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A Modern-day Review of The Fort Pillow Massacre - Act of War or Genocide

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A Modern-day Review of The Fort Pillow Massacre –
Act of War or Genocide



Fort Pillow, Tennessee (*Brady and Handy 1861-1865*)

By
Austin Valentine Jr.

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Introduction

On April 13th, 1864 Confederate Major General Nathan Bedford Forrest attacked Union held Fort Pillow in western Tennessee. The event would later be known as the Fort Pillow Massacre where a number of African American soldiers were killed while trying to surrender to Confederate forces.¹

Forrest was one who had not been a graduate of a military academy, nor had any military experience. He had simply been a Memphis slave trader turned Confederate sympathizer who enlisted as a private in the Confederate Army on June 14th of 1861.² However, he eventually financed and organized his own cavalry unit through his riches made by the selling of slaves. He quickly rose through the ranks based on his determination and his excellent horsemanship. Forrest was known to many as the wizard in the saddle.

Through his cavalry exploits Forrest would wreak havoc across portions of Tennessee and Western Kentucky, which historians continue to speak of today. Forrest had a number of skirmishes and raids in towns all across these two states from Paducah, Kentucky to Chattanooga, Tennessee.³ However, it wasn't until the massacre at Fort Pillow did his name become known across the country as a force to be reckoned with.

After the Civil War an organization called the Ku Klux Klan was formed to promote white racial superiority and suppress the enfranchisement of the African American race during the reconstruction years of the United States. This included targeting and terrorizing African

¹ Hurst, Jack. 1994. *Nathan Bedford Forrest - A Biography*. New York, New York: Vintage Books.

² Jordan, Gen. Thomas, and J. P. Pryor. 1996. *The Campaigns of General Nathan Bedford Forrest and of Forrest's Cavalry*. Edited by Albert Castel. New York, New York: Da Capo Press.

³ (Jordan, 1996.).

Americans across the south. The group was a tight circle that promoted white racial superiority in the majority of the south and initially former General Nathan Bedford Forrest was elected as leader of the group. However, the violence of the group got to be such that Forrest eventually tried to disband the group in 1869 but failed to do so.⁴

However, his being a part of the white supremacist group caused many Americans to forever associate Forrest's name with white superiority and suppression of the African American race.

⁴ History. 2019. *KKK Founded*. Accessed April 13, 2019. <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/kkk-founded>.

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The Early History of Fort Pillow

At the onset of the Civil War, the newly formed Confederate States of America wanted to secure the rivers which ran through southern territories to suppress river traffic, in an effort to prevent northern invasion. Thus, fortifying a number of locations along the banks of the Mississippi, Tennessee, and Cumberland Rivers.⁵

One of these fortifications was constructed on a former Chickasaw Indian bluff, situated in close proximity to a narrow spot in the Mississippi River. The fortification, which had a visibility just over three miles in all directions, was named Fort Pillow after Confederate General Gideon J.



Drawing of Fort Pillow by Union Soldier William D. Power who was stationed at the fort from December 29th, 1862 until Jun 19th, 1863. This is the only known contemporary sketch known of the fort (Strickland and Huebner n.d.).

Pillow. The initial work began construction in the summer of 1861 by Col. Patrick Cleburne of the 1st Arkansas State Troops.⁶

General Pillow later ordered a much larger fortification to be constructed at the site, which made the Fort into a Fortress, with slave dug earthworks that stretched more than two miles around the facility. The entire fort encompassed approximately 1,642 acres of hilly

⁵ Strickland, Colin, and Timothy S. Huebner. n.d. *From Civil War Fort to State Park: A History Of Fort Pillow State Historic Area*. Memphis, Tennessee: Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies - Rhodes College.

⁶ (Strickland, Colin, and Timothy S. Huebner, n.d.).

terrain.⁷ Thus, protecting the main body from all sides with sufficient firepower which made the fort easily defendable against any foreign invaders, in the minds of the Confederate Army.⁸

In March of 1862 the Confederate high command ordered Brigadier General John B. Villepigue to assume command over the fort. However, his command would not last long. Confederate General P.G.T. Beauregard feared the forts capture by ironclads and instructed Brig. Gen. Villepigue on May 28th of 1862 to dismantle the batteries and destroy all the guns, cannon, and ammunition.⁹ Thereby, abandoning the fort and allowing the Union Army to take up position there.

By September, the Union Army now had full control of the Fort Pillow site. It was initially occupied by the 52nd Indiana and later joined by the 32nd Iowa, 178th New York, and a few companies of the 2nd Illinois Cavalry.¹⁰ However, in



Black & White Photograph Taken by Austin Valentine Jr. At Fort Pillow Overlooking the Mississippi River on April 5, 2019.

January of 1864 the 52nd Indiana, 32nd Iowa, and the 178th New York was ordered to leave Fort Pillow by General William T. Sherman to join the 16th Army Corps at Vicksburg, Mississippi.¹¹

Seeing the importance of the federal held position, Major General Stephen A. Hurlbut assigned the 13th Tennessee Cavalry, consisting of nearly 300 men, commanded by Major William F. Bradford to move in and defend the Fort on February 8, 1864.¹² Known as Bradford's

⁷ Tennessee State Parks. 2019. *Fort Pillow State Historic Park*. Accessed April 11, 2019. <https://tnstateparks.com/parks/fort-pillow>.

⁸ (Strickland, Colin, and Timothy S. Huebner, n.d.).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² (Strickland, Colin, and Timothy S. Huebner, n.d.).

Battalion, they were attached to the District of Cairo, Department of Tennessee. Prior to their arrival at Fort Pillow, they had been garrisoned at Fort Anderson in Paducah, Ky.¹³ This was a controversial move for General Hurlbut placing the 13th Tennessee back into their home state. Especially, since the 13th Tennessee was considered to be traitors among the soldiers and citizens of the Confederate cause.¹⁴ Nevertheless the Tennessee regiment was assigned to the Fort.

Then on March 28th of 1864 General Hurlbut placed Major Lionel F. Booth in command of Fort Pillow and reduced Major Bradford to second in command. Booth was the commander of the 1st Battalion, 1st Alabama Siege Artillery, which was an African American unit.¹⁵ This unit was eventually consolidated into the 6th Regiment Heavy Artillery, United States Colored Troops. Out of which Major Booth along with companies A, B, C, & D were sent to garrison Fort Pillow.¹⁶ By this time the Fort now housed 295 soldiers of the 13th Tennessee and 262 soldiers from the 6th U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery.¹⁷

These regiments of soldiers would remain at the fort until April 12th of 1864, at which time they were attacked by a large cavalry force commanded by Confederate Major General Nathan Bedford Forrest.¹⁸ Creating an event that would be labeled a massacre and would forever generate a number of unanswered questions for years to come.

¹³ National Park Service. 2019. *Bradford's Battalion, 13th Regiment, Tennessee Cavalry*. Accessed April 10, 2019. <https://www.nps.gov/civilwar/search-battle-units-detail.htm?battleUnitCode=UTNBRADBC>.

¹⁴ (Strickland, Colin, and Timothy S. Huebner, n.d.).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ National Park Service. 2019. *United States Colored Troops - 11th Regiment, United States Colored Infantry (New Organization)*. Accessed April 10, 2019. <https://www.nps.gov/civilwar/search-battle-units-detail.htm?battleUnitCode=UUS0011RI02C>.

¹⁷ (National Park Service. 2019).

¹⁸ National Park Service. 2019. *Fort Pillow*. Accessed April 10, 2019. <https://www.nps.gov/civilwar/search-battles-detail.htm?battleCode=tn030>.

Nathan Bedford Forrest And The Attack

On April the 12th of 1864 Major General Nathan Bedford Forrest, who was in command of the Confederate Cavalry Department of West Tennessee, led a cavalry force of over eighteen hundred men against the troops stationed at Fort Pillow.¹⁹



General Nathan Bedford Forrest Wood Engraving, 1868
(*Mr. Lincoln and Freedom 2019*)

By the following day it was noted that 61% of the forts garrison had been counted among the wounded and the dead. However, the casualty figures have always been questioned by historians over the years.²⁰

Yet, there has been many questions about the manner in which the fort was taken with regard to a war crime being committed. Survivors have told a different tale than a simple Confederate defeat at

Fort Pillow. Out of the 226 prisoners taken during the battle only 56 were African American and the remaining 168 were white.²¹ This being an extraordinary number since the fort was garrisoned by 295 white soldiers and 262 African American soldiers.²² Therefore, nearly half of the garrisoned at Fort Pillow were African American.

¹⁹ Fuchs, Richard L. 2002. *An Unerring Fire - The Massacre at Fort Pillow*. Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania: Stackpole Books. 23.

²⁰ (Fuchs, Richard L. 2002, 23).

²¹ (Fuchs, Richard L. 2002, 23).

²² (National Park Service. 2019).

African American Soldier, 1st Sergeant Wilbur Gaylord of the 6th U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery recounted when he was captured during the battle. “He was wounded as the Confederates came over the wall. He offered to surrender and was taken prisoner. But at the same time he saw a Confederate soldier shoot down three black men who were begging for their lives, and who had surrendered.”²³ However, a story by a fellow private, George Shaw did not have the same outcome as Sergeant Wilbur Gaylord.

Private George Shaw of Company D of the 6th United States Colored Heavy Artillery was captured by a Confederate soldier. Shaw recalled, “I said don’t shoot me, and one of them said go out and hold my horse. I made a step or two and he said turn around, I will hold my horse and shoot you too. I no sooner turned around and he shot me in the face, and I fell down as if I was dead. He shot me again and hit my arm and not my head. I laid there until I could hear him no more, then I got up and started back. I got back about sun up and wondered about until a gunboat came along. I came upon that with about ten others.”²⁴

A similar story was given by an African American cook who recounted the events that transpired between the surrendering Union soldiers and the Confederates. “They just called them out like dogs and shot them down, I recon they shot about fifty white and black right there, they nailed some black sergeants to logs and set the logs on fire.”²⁵ This information also coincides with a letter written home by a Confederate soldier.

²³ The Tennessee State Museum. n.d. *Tennessee4me*. Accessed April 13, 2019. http://www.tn4me.org/sapage.cfm/sa_id/28/era_id/5/major_id/5/minor_id/4/a_id/24.

²⁴ Burns, Ken. 1990. *The Civil War - A film by Ken Burns*. Video. Directed by Ken Burns. Produced by Ken Burns and David McCullough. Performed by David McCullough. PBS. Accessed April 13, 2019.

²⁵ Blakley, Baron, and John D. Pagano. 2012. *The Ultimate Civil War Series - Chapter 6 The Killing Fields*. DVD. Directed by Kevin R. Hershberger. Produced by Kevin R. Hershberger. Performed by Coby Batty. Mill Creek Entertainment, LLC. Accessed April 13, 2019. 29:58.

Just two days after the battle of Fort Pillow a Confederate soldier under the command of General Forrest wrote a letter home to his sister about what had taken place. Achilles V. Clark writes “The poor deluded negroes would run up to our men fall upon their knees and with uplifted hands scream for mercy, but they were ordered to their feet and then shot down. The white men fared but little better. Their fort turned out to be a great slaughter pen—blood human blood stood about in pools and brains could have been gathered up in any quantity. I with several others tried to stop the butchery and at one point had partially succeeded—but Gen. Forrest ordered them shot down like dogs and the carnage continued.”²⁶

This extermination ideology is substantiated by a quote that General Forrest made after the battle. He quoted that “it is hope that these facts will demonstrate to the northern people that negro soldiers cannot cope with southerners.”²⁷ Thus, implying that the southern soldiers were a master race compared to the African American.

²⁶ (The Tennessee State Museum. n.d.)

²⁷ (Burns, 1990).

The 19th Century Military Findings

Immediately after the incident a general inquiry began to question the survivors of the attack and local citizens to expose any wrong-doings. One such inquiry took place between a resident Edward B. Benton who was a citizen of Fort Pillow and Union General William S. Rosecrans. The citizen told the General that he had been there two days after the battle burying bodies of burned and shot soldiers.²⁸ Confirming that some of the soldier's bodies had been set afire.

Mr. Benton spoke of several soldiers that were surrendering or wounded and begging for quarter, being shot by rebel soldiers. Some were even laying in hospital beds without any firearms and they were simply shot. Mr. Benton even went as far as to say the rebels had dogs, which they were using to hunt down the run-a-way black soldiers²⁹

In his statement to General Rosecrans, Mr. Benton talked about five black soldiers who were in the hospital who were simply buried alive. He did remark that they were able to uncover and save two of the soldiers. One of these soldiers buried was the regiment's quartermaster.³⁰

Aside from General Rosecrans inquiry, there was a letter written to Washington, D.C. from Army headquarters in Memphis, Tennessee by an Honorable E. B. Washburne who wrote on April 14th about the massacre. In his letter he stated "The colored troops fought with desperation throughout. After the capture our colored men were literally butchered. Chalmers

²⁸ The New York Times. 1864. *The Fort Pillow Massacre.; The Statment of an Eye-Witness and Participant -- Full Confirmation of the Terrible Feroicty of the Rebels*. April 26. Accessed April 13, 2019.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1864/04/26/archives/the-fort-pillow-massacre-the-statement-of-an-eyewitness-and.html>.

²⁹ (The New York Times, 1864.).

³⁰ (The New York Times, 1864.).

was present and saw it all. Out of over 300 colored men, not 25 were taken prisoner...”
(Williamson 1864)³¹

With all the commotion about the massacre at Fort Pillow, a judiciary committee was also formed to investigate the actions of General Nathan Bedford Forrest. However, in an May 13th, 1864 newspaper, the findings of a judiciary committee assigned to investigate the Fort Pillow Massacre published the following: “It would appear from the testimony that was taken that the atrocities committed at Fort Pillow were not the results of passion elicited by the heat of conflict, but were the result of a policy deliberately decided upon and unhesitatingly announced. Even if the uncertainty of the fate of those officers and men belonging to colored regiments who have heretofore been taken prisoners by the rebels, has failed to convince the authorities of our Government of this fact...”³² Basically, the United States Government felt, based on testimony given, that there were no crime committed by General Nathan Bedford Forrest during the seizure of Fort Pillow.

However, based on the evidence it makes one wonder why the United States would consider this to be a simple act of war and not a crime against humanity. Could it be based on the United States’ views on African Americans during this period. No matter what one’s view of this reaction by the United States, the fact remains that General Nathan Bedford Forrest, in the eyes of the United States Government, had not committed any crimes.

³¹ Williamson, Alice. 1864. *Alice Williamson Diary*. April 14. Accessed April 13, 2019. <https://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/scriptorium/williamson/annotations/pillow.html>.

³² J. B. Yerrington & Son. 1864. "The Fort Pillow Massacre - Report of the Investigating Committee." *The Liberator*, May 13, 1736 ed.: 1. Accessed April 13, 2019. <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.waterfield.murraystate.edu/docview/91072460/pageviewPDF/A42E4FE9E61B47E1PQ/1?accountid=12631>.

Conclusion

The United Nations states that the crime of Genocide must be composed of two main elements. The first is the Mental Element, which is meant to destroy in whole or part of an ethnical, religious, national, or racial group. The second is the Physical Element, which includes the “Killing members of a group, Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group, deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to about its physical destruction in whole or in part, imposing measure intended to prevent births within the group, and forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”³³

First, we must look at the mental element to determine if the criteria was met. In a number of instances surrendering black soldiers were commonly identified under the racial term of niggers or negros. This sentiment span across the south. One example took place during the battle of the Sink Hole, which occurred months after the battle of Fort Pillow. During the battle, a number of both white and colored troops tried to surrender to Confederate soldiers. The Confederates soldiers replied: “take the white men and kill the niggers!”³⁴

Nigger or Negro were terms that were meant to be demeaning and to suppress the morality among those of African American decent. General Nathan B. Forrest even quoted after the battle at Fort Pillow Massacre that: “...it is hope that these facts will demonstrate to the northern people that negro soldiers cannot cope with southerners.”³⁵ Thus, helping us to confirm that the mental element of the criteria for genocide was clearly met throughout the south.

³³ United Nations. n.d. *Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility To Protect*. Accessed April 13, 2019. <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide.shtml>.

³⁴ (Burns, 1990).

³⁵ (Burns, 1990).

Next, we must look at each of the physical components to see if the criteria is met under the definition of genocide, first being the killing of members of a specific group or ethnicity. During the battle of Fort Pillow, we have proven that a number of surrendering soldiers were killed despite their surrendering status, as one person put it, "they just called them out like dogs and shot them down."³⁶ Therefore, fulfilling this component of the genocide criteria.

Next, causing serious harm, either bodily or mentally to members of a given group or ethnicity. This can best be illustrated by the recollection of Private George Shaw Company D of the 6th U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery who was captured and told the Confederate soldier not to shoot. However, the soldier did shoot the Private in the face and left him for dead. Thereby fulfilling this component of the genocide criteria.

This is also substantiated by the acts witnessed by an African American cook and in a letter written home by a Confederate soldier named Achilles Clark who wrote "I with several others tried to stop the butchery and at one point had partially succeeded—but Gen. Forrest ordered them shot down like dogs and the carnage continued."³⁷ Thus, implying that General Forrest was aware and in command of his men who were committing these atrocities.

Next, to deliberately inflict upon a group conditions of life calculated to bring about that group's physical destruction in part or in whole. This could be looked at during two different time frames. During the war, under the direction of General Nathan Bedford Forrest, a number of surrendering black soldiers were killed. Thus, implying that the General was targeting a

³⁶ (Blakley, 2012, 29:58).

³⁷ (The Tennessee State Museum. n.d.)

surrendering race of people even after they had laid down their arms to his forces. Men under his command even went as far as burning soldiers and burying some of this same race alive.

Secondly, this could be looked at in the years after the war when the General was the leader of the Ku Klux Klan. This organization was created to terrorize and target blacks for several years and generations to come. As the leader it was his ideology that fueled this organization and their principle ideas. Thus, placing conditions upon a race to bring about their destruction in whole or in part.

Next, to impose measures intended to prevent births within a group or ethnicity. This is probably one of the hardest criteria to meet when it comes to General Nathan Bedford Forrest. However, by killing all surrendering African American male soldiers he captured was inadvertently preventing the growth or further propagation of the African American race. This continued further with the lynching actions that were done after the war by the Ku Klux Klan which did not limit their killings to just African American men.³⁸ Therefore, it is my opinion that through these actions he has met this criteria set by the United Nations on genocide.

Lastly, to forcibly transfer children of a group to another group or ethnicity. During a number of years prior to the war, Nathan B. Forrest profited from the sale of African American slaves in the town of Memphis, Tennessee. This would include the sale of children as well as adults against their will to others for the purpose of slave labor. This could be one of the more controversial aspects of General Nathan Bedford Forrest because it is a stretch to fulfill this aspect of genocide. However, the fact remains that Nathan B. Forrest did sell children of a

³⁸ The Conversation US, Inc. 2019. *Lynching memorial shows women were victims, too*. Accessed April 13, 2019. <http://theconversation.com/lynching-memorial-shows-women-were-victims-too-95029>.

particular race against their will, whether it was a legal practice of the times is irrelevant in this particular case.

Therefore, it is my conclusion that if these laws had been in place prior to the Civil War, that General Nathan Bedford Forrest could have been arrested, after his promotion to leader of the Ku Klux Klan, under the laws established by the United Nations and tried in a court of his peers, being charged with the crime of Genocide. His actions during the Fort Pillow massacre coupled with his participation in lynching actions by the Ku Klux Klan form a solid case against the former Major General of the Confederate States of America.

Fort Pillow Today

After the conclusion of the war, the land was returned back to its private owners for a little more than a hundred years. During this time parts of the area was farmed while other portions of the site remained stagnant. Seeing the potential to increase tourism to the area, Lauderdale County and the Tennessee Department of Conservation acquired most of the site in 1971, becoming The Fort Pillow State Historic Area (Strickland and Huebner n.d.).

On April 11th of 1973 the site was added to the National Register of Historic Places, making the site a state park of historical interpretation and recreation. This allows the park to obtain funding for archaeological



Photograph taken by Austin Valentine Jr. April 05, 2019

investigations. These archaeological investigations have successfully found a number of artifacts on the site including buttons, bullets, nails, glass, and various ceramic shards (Strickland and Huebner n.d.).

Today the site serves as a recreation area rather than a reminder of the fort's controversial history. There is a historical center onsite to give visitors an introduction into what took place on the grounds. There are also a number of hiking trails which take visitors on a tour of the massive slave dug earthworks that still remain visible at the Fort Pillow Site. And for the adventurers there are camping sites along with a lake to accommodate both boating and fishing. Thus,

making Fort Pillow a place where one, who knows the history of the fort, can sit and quietly reflect on the atrocities that took place on that very site many years ago.

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