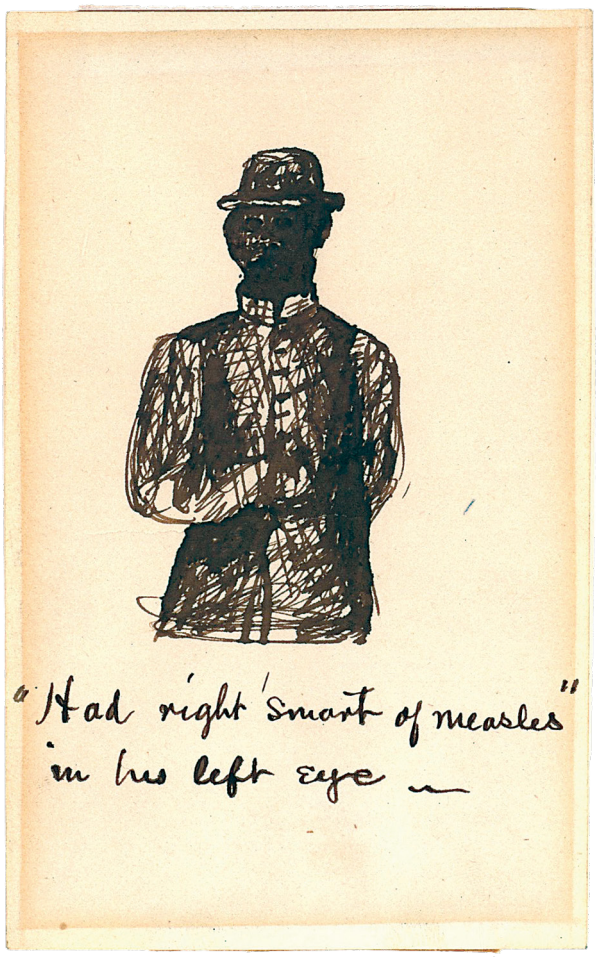

Of "Desdemona's Struggle"

A Search for a Black Family in Civil War America



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In 2016, American Ancestors acquired a series of pen and ink sketches that seem to depict the efforts of a woman, apparently named Desdemona Carter, to secure a Union Army pension. Much about these drawings remains unknown. The gallery that sold the sketches to American Ancestors provided an estimated date of ca. 1875, but their precise origin and age is unknown. Who composed these sketches, and where? Again, we do not know.

Yet, for all that is unknown about them, these sketches still have proven to be a revealing subject of study.[1] The search to identify the figures depicted compels us to consider many aspects of the African American experience in the Civil War and postbellum eras. In addition, this research process sheds some light on the discoveries and challenges that will lie ahead for the 10 Million Names project, which seeks to trace the names and lives of those who were enslaved in America.

While the intended order of the sketches is unclear, it is possible to infer that the woman in a heavy hood, face upturned with a proud, almost defiant, expression, is "Desdemona Carter." Although labeled "Witness for Desdemona Carter wife of Joe," the rest of this sentence seems to be continued underneath another sketch: "was present when 'de chile was born.'" This sketch shows a second, matronly looking woman. She, then, is likely the *witness* for "Desdemona," present at the birth of "Desdemona's" child and therefore able to attest to her identity. The words "Desdamona [*sic*] Carter / Relict [Widow] of Joe Carter / applicant for pension" appear beneath a third drawing of a woman who, like the first, wears a hood and cape and, again like the first, is drawn in a dark shade of blue rather than black. These similarities reinforce the idea that the first, most precise drawing is one of two that depict "Desdemona."

A sketch of a child who seems to be identified as "Desdemona's daughter" is described as "'aged 10 years — goes to school' colored girl of the period." The final two sketches depict a man, or two men, with the following text: "'Had right smart of measles' in his left eye" and "Was introduced to Genl. Forrest at Ft. Pillow—so glad to see me he shook my arm off." The references to "Genl. Forrest" and "Ft. Pillow" connect these sketches to the Civil War and make plausible the hypothesis that they depict an application for a Union Army

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pension. These sketches seem to depict Black people, the drawings reinforced by the description of the child as "colored."

Extensive research on "Desdemona Carter" and "Joe Carter" did not result in specific identifications, but instead led to the conclusion that these were not the real names of these figures. No "Desdemona Carter" was found in late-nineteenth-century censuses or in Freedmen's Bureau records. And no particular Joe Carter can be connected to these sketches. Our goal is still to try to learn as much as we can about the people depicted in these sketches. To do so, we must begin by tracing the broader historical context.

Black Soldiers in the Civil War

Some abolitionists believed that the recruitment of Black soldiers was necessary, if the war to preserve the Union was truly to become a war of emancipation. "[L]et the black man…get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder," Frederick Douglass declared, on April 6, 1863, and "there is no power on earth or under earth which can deny that he has earned the right of citizenship."[2]

Perhaps precisely because of this radical potential in arming Black men, Union policymakers were resistant. The enlistment of Black soldiers was initially a gradual process shaped by Union officers and enslaved people themselves. After the First Confiscation Act passed on August 6, 1861, the Union Army protected thousands of enslaved men, women, and children who had fled from slavery through a policy of "military emancipation." The escapees were known as contrabands, and some of the men worked in noncombatant roles such as repairing fortifications. Increasing numbers of enslaved people were encouraged to free themselves and make for Union-held areas—creating further pressure on Northern policymakers.[3] In 1862, Congress passed a law freeing enslaved people whose masters served in the Confederate military.

The Emancipation Proclamation, issued on January 1, 1863, fully opened the door to federal Black enlistment. The federal Bureau of Colored Troops was established in May 1863, and, over the course of the war, Black regiments were reorganized as United States Colored Troops (USCT).

Close to 180,000 Black men served, accounting for ten percent of all Union soldiers. While the first regiments were recruited in free states with strong traditions of abolitionist politics, most Black soldiers—approximately 98,000—came from Confederate states. About 93,000 enlisted after reaching Union lines or the North; 5,000 were recruited in the South but "credited" to Northern regiments. Across all Confederate states only about 2.5 percent of the Black population was free.[4] Another 40,000 Black soldiers came from border states such as Maryland and Kentucky, where slavery had been legal when war broke out. In other words, a decisive majority (likely around three-fifths) of Black Union soldiers were fighting not only for the principle of freedom, but for freedom for themselves and their families.[5]

White and Black soldiers shared many aspects of military life—boredom in camp, battle experiences, regimental camaraderie, the threat of disease, and the pain of being separated from loved ones—but they were not treated equally. USCT soldiers were deployed less frequently in combat and were assigned to labor-intensive tasks such as building fortifications more often than their white brothers-in-arms. Black soldiers initially were paid $10 per month, compared to $13 for whites.[6] The armed forces were segregated until 1948, and commissioned officers in USCT regiments were white.

The Civil War pension system, established in 1862, was theoretically color-blind, but in practice



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administered inequitably. In the years prior to 1890—when official pension requirements were stricter—officials more commonly investigated the "character" of Black applicants (especially women) than of white applicants. In this same period prior to 1890, officials were much more generous to white applicants, approving 81 percent of white pension applications compared to 44 percent for African Americans.[7]

"Remember Fort Pillow"

The search for "Joe Carter" was narrowed by a reference to a specific military engagement: "Was introduced to Genl. Forrest at Ft. Pillow—so glad to see me he shook my arm off."

Fort Pillow, a post in Tennessee, fifty miles north of Memphis, had been in Union hands since 1862. At dawn on April 12, 1864, approximately 1,500 rebel soldiers attacked the outpost, held by only 538 Union troops, including 262 Black soldiers. Confederate commander Nathan Bedford Forrest's soldiers engaged in what Northern newspapers condemned as a massacre, leaving half the garrison dead. One Confederate, Achilles Clark, wrote to his sisters that General Forrest's initial orders were for Black soldiers who surrendered to be summarily executed, "shot down like dogs." Wounded USCT Private Arthur Edwards described how rebel soldiers remonstrated with him, "God damn you, you are fighting against your master." The U.S. Congress's Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War's 1864 investigation described "deeds of murder and cruelty" continuing into the following day.[8] "Remember Fort Pillow!" was thereafter a USCT battle cry.

Southerners were quick to claim that no massacre took place. But while some specific incidents were likely exaggerated for Northern propaganda, evidence shows that Confederate soldiers conducted a brutal massacre, disproportionately targeting Black soldiers.[9] Given the massacre's notoriety, the quote that "Genl. Forrest" was "so glad to see me he shook my arm off" must be read as a grim and sardonic reference to this notorious battle. Indeed, the illustration depicts this figure with what looks like a pinned sleeve, leaving open the possibility that his arm is missing. Do the sketches therefore specifically suggest that this soldier was wounded at Fort Pillow?

Searching for "Joe Carter"

Two USCT regiments were at Fort Pillow, the 6th U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery, Companies A, B, C, and D; and the 2nd U.S. Colored Light Artillery, Company D.[10] Searching these regiments produced no soldier named Joe Carter. But "Joe" could plausibly be either a nickname, or simply a generic-sounding name used by the artist who drew the sketches.

The records for the 6th Heavy Artillery show a Robert Carter, while the 2nd Light Artillery had a Richard Carter. Compiled military service records provide basic information: age, birthplace, occupation, date and place of enlistment, and even a brief physical description. The Fold3 website shows index cards for pension applications submitted by their widows. Full pension files, held at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., can be lengthy, reflecting the complexity of the application process. Robert's pension file contains fewer than fifteen pages, but Richard's has more than three hundred.

Although sparsely written, service records can offer valuable information about Black soldiers' experiences. We learn neither Richard nor Robert Carter was recruited in his home state. Richard, 23 at enlistment, was a blacksmith from Missouri who mustered into service at Black River Bridge, Mississippi, in November 1863 amid the storied Vicksburg Campaign. Robert, 35, was a farmer who was born in western Virginia and enlisted in Memphis just a month before the Battle of Fort Pillow.

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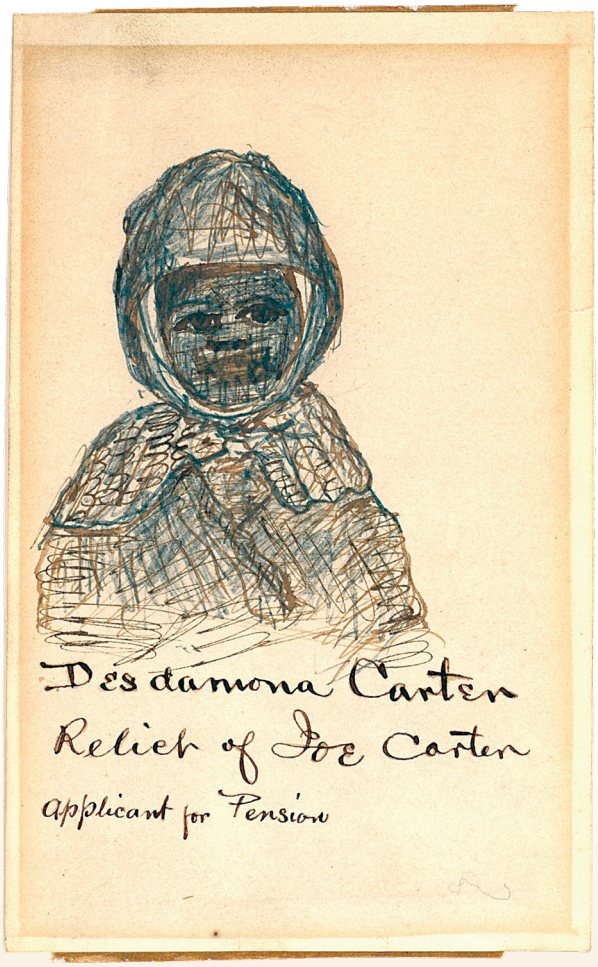
Neither soldier can be definitively placed at Fort Pillow. Richard joined the 2nd's Company D sometime in April or May, but perhaps not before April 12, when the battle occurred. Robert was in the 6th Heavy Artillery's Company L, which did not serve there. But we also can't entirely rule out either Carter's presence there. Richard might have ended up at Fort Pillow. Soldiers could be detached on duty with other companies for a variety of reasons. 2nd Light Artilleryman Samuel Mills, for example, was not a Company D soldier but was killed in action at Fort Pillow. Conversely, Corporal James Fate, a young farmer in the 6th's Company A, had been detached back to Fort Pickering for the day and so by sheer luck avoided the Fort Pillow massacre.[11] Robert might have been unlucky enough to join the company just before the battle.

More on Richard Carter

The cause of Richard's death, which likely occurred between November 1865 and the end of 1866, is unclear. What makes this pension file fascinating is that it contains the applications filed by *two* women claiming to be Richard's widow.



The first, Lizzie Foster of St. Louis, Missouri, applied in 1890. Her case dragged on for several years, partly because she had difficulty proving that she had been married to Richard Carter. In an 1892 letter, Lizzie wrote that Richard "was the first man I ever was married to in slavery time," and that although "lawfully married by a minister…we had no regular license." Lizzie had remarried, to a man named Eugene De Larry in St. Louis. Until 1901, remarried women were ineligible for a pension unless they were widowed after the remarriage. Deeper questions surfaced about Lizzie Foster's credibility. The Pensions Bureau dug up an 1889 assertion by Griffin Foster—likely a relative—that Lizzie had "defrauded" the state out of Richard Carter's enlistment bounty by falsely claiming she had been married to him. Lizzie's pension application was ultimately rejected because she could not prove her case.

In 1898, a contesting widow, Rachel Carter of Vicksburg, Mississippi, also sought a pension. In this case, too, identification was lacking, and no pension was granted.

Lizzie Foster's and Rachel Carter's applications cast some light on the labyrinthine process of applying for a pension—especially for formerly enslaved Black women lacking easy access to official records. But the research into Richard Carter did not find any specific, documented incident, such as a marriage or hospital stay, that unequivocally connected him to western Tennessee in April 1864. We conclude that Richard Carter was not the "Joe" depicted in the sketches.

More on Robert Carter

Now we turn to the pension file of Robert Carter, a soldier in the 6th Heavy Artillery, Company L. In August 1868, 43-year-old Bettie Carter applied for a Union Army widow's pension. She reported that her husband was Robert Carter of the 7th U.S. Heavy Artillery.[12]

Further details can be found in the widow's declaration, a two-page document completed by a clerk in the Memphis court during an interview with Bettie. This pension file, unlike that of Richard Carter, is slim and contains no other correspondence or narrative beyond the widow's declaration and standard bureaucratic queries.

According to Bettie, she married Robert on or about March 1, 1864—the same date Robert enlisted as a sergeant in the 6th Heavy Artillery. (Robert mustered into service on April 2, ten days before the Battle of Fort Pillow.) Bettie attested that they were married by a chaplain named "Richardson" (of whose current whereabouts she knew nothing) but said she had no official

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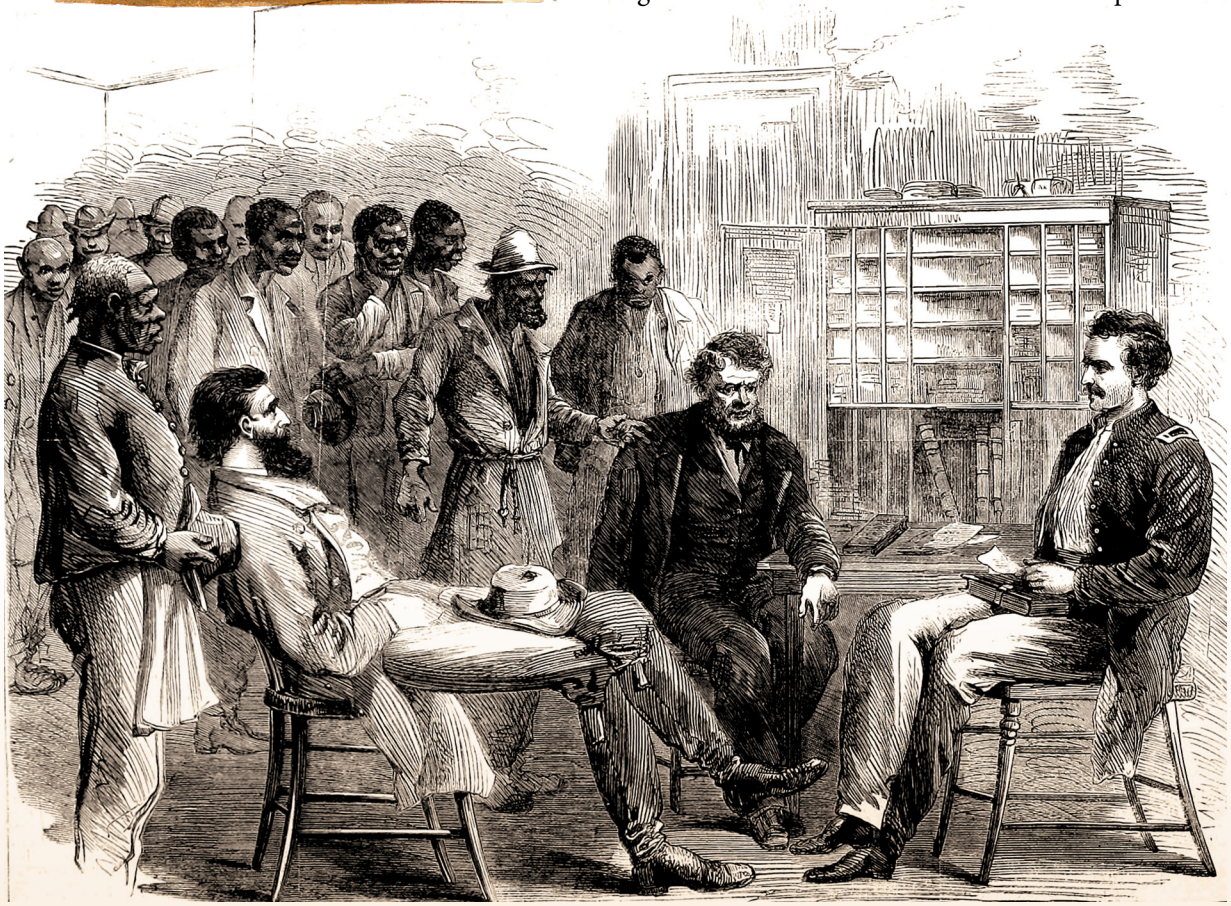
record of the marriage; her wedding certificate was lost when "her trunk was broken open."

Robert Carter was a soldier for only a month or two before his death in the Fort Pickering military hospital in Memphis. The certificate of death (forwarded to the Pension Bureau on November 14, 1868) and a November 7, 1868, letter from the Adjutant General's Office report that the disease was "not specified." But Bettie's declaration gives the cause as "measles." Text under one of the sketches refers to "a right smart of measles" that someone—"Joe"?—suffered. If it was "Joe" who was being referenced, perhaps the artist was simply recording information provided by Bettie.

Two different dates are given for Robert Carter's death. Bettie believed he died on May 20. To substantiate her claims, she called upon two witnesses, Braxton Clopton and Reason Barker, who said that they had been witnesses at Robert and Bettie's marriage. The men attested that they had seen Robert's body after his death. They said that Robert was taken ill with measles, seemed to recover, but then fell sick again and died after two days, on or around May 20. Service records, however, give the date as April 21— nine days after the Battle of Fort Pillow—and this earlier date is listed in the official documents from surgeon general's and adjutant general's offices. While a date of death of April 21 would



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Previous page: "Office of the Freedmen's Bureau, Memphis, Tennessee," from *Harper's Weekly*, June 2, 1866. Internet Archive. *Above:* "Contraband Yard," likely near Fort Pickering in Memphis, by J. W. Taft, undated. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

create a very narrow timeline for Robert to have been at Fort Pillow, it is still possible he was there.

If the sketches do depict scenes from this particular pension application process, perhaps the two drawings of men are not both drawings of Robert/"Joe," but of the male witnesses Clopton and Barker. Clopton was reported to have been sick at some point in April. Could he have had a "right smart of measles in his left eye"? These ambiguities might frustrate researchers, yet they also reveal overlapping possibilities that illuminate a complex range of historical experiences.

Another ambiguity is the presence of a daughter, but one whose birthdate doesn't fit the sketch narrative. Bettie's declaration recorded a daughter, Mary, who was born posthumously in January 1865—meaning Bettie became pregnant very shortly before Robert's death. The latest documentation in Bettie's file is dated 1868, when Mary would have been three years old. That "Desdemona's daughter" seems to be 10 years old is a discrepancy that cannot be satisfactorily explained.

To confirm Mary's birth, Bettie called as a witness 21-year-old Mollie Harris, who "attended the applicant when said child was born." The sketches depict a second woman who "was present when 'de chile was born.'" A woman of color in her mid-20s named Molly Harris appears in the 1870 census keeping house in Fisherville, Tennessee, near Memphis, living in a household

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with Peter Harris, Sam Harris, and two young children. Could this be the same Mollie Harris?

We do not know what happened to Bettie Carter after the army returned substantiating documents to the Pension Bureau in November 1868. The pensions application process could be arduously long and expensive, and many formerly enslaved African Americans lacked the financial resources to sustain a drawn-out application process. Whatever the circumstances in this case, Bettie did not receive a pension. The Pension Bureau did not reject her application; her case was marked simply as "Abandoned."

Do the figures in the sketches represent Bettie and Robert Carter? The fact is that we do not know. Suggestive parallels can be found between the sketches and the actual case of a Bettie Carter, a widow who applied for a Union Army pension. Based on the evidence available, though, we are only able to conclude that it is a possibility.

But no matter who composed these sketches, and for what purpose, the drawings reflect real African American Civil War experiences: the Battle of Fort Pillow, the arduous process of applying for a Civil War pension, the birth of a child during wartime, and the illness and early death of an USCT veteran. The figure of Desdemona, so evocatively drawn in the first panel, can indeed represent Bettie Carter of Memphis—regardless of whether that was the artist's intention. ◆

NOTES

1. Curt DiCamillo, "Desdemona's Struggle," *American Ancestors* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 62–63.
2. Quoted in Farrell Evans, "Why Frederick Douglass Wanted Black Men to Fight in the Civil War," *History Channel*, February 8 2021, https://www.history.com/news/frederick-douglass-civil-war-black-recruitment.
3. Elizabeth R. Varon, *Armies of Deliverance: A New History of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 33.
4. Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, eds., *Freedom's Soldiers: The Black Military Experience in the Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 16–17. See also "Data Analysis: African Americans on the Eve of the Civil War," tildesites.bowdoin.edu/~prael/lesson/tables.htm.
5. The idea that African Americans willingly fought for the Confederacy is one of Civil War history's most tenacious myths. Black men were never formally enlisted in the Confederate military or equipped with arms. Only as the Confederacy neared collapse in March 1865 did the rebel government consider enrolling Black men. As American Civil War Museum historian John M. Coski writes, their "status was that of enslaved or marginally free laborers serving in capacities in a military setting analogous to their roles in civilian life" (see acwm.org/blog/myths-misunderstandings-black-confederates). See also Kevin M. Levin, *Searching for Black Confederates: The Civil War's Most Persistent Myth* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).
6. Steven Mintz, "Historical Context: Black Soldiers in the Civil War," The Gilder Lehrman Institute for American History, gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/teaching-resource/historical-context-black-soldiers-civil-war.
7. Dora L. Costa, "Pensions and Retirement Among Black Union Army Veterans," *Journal of Economic History* 70 no. 3, 2010: 567–592, at 569.
8. United States Congressional Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, "Report on the Fort Pillow Massacre," May 5, 1864, gutenberg.org/files/41787/41787-h/41787-h.htm.
9. For a painstaking review of the evidence, see John Cimprich, "The Fort Pillow Massacre: Assessing the Evidence," in *Black Soldiers in Blue: African American Troops in the Civil War Era*, ed. John David Smith (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 150–168; and Erin L. Thompson, "At Fort Pillow, Confederates Massacred Black Soldiers After They Surrendered," *Smithsonian Magazine,* April 10, 2023, smithsonianmag.com/history/at-fort-pillow-confederates-massacred-black-soldiers-after-they-surrendered-180981952.
10. Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, "Report on the Fort Pillow Massacre," gutenberg.org/files/41787/41787-h/41787-h.htm. A potential cause of confusion is that there were two USCT 6th Heavy Artillery regiments, both reorganized in 1864 from previously recruited regiments. The one at Fort Pillow (formed between June 1863 and March 1864) was originally the 1st Alabama Siege Artillery, although organized in western Tennessee and Corinth, Mississippi. It was renamed the 6th Heavy Artillery only a month before the Fort Pillow massacre and ended the war as the 11th Infantry.
11. Slaves to Soldiers Project, slavestosoldiers.org/us-colored-troop-veterans/infantry-regiments/11th-us-colored-infantry-new.
12. The 6th Heavy Artillery became the 7th Heavy Artillery after it was reorganized following the Fort Pillow massacre. Seven months later, in January 1865, it was reorganized as the 11th Infantry.

For more on this topic, members can view "Researching Black Soldiers in the Civil War," a lecture given by Researcher Jonathan Hill. See AmericanAncestors.org/video-library/researching-black-soldiers-civil-war.

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