

### Milliken's Bend: A Civil War Battle in History and Memory

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## Review

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**Barnickel, Linda** *Milliken's Bend: A Civil War Battle in History and Memory*. Louisiana State University Press, \$39.95 ISBN 978-0-8071-4992-8

A fresh look at a lesser known battle

As the sesquicentennial celebration of the Civil War continues, scholars have produced a plethora of new scholarship on the war between the North and the South. While much of the new scholarship covers familiar ground, there are a few works that bring to light new perspectives of the subject. Linda Barnickel's *Milliken's Bend: A Civil War Battle in History and Memory* is one of those books which furthers our understanding of the war. Barnickel provides perhaps the most comprehensive examination of the Battle of Milliken's Bend to date. In addition to providing a detailed analysis of the military engagement at Milliken's Bend, Louisiana, the author examines the events leading up to the battle, including the Union army's recruitment of black troops from nearby plantations, southern whites reaction to the Union army's decision to use black troops, and the slaves willingness to leave the plantation behind for an opportunity to fight for their freedom. Additionally, the study explores the aftermath of the battle, investigating Union sympathizers' accusation that Confederates executed black prisoners of war as well as the white officers in command of the African American troops stationed at Milliken's Bend.

Occurring during the Vicksburg campaign, fighting broke out at Milliken's Bend on June of 1863 on the west bank of the Mississippi River when a brigade of Texas Confederates under the Command of Gen. Henry E. McCulloch attacked a federal outpost. Most of the federal troops charged with defense of the outpost had been slaves less than two months prior to the battle. Given their lack of training and the lack of military armaments provided to them, the African American recruits performed bravely under fire. Though they took heavy casualties, the African American units, with the aid of cover fire from federal gunboats operating on the river, were able to hold their position. The fact that the

African American troops had fought bravely was significant, because it proved to northern skeptics that the freedmen were well-suited for combat duty. As a result, the northern public became more accepting of the idea of creating additional colored units for service in the Union army.

The success of the African American troops had the opposite effect on white Southerners. Even before the battle, white plantation owners in Louisiana, especially along the banks of the Mississippi River, had become concerned over the behaviors of their slaves, growing more fearful of slave uprisings. Whites' fears were heightened further as their slaves began to leave the plantations in large numbers, escaping to the safety of Union lines and the promise of freedom. According to the author, events spiraled out of control, forcing some plantation owners to become prisoners in their own homes. The success of the African American troops at Milliken's Bend meant that even more slaves would attempt to break free from the yoke of slavery, and it also meant that black troops might enact vengeance upon their former masters. Some slaveholders lost all hope and moved from the area, retreating to the interior of Louisiana, or in some cases, as far away as eastern Texas.

The aftermath of battle at Milliken's Bend also proved significant to the conduct of the war. In the days following the engagement, rumors surfaced that Confederates had executed some of the black troops and white officers taken prisoner during the battle. According to the author this is a difficult charge to prove, but it does appear that a small number of prisoners may have been executed, but nothing on the scale that northern newspapers reported. Barnickel finds that two white officers taken at Milliken's Bend were executed, but contends that it is nearly impossible to conclude with certainty if black soldiers were murdered as well. In her final analysis, Barnickel writes that black soldiers "may have been returned as slaves to their former owners, retained as slaves in direct service to the Confederacy (such as through the quartermaster department), taken to Texas and possibly confined in state prison, or sent to a prison camp where they may have died before release at the end of the war." She continues, "The possibility remains that a few may have been executed" (133). While there is uncertainty about the number of black troops and white officers executed following the battle at Milliken's Bend, the effects of the rumors on the conduct of the war is not in question. Based on the northern reports of the executions, the practice of prisoner exchange between the Union and Confederate armies was suspended for the remainder of the war.

Aside from the detailed examination of the events surrounding the battle and the controversy surrounding the fate of the Union prisoners, Barnickel includes an insightful discussion of how scholars have remembered the engagement at Milliken's Bend. In her final chapter, the author reveals how the battle seemed to fade from pages of history and how a handful of scholars worked to rescue its memory from obscurity. Unfortunately, their attempts seemed to produce limited results. Furthermore, the book contains some useful appendices, including brief descriptions of the units involved in the battle, both Union and Confederate; biographical sketches of the primary participants involved in the battle, both Union and Confederate; and official reports on battlefield casualties associated with the Vicksburg campaign, on the battle at Milliken's Bend, and the death of one of the officers taken prisoner at Milliken's Bend.

Linda Barnickel should be commended for her work on the Battle of Milliken's Bend. Her work is well researched and well written. Scholars and students of the Civil War era alike will find merit in this work. Undoubtedly, Barnickel has achieved one of her major purposes for writing this work—she has reached into the dustbin of history and rescued the Battle of Milliken's Bend from obscurity.

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