



# History Explorer

Historical Society of Greater Lansing

[www.LansingHistory.org](http://www.LansingHistory.org)

January 2015

## Knapp's Auction Raises \$23,000 for HSGL Museum Fund!

A very big thank you to everyone who supported HSGL's annual auction at the Knapp's Centre! Thanks to your donations, attendance, and purchases, we raised \$23,000 – an increase of \$8,000 over last year. All of the money is now in our museum fund and will be used for the purpose of establishing a Lansing area historical museum. Thank you all very, very much for your support!

---

## Lansing Goes to War Exhibit

HSGL is hard at work preparing our next exhibit, which will open in late February - *Lansing Goes to War*. The exhibit will look at the many wartime roles Lansing residents have played.

Stories and objects for loan are being sought for the exhibit, which will include the War of 1812, the Civil War, the Spanish American War, World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and Desert Storm. The exhibit will examine the roles of both men and women during wartime, including home front life, wartime romance, medicine, wartime production, veterans organizations, anti-war protest movements, and more. If you have a story or an object that you would like to share, please contact us at (517) 282-0671 or [info@lansinghistory.org](mailto:info@lansinghistory.org).

## Upcoming HSGL Events

*1847 – Year of Beginnings*

*By MSU Professor Emeritus Ann Harrison*

*Thursday, January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015 - 7:00pm*

*Downtown Library, 401 S. Capitol Ave., Lansing*

Learn about all of the interesting things happening across the world in 1847, the year the Michigan Legislature voted to make Lansing, then home to a population of eight registered voters, the capital. Topics include medicine, international relations, and the women's movement.

*Chief Okemos, Man & Myth*

*By Jim Lalone*

*Thursday, February 5, 2015 - 7:00pm*

*Downtown Library, 401 S. Capitol Ave., Lansing*

*Michigan & the War of 1812*

*By Adam Franti*

*Thursday, February 19, 2015 - 7:00 pm*

*Downtown Library, 401 S. Capitol Ave., Lansing*

---

## Upcoming CADL Historical Events

*Crown: Portraits of Black Women in Church Hats*

*By Photographer Michael Cunningham*

*Sunday, February 1, 2015 - 3:00pm*

*Downtown Library, 401 S. Capitol Ave., Lansing*

## **It Was A Day of Horrors: The Fort Pillow Massacre**

*by Robert C. Mainfort, Jr.*

Two Michigan residents, Alexander Hunter and John Penwell, were among the survivors of what is perhaps the most controversial engagement of the Civil War. The incident took place at Fort Pillow, a Federal outpost located on the Mississippi River bluffs about fifty miles north of Memphis, Tennessee. The garrison consisted of about 600 men, with roughly equal numbers of white and black troops. Many of the black troops were former slaves; the whites were Tennessee unionists. Ominously, the Confederate government refused to recognize captured black troops as military prisoners, and left to its member states the options of returning them to owners or executing them as insurrectionaries. Confederate soldiers obviously were antagonized when their enemy armed runaway slaves, which raised the specters of slave rebellion, race war, and white subordination. On April 12, 1864, Major General Nathan B. Forrest attacked Fort Pillow with a force of about 1,500 men who had never before faced black troops in combat. The initial fighting boxed the Federals into a small fortification on the edge of a small bluff, and Forrest unsuccessfully requested the fort's surrender. In mid-afternoon his forces attacked, and it quickly fell to the Confederates.

This minor engagement gained notoriety only because the Federal survivors accused the victors of massacring much of the garrison, and the black troops in particular, after capturing the

fort. Their stories were quickly publicized by the northern press and led shortly thereafter to a Congressional investigation. The resulting report on the incident concluded not only that Forrest's troops massacred a substantial portion of the racially mixed garrison, but also that they committed numerous grisly atrocities. The report was heavily criticized by southern writers, who indignantly denied that a massacre took place and vehemently defended the conduct of the commanding general, who became a folk hero after the Civil War. The issue of whether or not Confederate troops massacred much of the garrison has provoked an intense, often partisan, debate. Only during the last 30 years have most general works on the Civil War accepted the massacre interpretation; some doubt still surfaces in print.

A major issue in assessing the controversy about the Battle of Fort Pillow has been the reliability of the evidence. Southern writers claimed, somewhat justifiably, that the congressional report was a propaganda device based on ex parte testimony. Certainly the congressional investigators asked some leading question, but the consistency and sheer abundance of published testimony by the survivors makes clear that this battle was more horrific than most. Moreover, much later statements given by Confederate participants in defense of their conduct contain a number of contradictions.

A massacre is commonly understood to involve a significant number of deaths, but the Federals did not file a complete casualty report after the Battle of Fort Pillow. The victorious Confederates captured or destroyed the post's records and also killed its two ranking officers. The resulting lack of a full casualty report hampered analyses of the event. In the late 1970s and 1980s, my colleague John Cimprich and I conducted a comprehensive search of the relevant military service records at the National Archives and derived a much more precise casualty estimate

### **Historical Society of Greater Lansing**

P.O. Box 12095 ~ Lansing, MI 48901  
www.LansingHistory.org

#### *Officers & Board Members*

Valerie Marvin – President	Jesse LaSorda – Trustee
Bill Castanier – Vice President	Erik Nelson - Trustee
Ron Emery – Secretary	Zig Olds - Trustee
Tim Kaltenbach – Treasurer	Roni Sionakides - Trustee
Joan Bauer - Trustee	Anne Wilson - Trustee
Harry Emmons – Trustee	

than those found in prior studies. The results provide conclusive support for the current interpretation that a massacre, particularly with respect to the black Union troops, occurred at Fort Pillow.

Of the 585 to 605 men present on April 12, 1864, between 277 and 297 Federals, 47-49 percent of the garrison, were killed or mortally wounded at Fort Pillow. This death rate is higher than that calculated in any earlier study. More importantly, our analysis also revealed markedly differential casualty rates for the black and white units. Black troops suffered a casualty rate nearly double that of their white counterparts (64 percent versus 31-34 percent).

By themselves, these figures could be used to support the occurrence of a massacre, a desperate defense by blacks, or both. To establish causality, Cimprich and I turned to Confederate documents written shortly after the engagement. Confederate Sergeant Achilles V. Clark wrote shortly after the battle: "The slaughter was awful. Words cannot describe the scene. The poor deluded negroes would run up to our men fall upon their knees and with uplifted arms scream for mercy but they were ordered to their feet and then shot down. The white men fared but little better." A Confederate newspaper correspondent added: "Thus the whites received quarter, but the negroes were shown no mercy." Desperate fighting by blacks fearing a massacre might have occurred, but if so, these quotations show that the fear was, or quickly became, reality.

In response to the Congressional report, which included a strongly worded denunciation of Forrest's army, the commanding General forcefully stated that he never ordered, approved, or knew of any maltreatment of captives. Significantly, his statement implied an acceptance, at least on the public level, of the Federal premise that the execution of blacks for

joining the Union army was wrong. The Confederate government never again officially endorsed such an action. Although smaller massacres of black soldiers occurred later, the Confederacy generally treated black military prisoners as property instead. After Forrest's next encounter with black troops — the Battle of Brice's Crossroads, Mississippi — personally appeared before the captured Federals and promised their safety.

The high death toll at Fort Pillow expressed the depth of hostilities over a major social change. Oddly enough, the resulting controversy modified the shape of that conflict.

Alexander M. Hunter emigrated from Scotland a year before the Civil War broke out and lived in Detroit. After enlisting in Third Battery 1<sup>st</sup> Michigan Light Artillery, in November 1863 (at age 24) he accepted a commission as Lieutenant in the 1st Tennessee Artillery, which became Battery D, 2<sup>nd</sup> U.S. Colored Light Artillery. Under Hunter's command, the battery fought at Fort Pillow. He was taken prisoner and spent most of the remainder of the war in various Confederate prisons. Hunter was honorably discharged October 6, 1865.

John Penwell survived the battle and testified before the congressional committee. Penwell stated that he was from Detroit and was at the fort as "a volunteer for the occasion." The latter claim is a bit suspect, as a John Penwell was mustered out of Company L, 1<sup>st</sup> Michigan Light Artillery on August 22, 1865. Various records indicate that Penwell was from Berrien County. Several white officers who commanded the black troops at Fort Pillow also were from the area, and it is possible that Penwell took unapproved leave from his unit to visit acquaintances at the fort.



Historical Society of Greater Lansing  
P.O. Box 12095  
Lansing, MI 48901

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

---

Historical Society of Greater Lansing - Membership Application

Please accept my application for:

- New Membership
- Renewal Membership
- Gift Membership

in the Historical Society of Greater Lansing

I have enclosed:

- \$20 Individual Membership
- \$30 Family Membership
- \$100 Business Membership
- \$\_\_\_\_\_ Additional Gift to HSGL

Member Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone \_\_\_\_\_ Email Address \_\_\_\_\_

- Please Send The Newsletter  
Via Email

Make Checks Payable to  
**Historical Society of Greater Lansing**

*The Historical Society of Greater Lansing is a 501 (c) (3) non-profit corporation.  
Thank you for your support of our programs and activities.*