

CONFEDERATE MONUMENTS: LESSON 4: HANDOUT 2

U.S. COLORED INFANTRY:
THE 112TH U.S. COLORED TROOPS AND CAPTAIN JAMES M. BOWLER¹

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The 112th United States Colored Troops in Arkansas consisted of four companies of around 400 men. This small number of soldiers was largely due to the discrimination that Black men faced in the military. Black troops often had to camp on the worst land and were not given the same amount of medical attention and supplies that White regiments were given. If they were in slave-owning territory, there was a chance they could be captured and forced into slavery or even killed. Black soldiers also tended to have the worst jobs, such as digging trenches and wells. Their equipment and weapons were often inferior, and soldiers sometimes faced discrimination from their commanding officers, who were almost always White.

Not all White officers were happy with the inferior status and jobs given to the Black troops they commanded. Captain James M. Bowler commanded the 112th and was not satisfied with the work and conditions his regiment was assigned. He was originally from Maine but moved to Minnesota when he was nineteen years old. He remained with the U.S. Colored Troops in Arkansas through the first year of Reconstruction. Following is a letter that Captain Bowler wrote to his wife during his time in Arkansas. In this letter, Captain Bowler describes his living conditions, the living conditions of others, and his relationship with the Black soldiers in his regiment.

Little Rock, Ark., July 10th, 1864.
(Sunday.)

“My Dear Lizzie:

I wrote you a short letter a day or two ago, but having nothing in particular to do today and feeling that my short letter would poorly repay you for your long, interesting one, I will make another attempt.

In yours of June 20th you ask “how I live and how I get along with my darkies.”² Well, my private quarters consists of a Wall Tent, in shape like a small house—nine feet square, four or five feet high at the eaves, and eight or nine at the ridge-pole. The frame consists of two light posts and one light cross pole over which the tent is stretched and stayed by ropes and small stakes or pins. Over the tent is stretched a “fly” conforming to the roof of the tent, only it is a little higher at the eaves. This makes the roof double—less likely to leak—cooler in

¹ Adapted from Edward G. Longacre and James M. Bowler, “Letters from Little Rock of Captain James M. Bowler, 112th United States Colored Troops,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, 40, no. 3 (1981), 235-248. The letter from Captain Bowler is a direct excerpt (primary source) from p. 239-241.

² In the past, some White people used the word “darkies” when talking about Black people to reflect that they believed Black people were inferior to White people.

the sun and a very little warmer in the shade. The entrance is through an opening at one end, extending from the bottom nearly to the top. Here the cloth overlaps and closes by tying with strings like a straw tick somewhat.

On the left side as you enter my bed, consisting of a mattress and two wool blankets stretched on a low, pine bedstead. Along the right side is another occupied by Lieut. [John G.] Gustafson, who, by the way, is suffering with fever and ague while I am writing this. Opposite the entrance stands a table with two drawers in which may be found brushes, combs, tincture of myrrh, books, one pipe—*not mine*—and divers and sundry other traps. Three chairs—strayed from some secesh habitation—make up the sum total of the furniture unless a very spongy bush, used as a wardrobe, may be considered as furniture.

In front of the tent is an awning of bushes, closed on the sunshiny sides, which renders it quite agreeable to those who do not like too much exposure to the hot sun. Close around also stand several friendly oaks, casting their shade over the tent. Such is my present habitation. Can you see it in imagination?

On the immediate right of my tent stands another wall tent occupied by Lieut. Jno. E. Jenks—you saw him and his wife on the boat—and used as Hd Qrs. [of the regiment]. Lieut Jenks is Adjutant. About thirty feet in front of these is a row of wall tents occupied by the rest of the officers. Beyond these are the tents of men about one hundred and twenty in all, and shaped just like the roof of a house, quite steep, but without walls. The walls of the wall tent can be rolled up and fastened up to the eaves making it quite cool in warmer weather.

I mess with Lieut. Evander Skillman, my Quartermaster. “Uncle Alfred,” a colored man, cooks for us—bacon, ham, pork, beef, potatoes, beans, hominy, rice, bread, butter, coffee, tea, dried fruit, &c., with occasionally a pie or nice rich pudding which Alfred manages to trade for with a colored girl who predominates in the neighboring kitchen of Mr. [Peter] Hanger. This is, however, all unknown to “Massa.”

In regard to the darkies, I get along well with them. We have drills and dress parade every day. They take hold of music readily, and we already have a good martial Band. Abner—Otto’s old servant, whom I tried at Hastings to get for Mr. Caleff, is one of the drummers in the band.

Recruiting now is very slow. But little can be done until the army moves again, which may not be until about the 1st of Sept. We hope however to fill up four companies soon, as we lack but few men; which will entitle us to have a Lieut. Col. Mustered.

I am rejoiced to know your health improves, even though it be but little. You must straighten up, pluck up courage and take exercise, if you have to go as far as *twenty rods* from the house...

Give my love to all. Kiss Birdie for me. Does she show any signs of going alone yet? I guess you will get tired of this mess [weaning the baby] before you get through with it.”

Ever your
Madison.