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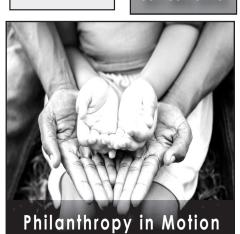
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Week of January 9, 2023

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Battle of Pea Ridge in Northwest Arkansas.

By Dr. Ken Bridges - Professor of History, South Arkansas Community College South Arkansas Historical Preservation Society kbridges@southark.edu<mailto:kbridges@southark.edu>

The Civil War saw neighbor fighting against neighbor, family against family, and brother against brother. In Arkansas, like so many other states that disintegrated into battlefields, Americans bled and died fighting other Americans. Like other southern states, most Arkansas troops signed up to fight for the Confederacy though there were a sizable number of Arkansans who fought in the Union Army. One Union soldier, William Perkins Black, became noted for his courage in battle while in Arkansas. Black was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for actions at the Battle of Pea Ridge, one of the few American troops ever awarded the nation's highest military honor for actions taken in Arkansas.

Black was born in Kentucky in 1842, one of four children born to a minister and his wife. His father died in 1847, and his widowed mother moved them to Danville, Illinois, near the Indiana border and near her brother and his family. His mother remarried to a local physician and former state legislator. Abraham Lincoln, the future presi-

dent, was a family friend and was sometimes a guest at their home.

Growing up, Black looked to a career in ministry like his father. He was studying ministry at nearby Wabash College in Indiana when the Civil War erupted. He and one brother, John Charles Black, enlisted in the Eleventh Indiana Infantry and was sent to Virginia. In June 1861, his unit fought in a battle at Romney, West Virginia. The city was juggled between Union and Confederate occupation nearly a dozen times during the war.

Black's enlistment in the Indiana Militia was only for three months. He was honorably discharged and returned to Illinois. Not long afterward, he enlisted in the Thirty-Seventh Illinois Infantry. His fellow men in the unit elected him first lieutenant, as Civil War units typically elected their officers as their units formed. He was soon promoted to captain.

In early 1862, his unit was transferred to Arkansas. They met Confederate forces at Pea Ridge in Benton County on March 7, 1862. There the largest Civil War battle west of the Mississippi River took

his unit was pinned down by Confederates. Seeing that a Union artillery battery was about to be captured, he rose from his position and fired at Confederate positions, preventing them from advancing. He single-handedly prevented the capture of the artillery unit. The next day, Union forces won the battle. He was highly praised for his actions. But the importance and heroism of his actions were realized years later as the army reviewed his actions that day. Black was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, the highest award in the military for his actions at Pea Ridge. The medal, however, was not awarded to him until 1893.

Black continued to serve in the meantime. He fought at the Battle of Arkansas Post in January 1863, taking the one-time capital of Arkansas into Union hands. He was also part of the Red River campaign of 1864, the failed Union effort to move from Little Rock to Shreveport. His time in Arkansas was brief and limited to the bitter tasks of war. He was honorably discharged in September 1864. He left Arkansas and returned to Illinois.

The Medal of Honor was created by Congress in 1861 to honor acts of valor above and beyond the call of duty. The first version was created for the navy by an act sponsored by

place. On the first day of the battle, Sen. James Grimes of Iowa in December 1861. The army version was created through an act sponsored by Sen. Henry Wilson of Massachusetts in February 1862. During the Civil War, 1,522 Medals of Honor were awarded, including 1,198 by the army. In the Civil War, these heroic actions taken to save the lives of the men in their units were all taken on American soil in a war that claimed more than 700,000 American lives. Since the creation of the medal, it has been awarded to 3,517 individuals. There are currently versions of the medal for the army, navy, and the air force.

> William P. Black's brother, John Charles Black, was also awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions at the 1862 Battle of Prairie Grove in Northwest Arkansas. Like his brother, he was awarded the medal in 1893, years after the end of the war. To date, they are one of only five pairs of brothers to receive the Medal of Honor.

> Black became a noted attorney after the war, earning admission to the Illinois bar in 1867. He tried a number of famous cases, including the defendants in the notorious 1886 Haymarket Riot. He was actively involved in veterans organizations such as the Grand Army of the Republic. Black died at his home in Chicago in 1916.