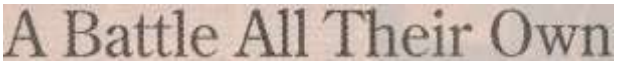
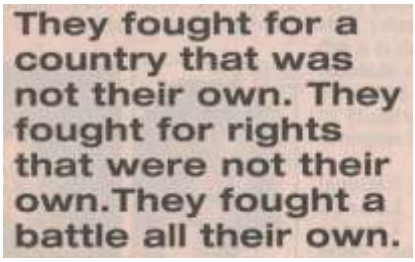
A Battle All Their Own

By Glenn Hodges

Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Tuesday, 27 February 1996, p.1D:





By Glenn Hodges, Messenger-Inquirer

After their Civil War victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg in 1863, Union generals saw the opportunity to force the Confederacy to its knees and sent many of their western-based troops to planned assaults on Atlanta and Richmond, Va.

Soon, so many Federal soldiers were pulled out of Kentucky that the state became one of the Union's most weakly defended territories.

In a last-ditch attempt to sustain the Confederate effort for a few more months, Gen. John Hunt Morgan was ordered to establish a second war front in the West and recruit new men in Kentucky for the Rebel army's thinning ranks.

At that point, the Union command decided to replace its white troops Kentucky with African American soldiers. The enrollment of black men for military service in Kentucky began in February 1864, and by March was underway on a large scale. In April, provost marshals were ordered to enlist both free blacks and slaves, assemble them in Louisville and transport them out of state for training. Slave owners who were loyal to the Union were supposed to be paid up to $300 for their slaves.

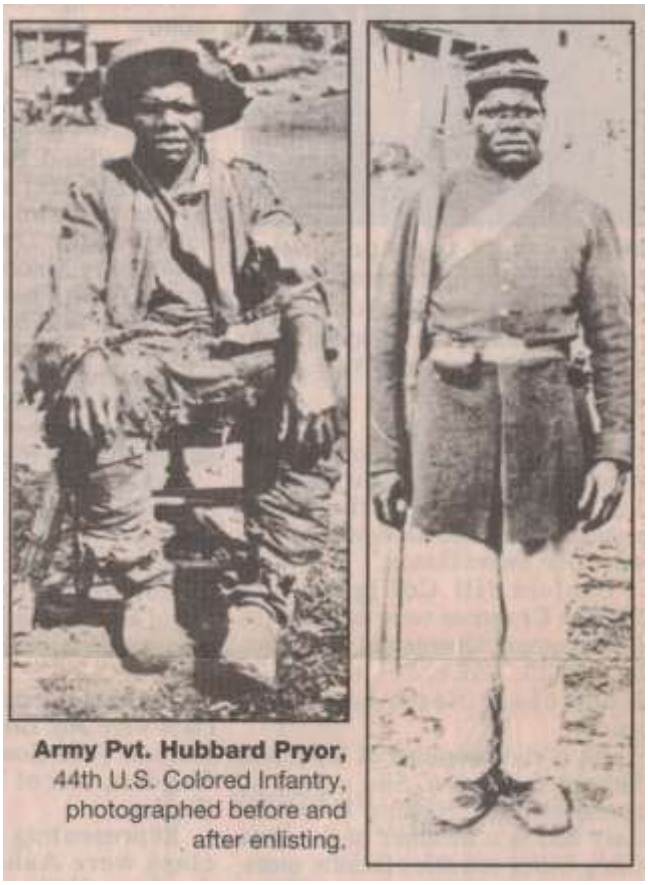
It was soon evident that the plight of the black soldier in Kentucky would be grim.

The new, much-dreaded recruiting policy drew complaints from all over the state. Even the staunchest Union men were violently opposed to it, charging it was unconstitutional and a trick to extend the Emancipation Proclamation to Kentucky, a loyal state. (The Proclamation freeing the slaves in 1863 applied only to the 11 states of the Confederacy.)

Soldiers who had fought for Kentucky in previous wars protested that putting blacks into uniform degraded the honor of serving in the military. Farmers feared that the loss of their chief labor source would seriously damage the state's agricultural economy. Many Kentuckians believed

arming slaves would give them ideas of freedom, and Unionists in the state envisioned fighting blacks as well as secessionists before the war was over.

A poster used in recruiting black soldiers for the Union Army during the Civil War.



Army Pvt. Hubbard Pryor, 44th U.S. Colored Infantry, photographed before and after enlisting.

To allay Kentuckians' fears and anger, President Lincoln told Gov. Thomas Bramlette that slaves would not be enlisted in any county of the state that furnished its required quota of white soldiers to the Federal war effort. But by June 1864, Kentucky failed to meet its quotas and the War Department in Washington began recruiting blacks vigorously. Reception camps for black recruits were set up at Paducah, Owensboro, Bowling Green, Lebanon, Louisville, Covington, Camp Nelson and Louisa.

As soon as the African American recruiting effort began in earnest, the trouble started. White owners found it hard to get the compensation they had been promised for their slaves. It also was reported that the Union Army was using strong-arm tactics to impress blacks into the service and that recruiters from other states were using bounties to entice slaves away from their owners.

In some cases, black soldiers were beaten, stabbed and murdered by angry whites. A Louisville newspaper reported that children of that town showed their hatred for the black troops by shouting insults and pelting them with rocks.

The white population of Hancock and Daviess counties considered the recruiting of African American troops as a slap in the face. The whites' subsequent actions exposed the racial prejudice and resentment that existed there and increased the tension that the war had ingrained in people's lives.

An incident occurred on Sunday, June 19, 1864, that galvanized local whites' attitudes toward the black Union troops.

A Federal recruiter, E.N. Powers, assembled a group of 28 black men at Hawesville and was waiting to transport them by steamboat to Owensboro that morning. As the boat took on coal at the city wharf boat, curious townspeople started to gather on the riverbank.

Among them was Robert Costain Beauchamp, a 64-year-old farmer and politician from Hancock County, who was concerned that some of his slaves might try to enlist.

Robert C. Beauchamp

Beauchamp was talking with Dr. Timothy Holmes on Water Street about a block above the river embarkation point as the men were assembling at the water's edge. About an hour had passed when Powers came up the bank and told Beauchamp that none of his slaves was among the group.

But soon after Powers walked away, one of Beauchamp's slaves walked by, heading in the direction of the black recruits who had started to board the boat.

"Beauchamp called to his slave several times, telling him to stop," Dr. Holmes said later. "But the Negro seemed disinclined to obey. Beauchamp caught him by the lapel of his coat when

the Negro drew a large knife. I believe he would have killed his master if I had not caught his arm and prevented him from using the knife."

Beauchamp was later said to have fired his pistol at the slave after the man tried to board the steamboat, and several men on the riverbank also opened fire. In the next chaotic minutes, the area near the wharf boat crackled with the sound of pistol and rifle shots as the guards on the boat exchanged gunfire with the men on the shore. The steamboat pulled away from the Kentucky riverbank to get out of range.

During the shooting spree, Capt. Charles Delaney of Union County, supposedly in Hawesville on a recruiting mission for the Confederates, was wounded critically in the back and died later. Another man on the riverbank was wounded but survived. The pilot, engineer and a passenger on the steamboat were wounded slightly.

The black recruits arrived in Owensboro that evening and were marched to the Daviess County courthouse where other Union troops were staying. They were turned away by the colonel in charge who would not permit them to be lodged in the courthouse. The black men had to endure the humiliation of sleeping overnight in the city jail. They were finally enrolled as Federal soldiers the next day.

The people of Hawesville would not get much of a respite from the threat of violence in their town, and the Union Army would be back soon to find the instigators of the gun battle.

Many of the black soldiers went on to serve the Union with distinction in the local area, but were a favorite target for Confederate guerrillas for the rest of the war.

Fearful Times: A History of the Civil War Years in Hancock County, Kentucky, Glenn Hodges (Owensboro, KY: Progress Printing Co., 1986) pp.25-29:

The year of 1864 brought the blackest, most dangerous experiences of the war to the people of Kentucky, and the residents of Hancock County had to bear more than their share.

The flow of rapidly developing events began in February with the appointment of Union Gen. Stephen Burbridge as the new commander of the Military District of Kentucky. His heavy-handed, often corrupt administration of army and civil affairs in the state during the next six months would arouse Kentuckians to a new peak of outrage. And by late spring, a shift in Union military strategy would stir a reaction by the Confederate command that brought pain and destruction to the doorstep of nearly every western Kentucky county, including Hancock.

After turning the tide of war with victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg in 1863, Union generals saw the opportunity to force the Confederacy to its knees and sent many of their western-based troops to the planned assaults on Atlanta, Ga., and Richmond, Va. Soon so many Federal soldiers were pulled out of Kentucky that the state became one of the Union's most weakly defended territories. Confederate strategists saw the gutted defenses quickly and took action. John Hunt Morgan, who had been captured during his July 1863 raid but escaped from an Ohio prison four months later, was given command of the Confederate Department of Southwestern Virginia and preparations began for another invasion of Kentucky. In a last-ditch attempt to sustain the Confederate effort for a few more months, Morgan was ordered to establish a second war front in the West and recruit new men in Kentucky for the Rebel Army's thinning ranks.

Concurrently, the Union Army began enrolling Negroes for military service in Kentucky in February 1864, and by March was doing so on a large scale. In April, provost marshals were directed to enlist both free Negroes and slaves, assemble them in Louisville and transport them out of state for training. Loyal masters of recruited slaves were supposed to be paid as much as $300 per Negro.

The new, much-dreaded recruiting policy drew a flood of complaints from all over Kentucky. Even the staunchest Union men were dead-set against it, charging it was unconstitutional, a disregard of people's rights, and a trick to extend the Emancipation Proclamation to Kentucky, a loyal state.(The Proclamation applied only to the 11 states of the Confederacy and had no effect on Kentucky slaves because their state had never seceded from the Union. A total of 23,703 Kentucky Negroes served in the U.S. Army during the war.) Old Kentucky soldiers protested that putting Negroes into uniform degraded the honor of serving in the military. Farmers feared the loss of their chief labor source would damage the state's agricultural economy seriously. Many Kentuckians felt that arming slaves would give them notions of freedom, and Unionists could envision themselves having to fight blacks as well as secessionists before the war was over.

To appease Kentuckians' fears and anger, President Lincoln told Gov. Bramlette that slaves would not be enlisted in any county in the state that furnished its prescribed quota of whites to the Federal war effort. But by June Kentucky had failed to meet those quotas and the War Department responded by recruiting Negroes vigorously. Reception camps for black recruits were set up at Paducah, Owensboro, Bowling Green, Lebanon, Louisville, Covington, Camp Nelson and Louisa.

Once the Negro recruiting program began in earnest, there was trouble. The promised compensation for the loss of a recruited slave was very hard to get. There were reports of the U.S. Army using strong-arm tactics to impress Negroes into service, and of recruiters from other states using bounties to entice slaves away from their owners. In some cases, black soldiers were beaten, stabbed and murdered by angry whites. A Louisville paper reported that even some children of that city showed their hatred of the Negro troops by pelting them with rocks and shouting insults.

The recruiting of Negro slaves in its home region was another slap in the face to a large part of the white population of Hancock and Perry counties. It exposed the undercurrent of racial prejudice and resentment that existed there, and the tension that the war had ingrained into people's lives.

At least two ugly reactions to the new recruiting policy and swirling events of that spring and summer occurred at Hawesville and Cannelton, and Negroes were caught in the middle of both.

The first victim was a 15-year-old mulatto girl who had moved to Cannelton from Memphis with a white family early during the war. In the week of April 3, 1864, Union soldiers from the 53rd Indiana Regiment obtained an order from a Cannelton deputy sheriff, seized the girl from her family's home and took her to Hawesville, where they handed her over to the Hancock County jailer.

About 11 p.m. that night, a lieutenant and eight men from the 26th Indiana, another Federal regiment stationed at Cannelton, crossed the river and demanded the release of the girl. When the jailer refused, a soldier put a pistol to his head. He quickly unlocked the cell door, and the girl was taken to her home in Cannelton.

On Saturday, April 9, the soldiers who had abducted the girl were charged with kidnapping. They were unable to post bail and were lodged in jail at Cannelton. But their arrest and confinement caused so much excitement and drew so many threats of violence that they soon were set free.

The second incident took place on Sunday, June 19. A Union recruiter, E.N. Powers, assembled a group of 28 Negroes that morning in Hawesville and they were waiting to board the steamer Science No. 2, bound for Owensboro, 24 miles down the river.

While the boat took on coal at the town wharf boat, a crowd of curious townsmen gathered on the river bank.

Among these concerned observers was Robert Costain Beauchamp, a 64-year-old farmer, politician and slave owner. (His two-story brick plantation house built in 1842 still stands along U.S. 60 northwest of Hancock County High School.) Beauchamp was talking with Dr. Timothy Holmes on Water Street, about a block above the river embarkation point. The Negroes had been at the water's edge for almost an hour when the recruiter came up the river bank to tell Beauchamp that none of his slaves was in the contingent.

But soon after Powers walked away, one of Beauchamp's slaves came along, heading in the direction of the wharf boat where the black recruits had started to board.

"Beauchamp called to his slave several times, telling him to stop," Dr. Holmes said later in a sworn affidavit. "But the Negro seemed disinclined to obey. Beauchamp caught him by the lapel of his coat when the Negro drew from his person a large butcher knife. (I) believe he would have killed his master if I had not caught the Negro's arm and prevented his using the knife."

The black man broke away from Beauchamp and Holmes, and ran toward the Science No. 2. Beauchamp was close behind, and two of his sons soon arrived and joined the chase.

Holmes said he began to move toward the steamer to "prevent all violence" when he heard gunfire.

Beauchamp later was accused of firing his pistol at the Negro as he tried to board the steamboat. After he had discharged the weapon, several men on the river bank also opened fire. In the next chaotic minutes, the area near the wharf boat crackled with the sound of pistol and rifle shots as the boat guards traded fire with the men on the river bank, and the steamboat pulled away from the Kentucky shore to get out of range.

During the shooting spree, Capt. Charles Delaney of Union County—alleged to have been in Hawesville on a recruiting mission for the Confederates—was wounded critically in the back and died later. Another man on the river bank had a finger shattered by a pistol ball. The pilot, engineer and a passenger on the Science No. 2 also were wounded slightly.

The black recruits arrived in Owensboro that evening and were marched to the Daviess County courthouse where other Union forces were staying. They were turned away by a defiant State Guard commander, and had to endure the humiliation of sleeping overnight in the city jail. They finally were enrolled as Federal soldiers the next day.

<u>Owensboro Monitor</u>, Owensboro, KY, Wednesday, 22 June 1864, p.3:

Negro Recruiting at Hawesville—Excitement There—
Arrival of the Negroes at Owensboro—Almost a Battle.

On Sunday last a score of negroes who had been secretly recruited by one Powers and a few associates, appeared on the streets of Hawesville preparatory to their shipment to this place. A, small steamer happening to land at the wharf to discharge some freight, the negroes were ordered aboard and aboard they went. A Mr. Beauchamp attempted to arrest a negro belonging to

him while yet on the shore, the negro hastened on the boat, and was fired at by Beauchamp. Instantly a number of pistols were discharged in the direction of the boat, from the midst of a crowd of excited citizens on the shore; injuring no one on the boat but riddling the steamer pretty badly. A man named Coon, associated with Powers, shot into the crowd of citizens, severely wounding Mr. Charles Delany, a son of Dr. Delany, of Union county. The ball entered his back, and passed through his body. It is feared he will not recover. The boat escaped with her sable cargo and late in the afternoon arrived at this place where the negroes disembarked. Powers marched them to the Court House square, he making a very warlike display at the head of the column with a cocked navy revolver in his hand. The negroes were met at the gate of the Court yard by Col. Woodward of the State Guard, whose force is quartered at the Court House, and were forbidden to enter. The Provost Marshal soon made his appearance and ordered the negroes to be admitted. – Woodward commanded his men to arm themselves. They quickly seized their guns, drew up in line of battle with orders to fire on any one who dared to enter. In that hostile attitude they kept negroes, Powers and the Provo at bay. The negroes finally fell back in good order, changed their base, and were securely entrenched in the county jail, under locks and bolts. The jail keys were taken in possession by the Sheriff, and for more than twenty four-hours, the negroes were on "short rations," having absolutely nothing to eat, enjoying their first installment of liberty. The Provost Marshal, not being able to secure the jail keys, procured a blacksmith, who, by cutting away some bolts, opened the door, and liberated the negroes, who repaired to headquarters and were duly enlisted as soldiers of the United States, and were again remanded to jail. Some of Powers' associates went over to Cannelton, and made an effort to raise a force to "clean out" Hawesville for the indignity offered to their fellow citizens of African descent as they were about to depart to this land of the free and home of the brave, but were not successful.