Kansas Negro Regiments in the Civil War

DUDLEY TAYLOR CORNISH

NEGRO soldiers made a substantial contribution to the victory of Union arms in the Civil War. Two Kansas Negro regiments played an active role in the war on the border, from Fort Scott south along the Arkansas frontier to Fort Smith and Camden and Pine Bluff. Although the history of these regiments is fundamentally military, it has important social and political overtones.

The records are not easily found, for they are scattered through the 130 volumes of the Official Records. The story is treated sympathetically but partially in Britton's Civil War on the Border. The full history must be dug out of contemporary newspapers, adjutant generals' reports, the correspondence and memoirs of some of the main characters in the drama, much of it in the Kansas State Historical Society's excellent collections in Topeka. Important and illuminating details can be found only in the regimental and company records on file (in part only) in the National Archives, Washington, D.C. The story of these two Kansas Negro regiments is a fascinating one; often thrilling, sometimes pathetic, and now and then horrifying or heroic.

Abraham Lincoln's administration refused offers of Negro military assistance in the first 15 months of the Civil War because of ill-founded hopes that the Southern insurrection might be quickly put down, that the Confederacy might become reconciled to a return to the Union, and that in any case white volunteer armies would be able to defeat the opposing armies of the South. President Lincoln feared that the use of Negroes would turn loyal men of the Border states away from the Union cause and stir the South to more determined efforts. Feeling against Negroes was strong among labor groups and some foreign elements in the North, and there was a substantial body of opinion which held that the acceptance of

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1. Although the raw material for work on the Negro soldier in the Civil War is extremely plentiful, only three book-length studies have appeared since Appomattox; the most recent was published in 1901. For the slow development of top Union policy and procedure in the use of Negro troops, see Dudley Taylor Cornish, "Negro Troops in the Union Army, 1861-1865," an unpublished doctoral dissertation (University of Colorado, Boulder, 1949).

2. There were four Kansas Negro military organizations during the Civil War: the First Kansas Colored Volunteers, later officially designated by the War Department as the 79th U.S. Colored troops (new); the Second Kansas Colored volunteers, later designated the 86th U.S. Colored troops (new); the Leavenworth Colored militia (infantry) called into service in October, 1864, on the occasion of the great Price raid; and the Independent Colored Kansas battery (light artillery), unique in that it was offered entirely by Negroes. For a good discussion of Kansas Negro soldiers, see Thomas James Boyd, "The Use of Negro Troops by Kansas During the Civil War," an unpublished master's thesis (Kansas State Teachers College, Pittsburg, 1939).
Negro soldiers would be an admission of white failure and therefore an insult to white soldiers.

Favoring the use of colored soldiers were Abolitionists and Radicals who maintained that slavery was the primary cause of the war and that the war, accordingly, ought to be considered and conducted as a crusade against the institution of slavery. Radicals in Congress and in the army forced the issue of Negro troops on the Union by providing legislation permitting their enrollment and by organizing colored units before public opinion had expressed itself in favor of their enrollment and organization. Not until the war had dragged well into the second year without substantial Union gains did hope for reconciliation with the South die, and not until Negro soldiers had demonstrated in combat what they could do for the Union did feeling against them begin to subside.

Although the movement to use Negroes made slow progress in the North and East during the first year and a half of war, matters moved more rapidly in the trans-Mississippi West. More than three months before Secretary of War Simon Cameron was dropped from Lincoln’s cabinet, for, among other reasons, urging too forcefully the value of Negro soldiers, the Leavenworth Daily Conservative discussed without adverse comment the plans of Col. Charles R. Jennison for organizing Negroes into Home Guard units, and one of the paper’s correspondents described a colored soldier he had seen among Sen. James H. Lane’s cavalry troops.

3. The Second Confiscation Act of July 17, 1862, authorized the President “to employ as many persons of African descent as he may deem necessary and proper for the suppression of this rebellion,” and to that end, to “organize and use them in such manner as he may judge best for the public welfare.” Another act passed the same day went further and specifically authorized the employment of Negro soldiers. In both instances, the authority was vested in the President, and actual enrollment of Negro soldiers was left to his discretion.—U. S. Statutes at Large, v. 12, pp. 592, 596.

4. Maj. Gen. David Hunter, commanding the Department of the South, began to recruit the famous First South Carolina volunteers on May 9, 1862.—The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies (Washington, 1890-1901), Series 3, v. 3, p. 31. (Hereafter cited Official Records.) On August 25, 1862, Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler, commanding the Department of the Gulf, published his General Order No. 63, calling on the free colored militia of Louisiana to enroll in volunteer forces serving the Union. Ibid., pp. 436-438. Neither Hunter nor Butler had presidential permission for this activity; Hunter’s experiment failed through lack of War Department support, but Butler was permitted to continue without let or hindrance and by November, 1862, had mustered three infantry regiments into federal service.—Official Army Register of the Volunteer Forces of the United States Army for the Years 1861, ’62, ’63, ’64, ’65, Pt. 8 (Washington, 1867), pp. 240, 249, 250. (Hereafter cited Official Army Register.)

5. Wrote Joseph Holt, the Judge Advocate General, to Secretary of War E. M. Stanton in August, 1865, “The tenacious and brilliant value displayed by (Negro) troops . . . at Port Hudson, Milliken’s Bend, and Fort Wagner has sufficiently demonstrated to the President and to the country the character of service of which they are capable.”—Official Records, Series 3, v. 5, p. 696. Holt’s judgment was widely shared by the Northern press.


7. The Leavenworth Daily Conservative, September 24 and October 8, 1861. Jennison, an old friend and associate of John Brown, was of the Radical Abolitionist school and enjoyed a reputation for border ruffianism. James H. Lane, the Great Jayhawker and stormy petrel of the Border and Kansas politics, had been made a brigadier by Cameron on Lincoln’s recommendation in June, 1861, with authority to raise two regiments of volunteers.—Official Records, Series 3, v. 1, pp. 280, 281.
This Kansas activity was completely without the authority and contrary to the policy of the Lincoln administration. It continued even against express instructions from Washington. The reason can be found in part in Wiley Britton’s study of border warfare. So tenuous was the military situation and so explosive the political situation in the region, so difficult was the task of containing the surging Confederates and curbing the guerrilla warfare which made life precarious in Arkansas and Missouri, not to say eastern Kansas, that the supply of white troops was seldom if ever adequate to the requirements of Union commanders in the field. The demands were so great that practicality ruled out prejudice, slowly at first, and then with gathering speed. The Emporia News toward the close of 1861, argued that if the South insisted on using Negroes “to shoot down our brave sons, ought we not to retaliate by using them to subdue the enemies of the Government?” And Senator Lane maintained in early 1862 that a Negro might “just as well become food for powder” as his son.

In the senate, Lane was characteristically outspoken in urging the use of Negroes. “Give them a fair chance,” he argued, “put arms in their hands and they will do the balance of the fighting in this war.” To Jim Lane it was a matter of large indifference whether traitors were punished “on the battle-field, on the gallows or from the brush by a negro.”

Since color was not specifically mentioned in Lane’s authority to raise Union troops, the senator’s loose-constructionist conscience suffered no qualms. Aided by such old John Brown supporters as Charles Jennison and James Montgomery, the Great Jayhawker went to work. Lane wanted men; he asked no questions about


11. On January 15, 1862, Lane introduced a resolution to authorize field commanders of Kansas units to muster all persons who presented themselves for that purpose. Although in debate on the resolution Lane maintained that it would not give commanders power to arm Negroes, he drew gallery cheers with his assertion that he would say to Negroes, “I have not arms for you, but if it is in your power to obtain arms from rebels, take them, and I will use you as soldiers against traitors.”—Cong. Globe, 37 Cong., 2 Sess., pp. 394, 335.

12. Leavenworth Daily Conservator, January 29, 1865. The quotations are from a speech Lane made to the Leavenworth Mercantile Library Association on January 27.

13. Neither Jennison nor Montgomery seems to have given Lane more personal loyalty than momentary expediency required; behind each others backs they plotted for personal advancement. On August 3, 1862, Montgomery blasted Jennison in a letter to Governor Robinson as “an unmitigated liar, block-head and Robbery...” Montgomery was urging his own candidacy as colonel of the colored troops being raised. On August 12, George H. Hoyt, a friend of Jennison’s, wrote Robinson that while Jennison was working with Lane (no friend of the Robinson’s) he “takes hold of this work, not as a Lane man, but altogether on the Jennison basis...” Jennison wanted to be colonel, too. On August 22, Jennison himself wrote Governor Robinson to report that he had discovered “at all
race, color, or previous condition of servitude. For a time, Jennison led what was called the "Tri-color Brigade," composed of white, Indian, and Negro units. In early August, Lane casually disclosed to the War Department what kind of recruits he was rounding up: "Recruiting opens up beautifully," he wired, "Good for four regiments of whites and two of blacks. . . ." He claimed the Second Confiscation Act of July 17, 1862, as his authority for enrolling Negroes and on August 6 asked if the War Department had any objection. The department did, as anyone who read the newspapers carefully should have known, but not until the end of August did Secretary of War Stanton tell Lane that Negro regiments could not be accepted into service.

Meanwhile, Negro recruiting in and around Kansas proceeded. If Jim Lane ever received Stanton's message, his conduct betrayed no sign of it. Early in August he opened a recruiting office in Leavenworth for the enlistment of both white and colored men, although the latter were technically enrolled as laborers. To recruit Negroes north of the Kansas river, Lane appointed Capt. James M. Williams, and he named Capt. H. C. Seaman to enroll colored volunteers south of the river.

By the end of September, 1862, a New York Times correspondent was able to write at length from the "Headquarters First Regiment, Kansas Colored Volunteers, Camp 'Jim Lane' Near Wyandot." The new organization, he reported, was "progressing finely." This Times correspondent was one of the first of his contemporaries to comment with obvious surprise on "the aptitude of the men for acquiring the drill" and the neatness and order of their camp. He points in Southern Kansas a general feeling that Lane is a great humbug." Although Jennison did become a colonel, he never commanded either Kansas Negro regiment. In disgust, Montgomery went to Washington in December, 1862, and eventually became colonel of the Second South Carolina Colored volunteers; afterward the 44th U. S. Colored troopers.

16. Ibid., p. 311, Lane to Stanton, August 6, 1862.
17. Ibid., p. 445, Stanton to Lane, August 20, 1862.
19. Military History of Kansas Regiments During the War for the Suppression of the Great Rebellion (Leavenworth, 1870), p. 407. (Hereafter cited Kansas Regiments). The Leavenworth Daily Constitution, August 6, 1862, asserted that both Williams and Seaman were generally known as Abolitionists.
NEGRO REGIMENTS IN THE CIVIL WAR

found them easily managed, accustomed to discipline and well suited to soldiering. 21

These colored troops soon became more than recruits sweating at drill and endlessly policing their company streets. Late in October, 1862, they engaged a large force of guerrillas near Butler, Bates county, Mo., in what "is supposed to have been the first engagement in the war in which colored troops were engaged." 22 A Leavenworth Conservative correspondent waxed eloquent on the military prowess of these new additions to the Union forces: "It is useless to talk anymore about negro courage—the men fought like tigers . . . and the main difficulty was to hold them well in hand." 23 Five companies later returned to Bates county and engaged a large force of rebels near Island Mound, November 25 to 29, 1862. After capturing a large amount of stock and routing their enemies, the Negro soldiers continued on to Fort Scott. 24

This actual employment as combat troops, if only against rebel irregulars and bushwackers, was good publicity and seems to have helped reduce resistance to Negro recruiting. On January 13, 1863, six companies were mustered into federal service as the First regiment, Kansas Colored Volunteers, Lt. Col. James Williams commanding. 25 Four more companies were added to complete the regiment during the spring of 1863. 26 On the basis of dates of muster-in, the First Kansas Colored was the fourth Negro regiment to enter the Union army. Ben Butler had enrolled three regiments in Louisiana in the fall of 1862, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson's First South Carolina Volunteers was mustered in on January 31, 1863. 27 On the basis of newspaper accounts and military reports, however, Kansas appears to have been the first Union state to begin enrolling Negro soldiers; small units and companies of Kansas colored soldiers fought in the first engagements of the war in which Negro soldiers as such were used.

21. The New York Times, October 12, 1862: "The very first idea of a soldier's life, subordination, to learn which our white citizens have to unlearn nearly all their past experience has taught them, the negroes, by the circumstances of their lives, have certainly to a degree as great as the most strenuous martinet would insist upon. An army is essentially a despotism; the only point is to intelligently accept it, and, using the power thus acquired, our army will be invincible."

22. Kansas Regiments, pp. 406, 409. The boast is an accurate one: The First South Carolina Colored Volunteers (afterward the 33rd U. S. Colored troops) saw its first active service in the week of November 3 to 10, 1862, and then only one company participated.


25. Official Army Register, Pt. 8, p. 236.


27. Official Army Register, Pt. 8, pp. 204, 246, 248, 250.
This radical step was not taken without opposition. Many people in Kansas and Missouri opposed the movement out of prejudice against Negroes; some had honest doubts of the military value of colored soldiers; others, like the loyal slaveholders of parts of Missouri, feared the loss of valuable property in slaves as a result of the impetuous activities of recruiting officers; still others were frankly in sympathy with the Confederate cause.  

Some Negroes offered themselves quickly and eagerly for service, others were reluctant to come forward for fear they would be badly used by the white troops around them and by the Union government.  

Lane's recruiters found all sorts of obstacles placed in their paths by civil authorities; some of his officers were even charged with “unlawfully restraining persons of their liberty.” Perhaps these charges were not so unfounded as they may at first appear; perhaps the word “Volunteers” in the name of the Negro regiment was somewhat inaccurate. Jim Lane was primarily interested in getting troops; they did not have to be volunteers. At one Leavenworth mass meeting Lane asserted that “the negroes are mistaken if they think white men can fight for them while they stay at home.” To the Negroes Lane said, “we have been saying that you would fight, and if you won't fight we will make you.”  

The men who filled the companies of the First Kansas Colored seem to have been largely recruited from among fugitive slaves out of Arkansas and Missouri. Some of them were fugitives in a technical sense only; the former owners of many complained bitterly to government officials that Lane's forces had stolen them out of hand, which was probably true.  

One whole company of the First was raised by one man, Benjamin F. Van Horn. Learning that a large number of Negroes had taken refuge among the Sac and Fox Indians, Van Horn carried the news to Gen. James G. Blunt and Jim Lane. Those enthusiasts at once commissioned Van Horn as a lieutenant and sent him out to get a company, after thoughtfully providing him with several wagons of supplies and even a drill master. In a few weeks, Van Horn returned with a full-strength company of 80 men, and he was named its commander.  

29. Ibid., p. 407; Leavenworth Daily Conservative, August 27, 1862; some Negroes were concerned for the care of their families left at home.  
31. Leavenworth Daily Conservative, August 6, 1862.  
33. "Van Horn Manuscript," Ms. division, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, p. 21. This manuscript is a 30-page autobiographical statement dictated by Benjamin F. Van Horn in 1909. Events disclosed in it are well supported by military reports and records.
Union which these represent. He deserves equal pay with the best, and has been promised it. What he receives is this:

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The white soldier is permitted to purchase his clothing himself, but from the ten dollars of the colored, three are reserved for this purpose. The white chaplain has besides a perquisite of eighteen dollars.38

Not until 1864, and then only after furious debate in the army, in the press and in congress, did Negro soldiers finally get what amounted to equal pay for equal work.39

Fear that Negro soldiers would not know how to handle money was fairly general. Accordingly, Colonel Williams prepared an unusual general order on the occasion of the First Kansas Colored's first pay day:

The Colonel commanding desires to offer a few suggestions to the enlisted men of the command upon the importance of husbanding the proceeds of your labor, which you are about to receive from the Government. You are just relieved from servile bondage, and have had but few opportunities for learning the importance of saving carefully the proceeds of your toil.

Heretofore that has all gone to an unscrupulous Master who has with it fastened still more strongly the Irons with which he held you; every dollar gained by your labor was but another link in the iron chain.

Now the whole condition of your existence is changed.

A wise and just government has decreed that hereafter you shall be free, and shall yourselves enjoy the fruit of your labor.

This boon which is freely given must not be allowed to forge your ruin. You have been brought up to habits of industry and frugality, and if you depart in the least from either of these habits, it sooner or later will have the effect to destroy your whole prosperity as individuals and measureably effect your condition as a people. I therefore urgently advise you to carefully save the money, which is about to be paid you, for the support of your families; and, as a foundation upon which to build a home for your wives and children, your families and friends.

To this end, I advise you, to make a deposit of such funds as you do not need, in some safe hands for transmission to your families, or safekeeping for yourselves.40

38. The Chicago Tribune, May 1, 1864.
That the colonel's advice was followed is indicated by this newspaper comment of a few weeks later: "The soldiers of the First Colored send up with the Paymaster about $12,000 of their pay for their families at Lawrence and Leavenworth. Bully for the First Nigger. That regiment cannot be beat." 41

The first important field duty for the First Kansas Colored came when the regiment moved south from Fort Scott to the Baxter Springs outpost guarding the military road to Fort Gibson in Indian territory. While stationed at Baxter Springs, Colonel Williams' men began to build up their battle record—and their casualty list. On May 18, 1863, a foraging party of 40 or 50 white and colored troops suffered a surprise attack from guerrillas under the notorious Maj. T. R. Livingston. 42 The Negro regiment lost 20 men killed in action, and several were taken prisoner. One of these prisoners was afterwards murdered by Livingston's men. 43 In retaliation, Williams ordered one of his Confederate prisoners shot. 44

Toward the end of June the regiment moved farther south as part of the escort of a wagon train for Fort Blunt, Cherokee Nation. 45 This expedition provided further opportunity for the Negro soldiers to show their fighting ability. At Cabin Creek the train was attacked by a large force of Texans and Indians, and after skirmishing, the rebels took up strong positions on the south bank of the creek. The next morning the Union forces attacked and in two hours fighting drove the enemy with substantial losses from his position. 46 This engagement seems to have been the first in the Civil War in which white and colored Union soldiers fought side by side, and it is recorded that the white officers and men "allowed no prejudice on account of color to interfere in the discharge of their duty in the face of an enemy alike to both races." 47

41. Leavenworth Daily Constitution, September 1, 1863.
43. See "Regimental Order and Order Book," 79th (New) U. S. Colored troops, for correspondence between Williams and Livingston, May 20-23, 1863. Williams made his position clear on the matter of the treatment of any of his men taken prisoners: "... it rests with you [he wrote Livingston] to treat them as prisoners of war or not, but be assured that I will keep a like number of your men as prisoners until [sic] these colored men are accounted for. And you can safely trust that I shall visit a retributive justice upon them for any injury done them at the hands of confederate forces. ..."—Williams to Livingston, May 21, 1863.
44. Kansas Regiments, p. 410.
45. Official Records, Series 1, v. 22, Pt. 1, pp. 379, 380. Lt. Col. Theodore H. Dost, 2d Colorado Infantry, commanded the escort which included, besides the Negro regiment, six companies of the 2d Colorado, cavalry companies from the 9th and 11th Kansas regiments, a section of the 2d Kansas battery, and 600 members of the 3d Indian Home Guards sent up from Fort Gibson to meet the train.
46. Ibid., pp. 380, 381. The battle plan followed was drawn up by Colonel Williams as senior officer in the escort. The engagement took place on July 2, 1863.
47. Kansas Regiments, pp. 411, 412.
It was at Honey Springs, slightly over two weeks later, that the First Kansas Colored established its military reputation. After an all-night march, Union troops under command of Maj. Gen. James G. Blunt came upon a strong rebel force under Gen. Douglas Cooper and after a “sharp and bloody engagement of two hours’ duration” forced Cooper’s command to flee the field.48 During the fight the Negro regiment, which held the Union center, moved up under fire to within 50 paces of the Confederate line and there, still under fire, halted and exchanged volley fire for some 20 minutes before the rebels broke and ran.49 The Kansas Negroes captured the colors of a Texas regiment, but the Second Indian regiment seems to have taken possession of the trophy after the shooting was ended.50

This was the most important battle in the regiment’s entire history: it set to rest a great deal of criticism of the use of Negroes as soldiers. Wrote General Blunt of Honey Springs:

... I never saw such fighting done as was done by the negro regiment. They fought like veterans, with a coolness and valor that is unsurpassed. They preserved their line perfect throughout the whole engagement and, although in the hottest of the fight, they never once faltered. Too much praise can not be awarded them for their gallantry.

The question that negroes will fight is settled; besides they make better soldiers in every respect than any troops I have ever had under my command.51

An officer of the Third Wisconsin cavalry at Honey Springs, an Irish Democrat, had this to say after the fight: “I never believed in niggers before, but by Jesu, they are hell for fighting.”52

Recruiting for the Second Kansas Colored Volunteers began under good auspices in June, 1863, and by the middle of October ten companies were full, officered by battle-hardened enlisted men from various white regiments.53 Samuel J. Crawford, afterward governor of Kansas, was appointed colonel of this new regiment, and he played a vital role in making it what the Kansas historian William


49. Official Records, Series 1, v. 22, Pt. 1, pp. 449, 450. Williams was severely wounded as his regiment moved into close action, and Lt. Col. John Bowles assumed command. For an eye-witness account of the action, see the Van Horn Ms., Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka; Van Horn commanded Company I of the 1st Colored at Honey Springs.

50. Ibid., p. 450. Losses were reported as follows: Confederate—150 killed, 400 wounded, 77 prisoners; Union—13 killed, 82 wounded. The 1st Colored suffered two men killed in action and 30 wounded.—Ibid., pp. 448-450.


52. Leavenworth Daily Conservator, July 17, 1863.

E. Connelley has called “a famous regiment.” Crawford was not the Abolitionist Colonel Williams was; he accepted the colonelcy of this Negro infantry regiment with great reluctance, but he brought to his new command a wealth of intelligence and practical military experience.

Under Crawford the Second Kansas Colored was molded into an efficient fighting unit. He insisted on competent, hard-working officers and required that they “make good in drill, discipline, and military appearance, or hand in their resignations.” After assembling by companies at Fort Scott, the regiment began its military career as part of the escort for a supply train to Fort Smith, Ark. Near Fort Smith the men completed their training under the demanding Crawford. Colonel Williams’ First Colored was stationed at Fort Smith during part of October and November of 1863; this regiment moved in December to Roseville, Ark., about 50 miles east of Fort Smith, and there went into winter quarters.

In the spring of 1864, both Negro regiments moved south as part of the Frontier division under Brig. Gen. John M. Thayer in the Camden (or Steele) expedition designed to cooperate with the ill-starred Banks expedition up the Red river in Louisiana. This Camden expedition, under command of General Frederick Steele, provided both Kansas Negro regiments with heavy field duty. The First Kansas Colored suffered its greatest losses of the war in the engagement at Poison Springs near Camden on April 18, 1864—117 dead and 65 wounded—when a large foraging party of white and colored troops under Colonel Williams was cut off and cut up by Confederates of Cabell’s, Maxey’s, and Marmaduke’s commands.

55. Samuel J. Crawford, Kansas in the Sixties (Chicago, 1911), p. 102. Crawford had served in the 2d Kansas cavalry and was not enthusiastic at the thought of leading infantry; further, he preferred a white organization and did not desire the “months of tedious, hard work, drilling and preparing the regiment for field service.”
56. Ibid., p. 107. “As a result ...” Crawford recorded, “we soon had a number of vacancies.”
57. Kansas Regiments, pp. 426, 427. “... the regiment attained a degree of proficiency second to none in the Army of the Frontier.”
58. “Regimental Letter and Order Book,” 79th (New) U. S. Colored troops; the regiment was ordered to Fort Smith on September 14, 1863. While at Fort Smith, Williams used a period of relative freedom from field duty to rebuild his campaign-worn organization; see drill schedule instituted October 25, 1863.
59. Ibid., December 11, 12, 1863. The regiment was ordered to seize and occupy Roseville, collect cotton and other stores in the vicinity, and wage constant war against guerrilla bands in the neighborhood.
60. For reports covering the Camden Expedition, see Official Records, Series 1, v. 34, Pt. 1, pp. 653-850, passim.
61. Ibid., pp. 743-797. Williams’ force of 875 infantry and 285 cavalry included some 800 members of the 1st Kansas Colored; total white Union losses were reported as 87 killed, 32 wounded, ibid., p. 746. Brig. Gen. W. L. Cabell, C. S. A., estimated the Union forces at 1,390 Negroes and 1,000 whites and reported 450 Negroes and 30 whites killed in action with four Negro and 23 white prisoners taken, ibid., p. 792. Cabell’s figures for Negro dead and prisoners seem utterly disproportionate to white Union losses.
The engagement was referred to by contemporaries as a massacre, and there is considerable evidence that on this occasion Confederates did murder many Negro soldiers. Crawford's Second Kansas Colored reacted to the Poison Springs affair by resolving to take no rebel prisoners in the future.

Since General Steele's supplies were practically exhausted and his forces inadequate for the task of holding off the combined Confederate armies of Sterling Price and Kirby Smith, Steele decided "to fall back at once." Meanwhile, Gen. Nathaniel Banks had met with disaster on the Red river near Shreveport, and on April 26 the Steele expedition began its withdrawal from Camden.

On April 30, Crawford's command found occasion at Jenkins Ferry on the Sabine river to fight their most distinguished action. The Second Kansas Colored relieved the 50th Indiana which had expended most of its ammunition in a hotly contested rear-guard action. After fighting for two hours without gaining any advantage, the Kansas Negroes found themselves under fire from a rebel battery of three guns. Crawford asked for and got permission to charge this battery with the result that it was quickly overrun by his troops shouting "Remember Poison Spring!" Rebel casualties were high—about 150 killed or mortally wounded; the Second Kansas Colored lost 15 men killed, and 55 were wounded.

The Camden expedition was a costly Union failure, and the Kansas Negro regiments suffered heavily as a result of their heroic part in it; the First was greatly reduced by casualties, and the Second brought back only its weapons and what the men wore on their backs. But the war went on, and there was no rest for either the First or Second. Early in May, 1864, Colonel Williams assumed command of the Second brigade, Frontier division, a brigade made up entirely of Negro regiments. Besides the Kansas regi-

62. Williams flatly stated that "Many wounded men belonging to the 1st Kansas Colored Volunteers fell into the hands of the enemy, and I have the most positive assurances from eye-witnesses that they were murdered on the spot."—Kansas Regiments, p. 430. Crawford, too, was convinced that many Negro soldiers were "murdered on the field."—Kansas in the Sixties, p. 117. Wiley Britton has left a gory picture of Confederates stalking Negro wounded.—The Civil War on the Border, v. 2, pp. 290, 291. A clue to the attitude of some trans-Mississippi Confederates toward Negro soldiers is provided by John N. Edwards, a member of Shelby's division, in his description of an engagement at Mark's Mill, Ark., on April 25, 1864: "The battle-field was sickening to behold. No orders, threats, or commands could restrain the men from vengeance on the negroes, and they were piled in great heaps about the wagons, in the tangled brushwood, and upon the muddy and trampled road."—Shelby and His Men; or, The War in the West (Cincinnati, 1887), pp. 279, 280. No Kansas Negro troops were engaged at Mark's Mill.

63. Kansas in the Sixties, p. 117.

64. Official Records, Series 1, v. 34, Pt. 1, p. 668.

65. Ibid., p. 669.


ments, Williams' colored brigade included the 11th U. S. Colored troops, commanded by Lt. Col. James M. Steele, formerly of the 12th Kansas infantry, and the 54th U. S. Colored troops. As members of this brigade and as individual organizations, the two Kansas Negro regiments saw their full share of onerous duty from the spring of 1864 until their final muster-out in October, 1865. They moved from Little Rock to Fort Smith and back, escorting supply and refugee trains; they pursued guerrilla bands and occasionally had the pleasure of hitting them hard and effectively; they went out on foraging and other fatigue parties; they did garrison duty at Fort Smith and Pine Bluff. They were worn down by constant work, by occasional battle casualties, and by disease.

The record of these Negro regiments is a commendable one. They overcame initial prejudice and strong opposition to their military employment. Their soldierly performance of difficult and dangerous duty won the respect and even the admiration of their white comrades in arms. Their losses were high: 177 men were killed in action, 26 died of wounds, disease took over 350 more. The First Kansas Colored lost 156 men killed in action, the highest number of battle casualties of any Kansas regiment, white or colored. The desertion rate for Kansas Negro soldiers was a comparatively good one: 62.201 per thousand. The rate for all Kansas troops was an unusually high 117.54 per thousand, while that for all loyal states was 62.51 per thousand.

Col. C. K. Holliday, Kansas adjutant general, expressed an accurate judgment of the performance of these Negro soldiers in December, 1864, when he wrote:

Though suffering severe losses, and fighting at great disadvantage, owing to the merciless treatment they were sure to receive if taken as prisoners of war, yet they faltered not, but with a steadiness and a gallantry worthy of themselves and the cause, have earned an honorable reputation among the defenders of the Union.

68. Kansas Regiments, p. 431.
69. Ibid., pp. 422, 423, 492-493.