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2. The Hermit of Bald Mountain

The Trappers' Last Shot by William Tylee Ranney 1850 (LOC: Public Domain).

"A fine line separates the weary recluse from the fearful hermit. Finer still is the line between hermit and bitter misanthrope." — Dean Koontz, American Writer, from his novel Velocity.

In November 1824, the U.S. presidential election was still undecided because none of the four candidates, John Quincy Adams, Henry Clay, William Crawford, or Andrew Jackson, had won a majority of the Electoral College. As part of his year-long tour of the United States, the 67-year-old Marquis de Lafayette, the only surviving major general of the American Revolutionary War, visited Thomas Jefferson in Virginia. Constable William Erwin and his assistant, James Cooper, were escorting a prisoner named Higgins to the Justice of the Peace in Jonesborough, TN.

While Adams went on to become the 6th president of the United States and Lafayette made it safely back to France aboard the frigate USS Brandywine, Higgins never saw Jonesborough alive.

A concealed rifleman fired on Erwin and his party but missed. If the constable thought the worst was behind them, he was mistaken. The shooter managed to get ahead of them and fired again, this time from an outhouse (some accounts suggest it was an abandoned cabin). His aim was true. Higgins was hit in the chest near his collarbone and died on the spot.

When Erwin saw his prisoner fall, he sprinted to the structure and threw open the door. Inside, he found a large man armed with a flintlock rifle and an ax. Undeterred, Erwin came to grips with the man.

A violent scuffle ensued. The man attempted to bring his rifle to bear, but his size and the low joists of the privy prevented him from maneuvering it clear. He then strove to get hold of his other weapon. Erwin had none of it and smacked him across the head with a wooden cudgel, knocking the big man to his knees. The man stood up. Erwin clubbed him again, harder this time. Again, the man went to his knees and rose.

Sensing that the issue was in doubt, Erwin ordered Cooper to shoot the man. Cooper complied, hitting the giant in the hand. The wound took enough of the fight out of him for Erwin and Cooper to secure him, and they arrested David Greer, known to history as the Hermit of Bald Mountain, for the murder of Holland Higgins.

The details about Higgins's death and Greer's hard-fought capture come from a January 1825 article in the American Economist and East Tennessee Statesman, published in Greeneville 1822–1826. Multiple other papers reprinted the article, crediting it to either the Greenville Economist or the Tennessee Statesman, including the Charleston, S.C., Daily Courier; Lexington, KY, Gazette; and Pennsylvania Republican (York, PA).

Another startling record of the crime is Higgins' headstone in Erwin, TN, which bears the legend "Shot and killed by David Greer Nov. 30, 1824."

The London Morning Chronicle was one of the papers that reprinted the article from the Economist, making it an international story. The article ran under the column heading "Horrid Murder" alongside items about a levy for British regiments in India and news of a fire in Dublin, Ireland. Greer was now famous or infamous. The article also ran in the North Devon Journal-Herald, about 180 miles southwest of London.

Murder Trial and a "Deranged" Verdict

Greer was tried in the March 1825 term of the circuit court in Jonesborough. At the end of the two-day trial, the jury returned a verdict of acquittal in consequence of insanity. A bond was given to the court for the prisoner to keep the peace for one year, and he was set free. One wonders if they gave him his rifle and ax back.

The Greeneville paper covered the trial, and the account was even more widely shared than the earlier report of the crime itself, at least in the United States. We found the article in newspapers from Alabama, Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Vermont, and Virginia.

The article begins with the Greeneville paper's admission that it did not have a reporter present at the trial but had collected "some of the prominent incidents from a conversation with a gentleman who was present during the greater part of it and here give them to our readers."

The article is an exciting mix of fact and speculation. It states that Greer and Higgins got into a fistfight over a disagreement in their trading, and Greer had Higgins arrested "for the sole purpose of having a good chance to shoot him while he was under arrest." It also mentions that Greer wrote his own constitution for a government, which was introduced at trial as evidence of his "lunacy."

The report goes on to say that Greer left civilization and settled on Bald Mountain due to the unhappy termination of a "love affair," where he had spent the last 20 or more years on or near the mountaintop. He protested a tax that the court of Buncombe County levied on him with spectacular violence, yet he was very kind to visitors who came to see "the strange man of the mountain." Greer also grew potatoes and corn on the mountaintop, protecting them with a ditch. He later moved this garden downslope because the growing season was too short at Big Bald's highest point, 5,516 feet (1,681 m) above sea level.

Among the less well-documented and perhaps less credible claims made in the article are that Greer rented cattle grazing rights on the top of the bald and even had it marked off into patches: "Hazle Patch, Haw Thicket, &c. &c." He built a small gristmill "kept in motion by the water of a small mountain stream." It could grind a half bushel to a bushel of grain per day. He was also credited with building an "iron manufactory" on the mountain. He had uncommon physical strength, demonstrated by his single-handed construction of the mill and other machinery.

Perhaps the most outlandish claim the paper made was that he was Turkish on his father's side. The surname Greer is usually associated with Scotland. Later reports suggested that he may have been German. An article in a Knoxville newspaper said he was a "Polander."

The Frontier Between Fact and Folklore

Each newspaper reporter or book author had a different take on the hermit and added or subtracted details to the story. Just as Greer went into the wilderness to find comfort for his broken heart, let's set out and explore the story of the Hermit of Bald Mountain.

Let's start with the facts of David Greer's life, on which most of the writers agree. Greer, a South Carolina native, came to work for David Vance near current-day Weaverville, N.C., around 1798 and fell hopelessly in love with one of his daughters. By all accounts, Greer was well educated for the day, strong, and a hard worker. Three years later,

when the young lady married another man, he was devastated and, a few days later, set out to find a home far from civilization with only a rifle, a knapsack, and $250 in back wages. He settled on Big Bald Mountain, apparently stopped in his tracks by the sublime view from its summit.

A bit of background on the Vance family: Colonel David Vance, Sr., served in the U.S. Revolutionary War at the battles of Brandywine, Germantown, and Valley Forge. He also took part in the battles of Musgrove Mill and Kings Mountain. He was the grandfather of Zebulon Vance, N.C. governor, U.S. senator, and Confederate officer. Greer was most likely smitten with Jane Vance, who married Hugh Davidson, or possibly Sarah Vance, who married Charles McLean.

There are several accounts of Greer traveling to a courthouse after being told he was required to pay a 75-cent poll tax. Two of these specifically mention Buncombe County or Asheville. All of them say he showed up with a rifle in hand and threw rocks, breaking the windows and pelting everyone present, the judge, jury, lawyers, and sheriff, until he drove them from the building.

Given how early and often the claim is made, it seems likely true. At the same time, it's hard to believe that one man armed with a flintlock could raise that much havoc without being arrested. We're giving this one a 50/50 chance of being factual.

Ditches and Graves

One of the most tantalizing details of the hermit's story is the ditch he dug on the mountain. Its location, dimensions, and purpose vary depending on the account or author. The article about Greer's trial described the ditch as a means to secure his mountaintop potato and corn patches from intrusion, most likely from rabbits, deer, groundhogs, and raccoons.

According to an 1838 newspaper article at that time, the ditch was still visible and was originally dug eight feet deep without hitting either rock

or clay in a spacious field on the summit. Unfortunately, the report does not state the ditch's purpose.

Pat Alderman in *Wonders of the Unakas Unicoi County* says Greer dug a ditch four feet deep and four feet wide as a moat to keep his livestock in and other people's stock out. Both of Alderman's books have a photo of a person kneeling in a depression on the Bald's summit, which is described as the remains of the four-by-four ditch "dug as a fence." In *Greasy Cove in Unicoi County*, he refers to it as an "animal barrier."

In his book *Two Worlds in the Tennessee Mountains*, David Hsiung quotes David A. Deaderick's diary, which describes Greer's ditch work on the mountain as being on "the pinnacle of which he had ditched for the purpose of cultivation."

Another compelling question about the hermit is why he killed Higgins. The earliest newspaper articles do not mention a motive. An 1838 article reports that Higgins lied to Greer, which was the one offense he would not tolerate. Lanman wrote in 1849 that Higgins was killed for hunting deer on Greer's property. Zeigler & Grosscup, writing in 1883, say it was over real or imaginary land rights. Alderman tells us that he killed Higgins to acquire a cherry orchard adjacent to his property. Hsiung stated in 1997 that Higgins encroached on Greer's land.

While there is some debate over exactly where and when it happened, most sources agree that George Tompkins, a blacksmith whom Greer had threatened to kill, shot and killed Greer in 1834. Greer was buried in an unmarked grave, and Tomkins was never tried for the shooting due to Greer's reputation for violently carrying out his threats.

Trailing the Hermit Through Time

We know much about Greer's life and exploits, even though a significant portion of the story cannot be true. The first written mention of Greer is in newspapers from 1825. The articles cover Greer's murder of Higgins and his subsequent trial, as discussed above.

The hermit's story was carried forward in newspapers and books. Interest in David Greer rose and fell over the decades, with a big surge in the 1970s, probably due to the writings of Pat Alderman. While the details of his life vary from the likely to the preposterous, this romantic, mysterious, and sometimes terrifying figure continues to captivate an audience even today.

In 1849, Charles Lanman, a newspaper editor, librarian, and private secretary to Senator Daniel Webster, told the hermit's story in his book *Letters from the Alleghany Mountains*.

Lanman described Greer as a "literary recluse" who wrote singular works on religion and human government. He paints a dark portrait of the hermit, saying that he mutilated cattle that strayed onto his property and used his rifle to shoot down on the plantations of his neighbors.

In 1883, Wilber Zeigler and Ben Grosscup, two Ohio lawyers who traveled through North Carolina to research their jointly written book, *The Heart of the Alleghanies or Western North Carolina*, refer to the hermit as David Grier and credit the "posthumous papers of Silas McDowell" for the "facts of the hermit's singular history." McDowell was a science-based apple orchardist and writer from Franklin, N.C.

Zeigler and Grosscup tell us that Greer built a permanent lodge in one of the mountain's coves and cleared a nine-acre tract. He subsisted by hunting and using a portion of the $250 paid to him by Colonel Vance for his services. They also say that Greer published a pamphlet justifying his actions after his trial and sold it on the streets. If only that pamphlet had survived to the present day.

In 1914, John Preston Arthur, secretary of the Street Railway Co. in Asheville, who later became company manager and superintendent, quoted Zeigler's and Grosscup's account in his book, Western North Carolina: A History (1730–1913), passing the hermit's tale forward into the 20th century.

Arthur, writing under the pen name Bud Wuntz for the Raleigh Morning Post, mentioned David Greer in one of his 1903 columns. He described Greer as a "demented hermit." In the column, Arthur said that after he killed Higgins, Greer was killed on his first trip to “Irving” (most likely Erwin, TN) to buy coffee and ammunition.

Arthur/Wuntz concluded the Greer portion of the column with: "One of the descendants of the murdered Higgins told me this story, and I have no doubt of its truth. Those were wild, rough times, and human life was held cheap."

Pat Alderman, a choir director and writer who lived in Erwin, wrote two books, *Wonders of the Unakas in Unicoi County* and *Greasy Cove in Unicoi County*, in the 1960s and 1970s, which included stories about the hermit.

Alderman is the first source to say the hermit was called "Hog Greer" and that local mothers would use stories about him to scare their children. His work is also the source of what my co-writer and I have come to call "the hat trick." Most sources agree that Greer was killed by a blacksmith named Tompkins, who, when threatened by Greer, took the law into his own hands and shot first. Details vary on exactly when, where, and how Greer’s demise happened.

In Alderman’s version, Greer, angry that the blacksmith did not have his tools ready on time, left the shop and immediately set up a blind to ambush the blacksmith when he left work for the day. A neighbor who happened to be in the shop placed Tompkins's hat on a "gun stick" and held it up to a window. The hat was instantly shot off the stick. The blacksmith scrounged around the shop to find a bullet and powder to load his rifle, stuck it out a window, and shot Greer in the back as he rose from the blind.

Lanman’s version, in which Tompkins went armed after being threatened and encountered Greer on the road with a rifle in hand and shot first, seems much more likely.

In 1976, Greer shared the front page of the Asheville Citizen-Times with Patty Hearst, the famous newspaper heiress on trial for her involvement with the Symbionese Liberation Army, when the legendary newspaper columnist and folklorist John Parris introduced a new generation of readers to the hermit of Bald Mountain and compared Greer to Lochinvar, the fictional romantic hero of the ballad "Marmion" by Sir Walter Scott, in his Roaming the Mountains column.

Alas, unlike Lochinvar, who arrived unannounced to his beloved's wedding, danced her out the door, and spirited her away, Greer could only watch his beloved marry another and then flee into the wilderness and a tragic existence.