

**THE 14th COLORED INFANTRY:  
BLACK UNION SOLDIERS  
FROM UPPER CUMBERLAND**

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On May 22, 1863 – a few months after the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect on the first day of the year – the United States War Department established the Bureau of Colored Troops and began actively recruiting African American soldiers for the effort to preserve the Union. About 175 regiments of the USCT (United States Colored Troops) were eventually raised, composed of about 180,000 men, or about 10 percent of the Union Army. Thousands of them never came home, meeting their deaths at the hands of the enemy, or – more often – as a result of disease, a common fate for many soldiers of the time. The most celebrated of these regiments was the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts, commanded by William Gould Shaw, whose exploits at the Battle of Fort Wagner were memorably captured on film in the 1989 movie “Glory.”

Before the film, many Americans were unaware of the role black Union soldiers played in the Civil War. Most people in the Upper Cumberland also remain unaware of our region’s own contribution to that story.

In October and November of 1863, the 14<sup>th</sup> United States Colored Infantry was organized in Gallatin, Tenn. Four companies were immediately sent to Bridgeport, Ala., for fatigue duty; the remainder of the regiment was sent to Chattanooga in February to work on the fortifications of the city, and were there reunited with those first four companies.

The 14<sup>th</sup>, however, made a stop along the way to Chattanooga – in Sparta, Tenn. The regiment’s commander had been ordered to recruit along the Caney Fork and Calfkiller rivers, “impressing” (or drafting) no Negroes, but accepting as many volunteers as he could find. The 14<sup>th</sup> was commanded by Colonel Thomas Jefferson Morgan, an abolitionist from Rhode Island who would later serve as Commissioner of Indian Affairs under President Benjamin Harrison. Morgan’s second-in-command was Lieutenant-Colonel Henry C. Corbin. On March 28, 1864, Colonel William B. Stokes of the Fifth United States Cavalry (a native of the region) reported that the 14<sup>th</sup> was in Sparta, “recruiting rapidly.”

Most of these volunteers were slaves from the various Upper Cumberland counties. Now that the area was occupied by Union forces, they were able to come forward freely and volunteer. How many did so? This author is presently researching that question, which requires going through the regimental records soldier-by-soldier, but eventually a number will be determined. The majority of volunteers were sent to Chattanooga, where the 42<sup>nd</sup> and 44<sup>th</sup> United States Colored Regiments were being formed for guard duty and defense of that city; many, however, were accepted into the ranks of the 14<sup>th</sup>, which was a combat regiment.

Two days earlier, Amanda McDowell – a pro-Union woman lived in White County – wrote in her diary: “...*The Yankees are still in Sparta, not only there but have some negro soldiers there too. They were bad enough but when it comes to negroes, Heaven defend us! It is indeed humiliating, but the country deserves to be humiliated. Even to the very dust...*”

In an earlier entry McDowell had noted that the Anderson family of Sparta had suffered the loss of several slaves who had run away. Some of them may have been among the African American Andersons who joined the 14<sup>th</sup> at Sparta: David, Thomas, and James Waymon Anderson.

In August the 14<sup>th</sup> was part of the charge that drove General Joe Wheeler’s forces out of Dalton, Ga. The following month, in Murfreesboro, they were involved in a skirmish with the Eighth Confederate Tennessee Cavalry, commanded by George Dibrell of Sparta, whom they prevented from joining Wheeler’s main force. It is quite possible that the conflict on that day, involving Sparta men who were black and white, in blue and gray, may have seen former slaves fighting their own former masters.

The most dramatic point of the war for the 14<sup>th</sup> was the Battle of Nashville, on Dec. 14 and 15, 1864. Two of the regiment’s companies had been on a troop train derailed, and subsequently pinned down, by Confederate cavalry commanded by Nathan Bedford Forrest on Dec. 10, and made their way to their regiment under cover of darkness. Once there, according to Morgan, they “advanced until they were under sever fire” and were “ordered to carry the rifle pits...killing, wounding, capturing or driving away the enemy” with much success. After the main battle, the 14<sup>th</sup> was singled out for praise by General George Thomas, commander of the Union forces.

The fact that a significant number of recruits in the 14<sup>th</sup> United States Colored Infantry came from the Upper Cumberland has been lost to local memory. This has likely been due to circumstance – many African American families from the region moved west after the war, and their stories were lost – rather than intentional, but nonetheless the result has been an unfortunate failure to honor their roles in the war. There are no mentions of them or local histories. It is my hope that the revelations of my ongoing research will change that, and that henceforth – along with the other Confederate and Union units raised in White County and the Upper Cumberland in general – the name of the 14<sup>th</sup> United States Colored Infantry will be displayed proudly.

They fought hard for it.

\*Read more ‘Cumberland Tales’ at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>