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History

*Confederate Raider...Criminal...Hero: Captain Jake Bennett's Civil War**

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ABSTRACT

The story of how irregular warfare during the Civil War played out in border regions has been unevenly told. There exists a relatively large body of scholarly work, for example, on irregular Civil War activities in the border areas of Missouri and Arkansas and, more recently, in eastern Kentucky and southwestern Virginia. Other areas besides these, however, also witnessed intense and brutal partisan fighting. These other locations have received little attention from historians. A case in point concerns the fierce irregular warfare that took place in western Kentucky and the forgotten story of guerilla fighter Captain Jake Bennett.

KEY WORDS American Civil War; Civil War in the Border States; Western Kentucky; Irregular Warfare

On a miserably hot day in August of 1864, rugged Confederate fighter Jake Bennett found himself in an unexpected pickle. His meticulous plans for a lightning raid into the unprotected town of Owensboro, Kentucky, to steal a large cache of US dollars said to be kept in the local bank there had not turned out as he had intended. The imposing partisan leader and his 19 disheveled troops found themselves trying to silence the crowd of citizens they had earlier herded into the courthouse square. After some degree of order was restored, Bennett once more announced his intentions: Someone had better open the bank vault quickly or the town's majestic courthouse would be burnt to the ground. It soon became apparent, however, that the vault was well secured and that whoever possessed the knowledge to open the thick, sturdy door had escaped in the hectic scramble that had taken place earlier when the 20 men came roaring into town, guns blazing. Two rapid occurrences saved the town's stately courthouse. First, a few of the men in the crowd recognized Bennett as a local and began to reason with him to leave the building untouched. Then, another citizen pointed out there was likely something of

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value in the boats tied up at the wharf where Union supplies were often stored. Unknown to all standing there at that moment, the fate of a band of black soldiers had been sealed when the partisans' attention shifted to the supply boats rocking gently in the Ohio River.

Although neither Jake Bennett nor the citizens of Owensboro, Kentucky characterized the traditional Civil War experience, given the realities of the war in border regions such as western Kentucky, their actions do indeed appear predictable in those gray areas of fighting where guerrilla bands held sway. Mackey (2004), in his study of the irregular warfare that the Confederacy carried out during the war in border regions, adds several other categories of informal participation besides guerilla fighting to the mix. He argues that the term "guerilla," used at the time to describe almost every type of irregular fighter, failed to capture the complexity of the shadow war that Confederate irregular troops fought. Mackey believes such bands can be better placed on a spectrum from least organized to most organized. At the latter end of the spectrum are leaders who commanded more conventional forces, typically called "raiders." Nathan Bedford Forest, John Hunt Morgan, and John Mosby would fit into this category. The most organized of the unconventional groups were the partisan bands. Initially, the group Jake Bennett served with in western Kentucky seemed to fit into this category. Less-organized fighting groups included guerrilla bands, followed by bushwhackers, brigands, and, finally, criminal gangs.

Mackey further notes that as the war turned more and more against the South, raider and partisan bands in the border regions often deteriorated into criminal gangs. Captain Jacob Bennett and the small band of men who served under him represent an interesting case study of this process. During the exciting first year or so of the war, Jake Bennett and other irregular Confederate officers looked forward to playing an important tactical role in the region. By 1863, however, it was clear that guerrilla fighters who stayed in Kentucky would be limited to carrying out small harassing engagements at best. As the war worsened for the South and irregular bands grew more disconnected from the main military leadership, partisan actions often deteriorated into acts of plunder and terror. One frustrated Confederate military leader described these types of partisans as "dare-devil [in] appearance . . . and organized for plunder" (Davis 1904:6). Local civilians also learned, as witnessed in Owensboro during the Bennett raid, that their safety depended on obeying the orders of these rowdy bands.

The story of Bennett's rise and fall has another twist. Sometime during the end of the nineteenth century, and on into the next, a powerful cultural myth began to develop and thrive in the South, that of the Lost Cause. Gallagher and Nolan (2000) note, for example, that this process "sought to justify" the actions of the South in general and also many other specific negative events such as the cruel guerrilla fighting and the outright atrocities, especially against black Union troops. Much of this myth was constructed through "participants' memoirs, from speeches at veterans reunions, from ceremonies at the graves of soldiers killed while serving the southern armies and other commemorating events" (p. 1). Stories of gallant rebel fighters emphasized the swashbuckling aspects of the war. In the case of the partisan fighter turned bandit, Captain Jake Bennett, much of his eventual heroic status came from local and regional newspaper accounts over time—

accounts that told of his daring and exciting exploits while ignoring his outright robbery and murder.

Interestingly, the story of how irregular warfare played out in border regions has been unevenly told. There exists a relatively large body of scholarly work on irregular Civil War activities in the border areas of Missouri and Arkansas and, more recently, in eastern Kentucky and southwestern Virginia (Feldman 1990; Goodrich 1991; McKnight 2006; Nichols 2004; Phillips 2000). Other areas besides these also witnessed intense and brutal partisan fighting. These other locations have received little attention from historians. A case in point concerns the fierce irregular warfare which took place in western Kentucky. Short but sharp battles there often left citizens physically and emotionally exhausted, as well as anxious for their futures. The luckless often found themselves caught between Northern occupation troops and roaming pro-Confederate marauders. Personal letters, newspaper articles, diary accounts, and memoirs give vivid testimony to this turmoil. Already having to deal with Union occupation forces, a western Kentucky woman lamented how guerrilla bands constantly plagued her “already harassed community” (Johnson 1928). Another eyewitness explained the immense fear created by the dual pressures that existed in border regions: “People were afraid to talk, afraid to give an opinion or express a sentiment. Men were afraid to stay at home and afraid to leave home and no one felt safe or secure in his rights or liberties” (Ireland 1979). By 1862, in the river town of Owensboro, Kentucky, a citizen reported how “[the] war . . . tightened its clanking hold upon a helpless people.” Even newspaper circulation was “prohibited to some extent, and citizens of nearly all classes [were being] arrested for suspected disloyalty, or persecuted and robbed by guerrillas for having any strong sympathies in any direction” (*History of Daviess County Kentucky* 1883:160). In short, citizens of western Kentucky found themselves trapped in a no-win situation.

One such event involved the abrupt irregular troop raid on Owensboro, an attack that fell, in the words of one witness, “as unexpectedly as a flash of lightning from a clear sky” (*Owensboro Monitor*, August 29, 1864). As noted, the bold assault on Owensboro in July of 1864 was led by one of the region’s most daring Confederate fighters, the dashing but erratic Captain Jacob Bennett. While the audacity of the act was dramatic, a much more disturbing aspect of this attack was the savage murder by these Confederate troops of several captured black Union soldiers who were guarding a supply boat dock. Incredibly, almost nothing was reported in local papers or showed up in later local historical accounts about this particular atrocity. Regarding this void, Burkhardt (2007), in his book *Confederate Rage, Yankee Wrath*, argued that such atrocities against black troops, although there were many, were almost all buried after the war in the process of the reconciliation between North and South. Over time, the war witnessed new and less harsh interpretations. The black soldiers’ role faded from the story, and almost all the many atrocities against black troops were ignored and forgotten. The war was further reinterpreted as a struggle between two noble causes, filled with worthy opponents and void of bad deeds. The lack of information regarding Bennett and his men’s murder of black Union soldiers in the Owensboro raid stands as one example of this process.

The initial leader of Confederate irregulars in western Kentucky was Henderson County native Adam Rankin Johnson. As a young adult, Johnson had gone to Texas, but when the war broke in April 1861, he hurried back to Kentucky, where he organized a small, but effective, army. Johnson had great hope that his band would grow to become an army to be reckoned with. Most of all, Johnson anticipated a Confederate invasion of the state during which his group would become indispensable by protecting its flank or by distracting the main elements of the Union forces with sharp harassing attacks. While Johnson waited for this invasion, his forces occupied their time by making periodic raids. A clever military tactician, Johnson made up for a lack of men and materials by relying on sheer daring. During the early portion of the war, for example, his tiny force carried out the first successful “invasion” of Northern soil, capturing, for half a day or so, the village of Newburgh, Indiana, along the Ohio River in July 1862 (Davis 1904; Mulesky 2006; Starling 1887). For a few brief days, this feat brought sensational headlines and regional attention. The event also led to Johnson being given an unusual nickname. Because of his use of two pieces of stovepipe to mimic cannons in the raid, the daring partisan became known as Stovepipe Johnson. Stark realities, however, would soon set in for this bold irregular fighter and his men.

Before Adam became Stovepipe, he had to recruit an adequate guerilla force from what remained after most of the best men of the community had joined formal armies. Wiser men from the border area stayed neutral or joined regular units of the North or South. Consequently, it was often the more adventurous and volatile youth of the area who joined Johnson’s group. Richard Ray, for example, was but a 13-year-old boy when he joined Johnson’s partisan rangers in early 1863. In attempting to receive a Confederate pension in 1927, Ray reported, “I was just a lad at the time and, because of my extreme youthfulness, may never have been carried on the rolls as an enlisted soldier” (Texas State Library Archives 1927). Copies of tintypes of Johnson’s men which appear in William J. Davis’s book *The Partisan Rangers of the Confederate States Army* are also telling. They often revealed youths with greasy long hair, brandishing guns and daggers and garbed in slapdash “uniforms” of all sorts, including plain buckskin.

Of all of Johnson’s young recruits, his favorite seemed to be Jacob Bennett, also a native of western Kentucky. Jake, as he was commonly called, was only a teenager and was the youngest captain in Johnson’s partisan unit. The young soldier’s tintype reveals a rather dapper fellow with long hair, a string bowtie, and high riding boots. In the portrait, Bennett is restlessly leaning back in his chair, his head cocked back, his left hand holding his open vest, his right leg thrown over his left at the ankle to better show off his fancy riding boots. A pistol hangs in a holster off his right shoulder.

Prior to joining Johnson, the Livermore, Kentucky, native had fought at the battle of Fort Donelson, where he had been captured but soon escaped. The youth seemed, on first glance, to be just “a great, overgrown, awkward country youth.” In battle, however, the sturdily built 6’2” Bennett would quickly prove otherwise. He quickly demonstrated that he possessed both a gift and a taste for handing out death. In one particular fight, a superior officer watched in amazement as the cat-quick Bennett killed “a Federal [soldier] who had his Sergeant at a disadvantage, then killed the one who threatened

him—so quickly it seemed like sleight of hand.” The same observer also said of Bennett, “He had the air of the true cavalryman; in action he was all alive, quick of motion, prompt, a fine shot, and in a hand-to-hand fight always got the best of his adversary—in a melee on the road, when opposing advance guards were mixed pell-mell, he had no equal”(Davis 1904:278). Brave beyond words, and automatic in his actions and reactions, Bennett made a perfect partisan fighter.

In the beginning, Bennett and his other partisan companions fought a spirited war, complete with brilliant field strategies. The small band rode in and, by bluff and daring, captured for short periods of time the towns of Madisonville, Hopkinsville, Clarksville, Owensboro, Uniontown, and Henderson, among others, in the heady first months of the war. In each case, they proudly raised the Stars and Bars to the cheers of local Southern supporters. In one instance of a town’s capture—carried out by Johnson, the youthful Bennett, and only four other men—the citizens were ecstatic, giving the partisans credit for saving their property from federal troop destruction, but these heroic victories would soon wane as the focus of the overall war shifted.

In 1861, Confederate Brigadier General James L. Alcorn wrote to Simon Bolivar Buckner, pleading with the Confederate leader to move an army into Kentucky’s western area or “all will be lost to us.” A move into towns such as “Owensboro, promptly made, would give us the whole country,” Alcorn asserted (Davis 1904:102). Southern leadership, however, began to reconsider its efforts in the neutral state, and irregulars found themselves left to fight harassing actions, as opposed to fighting in support of an outright invasion. This switch greatly disappointed partisan leader Adam Johnson, who later asserted that if a major Confederate army had moved into Kentucky, as initially intended, many more recruits would have come over to the Southern cause and the federal army would have been crushed. “Here,” lamented Johnson, “was the turning point of the war in the West” (Davis 1904:125)

At the time the decision was made to pull a conventional Confederate army out of Kentucky, Jacob Bennett rode primarily with Adam Johnson’s larger irregular group, a group that fit into Robert Mackey’s category of partisan rangers. While not a conventional force, partisan rangers carried some status as an organized fighting group compared to guerrilla bands that later terrorized the western portion of Kentucky. In 1863, both Johnson and Bennett were pulled into a larger and more spectacular endeavor. General John Morgan organized and led one of the more dramatic and least effective campaigns of the war, a raid through southern Indiana and Ohio that was doomed to failure from the start.

Along with General Morgan and others, Johnson and Bennett were captured at the end of Morgan’s Raid through Indiana and Ohio during the early summer of 1863. Bennett’s prison experience took much of the pluck out of the brash upstart. Sent to the forbidding Ohio Penitentiary in Columbus, Bennett was placed in a cell “three feet six inches wide, about seven feet long and about seven feet high, with a heavy iron grate door.” His bed “was a small skeleton, hung to the partition wall by small iron hinges, so that it could be turned back against the wall to allow the prisoner room for a small

promenade; there was also a small three-legged stool to each cell, and a strip of plank one inch thick, three inches wide and three feet long which was used as a prop to the bed.” An eyewitness told of how Bennett, upon entering his tiny cell, “cast his eyes to the ceiling and exclaimed, “No, my God! I might as well try to get out of hell”” (Davis 1904:367).

Prison conditions for Bennett and the others were almost beyond bearing. So desperate and determined was Bennett to dig his way out of the dank penitentiary that at one time, he was not able to help in the breakout work, having severely “blistered his hands” while using the crude digging tools the prisoners had fabricated (Davis 1904:377). Once free, Bennett quickly escaped to Tennessee, to an isolated region in the north-central part of the state relatively untouched by the war. There he met his future wife, Martha Dale, and lived among her family. The restless young partisan soon discovered he could not stand the lack of action for long. Bennett organized a small band of men from the region in Tennessee in which he had landed. Several under his charge were his new brothers-in-law. By 1864, after the war began to go badly for the South, Bennett’s band, now acting as guerrilla fighters, began numerous raids into western Kentucky.

Union military leaders would tolerate the pestering rebel partisan attacks in western Kentucky for some time. By mid-1864, however, Indiana governor Oliver Morton journeyed to Washington, DC, to try to enlist more help in defending the border area of western Kentucky, especially where the bluegrass state touched Hoosier soil. The *Evansville Daily Journal*, on July 7, 1864, noted the governor’s attempt and how “the guerrillas have become very bold of late.” Morton’s efforts apparently succeeded. From Mississippi, Major General William Tecumseh Sherman, commander of the Union Army in the West, sent General Stephen Burbridge a “stringent order” to arrest and transport to Louisville anyone in the Kentucky district who was “harboring any irregular rebel soldiers.” Sherman gave very specific criteria for determining whether a soldier was a legitimate enemy or a rogue guerrilla: “Guerrillas are not soldiers. . . . To be recognized as soldiers, they must be enlisted, enrolled, officered, uninformed, armed, and equipped by recognized belligerent [sic] power, and must, if detached from a main army, be . . . with written orders from some army commander, to do some military thing”(Owensboro Monitor, July 7, 1864).

As the civil unrest continued to grow, Burbridge would use these criteria to justify his notorious General Order No. 59, which in part stated that for any “outrage committed by armed men not recognized as public enemies by rules and usages of war,” there would be reprisal executions. Further, local residents who were known Southern sympathizers would be held responsible for reimbursing victims of “acts of such lawless men.” To effect this, their property would be seized as necessary. Coldly, Burbridge also declared, “Whenever an unarmed citizen is murdered, four guerrillas will be selected from the prisoners in the hands of the military authorities, and publicly shot to death in the most convenient place near the scene of outrage” (*Henderson Weekly Reporter*, July 28, 1864). The chilling order would soon be carried out in several places, including a sad episode in Henderson that would have strong repercussions in nearby Owensboro.

On Monday, July 11, 1864, a small band of unkempt men swept into the sleepy town of Henderson, Kentucky, just forty miles downriver from Owensboro. The behavior of this group that day demonstrated the kinds of acts that the irregular arm of the Confederate Army in western Kentucky was capable of. One newspaper account claimed they were “unauthorized, for they belonged to neither army.” Whatever their status, several of the wild-looking men soon began looting the establishment of merchant James Rankin, a leading businessman in the town. The hapless Rankin was shot and mortally wounded by a guerrilla while trying to protect his goods. Although the members of the outlaw group were unsuccessful in getting the large amount of cash in Rankin’s safe, they were able to load their horses down with plunder before they left Henderson with “a reckless indifference” (Starling 1887:547–49). It was also during this same time that a popular local Union officer, Colonel James Poole, was murdered by a band of irregular Confederate troops.

A week or so after Rankin’s assault and Poole’s death, federal forces under the command of Lieutenant Headington arrived in Henderson from Louisville. They brought with them 23-year-old John [Pierman] Powell and 18-year-old William Thompson, both of whom had been captured on July 12, 1864, about five miles from Owensboro. The two young men claimed they were members of a Confederate company commanded by “Captain Dick Yates, a commissioned Confederate officer, who was recently killed in a skirmish near the town of Owensboro.” Thompson and Powell had had the misfortune of being separated from the rest of their company when the Union forces encountered them. These two hapless young men would be the very first to suffer under Order No. 59. The local Henderson newspaper account reported that the Union commander, Lieutenant Headington, had instructions “to publicly execute” the two men in Henderson the next day under General Burbridge’s notorious declaration, in response to “the atrocious attempt of a gang of guerrilla scoundrels and marauders . . . to murder in cold blood, Mr. Jas. E. Rankin . . . and for other outrages perpetrated of late in Henderson and vicinity” (Starling 1887:549–50).

The news of the impending executions spread like wildfire. Several members of the community who were themselves noted Unionists convinced Headington to delay the executions so that a Catholic priest—both young men professed to be of that faith—would have time to arrive from Evansville, Indiana, to administer last rites and provide spiritual comfort. Even Rankin himself, now lying in bed, mortally wounded, sent a written request to Headington asking that the two men be spared. In the meantime, the *Henderson Weekly Reporter* on July 28, 1864, reported that two prominent citizens of Henderson, Archibald Dixon and Mayor Banks, had rushed to Evansville to send a telegram to Union general Hugh Boyle Ewing in Louisville, requesting a stay of execution because the town’s citizens feared retaliation from the “bands of guerrillas who now swarm in our vicinity” and because the two young men continued to claim they were not “robbers or marauders, but regularly sworn Confederate soldiers.” Ewing agreed to a delay until he had time to consult Burbridge. The request was in vain, as the orders arrived for the executions to proceed.

Gruesome detailed descriptions of the deplorable executions were carried in all the regional newspapers. Such sensational newspaper reports, along with elaborate verbal grapevines in the area, allowed irregular fighters to hear in great detail what had happened to two of their fellows. Many swore revenge for the men's deaths. Ironically, despite the fact that while he served as the federal administrator for the Kentucky district, Burbridge ordered more than 50 individuals executed under Order No. 59, his retributive justice failed. Locally, two days after the executions of Powell and Thompson, a resident of Owensboro noted, "guerrillas in the county again robbed Jesse Potts" (*History of Daviess County Kentucky* 1883:171). Shortly after Powell and Thompson were buried in St. Alfonsus Catholic Church cemetery in Daviess County, about eighty guerrillas moved through the area, robbing everyone they met of horse and money. Some entered Hebardsville and Curdsville, robbing several stores and firing weapons at citizens. The *Henderson Weekly Reporter* declared on July 28, 1864, that the guerrillas were simply "on a rampage." A chilling response to the two partisans' death was also quickly issued to local newspapers by partisan leaders in the area, a proclamation that threatened to kill four Union troops for the deaths of Powell and Thompson.

The brutal execution of the two Confederate soldiers and other irregular fighters in the region made guerrillas grow especially edgy and furious. Adding to the tension was the deteriorating spirit of the once proud partisan fighters in general. Cut off from regular command, basically ignored and left to their own devices, many of these men turned to simple plunder. Another factor that further enraged irregular troops around the region by 1864 involved the enlisting of black troops into the Union Army and their service in the immediate area. Such black empowerment outraged both white irregular fighters and citizens. The *Owensboro Monitor* reported in a detailed piece on August 29, 1864, for example, that these once "runaway slaves" were now in uniform and "demanding passes of [white] Kentuckians—arresting their wives and daughters, and taking them to places of confinement." Owensboro, Kentucky, would soon feel the wrath of all these converging elements.

In July of 1864, the 108th Colored Infantry Regiment was formed in Louisville, Kentucky, with a large proportion of the new recruits being made up of recent slaves throughout the area. Once enlisted, the slave became free, and often, in rather short order, so did his family. "The enlistment of the blacks in Kentucky," noted one historian, "set in motion a reaction which quickened the deterioration of slavery in the state" (Howard 1982:25). By the spring of 1864, Daviess County black men in the Owensboro area began joining the Union cause in great numbers.

The persistence of former slaves to escape slavery and serve in the Union army as a force for their own freedom and empowerment can be found in the memoirs of Elijah Marrs, who had joined an earlier unit in Louisville just prior to the 108th's formation:

I remember the morning I made up my mind to join the United States Army. I started to Simpsonville, and, walking along, I met many of my old comrades on the Shelbyville Pike. I told them of my determination, and asked all who

desired to join my company to roll his coat sleeves above his elbows, and to let them remain so during the day. I marshaled my forces that day and night. I had twenty-seven men, all told, and I was elected their captain to lead them to Louisville. (Marrs 1885:17–18)

The Marrs narrative suggests the empowerment that came with the sudden opportunity for slaves and recent slaves to fight in the Union cause and against the slave system. It has been argued that the initiative taken by the masses of blacks to enlist “lay at the heart of slavery’s decline in Kentucky” (Howard 1982:253), but trying to do so could be a very difficult endeavor.

White Owensboro citizens had great difficulty accepting the enlistment of their former local slaves. Two newspaper accounts in the *Owensboro Monitor*, one on May 7 and the other June 18, 1864, in particular indicated the harsh feelings and concerns that were harbored by many white citizens in the Kentucky river town. In the first narrative, it was reported that “Negroes [were] enlisting [here] in great numbers, [causing] great excitement.” Determined black men “thronged the Provost Marshal’s office [in Owensboro] so boisterously that violence was feared, and they were taken to the fair-ground in a body and sent back to the office in small squads for enlistment.” Shortly after this event, more black troops from nearby Hawesville poured into Owensboro. This brought further trouble when 20 of these “Negro recruits on board a small steamer . . . marched . . . to the court-house square, intending to quarter . . . in the court-house with Colonel Woodward’s State Guard of white soldiers.” The white soldiers “refused to let them in,” causing both sides “to call to arms, and a fight almost ensued. The colored recruits were then quartered in the jail, with nothing to eat, and under locks and bolts for about twenty-four hours.” Soon, another aspect added to the tension.

Rather quickly, black recruits were serving as the primary occupation force of the town, a situation that almost wrought violence. A *Monitor* report of this tension, on July 18, 1864, noted that when a “Colonel Bishop and colored soldiers arrived, the circuit clerk locked up his office, as the colored infantry had the court-house as quarters.” By mid August, almost four hundred stalwart black troops patrolled and guarded Owensboro. It was during this time that one group of black fighters proved their mettle when they encountered a fair number of guerrilla troops in the area. After a brief but bitter fight, the Union men “captured nine guerrillas at Yelvington and brought them to Owensboro, where they were confined in jail.” The excitement and bravado of these black troops as they paraded the disheveled guerrilla captives through the streets of Owensboro did not go unnoticed by men who had contact with the irregular army network.

Many partisans and guerrilla groups in the Owensboro region now chomped at the bit to wreak vengeance on what they perceived to be the swaggering former slaves, who had not only embarrassed their efforts with the capture of the Yelvington guerrillas but who had also defiled the town of Owensboro with their presence in the town’s courthouse. In one instance, over two hundred guerrilla soldiers appeared in Owensboro under a Major Anderson, “intending to take [a] steamer, believing that Negro soldiers

were aboard. A few of the soldiers in advance went to the wharf and endeavored to decoy the boat to the landing, but in vain. They fired forty or fifty shots, but only one touched the boat, doing no damage” (*History of Daviess County Kentucky* 1883:174). At this same time, a sick black soldier convulsing just downriver in Henderson was taken out by Southern partisans and hanged in a nearby woods (Starling 1887:230–51).

This drive on the part of some Confederate irregulars and conventional troops to kill black troops who now fought against them began to manifest itself on a greater scale in early 1864, as blacks began to take a larger role in the war. The Fort Pillow Massacre, for example, which took place in April of 1864, saw over two hundred captured black troops murdered (Ward 2006). Such attempts to target black troops in western Kentucky, however, were rarely successful. The sheer number of well-armed black troops in Owensboro, for example, backed by white troops and heavily armed Union gunboats, typically kept partisans and guerrillas at bay.

Meanwhile, irregular raids in the Owensboro area increased, driven more by frustration and the chance for plunder than by military objectives. Gone were the heady days of the earlier war when partisan groups seemed to be a force in the region and civilians lustily cheered them as heroes. It is apparent, using Robert Mackey’s model for categorizing irregular forces during the war, that Bennett and his followers, as well as other once partisan groups in the border region, had deteriorated into a guerrilla band or worse. The *Henderson News* reported on July 12, 1864, for example, that a “gang of twenty-one or twenty-two guerrillas invaded the city and stole only non-military items including watches, rings, and U. S. greenbacks.”

A lingering sense of dread loomed over the town of Owensboro as the summer of 1864 unfolded. June had proven to be especially hot and dry. One report told that summer crops were “suffering” and that the important tobacco crop was “cut down apparently to half.” Cutworms were also reported to be “bad.” In July, and at the beginning of August, a heat wave caused the river to become “quite low” (*History of Daviess County Kentucky* 1883:290). Perhaps these conditions were a foreshadowing of another vicious set of events the city would soon endure.

Sometime in late August 1864, almost all Union troops were pulled out of Owensboro, leaving a skeleton crew commanded by Provost Marshall Captain J. R. Grissom and a small staff. Scouting reports indicated there was now little danger from guerrilla raiding groups, and the black Union troops guarding the town were needed elsewhere. For added insurance, the heavily armed federal gunboat *Silver Lake* anchored at the town’s wharf to help turn back any raids by irregular bands. As fate would have it, however, *Silver Lake* received orders to depart Owensboro and to patrol the Cumberland River. The gunboat’s replacement, *Brilliant*, soon experienced boiler troubles, which caused it to be docked a few miles downstream at Evansville, Indiana, for repairs (report. S. Naval War Records Office 1914:532–38).

At this crucial time, the *Monitor*, on August 24, 1864, reported that a small group of black troops, who had earlier escorted the guerrilla prisoners captured at nearby Yelvington to Louisville, returned to town. The returning black soldiers were surprised to

discover their comrades had left, but they looked forward to a break from hard duty as they waited to see what their next set of orders might be. A few white Union troops, under Captain Grissom, still remained. They were a skeleton crew of sorts, taking care of things until the return of a larger force. All the elements were now in place for a tragic drama to unfold.

It is unclear why former partisan and now guerrilla captain Jake Bennett came to organize a handful of twenty or so men down in north-central Tennessee and make a lightning-like attack north to Owensboro in the late summer of 1864. Having earlier developed a network of friends as a part of Adam Johnson's partisan army in the region, Bennett could have very easily been informed of Owensboro's vulnerability by confidants in the Ohio River town. As it turned out, Bennett's wild-looking band did not seek out guns, powder, ammunition, or other types of supplies connected with guerrilla fighting. Owensboro, because of its long and intense occupation by Union troops, possessed another kind of wealth. One of Bennett's men, telling of the event many years later, testified that "Captain Bennett was informed by an old rebel friend that there was a large amount of government money in the bank" (Dale 1922). It was this treasure that drew Bennett like a magnet. Another more sinister incentive for the raiders involved the opportunity to pay back federal authorities for allowing black troops to occupy the town and be quartered in Owensboro's courthouse. Perhaps also seared into Bennett's memory were the stories of black troops strutting into the town while parading guerrilla captives through Owensboro's dusty August streets. If possible, Bennett would pay these troops back brutally for what the guerrilla leader viewed as outrageous arrogance.

Jake Bennett's ragtag band of unkempt raiders came howling into Owensboro on the hot, dusty afternoon of August 27, 1864. Because it was Saturday, a larger than usual number of people crowded the streets, offering even greater chances for looting. An eyewitness to the invasion reported the partisans came as "unexpectedly as a flash of lightning from a clear sky," announcing themselves "in front of the courthouse, by the rapid firing of revolvers, sometimes in the air and sometimes at fleeing citizens and at store office doors." The partisans quickly ordered "all persons at once to repair to the court-house yard; and these orders were 'sanctioned' with the wickedest profanity. They thus advertised themselves to the guerrillas at once." Events now seemed to speed up so that everything came in a blur: "Such a stampede, of all classes of people, from the central part of town toward the outskirts was never before nor since witnessed in any other place during the war. It was ludicrous as well as exciting." Scared townspeople "shot out of the back doors and windows of the stores and offices and hid themselves in boxes, barrels, privies, dog kennels, [and] deep weeds." One especially wild-looking mounted raider charged his sweaty horse into a store and dashed down the aisles, driving frightened customers "pell-mell into the rear yard" (*Owensboro Monitor*, August 24, 1864). In just a few short minutes, the abrupt raid had the town in chaos.

It was quickly evident that the departure of the Union gunboat, along with the great majority of black troops, made the federals who remained very vulnerable. Stunned by the sudden appearance of the wild, disheveled men in the heart of the town, Captain Grissom and his meager staff hastily fled their headquarters, running to an unarmed

vessel that hurried downriver to Evansville, Indiana. In their haste, they left behind piles of official papers throughout the federal headquarters. A few of Bennett's men would later spend a brief time here, staying only long enough to destroy a few papers and throwing away the rest. Grissom later reported official documents "were scattered in every direction" (U.S. Naval War Records Office 1914). Left behind, too, were 10 or so black union troops, guarding supplies at a boat tied to a river wharf.

Bennett had better things to do than to bother with a few boring government documents. While a few of his men made a short show of rummaging the Union headquarters, the majority of the partisans rounded up about three hundred of the town's frightened citizens, along with the Saturday shopping guests, at the courthouse square. Owensboro folks quickly came to understand what Bennett and his rough charges were after. The townspeople were told their courthouse would be burned to the ground if the town's bank vault was not opened. One of Bennett's men later reported, however, that the threat did not work, as the money "was strongly vaulted and we had no time to spare or waste as the enemy was after us" (Dale 1922).

Jake Bennett had grown up in the area, and a few of the locals who were Southern sympathizers recognized him and begged that he and the other guerrillas spare the town's cherished courthouse. Bennett consented to do so. Some of his men, however, took some of their frustration about the impervious bank vault out on a local jeweler, taking three gold watches worth over \$700.00. The raiders also stole, according to an *Owensboro Monitor* account on August 24, 1864, several horses from hapless Owensboro citizens to replace the ones worn out by the three-day forced ride from Tennessee. Once these fresh horses were in hand, it looked as if the raiders might finally leave. Then someone mentioned a Union supply boat.

The initial success of Bennett and his men had been based on surprise, but as time passed, their situation grew more precarious. Grissom, having fled to nearby Evansville, Indiana, would no doubt soon return with a sizable group and a gunboat. The raiders, however, as they mounted to leave, suddenly turned their attention to the Union supply boat tied down at the wharf. Bennett reasoned there would still be time to search the boat for plunder and then set it afire before he and his men fled. Unbeknownst to the Confederate raiders, however, was the presence of at least ten black Union soldiers left to stand guard over the craft. These black soldiers were no doubt aware of previous treatment of black soldiers by Confederate armies at Fort Pillow. This knowledge probably caused some of the blacks to panic and open fire on Bennett's men as the raiders approached the Union supply boat.

One of the Tennessee raiders remembered being fired upon and the immediate results: "Everybody dismounted and made a charge for the wharf." According to this account, 13 black soldiers, fearing a large force had captured the town, quickly surrendered. This turned out to be an unfortunate move. Guerrilla fighters Powell and Thompson had been brutally executed just three weeks before in nearby Henderson, and the horrible details of their killings had circulated throughout the region. Shortly after that, captive guerrillas had been paraded through Owensboro by animated black troops.

Perhaps Bennett decided it was time for payback. One of Bennett's men later reported the actions of Bennett: "killed all of [the captives] on the boat, set the boat afire, turned it loose from the tie up with Negroes and cargo all floating down the river with a big fire" (Dale 1922). This awful deed completed, the guerrilla band rode out of the ransacked town just as suddenly as it had appeared.

The story of the outright murders of the black soldiers at Owensboro would take an especially strange twist. Although one guerrilla soldier clearly reported the capturing and brutal killing of 13 men, local newspaper accounts suggested only three of nine black men were killed and the rest escaped. On September 1, 1864, a regional newspaper, the *Evansville Daily Journal*, reported that only three black troops were killed, but it mostly emphasized the property loss, which included civilian-owned horses, watches, and \$10 in greenbacks, along with the burning and civilian property lost on the boat. The Owensboro paper, the *Monitor*, on August 29, 1864, reported, "Nine Negro soldiers, said to have been the guards that conducted [Confederate soldiers] to Louisville, were at the wharf boat, having but that morning returned, not knowing of the departure of their regiment." The Owensboro paper also reported that three of the blacks guarding the boat were murdered while the others escaped. The partisan raider's account, however, as noted, clearly stated that 13 "Negro soldiers" were captured and that the partisans "killed all of them" (Dale 1922). One can only guess as to the cause of the discrepancy. One possibility is that the local paper wished to play down the level of atrocity. This research, for example, uncovered two other newspaper accounts, one regional and the other national. Both the *Louisville Journal* and the *New York Times* carried stories of the raid which emphasized the murder of several black Union soldiers. The latter account, a rather detailed narrative, appeared on September 3, 1864:

On Saturday afternoon last, Jake Bennett, the notorious guerrilla, at the head of seventeen men, dashed into Owensboro, and, as they rode down the street, fired in a reckless manner at every person that exposed himself to view. The scoundrels exhibited a heartlessness and depravity of feeling worthy of devils and fiends. The citizens were insulted, and forced to flee for their lives. Shots were fired into open doors of the different storerooms. Capt. Walters of the Third Kentucky Cavalry, was made a prisoner in the town, and shot down by the cowardly assassins—murdered in cold blood.

For some time Owensboro was garrisoned by a battalion of negro troops, but on Friday they were withdrawn from the post, ten being left to guard the wharf-boat against guerrilla attacks. Bennett had received correct information of this movement, and, charging down upon the boat, he commanded the squad of negroes to surrender. They were frightened by the imposing front presented by the thieving

band, and at once laid down their arms. An indiscriminate slaughter of the blacks then commenced. Seven were deliberately shot to death, the other three taking refuge in the hold of the boat, and escaping the vengeance of the assassins. The boat was then plundered of light articles of value and set fire, the dead bodies of the murdered negroes still stretched upon the blood-stained deck. The boat burned rapidly, and Bennett left word that if any of the citizens attempted to extinguish the flames, he would return and burn the town.

Official Union Army reports glaringly do not mention the death of the black Union soldiers at all. One report stated, "It was only two hours since that I was telegraphed from Evansville by Captain Grissom, provost-marshal, Second District, that Owensboro, his headquarters, had been taken by the enemy, a portion of his records destroyed, and he, with his officers and employees, driven out and now are at Evansville" (U.S. Naval War Records Office 1914).

Captain Grissom also reported no deaths. Indeed, the only damage reported was said to be slight and involved the loss of some official papers. Just as chilling a discredit to the black soldiers who died was another report by LeRoy Fitch, Lieutenant-Commander of the Navy in the area, who coldly related in his report, "The damage done by the rebels amounted to scarcely anything, as I am told the Government stores burned with the wharf boat were only a few things left behind by the regiment that had left there" (U.S. Naval War Records Office 1914). Ironically, Fitch had helped bury the bodies of over one hundred murdered black Union troops at the earlier massacre at Fort Pillow.

The murder of black Union soldiers in Owensboro was not the end of such atrocities in Kentucky. On January 28, 1865, the *Cincinnati Daily Gazette* reported that 35 captured black soldiers were murdered (later accounts say 19) by a guerrilla band near Simpsonville, Kentucky.

Bennett's raid was not the end of Owensboro's travail. Throughout 1864, Owensboro, terrorized by partisans on one hand and occupying federal troops on the other, found itself, in the words of the newspaper's local editor, "between a hawk and a buzzard" (*Owensboro Monitor*, June 28, 1865). But by November of 1864, several locals in the region, while still pro-South, had had enough of partisan plundering. In nearby Henderson County, for example, after several households had been robbed by a band of six guerrillas, citizens organized into a militia and captured the marauders. These citizens were further inspired by an order that had gone out in October for Union military units to execute all captured guerrillas, as they formed "no part of the organized army of the rebellion" and frequently robbed and murdered. Sixty black troops escorted the half dozen captured partisans to a freshly dug hole at Henderson's riverbank, one large enough for all six men's rough coffins. Each guerilla was seated on his coffin and shot by two lines of 30 black troops. Three of the dead were brothers (Starling 1887:541-44).

In early 1865, just a few months before the war's end, a band of partisans, led by Confederate captain William Davison, stormed into Owensboro in broad daylight and set fire to the courthouse. One witness later claimed the deed was done "for the sheer pleasure of destroying it" (Johnson 1928:84). In reality, Davison had been ordered to burn to the ground every courthouse in Kentucky "occupied by Negro troops" (*Owensboro Monitor*, January 4, 1865). Ella Johnson recalled how, as a young girl, she stood in fascination "on the steps of our gallery and watched the burning sheets from books and papers rise and fall in fiery showers" (Johnson 1928:86). Soon after the building's destruction, the war ended.

After their raid on Owensboro, it took Bennett and his men three hard days of riding to get back to the safety of Tennessee. Early in 1865, they returned for another brief round of plundering, including the burning of a Union train loaded with supplies. Unbeknownst to the raiders, the train also carried a large amount of money to pay Union soldiers. One raider reflected later that had they only realized government money was on the train, they "would have been a rich little rebel gang" (Dale 1922).

After these latter activities, Bennett returned to Tennessee, married, and quit the war. Ironically, the bloody-minded partisan went into law enforcement, being elected sheriff and later working as a guard in the state penitentiary at Nashville (Davis 1904:278). The glorification of Bennett's actions, along with the actions of many irregular Confederate fighters, some of whom were outright criminals, is interesting. Indeed, the stories of Bennett's efforts seemed, over time, to spin into the realm of archetypal legend. On February 4, 1884, 20 years after the Owensboro raid, a western Kentucky paper, the *Calhoun Daily Messenger*, told of Bennett's visit to the area of his birth. It was an altogether sanitized piece and presented Bennett as something of a swashbuckling hero for the Lost Cause. Under the heading "Guerrilla Jake," the article related an exciting tale:

This most remarkable man, who stands 6 feet and 2 inches, is 47 years of age, had many hair breadth escapes during the war. It is very interesting to hear him relate his adventures; one never becomes wearied with him. With him the war is over, he seldom mentions it, unless called up in his presence by someone else. Although he received twenty six bullet holes in his skin, he is a stout and able-bodied man, and holds no malice against any man; when he surrendered in Tennessee, he laid down everything but memory. The details of his escape with that of John Morgan and others from Ohio penitentiary will shortly appear in the Nashville American. Capt. Bennett since the war has been riding most of the time in Tennessee, where he was sheriff of the county in which he lived for several terms; he now resides in this state in one of the counties he operated most during the war. He is a consistent Christian,

a splendid conversationalist, personally magnetic, bold and impressive countenance and a man once cannot help liking.

Ten years later, a Tennessee paper, the *Gainesville Sentinel*, in a December 22, 1898 issue, offered yet another romantic version of Bennett's life as a soldier: "His army career reads like romance." The article went on to tell of Bennett's guerrilla adventures, leaving out any hint of atrocities:

He received twenty-six bullet holes in his body, and had eleven horses killed under him in battle. He was in prison thirteen times, but always succeeded in making his escape, and was never exchanged or took the oath. Capt. Bennett was one of the six prisoners who, with Gen. John H. Morgan, escaped from the Ohio penitentiary, in a most remarkable manner by tunneling under the walls. But his numerous daring adventures and narrow escapes would fill a good sized book.

The piece ended by reporting that Bennett hoped to land a job as a prison guard at the state facility in Nashville. "We are sure," the paper declared, "that no appointment would please the people of this section of the State more than this. He is fully qualified to discharge every duty of the position and is a deserving gentleman upon whose character no stain or suspicion has ever rested."

Bennett did indeed receive the prison guard position. On June 14, 1904, 40 years after the raid, the *Nashville Banner* interviewed the aged ex-guerrilla as he patrolled around the perimeter of the state prison. Again, he was offered as a heroic figure of the Confederacy:

Capt. Jake Bennett, with grizzled hair, keen, bright eyes and his willowy form silhouetted against a bank of clouds which hid from view the setting sun, presented a most striking and solitary appearance as he stood resting on his repeating rifle on the wall around the state prison, and told to a reporter in the yard below the story of his thrilling escape with Gen. John H. Morgan from the Columbus, Ohio, penitentiary on that memorable day, November 28, 1863. This man with well modulated voice, presented none of the characteristics of the desperado, which Northern sympathizers and Northern critics were wont to paint all of the followers of the intrepid Morgan. Yet he was a follower of Morgan, was one of Morgan's men and as brave and as daring as any of that valiant band.

Six months later, on December 7, 1904, the same paper reported the ex-guerrilla fighter's death: "Capt. Jake Bennett, a survivor of the six Confederate soldiers who made

the daring escape from the penitentiary in Columbus, O. during the civil war with their intrepid leader, Gen. John H. Morgan, is dead, and his death leaves only one, Capt. L. D. Hockersmith of Kentucky, of the daring squad alive." Bennett, the paper explained, "died at the state prison where he had been one of the most trusted guards for the past years." The ex-guerrilla "had been a sufferer from Bright's disease for years, but was confined to his room only two days previous to his death, which occurred last night. He was taken sick Sunday night after he had left his post on the prison walls, and at once it was recognized that the attack was serious, and while everything was done for his relief, he continued to sink gradually, dying, as stated, last night." The newspaper account also played up the heroic, swashbuckling aspects of his soldering career, conveniently neglecting the pillaging and murder wrought by Bennett and his men: "Capt. Bennett was one of the most interesting characters and he possessed a store of wonderfully interesting stories, incidents and thrilling experiences of the war, and especially of Morgan and his men. He had long contemplated writing a book giving his personal reminiscences and had already prepared some of the material for this publication."

The city of Owensboro, Kentucky, would also eventually draw close to the theme of the Lost Cause. Today, for example, an impressive statue of a lone Confederate soldier stands in the Owensboro courthouse square, staring "southward toward a vanished way of life, rather than northward to repel the enemy" (Dew n.d.:57). Beneath it are the words "to our Confederate heroes." Forgotten are the events of criminal raids, robberies, murders, and the destruction of the town's picturesque courthouse. Aptheker (1947) especially laments the historical treatment of blacks who served in the Civil War. Speaking of the need to accurately assess the number of blacks who gave up their lives in the conflict, he notes, "It might well be believed that some eighty years after such a contest the victor would have compiled and preserved precise data concerning its martyrs, but the truth is otherwise" (p. 10). The fate of the black American soldiers who died at Owensboro certainly supports Aptheker's notion; their names are as forgotten as the event itself.

Today, the myth of Captain Jake Bennett as a hero continues. A song about Jacob Bennett and his raid on Owensboro, "Rebel Partisan," is often performed by a group called the Border Ruffian Band. In an interview with Ray Mulesky in 2008, the author of the song, Terry Warren, related, "I first learned of the raid from word of mouth from my grandfather when I was a young boy. His grandfather rode under Jake Bennett's command . . . and participated in the [Owensboro] raid. The simple fact that I had an ancestor who participated in such a daring undertaking was all the inspiration I needed" (Mulesky 2007).

As noted, scholars have recently begun to examine the interesting process regarding the eventual sanitizing of cruelties and outright atrocities committed by Confederate troops during the Civil War. This seems especially true about crimes committed by Confederate troops against black union soldiers. Such stories are hardly mentioned in books about the war. What are often offered instead are stories of the more swashbuckling aspects of the war. In this process, many Confederate guerilla fighters who led groups that were little more than roving bands of thieves and killers eventually

achieved hero status. The forgotten story of Captain Jake Bennett and the nature of the Civil War in the border region of western Kentucky, told here for the first time in its more complete context, demonstrates that Jake Bennett and the questionable actions he helped to carry out are prime examples of this sanitizing process.

The general public cannot be blamed for lionizing fighters such as Bennett when little information about his story is available. Consequently, a more accurate version of this story, one which includes the full account of robbery, the terrorizing of innocent civilians, and murder, should be constructed. One might want to also argue that some type of monument be raised to mark the place on the Owensboro, Kentucky, waterfront where several black American soldiers died at the hands of Bennett and his men. Like their lifeless bodies, which were sent down the river in a burning supply boat, the deeds of these union soldiers have been allowed to disappear beneath the dark waters of time. Justice demands that a more complex story of this event, including Jake Bennett's transition from dashing Confederate raider to criminal gang leader and murderer, accurately be told. This work has endeavored to do so.

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