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Battle of Island Mound Site Dedicated in October 2012

The Battle of Island Mound State Historic Site, the newest addition to the Missouri state park system, was dedicated October 27 during a sesquicentennial commemoration of the Civil War battle on the Missouri-Kansas border. The 1862 battle marked an important—though long overlooked—milestone in American history, the first time that African-American troops experienced combat during the Civil War.

Most Civil War buffs, including many historians, have long thought that this distinction fell to the men of the 54th Massachusetts, whose July 1863 attack on Fort Wagner, South Carolina, was made famous by the film *Glory*. That assault, however, came eight months after the First Kansas Colored Volunteers dispersed a band of pro-Confederate guerrillas in a brief but furious engagement in Missouri.

The organization of the First Kansas Colored Volunteers marked a fateful turn in the long, bloody struggle over slavery along the Missouri-Kansas border. Commissioned by controversial Kansas Senator James Lane, the regiment consisted of nearly 500 recruits. Its African-American members included a small number of free blacks and Cherokee-owned slaves. Most recruits had only recently escaped from slavery in Missouri and Arkansas; some volunteers had been liberated by Lane's own Jayhawker brigade just a year earlier. The regiment's Company D, led by William D. Matthews and Patrick Minor, was perhaps the first American unit to be led by African-American officers.

Union officers sent the First Kansas Colored into Bates County, Missouri, in late October with orders to clear out a gang of guerrillas that had taken refuge at Hog Island, a brushy mound along the Marais des Cygnes River. The Kansans commandeered the home of Enoch Toothman, just north of the river, and dubbed their new position "Fort Africa." Two days later—on October 29, 1862—a diversion force clashed with mounted guerrillas as a foraging party left to find corn meal and salt. The Missourians set fire to the tallgrass prairie, and advancing Kansas forces were soon overtaken by guerrillas on horseback. The ensuing skirmish was marked by fierce hand-to-hand combat and resulted in nineteen casualties, including eight deaths, for the Kansans and an unknown number for the guerrillas, who abandoned several horses and nearly a hundred cattle in their retreat.

The tenacity of the First Kansas Colored Volunteers challenged assumptions among many southern whites about the fighting abilities of former slaves. Days later after the skirmish, guerrilla Bill Turman reportedly told friends, "Those black devils fought like tigers." In January 1863, the Kansans were mustered into federal service, joining more than 170,000 African-Americans who would eventually fight for the Union army. By war's end, the service of these veterans proved to be a critical factor in their push to gain the ballot and other civil rights.

Battle of Island Mound State Historic Site is located nine miles from the town of Butler, just west of Interstate 49/U. S. Highway 71