

Book Review by Dan Reigle:

Fort Pillow, a Civil War Massacre, and Public Memory. John Cimprich. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005. 193 pp.

Consider this an advance reading assignment for the January 2007 meeting, at which Dr. John Cimprich, Professor of History at Thomas More College in Crestview Hills KY, will be our speaker. Dr. Cimprich has been studying the history and events at Fort Pillow for many years, having published several articles and chapters on Fort Pillow as early as 1982. In this new book, he “approaches the story of Fort Pillow and the sources about it afresh,” taking advantage of all available information and improving on his earlier research.

The book includes a concise, informative description of the fort from its early construction in 1861 through and beyond the events of 12 April 1864 that provoke controversy to this day. There are descriptions of the main personalities with roles in the fort’s history, including Capt. Montgomery Lynch who built the main outlines of the fort, its Confederate commander BG John Villepigue, Navy Captain Andrew H. Foote, Col. Charles Ellet, Col. John Scott of the 32nd Iowa, Capt. Franklin Moore of the 2nd Illinois Cavalry, and General Nathan B. Forrest. The social and political context of Fort Pillow is exemplified by the profile of Samuel B. Lanier, a young plantation owner whose Unionist sympathies and actions put his property and his life at risk of retaliation in the swirling local politics and partisan violence. Of interest because of his later fame is the first Confederate officer to lead a force to the site and begin building the fortifications that became Fort Pillow, an Arkansan loaned to the Tennessee state forces in June, Patrick Cleburne. An excellent chapter on the “challenge of everyday military life” describes the many difficulties associated even with the “safe” life of soldiers and officers on garrison duty.

Dr. Cimprich includes seven tables of information, including the garrison commanders, garrison size, and garrison units for both the period of Confederate control of the fort and the period of Union control of the fort. The most interesting table contains detailed analysis of the Union soldiers who died as a result of 12 April, and those who survived. In one sense, three numbers tell the story of Fort Pillow: for the 6th U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery, 174 men were killed or died from their wounds out of their total strength of 269, while only 25 were wounded, a ratio of seven killed per soldier wounded. For perspective on this upside down statistic, the combined Union and Confederate forces at Shiloh two years earlier suffered 16,420 wounded and 3477 killed, a ratio of nearly five wounded per soldier killed (Livermore, *Numbers and Losses*, p. 79-80).

In the final two chapters, the major sources of information about Fort Pillow from the day of the battle until today are summarized and evaluated, including letters to newspapers, official reports, affidavits given by participants, stories by reporters, and studies by historians and other authors. These chapters are very useful in understanding how various sources have been used and misused, and how interpretations have changed through the past 140 years with reconciliation politics, white supremacy efforts, and finally the civil rights movement. I found these chapters to be the most important and valuable in the book. I know that reading them ahead of Dr. Cimprich’s visit to CCWRT will be a worthwhile investment in understanding the issues surrounding the events at Fort Pillow.