

NATHAN BEDFORD FORREST  
AND  
CONFEDERATES WHO WERE BLACK

I have titled my remarks as I have because I am tired of talking about “black Confederates.” Those who fought under, those who served the cause, represented by the red flag with the blue St. Andrew’s cross were, first and foremost, Confederates. That is an honorable title and one which they were proud to bear. Any other title or qualification is superfluous. I am satisfied with that as a sufficient title for any and all of them.

However, as a concession to the purpose of this discussion, and as a concession to those who wish to deny that these men even existed, I will, on this occasion, speak of a certain group of Confederates by using a term which refers to their color, sometimes I will refer to their race, but on all occasions the important thing to remember is that these men were CONFEDERATES.

*ANGLO-SAXON SUPERIORITY*

In order to understand the relationship between Bedford Forrest and Confederates who were black we need to try to think as people of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century thought. The concept of “racial equality” was practically unheard

of in that century; the prevailing attitude toward non-whites was called “Anglo-Saxon superiority.” This was the assumption that the Anglo-Saxon people of the world were superior to all other ethnic groups and races. This belief rested on the fact that, in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the culture and technology of Western Europe and North America had spread over all the globe and had become dominant. If culture and technology were so superior as to dominate other lands, it was reasoned, then the race which produced the culture and technology must be superior. This is not accurate reasoning, but it is the way the people of those days thought.

Look at world conditions of the time. All of Africa, with two tiny exceptions, had come under the dominance of European nations. The same had happened with the islands of the Pacific. Asia had been losing territory to European colonization for a century with the British occupying Hong Kong, Burma, and India while the French took over Indochina, which we know as Viet Nam. Anglo-Saxon nations dominated the globe and this was thought to be proper—at least by those who were dominant.

In North America we, and the Canadians, were busy driving the original residents, the Indians, to the further reaches of the continent. If resistance was offered to this displacement, extermination was the

alternative. This was thought only proper, after all, the reasoning of the time said, Anglo-Saxons are superior.

Not only was this attitude directed toward the Native American Indians, we had just fought a war with Mexico in which we took over a great deal of desirable and valuable territory from the Mexican government. This was right and proper, most thought; it was our “manifest destiny” to rule from sea to sea and perhaps more. After all, we were an Anglo-Saxon nation.

Many people in the United States had an eye on Central and South America and Cuba. Why stop with Mexican territory? Would it not be advantageous to take over Nicaragua so that a canal could be built connecting the Atlantic waters with the Pacific? Would not Cuba, with its climate so favorable for growing sugar cane, be a welcome addition to the U.S.? And why not do so? Were not Anglo-Saxons destined to rule the world?

Most public figures of that day accepted this reasoning. The well-known philosophers David Hume, John Fiske, and John Burgess supported Anglo-Saxon superiority as did the German composer Richard Wagner, the British writer Rudyard Kipling, the New England clergyman Josiah Strong,

Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts, Union general and German immigrant Carl Schurz, and President Abraham Lincoln.

This is the common attitude of the time, place, and culture in which Nathan Bedford Forrest was born and matured into manhood. It is no surprise that he grew up accepting the common beliefs and prejudices of his day. We all do the same in our day.

This means that in 1861, when Forrest began his military career, he accepted the idea that white people were superior to other people and that this was a matter demonstrated by the conditions which anyone could observe. To say that Forrest believed this is not only true, it is to say that he was identical in his beliefs with 99% of the rest of the white men of his day. He was no better and no worse than the others.

The study of history is afflicted with a persistent virus which infects both professional and amateur historians. That virus is the belief that the people of the past can be judged by the standards of today. The name for this, in the history profession, is “presentism.” It makes just as little sense to judge Forrest on the basis of 21<sup>st</sup> Century racial beliefs as it does to judge a 19<sup>th</sup> Century doctor on the basis of modern medicine. Use the standard of the present and all the people of the past will fail to pass the test.

So, let us judge Forrest by the standard of his day, a standard which was not unique to the South but was shared by the vast majority of people in the North and in Europe.

*PERSONAL ASSOCIATION WITH BLACK PEOPLE*

Although Forrest shared the common racial views of his time those views were tempered and modified by a life-long personal association with black people. For Forrest, like all people who lived and live in the South, black people were not an abstract concept, a theoretical issue. Southerners have always known blacks as persons, as real people with whom there is a day-to-day association. Racial views may say one thing only to have that view challenged by personal experience.

Forrest had known black people since he was a child. He had seen them come to his father's blacksmith shop and forge. He had seen them working in the fields and had worked alongside them when he hired himself out to neighboring farmers or when he "swapped work" with other small farmers. As his wealth increased, Forrest became a large farmer—a plantation owner—and supervised the work of black people every day. Let me remind you that plantation owners did not spend their time sitting in a rocking chair on the front porch of a white columned mansion, sipping mint juleps from a silver cup; plantation owners were in the field every day

during planting, cultivating, and harvest season for they were the managers, the supervisors who kept a close eye on the running of their agri-business.

As a result of this life-long experience Forrest came to identify individual characteristics among black people. He recognized personal qualities, characteristics, strengths, weaknesses—he did not see black people as an amorphous, undifferentiated mass. He still felt he was superior, but he know some black people were good at certain tasks, some of them better at those tasks than some white people.

Forrest was a shrewd judge of character and of ability. As a businessman and as a general one of his greatest strengths was this ability to identify what a person could do well and then to assign them to do that task. This not only made for a happier worker or soldier, it made for greater efficiency in the operation. Forrest applied this analysis of character and ability to the black people around him and used it in assigning them their tasks. In short, talent knew no color. And Forrest didn't care!

At a point in his life, Forrest became a slave-trader. The business was legal and was accepted as a valid part of the society in which he lived. Although the people who engaged in the business of trading slaves were looked down on socially Forrest didn't care about that either. He knew that slave trading was a viable and profitable business which was protected by

the Constitution of the United States as well as by Federal and state legislation. If a plantation owner wanted and needed more labor, slave trading was the solution to that problem if one had the money to afford it.

As a slave trader, however, not only did Forrest engage in more personal contact with black people, he also saw their individuality. This was carried over from his association with black people as workers.

This recognition of individuality did not change Forrest's mind about the legality of selling slaves, it did not shake his belief in Anglo-Saxon superiority, but it did temper his actions and sharpen his eye for recognizing these things.

John Hope Franklin, a great historian who died just this year, was one of the finest modern historians of the South and of race relations. Franklin, himself an African American, said of Abraham Lincoln that Abe looked on black people as "a man but not a brother." I contend that the same could be said about Nathan Bedford Forrest. A black person was a man, with individual characteristics, traits, strengths, and talents; a man, but not his equal.

*CONFEDERATES WHO WERE BLACK AND WHO “RODE WITH FORREST”*

So, in 1861, black men were not thought as the equal of white men but Forrest knew many of them possessed the characteristics which would make them valuable to the military effort of the Confederacy. The law did not permit the recruitment of slaves for military service but it did allow the hiring of such for non-combat duty. This is the first area in which Forrest would find himself in command of black Confederates.

Forrest certainly had a personal relationship with the most celebrated group of black Confederates in the history of the war, his wagon drivers. These men were absolutely essential to the military success of Forrest and his command, they were his troops of “the service of transportation and supply.” The actions of these men in performing non-combat duties freed other men to carry weapons and to fight. Without the service of these forty-five, and thousands more like them, the Confederate war effort would have been ham-strung.

Union officers who were involved in cavalry attacks on Confederate wagon trains have left many accounts noting that wagon drivers were armed

and that they defended themselves on numerous occasions. The military value of these non-combat men to the Confederacy was also recognized by their treatment when they were captured. They were not sent home or to refugee camps as men who had been “forced into labor” by the Confederates, they were compelled to surrender and to give a parole—the same acts required of combat soldiers. Many of these black non-combat men were sent to prison camps along with white Confederates.

Their story begins at the start of the war when, according to Forrest, *“I said to forty-five colored fellows on my plantation that it was a war on slavery, and that I was going into the army; that if they would go with me, if we got whipped they would be free anyhow, and that if we succeeded and slavery was perpetuated, if they would act faithfully with me to the end of the war, I would set them free. Eighteen months before the war closed I was satisfied that we were going to be defeated, and I gave these forty-five men, or forty-four of them, their free papers, for fear I might be killed.*

Of the original forty-five, forty-four were still with Forrest at the end of the war. These men, at one time or another, accompanied Forrest into combat situations; they had gone on raids far behind U. S. lines; but they had not deserted. They were still with the Corps at Gainesville, Alabama, on May 26, 1865.

One of these men was Ben Davis, born in Fayette, Tennessee. Davis survived the war and, in 1921, applied for and received a Confederate pension. On his application he declared that he had been one of Forrest's teamsters and that he had been present at Gainesville. His application was supported by the oath of other Confederates who had known him in the service.

Nimrod Wilkes was another of the teamsters under Forrest. He was born in Maury County, Tennessee, and served with Forrest for three years. In 1915 surviving members of Forrest's command endorsed his application for a Confederate pension which he received. Wilkes is buried in Crestview, Tennessee.

Forrest was mistaken about the date at which the papers were issued formally making the men free. While some of them may have been given "free papers" in late 1863 or early 1864, others were still being emancipated only days before the surrender. A soldier in the 13<sup>th</sup> Mississippi Cavalry, George Washington Cable, was involved in the process. Cable would, after the war, become one of the leading authors of the period making an international reputation as a writer telling stories of Creole life in Louisiana and of antebellum life along the Mississippi River. While recovering from wounds he was assigned to temporary duty at headquarters as a clerk. On

April 14, 1865, Forrest came into the building where Cable was working and loudly asked for “that clerk Major Strange had told him about.” Cable was handed a sheet of paper and was told, “*Here’s the legal form for you to follow, and the boy’s will come to you one by one as you want ‘em. Here, Tom! You go first.*” And so the wagon drivers came forward, one by one, until Cable had written out manumission papers for each one, a task that consumed the working hours of three days.

Line officers and field officers may worry about tactics and strategy; general officers concern themselves with logistics. Forrest depended on men who were black to solve his logistics problem.

#### *SUB-HEAD OF COMMISSARY DEPARTMENT*

Preston Roberts is one of the men of color whose service with Forrest deserves more recognition. Roberts enlisted in 1861 and was placed in charge of the cooking arrangements for Forrest’s original command when the men were in camp. The soldiers ate in small groups, or “messes,” when in the field but when in camp cooking was done en-masse to free the men from this duty.

Roberts had under his command seventy-five cooks, ten wagons with their teams, and all the necessary equipment to provide food for the unit. As Forrest was promoted, Roberts went with the general, and Roberts’

responsibilities increased accordingly. Roberts was solely responsible for supervising the cooking for an entire brigade in 1862 and 1863 and remained in this position under Forrest until the end of the war. Once Forrest came to command a division, and even a corps, Roberts was the man who received the funds made available to purchase food from civilians. He kept the financial records of up to \$75,000 at a time and was also responsible for receiving food from the Assistant Commissary officers who led foraging details. In the years after the war Roberts was presented the Southern Cross of Honor by the United Daughters of the Confederacy.

One of the men serving under Roberts was Burrell Buchanan. This black Confederate joined at the beginning of the war and was still present at the surrender. In 1888, at a meeting of the Escort's Veterans Association held in Petersburg, Tennessee, Buchanan presented himself for membership in the Association. He was unanimously admitted to full membership and was elected an officer. At the 1889 meeting of the Association Buchanan was one of the speakers, addressing the old veterans and a large audience who came to hear his remarks. Buchanan said that he had been a "loyal Confederate all during the war and my heart has never changed."

At this date, 1888-89, the Grand Army of the Republic, the GAR, the veterans association founded by Union veterans, was strictly segregated by

race. The Veterans Association of those who were bodyguards to Forrest was integrated and had a black officer.

That statement probably astounds some whose knowledge of Forrest, and of the Confederacy generally, is shallow; but facts are facts, however inconvenient they may be to some.

### *HOSPITAL STEWARDS*

Forrest's command included medical services. These were led by Dr. James B. Cowan, a relative of Forrest's wife who was a "skilled surgeon." Cowan held the rank of Major and was a part of Forrest's staff. Under Dr. Cowan were several other doctors, depending on the current size of the command, and a number of nurses and stewards serving in hospitals.

When on a combat operation Cowan and the other doctors accompanied the men. Several nurses and a single doctor would set up a "forward post" as close to the firing line as possible and it was to this location that stretcher bearers brought the wounded. At this post triage was performed, first aid sent some men with minor wounds back to the firing line while those who would benefit from more advanced care were sent to a field hospital whose location had been previously agreed upon and which was marked by a large red flag.

At the field hospital Cowan and the other surgeons would perform needed operations and wound dressing. The men were then turned over to the care of “hospital stewards” for long-term care. After the battle the more seriously wounded who were not expected to survive would be brought to the field hospital and made as comfortable as possible, also under the care of the stewards.

Forrest used many black men as “hospital stewards” and these men won the praise of those for whom they cared. They also won the praise and admiration of the local women who invariably came to help at the hospitals, feeding and comforting the wounded.

William Holland was one of these hospital stewards and his story illustrates the nature of how blacks and whites formed personal relationships before and during the war.

William Holland was born a slave in Todd County, Kentucky, in 1831. He moved with his owner to the town of Cowan, Tennessee, before 1840. When the U.S. army occupied that area in July 1863 Holland joined the U.S.C.T., being assigned to the 111<sup>th</sup> Regiment where he rose to the rank of Sergeant. Assigned to garrison duty in Pulaski, Tennessee, Holland’s unit was sent a few miles south to man an earthwork at Sulphur Creek Trestle .

That post was attacked and captured by Forrest on September 25, 1864. As the prisoners marched out to lay down their arms Dr. J.B. Cowan recognized in their ranks Holland, a man he had known when they both were growing up near the village of Cowan. The doctor approached the sergeant and offered to make him a hospital steward instead of sending him to a prison camp at Cahaba, Alabama. Sergeant Holland accepted and served in that capacity for the rest of the raid into Tennessee and was exchanged for a captured Confederate before Forrest left the state. This service to the Confederacy probably saved Holland's life. Most of the Cahaba prisoners wound up on the *Sultana*.

Holland remained in the U.S. army until 1866. His final military duty was to remove Union bodies from battlefield graves to the newly established National Cemeteries. Holland is buried adjacent to the Hazen Monument on the Stones River Battlefield Park.

### *BODY SERVANTS*

At the beginning of the war many of the wealthier Confederates had body servants to do the hard work around camp. This practice declined as the war went on but never disappeared. The men under Forrest had fewer body servants than was common in many commands but the officers did utilize the services of such men on occasion.

In May 1863 Lt. Nathan Boone and Lt. George Cowan, officers in Forrest's personal Escort Company, hired Jones Greer as a body servant. I say "hired" because Greer's owner was not a member of Forrest's command. Jones Greer accompanied these two officers for the rest of the war, serving faithfully as mess cook, groom, camp orderly, and helping in a variety of other ways. Greer accompanied these officers into combat on more than one occasion and formed a strong bond of friendship with them. At Gainesville, Greer was not treated by U.S. authorities as a non-combatant but was required to accept the articles of surrender and to sign a parole before being sent home. In 1886 when the surviving veterans of Forrest's Escort met for a reunion in Lynchburg Jones Greer was among them and was included in their group picture. The Marshall Rangers Camp, SCV, dedicated a tombstone at the burial place of Jones Greer on June 28, 2009. Some 30 members of the Greer family participated in the ceremony.

Thus, in a variety of capacities, black Confederates served under Forrest, most of them in the line of service and supply.

#### *BLACK CONFEDERATES IN COMBAT WITH FORREST*

The first clear incident of black Confederates going into combat with Forrest occurred on the First West Tennessee Raid. After capturing Trenton, Tennessee, Forrest divided his command into several units to hit diverse

targets. Major George V. Rambaut, chief of Commissary, was sent along a country road which was thought to be well away from any Yankees. The only white men with Major Rambaut were a handful of troopers whose mounts had gone lame. When the rural track reached the railroad at Kenton Station the group was very surprised to see a stockade with the stars and stripes still flying above it.

Rambaut dismounted the wagon drivers and the few troopers with lame horses and sent them to surround the stockade, staying at extreme range for small-arms fire. Opening fire, this scratch force pinned down the garrison in the stockade while one teamster unhitched a mule, climbed aboard it, and went trotting away to find Forrest and the Escort. An hour or so later, during all of which time the wagon drivers kept peppering the stockade with rifle balls, Forrest, the Escort, and two guns under John Morton arrived. One salvo from the artillery and the flag came down from above the stockade. Major Rambaut was allowed to accept the surrender; this must have been a proud moment for a commissary officer whose command was 45 black wagon drivers.

In the summer of 1864 when Forrest fought so long and so well in Mississippi, defending that important source of food, one of the units under his command was Cobb's Texas Scouts. This unit had originally been made

up entirely of men from Texas, but facing the necessities of war and the difficulty of communicating with their home country, Cobb had accepted enlistments from wherever he could get them. One observer who saw Cobb's unit as it camped near Forrest's headquarters described them as "white, black, red Indian, and every mixture between." Cobb's Scouts were one of several small units Forrest liked to keep around his command post to be used for special missions, especially missions which called for penetrating Union lines for the purpose of wrecking rail lines, and generally raising havoc. In many cases these "special forces units" would receive the cooperation of local guerrillas. Black men were especially useful in making contact with these guerrilla units since the U.S. forces did not check too closely into the purpose of "contrabands" roaming behind their lines.

One of these "scouts" who helped Forrest by penetrating Union lines was from Shelbyville, Tennessee, and was named William Key. Born a slave, Key accompanied his two young masters into Confederate service. He escaped with them from Fort Donelson and, by the summer of 1862, had made himself invaluable to Forrest's command as a veterinarian.

In 1863, during the fighting in Middle Tennessee, William Key went behind Union lines on numerous occasions, once getting a job as a waiter at the St. Cloud Hotel in Nashville so he could listen in on the meal-time

conversation of Union officers and report any useful information to Forrest. In late 1863, following the battle at Chickamauga and the furious confrontation between Forrest and Bragg, Key undertook a mission behind Union lines and was apprehended. Sentenced to hang, he got into a poker game with his guards and won over \$1,000. The guards didn't worry about losing their money since they would take it back off Key's body the next morning. During the night, however, Key bribed another of the guards to desert and allow Key to escape. Both slipped through Union lines, Key to return to Forrest and the deserter heading for California.

After the war Key returned to Shelbyville and became internationally famous as a horse trainer and veterinarian.

The most fabulous band of black Confederates were the seven black members of Forrest's Escort Company. These men are known from two sources: Nelson Winbush, an African American member of the SCV, recounts stories told by his grandfather about these men; the second source of information is the records of the veterans association formed by the surviving members of the Escort in the years after the war.

As far as can be determined, all the black members of Forrest's bodyguard, or Escort Company, were free men of color. They joined the Confederate army in the late summer of 1862 when the Escort was

organized. The impetus for their enlistment seems to have been the treatment they, their wives and children, and their property, had been treated by U.S. soldiers under the command of Don Carlos Buell. Buell led the Union forces into Middle Tennessee and North Alabama in the spring and summer of 1862 following the Battle of Shiloh. During the occupation of this area by these U.S. troops there was a considerable amount of looting, indiscriminate destruction of property, and numerous rapes. Many of the sexual assaults were directed against black women. The Illinois and Indiana troops commanded by Colonel Ivan Turchin were especially noted for their lack of moral behavior.

The laws governing the enlistment of black men in the Confederate armies allowed free men of color to enlist in 1861 and 1862. Such enlistments were prohibited in 1863 but were again allowed in 1864. Frankly, I doubt Forrest paid much attention to the laws concerning enlistment. If an able-bodied man approached Forrest and said “I want to fight” Forrest’s response probably was “That man sittin’ under that tree yonder is the Adjutant. Give him yore name and he’ll see you get a gun.”

At least one of these black Escort members paid the ultimate price for riding with Forrest. Pleasant Polk Arnold, born in 1844, enlisted in the Escort and rose to the rank of Corporal. He was in the platoon commanded

by Lt. Nathan Boone who was a pre-war neighbor of Arnold. On July 17, 1864, Arnold was killed in combat at Harrisburg, Mississippi, as the Escort participated in an attack on the Union lines. Arnold was just over 20 years old and left behind a widow, Caldonia. In 1916 she filed for a Confederate pension which was granted. That pension lists Pleasant P. Arnold as “free man of color” and his wife as “Negro.” The service of Arnold was proven by a service record which shows him answering to roll call and receiving pay. He was not a wagon driver, cook, or body servant. He was a regularly enlisted Confederate soldier who held rank, drew pay, carried a weapon, and who took his turn standing guard outside the tent where Bedford Forrest lay sleeping.

F.F. Arnold seems to have been a relative of Pleasant Polk Arnold. Following the death of Pleasant, F.F. went missing but returned to duty and gave a satisfactory explanation for his absence. No charges were filed against him and no punishment was inflicted for his absence. It is probable that F.F. had gone back to Tennessee to tell Caldonia that her husband was dead.

Thomas Butler was discharged due to illness and died of “brain fever” at Gainsboro, Alabama, in the closing days of the war.

H.C. Gowan was missing in action following the fight at Brices Cross Roads. Given the wooded nature of that battlefield it is probable that he was killed or died of wounds and his body was never found.

The names of the other black members of the Escort are not known. It is interesting to note that their enlistment papers do not describe their race at all. Their age, height, weight, and color of eyes are stated but not the color of their skin. Their race has been determined by pension records or by census records.

### *CONCLUSION*

Bedford Forrest was a leader of men. When men put themselves forward as ready to respond to his leadership Forrest does not seem to have asked questions about race, ethnicity, or such; Forrest wanted to know if they were “man enough to do the job.” If they wanted to try, and if they proved equal to the task, that was enough for the general.

Forrest did not look on all men as his equals. Few of his contemporaries did so either. But Forrest was a shrewd judge of character and of ability. On those bases he was willing and ready to work with anyone who wished to “ride with Forrest.”