

# The Fort Pillow Massacre, 1864

## Introduction

---

“Among the stories of the stormy days of the Republic, few will longer be remembered than the heroic defense and almost utter annihilation of the garrison of Fort Pillow.”

—Mack J. Leaming, April 1893

On April 12, 1864, fifteen hundred Confederate soldiers led by General Nathan Bedford Forrest attacked the 567 Union troops stationed at Fort Pillow, Tennessee. Fighting raged until a truce was called at 3 p.m., but despite being greatly outnumbered, the Union troops refused to surrender. The Confederates renewed their attack at 4 p.m. and quickly overwhelmed the garrison. Nearly 300 Union soldiers were killed. The Confederates suffered only fourteen deaths.



“The Fort Pillow Massacre,” Kurz & Allison, 1892. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC07727)

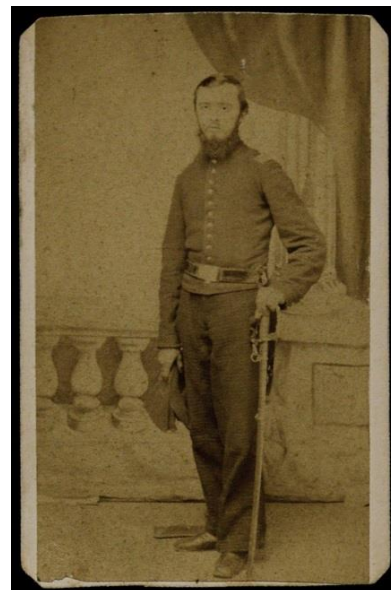
The attack on Fort Pillow fell on the third anniversary of the firing on Fort Sumter in South Carolina, the start of the Civil War. Many believe that Forrest and his men wanted to punish, not just defeat, both the African American soldiers and the white men from Tennessee fighting on the side of the Union who were based at Fort Pillow. According to eyewitnesses, Confederates murdered Union prisoners, including some who were wounded, after the fort had been taken.

## The Fort Pillow Massacre, 1864

Despite the carnage, Fort Pillow was of little tactical significance. General Forrest abandoned the fort the next day.

The events were soon called a “massacre,” and the US Congress investigated the reports. At the congressional inquiry, witnesses stated that most of the wounds suffered by Union soldiers targeted the torso and head, while battle wounds usually occurred to the limbs. Of the 300 Union dead, close to 200 were African American. While 70 percent of white soldiers survived, only 35 percent of African American soldiers survived. But the massacre did not deter black troops from serving in the Union Army. “Remember Fort Pillow” became a rallying cry for African American soldiers.

First Lieutenant Mack Leaming served in the 13th Tennessee Regiment in the Union Army. As the highest-ranking officer in his regiment to survive, Leaming wrote his regiment’s official report of the battle. Nearly thirty years later, he wrote a vivid seventeen-page account of the battle and its aftermath. It stands as testimony to the brutality and ruthlessness of the battle.



Mack Leaming, March 8, 1864, at Fort Pillow. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC05080.02)

### Excerpt

Mack Leaming’s memoir of the Fort Pillow Massacre (1864), April 15, 1893

From where I fell wounded, I could plainly see this firing and note the bullets striking the water around the black heads of the soldiers, until suddenly the muddy current became red and I saw another life sacrificed in the cause of the Union. Here I noticed one soldier in the river, but in some way clinging to the bank. Two confederate soldiers pulled him out. He seemed to be wounded and crawled on his hands and knees. Finally one of the confederate soldiers placed his revolver to the head of the colored soldier and killed him.

### Questions for Discussion

1. Define the term “massacre.”
2. To what extent do the events in the memoir by Mack J. Leaming fit the description of a massacre? Provide two or three examples to support your response.
3. How were African American soldiers serving in the Union Army treated differently from the white Union soldiers during this battle?
4. Although the capture of Fort Pillow was of little tactical significance, why is it remembered today?

## The Fort Pillow Massacre, 1864

### Transcript

---

Mack Leaming's memoir of the Fort Pillow Massacre (1864), April 15, 1893, pp. 8–17. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC05080.01) Note: Handwritten text appears in ***bold and italics***.

[*Excerpt beginning on page 8*]

A vote was taken and the officers unanimously voted not to surrender. Major Bradford directed that our answer refusing to surrender be made accordingly. I prepared it, placed it in a sealed envelope, and took it out to Forrest. He tore open the envelope, read t [*sic*] the communication, we saluted, and he with his staff rode over the bluff, while I returned to the fort. Scarcely had I regained my position when the rebel bugle sounded the charge, and with the characterteristic [*sic*] rebel yell, we beheld the lines of the enemy rushing upon us. WWhile [*sic*] the flag of truce was flying, and the attention of our officers was drawn to the south side of the fort, the enemy had quietly gained a position in front of the northern and eastern portion of our works, from which during the battle, we had successfully repulsed him. Hence when the final order to storm our works was given, we were astounded to see the enemy rise from this position for the desperate charge. We had barely time to fire one volley before they swarmed over our works. Our line broke and many of the troops threw down their muskets and rushed down the bluff towards the river, the rebels meanwhile keeping up a murderous fire. Many of the colored soldiers, seeing that no quarters were to be given, madly leaped into the river, while the rebels stood on the banks or part way up the bluff, and shot at the heads of their victims. From where I fell wounded, I could plainly see this firing and note the bullets striking the water around the black heads of the soldiers, until suddenly the muddy current became red and I saw another life sacrificed in the cause of the Union. Here I noticed one soldier in the river, but in some way clinging to the bank. Two confederate soldiers pulled him out. He seemed to be wounded and crawled on his hands and knees. Finely one of the confederate soldiers placed his revolver to the head of the colored soldier and killed him. I could hear a good deal of firing all around me, but could only see the effect of what occurred between where I was lying on the side of the bluff and the river bank. While this firing was going on the Confederates had full possession of our works, and firing on the Federal side had wholly ceased. The Confederates themselves pulled down the stars and stripes and hoisted the stars and bars. It is true that there was no formal surrender in the sense that we lowered our flag. But when a garrison is overpowered and captured; when its artillery and munitions of war are in the hands of the enemy and further resistance has ceased, all

## The Fort Pillow Massacre, 1864

the substantial elements of a surrender exist, and mere formalities are merged in the actual condition of things. But in all that bloody picture there are a few incidents that shine like a star in my memory to-day-incidents that tell of our better nature, and, being enacted under the smoke of battle, and in presence of so many evidences of total depravity, are all the more striking and worthy to be remembered. True it is that “one touch of nature makes the whole world kin.” I trust that my companions will pardon the free use of the personal pronoun “I” in reference to these features. It would be extremely difficult for me to give you a correct description thereof except by reference to such of them as concerned me personally and fell under my personal observation. I am furthermore tempted to adopt this method of statement concerning them in grateful acknowledgement of the valuable aid extended to me by the enemy at a time when those acts, comparatively trifling as they would have been under ordinary circumstances, yet, nevertheless, seemed to snatch me from the threshold of eternity.

It was nearly four o'clock p.m.; and the confederate lines had just swept over our works, when a minnie ball, burried itself in my right side, where by the way, it gas [*sic*] ever since borne me faithful company. While I lay upon the field perfectly helpless one Captain Roberts, a mason, who commanded a company of Texans, seeing my desperate condition and ascertaining that I was likewise a mason, promptly did what he could in my behalf. He, with the assistance of two men carried me a little distance and laid me in a small building which had been occupied as a sutler's store. Here he summoned the confederate surgeon who examined my wound, bandaged my body and arrested the further flow of blood. Here also the confederate General Chalmers, who was second in command to General Forrest, sent me some brandy. The attention which I received from these three confederate officers at that critical moment, doubtless contributed, in no small degree, to my ultimate recovery. While Captain Roberts and his two men were carrying me into this building I heard a group of confederate soldiers commenting upon the attention I was receiving. One of them said, “I wonder who the hell that d---d Yankee officer is that our officers are paying so much attention to”. It was while lying in this building, and after further resistance on the Federal side had wholly ceased, that suddenly I heard several shots fired just outside the building, and at the same time some one – presumably a confederate officer – gallop up and order the firing to cease and the arrest of someone ingaged in it. It was understood that a number of colored soldiers were shot in that firing. During the night many of the wounded, myself among the number, were collected and placed in one of the rows of cabins just outside the

## The Fort Pillow Massacre, 1864

fort. At irregular intervals throughout the night stray firing could be heard in the vicinity, telling but too plainly that the hot exasperation of the charge had not even yet worn away, but was still calling for fresh victims. After what seemed to be an age of darkness the gray dawn of April 13th began breaking. In the meantime the white prisoners and such of the wounded as could walk, had left during the night for Andersonville. About sunrise a gun-boat from Memphis arrived and began shelling the rebels along the river bank. Instantly General Forrest ordered the burning of all buildings and commissary and quartermaster's stores. In a few minutes the crackling sound of burning buildings came to my ears and with it the horrible apprehension that the row of cabins where our helpless wounded were lying would soon be in flames. These fears were but too well founded, for in almost less time than requires to tell about it, these buildings were on fire. No words of mine can depict the awful horror of that moment. The air soon became hot and stifling. With my right lung pierced with a minnie ball, the process of breathing was momentarily becoming more difficult and painful. It verily seemed that those of us who, although desperately wounded, had nevertheless escaped death in the storm of battle, had been reserved for a worse fate. Why was it, I thought, that the demon fire had been summoned to complete the horrors of that awful hour? Was it not enough that many of our brave comrades had been mercilessly shot down after capture? Was not the fact that our forces had defended the flag against overwhelming numbers a thing to be rightly considered even by the enemy? The open door of the cabin wherein I was lying was but a few feet away, and although the strongest impulse was upon me to walk out and enjoy the fresh morning air, still I was powerless to move.

The little cabin with its wounded and helpless inmates was actually on fire. Soon through cracks and crevices I caught glimpses of the mad flames that seemed all too eager to consume the slender thread that still held us to life. The last ray of hope seemed to be bidding us a long farewell, and I knew that in five or at most ten minutes more, without help, the frail tenure by which we held to life would be consumed in fire and smoke.

Then like a flash a soldier rushed in and seizing my shoulders drew me forth from the burning building more dead than alive. Others were rescued in the same manner. How many I know not. In a few minutes more the cabins were entirely consumed. As to whether or not any of the wounded were burned I can not speak from personal knowledge. The testimony taken by the Committee on the Conduct of the war, seemed, however, to indicate, unmistakably, that such was the fate of some of our wounded. From the report of this committee I quote on this subject as

## The Fort Pillow Massacre, 1864

follows: “The charred remains of five or six bodies were afterwards found, all but one so much disfigured and consumed by the flames that they could not be identified, and the identification of that one is not absolutely certain, although there can hardly be a doubt, that it was the body of Lieutenant Akerstrom, quartermaster of the 13th Tennessee Cavalry, and a native of Tennessean; several witnesses who saw the remains, and who were personally acquainted with him while living, have testified that it is their firm belief that it was his body that was thus treated.”

I was dragged a distance of forty or fifty yards from the burning building and left on the field, with a number of other wounded, white and black, within a few feet of me. I heard considerable firing near me on different parts of the field, and presently a rebel soldier walked past me, halted, and with a curse aimed his gun at a wounded colored soldier who lay with his head and shoulders resting against a stump, some ten or twelve yards away. The soldier begged for his life, but the next instant a bullet crashed through his brain. Another colored soldier was standing a few feet away. He had an ugly wound through his wrist, and on him the same rebel turned, reloaded his piece and aimed at his head; the wounded man, meanwhile, pleading for his life, and exclaiming, “de Yankees made me fight, massa.” The murderer’s gun snapped, and, as coolly as an executioner at a hog killing, the rebel brought down his weapon, jarred the powder into the tube, placed on a fresh percussion [*sic*] cap, again took aim, and the wounded soldier joined his comrade in death. These two murders of wounded colored soldiers I saw committed the day following the battle.

What was the effect of the other firing on different parts of the field that I heard about the same time I can not say. It is fair to presume, however, that the same motives that prompted the murder of these two men, likewise directed the other firing, and probably with like effect.

While these buildings were burning Forrest sent a flag of truce to the officer of the gun boat, with a message to the effect that if the naval authorities would recognize his right to parole such of the wounded as were unable to march he would permit a party to land and remove them. Under this arrangement a detail of men was sent ashore to bury the dead and remove the wounded.

For the writer of this narrative there are no regimental reunions. His comrades of that stormy day gallantly met the crimson tide of battle and rode into immortality.

When the guns of Fort Pillow ceased to reverberate, but little more than a fragment of the

## The Fort Pillow Massacre, 1864

battalion to which he then belonged, remained; and this was destined to grow still smaller by weary months at Andersonville. Of these survivors only thirteen were known ever again to reach Tennessee, and these with constitutions so broken and impaired as to bear little resemblance to fighting men.

The fate of Major Bradford was peculiarly sad. During the night following the battle he was marched away with a few other prisoners. Before starting he obtained permission to bid me good by. He knelt down by my side and, taking my hand, told me that he knew he would soon be killed. He had been among the foremost of the few loyal men in his neighborhood in West Tennessee, and in Forrest's command there were some of his bitterest enemies. On the second day after the battle, about five miles from Brownsville, Tennessee, according to the sworn testimony of an eye witness, furnished to the committee on the Conduct of the War, a detail of five rebel soldiers led him about fifty yards from the line of march and shot him to death. His body was left where it fell and the line moved on.

Forrest's first dispatch to the Confederate authorities reporting his engagement at Fort Pillow, admitted to a great extent, the atrocities committed. Subsequently, however, when the abhorrence of mankind over his work began to be made manifest, he endeavored to suppress his first reports concerning the affair and in some of the details to deny, and in others to palliate the excesses of his troops.

From Forrest's first dispatch to the Confederate authorities reporting his engagement at Fort Pillow, I quote the following:

"The river was dyed with the blood of the slaughtered for two hundred yards. The approximate [*sic*] loss was upward of 500 killed, but few of the officers escaping. My loss was about 20 killed and 60 wounded. It is hoped that these facts will demonstrate to the northern people that negro soldiers can not cope with Southerners. General Grant in his Memoirs, speaking of this report says: "Subsequently Forrest made a report in which he left out the part which shocks humanity to read."

I estimate that fully 300 of our men were killed by the enemy after our works had been stormed and carried, and further resistance on our part had wholly ceased.

Thus ended, in fire and blood, in murder and cruelty beyond the pale of civilized warfare, the battle of Fort Pillow. More than two and a half centuries of wrongs were, in a certain sense resented by the men who operated our artillery there against the oppressors of their race. The

## The Fort Pillow Massacre, 1864

steady roar of these guns while the conflict lasted, seemed to be echoing back through the ages the story of the slave master's rule and tyranny, while at the same time, this ringing speech of artillery was proclaiming in language not to be misunderstood, that the "Kingdom was coming."

On the other hand, the men in Gray were there, aroused by passions born of the "peculiar institution" and determined to maintain it at all hazards. It seemed to be the last great act in a drama which had been culminating for two hundred and fifty years. It was, in one sense, on their part, a farewell shot against victims of the institution they loved so well. Without slavery Fort Pillow would have been impossible.

Under no other system could the fiendish elements which entered into the horrible aspects of that affair, have ever been evolved in the hearts of civilized men.

Along the pathway of the war for the Union are thickly strown deeds of heroism and patriotism, and the contemplation of which, stirs a nation's pulse till they beat as one man's. These constitute the bloody but priceless heritage of "grim visaged war."

But now in the beautiful language of our gifted war poet – the laet Benjamin F. Taylor –  
 "The drifting years like thistle down, have glittered out of sight,  
 The boys are mustered out of life, let no man say "good night"!  
 The Boys in Blue, and Boys in Gray sleep peacefully together,  
 And God's own stars shine through the flag, and make it pleasant weather."

Among the stories of the stormy days of the Republic, few will longer be remembered than the heroic defense and almost utter annihilation of the garrison of Fort Pillow.

MACK J. LEAMING.

*Mack J. Leaming.*

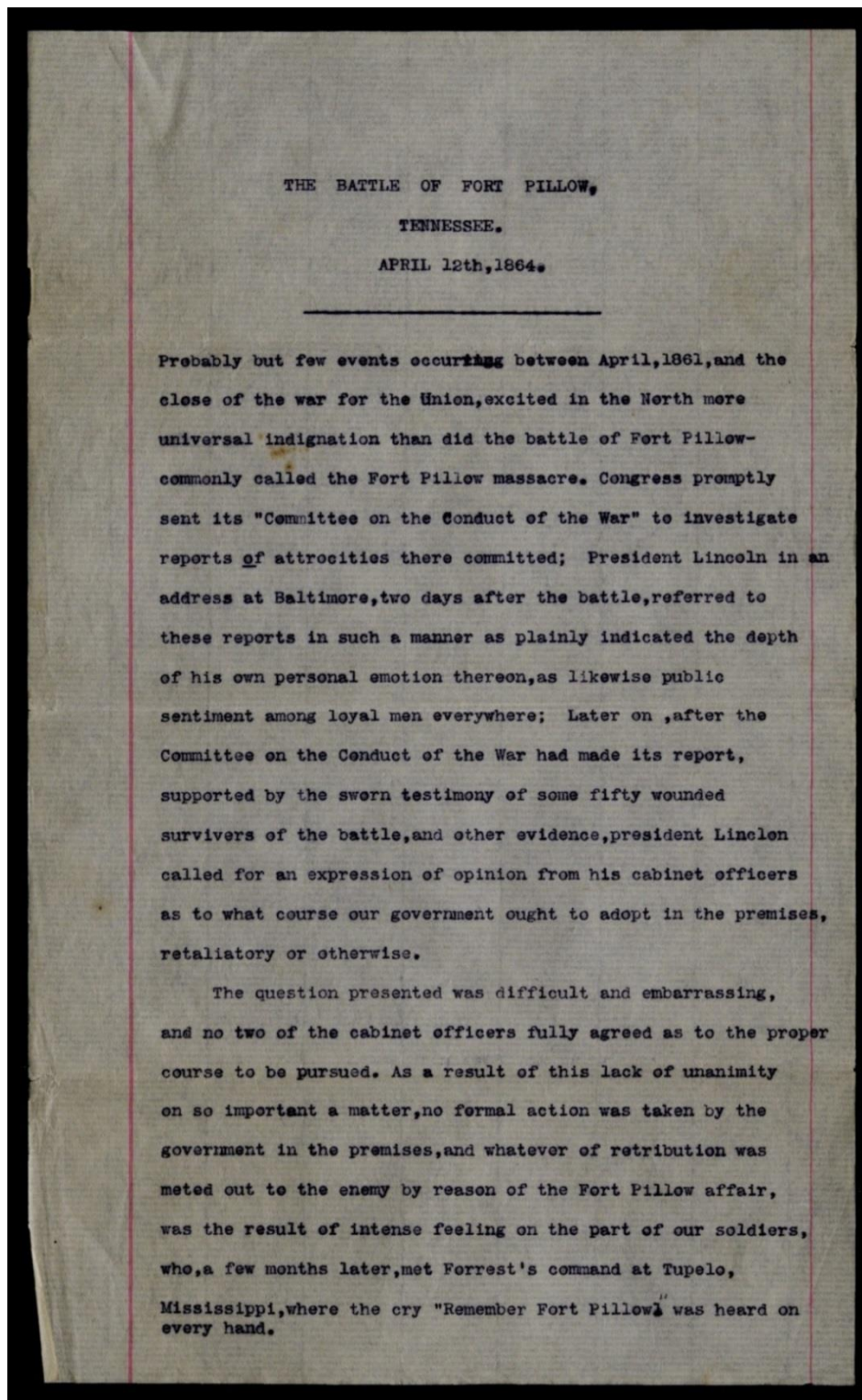
*Great Falls, Montana.        }*

*15th April 1893.            }*



## The Fort Pillow Massacre, 1864

Image



Mack J. Leaming's memoir of the Fort Pillow Massacre, April 15, 1893.  
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC05080.01 p.1)