



Remember Me: First Kansas Colored Infantry

Where organized: Fort Scott, Kansas

Date organized for Federal service: January 13, 1863

Battles: Island Mound, MO; Reeder Farm, MO;
Cabin Creek, Indian Territory; Honey Springs, Indian
Territory; Poison Spring, AR; Flat Rock Creek, Indian
Territory; Timber Hills, Indian Territory

Date regiment disbanded: October 1865

Options for newly freed slaves in Arkansas

Thousands of slaves abandoned their cabins and followed the Union army as it invaded Confederate Arkansas, even though the army tried to discourage them from doing so. Union soldiers struggled to feed and clothe an increasing number of runaway slaves. Able-bodied men were hired to build fortifications or chop wood for the Federal fleet on the Mississippi River. Many women worked as cooks or laundresses.

Newly freed black Arkansans who did not become soldiers or find work with the army were gathered together into camps across the state. Almost 1,000 freed slaves worked in camps near Little Rock. These camps were filled with young, old, and those who were too weak or sick to work. Conditions in these camps were horrible due to exposure to the weather and poor food. Many died from diseases such as measles, mumps, whooping cough, pneumonia, and dysentery. The Union army sometimes appeared more concerned with military matters than with the care of former slaves.

“Freedmen farms” were plantations taken by the United States Government that newly freed slaves were allowed to live on and cultivate. Former Union officers owned many of the farms and employed freed slaves to grow cotton and food. Often, freedmen worked all year only to find that the land owners kept the money from the sale of their crops, leaving the freedmen with nothing. Former slaves often found their freedom little different than when they were slaves.



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Black soldiers from Arkansas

Many former African-American slaves and freedmen from Arkansas answered President Abraham Lincoln's call for volunteers to help put down the Confederate rebellion. Black men had previously not been allowed to serve in the military because U.S. law did not consider them citizens. Across the war-torn nation, 180,000 black men – including 5,500 from Arkansas – responded by serving in all branches of the military. An estimated 40,000 were killed.

The War Department created the Bureau of Colored Troops, most commonly known as the United States Colored Troops (USCT), on May 22, 1863. All of the black regiments were led by appointed white officers. The First Kansas Colored Infantry, made up of ex-slaves from Arkansas and Missouri, was the first black infantry regiment to see combat in the war. It participated in the battle of Island Mound, Missouri on October 28, 1862. The 1st Kansas Colored Infantry was also the first black unit to fight alongside white soldiers. The regiment suffered heavy losses at the Battle of Poison Spring on April 18, 1864, accounting for 60% of the casualties.



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Battle of Poison Spring

Union General Frederick Steele occupied Camden, Arkansas, on April 15. Two days later, he sent 1,100 men to gather 5,000 bushels of corn west of Camden to help feed his men and livestock. They discovered half of the corn had been destroyed, but loaded the rest into 200 wagons. On the way back to Camden, these soldiers were attacked by 3,600 Confederate troops.

The 1st Kansas Colored Infantry was placed between the wagon train and the Confederate forces. The regiment fought off two attacks, but retreated after a third assault. The Union army lost 301 men killed, wounded, and missing at Poison Spring. Of those, 117 of the dead and 65 of the wounded were from the 1st Kansas Colored Infantry. Both Union and Confederate accounts agree many of the black troops were killed after the battle was over. No black troops were captured, and those left wounded on the battlefield were killed. The *Washington Telegraph*, the major Confederate newspaper in Arkansas, justified the act by saying "We cannot treat Negroes taken in arms as prisoners of war without a destruction of social system for which we contend."

During the Battle of Jenkins' Ferry two weeks later, soldiers from the 2nd Kansas Colored Infantry stabbed several surrendering Confederate soldiers in retaliation for the killing of wounded soldiers from the 1st Kansas Colored Infantry Regiment after the Battle of Poison Spring.



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Eyewitness accounts of the 1st Kansas Colored Infantry in battle

"The First Kansas (colored) particularly distinguished itself, they fought like veterans and preserved their line unbroken throughout the engagement. Their coolness and bravery I have never seen surpassed."

- Major General James G. Blunt--July 26, 1863

"In conclusion, I feel it but justice and my duty to state that the officers and men throughout the entire regiment behaved nobly, and with the coolness of veterans. Each seemed to vie with the other in the performance of his duty, and it was with the greatest gratification that I witnessed their gallant and determined resistance under the most galling fire."

- Lt. Colonel John Bowles--July 20, 1863

"The negro regiment is a triumph of drill and discipline, and reflects great honor on Col. Williams, in command. Few volunteer regiments that I have seen make a better appearance. I regard them as first-rate infantry."

- Brigadier General John McNeil--November 2, 1863