

# THE NEGRO SOLDIER IN THE SECOND BATTLE OF BOONVILLE

## The Earliest Combat Soldier

By James F. Thoma

The role of the Negro soldier during the later part of the Civil War is well known and documented. As one Cooper County resident, in referring to the mass enlistment of Negroes during the fall of 1863 expressed it; "The negroes just keep rollin'." But little is known of the role of the Negro soldier during the earliest part of the Civil War, especially in the role of a combat soldier. Indeed it may be that the earliest record of a Negro combat soldier is the Second Battle of Boonville, which occurred on September 13, 1861.

The role of Negro soldiers in the Second Battle of Boonville has never been presented and is generally unknown. As a result, I will attempt to document and prove that Negro soldiers did fight in this battle. And in fact, his role may have been responsible for this Union victory. As with all stories the best place to begin is at the beginning and I will begin with the events leading up to the Second Battle of Boonville in a time-oriented sequence.

### *September 09, 1861, Monday*

In<sup>1</sup> part of Cooper County, the winds of an impending battle were being circulated. John A. Poindexter, captain of some of the local Confederate forces, indicated his designs to Colonel William B. Brown in the following missive: *Dear Sir - I learn this evening, from undoubted authority, that there is a boat aground, about three miles above Boonville, with a large quantity of sugar and coffee and ammunition, and manned with about ninety Federals. I intend sending a force against them in the morning, and would like to have your cooperation. I am satisfied you are fond of fun, and if we fail to get there in time to capture the boat, we can and will make a demonstration against the force at Boonville. Send me an answer by the bearer, Mr. Collins, with whom you may converse freely.*

### *September 10, 1861, Tuesday*

At this time the impression had also been received from Boonville that the home guards under Captain Joseph A. Eppstein would throw down their arms and surrender if given the chance. In light of this and the possibility of obtaining desperately needed supplies from the grounded boat; Captain Ephraim Jemison, of Blackwater Township, at one raised a company of Confederates. He had also arranged with a company located near Pilot Grove<sup>2</sup> to go down and capture the garrison. The plan, for one reason and another failed to materialize, and the attack was not made.



### **Robert J. McMahan**

*Etching From The Boonville Weekly Advertiser; By Charles W. Lemon  
From Photograph.*

### *September 11, 1861, Wednesday*

In the morning Mr. Robert J. McMahan was on his way to Arrow Rock, when he fell in with Captain Jemison and his company, and rode with them to Arrow Rock. Jemison in the course of the conversation said that Colonel William Brown was at home with a company of men, and that Colonel John A. Poindexter was also in the neighborhood with a company of men<sup>3</sup>. Jemison requested that McMahan go to Colonel Brown and ask him to unite with the other forces on the evening of the 12<sup>th</sup>; and cooperate in the proposed assault on Boonville, stating that a large amount of arms and ammunition could be captured, were the venture successful, as no doubt it would be. John W. Piper, Richard Durrett and Robert J. McMahan agreed to undertake the mission to Brown, and were on the point of setting out, when George William Sahn, rode into town. He was at once recognized as being from Boonville, and was arrested. It was then thought best, it being suspected that he was a spy, to send him, in company with the three gentlemen named, to the camp of Colonel Brown, lest he should return to Boonville and report what was going on. Upon reaching Brown's house, Mr. Sahn was placed under guard. Brown then went with McMahan

and Piper over to Poindexter's camp, which was situated in the neighborhood.

A consultation was held with Poindexter, who seemed quite anxious to undertake the expedition. Colonel Brown hesitated as to the feasibility of it, for several reasons, and was fearful it would prove disastrous, but agreed to meet Poindexter at Sanders Townsend's<sup>4</sup> the next evening, Robert J. McMahan and John W. Piper agreed to guide them to the location. The party returned that night and notified Captain Jemison, and a few men in Lamine Township, of what had been done and proposed.



### **Col. William B. Brown**

*From The Boonville Weekly Advertiser;  
Etching By Charles W. Lemon From Photograph*

*September 12, 1861, Thursday*

Captain Ephraim Jemison's company and the companies commanded by John A. Poindexter and William B. Brown joined their forces at the Lamine River Bridge in Lamine Township. Unfortunately, the company of men from Pilot Grove failed to meet their comrades at the bridge, according to the agreement, but the expedition moved forward, through the night undaunted. This band of Confederates, numbering somewhere between several hundred and eight hundred<sup>5</sup>, was divided by Colonel Brown into three divisions. His brother, Captain Mason Brown, in command of one, was to approach the earthworks from the eastside. Captain Poindexter, in command of another, was to attack from the west, going down the riverfront. Colonel Brown would make the assault from the southeast.

*September 13, 1861, Friday*

The memorable day<sup>6</sup> was ushered in cloudy and rainy. The two columns commanded by the Browns had passed through Boonville by six o'clock, and few of the inhabitants were aware of what was transpiring. These troops dismounted on the hill near the Thomas Withers Nelson<sup>7</sup> place, and left their horses in a pasture in charge of a few men. They then "double-quickened" through what is now the Missouri State Penitentiary, thick then with forest trees - the "rebel yell" being the first fearful warning to the garrison, then at breakfast, that the enemy was upon them.

### **Captain G. Mason Brown**

*Etching From the Boonville Weekly Advertiser; Etching By Charles W  
Lemon From  
Photograph.*

Immediately upon crossing the lane, Colonel Brown turned to his aid, Robert J. McMahan, and said: "Hold, I will get that fellow!" - who was standing on some high place inside the fortifications. The Colonel, while sitting on the fence - and who carried a fine hunting rifle, and was regarded as a sure shot - fired. The man fell, but rose again and seemed to stagger off. This was the signal for the opening ball, and the first the people in town knew that a battle was in progress so near by, was the sharp rattle of musketry through the dismal, rainy September morning. Colonel Epstein's men were promptly at their posts by this time. It did not take them many seconds to change from bread to bullets, and the firing became general. Brown's men pulled the pickets off the southeast part of the enclosure, the minnie-balls from the home-guards meantime flying thick and fast, knocking splinters from the fence and splashing the mud and water, as it was then raining hard. About this time, McMahan said he felt his cap jerk, and, upon looking at it shortly afterwards, found that a ball had struck and split it, directly in front, from brim to crown.

Colonel Brown's men charged gallantly along the fence, to within about thirty yards of the works, when the



Colonel was shot in his left leg, and, fell near the fence. He pulled himself up by a post, and was firing his pistol, when he received a second shot - this time in the right lower groin. His aide McMahan ran to him and braced him up against - and rather behind - a post, to shield him from the shower of bullets. A short distance away another aide, John W. Piper was down - with a bullet in his body - and yet, again, but ten feet removed, lay the gallant Captain Mason Brown, writhing in his death wound. Colonel Brown, though suffering and weak with two mortal shots, blew his hunting-horn urging his men on to the charge. Brown's whole immediate force were leaving the field by this time, and of the five men - the two Browns, Richard Durrett, John W. Piper and Robert J. McMahan - who had started to cross the deep ditch in front of the works, McMahan was the only one left on his feet.

It was in the early part of the fight, that Adjutant John A. Hayn, of the Federal garrison, ran up on the David Lily burial mound and shouted for the Union. Just as he did this, a ball mortally struck him down from one of the Rebel troops. Mr. Jacob F. Gmelich, a Federal soldier, says that he was standing within about ten feet of the Adjutant when he fell. Hayn was the only Federal to be killed outright inside the works.

### **Adjutant John A. Hayn**

*Etching From The Boonville Weekly Advertiser; Etching By Charles W. Lemon  
From Photograph.*



While these thrilling incidents were occurring, Captain John A. Poindexter's division had approached directly from the west. As they were passing down Water Street, it was raining very hard, and the flag they carried was wrapped in black oilcloth. This gave rise to the report, afterward circulated, that they carried a black flag - which meant no quarter to the garrison.

Poindexter was belated, somehow, in his part of the movement, and the attack from the west did not affect anything. This division charged up from behind the long building, which had been used as a floral or agricultural hall. Colonel William B. Brown still blew his hunting-horn and urged them not to run - that the day was not lost. But when the bullets from the garrison, flying thick and fast, would splash the water from the ground, the Confederates would waver and fall back. It was here that some of Poindexter's men fired into Brown and McMahan mistaking them for the enemy.

At this juncture, Mr. William E. Burr, cashier of the Bank of Boonville, one of the hostages held within the works, convinced that the entrenchments could not be taken he asked, and was granted permission to visit the Confederates. He approached Poindexter with a white flag of truce, in order to see what arrangements could be made so as to bring about a cessation of hostilities. An agreement was entered into by which the Confederates were to withdraw a distance of one or three miles from the town, and for not more than three of them to enter the city at a time, for a period of seven days, and only for medicine. John A. Poindexter was to return all horses taken from Union men, and surrender the arms of the men who had fallen in the engagements. If the terms of the armistice were broken by John A. Poindexter, then Reverend H. M. Painter was to be shot.

The firing ceased, the baffled Southern troops retreated, and the brave little garrison of Federal troops held the fort. The dead and wounded were removed from the field to the old Adelphai College on the corner of Fourth and Vine Streets. There the brave Browns, who had been foremost in the fierce fight, died in the midst of their friends. Shortly afterwards their bodies, accompanied by the Reverend Peter Rea, the widely-known Cumberland Presbyterian preacher, were conveyed to Arrow Rock and buried with full Masonic honors.

The home guards numbered about 140 effective men. Their loss was two killed and seven wounded. The names of the killed were John A. Hayn, adjutant, and Ferdinand Kimbold, a private who had enlisted at Jefferson City on August 1, 1861. Among the names of those wounded were Anthony Back, Vincent Blair, and Martin Thomas. Martin Thomas was shot through both thighs. The number of Colonel William Brown's command who were killed and wounded, other than those previously mentioned, is not known.

And so ended the Second Battle of Boonville as it has been recorded for these so many years.

### **September 15, 1861, Sunday**

Nancy Jones<sup>8</sup> and her husband, Caleb, were strong southern sympathizers living several miles west of Boonville. In a letter written to her daughter in San Antonio, Texas only days after the Second Battle of Boonville, she sheds a different light on some of the events of that battle. She recounts to her daughter, *I send you an account*

of the last "Boonville battle" which is nearer the truth than any thing I have seen published. The writer, however, neglected to mention, that three runaway negro's joined the home gaurd and told them of Colonel [William B.] Browns plans, which was the cause of citizens being arrested as hostages. These negroes were in the entrenchments during the fight, they had guns given them, and are said by the prisnors who saw them, to have fought bravely, one of then is a splendid shot, he knew the Browns, and claims the killing of them. Colonel Eppstein retains those negroes, and refuses to give them up to their masters; you can well imagine what a corrupting influence that has on others.

This is the first recorded account of Negro soldiers in the Second Battle of Boonville. It explains the source of information that Joseph Eppstein relied upon in believing that his garrison would come under attack. Never knowing whether a white man was a Union man or a Confederate sympathizer was always a problem. A Negro could be trusted provide honest information as they understood the information. Additionally this account places Negro soldiers as combatants in the engagement and credits one of them with the killing of the Confederate commander.

#### **September 17, 1861, Monday**

Michael Fellman<sup>9</sup> in his book "*Inside War The Guerrilla Conflict in Missouri During the American Civil War*" quotes a letter from Daniel R. Smith to his parents. The letter written September 17, 1861 states: *Five negroes brought the news of the intended attack and were inside the entrenchment during the engagement. Among them was a slave of Col. Brown's. Whilst fighting he took hold of a gun and shot his master who fell and soon after expired. The darky is tickled almost to death.*

This letter again explains from whom Colonel Joseph Eppstein, on September 5, 1861, received his information that rebel forces would attack Boonville. The information would have even more credibility to Eppstein, considering that a slave of Colonel William B. Brown provided the information. Finally this account also places the Negroes as active participants in the fight and again credits a Negro as killing the leader of the Confederate forces.

#### **October 6, 1861, Sunday**

Letters concerning the Negro involvement in the Second Battle of Boonville and written when the event occurred is certainly credible evidence. However, more evidence can be gleaned from the official records<sup>10</sup> of events of the Civil War. At this stage in the War of the Rebellion, the slaves had not been freed. The question now in the mind of Joseph Eppstein was how to protect the slaves who had aided him. The dilemma was eventually addressed to the Adjutant General of the Army of West in this missive sent by John C. Kelton. *I send by the Northerner in charge of Captain William R. Renfro, " Ninth Regiment Missouri Infantry", several slaves who having given important information to Major Eppstein while in command of this post which saved his command from surprise now seek protection from their masters who threaten to kill them. Major Eppstein cannot longer protect them. I therefore send them to Jefferson City where they can work on the fortifications.*

While not acknowledging the Negroes direct involvement as combatants in the Second Battle of Boonville, this communiqué further confirms and supports the unofficial records. It does acknowledge that the information provided to Eppstein was important and saved his command.

#### **November 30, 1861, Saturday**

The final article presented as proof of negro combatants in the Second Battle of Boonville also comes from the official government<sup>10</sup> records. In this record, Isaac P. Jones wrote to Major General Henry Wager Halleck, to inform him of a situation that existed in Boonville. He informs Halleck that he is a *native of East Hartford, Conn., and am now visiting this State to induce a widowed sister and her family to return to that vicinity where our parents, much advanced in years, reside; that my sister and her family now residing in a disturbed locality (being in Johnson County) may escape troubles and dangers growing out of the sad condition of affairs in Western Missouri and relieve us at home of great uneasiness on her account. Being detained in this neighborhood several days expecting a friend who per appointment was to meet me here I have become somewhat informed as to local matters, which as a good and loyal citizen I briefly make known to you. I do not do this obtrusively nor expect that my advice is of great importance but simply as a witness, from the fact that it is impossible for you to enforce obedience and punish willful disobedience and contempt or disregard of your authority unless you are specifically made acquainted with abuses in the localities under your military command where they abound.*

*Much will never reach you for the simple reason that resident inhabitants are afraid to complain, and it [is] as a precaution in my own behalf proper for me to say to you that I am in personal danger of the Boonville*

Home Guards could they identify me as the author of the enclosed communication. Every one who ventures to complain or dissent from their malpractices is denounced as a secessionist in league with the enemy. They are composed mainly of the rudest portion of the German population, and there is no reasoning with them allowed on the part or in behalf of abused civilians. The captains of the two companies were recently keepers of drinking houses and one of them still keeps his "doggery." I mention this merely to show you the kind of material U.S. captains are made of in this locality.

I have had a good opportunity of forming an opinion of the temper of the people of Missouri having made two protracted visits to the State within the last twelvemonth, and it is my candid opinion from a loyal standpoint that the mismanagement of Federal advisers in this State has made more enmity to the Government than any influence to be attributed to Jeff. Davis, Governor Jackson or all the secessionists combined for three-fourths of those now in arms and hostile to the Government disavow belief in the dogma of the "right of secession."

Your recent orders published in the Saint Louis daily papers concerning the harboring of runaway or fugitive slaves within the lines or within the camp and prohibition against the unauthorized seizure of persons and arbitrary appropriation and destruction of private property (evils or I may say barbarities practiced by the so-called "home guards" in this county to a serious extent) promise security and would do much to restore confidence among the people did they believe that they would be obeyed. If rigidly enforced they would go far to tranquilize the State and put a "damper" on successful recruiting for Price's army.

But your orders are not obeyed here, and the reply to me when I have cited your orders to prove that this war is neither an abolition war nor a sectional war to devastate the South is that "the orders will not be enforced by subordinates," and "if General Halleck should enforce them the immediate advisers of the President in this State will have him displaced." They invariably ask, "How are General Halleck's orders enforced here since published?" And I say with shame to that subordination which should exist that I can afford no satisfactory answer beyond the only presumption that you are not advised of such abuses.

It is known as a fact not disputed here by any one that sundry runaway slaves, three or four at least, are now openly harbored in the camp of the home guards at the fairgrounds at this post and all efforts of their owners to recover them have proven fruitless. These same slaves often appear in U.S. uniform and on one occasion at least had U.S. arms placed in their hands and acted the part of U.S. soldiers inside of the intrenchments here. Surely the Government is not so hard off for soldiers that we have to arm negroes to sustain it. If so I am for peace. When it comes to arming negroes to shoot down and slay our rebellious Southern kindred I, a loyal Connecticut Yankee and proud of the name, will have no hand in it unless I turn rebel against such an infamous policy; but I am for the Union as our fathers fashioned it and all righteous efforts to preserve the same.

Several weeks ago a Mr. Marr, a citizen of Saline County, called upon Colonel [Lucien J.] Barnes, in command of this post, to recover a negro man belonging to him named Jim. Colonel Barnes (as I learned) upon the advice of Judge George W. Miller judge of the circuit court (and a prominent Union man), gave Marr an order for his negro then in camp addressed to Major Eppstein, of the home guards. Major Eppstein said the negro was not in his possession but Captain Biehle had him. The order was then amended addressed to Captain Biehle. Captain Biehle told Mr. Marr to look for his negro but when Marr attempted to do so he was followed by home guards and assailed with clubs and stones until he was compelled to flee for personal safety. Upon a representation of these facts to Colonel Barnes (who has no sufficient force to enforce obedience on the part of home guards) he was advised by Colonel Barnes to go home and offer \$100 reward for his negro. This Marr did not do and his negro is still in camp here harbored by home guards.

Hence it is that people here say that your orders in reference to fugitive slaves forbidding them in camp will not be obeyed by subordinates out of your sight, and they cite existing facts here and the recent conduct of Lane and Jennison in evidence of such a belief. To put a correction to this flagrant abuse will I believe require nothing less than the presence of a resolute regular U.S. officer with competent skill, will and authority (and it might be force) to right matters. No such officer is here now it is evident or your instructions would be rigidly enforced.

For the facts which I have communicated I refer you to Judge George W. Miller (of circuit court), Judge [Isaac] Lionberger (of county court), Judge Charles H. Smith (of probate court), and Doctor [William Hodge] Trigg, banker, all Union men avowed of position and property. If you dispatch an officer to investigate matters here it will be of great service to the Union cause, if he diligently and with determination does his duty.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,  
Isaac P. Jones

The pertinent part of this letter reads: It is known as a fact not disputed here by any one that sundry runaway slaves, three or four at least, are now openly harbored in the camp of the home guards at the fairgrounds at this post and all efforts of their owners to recover them have proven fruitless. These same slaves often appear in

*U.S. uniform and on one occasion at least had U.S. arms placed in their hands and acted the part of U.S. soldiers inside of the intrenchments here.* Once again, we have evidence that Negroes were in the entrenchments at the Boonville Fair grounds, were armed, and performed as U.S. soldiers.

### Conclusions

While any single point of proof is not proof conclusive, taken as a body of evidence I believe the conclusion is inescapable that Negroes did fight in the Second Battle of Boonville. That the information provided by these slaves did prevent the Federal forces from being overwhelmed by a surprise Confederate attack. Furthermore by their killing the Confederate leaders the attack against the Federal entrenchments faltered; bringing about a negotiated settlement to this minor conflict.

In examination of all the records in my capability to examine, I have found no evidence of Negroes acting as soldiers in battles or engagements earlier than the Second Battle of Boonville. There are records of free Negroes and slaves working as manual laborers in erecting battlements as early as May 26, 1861. And there are many recorded instances of slaves or 'contraband' coming into Union camps; but almost invariable they were returned to their owners.

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<sup>1</sup> This date starts events in motion events that climax in the Second Battle of Boonville. The accounts of this battle are almost entirely dependent upon two main sources. Levens and Drake's book *A History of Cooper County, Missouri*, written in 1876, is the first account; while Walter Williams' account written in 1889 is the most detailed. This article uses these two sources in addition to others; but relies most heavily upon Walter Williams' article. Most of it is "lifted" verbatim from the Williams' account. Williams, W.; *Second Battle of Boonville*; Boonville, Missouri: The Boonville Weekly Advertiser, Christmas Edition; 20 December 1889.

<sup>2</sup> In all likelihood, this was the company of men under the command of Captain Charles B. Alexander.

<sup>3</sup> The encampment of Colonel John A. Poindexter was said to contain over three hundred men under the leadership of Captains Fagan, Davis, Fort, and Owens.

<sup>4</sup> Sanders Townsend was a wealthy farmer living in Lamine Township, Cooper County, Missouri. He was a slaveholder who lost between forty and fifty slaves during the war. Some of Townsend's land was situated close to the Lamine River Bridge.

<sup>5</sup> There were a minimum of eight companies and no more than ten companies of soldiers in the Confederate assault. If an assumption is made that they were all "short" companies of eighty men each then the number of Confederate soldiers in the engagement would be between 640 and 800.

<sup>6</sup> *Full Particulars of the Battle at Boonville*; Columbia, Missouri; The Missouri Statesman; 20 September 1861.

<sup>7</sup> Located at the intersection of Locust and Tenth Streets in Boonville. This magnificent mansion still exists.

<sup>8</sup> Jones, Nancy Chapman; *The Civil War Letters of Nancy Chapman Jones*; Unpublished.

<sup>9</sup> Fellman, M.; *Inside War The Guerrilla Conflict in Missouri During the American Civil War*; New York; Oxford University Press; 1989.

<sup>10</sup> The Civil War CD-ROM; *The War of the Rebellion: A compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*; Carmel, Indiana: Guild Press of Indiana, Inc.; 1997.