

# OH, COULD THEY BUT SPEAK...”

*The history and importance of Michigan’s Civil War Battle Flags*

## Michigan’s Role in the Civil War

Adapted from: Father Abraham’s Children, by Frank B. Woodford

The sectional tension created by the election of President Abraham Lincoln in November 1860 finally boiled over on 12 April 1861. On that day, Southern forces turned their guns on Fort Sumter, a federal stronghold in Charleston Harbor. The attack ended any hope of a peaceful agreement between Lincoln and the seceded states of the Confederacy. On 15 April, two days after Fort Sumter’s surrender, the President issued a call for 75,000 loyal volunteers to help suppress the rebellion.

Michigan’s state government supported the call for volunteers with great enthusiasm. Governor Austin Blair advocated the use of military force against the Confederacy in the months preceding the attack at Fort Sumter. In his inaugural address in January 1861, the governor placed Michigan’s resources at President Lincoln’s disposal. On 16 March 1861, the State Legislature passed a law authorizing Governor Blair to raise two regiments of militia so that the state would be prepared if and when a volunteer force was needed.

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Lincoln’s call for troops required Michigan to raise no more and no less than one fully equipped infantry regiment. Some preparations had already been made; however, the law establishing the militia regiments contained no provisions for funding the feeding, clothing, or training of these forces. On 16 April, Blair solved this problem by securing a loan of \$50,000 from the city of Detroit and by pledging that the state government would match that contribution.

Michigan filled its quota quickly, turning away hundreds of prospective soldiers in the process. The soldiers were fully equipped; their uniforms and equipment were purchased out of state. The First Michigan Infantry Regiment, composed primarily of men from the southern portion of the state, was organized at Fort Wayne in Detroit on 29 April 1861. Its men endured a crash course in military drills and marches before the regiment received its colors [its battle flag] from the Ladies of Detroit on 11 May. The regiment left Detroit two days later and arrived in Washington on 16 May, the first western troops to reach the Capitol. President Lincoln, upon seeing the regiment marching through the streets of Washington, said simply, “Thank God for Michigan.”

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On the home front, support for soldiers and their families were provided both by the state government and by private organizations. The state legislature adopted a Soldier’s Relief Act which contributed money to the families of Michigan soldiers. If a soldier died, his family could continue to receive benefits for an additional year. In addition to these state efforts, private organizations such as the Michigan Soldiers’ Relief Association, located in both Washington and Detroit, provided medical care for wounded soldiers while gathering supplies to send to soldiers at the front.

There were numerous other signs of support for the Union cause. Cities throughout the state held patriotic rallies to celebrate the departure of local men for the front. Many local groups also organized

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ceremonies to welcome returning regiments. Local soldiers' homes were built to help seriously wounded veterans recover from their injuries. In several cities, special commissions were established to build monuments and cemeteries to honor the lives of local men killed in action.

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Michigan soldiers fought in every major battle of the war. A number of these men made great contributions to the Union cause. General Israel B. Richardson entered the army as a commander in the Second Michigan Infantry. He soon rose through the ranks to become a major general in command of an entire division. Richardson was killed at the Battle of Antietam on 17 September 1862 while rallying the federal forces near a sunken road referred to as the "Bloody Lane." A marker now stands in the spot where he fell mortally wounded. In the western theater, Colonel Benjamin J. Prentiss and his forces held the federal positions against numerous Confederate charges at the Battle of Shiloh. Prentiss was captured, but his bravery prevented the Union armies from being pushed back into the Tennessee River and destroyed. The federal forces rallied the next day and won one of the war's most significant battles. Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin D. Pritchard commanded the Fourth Michigan Cavalry. Stationed near Macon, Georgia, in May 1865, Pritchard and his men performed one of the last significant feats of the war. On 7 May Pritchard was assigned the task of locating Confederate President Jefferson Davis, who was said to be escaping through Georgia. Pritchard and his men caught up to Davis' party early on the morning of 10 May, capturing him shortly after dawn.

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The Battle of Gettysburg is widely regarded as the most crucial battle of the war. Fought over three days on a wide front, Michigan soldiers played an important part in the eventual Union victory. On 1 July 1863, the first day of the battle, the Twenty-Fourth Michigan Infantry succeeded in checking the Confederate advance toward the town, but not before suffering immense casualties. By nightfall on the first, 399 of its 496 men were listed as dead, wounded, or missing. No other regiment engaged at Gettysburg would suffer as many casualties. The second day of battle found five Michigan regiments fighting to hold the federal positions on Big Round Top and Little Round Top, the two high hills on the Union's left flank that commanded the battlefield. The Fourth, Fifth, and Sixteenth Michigan Regiments in particular saw heavy fighting. The Confederates charged up the hill several times. The fighting was often hand-to-hand, but once again the federal positions held. On the third day, the Seventh Michigan helped repel the Confederate charge upon the center of the Union defenses. Pickett's Charge, as it was later called, was an unmitigated disaster for the Confederate Army and the last significant offensive attack by the southern forces.

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Michigan's African-American citizens also played a significant part in the state's war effort. The First Colored Infantry entered the service in February 1864. Later renamed the 102nd Regiment United States Colored Troops, the unit worked to upset Confederate supply lines in Florida and South Carolina. Miles of southern railroads were destroyed by the regiment, a significant contribution to the war effort.

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All told, over 90,000 Michigan men fought for the Union cause. Approximately 85,000 of these men were volunteers; 1,661 of these volunteers were African-American. The desire of the men of Michigan to see the Union preserved was so strong that over 1,000 men unable to find a place in Michigan units fought for the regiments of other states. Michigan raised thirty-one infantry regiments and eleven units of cavalry. Nearly 14,000 Michigan men died in the war; over 4,100 died in battle, while almost 10,000 died from disease. The bravery of these men, coupled with the support offered them both during and after the war, represented a record of patriotism and dedication difficult for any state to match.