

# Battle of Johnsonville

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## Johnsonville

After the fall of Atlanta in September 1864, John Bell Hood tried to draw Sherman's forces into Tennessee by threatening their supply lines. As part of this plan, Nathan Bedford Forrest moved his forces to Johnsonville on the Tennessee River near the Kentucky line. Johnsonville was the site of a Union supply depot guarded by United States Colored Troops. Forrest had previously faced USCT troops at Fort Pillow near Memphis in April. The Bureau of Colored Troops was established on May 22, 1863 to oversee the various units of Black troops that had been raised in the North and in Union controlled areas of the South. While units raised in the North such as the famous 54th Massachusetts, were generally made up of men who had been born free, units raised in the South were often composed of men who had self emancipated.<sup>1</sup> The USCT certificate of enlistment for Dennis Morgan shows that military officials were aware and welcomed these individuals. The form recorded the name of the enslaver and a note at the bottom advised that one copy of the form would be given to the "alleged owner."<sup>2</sup> USCT troops were initially restricted from combat and often served garrisoned forts and other positions."<sup>3</sup>

In April, 1864 Forrest's troops attacked Fort Pillow which was garrisoned by USCT troops and Tennessee Unionists. The Confederates outnumbered the fort's defenders who attempted to surrender. However, approximately half of the 600 men in the fort were killed as they attempted to surrender or in the aftermath of the battle. USCT soldiers made up 67% of the dead.<sup>4</sup> Thomas Adison of the 6th United States heavy artillery gave testimony about Fort

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<sup>1</sup> Budge Weidman, "Black Soldiers in the Civil War," National Archives, <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/blacks-civil-war/article.html> accessed 07 July 2021.

<sup>2</sup> "Certificate of enlistment for Dennis Morgan into the United States Colored Troops," Tennessee State Library and Archives, <https://cdm15138.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15138coll9/id/16/rec/1> accessed 07 July 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Weidman, Black Soldiers in the Civil War"

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 321.

Pillow to the Congressional Committee on the Conduct of the War. Adison testified "After I surrendered I did not go down the hill. A man shot me under the ear, and I fell down and said to myself, 'If he don't shoot me anymore this won't hurt me.' One of their officers came along and halloed,"Forrest says, no quarter! no quarter! " and the next one halloed, " Black flag! black flag! "5

Another survivor, Elias Falls, testified that "They killed all the men after they surrendered, until orders were; given to stop [by Forrest]; they killed all they came to, white and black, after they had surrendered."<sup>6</sup> Whether Forrest ordered the killings or lost control of his men remains unclear. The Fort Pillow Massacre was widely publicized in the North and became a rallying cry for Union troops.

It was against this background that Forrest's troops attacked the USCT troops at Johnsonville on November 4, 1864. The Union commanders burned the transports, barges and gunboats docked there to prevent Forrest's men from capturing them. The fire spread to the warehouses along the dock. Before Union reinforcements could arrive from Nashville, Forrest retreated under the cover of darkness. Forrest estimated that the supplies and vessels destroyed were worth \$6.7 million, although the Union estimates were much lower. The attack at Johnsonville led to rumors of a Confederate invasion in the midwest, but ultimately did little to change the outcome of the war. Forrest and Hood had hoped that the destruction of the supplies would stop Sherman's advance through Georgia. However, the raid did not stop Sherman or prevent Hood's defeat at Nashville in November.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> United States. Congress. Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War. "Fort Pillow massacre." 1864. Making of America. University of Michigan. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=moa&cc=moa&sid=95e3f6e828e116b80d4cccd93c806bc1&view=text&rgn=main&idno=AAW7861.0001.001> Accessed 14 June, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Ashdown, "Battle of Johnsonville." Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture. Tennessee Historical Society. 2018. <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/battle-of-johnsonville/> 5 June 2019