

# The Battle of Saltville Lesson Plan

## HIGH SCHOOL

*BY PAUL LARUE*

Saltville and its controversy provides an excellent opportunity to teach a lesson that highlights some complex and difficult aspects of the civil war. This lesson helps students see the complexity of African American military Service. As our nation begins its Civil War Sesquicentennial; students need to see past “Glory” and look at some often difficult aspects of the war.

**Approximate Length of Time:** One, 50 minute class period

### Goals:

1. Students will view the controversial events at Saltville from multiple perspectives.
2. Students will understand the challenges African American soldiers faced in combat.

### Objectives:

1. Students will be able to recall and write details about the Battle at Saltville.
2. Students will be able to discuss orally and in writing the relationship between African American troops and Confederate troops.
3. Students will be able to discuss in writing the sacrifices made by families of African American soldiers.
4. Students will be able to analyze the definition and use of the word "massacre."
5. Students will be able to compare the events at Saltville with other historic events, and argue whether or not Saltville should be considered a massacre.

### Materials:

All materials can be downloaded with the lesson plan on the right side of this page.

- Student Handouts:

- Union description of battle
- Confederate description of battle
- Surgeon description
- List of killed, wounded, missing
- Story of Private William Garry, Private Co. "H", 5th United States Colored Cavalry
- Battle/ Event Summary Clue Sheet
- Teacher:
  - Quiz: Measure Lesson Objectives (Student Evaluation #1 and #2)
  - Movie Maker Civil War Battles/ Events

## **Inquiry Question for Class Discussion:**

Can be used before and/or after completion of the lesson.

1. Was Saltville a battle or a massacre?
2. What defines a massacre?
3. Develop a list of features/examples of both battles and massacres.

## **Procedure:**

1. Present inquiry question 1: Was Saltville a battle or a massacre?
2. Have students read the handouts, which are all primary source documents.
3. Discuss what defines a massacre. Discuss the difference between a battle and a massacre.
4. Have students complete the Evaluation #1, the quiz.
5. Review the answers to Evaluation #1 as a group.

## **Closure:**

Have students complete Evaluation #2; the student writing assignment.

## **Assessment:**

1. Evaluation #1
2. Informal assessment through group discussion
3. Evaluation #2

## Student Hand-out: #1

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O.R.—SERIES I—VOLUME XXXIX/1 [S# 77]

**SEPTEMBER 20-OCTOBER 17, 1864.—Raids from Kentucky and East Tennessee into**

**Southwestern Virginia**

**No. 6—Report of Col. James S. Brisbin, Fifth U.S. Colored Cavalry of the part taken by a detachment of the Fifth U.S. Colored Cavalry, under the command of Col. James F. Wade, Sixth U.S. Colored Cavalry, at Saltville.**

HEADQUARTERS U.S. COLORED TROOPS,

*Lexington, Ky., October 20, 1864.*

GENERAL: I have the honor to forward herewith a report of the operations of a detachment of the Fifth U.S. Colored Cavalry during the late operations in Western Virginia against the salt-works... On the 2d of October the forces reached the vicinity of the salt-works, and finding the enemy in force preparations were made for battle. Colonel Ratliff's brigade was assigned to the left of the line, and the brigade (dismounted) was disposed as follows: Fifth U.S. Colored Cavalry on the left, Twelfth Ohio Volunteer Cavalry in the center, and the Eleventh Michigan Cavalry on the right. The point to be attacked was the side of a high mountain, the rebels being posted about half way up behind rifle-pits made of logs and stones to the height of three feet. All being in readiness, the brigade moved to the attack. The rebels opened upon them a terrific fire, but the line pressed steadily forward up the steep side of the mountain until they found themselves within fifty yards of the enemy. Here Colonel Wade ordered his force to charge, and the negroes rushed upon the works with a yell, and after a desperate struggle carried the entire line, killing and wounding a large number of the enemy and capturing some prisoners. There were 400 black soldiers engaged in the battle, 100 having been left behind sick and with broken-down horses on the march, and 100 having been left in the valley to hold horses. Out of the 400 engaged 114 men and 4 officers fell killed or wounded. Of this fight I can only say that the men could not have behaved more bravely. I have seen white troops fight in twenty-seven battles and I never saw any fight better. At dusk the colored troops were withdrawn from the enemy's works which they had held for over two hours with scarcely a round of ammunition in their cartridge-boxes. On the return of the forces those who had scoffed at the colored troops on the march out were silent. Nearly all the wounded were brought off, though we had not an ambulance in the command. The negro soldiers preferred present suffering to being murdered at the hands of a cruel enemy. I saw one man riding with his arm off, another shot through the lungs, and another shot through both hips. Such of the colored soldiers as fell into the hands of the enemy during the battle were brutally murdered. The negroes did not retaliate, but treated the rebel wounded with great kindness; carrying them water in their canteens and doing all they could to alleviate the sufferings of those whom the fortunes of war had placed in their hands.

**JAMES S. BRISBIN,**

*Colonel and Supt. Organization U.S. Colored Troops.*

## **Student Hand-out: #2**

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O.R.—SERIES I—VOLUME XXXIX/1 [S# 77]

**SEPTEMBER 6, 1864.—Skirmish at Readyville, Tenn.**

**No. 2.—Report of Col. George G. Dibrell, Thirteenth Tennessee (Confederate)  
Cavalry,**

**commanding brigade, including engagement at Saltville, Va., October 2.**

HEADQUARTERS DIBRELL'S BRIGADE,

*Greenville, S.C., October 19, 1864.*

For the information of the major-general commanding I respectfully submit the following report of my operations since I left the command at Sparta, Tenn.: . . . I cannot close this without adding a word in regard to the battle of Saltville on the 2d instant. I am fully convinced that the presence of Brigadier-General Williams' command saved the salt-works. My brigade, consisting of the Eighth [Thirteenth] Tennessee, six companies of Colonel McLemore's Fourth Tennessee, And Col. Paul Anderson's Fourth [Eighth] Tennessee, occupied the extreme right and fought about 2,500 Yankees and negroes, making a most desperate fight, killing in front of our lines over 200 and wounding a great many. Thirty minutes of the last of the fight by the Eighth [Thirteenth] was with their pistols, their ammunition having failed. General Robertson's right, which rested upon our left, having been withdrawn, left a gap through which the enemy passed and got into our rear, compelling us to retire (in good order and at our leisure) to the fortifications in our rear, where we turned and drove the enemy back. The conduct of the entire brigade was such as any veteran soldier might be proud of, and won the applause of all who witnessed the fight and went over the battle-field the next morning and saw the effects of their hard fighting. I feel very certain that my command killed and wounded more than we had in the fight, and more than two-thirds of the whole; captured all the prisoners taken and five stand of colors.

Very respectfully,

**G.G. DIBRELL,**

*Colonel, Commanding Brigade.*

## **Student Hand-out: #3**

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**SEPTEMBER 20-OCTOBER 17, 1864.—Raids from Kentucky and East Tennessee into  
Southwestern Virginia.**

**No. 3.—Report of Surg. William H. Gardner, Thirtieth Kentucky Infantry, of the shooting of  
Union prisoners.**

LEXINGTON, KY., *October 26, 1864.*

SIR: I have the honor to report that I was with the command of Brevet Major-General Burbridge in the attack on Saltville, Va., October 2, 1864, and that I was left with the wounded and was captured October 3, and paroled By Major-General Breckinridge.

I would state that on Monday morning, October 3, there came to our field hospital several armed men, as I believe soldiers in the Confederate service, and took 5 men, privates, wounded (negroes), and shot them.

I would also further state that on Friday evening, October 7, at Emory and Henry College Hospital, Washington County, Va., to which place our wounded had been removed, several armed men entered the said hospital about 10 p.m. and went up into the rooms occupied by the Federal wounded prisoners, and shot 2 of them (negroes) dead in their beds.

I would further state that on Saturday, October 8, at Emory and Henry College Hospital, several armed men wearing the Confederate uniform, and, as I believe, soldiers in the Confederate service, entered the same hospital about 4 p.m., overpowered the guard that had been placed there by the surgeon in charge, and went up into the rooms occupied by the Federal wounded prisoners, and shot Lieut E. C. Smith, Thirteenth Regiment Kentucky Cavalry, dead in his bed, where he lay severely wounded. They at the same time called out for the other Federal officers confined there, particularly Colonel Hanson, Thirty-seventh Regiment Kentucky Volunteers, and Captain Degenfeld, Twelfth Ohio Cavalry, swearing that they intended to kill all of them; and I believe that they were only prevented doing so by the exertions of Surgeon Murfee, the surgeon in charge, the steward, Mr. Acres, and the other attendants of the hospital. I would further state that Surgeon Murfree, the other surgeons, and the hospital attendants did all in their power, even to risk of their lives, to prevent the perpetration of these Outrages; and that they assisted in removing Colonel Hanson and Captain Degenfeld, as well as myself, to a place of safety.

I would further state that we left about 70 of our wounded prisoner in the said hospital, and that I have been informed that these outrages have been perpetrated on them since we left there.

Respectfully, your obedient servant,

**WM. H. GARDNER,**

*Surgeon, Thirtieth Regiment Kentucky Volunteer Infantry.*

## Student Hand-out: #4

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**SEPTEMBER 20-OCTOBER 17, 1864.—Raids from Kentucky and East Tennessee into Southwestern Virginia.**

**No. 2.—Report of Surg. James G. Hatchitt, U.S. Army, Surgeon in Chief, First Division, District of Kentucky...**

*... of the killed, wounded, and missing in the action at Saltville.*

HDQRS. FIRST DIVISION, DISTRICT OF KENTUCKY,

*Richland, Va., October 4, 1864*

SIR: I have the honor to submit the following report of the killed, wounded, and missing of this division on the 2d instant in the battle of Saltville, Va.:

It is impossible for me to give a correct list of the killed and wounded at present, because the recording surgeons were left on the field with the wounded. It will be furnished as soon as possible.

| <b>Command.</b>                                     | <b>Killed.</b> | <b>Wounded.</b> | <b>Missing.</b> |
|-----------------------------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 13 <sup>th</sup> Kentucky Cavalry                   | 4              | 13              | 1               |
| 35 <sup>th</sup> Kentucky Mounted Infantry          | 3              | 11              | 21              |
| 45 <sup>th</sup> Kentucky Mounted Infantry          | ....           | 2               | ....            |
| 40 <sup>th</sup> Kentucky Mounted Infantry          | ....           | 1               | ....            |
| 26 <sup>th</sup> Kentucky Mounted Infantry          | 1              | 3               | ....            |
| 30 <sup>th</sup> Kentucky Mounted Infantry          | 5              | 2               | ....            |
| 11 <sup>th</sup> Kentucky Cavalry                   | ....           | 10              | 1               |
| 37 <sup>th</sup> Kentucky Regiment Mounted Infantry | 2              | 9               | ....            |
| 39 <sup>th</sup> Kentucky Regiment Mounted Infantry | 1              | 10              | ....            |
| 12 <sup>th</sup> Regiment Ohio Volunteer Cavalry    | 5              | 31              | 12              |
| 11 <sup>th</sup> Regiment Michigan Cavalry          | 11             | 61              | 16              |
| <b>5<sup>th</sup> Regiment U.S. Colored Cavalry</b> | <b>22</b>      | <b>37</b>       | <b>53</b>       |
| <b>Total</b>                                        | <b>54</b>      | <b>190</b>      | <b>104</b>      |

**J. G. HATCHITT,**

*Surgeon, U.S. Vols., Surgeon in Chief, First Div., Dist. Of Ky*

## Student Hand-out: #5

William Garry, Private Company "H", 5<sup>th</sup> United States Colored Cavalry

Dennis Dickenson (sometimes spelled Dickinson or Dickerson) enlisted in the Union Army as a free man (though was likely a slave earlier in his life). Much of what we know about Dickenson was provided by his wife in her quest to acquire a widow's pension. She states, "... she was married and lived with her said husband as man and wife up to the time he run off from Virginia and entered the service of the United States at Cumberland Gap, Kentucky..." Dickenson followed a fairly common practice for slaves enlisting in the Union Army; he enlisted under a different name: William Garry. Dickenson (Garry) enrolled in the Union Army on the 16<sup>th</sup> of September 1864 at Camp Nelson Kentucky. He volunteered for three years in the 5<sup>th</sup> United States Colored Cavalry, Company "H", as a private. Little more than two weeks after enrolling Private William Garry found himself on the battlefield at Saltville. Following the battle, Garry was listed as "missing in action. Saltville, Virginia, October 2, 1864." On the regimental muster out roll of Company, Helena Ark., March 16, 1866, he was reported "killed in action. Saltville, Virginia, October 2, 1864." Both Garry's name change and confusion over his regiment were problematic for his widow. Rosa Dickenson in a deposition in 1869 states, "She is the widow of Dennis Dickerson, Private Company "D", 6<sup>th</sup> United States Colored Cavalry." The 6<sup>th</sup> USCC was a regiment also formed at Camp Nelson Kentucky at the same time as the 5<sup>th</sup> USCC. Rosella Garry (Dickenson) not sure of what became of her husband, including what name he enlisted under and what regiment. Rosella in an earlier deposition in 1867 states, "... Dennis Dickenson was a private, 5<sup>th</sup> Colored Regiment of Kentucky Cavalry (her husband) was killed, King's Salt Works, Virginia, November or December, 1864. That he was killed in battle of the King's Salt Works, Virginia, while in the line of duty as a soldier..." Rosella even struggles to prove her marriage due to the nature of slavery, she states, "... there is no public or private record of her said marriage... at the time of said marriage was no records kept of colored person's marriages... (was married) by one Albert Whitten, a colored man, a minister of the Gospel who married colored persons before the war in slave times..." Rosella received a widow's pension of \$12.00 per month at the time of her death in October 17, 1900.

The story of the life and death of Private William Garry illustrates the unique challenges faced by African American soldiers and their families.

Source: Widow's Claim for Pension

Rosa Dickinson, Certificate #227259

Filed September 23, 1867: National Archives and Records Administration

**Student Evaluation #1**  
**Student Quiz: Battle of Saltville**

- 1.) Date of Battle? Place of Battle?
- 2.) How many African American soldiers were in the Battle?
- 3.) Size of Union Force?
- 4.) Why did Confederate forces Eighth [Thirteenth] use their pistols?
- 5.) What about this battle changes to a massacre on October 3<sup>rd</sup>?
- 6.) How many wounded African American soldiers were killed following the battle?
- 7.) How many African American soldiers were missing in action following the battle?

**Questions for Critical Thinking**

- 1.) What was the likely fate of William Garry? What is your answer based on?
- 2.) What makes a massacre?



a.) The number killed?

b.) The method of killing?

3.) Compare the Saltville Massacre to:

a.) Events at Fort Pillow

b.) The Boston Massacre

c.) The My Lai Massacre

d.) What are their similarities and differences?

4.) Discuss the impact of race on the events at Saltville.

## **Quiz Answers**

- 1.) October 2, 1863, Saltville, Virginia
- 2.) 400
- 3.) 2500
- 4.) Low on Ammunition
- 5.) Wounded African American Soldiers executed
- 6.) (5) executed Monday October 3<sup>rd</sup>, (2) executed Friday October 7<sup>th</sup>, (1) {white officer}October 8<sup>th</sup> or (7) African American soldiers and one white officer executed.
- 7.) (53) 5<sup>th</sup> US Colored Cavalry listed missing in action.

## **Critical Thinking Answers**

- 1-4.) Answers will vary with student/teacher discussion and research.

## **Student Evaluation #2**

### **A.) Student Writing Assignment:**

1.) Directions: Student is to write 1-3 paragraphs answering the following Question: "Were the events at Saltville: a battle, a massacre or both?" Explain your answer.

### **2.) Your writing needs to incorporate:**

- a.) Data from all hand-outs (facts).
- b.) Did this event have to happen?
- c.) Was the outcome of events at Saltville anticipated or predictable?

## Resources

(For additional reading)

### A.) Books:

- 1.) The Saltville Massacre: By Thomas Mays (Whitney Foundation Press, 1998)
- 2.) Like Men of War: Black Troops in the Civil War 1862-1865: by Noah Trudeau (Little, Brown and Co., 1998)

### B.) Articles:

- 1.) "Was It A Massacre in Southwest Virginia?" by William Marvel (Blue and Gray Magazine, August 1991)
- 2.) "Researching Ohio's Men of Color and their Civil War Service" by Paul LaRue (Ohio Civil War Genealogy Journal, Volume X, 2006.)

### C.) Primary Sources:

- 1.) Official Records: Series I, Volume XXXIX/I, series #77
- 2.) Pension and Military Files (William Garry, 5<sup>th</sup> USCC, Co. "H") National Archives and Records Administration

### D.) Internet:

- 1.) Civil War Trust ([www.civilwar.org](http://www.civilwar.org)) – America's largest non-profit organization devoted to the preservation of our nation's endangered civil war battlefields.
- 2.) African American Civil War Memorial ([www.Afroamcivilwar.org](http://www.Afroamcivilwar.org)) – Includes database with the names of African American civil war soldiers.