

A National Disgrace Whitewashed

By Peter H. Michael

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Day 64- Between trips, our friend Fergus Bordewich happened to email me about his op-ed piece appearing in *The Wall Street Journal*. The subject was the 150th anniversary of the Civil War massacre at Fort Pillow, Tennessee, on April 12, 1864, when 1,500 Confederates overwhelmed 550 white and black Union soldiers in the Battle of Fort Pillow after which a heavy majority of black Union soldiers were massacred even though Union forces had surrendered. The laws of war recognized by both sides stated that shooting stops with surrender and that surrendered soldiers automatically become prisoners of war with recognized POW rights.

The massacre sprang from Southern infuriation that the North would use black soldiers to fight whites, and that black Union soldiers were having success in doing so. Under the command of General Nathan Forrest, Confederate forces, after the Union commander had surrendered, wasted no time systematically killing more than three hundred black troops, women and children, some shot, others bayoneted, clubbed to death, saber-hacked, burned alive or buried alive. Death rates tell the story: Confederates one percent, Union whites twenty-two percent, Union blacks sixty-three percent. All of the approximately one-third of black soldiers who survived escaped through thick woods or in a single skiff which made it across the nearby Mississippi River. Records show that the Confederates took no black prisoners, only the 296 white soldiers who had surrendered and been spared.

For the remainder of the Civil War, black soldiers going into battle shouted the rallying cry "Remember Fort Pillow!"

Among many racial incidents, the Fort Pillow Massacre has been reckoned the war's ugliest. Forrest and his Confederate troops immediately began denying that any massacre had taken place, but a Congressional investigating committee, relying on numerous escapee and civilian eye-witness accounts, verified that without doubt it had. Before the war Nathan Forrest had been a plantation owner and slave trader, and afterward became a founder of the Ku Klux Klan. After Reconstruction ended, town after southern town erected statues of Forrest or memorialized him in other ways.

Bordewich's article and a later exchange of emails left the impression that the Tennessee Department of Parks which operates Fort Pillow State Park could do more in its portrayal of the Battle of Fort Pillow to recognize the historical fact that a massacre had taken place. Since our route took us near the park, my curiosity prompted me to visit to see just how the massacre is officially portrayed.

Driving west from Covington, Tennessee, one would not guess from the peaceful countryside that it once was inflicted with a racial massacre. Getting to Fort Pillow on the Chickasaw Bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River involves turns onto ever more rural roads way off any beaten track. The fifteen miles or so between US Route 51 and the river cover deep countryside with nothing more than a few sleepy crossroad stores and the occasional farm. The further one gets from the highway, the more forest takes over farm land until when reaching the park entrance one is well into solid forest.

Fort Pillow, named for Confederate General Gideon Pillow, did not consist of a single constructed walled fort but of a series of earthen breastworks some of which have been restored and may be visited. The fort and adjacent area where the Battle of Fort Pillow took place comprise about a half-mile square overlooking where the river used to run in 1864. The park map available at the visitor center locates and describes twenty-one places involved in the battle but makes no mention of the main massacre site for which Fort Pillow is most noted. The Tennessee State Parks color brochure listing all of the state's parks contains a one-paragraph description of Fort Pillow State Park which does not mention the massacre. The description mentions the battle, wildlife and archeology but, as far as the massacre is concerned, the brochure says only that the "Battle of Fort Pillow remains controversial" without saying why.

Visitor center displays begin to move closer to the truth but avoid getting all the way there. One display lists by name those killed in the battle; from the lengths of the three lists—one hundred sixty-four Union blacks, sixty-four Union whites, fifteen Confederates—the visitor can begin to get an idea of what happened. Another display tiptoes toward candor by mentioning "the controversy" of the numbers killed by race and goes as far as to say that "different historical interpretations" contend with one another as to the marked disparity in casualties by race. I did not see the word "massacre" in the visitor center or anywhere in the park, and, if I hadn't read up on it before arriving, would have had no way based on the displays and brochures of knowing the gravity of what had actually happened.

The only photograph on the park's trail guide is of Forrest, but a life-size photo cut-out of a group of United States Colored Troops is placed to face a wall in the visitor center. The few exhibits devoted to blacks and the euphemized massacre are much over-shadowed by what amounts to an official modern-day State paean to General Forrest in the color brochure, the park map and a number of exhibits including an entire major display devoted to him. The reason Forrest was never prosecuted for war crimes and the Fort Pillow Massacre is that his fellow Tennessean Andrew Johnson succeeded to the presidency upon Lincoln's assassination and went easy on Forrest despite Congressional inquiry findings of Forrest being guilty of war crimes.

At the very least, Tennessee State Parks soft-pedals the Fort Pillow Massacre and unashamedly continues to idolize native son Nathan Forrest without mention that after the war the federal government found him to be a common war criminal because of the massacre. Given the imperative that parks have in presenting history faithfully to the public, the way that Forrest is portrayed and the massacre is white-washed amounts to a 150-year cover-up by the State of Tennessee.

In 1877, Nathan Forest died wealthy in Memphis which still has a city park named for him. Nearly a century and a half later, the nation's memory of Forrest was reawakened when late in 2013 students and parents at the Nathan B. Forrest High School in Jacksonville, Florida, used a worldwide Internet petition to successfully pressure the Duval County Board of Education to change the school's name. Parent Ty Richmond's Change.org petition drew 162,150 signatures. The school is sixty-two percent black.

Leaving the visitor center, I took a walk along a park path toward the area where the massacre had happened. There it was again: another place with the ghostly reverent hush of what should never have occurred, as if the place itself is traumatized by what it remembers. Even birds were quiet.