THE BATTLE OF POISON SPRING

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By the fall of 1863, Federal arms had gained complete control of the Mississippi and Arkansas Rivers, severing the last effective connection link between the eastern and western portions of the Confederacy. It now became imperative for all Union Leaders to decide what military policy should be pursued in the Trans-Mississippi West. This problem was solved by Major-General Henry W. Halleck, General-in-Chief of the Federal armies, with the decision to advance in a winter campaign to destroy the Confederate forces in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas. The movement, to be known as the Red River Expedition, would be a simultaneous advance from Louisiana and Arkansas with Shreveport as the common objective.

The Arkansas phase of the Red River campaign, under the direction of the Departmental commander, Frederick Steele, left the friendly confines of the Little Rock on March 23, 1864. The ponderous Union column moved slowly in a southwesterly direction, not covering the seventy miles to Arkadelphia until March 29. Here Steele expected to be reinforced by a Federal contingent from Fort Smith, 170 miles northwest of Arkadelphia, under the command of Brigadier-General John M. Thayer. Numerous difficulties beset Thayer’s Frontier Division, disrupting the timetable; and the impatient Steele refused to linger in Arkadelphia beyond April 1.(1)

The Arkansas commander pushed boldly forward with his 9,000 troops, leaving the Fort Smith column to catch up at some point along the line of march. Thayer with 5,000 troops joined Steele nine days later near the Little Missouri River, after the latter had encountered stiff opposition from the Confederate cavalry commands of Brigadier-General John S. Marmaduke and Joseph O. Shelby.(2)

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Battle of Posion Spring, map 1.
Battle of Posion Spring, map 2.

MAP 2

ASSAULT AT POISON SPRING
APRIL 18, 1864
Steele's intention from the start of the campaign had been to proceed to Shreveport by way of Camden, the strongest Confederate point in southern Arkansas. His current line of march, a deceptive ruse, was designed to carry him through the town of Washington some thirty miles west of Camden. Steele's strategy was simple: force the Confederates to abandon their impregnable position and compel the enemy to converge in his front. With this accomplished, the Union Army, behind a covering screen of cavalry, could then turn swiftly and occupy Camden without opposition. The plan worked to perfection as Sterling Price, the Confederate chief, concentrated his widely scattered little army at Prairie d'Ane before Washington. The Confederates were caught unaware, for Steele, after a making feint against the Confederate position, withdrew and slipped his army into Camden twenty-three days after leaving Little Rock. April 15, the day the Union column entered Camden, marked the high tide of Federal success in Arkansas. Steele and his army seemed irresistible in their sweep toward Shreveport. The Bluecoated invader now occupied what was generally considered the most important military center in southern Arkansas. Never had an enemy force of substantial size penetrated so deeply into the heart of the Trans-Mississippi Confederacy. However, events were quickly taking shape, directly and indirectly, which would first halt the Northern thrust and then cast it back to its origin, the muddy banks of the Arkansas River. Such was the affair at Poison Spring.

Shortly after occupying Camden, Steele received grim tidings from Louisiana. The Louisiana wing of the Red River Expedition under the direction of Nathaniel P. Banks suffered defeat near Pleasant Hill, Louisiana. (4)

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After two hard-fought battles, Banks and his entire force were first immobilized then withdrawn from active participation in the campaign. The Pleasant Hill disaster removed the Arkansas general's initiative, and his decision to remain at Camden to await further developments is not surprising.

Little time could be wasted worrying about Banks' ill-fortune to the south. Steele, himself, was faced with a pressing problem which threatened to become critical in the near future. Both forage and food were running extremely low. Regular rations for the army were practically non-existent, and a supply train ordered on April 7 had not yet arrived. (5) Its start had been delayed by an unfortunate accident. On April 13, two Federal steamers, the Adams and the Chippewa, loaded with provisions for Steele were en route to Pine Bluff from Little Rock. About twenty miles below Little Rock the two vessels collided, sinking the Adams and seriously crippling the Chippewa. (6) Forage around Camden was scarce since a "destroying mania had seized the rebels . . . [and] by night the whole heavens were illuminated by reflections of the devouring flames." (7) The civilian inhabitants of Camden were starving; therefore, no relief could be expected from that quarter. To the contrary, the Federal commissary was forced to provide some food for the destitute population. On the night of April 16 a stroke of luck temporarily alleviated a desperate situation. Federal patrols ranging far down the Ouachita River captured the Confederate transport Homer. On board the craft was found 3,000 bushels of corn which provided a degree of relief to the hungry troops at Camden. (8)

But the question of supply remained unsolved. What appeared to be an excellent solution, the transporting of needed goods by way of the Red and Ouachita Rivers, dissolved completely when the former stream dropped suddenly trapping the Union gunboat fleet on its upper reaches.

5. Larron D. Ingersoll, Iowa and the Rebellion (Philadelphia, 1866), 621.
7. Ingersoll, Iowa and the Rebellion, 621.

Accounts vary as to how much corn was on board the Homer. Wiley Britton, Civil War on the Border (New York; G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1904), 279, sets the figure at 4,000 bushels.
The shortest line of supply overland to Pine Bluff on the Arkansas River, had as yet not been tested. (9) Faced with starvation, Steele's only alternative was to scour the surrounding countryside.

Steele's foraging was no haphazard affair. During the army's dash from the Prairie d'Ane to Camden, a great quantity of corn had been discovered near Poison Spring, west of Camden. Because of the rapid pace of the column the cache had to be left behind; however, with the army now solidly entrenched, a large wagon train could return for the forage. Such was Steele's thinking, and on April 17, 1864, the train departed from Camden. (10)

For some unexplained reason, no reconnaissance was conducted to determine the location of Price's cavalry—an omission which proved to be a costly error. Had the Federals reconnoitered the territory in the immediate vicinity of Camden, probably a much stronger escort would have accompanied the forage train.

General Price had established headquarters sixteen miles west of Camden near Woodlawn. To oppose Steele, the Confederates had seen cavalry brigades including Brigadier-General Samuel B. Maxey's division from the Indian Territory, Price's strength did not exceed 6,000 effective troopers. These troops were spread fanwise to cover all roads from Camden west of the Ouachita River. (11) Thus any movement in this direction would be instantly observed by Confederate vedettes.

On the morning of April 17 the forage train, composed of approximately 200 wagons and an escort, rolled out of Camden on the Prairie d'Ane-Camden road. Most of the guard was taken from Thayer's Frontier Division, and Colonel James M. Williams was picked to head the mission. Williams' command consisted of 438 men of the First Kansas Colored Volunteers; 195 troopers from three cavalry units—Sixth Kansas, Second Kansas, and Fourteenth Kansas; and one section of two guns from the Second Indiana Battery served by thirty-three artilierrists. Williams' aggregate force totaled not more than 670 men, more than half of whom were Negroes. (12)

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9. The first supply train arriving in Camden from Pine Bluff did not reach Steele until April 20.
11. Report of Major-General Sterling Price, May, 1864, ibid., 781. Price had also been instructed to throw a detachment of cavalry across the Ouachita River to disrupt Steele's communication and supply lines. This he failed to do.
12. Report of Colonel James M. Williams, April 24, 1864, ibid., 743.
The route selected by the forage train was under the surveillance of Confederate pickers from Colonel Colsen Green's brigade of Marmaduke's division. Greene promptly reported the Union activity to his superior, who in turn informed General Price. Marmaduke, lacking adequate strength to attack the column, requested the services of Brigadier-General William L. Cabell's brigade, then temporarily attached to Brigadier-General James F. Fagan's division. Price readily assented. (13)

Near dark of April 17 Marmaduke set out to intercept the Federal train. After proceeding about two miles, he received the startling news that another Union column numbering over 500 men had left Camden presumably to reinforce Colonel Williams' command. Confronted with this intelligence, Marmaduke again decided that his force was too weak for a successful assault on the strengthened forage party, and he returned in person to Woodlawn for additional troops. (14) To the second request for reinforcements, Price ordered Maxey's division to join the venture. (15) In selecting Maxey, the Confederate commander perhaps did not realize that Maxey's commission antedated that of Marmaduke's, making the former senior officer of the expedition. Quite naturally Marmaduke would be loath to relinquish command of an enterprise he himself had initiated; in fact, friction eventually developed between him and Maxey.

On the night of April 17, Colonel Williams' command made camp some fourteen miles from Camden. The largest accumulation of corn was still six miles away, and Major Richard G. Ward continued with half of the wagons with orders to load that same night and return to the main column as quickly as possible. Ward had no trouble locating the forage, 5,000 bushels of corn, and wasted little time loading the wagons. By midnight he had rejoined Williams.

The other half of the train would be loaded the next day from the numerous small concentrations of forage along the return route. (16)

By daybreak on April 18 Williams had the train in motion toward Camden, dispatching wagons at spots promising sizable yields of grain. Each group had to be provided with an escort, thus greatly reducing the strength of the column. Near Cross-Roads, two miles from Poison Spring, the train was met by the Federal relief column which had left Camden the previous afternoon.

These fresh troops under Captain William M. Duncan almost doubled Williams’ total strength. They consisted of 383 men of the Eighteenth Iowa Volunteers, ninety-six troopers from the same three cavalry regiments which had furnished the original mounted arm for the mission, and twenty-five artillerymen with two additional howitzers — a total of 504 men of all arms. (17) Williams now had under his immediate command 1,170 troops, although his effective fighting force probably would not exceed 1,000.

Meanwhile, the Confederates were gathering for the kill. After receiving oral assurance from Price that more troops would be available, Marmaduke began his march to intercept the Federal forage train. Accompanying Marmaduke were the brigades of Colonel William Crawford, 300 men; Cabell, 1,200 men; and Greene, 500 men. (18) After entering the Prairie d’Ane - Camden road near Lee’s plantation, Marmaduke dismounted his entire command with the exception of Green, who formed the reserve. Crawford was placed on the right while Cabell’s men were stretched across the road and to the left. (19) With the road closed, the Union column would be forced to fight its way through, or surrender. Thus deployed, Confederate pickets were thrown forward to warn of the enemy approach.

16. Report of Colonel James M. Williams, April 24, 1864, ibid., 743. Almost 2,500 bushels of the corn had been burned one day earlier by a Confederate patrol.
17. Ibid., 744.
Around 9:30 a.m., shortly before the Union train appeared, Maxey arrived on the scene with the brigades of Colonel Tandy Walker and Colonel Charles DeMorse. Walker’s brigade, composed of mostly Choctaw and Chickasaw Indians, normally numbered 1,000 troops, but on this day he could muster only 680 Indians. DeMorse had under his immediate command 655 Texans. (20) Thus, Maxey brought 1,335 men onto the field, which, added to Marmaduke’s command, raised the total Confederate force to 3,335.

Maxey was the ranking general present, and should have been in command of the operation. Marmaduke, however, had made the dispositions and Maxey declined the responsibility, asking where his men could best be used. To this query Marmaduke had a ready answer. Maxey’s troop would make up the Confederate left wing forming a line parallel to the road and at right angles to the line established by Crawford and Cabell. Placed in their position, Maxey would be on the Federal right flank while Marmaduke would oppose the Union advance in front. (21) Greene remained in reserve.

While the Confederates deployed for action, the Union train continued down the road unaware of the imminent danger. With the arrival of the supporting column at Cross-Roads, the Union commander, Colonel Williams, rearranged his order of march. The First Kansas Colored, Major Richard G. Ward commanding, moved to the front of the train changing positions with the Eighteenth Iowa under Captain Duncan. (22) Duncan retained the cavalry detachment that accompanied him from Camden, and Ward had the troopers originally assigned to the escort. Williams was with the advance.

Leaving Cross-Roads, the column moved forward one mile before Confederate pickets were encountered. The Confederates were not in force, and fell back before the determined Union drive. For perhaps a mile Williams had little trouble pushing the enemy skirmishers, but as his train approached Poison Spring, in the vicinity of Lee’s plantation, Confederate resistance stiffened.

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20. Report of Colonel Tandy Walker, April 19, 1864, ibid., 849; Report of Colonel Charles DeMorse, April 21, 1864, ibid., 846.
21. Report of Major- General John S. Marmaduke, April 21, 1864, ibid., 819. A controversy has risen over who commanded at Poison Spring. Both Maxey and Marmaduke claim the honor, but the evidence points toward Marmaduke as the field commander.
In the distance a strong Confederate line could be seen completely blocking the road. (23)

Recognizing the danger, Williams quickly closed up the train and whipped the First Kansas into line fronting the enemy with his cavalry on both flanks. As yet he had no indication of activity on his right where Maxey remained hidden from view.

As soon as possible Williams brought forward two field pieces and fixed on the Confederate position. His reasons for hurriedly discharging the cannons were important. First, the scattered foragers needed to be recalled and the sound of firing would do this. Second, he hoped to learn whether or not the Confederates possessed artillery. If they did, a return fire might reveal their strength. The Confederates had twelve pieces of artillery, but refused to answer the bombardment. Third, and perhaps most important, the Union commander hoped the sound of battle would bring aid from Camden. Indeed, Steele heard the noise of battle but did nothing to relieve Williams' desperate plight. (24)

The Confederate plan of attack at Poison Spring called for Maxey to deliver the initial assault on the exposed Union right flank. Once the Federals changed front to meet Maxey, Marmaduke would hit straight ahead up the road, roll up the Union left flank, and trap the remaining enemy troops in a cross fire. (25) Had Maxey's attack come as a surprise, the plan might have worked admirably. Instead, Williams noted the activity on his right and shifted four companies of the First Kansas to meet the threat. (26) The Confederates, therefore, were forced to rely on numerical superiority to wear down their opponents. The Confederate line from left to right consisted of the forces of Walker, DeMorse, Cabell, and Crawford, with Greene one mile to the rear. Only Greene's brigade remained mounted.

At 10:00 a.m. the troops of DeMorse and Walker plunged forward.

In their front was a steep, wooded ravine beyond which ran an open field criss-crossed by several fences. Crossing the ravine, DeMorse halted momentarily to straighten his line which had become entangled in heavy undergrowth. When he stopped, Walker did likewise, although the latter’s troops were still in good order. Both then moved forward again. (27)

Approaching the open field DeMorse’s Texans were hit head-on by a galling fire that drove them back to the timber for protection. On DeMorse’s left Walker’s Indians, more removed from the scene of battle, did not feel the terrific fire. Throughout the affair they never did more than skirmish with the Union rearguard. At this point Maxey’s artillery opened up with devastating effect, enabling DeMorse to rally his men and move into the field once again. (28)

The Confederate right wing moved forward once the sound of battle on the left reached their position. Both Crawford and Cabell crossed fields and fences but managed to keep their lines intact. (29) However, a hectic in plans soon occurred when Cabell could not establish contact with DeMorse. Evidently Cabell’s left should have overlapped the Texas brigade’s right flank, but DeMorse had been repulsed in his initial charge. Now a slowly widening gap appeared between the Confederate’s left and right wings. Williams probably could not have exploited the break even had he known of its presence. With a long wagon train to guard, troops could not be concentrated at any one point. Then, too, Marmaduke soon learned of the hole in his line and ordered Greene forward to fill it. By this time it was 10:45 a.m. (30) Greene came up swiftly and hurled the entire weight of his brigade against the already weakened Union line. It sagged in the middle, then broke on the left when Crawford managed to outflank his opponents.

27. Report of Colonel Charles DeMorse, April 21, 1864, ibid., 846; Report of Colonel Tandy Walker, April 19, 1864, ibid., 849.
29. Report of Major-General John S. Marmaduke, April 21, 1864, ibid., 819; Report of Major-General William L. Cabell, April 20, 1864, ibid., 791. Cabell did stop near a copse of trees for a few minutes to straighten his line.
30. Report of Colonel Colton Greene, April 26, 1864, ibid., 828. Confederate reports mention no break in the lines, but one must have occurred since DeMorse was not in the correct position when Cabell advanced.
Organized Union resistance vanished, although the Eighteenth Iowa made one stand at the rear of the train which lasted perhaps twenty minutes. In some instances the Confederates pursued their defeated foe for two and one-half miles, but a majority of the fleeing Union soldiers escaped by entering a swamp not too far from the field of battle. Isolated individual stands were made to slow the Confederate pursuit, but all firing had ceased by 2:00 p.m. (31)

The First Kansas Colored fought remarkably well while their line remained unbroken. They faced odds of approximately four to one. Also, a severe artillery cross fire played on them during much of the battle. Union officers later described the barrage as the worst their troops had undergone throughout the war. (32) The threat to the Negro regiment’s left forced that side to retire and the right, hard-pressed in front and with no support on the left, became panic-stricken and fled in utter disorder.

When the First Kansas cracked under the strain, Williams hurried to the rear to form a new line with the Eighteenth Iowa. His decision meant the abandonment of the train, but this mattered little since his entire command now faced possible annihilation. He hoped to have the First Kansas fall back slowly to the new position; however, he had scarcely rearranged the Iowa regiment before broken remnants of Negroes came streaming past. (33) Since the white troops could not stem the Confederate tide without assistance, they beat a hasty retreat to prevent capture.

The end of Federal resistance came in the rear of Lee’s plantation on the north side of the road. Desperate Union officers rallied a ragged following near the edge of a thickly wooded hill. Beyond the ridge stretched a swamp area, and many stragglers gained its safety once the Confederates were slowed in the pursuit. (34)

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31. Report of Colonel James M. Williams, April 24, 1864, ibid., 746. After the Union rearguard broke, the fighting is confused and a clear picture of events is impossible.
33. Ibid., 753; Ingersoll, Iowa and the Rebellion, 315-316. Four companies of the First Kansas were entirely without officers.

Passing through the swamp, the Union survivors made a wide circle to the north in their trek back to Camden.
Cavalry could not easily penetrate the marsh. The fighting terminated, and Southern arms had won an impressive victory. But the fruits of success were considerably lessened by an unfortunate change of command in the closing seconds of action.

The Union loss at Poison Spring numbered 301 killed, wounded, and missing, or 26 per cent of their total strength. The First Kansas suffered most, losing 41 per cent of its personnel. With 438 men engaged, the Negro regiment had 117 killed and sixty-five wounded. Williams' losses were not heavier because of dissension in the Confederate ranks. Marmaduke had called for full scale pursuit of the fleeing Federals by the fresher cavalry units which had seen only limited action. Confederates were everywhere hunting down stray Bluecoats when Maxey unwisely assumed command and countermanded the order. Marmaduke's hand were tied since Maxey did outrank him. This hasty decision, Marmaduke reported, allowed the remnants of Williams' disorganized command to escape unscathed.

General Maxey's explanation is unconvincing. He wished, he said, to get the captured wagon train to safety, and he feared Steele's retaliation. Certainly all the cavalry would not be needed to escort the train through Confederate territory. And, too, one regiment from Cabell's brigade watched the road to Camden to prevent any Federal surprise. The facts fail to exonerate the general; Maxey's move was ill-timed.

Confederate casualties were slight, totaling 114 men or 3 per cent of their full strength. As partial compensation, 200 wagons loaded with forage and four field pieces fell into Confederate hands. Thirty of the wagons were beyond repair, but the others were removed to Price's headquarters near Woodlawn.

Much has been said concerning the massacre of Negro troops at Poison Spring.

39. Returns of Casualties (Incomplete), ibid., 786.
Reports of Union officers engaged in the fighting frequently mention that wounded Negroes were shot down without mercy. The surviving evidence tends to support this assertion. While no Confederates reported a "massacre," General Cabell did state that "Morgan's regiment killed at least eighty Negroes." Morgan did not participate directly in the fighting but was stationed between Poison Spring and Camden in the path of the fleeing Negro troops. It also seems significant that the Confederates reported the capture of only four Negroes.

Whether a massacre of Negro troops had occurred or not, the Confederacy had won at Poison Spring a signal victory, the first of the current campaign. The boost in morale alone, at the low ebb after weeks of retreating, proved of incalculable value to Price's weary troops. On the other hand, the loss of his forage train was a real blow to Steele, helping to hasten his decision to withdraw his army from Camden.


42. Ibid., 792; Britton, Civil War on the Border, 291.