

A BLACK WHITE MAN MADE A GOOD MAINE SOLDIER

By Brian Swartz

Adapted from *Maine at War*



General Franklin Stillman Nickerson.
Courtesy Maine State Archives.

Franklin S. Nickerson knew a white man when he saw him, and even if he were a black white man, he was still a darn good soldier.

A Searsport attorney, Nickerson initially served as a 4th Maine Infantry officer in spring 1861 and became the 14th Maine Infantry's colonel that fall. The regiment and four other Maine units — the 12th, 13th, and 15th infantry regiments and the 1st Maine Battery — went to New Orleans, Louisiana with Maj. Gen. Ben Butler in spring 1862.

Bug- and water-borne diseases felled many Maine lads in Louisiana. Where could Nickerson find replacements for his 14th Maine? By recruiting white men in Union-held sections of the Pelican State.

So the 14th Maine hung out a shingle in New Orleans and accepted self-proclaimed white Unionists who could pass a physical.

Sometime in mid-June 1862, “Calvin McRae was enlisted in Co. C, in the usual manner, by the recruiting officer of that Company,” Nickerson informed Maine State Senator B.M. Roberts on February 21, 1863.

By then Nickerson was a brigadier general commanding the 3rd Brigade, 2nd Division, XIX Corps.

Capt. George Scott of Co. C had picked up at least 44 southern Unionists, including the 24-year-old Calvin “McRea,” who mustered on June 12.

Then New Orleans businessman B. Bronson, a trunk maker, discovered that “my slave, Calvin, a light mulatto” had “absconded” on Tuesday, June 16. Bronson was angry, to say the least.

On Saturday, June 20, “as I was passing Lafayette Square, I found the said slave with a United States uniform on, standing guard just above the Brooks House, on Camp street,” Bronson informed Nickerson on June 23.

Calvin had “enlisted as a United States soldier, assuming to be a white man,” Bronson complained. “I have the documents to prove him a slave.”

Nickerson raised an eyebrow when Bronson’s “demand for his [McRae’s] surrender” arrived. And rather than deliver the demand himself, Bronson dispatched it via his agent, E.W. Herrick.

Going with Herrick to locate McRae, “I ... found him to be a white man—as white as I am,” noted Nickerson. “Therefore I required the proper proof that he was a slave.”

Bronson’s ownership papers stated that McRae “was so white that a stranger would not suspect him of being a *black man*,” Nickerson later informed Senator Roberts.

Many white Northerners thought that slaves universally had dark pigmentation. Generations of ill-use of women slaves by white men (often plantation owners and their sons) had bred lighter shades among many offspring, however, and terms like “mulatto” and “yellow” described such skin tones, especially in laissez-faire New Orleans.

Many Union boys were realizing that the South's antiquated slavery laws cast a wide miscegenetic net. In late autumn 1862, Corporal John A. Dicker of Orono and Co. F, 12th Maine Infantry watched the black men joining the colored regiments forming in New Orleans.

Escaping blacks "are coming in here every day in squads of from ten to thirty at a time," Dicker said, noticing the diverse epidermal hues among the men, women, and children reaching Union lines, colorations ranging from deep black to skin as light as that of most Mainers.

"Some of them (blacks) are as white as I am, and could walk the streets of Orono, and you would not suppose they were negroes for a moment," Dicker said. "If they fail" to qualify as Caucasian, "it will not be for the want of white blood in their veins."

Dithering and dallying, Frank Nickerson delayed releasing McRae to Bronson, who soon appealed to Butler, the Union commander in New Orleans. On July 7 Butler dashed off terse instructions concerning McRae.

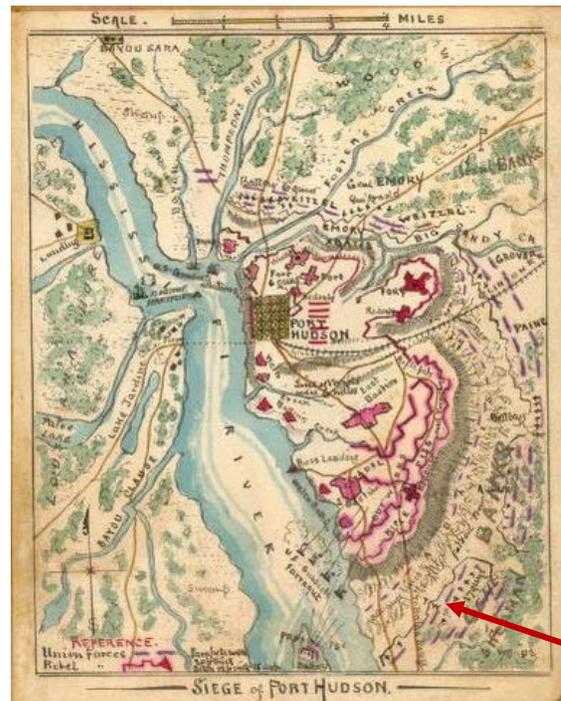
"You will forthwith discharge him" to Bronson, Butler informed Nickerson.

That order "was not obeyed," Nickerson told Senator Roberts. The 14th Maine went upriver to fight at Baton Rouge in August, and "Calvin did not return; he still serves with us as a soldier; distinguished himself at Baton Rouge, and is one of the best soldiers in the 14th Regiment," Nickerson reported.

"I say without fear of contradiction, that he [McRae] is one of the best drilled, and the best soldier in every respect, in the Regiment," he stated. "There is not a man who knows him who would not forcibly resist the attempt to take him out."

"This is but one instance of negro soldiers," Nickerson commented.

Calvin McRae capably served in the 14th Maine Infantry Regiment until he was killed in action at Port Hudson, Louisiana on July 1, 1863.



Siege of Port Hudson. Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division. (Cropped for presentation.)
[Note: The red arrow indicates the general area on the Union left where Pvt. McRae was killed in action.]

Sources:

Maine Adjutant General's Report 1863; Employment of Colored Men, Daily Whig & Courier, Monday, December 15, 1862; and Kennebec Journal, Friday, May 29, 1863.

Brian Swartz is a Civil War buff and a newspaper editor recently retired from the *Bangor Daily News*. He hosts a weekly blog titled *Maine at War: Maine and the Civil War* that explores the roles played by Maine and her sons and daughters in the Civil War. Brian's blog can be accessed at maineatwar.bdnblogs.com.