Without Controversy: The Development of Fort Pillow State Historic Park

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On April 12, 1864, approximately 1,500 Confederate cavalry under the command of Major General Nathan Bedford Forrest surrounded Fort Pillow, a West Tennessee Fort situated along the Mississippi River, and its Union garrison of about 600 black and white troops. After the Union garrison refused demands for surrender, Confederate forces stormed the fort and quickly overwhelmed Union forces. Over the next several hours Confederates continued to shoot down Union troops, despite their repeated attempts to surrender or flee. When the battle was over, fewer than two dozen Confederates were killed but nearly half of the Union garrison, including two thirds of the black troops, was dead. Although a decisive Confederate victory, the event became a media sensation, resulting in a highly publicized U.S. Congressional investigation. For nearly 150 years almost every detail of the event has been scoured, but the most controversial aspect of the debate continues to be how the event is defined. Was Fort Pillow a massacre? Although historians agree that a massacre occurred, many still refuse to accept this contentious label.

Only three years after the end of the Civil War, Forrest biographers became the first to explain the events of Fort Pillow. As such, the event was placed in the larger context of Forrest's life and military career, and tended to be centered on Forrest's involvement and responsibility. Many early historians attempted to frame Fort Pillow not as a massacre, but rather a ferocious and unorganized battle in which discipline and control were regretfully lost. One of the most popular Forrest biographies blames the inferior racial intelligence of African Americans as a reason for higher casualties.[1] The consistent yet disconcerting theme of the early Forrest biographers is their failure to adequately examine the actions of Confederate soldiers, and an overriding tendency to blame the Union garrison for its own demise. Some early historians, however, though differing from Forrest biographers, were also faulty in their description of Fort Pillow. The scholarly discussion reached a turning point in 1958, following an article by Albert Castel that carefully reexamined the evidence, and convincingly concluded that a massacre did indeed occur.[2] This article, combined with the rise in importance of African-American history, served to reopen the examination and study of Fort Pillow. Based on the totality of evidence, modern historians agree that racial atrocities did occur at Fort Pillow and few remain hesitant to label the event a massacre.

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Beginning with a land purchase, the early 1970s saw major milestones in the preservation of Fort Pillow, including its listing on the National Register of Historic Places in 1973, and designation as a National Landmark in 1975. The development of Fort Pillow began during a crucial time for the Tennessee state park system. The early 1970s not only saw the initial stages of the creation of Fort Pillow State Historic Area, but more importantly a fundamental reorganization of the Tennessee State Parks. Although the reorganization provided a new and much needed professionalism, and a commitment to embrace scientific and historical data from scholarly debate, this new management scheme was severely challenged by controversies that plagued the development of Fort Pillow State Historic Area.

In 1971, the Department of Conservation purchased 1,628 acres of land in Lauderdale County, including most of the Fort Pillow site.[3] After the property was acquired, the Department of Conservation requested a historical survey of the site from the Tennessee Historical Commission (which also serves as the State Historic Preservation Office).[4] The survey eventually evolved into a national register nomination for the Fort Pillow site, in 1973.

For the next two years, development of the Fort Pillow site continued, but attracted little attention. The calm was shattered when Fort Pillow was officially designated as a national landmark on November 19, 1975. Unlike the national register nomination, Fort Pillow's designation as a national landmark created a major controversy for both state and federal agencies. The designation involved an official ceremony at the Fort Pillow site, attended by a representative of the Department of the Interior (DOI) and National Park Service (NPS), Paul Swartz, chief of Cooperative Activates for the NPS Southeast Regional Office, and Buck Allison, commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Conservation. As part of the ceremonial designation, Swartz offered a few words to mark the occasion. After first noting the high integrity of the National Landmark Program, Swartz described Fort Pillow as "the place where more than 250 unarmed black Union soldiers were murdered and other atrocities committed... What happened here will forever shame us as a nation." Swartz characterized the events of the battle as a "lesson—deep, ominous and everlasting." In concluding his remarks, Swartz hoped that "the 'lesson' of Fort Pillow today might be to keep us utterly realistic about the enigmatic nature of man—ourselves—and what we are capable of if we let the beast be uncaged."[5] Unlike the national register nomination, Swartz's remarks would not go unnoticed.

The following month, Tennessee State Representative Edward F. Williams III, representing the 96th representative district, north of Memphis, wrote a scathing letter to Tennessee Department of Conservation Commissioner Buck R. Allison. Not only was Fort Pillow located within Williams' District, but more importantly, Williams sat on the House Conservation and Environment Committee, the committee that oversaw the Tennessee Department of Conservation. The letter vigorously disputed the massacre interpretation and tone of Swartz's comments and the NPS press release. Williams argued that the Tennessee State Parks should not interpret the event as a massacre, and took strong exception to the federal government telling the state how to interpret the past. According to Williams, "It appears that Federal officials are determined to continue to use Civil War propaganda, discredited more than a century ago, in their references to this Tennessee State Park.... I feel certain that you will agree with me that it is neither the duty nor the responsibility of the Tenn. Department of Conservation to aid the National Park Service in perpetuating erroneous propaganda which was manufactured more than 111 years ago."[6]

Commissioner Allison responded a week later. Allison's letter agrees with Williams sentiments, calling Swartz's comments "unjustified, stilted, and pedantic. The ground breaking was not the time to present such a biased view-point." Although both Williams and Allison were critical of Schwartz, Allison implied that the director of the National Landmark Program would soon issue a formal apology to the state. Remarkably, Allison concluded the letter by revealing that he has a personal connection to the battle: "You see, there was an Allison fighting alongside General

Forrest at Fort Pillow."[7] Despite the letter writing-campaign, it remains unclear if the NPS, DOI, or the National Landmarks program ever issued an apology.

In many ways the controversy established and hardened polar opposite versions of the Fort Pillow battle. For the NPS and others, such as the African-American Bicentennial Committee, the event was an unmitigated racist massacre and atrocity on the scale of a modern war crime. For others, particularly Tennessee state officials, such as Representative Williams and Commissioner Allison, a massacre interpretation of Fort Pillow was not only completely unacceptable, but a blight on the name of cherished ancestors, and a long-venerated Tennessee hero, Nathan Bedford Forrest. Despite serious factual errors in both versions, there appeared to be no middle ground, nor did there appear to be an interest in examining the evidence with an open mind or a neutral perspective.

By 1982, Tennessee State Parks completed museum exhibits and an audio-visual presentation.[8] Unlike the exhibits which did not discuss the 1864 battle in depth, the program addressed the battle with significant yet nuanced and accurate detail, based on a massacre interpretation reflected in current scholarship. On May 12, 1982, prominent Memphis attorney T. Tarry Beasley II wrote a scathing letter to Department of Conservation Commissioner Charles A. Howell III. Calling the audio-visual program "Yankee propaganda," Beasley suggested that the program be taken down and reviewed by local historians "to give you documentation for the correct presentation of the controversy."[9]

On June 2, 1982, Commissioner Howell sent a response letter to Beasley stating that the audio-visual program had been removed. Howell promised to order a review of the program and request input from Ed Williams to determine the "historical authenticity."[10] Despite his brazen antagonism and pro-Confederate bias, Beasley's request was completely and immediately granted. After a thorough review, the Department Interpretive Committee decided to make twelve changes to the program. The changes included the addition of an introductory disclaimer, the rewording of several battle descriptions, and the addition of a new ending "designed to leave the viewer with a purposeful feeling, and a conciliatory frame of mind." Two notable changes included a modification of language describing Forrest's involvement. The following quote by Forrest was removed: "The river was dyed with the blood of the slaughtered for two hundred yards … it is hoped that these facts will demonstrate to the northern people that Negro soldiers cannot cope with Southerners." Forrest's quote was replaced with a quote by Confederate Sam Caldwell: "They refused to surrender which incensed our men, and if General Forrest had not run between our men and the Yanks with his pistol and saber drawn, not a man would have been spared."[11] This change fundamentally changed how the program depicts Forrest.

Later, on October 5, 1982, Memphis resident Les Birchfield wrote a letter of complaint to Tennessee State Parks Director Don Charpio, arguing that a massacre did not occur, and the Fort Pillow State Park did not accurately interpret the battle. As support for his position, Birchfield included a photocopied description of the battle from John Allan Wyeth's biography, *That Devil Forrest*.[12] The letter is notable in that it elicited a response, which included a preliminary interoffice memorandum from Robert Mainfort to Tennessee State Parks Director Don Charpio. The Mainfort memorandum presents an unvarnished perspective that reveals how the Tennessee State Parks employees interpreted Fort Pillow after having dealt with the movie controversy earlier that year. In a memorandum, Mainfort refutes Birchfield's points, and dismiss Wyeth's interpretation stating, "Wyeth's discussion of the massacre has not stood up under the scrutiny of historians. This was made clear as long ago as 1958 (article by Albert Castel) and the new evidence published by myself and John Cimprich clinches the case for the occurrence of a massacre. The concept of presenting 'both sides' of the issue is invalidated by a mass of historical data."[13]

By 1989, Tennessee State Parks completed the first and only strategic management plan for Fort Pillow. The strategic management plan included a short section entitled "History of Park"

which identified several secondary research sources. According to the management plan, "Included in the more outstanding of these were John A. Wyeth's biography of Nathan Bedford Forrest and John L. Jordan's interpretation of the Fort Pillow 'Massacre' published in the *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*."[14] Despite the fact that Mainfort had dismissed Wyeth's interpretation seven years earlier, by 1989 Wyeth had become one of the most important secondary sources for park management.

In 1993, Fort Pillow Superintendent Tom Shouse was quoted at length in an article in *Civil War Times Illustrated*. In an abrupt turn from Fort Pillow developer and scholar Robert Mainfort, Shouse described the events of Fort Pillow as a mystery and cast serious doubt as to a massacre. Specifically, Shouse cast doubt on the casualty numbers, described the Congressional Report as "propaganda," and presented the event as a two sided story in which the visitor must decide who is correct: the northern version or the southern version.[15] In his interpretation, Shouse directly contradicts not only the huge body of evidence and scholarship, but more importantly the interpretive development as previously stated by Robert Mainfort. Although the Tennessee State Park planners were initially successful in presenting a balanced interpretation based on sound scholarship, subsequent Tennessee State Park employees have abandoned that scholarship in favor of a version of the past more agreeable to Tennesseans interested in the history of the Fort Pillow incident.

Although it was not the war's only racial atrocity, nor was it the largest, Fort Pillow was the most publicized and perhaps the best-known racial atrocity of the conflict. The conception of Fort Pillow is largely thanks to its association with Nathan Bedford Forrest, yet his notorious legacy continues to confound and frustrate how this site is presented to the public. While the legacy of Forrest and racism generate significant difficulties, they also offer unique opportunities for the public to explore some of the most pertinent, enduring, consequential yet unapprised issues of the Civil War, including the meaning of freedom and the legacy of slavery and racism. Despite the controversial nature of Forrest or the contentious racial overtones of the Fort Pillow massacre, the greatest obstacle to effectively interpreting and preserving the parks is the state of Tennessee, which remains steadfast in its unwillingness to embrace the controversial past of Fort Pillow as a foundation for interpretive opportunities.

Endnotes

1. John Allen Wyeth, *That Devil Forrest* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), 328–329.
2. Castel, Albert, "The Fort Pillow Massacre: A Fresh Examination of the Evidence." *Civil War History* (March, 1958): 45–46.
3. Robert C. Mainfort Jr., *Archaeological Investigations at Fort Pillow State Historic Area 1976–1978* (Nashville: Division of Archeology, Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, 1980), 1.
4. Tennessee State Parks, *Fort Pillow State Historic Park General Management Plan* (Nashville: Tennessee Department of Conservation, 1989), 9.
5. National Park Service press release, "Place of Civil War Massacre of Blacks Designated National Historic Landmark" (November 19, 1975). Tennessee State Parks Archive, Nashville.
6. Edward F. Williams III, letter to B. R. Allison, commissioner, Tennessee Department of Conservation (December 1, 1975). Tennessee State Parks Archive, Nashville.
7. B.R. Allison, letter to State Representative Edward F. Williams, III (December 8, 1975). Tennessee State Parks Archive, Nashville.
8. Tennessee Department of Conservation, "Fort Pillow A/V Program." Notes from Tennessee State Parks Departmental Interpretive Committee meeting (June 1, 1982). Tennessee State Parks Archive, Nashville.

9. T. Tarry Beasley II, "Fort Pillow State Park," letter to Charles A. Howell III (May 21, 1982). Tennessee State Parks Archives, Nashville.
10. Charles A. Howell III, "Response Letter to T. Tarry Beasley" (June 2, 1982). Tennessee State Parks Archive, Nashville.
11. Tennessee Department of Conservation, "Fort Pillow A/V Program." Notes from Tennessee State Parks Departmental Interpretive Committee meeting (June 1, 1982). Tennessee State Parks Archive, Nashville.
12. Ibid.
13. Robert Mainfort, "Fort Pillow—letter from L.E. Birchfield," memorandum to Don Charpi (October 20, 1982). Tennessee State Parks Archive, Nashville.
14. Tennessee State Parks, *Fort Pillow State Historic Park General Management Plan* (Nashville: Tennessee Department of Conservation, 1989), 10.
15. John E. Stanchak, "A Legacy of Controversy: Fort Pillow Still Stands." *Civil War Times Illustrated* (September/October 1993): 78.