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Buckeye Blood Waters the Longleaf Pines

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Abstract

In the woods south of Wilmington, men in blue uniforms moved forward in a loose skirmish line. They were probing, trying to find General Hoke's last line of defense. Brig. General Charles Paine sent the men forward to develop the enemy. But in the pine thicket ahead, in a thin, ragged line, the bedraggled rebel troops likely had more to fear than bullets as those skirmishers probed and prodded on a February day in 1865. [*excerpt*]

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Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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Interpreting the Civil War

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TUESDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2013



In the woods south of Wilmington, men in blue uniforms moved forward in a loose skirmish line. They were probing, trying to find General Hoke's last line of defense. Brig. General Charles Paine sent the men forward to develop the enemy. But in the pine thicket ahead, in a thin, ragged line, the bedraggled rebel troops likely had more to fear than bullets as those skirmishers probed and prodded on a February day in 1865.

The skirmishers moved through the sandy soil along Federal Point Road. Behind them, the entire third brigade commanded by Colonel Elias Wright was crashing through the woods. And the color of their skin was the greatest weapon of the war.

The skirmishers of the 5th United States Colored Troops found the enemy strung out in a thin single-file line. But the rebels' fire was strong, a last ditch effort to defend the Confederate capital's final lifeline. The rebels were commanded by Major General Robert F. Hoke.

Hoke, facing off against these black soldiers, must have felt some trepidation. The world was changing. At home in Lincoln County, his mother Frances owned six human beings as property, including two men who by 1865 were old enough to wield a gun for the United States and fight in a war of freedom and revenge. Those skirmishers were a familiar and frightening bogeyman for any southern man: slave rebellion on a grand scale.

When the war broke out, the population of the county where those men now marched was nearly half enslaved. Now, through the pine forests where slaves had once gathered resin, distilled turpentine and harvested straight timber, black men marched for freedom.

And they bled as the rebels opened fire.

John Byrd bled when a musket ball blasted through the flesh around his left knee. He stood, before his knee was mangled by a rebel ball, at 5 foot 8 inches tall, with a shock of black hair and dark eyes. He farmed a field somewhere near Wooster, Ohio before joining the army. And Byrd had never tasted the bitters of slavery. Yet he fought for men with skin the same color as his.

Edgar S. Wright was wounded as well. His finger was hit by a musket ball during the assault. The 19-year-old Wright was born in Fayette County, Ohio. He had already had one close scrape with rebels; just a year before in May, Wright was captured by rebel troops, but escaped their hands. Had he stayed locked behind enemy lines in 1864, he might have been enslaved. Not again, but for the very first time. Wright was born free, risking his safety so that others might be free as well.

The 5th United States Colored Troops was pushed back, one final repulse before Hoke's line gave up the ghost and retreated in the darkness a few hours later. And as the men poured back to the safety of their comrades' line, William Alexander was likely struck in the back by a hunk of hot iron. The 36-year-old farmer from near Hillsboro, Ohio was a slight man, standing only 5 foot 5 inches. He enlisted in August of 1864, and never received a single cent from the Federal Government. Yet still his black skin was good enough to bleed in the North Carolina sand for the freedom of men he had never met.

The 5th United States Colored Troops, formerly known as the 127th Ohio Infantry, marched into Wilmington a few days later. Byrd, Wright and Alexander didn't. The men of the 5th USCT [saw, standing on the city's edge](#), "an aged colored woman," who cradled in her hands an American flag, squirreled away somewhere during the long years of war as a symbol of hope. The men cheered. In the streets, the black men and women swarmed the men of the 5th USCT. "Glory to de Lord," a white officer of the brigade remembered them cheering long after the war, "The blessed day ob salbation am cum. De good Lord bress Massa Linkum."

Byrd, Wright and Alexander likely heard little of the cheering; they were too busy suffering in agony from rebel lead and iron. Alexander had been shuttled back to Fort Fisher to be treated. He died 4 days after being wounded on the skirmish line. Wright and Byrd were brought into Wilmington, suffering in the general hospital in the newly liberated city for weeks. The two men died within hours



of one another in mid-March.

And they're buried in sandy, humid graves now, far from their Ohio homes. Private William Alexander has a gravestone, a marker at his head. But Byrd and Wright have none.

The National Cemetery at Wilmington is filled with unknown graves, both white and black. And there, likely, the other two sleep. These men from the Buckeye state, who freed a city and a nation from man's inhumanity to his fellow man, gave all that that nation might live. Because in giving freedom to the slave, they assured freedom to the free - honorable alike in what was given and what was preserved.