By war’s end, Kansas had enlisted nearly 20,000 soldiers in seventeen regiments and three batteries, plus two “Colored” regiments and one “Colored” battery. Although most of men for the “Colored” units came from Missouri, Kansas is credited with the enlistment of 2,080 black men. Many white recruits also hailed from elsewhere but traveled to Kansas for the purpose of enlisting in one of its regiments. Regardless, these are impressive numbers for the youngest member of the Union, whose total population was just 107,000 in 1860 and only 135,000 five years later.

Pictured is the blue silk regimental banner of the First Kansas Colored Infantry (Kansas Memory, http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/209892). The First Kansas Colored commenced forming under the direction of James H. “The Grim Chieftain” Lane in August 1862 and was mustered into U.S. service on January 13, 1863. The delay was due to opposition to the arming of black troops among many in the North and federal policy that reflected this prejudicial attitude. Despite this widespread national reticence, many Kansans advocated the use of black troops early on. During the fall of 1862, a portion of the regiment engaged in battle with a rebel force at Butler, Missouri, thus gaining the distinction of being the first “colored soldiers in the Union army” tested in battle. “The blacks behaved nobly,” reported the Lawrence Republican, November 6, 1862, “and have demonstrated that they can and will fight.” According to the Republican’s correspondent, “the battle of Toothman’s Mound [also Island Mound],” October 29, proved “that black men can fight,” and they were “now prepared to scour this country thoroughly, and not leave a place where a traitor can find refuge.”

At Cabin Creek, Indian Territory; Poison Springs, Arkansas; and several other engagements noted on the regimental banner, the First Kansas Colored continually proved its mettle. But the regiment’s defining moment was at Honey Springs on July 17, 1863. “This was the most important battle in the regiment’s entire history,” wrote the historian Dudley T. Cornish. Along with the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts’s gallantry at Fort Wagner, South Carolina, on July 18, it “set to rest a great deal of criticism of the use of Negroes as soldiers” (Dudley T. Cornish, “Kansas Negro Regiments in the Civil War,” Kansas Historical Quarterly 20 [May 1953]: 426). Major General James G. Blunt was certainly convinced. “I never saw such fighting done as was done by the negro regiment,” he wrote in a letter published in the Daily Commercial, Cincinnati, Ohio, on August 12, 1863. “They never once faltered. Too much praise cannot be awarded them for their gallantry.”
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