wittenmyer, “A Woman’s Reminiscences” pp. 3-4.

save the men was to get them out of Helena to the large hospital facility in Memphis. The plucky nurse hopped a north bound steamer and went from office to office until she roused a general out of his sick bed. She asked that four hospital boats be sent to Helena. She reinforced her request by mentioning that if all else failed she'd have to go to the newspapers. In the end, Wittenmyer got her boats and the worst of the sick and wounded were taken to Memphis.⁶⁴

In the winter of 1864, an inspection report stated that many of the men in the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th Arkansas Infantry Regiments of African Descent and the 1st Iowa Infantry Regiment of African Descent were sick. The inspector blamed the locations of the camps, which were wet. Part of the problem was sewage seeping from the soldiers sinks [latrines]. In December, Dr. Brackett had sent a letter to the colonel of his regiment to order the enforcement of regulations regarding sinks. The doctor saw a real danger, especially since the sinks were located near the area where the men got their water. Ironically, Dr. Brackett died of typhoid fever in February. No doubt similar problems plagued the USCT encampments. The commanding officers of two of the regiments were condemned by the inspector as being unfit for command.⁶⁵

Charles O. Musser of the 29th Iowa reported a great deal of sickness in his regiment. He noted that only 230 out of the regiment's 900 men were present at dress parade. "It is hard to see so many men away from home suffering and dying more for the want of care and attention than anything else. The post hospital here is full, and several steamboats are occupied for hospitals. . ." ⁶⁶ Subsequent inspections in the spring found an improvement in the general health and condition of the garrison at Helena. The inspector commended General N. B. Buford's "untiring energy and able the manner in which he commands."⁶⁷

Incidents of illness decreased with the cool spring weather but when summer came with its oppressive heat, humidity, and insects, people began to get sick again. One inspector blamed the sickness on vaccinations, which he felt should not have been given to the men in the heat of the year. In July 1864 there were 5,556 enlisted men on duty in Helena and over 1,000 of them were reported sick.⁶⁸

Sickness was prevalent among the 6th Minnesota. The climate and the lack of good sanitary conditions were probably responsible for most of the sickness. The toll Helena took on the 6th Minnesota is staggering. According to the Minnesota Adjutant General's report, when the regiment arrived in Helena in June 1864, it was full, meaning that there were 1,000 men,

64. Wittenmyer, "A Woman's Reminiscences" pp. 5-8.

65. "Office of the Acting Assistant Inspector General to Lt. Col. W. H. Thurston, January 19, 1864," *Department of East Arkansas – Special Orders 1863*, RG 393, Part IV, Entry 546, Volume 116.5, pp. 10-13 and Wheaton, *Surgeon on Horseback*, pp. 194-195.

66. Popchock, *Soldier Boy*, p. 24.

67. "Office of the Acting Assistant Inspector General to Maj. J. B. Rogers, April 23, 1864," *Department of East Arkansas – Special Orders 1863*, RG 393, Part IV, Entry 546, Volume 116.5, pp. 27-29.

68. "Office of the Acting Assistant Inspector General to Maj. J. B. Rogers, July 19 and 31, 1864," *Department of East Arkansas – Special Orders 1863*, RG 393, Part IV, Entry 546, Volume 116.5, pp. 33-35.

or there about. In August, only seven officers and 178 men were fit for duty. Six hundred of the Minnesotans were sent to northern hospitals.⁶⁹

The 6th Minnesota had originally been encamped on the river in a very low area. The regiment eventually moved up near the Hornor House but by then the damage was done. It is very likely that the sickness that befell the men was typhoid or some other disease associated with unsanitary conditions. Malaria or another disease carried by mosquitoes is also very likely.⁷⁰

The plight of the Minnesotans, while extreme, was hardly unique. Laundry lists of death and sickness fill the letters, diaries and regimental histories. Helena was simply not a healthy place. W. P. Belden, surgeon of the 6th Minnesota, summed up Hell in Arkansas. “. . . Helena is a city in a swamp, and is the city which the valorous Sixth helped hold through trying times, in the face of poisonous dangers a hundred fold more damaging and terrifying than the fiercest battlefield. . .”⁷¹

The hell continued even after the war was over. In August 1866, two steamers left Helena for St. Louis with the officers and men of the 56th US Colored Infantry aboard. By the time the two boats reached Cairo, Illinois, one man had died on one steamer and thirteen aboard the other and over sixty men were sick. By the time the vessels arrived in St. Louis another 50 men had died. The first army surgeon found no cholera. However, the second confirmed cholera on board. The soldiers were sent to the Quarantine Grounds at Benton Barracks. By the end of August, 175 officers and men had died. They were buried at the National Cemetery at Benton Barracks.⁷²

CIVILIAN LIFE UNDER MILITARY RULE

When the Union Army of the Southwest marched into Helena in July 1862 it is not known how many people remained in the town. A great many of the higher ranking Confederates had left town and had sent their families to safer places. Judge Hanks, a Quaker, took his family north, to Burlington, Iowa. It is very likely that anyone who could afford to had left before the Union Army arrived or left soon thereafter.

General Curtis took up residence in Thomas Hindman's house, one of the finest in Helena. But perhaps there was more symbolism to Curtis' act than that. Hindman was in command of Arkansas. Curtis now held Hindman's home town and was living in his house. Curtis made a statement – I have your town and your house; if you want them back you'll have to come and take them.

Dr. Charles Brackett often had business in Helena. When he was in town he roomed at the

69. Charles W. Johnson, "Narrative of the Sixth Regiment," *PCHQ*, Vol. 24 Nos. 3 & 4, June and September 1986, pp. 7-8.

70. Johnson, "Narrative of the Sixth Regiment," pp. 9-10.

71. Johnson, "Narrative of the Sixth Regiment," p. 10.

72. *Missouri Democrat*, "56th Colored Infantry," September 20, 1866.

H. C. Rightor House and also seems to have boarded at the Richardson House next door. Rightor charged the doctor 50¢ a night. The doctor mentioned that the Rightors had seven slaves even though Mr. Rightor claimed to be a Union man. He also mentioned having made the acquaintance of a Mrs. Waite whose husband had fled to the north. When Brackett returned from an expedition in the fall he reported to his wife that Mr. Richardson had left town.⁷³

An entry made by an Iowa soldier in his diary in April 1863 mentioned that his colonel now occupied the Tappan House. The soldier mentioned that the house “was splendidly furnished.” As a Confederate general Tappan’s property was subject to confiscation and thus his house was used by Union soldiers. The soldier also mentioned that Union troops who had lived in the house earlier had taken “nearly all that was portable.”⁷⁴

Joseph R. Edwards, a soldier in the 12th Michigan, was in the hospital in Helena recovering from intermittent fever. He did not specify if he was in a general hospital or a regimental hospital but he did say they the hospital was in a residence. Private Edwards described the house to his sister, “Our hospital is a fine dwelling house. It’s built in real Southern style & is large and commodious for the number in it. The cool breezes pass through the wide halls & airs all the rooms.” Whoever owned the house had left Helena and the army had taken it for a hospital.⁷⁵

General Benjamin Prentiss determined that a great deal of the merchandise being purchased in Helena by citizens who lived in the countryside was going to aid the Confederates. On February 23, 1863, he issued *General Order # 9* forbidding anyone to take any merchandise beyond the Union lines into the country. The general felt “. . . that the evil resulting therefrom far exceeds that which may result from any suffering of destitute families in the country. . .”⁷⁶ It was a hard order but those were hard times.

The Edmondson family lived northeast of Walnut Corner along Spring Creek Road. In the summer of 1863 seven members of the family and most of their slaves traveled to Louisiana to live in a part of the Confederacy then safe from Union control. In her diary Mary Francis Sale Edmondson wrote of the hardships she endured as a result of Union occupation. She complained that of the few slaves she had left all but two had gone to Helena. Her yard was overgrown with weeds and she was faced with a situation that had turned her world upside down.⁷⁷

73. Wheaton, *Surgeon on Horseback*, pp. 156, 166, 171 and 190.

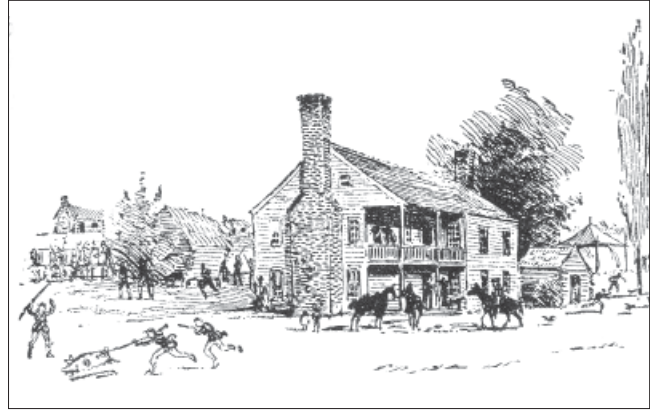
74. “Dudley Emerson Jones Diary, April 10, 1863,” *Dudley Emerson Jones Collection*, Diary MC 1409 3:15, University of Arkansas Library Special Collections.

75. Jan Sarna “Civil War and Reconstruction-Letters Written by Joseph R. Edwards 12th Michigan,” *PCHQ* Vol. 16 No. 3, June 1978, pp. 5-6.

76. “General Order No. 9,” *Department of East Arkansas – General Orders 1863-64*, RG 393, Part IV, Entry 546, Volume 113, p. 1.

77. R. P. Baker, “This Old Book, The Civil War Diary of Mrs. Mary Sale Edmondson,” *PCHQ*, Vol. 10 No. 3, June 1972, pp. 5-9.

Life in rural areas outside of Helena would have been very trying indeed. Beginning in the fall of 1863 the Union army sent scouts, small expeditions, out into the area immediately around Helena. These scouts, generally less than 100 men, would travel less than thirty miles. Their objective was to capture Confederate soldiers in the area, including soldiers home on leave and those harassing the Union garrison. The scouts took forage, food, horses and mules from Southern sympathizers, that is, anyone who had not taken the oath of allegiance.



Union scouts took forage and food.

The Union scouts were the bane of the Confederate loyalists' existence. Records located at the National Archives indicate that 56 scouts were sent out in the Helena area between October 13, 1863, and February 28, 1865, roughly two per month. The size and scope of the scouting parties varied. After Col. Archibald Dobbins began his 1864 campaign to break up the Freedmen farms the scouts' focus turned to locating and capturing Confederates.⁷⁸

Anytime a person in the interior met a scout they feared that they might be taken into custody or, if they were riding a horse or a mule, that it would be confiscated. "Dr. [Edmondson] met three federals today – trembled for his horse, but got off with him."⁷⁹ Another diarist, Sue Cook, wrote of some of her friends leaving her house early in the morning for fear of a scout.⁸⁰

Sue Cook's diary mentions the scouts quite often. She had a lot of contact with people in Helena and she even got to know some of the Union officers who patrolled in her area. Her main fear was that her brother or other men that she knew in the Confederate army would be captured, "The first thing I saw when I got to the road this morning was that a scout had passed in the direction of our house. My heart beat fast! I feared they had caught brother, but they had not."⁸¹

By the fall of 1863, Mrs. Edmondson had grown despondent, "I have never in all my life been obliged to wait on myself before, I am now forty-five years of age." While some may find it hard to empathize with Mrs. Edmondson, the total disruption of life as she had known it was obvious. She became more bitter as time went on, blaming the Yankees for all of her problems, "They have shut us in on all sides — have stopped us — everything but bedding,

78. "Fifty-six reports October 13, 1863 to February 28, 1865," *Department of East Arkansas – Letters Received 1864-1865*, RG 393, Part II, Entry 299, Box 1.

79. Baker, "This Old Book," *PCHQ*, Vol. 11 No. 1, December, 1972, p. 7.

80. Betty M. Faust, "Diary of Sue Cook," *PCHQ*, Vol. 4 No. 2, December 1965, p. 31.

81. Faust, "Diary of Sue Cook," *PCHQ*, Vol. 5 No. 1, December 1966, p. 34.

clothing and house, with few tools, farming utensils, cows, and hogs. They have taken from us the means of supporting ourselves and refuse to let us have anything unless we lie or smuggle [and they] have rendered the latter difficult and dangerous.”⁸²

Emma Rightor was one of the young women who made the regimental flag presented to the Phillips Guard on the occasion of their leaving Helena to enlist in the Confederate army. Emma lived with her parents in Helena. When the Union army occupied the city they took over the Rightor house. Emma remained a staunch Confederate, often flaunting her views in front of Union officers. Her desire to help the Confederate cause led her to smuggle goods through the Union line to Confederates outside of town. On one such trip, she claimed to have carried through the pickets, “quinine, socks, blankets, pistols, two pair of rubber boots and other things” under her hoop skirt. It would seem that General Prentiss was right about merchandise going from Helena to aid the Confederacy. Due to her uncompromising views, Miss Rightor was eventually forced to flee Helena. She spent the remainder of the war in Indiana and Kentucky.⁸³

The people who lived outside of Helena were, as a rule, staunch Confederates. The information available demonstrates their loyalty. Sue Cook, Mary Sale Edmondson and Emma Rightor never took the oath. Mrs. Edmondson found the whole idea of taking the oath “repugnant.” To her, swearing an oath was a moral obligation. She could not take the oath and then ignore it, “I do not yet think I can take the oath to save us from starvation, and utterly disregard it, as so many have done — and yet to renounce all that is dear to me on earth — is simply impossible.”⁸⁴

Sue Cook, who seemed to have had a very matter of fact world view, heard that some captured Confederates held in Helena had taken the oath. Her response was that the act was just plain ludicrous. The idea of taking an oath to support one government while fighting that government didn’t sit well with her. She noted the men’s names, as if she would ask them when she saw them next, ‘What were you thinking?’⁸⁵

Perhaps the biggest surprise to the civilians of Helena was the behavior of their slaves. Thousands of slaves followed the Union army as it marched across Arkansas. Helena became a haven, a place where slaves could become free and work for money. The conditions in Helena may have been poor but they did not stop slaves from seeking a better life. Mrs. Edmondson lamented that the most of the few servants she had had gone off to Helena. “We have tried to act patiently and generously toward them but nothing will satisfy them but Yankee freedom and equality.”⁸⁶

82. Baker, “This Old Book,” *PCHQ*, Vol. 11 No. 1, December, 1972, p. 3 and Vol. 11 No. 2, March 1973, p. 5.

83. Mary Morris, “My Mother’s Story: Who was Emma Rightor Morris,” *PCHQ*, Vol. 36 Nos. 1 & 2, Fall 1998, p. 31.

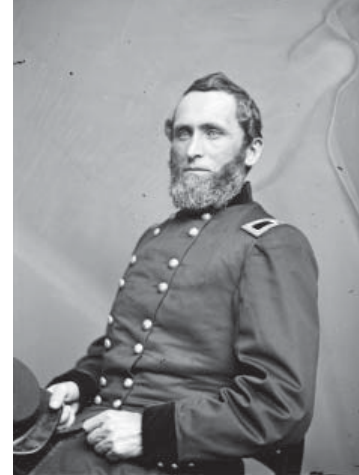
84. Baker, “This Old Book,” *PCHQ*, Vol. 11 No. 2, March, 1973, p. 3.

85. Faust, “Diary of Sue Cook,” *PCHQ*, Vol. 4 No. 2, December 1965, pp. 41-42.

86. Baker, “This Old Book,” *PCHQ*, Vol. 12 No. 3, June 1974, p. 5.

THE BATTLE OF HELENA, JULY 4, 1863

The Battle of Helena was the result of a plan devised by the Confederate high command to relieve pressure on Vicksburg by an “. . . attack on and seizure of Helena, while all available forces of the enemy are being pushed to Grant’s aid.” On June 15, 1863, Confederate Gen. Theophilous H. Holmes, Commander of the District of Arkansas, wired his superior, Lieut. Gen. Edmund Kirby Smith, for permission to do just that. The next day, Kirby Smith sent Holmes word to get on with it. Holmes put his plan in motion.⁸⁷



Gen. Benjamin M. Prentiss, US

Gen. Holmes had almost 8,000 soldiers at his disposal. Maj. Gen. Sterling Price’s infantry division (3,095); Brig. Gen. John S. Marmaduke’s cavalry division (1,750); Brig. Gen. John F. Fagan’s infantry brigade (1,339) and Brig. Gen. L. Marsh Walker’s cavalry brigade (1,462); a total of 7,646. The force was scattered from Little Rock to Jacksonport to Helena, where Walker’s cavalry was in place screening the rest of Holmes’ army.⁸⁸

Prior to Holmes’ move on Helena he received a report from Marmaduke that the Federals had weakened Helena to reinforce Grant at Vicksburg. Marmaduke was wrong, as he and the rest of Holmes’ army would soon find out. Holmes’ scattered army converged on Helena, all four commanders arriving at the Allen Polk house on July 3, 1863.⁸⁹

Union Gen. Benjamin M. Prentiss had not been idle. He had been preparing his command for over a week for the fight that he knew was coming. Prentiss had finished fortifying Helena. There were four batteries on Crowley’s Ridge, Fort Curtis in town, and earthworks and a barricade across the roads entering the city from the north and south. The general ordered that the whole garrison should be up and under arms by 2:30 in the morning. He put off his planned Independence Day celebration. Instead, a single gun fired from Fort Curtis would alert the garrison that the Confederate attack was underway.⁹⁰

John A. Williams, 28th Wisconsin, wrote, “At 4 o’clock the gun on Fort Curtis thundered forth its warning that the enemy was coming, and in five minutes every man in the regiment was under arms, and in five more were in their place in the rifle pits to do his duty. We had not long to wait – the butternuts soon came pouring in, and the ball opened in earnest.”⁹¹ The battle began with Fagan’s Arkansas brigade pushing from the Lower Little Rock Road and

87. George J. W. Urwin, “A Very Disastrous Defeat: The Battle of Helena, Arkansas,” *North & South* Vol. 6 No 1 December 2002, p. 29 and *OR*, Series I Vol. 22 part 2, pp. 367-368.

88. Urwin, “A Very Disastrous Defeat,” p. 29.

89. Edwin C. Bearss, “The Battle of Helena July 4, 1863,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. XX No. I, Spring 1961, pp. 259-265.

90. *OR*, Series I Vol. XXII part 1, p. 388 and “Minos Miller to his mother June [July] 6, 1863,” *Minos Miller Papers*.

91. Jane Hall, “The 28th Wisconsin: Before the Battle,” *Landmark*, Vol. 25 No. 2, Summer 1982, p. 8.



Gen. John S. Marmaduke, CS

up the old hill road along the ridge toward Battery D.⁹²

Fagan's cavalry, led by Col. William H. Brooks, drew first blood. The Rebel horsemen pushed the Union pickets in, but not before Co. G 28th Wisconsin emptied a few saddles with a well directed volley. The Wisconsin boys fell back to the line of works before Battery D. Brooks brought his artillery forward, only to have it quickly silenced by guns from Fort Curtis and the *USS Tyler*. After his initial assault, Brooks became a bystander. "I deemed it best to hold that force of the enemy in check, and prevent him from reinforcing his most important points of defense. . ."⁹³

Fagan's attack began at dawn. As the sun rose, he discovered that the Union army had felled trees across the road; there was no hope of getting wagons or artillery up the ridge. The obstructions were so bad that he ordered his officers to dismount. He had received no intelligence regarding the obstruction and had brought no axes. Regardless, Fagan pushed forward. Four hours later, his exhausted Arkansas brigade had taken four lines of rifle pits. The July day had begun to heat up and the battle was just getting started.⁹⁴

The Confederate attack on Helena was supposed to be synchronized, with three lines hitting Batteries D, C and A at the same time. Holmes ordered his commanders to begin the attack at daylight. Unfortunately for the Confederates, 'daylight' meant different things to different commanders. Fagan and Marmaduke attacked at first light; Price would not bring his infantry on line until sunrise, four hours later.⁹⁵

On the north end of the battlefield, the 29th and 33rd Iowa took the brunt of Marmaduke's attack. Marmaduke set his assault in motion in the predawn hours. He, too, ran into the felled trees that Fagan faced on the south end of the line. Unlike Fagan, Marmaduke managed to get his artillery into position, placing it on a sheltered hill. The Confederate artillery began to pummel the federal line. The 33rd Missouri (US) manning the guns in Battery A replied with gusto and for an hour or more an artillery duel was fought north of town.⁹⁶

But Marmaduke's assault soon ground to a halt. Col. Samuel Rice pushed the 1st Indiana Light Artillery and a section of the 3rd Iowa forward. The 1st Indiana and 5th Kansas cavalries at the levee



Gen. Sterling Price, CS

92. Christ, *Rugged and Sublime*, p. 81.

93. Hall, "The 28th Wisconsin," p. 8 and *OR Series I Vol. XXII part 1*, p. 430.

94. Steven R. Davis, "Death Takes No Holiday," *America's Civil War*, 1993, pp. 26-27 and *OR Series I Vol. XXII part 1*, pp. 424-425.

95. Christ, *Rugged and Sublime*, pp. 80-81.

96. *OR*, Series I Vol. XXII part 1, p. 436 and Fay, *Following the Fifth Kansas Cavalry*, p. 45.

east of Marmaduke's position kept a continuous harassing fire on the Confederate line. With the cavalry on his flank, Marmaduke could not advance without encountering enfilading fire. He sent word to Gen. L. Marshall Walker to clear the Federals from his flank.⁹⁷

Walker sent Col. Archibald Dobbins and 300 or so Arkansas cavalry down the Sterling Road. But, for reasons he never explained, he kept the bulk of his brigade north of the fray. Marmaduke was stuck.⁹⁸

As the sun came up, Gen. Sterling Price's infantry finally moved. Because of Price's tardiness, the guns at Battery C raked Fagan's men while Battery B's gunners hammered Marmaduke. About 8 AM Price's division moved on Graveyard Hill. At the same time, the fog that had been shrouding the battlefield all morning lifted, exposing the movement of the Confederate infantry. Then, all hell broke loose.⁹⁹

Finally prodded into action, Price's infantry was up to the task. Dandrige McRae's and Mosby M. Parsons' brigades led the assault, "On, on they went, yelling like demons, up to the breastworks, and in an instant driving the brave little band of heroes that stood until they actually crossed bayonets." It took three tries but Price took Battery C. McRae's and Parson's men withstood the Union artillery barrage thrown at them from Batteries C, D and B, the *Tyler*, Fort Curtis and several batteries along the river. The Confederates had planned to turn the guns at Battery C on the Union forces in town. The quick thinking men of the 33rd Missouri (US) foiled them. As they were rushing out of the battery they managed to disable one gun and they took all of the friction primers with them, rendering the other guns harmless.¹⁰⁰

As the battle flag of the 9th Missouri (CS) was waved from the parapet of Battery C, Fagan's weary soldiers rallied one last time. Fagan's Arkansans took the fifth and final line of rifle pits in front of Battery D, "My men sprang forward bravely and defiantly, and after a severe contest succeeded in driving out the enemy, who fled, crowding back into the frowning fort under the cover of the heavy guns."¹⁰¹ Fagan was finished. His men made another attempt to take Battery D but the hours of fighting and the heat had taken their toll on his men.

Bedlam reigned on Graveyard Hill. Regiments were mixed and the command and control system had broken down. In the midst of the chaos General Holmes made his way to Battery C and began giving orders. He ordered Parsons, whom he said was the only general-officer present, to attack "the fort on Hindman Hill," Battery D. He ordered Price to do the same thing. Somehow his orders were misunderstood or misinterpreted or, given the lay of the land, simply difficult or impossible to implement quickly and efficiently.¹⁰²

97. *OR*, Series I Vol. XXII part 1, pp. 395, 435-437.

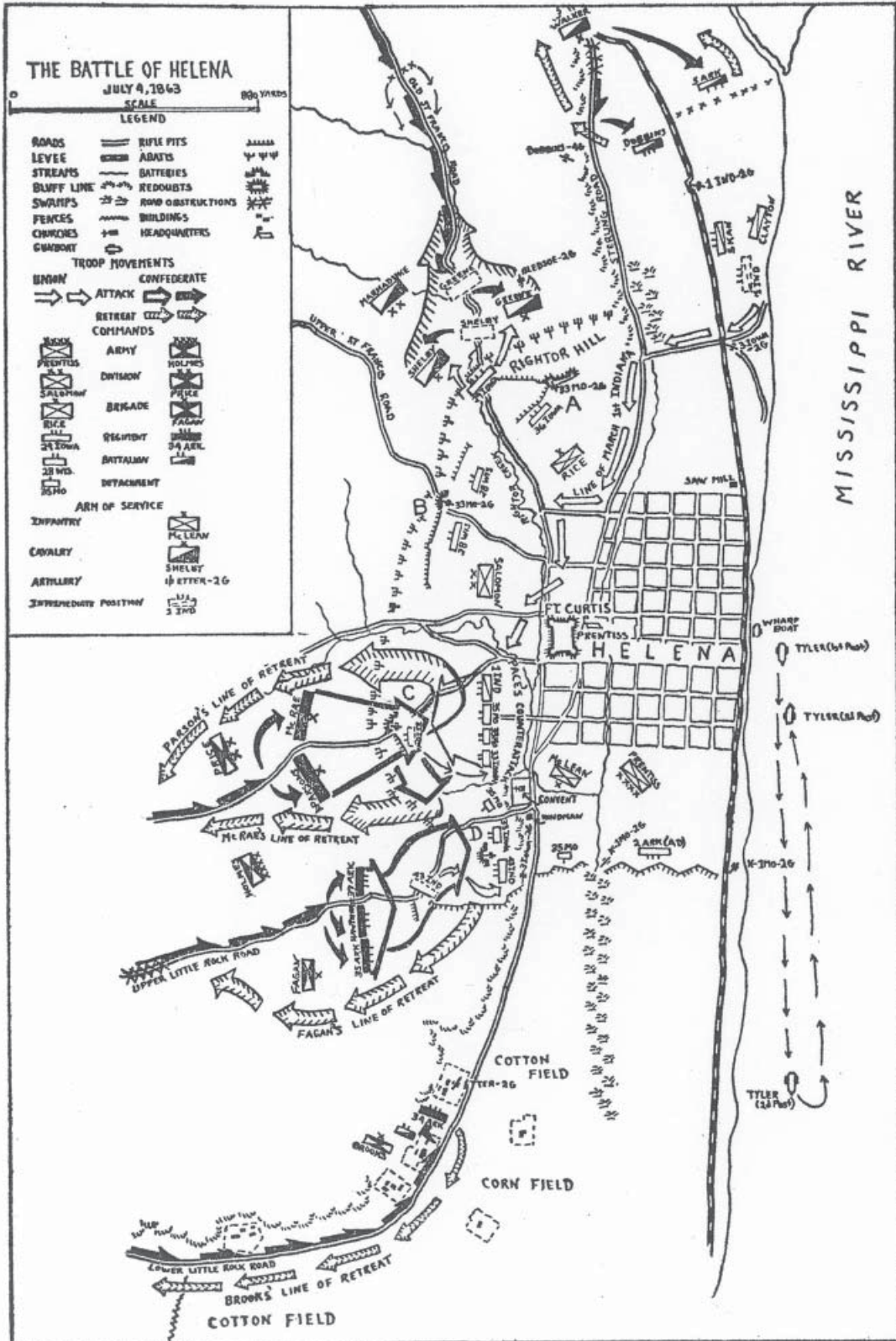
98. Urwin, "A Very Disastrous Defeat," p. 34.

99. Davis, "Death Takes No Holiday," p. 28.

100. "PCHS, "28th Wisconsin Infantry at Helena, Letters of Edward S. Redington, Company D," *PCHQ*, Vol. 14 No. 2, March 1976, p. 33 and George David Schieffler, "Too Late to Save Vicksburg: The Battle of Helena, Arkansas July 4, 1863," MA Thesis, University of Arkansas, 2005, p. 68.

101. Davis, "Death Takes No Holiday," p. 28 and *OR* Series I Vol. XXII part 1, p. 425.

102. *OR*, Series I Vol. XXII part 1, pp. 410-411.



Map taken from Edwin C. Bearss, "The Battle of Helena July 4, 1863," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. XX No. 1, Spring 1961, p. 270.

According to Parsons, Holmes ordered one of his colonels to “carry the fort in the direction of town.” The colonel, of course, obeyed the order and a portion of Parson’s Brigade rushed down the slope east of Battery C to attack Fort Curtis. “With a wild yell of rage,” the Confederates came off the hill toward the fort. They had no chance. Col. Friedrich Salomon, who had been watching the drama unfold from his headquarters at the Hornor House at the base of the hill, gathered up the scattered Union reserve and made the Confederates pay.¹⁰³ The Confederates were met by grape and canister from the guns of Fort Curtis, punished by the *Tyler’s* big guns, and volley after volley from Salomon’s reserve. “[E]very ball went through their ranks; but still on they came, and some of them nearly reached the fort, but fiends themselves could not stand such a fire, and they broke in all directions.” The remaining Confederates retreated into a ravine and after a brief fire fight, surrendered.¹⁰⁴

“I write this report with deep pain,” wrote Theophilous Holmes after the ghastly failure at Helena. He blamed everyone but himself. His army was cut to pieces. Of the 7,646 men who began the battle, 173 were killed, 687 wounded and 776 missing, a total of 1,636 men. The Union side fared much better. Of the 4,129 Union soldiers engaged, 57 were killed, 127 wounded and 36 missing; total casualties of 220.¹⁰⁵

What remained was caring for the wounded and burying the dead. The stench in the July heat of Helena must have been intolerable. “[O]ne of the most disagreeable & sickening jobs of my life” wrote Benjamin Pearson of the 36th Iowa on July 5 after he led a burial detail. It would be days and probably weeks before all of the men, and the horses, killed in the battle were found and buried.¹⁰⁶

HELENA – UNION BASE OF OPERATIONS

General Samuel R. Curtis established his command in Helena in July 1862, knowing as he did so that he had established a Union base of operations in Arkansas. This base could be readily supplied from Memphis via the Mississippi River. From Helena, Union soldiers could strike anywhere downriver and into the Arkansas interior.

Almost as soon as he arrived, Curtis began to harass the Confederates in the area. The Union brown water fleet controlled the Mississippi and the army could board steamers and move up and down the river at will. Curtis took advantage of the river transportation, sending small detachments of troops out on hit and run raids. These small expeditions, which came to be known as scouts by both the military and the locals, continued throughout the Union occupation.

103. Bearss, “The Battle of Helena,” pp. 282-283; *OR* Series I Vol. XXII part 1 pp. 422-423 and Fay, *Following the Fifth Kansas Cavalry*, p. 45.

104. “28th Wisconsin Infantry at Helena,” *PCHQ*, Vol. 14 No. 2, March 1976, p. 33 and Schieffler, “The Battle of Helena, Arkansas July 4, 1863,” pp. 70-71.

105. *OR*, Series I Vol. XXII part 1, p. 411 and Urwin, “A Very Disastrous Defeat,” p. 37.

106. “Benjamin A. Pearson’s War Diary,” *Annals of Iowa*, Vol. 15 No. 3, Third Series, Vol. XV No.2, October, 1925, p. 205.

On August 3, 1862, a detachment of about 3,000 Union soldiers under the command of Gen. Alvin P. Hovey left the Pillow Plantation seeking a Confederate force that was supposed to be somewhere west of Helena. The Union column marched along the hot, dusty Arkansas roads until it reached Clarendon four days later. Hovey's soldiers stayed in Clarendon for five days. The march back took four days. They found no large Confederate force, just partisans and cavalry. The detachment lost four men killed.¹⁰⁷

On August 28 a detachment that included part of the 56th Ohio boarded the steamer *White Cloud* and moved downriver. The soldiers attacked a Confederate camp near Carson Landing, Mississippi, where they captured supplies. They continued to Gladdis Landing, also on the east bank of the river, skirmishing with Confederate soldiers before steaming south. The *White Cloud* anchored just below Napoleon, Arkansas. At Napoleon, the Union soldiers captured a wharf boat, which they secured and brought back to Helena. Confederates fired at the boat as it passed them heading back upriver but did no damage. The expedition returned to Helena on September 2, 1862.¹⁰⁸

Perhaps the largest operation out of Helena in 1862 was the Yazoo Pass Expedition, which began in December 1862 and continued into the spring. The purpose of the operation was to find a back door into Vicksburg. Thousands of troops and supplies left Helena, headed for Mississippi and Louisiana. The Union army and navy tried to find a way to reach Vicksburg via the Coldwater and Yazoo rivers. The expedition failed. The soldiers were in the field until March fighting the river, the elements and the Confederates.¹⁰⁹

Two scouts in May 1863 were typical of the small scale operations that originated from Helena before the July 4, 1863, battle. On May 5, 1863, Col. Clayton Powell was ordered to take a detachment of the 5th Kansas, 5th Illinois and 1st Indiana cavalry regiments and a battery of artillery and to "scour the country west and north of Helena, and destroy forage and other supplies. . ." The scout went west and crossed Big Creek arriving in Clarendon three days later. They took the road toward Cotton Plant and got as far as Bayou DeView but could not get across. They turned north and took the Little Rock Military Road and eventually crossed the L'Anguille River. Col. Clayton, the artillery and 1st Indiana Cavalry remained to guard the crossing until the rest of the force returned.¹¹⁰

The 5th Kansas and 5th Illinois continued south between the L'Anguille and St. Francis

107. Order of the Regimental Association, *History of the Forty-sixth Regiment Indiana Volunteer Infantry*, Press of Wilson Humphreys, Logansport, Indiana, 1888, p. 43.

108. Thomas J. Williams, *An Historical Sketch of the 56th Ohio Volunteer Infantry During the Great War from 1861 to 1866*, Lawrence Printers, Columbus, Ohio, 1899, p. 24.

109. William E. McLean, *The Forty-Third Regiment Indiana Volunteers: An Historic Sketch of its Career and Services*, C. W. Brown, Terre Haute, Indiana, 1903, p. 12; Wilson E. Chapel, *The Civil War Journals of Wilson E. Chapel March, 1861 to January, 1863: Company "F" 13th Regiment Illinois Infantry Volunteer from Cortland, Malta and Sycamore, DeKalb County, Illinois*, Dekalb County Historical Society, Sycamore, Illinois, 1998, p. 99 and Jerry Korn, editor, *War on the Mississippi: Grant's Vicksburg Campaign*, Time-Life Books, New York, 1985, pp. 72-77.

110. *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Kansas, Vol. 1, 1861-1865*, Leavenworth, Kansas: Bulletin Co-operative Printing Company, Chicago. 1867, p. 68.

rivers in an attempt to catch Col. Archibald Dobbins' command. The Union soldier soon realized that Gen. Marmaduke's command was between them and Col. Clayton. Maj. Wilton Jenkins turned the cavalry around, determined to fight his way back to the river. In the late afternoon, the 5th Kansas encountered a large detachment of Carter's Texas Cavalry armed with two pieces of artillery. The Union and Confederate cavalry fought an hour-long engagement before the Union soldiers returned the way they had come. The cavalry crossed the L'Anguille and returned to Helena. The scout returned eight days later, having burned a steam mill, 50,000 bushels of corn, tons of hay and fodder, and having captured a dozen prisoners. The Union cavalry lost less than twenty men killed and wounded.¹¹¹

The second scout was a much smaller affair. A detachment of the 5th Kansas and 5th Iowa cavalry, some 155, men left Helena under the command of Maj. Samuel Walker and rode toward Big Creek. The scout was to proceed twenty miles out of Helena before returning to town. Approximately eight miles out of Helena on the Little Rock Road the detachment ran into Col. Dobbins' cavalry. The Confederates wasted little time and quickly attacked the Union cavalry. When Dobbins quickly routed two companies of the 5th Kansas, the men of the 5th Iowa turned and fled. The Confederates captured two officers and twenty men. The rest of the Kansas cavalry fell back, Dobbins' cavalry pushing them for a mile. Maj. Walker halted and prepared to make a second stand. As Walker prepared for the Confederate assault reinforcements arrived from Helena and the Confederates retreated.¹¹²

These are just two of the numerous scouts that the Union army sent into the countryside to forage and to kill or capture Confederates. Most scouts were mundane and simply involved soldiers going out and coming back, encountering no one but civilians.

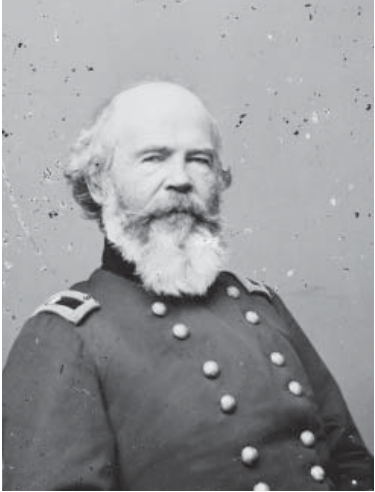
After the Battle of Helena, the Little Rock Campaign was launched from Helena. The fall of Vicksburg freed up thousands of Union troops to take care of business elsewhere in the theater. Maj. Gen. Frederick Steele was sent to Helena and given command of all Union forces in the state. On August 10, 1863, he left Helena with 6,000 infantry for the purpose of capturing Little Rock. He marched his force to Clarendon where he united with Brig. Gen. John Davidson's cavalry brigade. One month later, Steele's Union army marched into Little Rock and accepted the surrender of the city. Along the way he lost only 137 men. Confederate Arkansas was in disarray.¹¹³

Once Steele left Helena no further major operations originated out of the city. However, military actions by no means stopped altogether. The Union maintained a garrison at Helena until after the end of the war. Solders in Helena continued to conduct scouts into the countryside. More than fifty scouts have been documented as taking place between October 1863 and February 1865. These scouts do not include engagements between Union pickets and Confederate cavalry or the actions of the Union army fighting Dobbins' attempts to destroy the plantation lease system and to terrorize the Freedmen in and around Helena.

111. Fay, *Following the Fifth Kansas Cavalry*, p. 177.

112. Fay, *Following the Fifth Kansas Cavalry*, p. 42 and *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Kansas*, p. 69.

113. DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, pp. 93-96.



Gen. Napoleon Bonaparte Buford, US

THE BATTLE OF BIG CREEK, JULY 27, 1864

In the summer of 1864, Confederate Gen. Joseph O. Shelby decided it was time to break up the plantation lease system in Helena. Shelby sent 1,200 men under Col. Archibald Dobbins and Col. Frank Gordon to the Helena area to “ravage and destroy the Government plantations.” Shelby’s plan called for Dobbins to hurt the Federals in any way possible, but the main purpose of the raid was “. . . destroying the farms and driving off the stock and negroes employed on them. . .”¹¹⁴

Dobbins set the plan in motion, taking his cavalry to Phillips County to carry out Shelby’s order. General Napoleon Bonaparte Buford, now in command of the Union forces in Helena, knew that Shelby’s men were in the area but he had no idea why. Buford stepped up patrols and tried to prepare while obtaining as much information as possible.

On July 1, 1864, Buford sent Col. William S. Brooks with a detachment of 95 men and officers of the 56th U.S. Colored Infantry south to check on the situation. Brooks proceeded to Ft. Pinney, which was opposite Island 63, for the purpose of guarding the Freedman camp. Brooks left a captain and twenty men at Ft. Pinney, where there was already a captain and some men, though Brooks’ report did not record how many. Brooks moved on to Stewart’s Plantation. He and fifteen mounted men pursued a Confederate detachment but were unable to catch them. Brooks returned to Helena with cotton he had collected from the plantations, one prisoner and some livestock.¹¹⁵

Later in the month Buford sent a detachment of the 15th Illinois Cavalry under the command of Maj. Eagleton Carmichael on a scout in the vicinity of Big Creek. Carmichael’s plan was to capture Lieut. John R. Swan, a Confederate partisan who operated in the area. Carmichael intended to camp near the creek and, after the moon rose, to try to capture some Confederate pickets in hopes of getting information on Lieut. Swan’s whereabouts. Carmichael was foiled as one of his troopers was too ill to ride. They did capture a Pvt. Derrick, who told them that Swan had been conscripting men into Confederate service. He also discovered that Swan’s company was to unite with Dobbins’ force for the purpose of “gathering all the able bodied negroes through the county to take them west,” which would have been into the Confederacy.¹¹⁶

Frustrated by a lack of information, Buford ordered Col. William S. Brooks to take a

114. *OR*, Series I Vol. XLI part 2, p. 994.

115. “Col. W. S. Brooks to Capt. T. C. Meatyard,” July 10, 1864,” *Department of East Arkansas – Letters Received 1864-1865*, Record Group 393, Part II, Entry 299, Box 1.

116. “Maj. E. Carmichael to Capt. T. C. Meatyard,” July 25, 1864,” *Department of East Arkansas – Letters Received 1864-1865*, Record Group 393, Part II, Entry 299, Box 1.

detachment of infantry and a section of artillery and march to Wallace Ferry on Big Creek. Brooks took 360 infantry, 280 from his regiment and another 80 men of 60th U.S. Colored Infantry, and a two-gun section of Battery E 2nd U.S. Colored (Light) Artillery, about 42 officers and men. Wallace Ferry was about twenty miles west southwest of Helena. Brooks was to rendezvous with Maj. Eagleton Carmichael and 150 men of 15th Illinois Cavalry at Big Creek. Carmichael's men were coming from below Old Town, where they had been dropped off by streamer. The purpose of the scout was to determine what the Confederates were up to and how many of them were in the vicinity.¹¹⁷

The Confederate column of approximately 1,200 men, Col. Dobbins' 1,000 Arkansas cavalry and Col. Gordon's 200 Missourians, united at Trenton, a village just north of the confluence of Big Creek and Lick Creek. On July 25, 1864, several of the Confederates stopped at Holly Grove Plantation on Spring Creek Road where they talked to Mary Sale Edmondson, who recorded the visit in her diary. The Confederates were in Phillips County and a conflict was inevitable.¹¹⁸

Brooks had been ordered to proceed with caution and to travel at night. As a result, his column reached Big Creek about 3 AM on July 26. Once it was light, Brooks took out a patrol to determine if Dobbins was in the vicinity. His men talked with locals and were assured that Dobbins was no longer around. Satisfied that his command was safe, Brooks allowed his men to have breakfast. According to one account, a group of soldiers crossed the creek and went about a half mile down the road to a farm house to get a homemade breakfast. As they discussed the highlights of the day with their hosts, they learned that Dobbins had only just passed through. About the same time as their epiphany, Dobbins drove in Brooks' pickets.¹¹⁹

Dobbins almost literally caught the Yankees napping. His dismounted cavalry poured from the woods, hitting Brooks' detachment from three sides. As Col. Brooks tried to form up his men he was shot out of the saddle. The surgeon who went to assist him was also killed. Command fell to Lt. Col. Moses Reed. The situation quickly became desperate.

At the first alarm the artillerists struggled to reposition their guns. Lieut. Harmon T. Chappel got the rifled gun into position and opened fire on the charging Confederates. Chappel hit the column with canister again and again, at last driving them back. The Confederates regrouped and using the bridge abutments as cover drove Chappel's infantry support off, forcing him to retreat.¹²⁰

Chappel's gun was positioned on the Union left; Capt. J. F. Lembke had a howitzer on the Union right. As Chappel's men got their gun into position he went to Lembke for

117. *OR*, Series I Vol. XLI part 2, p. 16 and Brian K. Robertson, "Will They Fight? Ask the Enemy: United States Colored Troops at Big Creek, Arkansas, July 26, 1864," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. LXVI No. 3, Autumn 2007, pp. 323-324.

118. Robertson, "Will They Fight?," p. 326 and Baker, "This Old Book" *PCHQ*, Vol. 12 No. 2, March, 1974, p. 4.

119. Robertson, "Will They Fight?," p. 326

120. *OR*, Series I Vol./ XLI part 1, pp. 22-23.

orders. Before the captain could reply he was struck in the head and died. Chappel assumed command of the guns. He put Sgt. Joseph Graham in command of howitzer and returned to his gun. The guns crews performed yeoman's work, servicing the two guns under extreme pressure.¹²¹

The first half hour at Big Creek was hot and fast. Just as the battle began Colonel Brooks and Captain Lembke were lost, forcing a change of command. The troops did not panic, they held their ground and fought. That the small detachment of USCT stood for several hours against odds of two or three to one speaks volumes of the men in the ranks. It was not a fight for the faint of heart. Capt. George Holibaugh of Co. F the 56th U.S. colored Infantry acknowledged that there was confusion. He reported that during the engagement the men of various companies got separated and that he took command of a portion of the Co. A in addition to his own men.¹²²

Two things saved the little column of USCT from Helena, the artillery and the timely arrival of the 15th Illinois. What time the battle started is not recorded in any of the reports but it was probably seven or eight o'clock in the morning. Carmichael heard the artillery and hurried toward the sound of the guns, catching Gordon's mounted men unawares on the Wallace Ferry Road. The Union cavalry scattered the Confederates and took and held the road. The Major left his detachment in command of Capt. Hutchens and rode off to find the infantry.¹²³

As for the artillery, Jo Shelby's biographer wouldn't even give credit where credit was due. He wrote, "The Federals had two pieces of artillery, with 'Dubuque' on the caissons, and these two cannon were well served by whites and gave much trouble." That's quite interesting, as the artillery on the field was Battery E 2nd U.S. Colored Artillery. Regardless, had it not been for the artillery there would have been no one for Carmichael to rescue. Dobbins' boys might not have been whipped by the cobbled together force that marched out of Helena, but they sure knew they'd been in a fight.¹²⁴

Carmichael and Reed conferred and determined that the best course of action was to get out and back to Helena. The artillery had been cut up; Chappel reported that he lost nine horses and was forced to abandon his caissons and one limber. With the Illinois cavalry holding the road, the infantry disengaged and pulled back. With Carmichael's cavalry serving as a rear guard the Union soldiers retreated for Helena. The last engagement of the fight was at the junction of the Little Rock and Spring Creek roads where the Confederates were drawn up in line of battle. The USCT once more proved their mettle and shouting "Remember Fort

121. Robertson, "Will They Fight?," p. 328 and *OR*, Series I Vol./ XLI part 1, p. 23.

122. *OR*, Series I Vol./ XLI part 1, p. 23 and Affidavit George W. Holibaugh in Pension Application of Nelson Lamb, (56th USCT), *Civil War Pension Application*, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC.

123. *OR*, Series I Vol. XLI part 1, p. 20 and Robertson, "Will They Fight?," p. 329.

124. John N. Edwards, *Shelby and His Men or the War in the West*, Miami Printing and Publishing Company, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1867, p. 343.

Pillow!" charged into the Confederate line, driving the Confederates off.¹²⁵

Dobbins' report does not survive. Jo Shelby reported that Dobbins had defeated "1,250 white and negroes," which is over 800 more soldiers than Brooks and Carmichael had. Shelby's biographer, John Edwards, put the count at 1,400. In a way these over estimations are a compliment to the tenacity of the soldiers under Brooks' command. That tenacity probably saved their lives. Buford claimed to have evidence that three wounded USCT had been murdered. Mrs. Edmondson recorded a conversation with a Missouri soldier who stopped by her house the day before the battle and told her that he never took a prisoner alive.¹²⁶

The Union detachment lost 19 killed, 40 wounded and five missing. Shelby's report cited 8 killed and 40 wounded on the Confederate side. Sue Cook recorded the battle in her diary, writing that five Confederate dead were brought back to her farm, where the Confederate column spent the night and where some of the men were buried the next morning.¹²⁷

When all was said and done, Buford failed to protect the leased plantations. Gordon and Dobbins plundered the government plantations, drove off stock and took Freedmen back into bondage. However, if there was still any lingering doubt, the USCT proved they could and would fight.

ABANDONED LANDS AND THE PLANTATION LEASE SYSTEM

The Second Confiscation Act passed by Congress on July 17, 1862, authorized the confiscation of the property of persons in rebellion against the United States. This act allowed the freeing of slaves as contraband of war and it also allowed for the seizure of all real property. It was the Second Confiscation Act that allowed implementation of the plantation lease experiment in Phillips County and other places in the Mississippi Valley.¹²⁸

During his spring 1863 campaign through the Mississippi Valley to recruit black men for the Union army, Gen. Lorenzo Thomas decreed that abandoned plantations were subject to lease. The system was designed to lease land directly to Freedmen. There was to be no rent charged, only a tax levied per bale of cotton and bushel of corn harvested. In addition, a fixed wage system was set for laborers. The lease system fell under the control of the Treasury Department.¹²⁹

Some 8,000 acres in Phillips County was confiscated by the Union authorities. Most of that land, some 6,000 acres, belonged to the Pillow Plantation. Smaller, though substantial,

125. *OR*, Series I Vol. XLI part 1, pp. 20-21 and Robertson, "Will They Fight?," p. 331.

126. *OR*, Series I Vol. XLI part 2, p. 190 and Baker, "This Old Book" *PCHQ*, Vol. 12 No. 2, March, 1974, p. 4.

127. *OR*, Series I Vol. XLI part 1, pp. 19 and 22 and Faust, "Diary of Sue Cook," *PCHQ*, Vol. 4 No. 3, March 1966, p. 37.

128. James M. McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1982, pp. 270-271.

129. Maude Carmichael, "Federal Experiments with Negro Labor on Abandoned Plantations in Arkansas: 1862-1865," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. I No. 2, June 1942, pp. 102-103.

acreage belonging to William Sales, Robert Casteel, Thomas William White and Thomas Maney was also confiscated and leased.¹³⁰

The lease system in Phillips County seems to have been successful. Under the general supervision of Capt. A. L. Thayer, over thirty Freedmen leased land and planted cotton. On the average, the Freedmen made \$500 profit on each ten acres of land. The success of the lease system drew praise from the government and some of those employed earned enough money to buy their own land. One observer noted that the farms that were leased by Freedmen did better than those leased by whites. His conclusion was that the former slaves worked better for people of their own race. Perhaps it was simply that the working arrangement was different enough from slavery that the Freedmen felt that they were now part of the system rather than simply being subject to it.¹³¹

James E. Yeatman, the president of the Western Sanitation Commission, toured the Mississippi Valley in the fall of 1863. Yeatman not only visited hospital facilities, he also visited the leased plantations and the “home farms,” which were the refuge of the old, the young and the infirm. Yeatman and William P. Mellen of the Treasury Department established rules and regulations for the operation of leased plantations. The system was not perfect but it did set wages and limit the size and number of plantations that could be leased by a single individual. Mellen reported to Salmon Chase in February 1864, that he felt that without adequate military protection the whole enterprise was doomed.¹³²

In April 1864, possibly as a result of Mellen’s report, Gen. N. B. Buford ordered the construction of two fortifications with blockhouses to be built on the leased plantations. One was built three miles south of town the other about eleven miles south of town. The latter became Ft. Pinney; the former was on the Pillow plantation and also guarded the home farm there.¹³³

General Buford’s works failed to protect the Freedmen on the plantations. After the Battle of Big Creek on July 27, 1864, Confederate cavalry under the command of Col. Archibald Dobbins raided the plantations. The Confederates burned buildings and crops, took livestock and rounded up Freedmen and took them to Confederate-held territory. The Confederate raid damaged the lease system but it did not destroy it. Following Dobbins Raid *Special Order 200* dated August 2, 1864, established a board of officers to “report all the facts in this case” and make a report to General Buford. The order also called for those people leasing the plantations to create a committee to assess their losses and give a report under oath to the

130. Carl H. Moneyhon, “The Civil War in Phillips County,” *PCHQ*, Vol. 19 Nos. 3&4, June & September 1981, pp. 27-28.

131. Carmichael, “Federal Experiments with Negro Labor,” pp. 110-111; Moneyhon, “The Civil War in Phillips County,” p. 27 and John Eaton, *Grant, Lincoln and the Freedmen: Reminiscence of the Civil War*, Longmans, Green, and Co, New York, 1907, p. 164.

132. Eaton, *Grant, Lincoln and the Freedmen*, pp. 147-148.

133. “Officer of Acting Assistant Inspector General to Maj. J. B. Rogers,” *Department of East Arkansas – Letters Received 1863*, RG 393, Part IV, Entry 546, Book 116.5 p. 27.

military board.¹³⁴

The Confederates had struck a significant blow to the plantations; there is little doubt that people were terrified. In spite of Confederate attempts to disrupt and destroy it, the lease system as established in 1863 continued until March 1865, when The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned lands, better known as the Freedmen's Bureau, assumed responsibility for the system.¹³⁵

NORTHERN BENEVOLENT ORGANIZATIONS AND THE FREEDMEN'S BUREAU

Contraband had been coming to Helena to escape slavery since the summer of 1862. At first the army alone dealt with the escaped slaves, finding them work and making sure that they had adequate food, clothing and medical care. As the war progressed a number of benevolent and aid societies came forward to help Freedmen adjust to their new place in society. It would be 1865 before a government agency was established with expressed purpose of aiding the Freedmen. That agency, the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, known as the Freedmen's Bureau, also came to Helena but by then there were well established procedures for coping with refugees.

Several northern benevolent organizations worked to improve the health, education and moral welfare of the Freedmen in Helena. Among them were the Western Sanitary Commission, North Western Freedmen's Aid Commission, Western Freedmen's Aid Commission, American Missionary Association and The Indiana Yearly Meeting of Friends.

The Western Sanitary Commission arrived in Helena in late 1862. Anne Wittenmyer, who was associated with the Commission, visited Helena in December 1862 and observed conditions first hand. Her report may well have been responsible for the Commission's decision to send supplies and aid to hospital facilities in Helena. James Yeatman also made an inspection of the Mississippi Valley. While Mrs. Wittenmyer's visit was focused on hospitals, Yeatman's was an overall assessment of the condition of the Freedmen within Union lines. He was to ascertain what could be done to improve their condition and how his organization could help.¹³⁶

The organization that may have had the most impact on Helena was the Indiana Yearly Meeting of Friends, the Quakers who came to teach school and stayed to build a college. The influx of Freedmen into Helena coupled with sickness in the overcrowded city quickly produced a large number of orphan children. Gen. N. B. Buford used his authority to commission Elkanah Beard of the Society of Friends in Helena to provide a home for the orphans in the city. This was the humble beginnings of what would become Southland

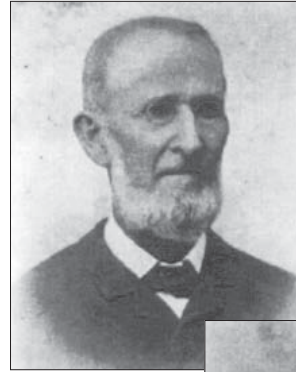
134. "Special Order 200 – August 2, 1864," *Department of East Arkansas – Special Orders 1863*, RG 393, Part IV, Entry 546, Volume 109, pp. 650-651.

135. Carmichael, "Federal Experiments with Negro Labor," p. 114.

136. Wittenmyer, "A Woman's Reminiscences," *PCHQ*, Vol. 17 No. 4, September 1979, p. 2 and Eaton, *Grant, Lincoln and the Freedmen*, pp. 145-146.

College.¹³⁷

The orphan asylum and school operated in Helena for two years. After the war, most of the property confiscated by the army was returned to its owners, including the building that housed the orphan asylum, which may well have been the Episcopal Church.¹³⁸ “On my arrival I found the Church still occupied as a negro school house. Application was made to the proper authorities for its restoration. . .”¹³⁹



Calvin & Alida
Clark in later
years



Without the asylum the children would again be homeless. At the urging of Col. Charles Bentzoni, then commander at Helena, land was purchased in Phillips County for a new school. The purchase price of \$900 for 30 acres was paid for with contributions from the officers and men of the 56th U.S. Colored Infantry. The men of the 56th also contributed labor. By the time the school was moved to the new site, frame buildings had been constructed and were ready for occupancy. Over the next few years additional acreage was added until the Indiana Yearly Meeting of Friends owned 167 acres.¹⁴⁰

Calvin and Alida Clark were among those sent to Arkansas by the Indiana Society of Friends. The Clarks worked tirelessly with the orphan asylum in Helena and then transferred that energy to the new school. The couple remained in Phillips County until 1886. During their tenure the fledgling orphan asylum became a boarding school for children and a normal school that trained teachers for African American schools across the South.¹⁴¹

The first permanent structures were built on the Southland campus with the aid of funding from the Freedmen’s Bureau. The Bureau had promised \$5,000 toward the construction of the buildings but only provided \$3,000. The Clarks were able to raise the remainder from the Society of Friends in England and Ireland. When the Freedmen’s Bureau closed down in 1869, declaring that the emergency was over, total funding for the school fell to the Missionary Board of the Indiana Yearly Meeting. The Clarks were asked to stay on, which they did. The school continued to be operated by the Friends until 1925.¹⁴²

Other organizations played a lesser role in Helena. Mr. S. Johnson, Miss M. A. Carter and

137. Thomas C. Kennedy, “Southland College: The Society of Friends and Black Education in Arkansas,” *The Southern Friend*, Vol. VII No. 1, Spring 1985, p. 40.

138. Dale P. Kirkman, “Southland College,” *PCHQ*, Vol. 3 No. 1, September 1964, p. 30.

139. Hackett, “Letters and Dairy of Rev. Otis B. Hackett,” p. 37.

140. Kirkman, “Southland College,” pp. 30-31 and David Taylor, “Garden in the Wilderness,” *PCHQ*, Vol. 26 Nos. 1 & 2, December 1987 & March 1988, p. 5.

141. Kennedy, “Southland College,” pp. 40-43.

142. Kennedy, “Southland College,” pp. 56-59 and Taylor, “Garden in the Wilderness,” pp. 19-20.

Miss H. Baldwin were listed in a June 1865 Freedmen's Bureau report as being employed as teachers. Mr. Johnson was assigned to Helena by the North Western Freedmen's Aid Commission, which was based in Chicago. The two women were assigned to Helena via the Western Freedmen's Aid Commission, which was based in Cincinnati. Another three teachers were sent by the Indiana Yearly Meeting of Friends who, interestingly, were paid \$5.00 a month more than the other teachers. In June 1865, the six teachers taught 520 pupils.¹⁴³

The Freedmen's Bureau elevated Mr. Johnson to Superintendent of Schools for the Helena district. Overall, the schools in Helena seem to have been successful; their population growing from 227 in January to 520 in June 1865. Capt. Henry Sweeny, Superintendent of Freedmen in Helena, praised the teachers, "The teachers in these schools are deserving of all praise, and the progress made by the scholars, surprising, it is extraordinary to see with what avidity the little ones pursue knowledge, and how rapidly they learn."¹⁴⁴

The Freedmen's Bureau did more than just help provide schools for Freedmen. It worked with landowners to insure that labor contracts were made with individuals who were seeking work. It also provided rations for individuals who did not have the means to feed themselves. The June 1865 report listed 3,000 rations needed for Freedmen and 1,500 rations needed for white refugees in Helena.¹⁴⁵

The tone of Reconstruction would change after 1868, but the system of sharecropping, established soon after the end of the Civil War with the blessing of the Freedmen's Bureau, established a tenant farming arrangement that remained the norm well into the twentieth century. The planter, tenant, merchant-based enterprise created a system that generally left the tenant in debt to the plantation store. Unscrupulous planters cheated the Freedmen. A Freedmen's Bureau agent wrote in 1866, "Many of the colored people are being swindled out of their year's work and the cold winter which is approaching will find them destitute of even the common necessities of life."¹⁴⁶

THE CONSTITUTION OF 1868

In 1864 an election was held in which only those who had taken the Oath of Future Loyalty to the Federal government were eligible to vote. A governor and legislature were elected but given the situation in Arkansas, the government had very little power outside of Little Rock. When the war ended a second round of elections was held to elect U.S. representatives. Congress refused to seat the delegation and the state Supreme Court struck down the

143. "Report of the Superintendent of Freedmen for the District of Southwest Arkansas, June 1865," *Department of Arkansas and 7th Army Corps and 4th Military District, Letters Received, 1864-65*, RG 393, Part I, Entry 269, Box 4.

144. *Ibid.*

145. Whayne, et al, *Arkansas*, pp. 208-209 and "Report of the Superintendent of Freedmen for the District of Southwest Arkansas, June 1865," *Department of Arkansas and 7th Army Corps and 4th Military District, Letters Received, 1864-65*, RG 393, Part I, Entry 269, Box 4.

146. Whayne, et al, *Arkansas*, pp. 209-211 and Tom Baskett, Jr. editor, *The Arkansas Delta: A Landscape of Change*, Delta Cultural Center, Helena, Arkansas, 1990, p. 54.

Arkansas loyalty oath.¹⁴⁷

The election of 1866, the first in Arkansas without restrictions on former Confederates, saw all of the Unionists swept from office. The new legislature did not pass restrictive “Black Codes” like many other southern states during the same period but it also did not vote to allow the former slaves to vote, hold office, serve on juries, have access to public education or marry whites. This same legislature refused to ratify the Fourteenth Amendment. This would be its undoing.¹⁴⁸

Only Tennessee ratified the Fourteenth Amendment. Failure on the part of the remaining Confederate states to ratify the amendment led to the Second Reconstruction Act, which divided the Confederate states, with the exception of Tennessee, into five military districts. The Act allowed a state to return to the Union if it wrote a new constitution that provided for universal manhood suffrage and ratified the Fourteenth Amendment. The constitution had to be approved by a majority of the registered voters. To register to vote men had to meet the qualifications stated in the Fourteenth Amendment, which excluded anyone who “. . .had having previously taken an oath, as a member of Congress, or as an officer of the United States, or as a member of any State legislature, or as an executive or judicial officer of any State, to support the Constitution of the United States, shall have engaged in insurrection or rebellion against the same, or given aid or comfort to the enemies thereof.” Needless to say, this provision excluded a great many white Arkansans.¹⁴⁹

Arkansas, which was in the Fourth Military District, quickly went about the business of holding a constitutional convention. White Unionists gathered in Little Rock to make plans. The African American population formed clubs and political societies to mobilize the black population and register voters. Many of Arkansas’ African Americans joined the Union League. Some 2,000 black men attended a league rally in Helena in May 1867. Before the November 1867 election the league helped register over 20,000 African American voters.¹⁵⁰

Eight African American men were selected as delegates to the constitutional convention. Two of those black delegates, William H. Grey and James White, represented Phillips County at the Constitutional Convention. James White was a Baptist minister and had never been enslaved. At the time of the convention he was 37 years old and had been a resident of Arkansas for three years. White was one of the four black members of the convention to take an active role in the proceedings.¹⁵¹

Perhaps the most influential of the black delegates was William H. Grey who came to Helena with his family in 1865. Grey, like White, had never been a slave. Before moving

147. Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877*, Harper & Row, Publishers, New York, 1988, p. 35 and Whayne, et al, *Arkansas*, pp. 207-208.

148. DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, pp. 157-160.

149. Foner, *Reconstruction*, pp. 275-277 and John R. Alden, *Rise of the American Republic*, Harper & Row, Publishers, New York, 1963, pp. 954-955.

150. Whayne, et al, *Arkansas*, pp. 213-215 and DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, pp. 164-165.

151. DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, p. 164.

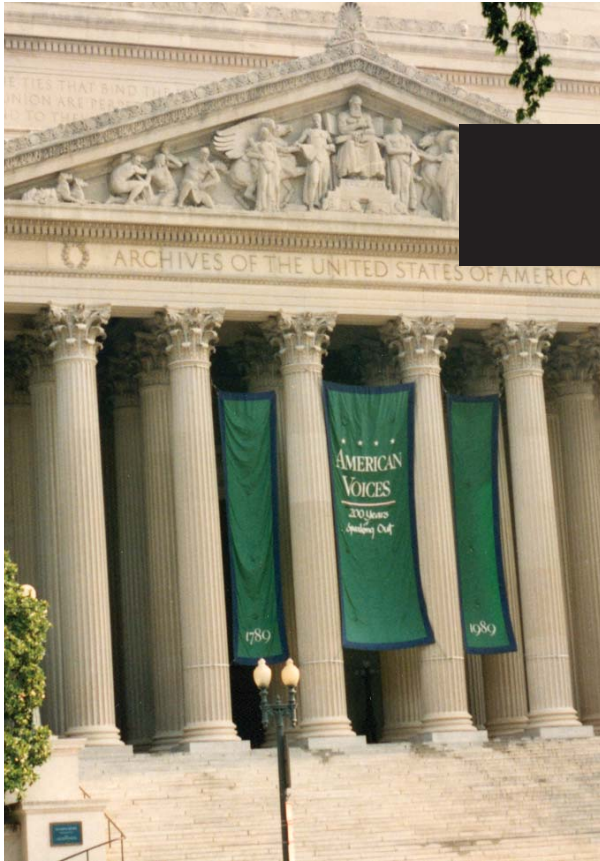
to Helena he was a servant of Virginia Governor Henry A. Wise. Grey learned a great deal about politics and parliamentary procedure from working for Wise and he used his knowledge and skills at the convention. Black suffrage was a major issue. Grey played down the notion that black suffrage would lead to black domination. How, he asked, could four million black people scattered across the country rule 30 million white people? Grey's education was evident in his eloquent speeches, "Give us the right of suffrage; establish a school system that will give us opportunities to educate our children; leave the door ajar that leads to peace and power; and if by the next generation we do not place ourselves beyond the reach of mortal men, why then take them away from us if not exercised properly. But, sir, we have no fears of failing to secure those rights."¹⁵²

The delegates at the Constitutional Convention approved the new constitution on February 1, 1868, by a vote of 46 to 20. On the day of the vote James White spoke, "My race has waited with patience, and endured the afflictions of slavery of the most inhuman kind, for two hundred and fifty years, and today I find a majority of the Constitutional Convention that is willing to confer upon me what God intended that I should have."¹⁵³

The constitution contained all of the provisions required by the Second Reconstruction Act for Arkansas to be readmitted to the Union. It gave black men in Arkansas the vote for the first time and established a public school system, albeit a segregated one. The victory for African Americans in Arkansas would not last. The fruits of the 1868 constitution were swept away in later years. It would be another one hundred years until all of those rights were regained.

152. Tom W. Dillard, "Three Important Black Leaders in Phillips County History," *PCHQ*, Vol. 19 Nos. 1&2 December 1980-March 1981, pp. 11-12 and DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, p. 167.

153. DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*, p. 170.



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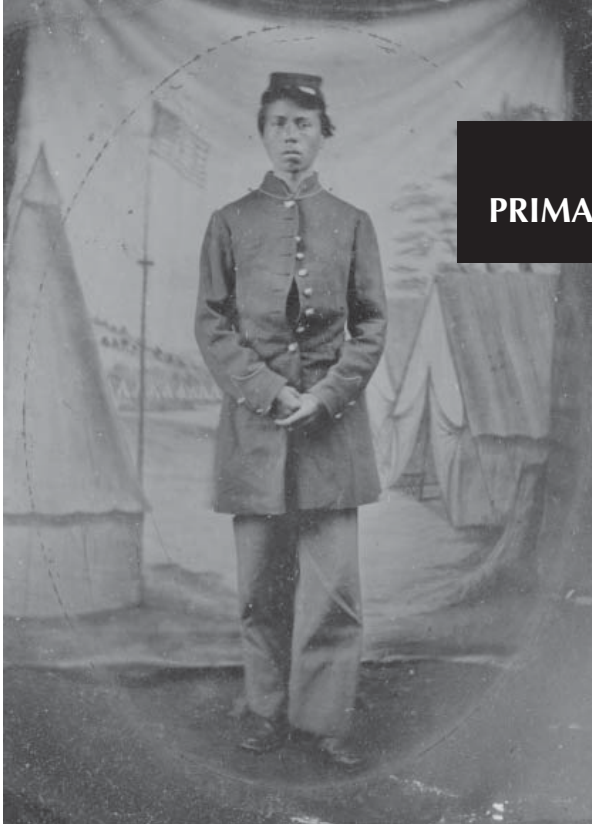
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