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BLACK SOLDIERS AT FORT HAYS, KANSAS, 1867-1869 A STUDY IN CIVILIAN AND MILITARY VIOLENCE

JAMES N. LEIKER

Historians of the western army contend with many romanticized myths. Few of those myths, in recent years, have held the popular consciousness as has that of the army's first black regulars, known as "buffalo soldiers." By now, the origins of the segregated regiments are quite familiar. In 1866, with the nation's acting military force having dwindled to a fraction of its Civil War size, the Republican Congress encouraged the enlistment of newly freed slaves and northern free blacks. Assigned to remote western areas, black units played an instrumental role over the next few decades in

opening the West for white settlement. Despite their important functions, uniformed African Americans continually suffered racism and discrimination from frontier civilians and even from some of their own white officers.¹

For much of this century, both popular culture and professional historians overlooked the buffalo soldiers. The gallant stereotype of patriotic, blue-jacketed warriors bringing civilization to the plains failed to accommodate the presence of armed blacks. Although scholars began to draw public attention toward black soldiers as early as the 1960s, the dedication of a buffalo soldiers monument at Fort Leavenworth in 1992 fully captured the popular imagination, partly because of Colin Powell's visible involvement. The Leavenworth project was accompanied by a veritable explosion of buffalo soldiers commemorations including museum displays, documentaries, newspaper and journal articles, and reenactment societies. Where once the public imagined the West only in terms of white soldiers and red Indians, the present fascination represents a positive step in defining the region as a meeting ground for numerous races and cultures, a step that scholars should applaud.

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Yet not all have been enthusiastic about proclaiming buffalo soldiers' contributions to western conquest. From a Native American standpoint, lionizing the black regiments to redress historical neglect appears no more just nor progressive than the Anglo myths that excluded them. When the U.S. Postmaster General announced a commemorative buffalo soldiers stamp in 1994, representatives of the American Indian Movement demanded both the stamp's withdrawal and a public apology.² For all the topic's recent attention, few grasp its frustrating irony: that black males, themselves victims of white prejudice, voluntarily aided the subjugation of Native peoples for the benefit of Anglo expansion. This scenario illustrates the complicated, even paradoxical, nature of American race relations. Unfortunately, significant questions are overshadowed by the topic's "contribution" aspects, helping to provide a focus for national and racial pride, a cry of "we were there too." Nor have academic historians pursued the more difficult questions as aggressively as they should. *New Western History*, which has debunked many myths surrounding white occupation and shown its catastrophic consequences for minorities, generally ignores the army's role in western conquest. Military histories have added tremendously to knowledge about the subject but most employ traditional approaches that are more event-centered and descriptive than analytical and interpretive.

The time appears right for a serious reappraisal of the army's first black regulars, one that resists the temptation to cast them either as villainous enforcers of white oppression or heroic subjects of injustice. The former depiction rests on the questionable assumption that blacks shared whites' racist attitudes toward Indians; the latter, more common view treats them as passive victims, stoically enduring discrimination. Both rob the buffalo soldiers of conscious agency, seeing them not as historical actors but merely as "acted upon." In fact, when uniformed blacks entered the hostile racial climate of western towns, some acquiesced to white racism but others violently resisted.

Although holding limited options, buffalo soldiers' individual reactions to civilian antagonism played a vital role in local race relations.

SETTING THE SCENE

Fort Hays, located in northwest Kansas, serves as an example of black agency. Active from 1865 to 1889, its garrison protected stagecoach and railway traffic along the Smoky Hill River to Denver.³ Stationed there in the late 1860s, troops from the Thirty-eighth Infantry and Tenth Cavalry (both consisting entirely of black soldiers) comprised the majority of the post's enlisted men up to 1869. Though engaged in several Indian battles, the average black soldier had more reason to fear civilians or even comrades than Indians; more injuries and killings resulted from altercations in camp or nearby Hays City than from combat. While Fort Hays's troubles were not unique, the unusual mingling of a predominantly black military with growing numbers of white civilians led to racial violence that mirrored and even surpassed that in other western communities.⁴

Given Kansas' early reputation among African Americans as a safe haven for freedmen, such an assertion might seem surprising. After all, Kansas had been among the first states to muster black volunteers into Union service.⁵ Even after the Civil War, images of "Bleeding Kansas" and John Brown enhanced the state's prestige among southern blacks as a place of opportunity and freedom. In the late 1870s, thousands of "exodusters"—emigrants fleeing the South after Reconstruction—chose Kansas as their destination. While most exodusters found only disillusionment in the so-called "Canaan of the Prairies," active state charity organizations worked diligently to ease the refugees' plight.⁶ In addition, Kansas claimed several black communities, among them Nicodemus, established in 1877 only fifty miles northwest of Hays City. If any state could have been expected to tolerate a high population of black soldiers, it should have been Kansas.

While the legacies of abolition and the Civil War may have encouraged relative open-

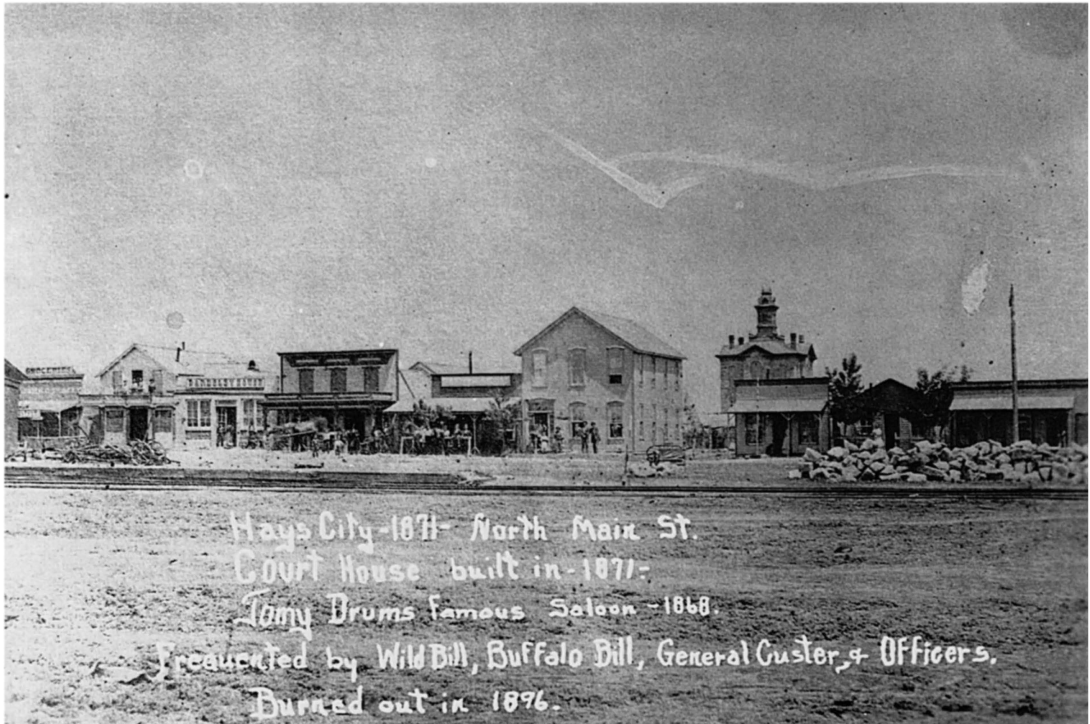


FIG. 1. Main street, Hays City, Kansas, 1871. Courtesy of Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.

ness in the state's eastern communities, however, isolated locales like Fort Hays initially shared little with Lawrence and Leavenworth. During the black units' peak enlistment in the late 1860s, the new forts and towns truly epitomized the "frontier," the peripheral edge of white settlement socially and geographically. While "frontier" as an analytical concept has been criticized for its ethnocentric connotations, the term retains usefulness for discovering how racial hatreds were transferred to the developing region.⁷ By examining how the civilian community perceived and interacted with black soldiers, we can draw a clearer picture of how the black military experience helped to shape western race relations.

Understanding the reception of black soldiers in Hays City first necessitates an examination of the military and social atmosphere at Fort Hays. As Indian raids diminished by late 1867, three Tenth Cavalry companies were recalled for winter rest at Fort Riley, leaving Fort Hays largely under the protection of black infantry.⁸ Because of its central location and proximity to the railroad, Fort Hays served as General Philip Sheridan's administrative headquarters and a depot for goods arriving by rail during the 1868-69 campaign. Although small cavalry detachments remained until 1871, infantry comprised the garrison's majority. Thus, if Fort Hays could claim a "semi-permanent" black population up to 1869, the Thirty-eighth



FIG. 2. Buffalo soldiers at Fort Hays guarding a U.S. express overland stage coach preparing to depart for Denver. Courtesy of Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.

Infantry fit that role better than the more transient Tenth Cavalry.

Narratives often focus on the cavalry's dramatic offensive campaigns and overlook infantrymen, who performed the more routine tasks of escorting surveying parties, military prisoners, and payroll and supply shipments. Infantry also received a disproportionate share of kitchen and hospital duties and sanitation detail. Although their activities attracted less attention, they nonetheless performed hazardous tasks in isolated groups of four or five that were vulnerable to surprise attacks. Troopers knew full well the perils of their work. Complaints reached the fort commander in July 1868 about five soldiers from the Thirty-eighth assigned to protect railroad water tanks. Housed in small shelters with ten-day rations, the troops

fired indiscriminately at anyone—white, black, or Indian—who ventured too close. Lest the frightened infantrymen fire on peaceful Native people and provoke conflict, officers ordered them to deal cautiously with anyone who approached rather than resorting to gunfire.⁹

Black soldiers often are depicted as victims, thereby emphasizing the army's racial prejudice. Indeed, discrimination did occur; troops frequently suffered abuse by bigoted officers and received harsher punishments than white soldiers for disciplinary offenses. The prohibition against blacks' serving as officers even in their own regiments indicates the army's low initial regard for their abilities.¹⁰ Yet deplorable conditions awaited all of the western army's enlisted men, no matter their color. None would have asserted "equality" as a goal;

the military, after all, constituted a system of institutionalized inequality. But that did not negate the possibility of fair treatment from officers who interacted with the men on a daily basis. In fact, at Fort Hays, white commanders often became their troops' greatest partisans, even protecting them from hostile civilians. In a macabre way, blacks and whites stationed there achieved a certain degree of equality: both lived abominably.

Fort Hays differed little from most outposts during its first few months, consisting merely of several tents and crude huts. Its isolated location limited the range of leisure activities—not that much leisure time was available. Poor hygiene and sanitation rendered soldiers vulnerable to disease. Beginning in July 1867, a devastating cholera epidemic swept the western forts, striking the black units especially hard. Cholera killed seven men of the Thirty-eighth Infantry that summer but the Tenth Cavalry lost more than twenty men, more than half the regiment's total number of combat deaths up to 1918.¹¹ Conditions gradually improved after the Union Pacific Railroad reached Hays in October 1867, particularly because it brought fresh supplies and materials for building permanent structures. Yet poor health continued to sap the garrison's strength. Despite their dangerous duties, soldiers obtained medical treatment more frequently for pneumonia and other ailments than for combat injuries. Gastrointestinal illnesses were especially common; nearly a third of the post's black soldiers received treatment for diarrhea.¹²

Health officials knew that improved hygiene and fresh food would decrease these problems yet found implementing such simple improvements difficult. Quartermasters unsuccessfully tried to provide unspoiled meat, while either insects or neglect doomed the post's paltry attempt at growing its own vegetables.¹³ Most enlisted men, regardless of color, cared little for personal cleanliness. Assistant surgeon William Buchannon complained that Tenth cavalymen stacked all their dirty clothes and muddy stable equipment under the bunks, attracting flies to an

already crowded and improperly ventilated barracks.¹⁴

Constant guard and escort duty, as well as the transient nature of army life, makes such apathy seem understandable. Similarly, Fort Hays' hectic work load left enlisted men little time or inclination to attend the post school that taught reading and writing, addition and subtraction. What leisure time existed was spent enjoying the benefits of steady pay. Earnings ranged from thirteen dollars a month for new privates to thirty dollars for noncommissioned officers. Although some men sent money to families back east, most wages purchased necessities from the post sutler's store or from local civilian merchants. A considerable amount ended up in the town's many taverns and brothels.

Drunkenness affected all troops at Fort Hays, including buffalo soldiers. Post records include many accounts of privates charged with neglecting duty or engaging in disorderly conduct while under the influence of alcohol. Perhaps because their isolated work made it easier and more tempting to sneak a drink, the Thirty-eighth Infantry seemed particularly prone to such problems. In February 1868 the commander placed pickets to arrest all personnel who were intoxicated, created a disturbance, or lacked passes signed by a superior officer. Typical punishment for drink-related offenses involved a fine, brief incarceration, or a reduction in rank.¹⁵

Why the high frequency of alcohol use? The combination of disease, separation from family, fear of Indian attack, and general loneliness likely inspired many to seek solace from a bottle. Frontier racism made intoxication particularly dangerous for black soldiers. Since the white public perceived the black units as experimental at best, charges of drunkenness and immorality could easily taint black regiments' reputations. At Fort Hays, the picket guard decreased alcohol-related offenses but did not necessarily increase sobriety. When getting drunk on the fort became too risky, soldiers waited until payday and visited taverns in Hays City. This proved dangerous for the

black soldier since he was subject to civilian law, not military, and white locals had extremely little patience with unruly armed blacks.

The violent atmosphere and miserable, disease-ridden conditions encouraged many desertions from the frontier military. In 1867 more than 14,000 men deserted the United States Army, nearly a quarter of its total strength.¹⁶ Most deserters disappeared successfully into civilian populations; the military simply lacked the time and manpower to pursue run-aways. Cavalrymen especially were likely to make clean breaks since they took their horses and all the army property they could carry, including food, mules, wagons, and firearms. Elizabeth Custer described how forty men deserted Fort Hays in one night, leaving officers fearful that the garrison would soon lack sufficient protection.¹⁷

Romanticized works on buffalo soldiers point proudly to their low desertion rates, a claim partly supported by statistics from Fort Hays. While more than half of the Seventh Cavalry deserted in only one year, a mere fourteen deserters were reported from Fort Hays' black regiments during its first five years.¹⁸ Although drunkenness and insubordination were common among all enlisted men, desertion appeared primarily to be a white phenomenon. The dearth of black western settlers, and black soldiers' distinctive appearance, made it difficult for potential deserters to blend into nearby communities. One should not, however, discount the more idealistic explanation that blacks' group identity and pride discouraged desertion. Despite its pitfalls, military service offered African American males opportunities for self-respect seldom matched in Reconstruction America.

Desertion rates remained high throughout the post-Civil War period but peaked in 1871.¹⁹ By then Indian resistance in the Hays vicinity had nearly disappeared, even though the fort remained a valuable transportation depot and winter quarters. As white settlement increased, a reciprocal relationship developed

between the post and nearby Hays City. Town merchants provided needed goods and services while the army employed civilian laborers on construction projects. Likewise, the thousands of dollars of army pay spent in Hays City fertilized a prosperous local economy.

Beneath this symbiosis lay major currents of hostility. Hays City resembled other western communities where violence between soldiers and civilians contributed to the region's reputation for bloodshed. If Civil War veterans were praised as heroes, federal regulars, often immigrants and displaced industrial workers, were often seen as rabble.²⁰ The proliferation of saloons and brothels that sprang up around every military post offended new settlers' puritanical values.²¹ In addition, many westerners dismissed the federal regulars as ineffective Indian fighters, even resenting their presence. One Kansan, explaining why the state militia could deal with local hostilities more effectively, ridiculed the army's ceaseless bugling, alerting enemies as soldiers prepared to attack, retreat, awake, or go to bed.²² Uniformed soldiers frequently elicited jokes or insults from civilians, not respect. In the case of a uniformed freedman, reactions could be openly hostile, especially among former Confederates for whom buffalo soldiers provided a visible reminder of southern defeat.

These charged emotions played out in the chaos of western communities during early years of development. Although scholarship on Kansas cattle towns emphasizes the exaggeration of violence in popular myth, Hays City, established in October 1867 as a Union Pacific terminus, lay beyond most major cattle trails, and its violence came not from rowdy Texas cattle drovers but from transients looking for profits from the railroad.²³ An eastern Kansas newspaper described Hays' citizenry in unflattering terms:

Gamblers, pimps, prostitutes, and dead beats, run the town, and the most unblushing defiance of everything that is decent is the prevailing sentiment. One year ago, for

the joke of the thing, they elected a prostitute as one of the School Board, and another Street Commissioner. How it is to be expected black or white soldiers will act any other way when they get a taste of the lightning poison vended there is a mystery to us. We hope the authorities of the State will incur no expense in protecting any such a class as runs Hays City.²⁴

Observers did not exaggerate the town's horrific level of violence; from 1867 to 1874, Hays City saw more than thirty recorded homicides.²⁵ During periods of ineffective civilian law enforcement, black troops served as the town guard. In late 1867, a visitor recorded that:

Hays City is really under martial law, the town being policed by soldiers from the fort; and, what makes it treble obnoxious to some, the soldiers are colored. They certainly have the credit, however, of maintaining quiet and general good order throughout the day and night: that is, quiet for a frontier town.²⁶

Actually, the presence of federal regulars exacerbated more violence than it prevented. Nearly half of all homicides up to 1874, thirteen, resulted from altercations between soldiers and civilians.²⁷

Considering the color of the troops involved, a problem arises in trying to separate "racial" violence from the larger pattern of civilian-military violence everywhere, regardless of race. Simply because an episode involved a black participant did not mean it had racial causes. The key distinction rests on whether an incident originated from some discriminatory behavior based on skin color. By that criteria, not all violence involving blacks during Hays City's first three years can be classified as "racial." But the Fort Hays experience certainly shows a hardening of white opinions toward armed African Americans, reflected not only in the callous actions of local toughs but in how state newspapers reported such activity.

Black soldiers did not behave like passive victims of prejudice. The same group cohesion that discouraged black desertions encouraged a search for vengeance when a soldier was wronged or insulted. White troops shared the feud mentality that characterized fort-town relations; if an individual returned to the post bruised or bloodied, comrades shielded him from discovery until they could get revenge on his assailants.²⁸ For buffalo soldiers, however, the drive to retaliate appeared especially strong. During a national age of violent racism, the army's black frontiersmen upheld the doctrine of "eye for an eye." Their refusal to tolerate abuse certainly deserves a measure of admiration, but their actions ultimately intensified white prejudice, creating a cycle of hatred that resembled an ongoing blood feud.

THE FIRST VIOLENT ENCOUNTER

The first violent encounter, initiated by townspeople, illustrates how officers generally sided with their men. Prior to the picket guard's establishment in February 1868, post commanders had to deal with the habitual problem of troops leaving the fort without permission. On 21 December 1867, a small detail was sent to retrieve all those absent without leave, most of whom were imbibing in civilian saloons. Privates Charles Allen, Thirty-eighth Company E, and John Washington, Tenth Cavalry Company I, demanded admittance to an establishment where AWOL soldiers reportedly languished. When they were refused, Allen began beating the door with his weapon. The saloonkeeper, Matthew "Red" Flinn, fired several shots, killing Allen and severely wounding Washington. The town guard, Allen's fellow infantrymen, immediately began searching for Flinn. Later the same evening a local named Cornelius Doyle accosted Corporal Albert E. Cropper, Thirty-eighth Company G, cursing him and shouting that "any damned nigger soldiers hunting Red" would be killed. The argument ended when Doyle apparently attempted to



FIG. 3. Passersby view the bodies of Private George Sumner and Private Peter Welsh the morning after they had been killed in Hays City by their comrade Private David Roberts, 6 September 1873. All were from the white Sixth Cavalry. The bodies were removed by an ambulance from the fort and Roberts was convicted of manslaughter. The viewers seem inured to the violent climate. Courtesy of Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.

draw his pistol and Cropper fatally shot him with his rifle.²⁹

While Allen's death produced no great uproar, talk immediately filled the streets about lynching Cropper. Civilian newspapers described Doyle's shooting far differently than the official military report. *The Hays City Railway Advance* claimed Doyle gave Cropper no "provocation whatever," a charge repeated by a Hays resident in a hearsay letter to the *Lawrence Tribune*.³⁰ Following his arrest and preliminary hearing, Cropper was transferred to the post guardhouse for his own protection. Meanwhile, fort commander Captain Samuel Ovenshine had arranged with county authorities to offer a reward for Red Flinn, who had

left the county and later was located near Leavenworth.³¹

Whether Cropper really acted in self-defense cannot decisively be determined from the disparate accounts, even though his record shows no history of similar trouble.³² Yet the fact that disparate accounts exist at all reveals how differently the civilian and military communities perceived the incident. Already suspicious of the patrol guard, residents now thought the army had protected a murderer. To prevent further hostility, Ovenshine withdrew the patrol and returned Hays City to the jurisdiction of civil law, the inefficiency of which only contributed to Cropper's eventual acquittal. By the time the District Court re-

convened after a six-month hiatus, only one witness to Doyle's shooting remained in the county, and Cropper's case was dismissed for lack of suitable jurors.³³

The killings of Allen and Doyle commenced years of hostility between the fort and town. While Cropper awaited trial, minor conflicts between black soldiers and white townsfolk continued through 1868, the same year Hays City came under control of an organized vigilante group. The vigilance committee visited perceived troublemakers and ordered them to leave town. Despite their stated purpose of establishing peace, vigilantes only increased local violence; thirteen documented murders occurred in 1869, the town's peak year for homicides.³⁴ While most eastern Kansas newspapers denounced the situation, at least one, the *Lawrence Tribune*, partly defended vigilante activity by declaring that lax law enforcement required citizens to protect themselves. In recalling the army's protection of the "murderer" Cropper, the writer implied the committee's real purpose was to defend the community from black soldiers.³⁵ In a state known for its supposed racial liberality, press coverage of events in Hays City paralleled what Democratic newspapers said about Southern race relations: armed, aggressive blacks, protected by a disliked federal military, posed threats to public safety. *The Leavenworth Daily Commercial* even likened the violence to southern "black outrages" provoked by Radical Republicans.³⁶ Attitudes became even more "Confederate sounding" after a murder by black soldiers in early 1869 led to one of Kansas' few known racial lynchings.

LEADING TO A LYNCHING

Civilian and military accounts concur that the events of 5 to 7 January began when Privates Luke Barnes, Lee Watkins, and James Ponder were refused admission into a local brothel. Prostitutes, in Hays at least, rarely discriminated on skin color, so more than likely the men's disruptive behavior prompted the refusal. All three belonged to the Thirty-

eighth Infantry, Company E, and at least two, Watkins and Ponder, had enlisted together in Nashville and spent detached service away from the post, protecting railroad camps.³⁷ Later that evening, the trio invaded the shop of a black civilian barber named John White. Hiding from the men's rage while they drunkenly smashed his shop, White heard the troops boast that they planned to get revenge for the deaths of their comrades by killing the next white man they saw. Wandering into the street, the trio opened fire on a Union Pacific watchman named James Hayes, a citizen of Leavenworth. Shot in the stomach, his spine severed, Hayes lived until the following morning, describing his assailants only as "two niggers."³⁸

Evidence against Barnes, Watkins, and Ponder would have been extremely meager without John White's testimony. Accompanied by the county sheriff and a federal marshal on January 6, White identified the three out of a lineup of the entire garrison, explaining the vandalism to his shop and their stated intent to kill a white person. The barber's testimony placed the post commander, Lieutenant Colonel Anderson Nelson, in a precarious position. Authorities insisted Nelson release the three to civilian custody rather than placing them under military protection like Cropper. Besides the resentment such an action would generate among his troops, Nelson must have known about the defendants' tenuous safety in a Hays jail cell, especially with the vigilance committee in operation. With tensions between soldiers and civilians running high, Nelson decided on a conciliatory gesture and permitted county police to assume custody of the privates, who were arraigned later that day before a justice of the peace and placed under overnight guard.

Luke Barnes, Lee Watkins, and James Ponder never saw their case brought to trial. During the evening of 6-7 January, a mob stormed the jail, overpowered the guards, and seized the prisoners from their cells. One account reported the mob's size as between seventy-five and one hundred, all with masks or darkened faces. The vigilantes hanged the men from the

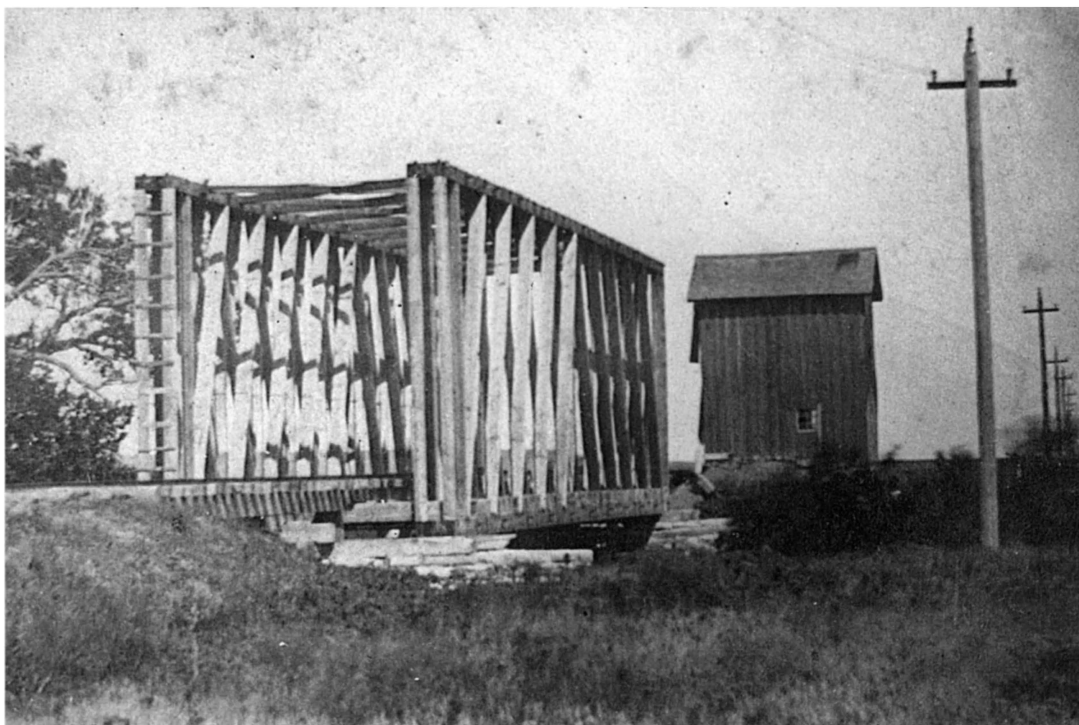


FIG. 4. This railroad trestle over Big Creek is the bridge from which the soldiers from Fort Hays Thirty-eighth Infantry were lynched in January 1869. Known locally as "Hangman's Bridge," this wooden structure was later replaced by a steel bridge. Courtesy of Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.

ties of a railroad bridge half a mile west of town. Union Pacific employees discovered their bodies the next morning.

Eastern Kansas newspapers, long contemptuous of Hays City's vigilante tradition, suddenly applauded the lynching. In James Hayes' hometown of Leavenworth, the *Daily Commercial* delighted in providing a detailed and hearsay version of the hanging:

Sometime during the night the vigilantes released the mokes from prison and indulged them in a dance in mid-air, in which they executed a treble shuffle, something of a novelty in negro breakdowns which are chiefly remarkable for merely a double shuffle. No doubt existed of the guilt of the

parties, as they sloshed around extensively brandishing their Springfield rifles, and threatening vengeance on the whites.

The men and brethren appear to be rather airy out on the plains, . . . Let us have peace!³⁹

The likelihood that Barnes, Watkins, and Ponder would have been convicted and executed anyway illustrates this incident's strong racist motives. Hays City's high number of homicides shows remarkable tolerance for violence—except when perpetrated by blacks. Rather than simply hanging three killers, the lynching issued a statement that racial norms concerning troublesome blacks would be enforced illegally if necessary.

RETRALIATION FOR LYNCHING

Unlike other racial lynchings, however, the January 1869 episode involved United States soldiers, not usually known for meekness in the face of violence. Troops of the Thirty-eighth Infantry performed the unpleasant task of retrieving their comrades' bodies and preparing them for burial.⁴⁰ Rather than intimidating soldiers, the lynching only enraged both the officers and enlisted men. Lieutenant Colonel Nelson, whose disastrous decision had placed the three within vigilante reach, responded with his own retaliatory measures. On 14 January Nelson sent a Thirty-eighth detachment into Hays City to arrest all persons out after curfew. Black soldiers raided a ballroom and arrested fifty-one people, jailing them overnight at the fort guardhouse. Nelson later wrote Governor James Harvey that because of the rumored plots against his men, he intended to close the saloons and livery stables and even declare martial law if necessary.⁴¹

Such drastic steps became unnecessary as a short-lived calm ensued following the lynching. In late January, rustlers stole several head of livestock from the post herd. The troops—their tempers running high—blamed locals for the theft. On 6 February Tom Butler, a white ex-quartermaster's employee who had been fired on suspicion of stealing, left town following the Union Pacific tracks east. When a mule was reported missing the next day, officials dispatched a search party which consisted of the quartermaster and post surgeon, a civilian detective and numerous employees, and ten soldiers from the Thirty-eighth Infantry. Tracking and cornering Butler at a water tank, the group choked him with a rope until he confessed to participation in a rustling gang. The party then divided, with fort officials and employees in one group and the black troops escorting Butler in another. Likely recalling their friends' treatment a month earlier, the soldiers shot Butler and left his corpse in an abandoned house. The mule he supposedly had stolen turned up wandering a few miles from the fort.⁴²

Clearly an act of revenge, Butler's murder illustrates the complicity of white military authorities. Tired of incessant attacks on the army's men and property, white officers willingly sided with black troops in using Butler as an example, frustrating any designation of the violence as purely racial. A Hays citizen summarized the situation: "There has been for some time much unpleasant feeling existing between the authorities of Hays City and Ft. Hays, commenced by the hanging of the three negro soldiers by the Vig's . . ." ⁴³ Indeed, the bad blood between fort and town transcended race, reflecting a larger pattern of antipathy characterizing civilian-military relations. In April, during the Nineteenth Kansas Cavalry's station at Fort Hays, white troops congregated nightly in Hays City, engaging in brawls and shootings with locals. As both the size and number of violent episodes increased, large gangs of black and white soldiers marched the streets armed *en masse*. Meanwhile, fort officials exercised little control over the troops' nightly sojourns.⁴⁴

SHOOTOUT AND RAMPAGE

In May 1869 two years of animosity climaxed in an armed confrontation that shared many features with modern race riots. Newspapers claimed that black soldiers planned to burn Hays City to the ground, a possibility in the wake of the lynching. Yet because the troops had just been paid and drunkenness and fighting often accompanied receipt of wages, it appears the violence began with the alcohol. According to admittedly biased civilian sources, several black infantrymen tried to break into a brothel from which they earlier had been refused admission. A scuffle began, with troops lining up in battle formation and opening fire into nearby homes and businesses. Townspeople returned the fire, shooting from doors and windows and exchanging more than four hundred shots in about half an hour.⁴⁵

At this point, fort officials finally took decisive action, dispatching soldiers from the Fifth Cavalry to quell the disturbance and or-

dering all infantrymen back to the post.⁴⁶ As white cavalrymen attempted to break up the melee, several residents embarked on a rampage against Hays City's few black civilians. Vigilante ruffians ordered all black families out of town and murdered two African American barbers. Of the newspapers that reported the atrocities, only the *Kansas Daily Commonwealth* voiced contempt for the deed:

Hays City has added another laurel to its garland of infamy. The other night—after the affray—a full account of which appeared in our special dispatches—was ended and the soldiers had been withdrawn, a party of roughs deliberately hunted down and murdered two peaceful and unoffending barbers, who were citizens of the town, and as quiet and harmless men as it afforded. Honest and decent men will want for language to express their indignation at this brutal and cowardly outrage.⁴⁷

Apparently, the two barbers became the only fatalities during the evening's chaos. The post surgeon recorded no gunfire injuries but newspapers reported six wounded civilians, including a U.S. Deputy Marshal, and a white trooper from the Seventh Cavalry.⁴⁸

While the events of 3 May definitely had racial motivations, classifying them as a "race riot" is not quite accurate, occurring as they did during a period of vigilante activity. In its coverage of the incident, the *Commonwealth* even pointed out that not all the discord derived from blacks' or even the military's proximity:

... it is certain that human life and limbs are altogether too unsafe in that locality. Every trifling dispute is settled by an instantaneous appeal to the pistol or the knife. All things considered, Hays City is one of the best places to move away from that can be found upon the globe.⁴⁹

Buffalo soldiers proved a contributing but not determinative factor in the town's history

of conflict. In late April and early May, the Thirty-eighth companies relocated to new assignments on the Mexican border, leaving Fort Hays with fewer than a hundred troops by summer of 1869.⁵⁰ Even so, the community's reputation for bloodshed continued, with friction between soldiers and civilians remaining a constant. In 1871, a saloon brawl involving white troops escalated into gunfire, resulting in the death of the county sheriff.⁵¹

One should not isolate racial tensions from their larger social context and exaggerate their importance over other causes of violence. Yet the buffalo soldiers' presence did produce long-lasting hostility toward the black population. As the *Daily Tribune* stated, "Hays City seems to have many of the same ideas that unreconstructed rebels have, to wit: that negroes have no rights which a white man is bound to respect."⁵² Following their eviction in May 1869, some black families were permitted to return, a decision most later regretted. In March 1871, four residents were arraigned for invading the home of an elderly black woman and raping her. Whites expressed disgust that the men were arrested on the word of "colored people." Fearing for their safety, the fort commander permitted all black families to relocate into dugouts on the post for protection, with troops once again sent into town to restore order.⁵³ The 1869 lynching and other such episodes firmly established the area's reputation as an unsafe place for African Americans. An observer in 1909 commented on the community's white homogeneity:

no negro has ever ventured to make Hays a place of residence. An occasional straggler has worked a few days in town, but the history of the place has appealed too strongly to his imagination for him to remain.⁵⁴

CONCLUSION

Fort Hays's predominantly black garrison and its hostile relationship with citizens in Hays City provides an example of how civilian/military social interaction helped to transfer racial

hatreds to the newly conquered region. The years from 1867 to 1869 saw African Americans' introduction to regular army life, the beginning of a twenty-year process in which they would forcibly help to seize western lands from American Indians. Prejudice always remained a factor in their lives but as the Hays City experience indicates, their active involvement in a local cycle of hatred obscured whatever achievements whites might have recognized and intensified racist paranoia.

Whether black soldiers' participation in an occupying army deserves praise or criticism, of course, remains a matter of individual perspective and moral judgment, an arena in which the historian can claim no particular authority. Yet if history teaches any lesson, it is that one group's pride may be another's tragedy. As Vernon Bellecourt has asked "Which do we value more, a wildly bastardized fable of progress and equality, or truth? Justice is the act of conscious, informed human beings."⁵⁵ In the recent rush to reveal the buffalo soldiers' past, historians should not forget the dual importance of understanding their legacy, lest new myths be created similar to those that once depicted white soldiers like Custer as heroes. Furthermore, the buffalo soldiers existed not only as enlistees in the fight against Indians but as actors in a complex theatre of negotiations framed by civilian whites' racism and the usual conflicts between army and civilians in a garrison town. Just as ethnocentric interpretations once regarded black history as insignificant, romanticizing the buffalo soldiers' experience not only perpetuates distortion, but it also robs them of the right to be judged not as representatives of an entire race but as human beings capable of human error.

NOTES

1. For an overview of the black cavalry's official duties, William H. Leckie's *The Buffalo Soldiers: A Narrative of the Negro Cavalry in the West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967) has become a classic. Arlen L. Fowler's *The Black Infantry in the West, 1869-1891* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Corporation, 1971) and John M.

Carroll's edited collection, *The Black Military Experience in the American West* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1971) also provide valuable descriptive information. For more recent works that deal with black soldiers' reception in civilian communities and their relationships with white officers, see Monroe Lee Billington, *New Mexico's Buffalo Soldiers, 1866-1900* (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1991), and Frank N. Schubert's *Buffalo Soldiers, Braves, and the Brass* (Shippensburg, Pennsylvania: White Mane Publishing Company, 1993).

2. Vernon Bellecourt, "The glorification of Buffalo Soldiers raises racial divisions between blacks, Indians," *Indian Country Today*, 4 May 1994, 5(A).

3. For general information on Fort Hays, see Leo Oliva, *Fort Hays, Frontier Army Post, 1865-1889* (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1980). Robert M. Utley's *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1891* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973) provides a thorough discussion of the late 1860s campaigns.

4. Studies of the buffalo soldiers' impact on local race relations commonly focus on specific forts and communities. For useful examples, see Monroe Lee Billington, "Black Soldiers at Fort Selden, New Mexico, 1866-1891," *New Mexico Historical Review* 62 (1987): 65-80; Thomas R. Buecker, "Confrontation at Sturgis: An Episode in Civil-Military Race Relations, 1885," *South Dakota History* 14 (Fall 1984): 238-61; Michael J. Clark, "Improbable Ambassadors: Black Soldiers at Fort Douglas, 1896-99," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 46 (1978): 282-301; and Ronald G. Coleman, "The Buffalo Soldiers: Guardians of the Uintah Frontier, 1886-1901," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 47 (1979): 421-39.

5. Dudley Taylor Cornish, "Kansas Negro Regiments in the Civil War," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 20 (May 1953): 417-29. For a more detailed discussion of the black volunteers, see Cornish, *The Sable Arm: Black Troops in the Union Army, 1861-1865* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1956); and Joseph T. Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* (New York: The Free Press, 1990).

6. Robert Athearn, *In Search of Canaan: Black Migration to Kansas, 1879-80*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1978); and Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977).

7. For discussion of the frontier concept, see Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II, and Charles E. Rankin, eds., *Trails: Toward a New Western History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991).

8. December 1867 monthly returns show Companies E and G, Thirty-eighth Infantry, and Com-

panies F and I, Tenth Cavalry, to be present. Of the 435 enlisted men, 285 belonged to black regiments. Headquarters, Tenth Cavalry, Special Order No. 139, Fort Riley, Kansas, 26 November 1867, Letters Received (LR), Fort Hays (FH), National Archives Microfilm Publication (NAMP), T-837, roll 5; and Post Returns, Fort Hays, December 1867, Adjutant General's Office (AGO), Record Group (RG) 94, NAMP, roll 3.

9. Brevet Major E.A. Belger to Major John Yard, Tenth Cavalry, Post Commander of Fort Hays, 16 July 1868, LR, FH, NAMP, T-713, roll 5.

10. Descriptions of prejudice are available in Billington, *New Mexico's Buffalo Soldiers* (note 1 above), pp. 181-201, and Arlen L. Fowler, *The Black Infantry in the West* (note 1 above), pp. 114-39. Jack D. Foner's *The United States Soldier Between Two Wars: Army Life and Reforms, 1865-1898*, (New York: Humanities Press, 1970), pp. 127-47, describes army and civilian attitudes toward the black units and attempts to replace them with integrated regiments.

11. James N. Leiker, "Voices from a Disease Frontier: Kansans and Cholera, 1867," *Kansas History* 17 (Winter 1995): 236-53; and Roman Powers and Gene Younger, "Cholera on the Plains: The Epidemic of 1867 in Kansas," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 37 (1971): 351-93; Post Returns, FH, July and August 1867, AGO, RG 94, NAMP, roll 3; Major Edward Glass, ed., *The History of the Tenth Cavalry* (Fort Collins: The Old Army Press, 1972), p. 95.

12. Monthly Registers of the Sick and Wounded, FH, NAMP, T-713. Dysentery, rheumatism, bronchitis, syphilis, and gonorrhea were also prevalent.

13. Oliva, *Fort Hays* (note 3 above), p. 57.

14. Report of William Buchannon, Assistant Surgeon, 14 July 1868, Monthly Surgeon's Reports, FH, NAMP, T-837, roll 3.

15. General Order No. 8, 21 February 1868, General Orders, FH, NAMP, T-713, roll 20.

16. For discussion of army desertion rates in the post-Civil War period and their causes, see Foner, *United States Soldier* (note 10 above), pp. 6-10, 222-24.

17. Elizabeth Bacon Custer, *Tenting on the Plains* (New York: Charles L. Webster and Co., 1887), p. 695. This edition is not to be confused with the 1895 abridged version which contains no reference to the forty deserters.

18. Monthly Post Returns, FH, 1866-71, AGO, RG 94, NAMP.

19. Foner, *United States Soldier* (note 10 above), pp. 222-23.

20. For public perceptions of federal regulars, see *ibid.*, pp. 59-75.

21. Billington, *New Mexico's Buffalo Soldiers* (note 1 above), pp. 181-82.

22. *Leavenworth Daily Conservative*, 10 July 1867.

23. For the myth of violence, see Robert R. Dykstra, *The Cattle Towns* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966). For a more recent revisionist example, see Ty Cashion's "(Gun)Smoke Gets in Your Eyes: A Revisionist Look at Violent Fort Griffin," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 99 (July 1995): 81-94.

24. *Junction City Weekly Union*, 8 May 1869.

25. James D. Drees, "The Hays City Vigilante Period, 1868-1869," (Master's thesis, Fort Hays State University, 1983), pp. 105-07.

26. *Kansas Daily Tribune*, 26 November 1867.

27. Drees, "Hays City Vigilante Period" (note 25 above), p. 8.

28. Elizabeth Custer, *Following the Guidon* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1890), p. 155.

29. Captain Samuel Ovenshine, Fifth Infantry, Post Commander, FH, to Brevet Captain M. Howard, Fort Harker, 2 February 1868, Letters Sent (LS), FH, NA, RG 393 (Continental Commands), Part 5; *Atchison Daily Free Press*, 4 January 1868 (quoted).

30. *Kansas Daily Tribune*, 25 December 1867; *Railway Advance*, 24 December 1867.

31. Ovenshine to J. M. Soule, Esq., Justice of the Peace, and J. E. Walker, Pres. of Ellis Co. Board of Commissioners, 30 January 1868, LS, FH, NA, RG 393, Continental Commands, Part 5; Ovenshine to Howard (note 29 above).

32. Muster rolls show Cropper as born in Baltimore, aged 21 at time of enlistment in May 1867, and having been promoted to Corporal within six months. He was discharged in 1870 at expiration of service and re-enlisted twice, joining the Ninth Cavalry in 1875. Enlistment records describe his character as "excellent." Unit Muster Rolls, Thirty-eighth Infantry, Company G, 1868, RG 94, NA; and Enlistment Papers, RG 94, NA.

33. *Railway Advance*, 24 December 1867; *Kansas Daily Tribune*, 10 January 1869.

34. Drees, "Hays City Vigilante Period" (note 25 above), p. 8. Of many local histories of Hays City's "gunfighter period," this provides the most thorough discussion of vigilante violence and its causes.

35. *Kansas Daily Tribune*, 10 January 1869.

36. *The Leavenworth Daily Commercial*, 9 January 1869.

37. Information on Barnes, Watkins, and Ponder was obtained from Unit Muster Rolls, Thirty-eighth Infantry, Company E, 1868-69, NA, RG 94.

38. Lt. Col. Anderson Nelson, Fifth Infantry, Post Commander, FH, to Governor James Harvey, 18 January 1869. LS, FH, NA, RG 393, Part 5. This contains the first official mention of the lynching by military personnel but since Nelson did not elaborate, detailed information in this and the following paragraphs derives from civilian newspapers. The *Leavenworth Times and Conservative*, 9 January

1869, provided a very brusque summation. *The Leavenworth Daily Commercial*, 9 and 12 January 1869, delivered the most factual details but also the most editorial comment, praising civilian law officers' handling of the matter. Though the papers vary in their reporting, all agree, including *The Kansas Daily Tribune*, 10 January 1869, on the points presented here.

39. *The Leavenworth Daily Commercial*, 9 January 1869.

40. *Kansas Daily Tribune*, 10 January 1869.

41. *The Leavenworth Times and Conservative*, 16 January 1869; Nelson to Harvey, (note 38 above).

42. *Kansas Daily Tribune*, 19 February 1869.

43. *Ibid.*

44. Drees, "Hays City Vigilante Period" (note 25 above), p. 42.

45. Both the *Leavenworth Times and Conservative*, 4 May 1869, and *Kansas Daily Tribune*, 8 May 1869, claimed the blacks had a predetermined plan to burn the town.

46. First Lieutenant Mason Carter to Captain J. W. Clous, Thirty-Eighth Infantry, 3 May 1869; and

Carter to Captain Sam Ovenshine, 3 May 1869, LS, FH, NA, RG 393, Part 5.

47. *Kansas Daily Commonwealth*, 6 May 1869, reprinted in *Junction City Weekly Union*, 8 May 1869.

48. *Kansas Daily Commonwealth*, 4 May 1869; *The Leavenworth Daily Times and Conservative*, 4 May 1869; *Kansas Daily Tribune*, 8 May 1869; and *Monthly Register of the Sick and Wounded*, May 1869, FH, NAMP, T-837, roll 3A.

49. *Kansas Daily Commonwealth*, 4 May 1869.

50. Post Returns, April 1869, FH, NAMP, T-713, roll 20.

51. *White Cloud Chief*, 27 July 1871.

52. *Kansas Daily Tribune*, 8 May 1869.

53. Major George Gibson to Acting Assistant Adjutant General, Headquarters, Department of the Missouri, Fort Leavenworth, 4 and 5 March 1871, LS, FH, NA, RG 393, Part 5.

54. James Beach, "Old Fort Hays," *Kansas Historical Collections* 11 (1909-10): 580.

55. Bellecourt, "Glorification of Buffalo Soldiers" (note 2 above), p. 5(A).