

The Winnowing Of Saltville: Remembering a Civil War Atrocity

Brian McKnight
Angelo State University

At dawn on 3 October 1864, George Dallas Mosgrove, a member of the 4th Kentucky Cavalry Regiment (C.S.A.), witnessed what would become one of the Civil War's most enduring controversies in the small, but strategically important hamlet of Saltville, Virginia: The massacre of captured Union soldiers, some of whom had been left wounded on the field, by Confederates. Since that day, the debate as to the number of men killed and the nature of those killings has raged. Whether the numbers exceed one hundred, as has been argued by at least one historian, or fewer than a half-dozen, the assertion of another, the issue remains as clouded today as it was one hundred and forty years ago. With such radically different interpretations having been tossed about by several excellent scholars over the course of the past half-century, perhaps a synthesis of the conflicting arguments would allow a more complete picture of the controversy to appear. More importantly, a reexamination of the literature reveals that while the principals recorded what they saw that day, subsequent examiners have turned the killings largely into a question of black and white, thereby losing the greater meaning of the atrocity by identifying it exclusively as a racial event.

The Events in Question

From the time of his appointment as commander of the Military District of Kentucky on 7 August 1864, Union Major General Stephen Gano Burbridge's zealous nature drove him to hatch a plan for the invasion of the Confederacy. Specifically, he sought permission from his superiors, John M. Schofield and army chief of staff Henry Halleck, to invade mountainous southwestern Virginia and attack the Confederacy's most valuable saltworks at Saltville, Virginia. Though Schofield

doubted the merit of the plan and the quality of its advocate, he acquiesced to Burbridge's wishes after Halleck's support was secured. Burbridge, a native of Georgetown, Kentucky, received authorization for his operation from the Federal high command on 19 September and wasted no time moving toward his goal. Immediately, he ordered Brigadier General Nathaniel C. McLean to move his 1st Division out of Mount Sterling into the eastern Kentucky mountains toward the Virginia border. At Prestonsburg, Kentucky, two other Kentucky regiments and, significantly, an estimated 600 still green troopers of the cobbled together 5th United States Colored Cavalry joined Burbridge at Prestonsburg.¹

With an invading force of 5,200 men united near the Kentucky-Virginia border, other, smaller forces under Brigadier Generals Jacob Ammen and Alvan C. Gillem moved out of Knoxville, Tennessee, in the direction of Saltville to offer both diversion and support. After a spirited march across the rugged mountain terrain, Burbridge's column dispatched a small group of Kentucky Confederates guarding Laurel Gap on 1 October and camped within easy reach of the saltworks. Burbridge preferred to wait until morning for the full assault.²

In the meantime, Confederate Brigadier General John Echols, who had been commander of the Department of Southwestern Virginia for less than a month, worked feverishly to consolidate the men scattered throughout his area. Though he spent the day successfully having various forces reassigned to his command for the defense of the saltworks, few of those men had made it to Saltville. Brigadier General John S. Williams had 1,700 men marching toward the works and 300 reserves were enroute on a train, but if Burbridge struck quickly, the battle would be finished before Williams arrived.³

On the field, the 54th Virginia Infantry's Colonel Robert Trigg initially took command and began setting up defenses. After a few hours, Brigadier General Alfred E. Jackson arrived and assumed command. Jackson, who had picked up the not-so-flattering nickname "Mudwall," proved himself worthy of his command that day. He calmly ordered fortifications built, trenches dug, and artillery placed. During the night, Colonel Robert T. Preston arrived with 300 reserves, but the Confederates were still outnumbered by 10:1. With the

Confederate emplacements prepared for the coming fight, "Mudwall" prepared to get some sleep before morning. Before turning in, however, he reportedly stopped to ask Preston and Lieutenant John S. Wise a question. "Kernel, my men tell me the Yanks have got a lot of nigger soldiers along. Do you think your reserves will fight niggers?" Confidently, Preston responded, "Fight em?...they'll eat 'em up! No! not eat 'em up! That's too much!...we'll cut 'em up."⁴ Though Preston's men spent the following day far away from the heated action that the men of the 5th U.S.C.C. experienced and probably did not see a black soldier until after the incidents in question had already taken place, the sentiments and overtones are unmistakable.

Early the next morning, the battle began in earnest about three miles in front of the Confederate preparations. The Union forces advanced, but were slowed by enemy skirmishers. This delay gave 250 men who had left Williams' force the day before time to arrive on the field and take a position near the right side of the Confederate line. Commanding this assemblage was Brigadier General Felix H. Robertson, a Texan who at twenty-five, had become one of the youngest general officers in the Confederacy.⁵ Robertson's small column was mainly made up of parts of the 8th and 11th Texas Cavalry. Importantly, the notorious Confederate guerrilla, Champ Ferguson, arrived with several of his men as part of Robertson's group. A couple of hours after Robertson's arrival, General Williams showed up with his van of 1,700.⁶ What most would have portended the night before to be a dire situation for the Confederates began to look much better by 10:00 a.m.

As senior officer on the field, John S. Williams began dispersing his troops. Following the blueprint established the evening before by Jackson, he strengthened the line by deploying Robertson's men to the right of the main road guarding the ford on the Holston River. Anchoring the right side of the line and abutting Robertson's brigade was Colonel George Dibrell's Tennessee Cavalry Brigade. On this day, part of Dibrell's command consisted of about 300 relatively untrained recruits. Not used to military discipline, these green troops had initially refused to follow the orders of officers on the field until either Dibrell or Williams arrived.⁷ The combination of Robertson's brigade made up partly by Tennessee guerrillas and Dibrell's

group with its undisciplined men would prove important when the 5th U.S.C.C. found itself facing them.

John Williams had only had his full force on the field for an hour and a half when the battle moved toward the Confederate positions outside of Saltville and intensified. Robertson's and Dibrell's men had been ordered to the east side of Cedar Creek, but that position proved untenable as soon as the Federal column began moving. Retreating hastily across the creek, the Confederates recrossed Cedar Creek, but were quickly caught by members of the 4th Brigade (11th Michigan, 12th Ohio, and 5th U.S.C.C.). The bottomland to the Confederate right of the ford erupted in hand-to-hand combat. In that creek bottom, the black soldiers who had never before seen action distinguished themselves and drove Robertson's and Dibrell's men into the log and stone fortifications halfway up the hill behind them.⁸

Although the 5th U.S.C.C. had begun the battle to the right of Dibrell's Tennesseans, by the time they reached Cedar Creek, the black soldiers had moved to the center of the line and were facing both Dibrell and Robertson. Here, color became all-important. William C. Davis described Dibrell's 8th Tennessee as becoming "exasperated" at the sight of black soldiers climbing the hill toward them and several let their irrational anger get the best of them and left the security of the works to fight a black man personally. The men of the 8th Tennessee paid a heavy price for their intense hatred as the regiment had four of its officers killed and another captured during the first half-hour of the fighting. For three hours, the fighting raged with both Robertson and Dibrell paying particular attention to the hated black soldiers in their front.⁹

By early afternoon, Felix Robertson created a crisis for the Confederate effort by withdrawing further up the hill behind him without informing Dibrell, who remained engaged on his right. A gap developed between the brigades forcing Dibrell to hurriedly withdraw to save his command. The Federals, along with the 5th U.S.C.C. moved up the hill closer to the enemy. Colonel Robert Ratliff commanded the 4th Brigade that day and seized the momentum offered by Robertson's mistake. Within a few minutes, the Confederates had been forced out of their trenches and had taken a tenuous position at the top of the hill. The 4th Brigade's unstoppable advance then pushed the Confederates

back toward town before a severe shortage of ammunition ended the Union threat. In his haste to move on Saltville, Burbridge had neglected to accumulate enough ammunition for a long assault. By 5:00 p.m., the battle was over.¹⁰

As the evening drew to a close, both armies began to assess their damage. Burbridge, who had arrived on the field with 5,200 men and had a full two-thirds of his force engaged with the enemy, lost an estimated 350 men during the fight. The Confederates, owing to their more defensible fortifications, lost less than 100 of their 2,800 active participants. Although Burbridge's men had finally come to control the Confederate right by the end of the day, the shortage of ammunition closed the fight for them. With a superior force looking down on the town of Saltville and the works just beyond it, Ratliff's 4th Brigade was powerless to press on and moved back across the Holston River. During the night, a frustrated and embarrassed Burbridge planned to extract himself from what might become a rout if fresh Confederate reinforcements arrived as expected. Filling the bottomland across the river from the Confederate positions with campfires, Union soldiers began a disguised midnight retreat.¹¹ In the overwhelming majority of military battles, when the actual fighting draws to a close, the battle is considered over. At Saltville, the real crisis occurred the following morning when Confederates roaming the battlefield reportedly began executing wounded enemy soldiers, many of whom were black troops.

Apart from the limited primary sources regarding the events at Saltville, the first scholarly examination appeared in Bell I. Wiley's introduction to *Kentucky Cavaliers in Dixie*. George Dallas Mosgrove's oft-reprinted diary again came to life in 1957, this time with the eminent historian Wiley providing context. Forcefully arguing that the fight at Saltville had been ignored in most histories of the war, Wiley continued with a brief synopsis of the battle that attempted to put an estimate on the number of soldiers felled after the fight ended.¹²

Wiley retold Mosgrove's story of hearing sporadic firing coming from the extreme right of the Confederate line around dawn on 3 October. Mosgrove mounted his horse and rode through the thick bottomland fog toward the action. Shortly, he came upon some of the men "shooting every wounded negro they could find."¹³ Although he made no effort to count the

number of wounded soldiers shot that morning by the feverishly angry Confederates, he attempted to illustrate the broadness of the atrocity by noting that after witnessing two groups of men walking the field in search for men to kill, he realized that the desultory firing he heard all around him meant more killings were taking place in every corner of the battlefield. He described seeing some of the men so slightly wounded that they could run, "but when they ran from the muzzle of one pistol it was only to be confronted by another." Mosgrove then entered a small log cabin where he saw "seven or eight slightly wounded negroes standing with their backs against the walls." In a moment, a young man who Mosgrove claimed was "not more than sixteen years old" came in and shot all the black soldiers.¹⁴

Shortly after Mosgrove left the cabin where he had seen the young boy kill those wounded men, an angry General Breckinridge arrived on the scene. "With blazing eyes and thunderous tones," Breckinridge "ordered that the massacre should be stopped." Despite the wishes of their commander, the Confederates continued on with their business of that morning. Mosgrove saw another murder shortly thereafter. General Basil Duke had reportedly recognized a young mulatto as a former slave of either his or his friend John Hunt Morgan. Ordering him to wait for his return, Duke rode away. In a few minutes, a Confederate came by and shot the boy.¹⁵

In his account, Mosgrove did not venture a guess as to how many soldiers had been killed on the morning after the battle. Wiley also refused to step into such a murky place, but the historian felt strongly that Mosgrove's account was accurate and that cruel and atrocious murders had been committed. Combining Mosgrove's story with what he had gleaned from the accounts of the battle in the *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*, Wiley started a still-raging firestorm by stating, "it appears that Saltville deserves more than Fort Pillow to be called a 'massacre.'"¹⁶

Several white Union soldiers, themselves wounded and lying on the field, corroborated Mosgrove's account of riding across the battlefield and witnessing numerous killings. Orange Sells, a Captain in the 12th Ohio Cavalry, which served next to the 5th U.S.C.C., echoed what Mosgrove witnessed. Sells "saw a good many negroes killed there" and recalled that "All of them were

soldiers and all were wounded but one." Similar to Mosgrove, Sells described the sound of the killings as "like a skirmish."¹⁷

More insightful was Lieutenant George Cutler's account. Cutler's 11th Michigan Cavalry was separated from the 5th U.S.C.C. on the battlefield by the 12th Ohio, but on the morning following the fight, the lieutenant "saw some colored soldiers killed, eight or nine of them." Recalling that all of the Federals on the field were now prisoners and no longer armed, Cutler claimed he then saw several of the prisoners killed. The men doing the killing confused Cutler. "I couldn't tell whether or not citizens or soldiers did the killing of the prisoners, as all seemed to be dressed alike." Not surprisingly, the profound breakdown of discipline and command within Confederate ranks that morning was also noted. Cutler did not "know that anybody had command" and recalled, "They all appeared to be commanding themselves."¹⁸

The Process of Revision

Fourteen years after Bell Wiley's introduction to the Mosgrove reminiscence, William C. Davis, then managing editor of *Civil War Times Illustrated*, wrote a piece intended to paint the first comprehensive picture of the events at Saltville. Though he relied heavily on George Dallas Mosgrove's reminiscences, Davis also collected a variety of other primary sources hoping to corroborate the Confederate cavalryman's assertions. Having devoted much time to locating every known and available primary source on the subject, Davis succeeded in telling the first comprehensive story of the battle and its aftermath.

Analyzing the geographic location of the fighting that broke out the following morning during which the soldiers were killed, Davis inadvertently slipped away from the nonracial element of the killings and began focusing his work on the 5th U.S.C.C., which most certainly bore the brunt of the after-battle killings. He found that "the worst of the slaughter took place considerably in advance of Robertson and Dibrell's line," directly where the 5th U.S.C.C. was positioned. The regiment, which had entered the battle with 400 men, later reported that 118 had been either killed or wounded during the campaign. Only two days after the battle, Burbridge's surgeon reported twenty-two men killed in action, leaving ninety-six men unaccounted.

Although without providing a number, Davis acknowledged that some men of the 6th U.S.C.C. were supposed to have been mixed in with the men of the 5th during the previous day's fighting and likely added to the number of casualties. His contention was bolstered by a newspaper article appearing later in the month that announced 155 black soldiers had been buried the day following the battle. Safely avoiding a concrete number, Davis wrote, "In the light of the total of wounded in the 5th, and the number of Negroes reportedly buried, it is reasonably safe to say that 100 or more were slaughtered."¹⁹ His estimate, although innocuous, ignited an intellectual firestorm that still burns.

Davis went further than a simple examination of the numbers to discuss and evaluate the nature of the fight itself and the likely state of mind of the Confederates on the field the following morning. Comparing the killings at Saltville to those perpetrated by Nathan Bedford Forrest's men at Fort Pillow, Davis noted the larger number both engaged and killed overlooking the Mississippi River. Forrest's soldiers overran more than 550 Federals, of which, 262 were black, "and supposedly 'massacred' some 231, about 120 of them whom were blacks." While not clearly seeking to define the term massacre, Davis suggests that in the case of Fort Pillow, the term massacre could be used if those men killed had already surrendered and were without arms. Noting that Forrest's troops engaged and killed the possibly disarmed men in the immediate aftermath of the battle while possibly "still flushed with battle-fever," Davis questioned the validity of this defense in regard to the incidents at Saltville. Identifying the night-long lapse of time between the end of the battle and the beginning of the killings in question, Davis condemned Dibrell's Tennesseans for returning to the field knowing the enemy had abandoned the fight and retreated. In Davis' words, "That morning they went out deliberately and solely for the purpose of killing the Negroes." Combining his research with Wiley's comparison between Saltville and Fort Pillow, Davis announced that the use of the word "massacre" to describe the events that took place on the morning of 3 October 1864, "is inescapable."²⁰

Although Davis' estimate of the number of black men killed that morning has not stood the test of time, his greatest

contribution came in his examination of responsibility. Importantly, Davis acknowledges Burbridge's apparent disregard for the safety of his black troops in preference to white soldiers. It was Burbridge who ordered the night's retreat and left many of the men of the 5th U.S.C.C. on the field, some wounded, but others likely uninformed of the withdrawal. Davis also recognized the merit in Mosgrove's assertion that Burbridge seemed to put his black men in harm's way more frequently than white troops.²¹

More pointed was Davis' identification of Felix Robertson as the instigator of the violence. Although the dispatch that John C. Breckinridge sent to Robert E. Lee reporting the results of the battle has not survived, Lee's response is a matter of record. "That a general officer should have been guilty of the crime you mention" shocked the professional soldier who ordered his subordinate to "prefer charges against him and bring him to trial." Indeed, the wheels of justice were already turning. Brigadier General John Echols had already ordered Robertson to stand before a court of inquiry and answer to his behavior at Saltville. Nearly five months later, on 22 February 1865, a letter from Echols confirmed his continuing interest in questioning Robertson about his "conduct at Saltville."²²

Although little doubt exists that Felix Robertson was the general officer under whose command the extracurricular killings took place, no serious attempt has been made to examine his motives for allowing such carnage to take place. Within the pantheon of Texas history, the Texas Rangers occupy a high place. As defenders of the Texas frontier, they earned fierce reputations in their dealings with Indians. During the Mexican War, their character more fully developed with enhanced components of recklessness, insubordination, and racially based violence—central elements in the breakdown at Saltville. None other than General Zachary Taylor cast doubt on the effectiveness of the Texas Rangers and spoke to their habits early in the Mexican War when he wrote about the rangers, "I expect if they could be made subordinate they would be the best, at any rate as good as any volunteer corps in service; but I fear they are & will continue too licentious to do much good." Similar assessments included, "The Mexicans dread the Texians more than they do the devil, and they have good reason for it, if all the

reports that we hear are true." A troubled Taylor again wrote, "The mounted men from Texas have scarcely made one expedition without unwarrantably killing a Mexican." During the Battle of Monterey in 1846, the extracurricular activities of the Rangers affirmed Taylor's feelings about them and forced him to send them home with the explanation, "With their departure we may look for a restoration of quiet and order in Monterey for I regret to report that some shameful atrocities have been perpetrated by them since the capitulation of the town."²³ Clearly, the behavior of the Texans was driven by their attitudes toward those whom they considered their racial and cultural inferiors.

In relation to Saltville, the Texan legacy of race-based violence played a significant role through Robertson's leadership and the shared experiences of some of his troops. Felix Robertson's father, Jerome Bonaparte Robertson, was a prominent fighter for Texan independence from Mexico, who continued to battle on behalf of his adopted nation against Indians and Mexican invaders before trading in his guns for a career in state politics. Although Jerome Robertson was not a member of the Texas Rangers, his sporadic activities alongside the group during the late 1830s and early 1840s certainly loomed large in his son's memory and stoked similar fires in Felix. In 1861, twenty-two year old Felix was a fourth-year student at the United States Military Academy at West Point; however, on 29 January, two days before Texas overwhelmingly approved its secession ordinance, he left the school and prepared to join the cause of the Confederacy. Over the course of the coming years, Felix steadily rose in rank and responsibility up to the point that he arrived at Saltville in the autumn of 1864. There, commanding a regiment of his fellow Texans, Robinson allowed his men to fight their battle against black Federals in the same way that Texans had prosecuted their fights of nationhood and expansion.²⁴

William C. Davis' article stood as the final word on the Saltville question for more than twenty years. However, when William Marvel's *The Battles for Saltville* was released in 1992, Davis' radical downward adjustment of the number of dead was further amended. After telling the story of the October 1864 Battle of Saltville in more detail than ever before, Marvel, using

carded casualty lists from the National Archives, confidently placed the maximum number of unauthorized killings of blacks at twelve, and possibly as few as five.²⁵

In order to arrive at such a startlingly small number, Marvel approached his study from a somewhat partisan standpoint. Because Marvel was taking direct issue with Davis' numerical estimate, he undertook the same line of inquiry and looked only at the 5th U.S.C.C. while ignoring the neighboring regiments which had white soldiers killed at the same time and in the same manner. Marvel took issue with the various pieces of damning evidence, all of which essentially told the same story and many of which came from the Confederate side of the fight, and attempted to interject significant doubt into the credibility of either the account itself or its author. Marvel dismissed many of the Confederate claims as being "all brag," although the evidence speaks to the contrary.²⁶

More curious is Marvel's attack on the character of one of the most convincing witnesses. Henry Shocker was only nineteen years old at the time of the battle having lied about his age to enlist in the Union army three years earlier. That day at Saltville, he personally saw Confederates calmly shooting down wounded Union soldiers both on the field and in the makeshift hospital. Marvel sarcastically notes that Shocker was a soldier "for whom lying seems to have been second nature" because he misrepresented his age in order to join the Union army...an indiscretion that would have been viewed as the height of valor in many circles. More legitimate is Marvel's assertions that Shocker may have lied about wartime wounds in order to shirk duty or to secure a postwar pension, but that does not cast aspersions on his credibility in this case. Interestingly, Marvel points out that Shocker did not mention his service at Saltville "as if something unsavory lay within his last term of se[r]vice," but he failed to even make mention of the fact that General Felix Robertson too never spoke of Saltville. Instead of taking to task the general whom William C. Davis had suggested allowed the killings to take place, Marvel chose to weave a complex story of Shocker as a battlefield coward who "tried to use his old wound not only as a means of getting a discharge, but as an excuse for having been captured." Upon his parole, Shocker took leave and returned to his unit later than scheduled. Jumping on this fact,

Marvel credited "His reluctance to return to his unit probably resulted from [Marvel's misspelling] lingering fear that someone had seen his battlefield conduct." However unlikely, all of Marvel's contentions are possible, although those like lying about one's age in order to join the army and returning late to duty after a leave were commonplace in the Civil War.²⁷

Methodologically, Marvel depended on official reports to arrive at his number and only examined the records of the 5th U.S.C.C. Upon the return of the regiment to Kentucky, the commander reported 118 casualties, four of whom were white officers, as a result of the fight at Saltville. More than two weeks later, the regimental surgeon offered a similar, though not exact, report of 112 black soldiers lost and wounded. Those reports comprise the official word on the number of casualties at Saltville. Marvel's examination of the official records revealed that four of the 118 were duplicated, therefore forcing the number down to 114. That adjustment further threatened the previous estimate of "100 or more" killed after the battle. Of those numbers, twenty-two black troops were reported as killed while fifty-three were counted as missing making a maximum total of seventy-five possibly killed. This number, while still significant, put to bed the possibility of Saltville rivaling Fort Pillow in the annals of Civil War atrocity.²⁸

With the number standing at seventy-five, Marvel set about examining the individual cards to determine if the numbers could be further narrowed. He found that the carded records specified that twenty men were killed outright during the battle. In his report, the surgeon added to the carded number two others who were so severely wounded they were left on the field and not expected to live, bringing the possible deaths down to fifty-three. With this done, the sixty-three men who were reported as wounded could be reduced down to sixty-one, still a stark increase from the thirty-seven noted by the commander shortly after the battle. The likely explanation for this disparity is in straggling. As the cavalymen beat a hasty retreat back into Kentucky, many of the wounded were left to make their own way back, which twenty-four of them apparently did over the course of the coming weeks.

Standing at twenty-two killed in battle, thirty-one missing in action, and sixty-three wounded, Marvel could safely assume the

maximum number of deaths within the black units alone would not exceed fifty-three. Thorough research of individual service records revealed that over the course of the coming weeks, only one of the wounded men died and the other sixty-two returned to duty. With solid evidence placing the men killed in battle and confirming the survival of the great majority of the wounded, Marvel's tally stood at thirty-one possible cases of wartime atrocity.

Marvel took the remaining thirty-one missing and began further reducing the number. He found that by the time of Lee's surrender in April 1865, sixteen of that number had returned to duty after deserting or enduring imprisonment. The remaining fifteen were explained away rather carelessly by acknowledging five black soldiers killed on the morning of 3 October, two more killed at Emory and Henry College on 7 October, and one killed by a "Mr. Stinson" after he found the wounded soldier near his home during the retreat.²⁹ With this done, Marvel's final number of men who could have possibly been killed in the post-battle carnage stood at only seven. However, the normally effusive Edward Guerrant's brief and basic story of Mr. Stinson killing the black soldier sounds very much like a pseudo-patriotic story by a host eager to impress his guest. Additionally, Marvel did not elaborate on why he separated the activities of Champ Ferguson, who was apparently responsible for the seven remaining deaths from the seven that he finally acknowledged as being likely victims. By accepting Marvel's accounting and adding the seven killed by Ferguson and the man who may or may not have been killed by Stinson, the upper reach of Marvel's possible number is fifteen. Marvel's final statement boldly announces, "no more than an even dozen could have been murdered 3 October, and quite possibly only the five witnessed by Surgeon Gardner." With this, the downward trend in the numbers of black soldiers killed at Saltville stopped.

To close his work, Marvel took issue with the question of whether or not Saltville qualifies as a massacre. With his research done and his attempts at diminishing the credibility of witnesses complete, he wrote, "The killing of prisoners is barbarous at any time and in any quantity, but the legend of the Saltville massacre consists of much misunderstanding, a good deal of exaggeration, and not a small measure of deliberate

misrepresentation, all cast around a fragment of truth." In this regard, Marvel did not lie.³⁰

Thomas Mays' small book, *The Saltville Massacre*, reopened the topic and reevaluated the question of how many Union soldiers were murdered. Responding to both Davis and Marvel's previous works, which by that time had defined the post-battle violence as exclusively racial, Mays found a surprisingly simple way to offer a new interpretation. By examining the rolls of the 5th and 6th U.S.C.C., he found forty-six men listed as missing in action who never returned to duty. While unable to specifically identify these men as falling victim to the killings that followed, Mays' work certainly presented a more plausible sum than that of Marvel.³¹ The stark difference between Marvel's and Mays' conclusions is attributable to the fact that each had historical documentation which led in different directions.

The most recent attempt to revise the numbers of black men killed after the fight at Saltville came from the research team of Bryce Suderow, Phyllis Brown, and David Brown. After wrestling with the conflicting interpretations and numbers presented by Wiley, Davis, Marvel, and Mays, the trio visited the National Archives, intent on verifying the existing research and hoping to find additional information. Indeed, the research team did locate an important piece of evidence when they found the previously unknown report of surgeon William Egle, 5th USCC. Egle's report identified twenty-eight men, who remained listed as missing at the end of the war, previously unknown to historians. With these new names revealed, the authors presented their findings, which they judged to prove "at least 45 to 50 of these men [5th USCC MIAs at Saltville] were never accounted for after the battle and are presumed to have been murdered by Confederate renegades."³²

Dead White Men

Largely forgotten in the story of racial atrocity is the fact that Brigadier General Robert Ratliff's command of the 12th Regiment Ohio Volunteer Cavalry and the 11th Regiment Michigan Cavalry were fighting alongside the 5th U.S.C.C. in the steep and narrow approach up the hill toward the Tennesseans. As the fight raged, black and white fell together in the vicinity of Cedar Creek. Throughout the remainder of the evening and night, the

wounded waited for stretcher-bearers but few, if any, came. By the time morning broke, Burbridge had his command well away from the field and those wounded men, both black and white, scattered across the hillside and in the bottomland were left to the charity of the enemy.

The only named white casualty during the morning's killings was Crawford Hinshillwood of the 12th Ohio Cavalry. Hinshillwood and his friend, Private Harry Shocker, lay wounded on the field on the morning of 3 October, until their attention was drawn to a lone approaching Confederate soldier. As Shocker watched, the Confederate, who turned out to be the infamous guerrilla Champ Ferguson, meandered across the field occasionally "pointing his pistol down at prisoners lying on the ground, and heard the reports of the pistol and the screams of the men." While Ferguson occupied himself by killing these wounded men, Shocker dragged himself safely out of the way and saw the guerrilla walk up to Hinshillwood and ask "why he came up there to fight with the damned niggers." Ferguson matter-of-factly asked Hinshillwood "Where will you have it, in the back or in the face?" at which point the wounded man began begging for his life. With that, Ferguson killed Hinshillwood and continued his methodical and bloody trek across the battlefield.³³

Several days after the incidents at Saltville, Shocker met up with Ferguson again. While recovering in the Confederate hospital at Emory and Henry College, Ferguson and a second man walked into the room Shocker shared with several other men. The stranger with Ferguson pointed at one of the wounded and told the guerrilla, "There is that boy now. I saved his life. He was lying among negroes at the time." Champ affirmed his ability to kill wounded soldiers of any color when he responded, "If I'd seen you lying among the negroes, it would have been all day with you." Ferguson and the other man then turned, left the room, and went upstairs where they killed a wounded Federal officer in his hospital bed.³⁴

Subsequent investigations of the casualty reports of Ratliff's Ohioans and Hobson's Michiganans reveal that a significant number of white soldiers could be added to the loss totals. The 12th Ohio lost eleven men killed in action on 2 October and two others counted as missing and assumed lost; however, while the numbers themselves are reliable, the details are not. One of the

men noted as being killed in action on 2 October was Crawford Hinshillwood, whose murder by Champ Ferguson was witnessed by Henry Shocker on the morning of 3 October. If Hinshillwood's death could be misidentified, it is plausible if not likely that some of the others were also mistaken. For the 12th Ohio, a minimum of one man was certainly killed after the battle had subsided and as many as thirteen may have suffered that fate. The 11th Michigan was farther down the line from the action, but abutted the 12th Ohio during the battle. Final casualty numbers for the Michiganans were ten killed, six wounded, and two missing. Of the dead, four were noted as having died on the battlefield on 2 October while one was recorded as having been killed on the day of the massacre. Combining the killed and missing, the 11th Michigan had a total of seven men who may have been killed in the fracas following the battle. Although adding twenty additional men to totals being debated for the 5th and 6th USCC would be highly speculative, these white casualties cannot be ignored as part of the post-battle activity.

In the end, it is possible that by combining the numbers verified by Suderow, Brown, and Brown of forty-five to fifty black soldiers with the twenty white soldiers unaccounted for after the battle, the total casualty numbers for the post-battle atrocities at Saltville could climb into the range of sixty-five and seventy. As already discussed, the total of 231 killed at Fort Pillow comprise the Civil War's worst battlefield atrocity; however, other battles descended into chaos due to the overwhelming anger Confederates felt at the sight of black Union soldiers standing opposite them on the field. At Poison Spring, Arkansas, a Confederate ambush devolved into an atrocity leaving dozens to die in enemy hands, including several whom Confederate Choctaws scalped. Interestingly, one of the Confederate commanders that day was Brigadier General Samuel Bell Maxey, a longtime acquaintance of the notorious Champ Ferguson.³⁵ In the end, the killings that took place in the aftermath of Saltville pale in comparison to those at Fort Pillow, but probably exceed those at Poison Spring, making it the second bloodiest of Civil War atrocities and certainly one of the most hotly debated.

Regarding the massacre argument, one final point must be made. In all of the primary and secondary accounts regarding

the post-battle activities at Saltville, much effort has been made to find the precise number of black soldiers killed in order to justify the assertion of a massacre. This is unnecessary. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a massacre quite simply and clearly, and nowhere in that definition is it stated that a numerical value must be assigned in order to justify the use of the word "massacre." One thing is sure about the killings at Saltville, they did constitute a massacre in that they were an "indiscriminate and brutal slaughter of people."³⁶

Notes

- ¹ John E. Kleber, ed., *The Kentucky Encyclopedia* (Lexington, KY, 1992), pp. 142; William C. Davis, "The Massacre at Saltville," *Civil War Times Illustrated* (February 1971): 4, 5; Thomas D. Mays, *The Saltville Massacre. Civil War Campaigns and Commanders*, ed. Grady McWhiney (Abilene, TX, 1998), pp. 15-27; William Marvel, *Southwest Virginia in the Civil War: The Battles for Saltville*. The Virginia Civil War Battles and Leaders Series (Lynchburg, VA, 1992), pp. 101-104; and James S. Brisbin to Brig. Gen. L. Thomas, 20 October 1864, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Ser. I, vol. XXXIX/1, 556-57, hereinafter cited as *Official Records* (unless otherwise indicated, all citations are for Series I).
- ² Davis, "The Massacre at Saltville," pp. 7.
- ³ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6, 8.
- ⁴ John S. Wise, *The End of an Era* (Boston, MA, 1899), pp. 379.
- ⁵ Marcus J. Wright, compiler, *Texas in the War: 1861-1865* (Hillsboro, TX, 1965), pp. 89-90.
- ⁶ Davis, "Massacre at Saltville," pp. 9.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 11.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² George Dallas Mosgrove, *Kentucky Cavaliers in Dixie: Reminiscences of a Confederate Cavalryman* (Jackson, TN, 1957), pp. x, xvii-xix.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. xviii, 206.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 206-207.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 207.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. xix.
- ¹⁷ Davis, "Massacre at Saltville," pp. 45.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.* George Cutler has historically been misidentified as George Carter.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 46.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 47.
- ²² William C. Davis, *Breckinridge: Statesman, Soldier, Symbol*. Southern Biography Series (Baton Rouge, LA, 1974), pp. 459-61; Charles Marshall to Maj.

Gen. J. C. Breckinridge, 21 October 1864, *Official Records*, Ser. II, vol. VII, 1020; and Jno. Echols to General S. Cooper, 22 February 1865, War Department Collection of Confederate Records, RG 109, National Archives and Records Administration II, College Park, Maryland.

²³ Z. Taylor to My dear Doctor [R. C. Wood], 7 July 1846, in Zachary Taylor, *Letters of Zachary Taylor from the Battle-Fields of the Mexican War* (Rochester, NY, 1903; reprint New York, NY, 1970), pp. 24; Lawrence R. Clayton and Joseph E. Chance, eds., *The March to Monterrey: The Diary of Lieutenant Ranking Dilworth, U.S. Army*. Southwestern Studies No. 102 (El Paso, TX, 1996), pp. 24; quoted in Stephen B. Oates, "Los Diablos Tejanos!," *Visions of Glory: Texans on the Southwestern Frontier* (Norman, OK, 1970), pp. 33. See Robert M. Utley, *Lone Star Justice: The First Century of the Texas Rangers* (New York, NY, 2002), Paul Foss, *A Short, Offhand, Killing Affair: Soldiers and Social Conflict During the Mexican-American War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 114, 119, 121, 131; and Stephen B. Oates, "Los Diablos Tejanos!," pp. 25-52, for a more expansive discussion of the various racial and ethnic atrocities perpetrated by Texas Rangers during the Mexican War.

²⁴ Biographical information taken from Ezra J. Warner, *Generals in Gray: Lives of the Confederate Commanders* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1987), pp. 260-61.

²⁵ Marvel, *The Battles for Saltville*, pp. 148.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 144-46.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 147-48.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 144-45.

²⁹ William C. Davis and Meredith L. Swentor, eds., *Bluegrass Confederate: The Headquarters Diary of Edward O. Guerrant* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1999), pp. 551.

³⁰ Marvel, *The Battles for Saltville*, pp. 148.

³¹ Mays, *The Saltville Massacre*, pp. 72.

³² Suderow, Brown, and Brown have collected an impressive number of sources which are online at: <http://mywebpages.comcast.net/5thuscc/massacr.htm>, including correspondence from Mays, Marvel, and William H. Egle to Col. James F. Wade, 8 October 1864. Marvel found that Mays' contentions are difficult to verify as Mays did not provide notes in his book. As a result, Mays' research must be viewed with some degree of skepticism.

³³ *Nashville Dispatch*, 2 August 1865.

³⁴ Thurman Sensing, *Champ Ferguson: Confederate Guerilla* (Nashville, TN, 1942, 1994), pp. 186.

³⁵ David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, *Encyclopedia of the American Civil War*, vol. 3 (Santa Barbara, CA, 2000), pp. 1535-36; and Gregory J. W. Urwin, "We Cannot Treat Negroes...As Prisoners of War": Racial Atrocities and Reprisals in Civil War Arkansas," *Civil War History* 42:3 (September 1996): pp. 193-201.

³⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. Vol. IX (Oxford, UK, 1989), pp. 436.