

June 18, 2020

## They Fought Equally

(Pennsylvania Military Museum, T. Gum, Site Admin.)



Painting by Don Troiana, featuring Kelly and Hawkins.

During the American Civil War Pennsylvania mustered more than 300,000 troops to defend the Union. Troops mustered from across the Commonwealth, eventually being outfitted, trained, and deployed.. for many, from Camp Curtain in Harrisburg.

When Lincoln called for volunteers, five units were the first to answer such call including the "The National Light Infantry," "The Washington Artillerists," "The Allen Infantry," "The Ringgold Light Artillery," and "The Logan Guards." These units mustered in Harrisburg on 17 April 1861 to be sworn into service before starting their trip to the nation's capital.

At the start of the War, officially recognized United States Colored Troop units were not yet mobilized. However, many former enslaved (escaped or otherwise) and born free black men mustered wanting to fight for Lincoln. One such man was Nicholas Biddle, of Pottsville, PA. Born in Delaware to enslaved parents, he would eventually escape to Philadelphia, PA.



**"NICK BIDDLE,"**

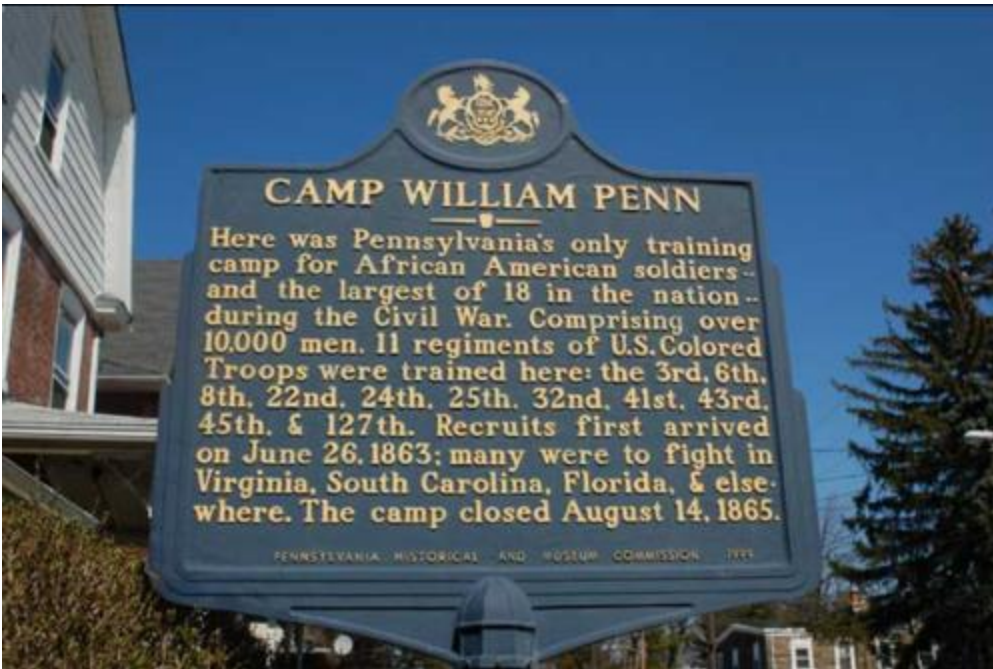
Of Pottsville, Pa, the first man wounded in the Great American Rebellion, "Baltimore, April 18, 1861."  
Published by W. B. Mortimer, Pottsville, Schuylkill Co., Pa.



Biddle fell in with "The Washington Artillerists," even though not permitted to do so, Biddle's comrades gave him a uniform. The First Defenders reported to Baltimore to quell riots on their way to Washington, D.C. to properly muster into service. The sight of Nick Biddle in uniform enraged some of the small-minded citizens of Baltimore who began hurling racist taunts and slurs at him. At some point in this exchange, Biddle was struck on the head, resulting in a deep laceration reaching his skull. When Biddle died in 1876 each of the surviving members of his unit donated money to purchase a headstone for his grave - inscription below.

“In Memory of Nicholas Biddle, Died Aug.2, 1876, Aged 80 years. His was the Proud Distinction of Shedding the First Blood in the Late War for the Union, Being Wounded while marching through Baltimore with the First Volunteers from Schuylkill County, 18 April 1861. Erected by his Friends in Pottsville.”

In 1863 General Orders 143 established the US Colored Troop. By this time there existed two units, however, this Order made such service officially recognized. Pennsylvania brought forth eleven USCT units, using Camp William Penn as the training grounds.



Camp William Penn was located in Cheltenham Township (near Philadelphia) from 1863 to 1865. Pictured here is the PHMC Historical Marker and original camp gate. This camp is most notable for being the first such designated camp for USCT in the Army. It is reported that more than 10,000 free and escaped enslaved trained here. This figure includes 8,612 Pennsylvanians – the most of any Northern State.

Awarded multiple Medals of Honor, the free and escaped enslaved men of Pennsylvania exemplified the very best of ideals. Of the fourteen Medals of Honor awarded to members of the USCT, two were awarded to Pennsylvanians.



Photo of Kelly, date unknown.

Alexander Kelly, First Sergeant, Company F, 6th USCT. Awarded for actions at Chaffins Farm (Battle of New Market Heights), 29 Sept. 1864 - seizing the unit colors which had fallen near the enemy lines, raising the colors, and rallying the men placing himself in great danger.

Kelly enlisted as a substitute for his brother, Joseph Kelly in August of 1863. Alexander Kelly was a 23-year-old coal miner who stood under six feet tall. On September 3rd, 1863 he was appointed First Sergeant of his unit while stationed at Camp William Penn. Kelly mustered out of the Army in Wilmington, NC, on September 20, 1865. Kelly is buried in Saint Peters Cemetery, in Pittsburgh, PA.



Photo of Hawkins, date unknown.

Thomas R. Hawkins, Sergeant Major, 6th USCT. Awarded for actions at Chaffins Farm (Battle of New Market Heights), 29 Sept. 1864 for the rescue of regimental colors from the enemy. Hawkins' personal story prior to or after the War is unknown at this time. He is buried in National Harmony Memorial Park, Landover, Maryland.