

# BLOOD on the BLUE RIDGE

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Historic Appalachian True Crime Stories 1808-2004

*R. Scott Lunsford*

And

*Alfred Dockery*

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For further research and more detailed information, readers are encouraged to consult the original sources and references listed at the end of the book.

The authors strive to impart an understanding and respect for the people and communities affected by these historical events

# Dedication

To our spouses, Robin and Barbara, whose patience and understanding allowed us to spend the time necessary to produce a work of this quality and length. Special thanks to Barbara for tirelessly reading every version of each chapter and spotting errors that otherwise would have gone unnoticed.

To our children, who remind us that hope and redemption are always possible and sometimes likely.

To our parents, who instilled in us the values of hard work, perseverance, and fair play.

And to our friends, whose insights, stories, and willingness to share their experiences and knowledge enriched our research and made this book more than just a collection of facts.

This book is a testament to the resilience of the Appalachian people, their enduring spirit, and the constant struggle for justice.

To those who have been wronged, who have fought for fairness, and who continue to seek a brighter future, we hope this book serves as a reminder of the enduring human spirit and the pursuit of justice.

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# 1. The Nearly Fatal Footprint



William Jackson Marion Hanging, Nebraska 1887 (Wikipedia: Public Domain).

*"Never knew what hit them. Hell of a phrase, isn't it? Nothing can happen so fast that there is not a micro-instant of realization ... insofar as self-realization is concerned. We're each expert in our own death. — John D. MacDonald, American novelist, and short story writer from his novel Cinnamon Skin.*

Suppose someone could tell you when you would die, day and time. Would you want to know? Throughout history, there have been people who knew when they were going to die. Events like the Charge of the Light Brigade in 1854 and the sinking of the RMS Titanic in 1912 come to mind. The best-known examples are, of course, condemned prisoners.

Convicted individuals who were found guilty and given the ultimate punishment of death. The time between sentencing and having the noose placed around one's neck, being strapped into the electric chair, led into the gas chamber, or strapped to a gurney for lethal injection has to be intolerable, even more so for those who are wrongfully convicted.

Reform efforts like the Innocence Project have shown us that wrongful convictions happen more often than any of us would like. Examples of wrongful convictions abound:

- Carlos DeLuna, executed in Texas in 1989.
- Leo Jones, executed in Florida in 1998.
- Leonard Mack, released from a New York prison in 2023 after serving 47 years.

The historical record has a multitude of cases of judicial errors and unjust verdicts. In 1808, a set of bizarre circumstances sent Henry West to the gallows for the murder of James Craig in Buncombe County.

## A Discourteous Manner and Brutal Disposition

Much of what we know about Henry West's case comes from the concise, beautifully written, and somewhat inaccurate account by renowned attorney and respected North Carolina historian F. A. Sondley (1857–1931).

From A History of Buncombe County, North Carolina:

*“'John' Craig was Buncombe County's first treasurer, then called County Trustee. In 1789, North Carolina granted him a body of land in the northeastern part of the town of Asheville, later traversed by Sunset Drive. In the latter part of his life, he resided in the eastern part of the county. There, he was shot and killed from ambush.*

*“A personal enemy was Henry West, a sailor who had deserted from his ship at Charleston, South Carolina, and came to Buncombe. He was lame in one of his feet owing to an injury which had left a disfiguration. This*



*footprint found at the place of the murder, and some other evidence led to his being tried and convicted as a murderer. James Patton and his sister, Mrs. Jane Erwin, wife of Andrew Erwin, thought him innocent, and Mrs. Erwin went to Raleigh in order to seek the Governor's pardon, arranging for relays of horses to bring the pardon if obtained.*

*“West conveyed a tract of land between Grassy Branch and Bull Creek to Philip Creasman in consideration of Creasman procuring proper burial for West's body. Much land there and on Haw Creek was then owned by West.*

*“The time for execution arrived. West was carried in a wagon seated on his coffin to the place of execution, on East and Hillside Streets now. James Patton sat beside him. The noose was adjusted. Patton procured a little delay by persuading the sheriff that the time fixed for execution had not arrived. Just then, a horseman galloped up with the pardon.*

*“West was a man of great eccentricity, much intelligence, and quick perception but prided himself upon a discourteous manner and brutal disposition.”*

**Sondley adds a couple more intriguing tidbits about West in his book *Asheville and Buncombe County*:**

*“Henry West was convicted of the murder but was pardoned, the pardon arriving while he stood on the scaffold with the sheriff ready to execute him. He was a most eccentric character of much intelligence and considerable property and was said to have been a sailor and served under (John) Paul Jones in the*

*Revolutionary War, but prided himself upon being discourteous in manner and brutal in disposition.”*

In addition to Sondley's work, we have contemporary accounts from two Raleigh newspapers: the *Minerva* and the *Register*. With help from librarians at the State Library of North Carolina, my coauthor found four petitions seeking respite (a stay of execution) or pardon for West sent to Governor Benjamin Williams in April and May of 1808. Finally, we have insights from the writings of Asheville *Citizen-Times* columnist Rob Neufeld and author Anne Chesky Smith.

Sondley makes a couple of errors straight out of the gate. First, it was James Craig who was murdered. In a 2019 column, Neufeld tells us that genealogists believe that James had a brother named John, which led to the confusion.

Errors of this sort are not that unusual. When my father was a boy growing up in West Asheville, he and his brother Lloyd Lunsford were riding a bike together when struck by a drunk driver. The accident killed Uncle Lloyd and put my father in the hospital. I have located several North Carolina newspaper stories with the two young men's names switched. In 1808, the newspapers did a better job, and the petitions confirmed that the murder victim was James Craig.

Second, Sondley tells us that James Craig and Henry West were enemies. It turns out West was engaged to marry Craig's daughter, so it would seem that this was not the case, but it would have led to some awkward family gatherings if true.

## Shot from Ambush

An article in the April 7, 1808, Raleigh *Minerva* gives us some details of the crime. On Tuesday, March 15, around 4:00 p.m., James Craig was working alone at his mill beside Bull Creek, about eight miles northeast of Asheville, when his dogs began barking at something on the opposite side of the creek in a laurel thicket.

He walked over to investigate. When he got within 20 or 30 yards of the noise, a gunshot rang out from the thicket, followed by the rolling smoke of a black powder firearm. A lead ball struck him a little below his ribs and lodged just within the skin of his back.

The article goes on to tell us that Craig lived about three hours after being shot and "manifested a firm mind and retained his senses to the last moment of his life." He saw a man he believed to be his assailant run from the thicket, and he identified the man as his neighbor, Henry West.

A petition to Governor Williams dated April 20 and sent by Kyle, Hamilton et al. gives us a bit more information:

*"It appears evident on trial that the ball taken out of the body of said Craig had been shot out of a small bored rifle as the marks of the rifles and patching were plain on it. It also appeared evident that the distance he was shot was 35 yards at least; also that West neither had owned nor was in possession of a gun. Six or eight months past another person has been strongly suspected the ball of whose gun perfectly corresponded with that taken out of said Craig in weight and size ..."*

The man they suspected of owning the murder weapon was Thomas Rogers, another of Craig's neighbors who had been engaged in a long and bitter lawsuit with Craig.

Given the timeframe and description of the projectile, the weapon would have most likely been a flintlock rifle of the Pennsylvania rifle or Kentucky rifle design firing a .32–.45 caliber patched round ball.

As for West's footprint, Anne Chesky Smith, in her book *Riceville*, tells us that he had an injured leg or foot that gave him a distinctive walking gait, and thus, he left distinctive footprints or tracks.

*“A set of footprints-one shallow and one deep-were found at the murder scene. This evidence was used against West, who had a deformed leg allegedly from being attacked by a shark in Charleston, South Carolina.”*

The problem with this evidence is, of course, that tracks may tell you that someone was at a particular place, but they don't tell you when. Depending on the medium or soil (sand, clay, or loamy) and the weather (dry, wet, or rainy). Further, evidence placing someone at a crime scene doesn't mean they committed the crime.

## A Divided Jury

Based primarily on James Craig's dying declaration, West was arrested, held in the Buncombe County jail, and tried on April 8-9, 24 days after the shooting.

Page three of the April 20 petition also gives some insights into the course of West's trial. One of the five signers was a grand jury member, and another was a trial jury member. It states that the jury was deadlocked with five in favor of guilty and seven in favor of not guilty.

*“At length, his honor, Judge Locke had a Tinnners Waggon drove up to the court house and assured the jury that he would have them hauled to Rutherford, the next court on the Circuit, and keep them together for a month but that they should agree.”*

The petition goes on to say that the prisoner, West, was offered a mistrial but declined because he did not want to remain in jail until the next term of court, and the judge insinuated that this refusal was an indication of guilt.

*“After a few minutes retirement, the seven jurors gave up to the five and brought in the prisoner guilty. These are all facts that did and do exist.”*

In the April 21<sup>st</sup> edition of the Raleigh Minerva newspaper, a one-paragraph item, reported:

*"West was tried for the murder of Mr. James Craig on the following day - the trial was lengthy, occupying the attention of the court more than 24 hours, but on Saturday morning about ten o'clock, the jury gave in the verdict - Guilty, and Judge Locke immediately pronounced the sentence of death. He is to be executed on Friday, the 6th of May next."*

The 1808 court system moved fast. Neufeld, in his September 16, 2019, column, quotes Lucien Holt Felmet, a Harnett County attorney and a Craig descendant:

*"This crime," Felmet stressed, "was perpetrated on March 15, the trial was held on April 8 and 9, and the execution was scheduled on May 6... What took 55 days in 1808 would consume a decade today."*

The North Carolina court system of the early 19th century was a stark contrast from the one we know today. The defendant was arrested, held for trial, and, if found guilty, received some form of corporal punishment. North Carolina did not have a prison until after the Civil War. Construction of Central Prison by inmates began in 1870. It was completed in 1884.

Thieves were flogged. Those found guilty of manslaughter had the letter M branded into the palm of their right hand. Liars and perjurers had their ears cropped. Here are two examples from John Preston Arthur's *Western North Carolina: A History (From 1730-1913)*:

*“It will be remembered that in those days, the great terror set up before rogues was the whipping-post where the fellow convicted of larceny got thirty-nine lashes well laid on his bare back with long keen switches in the hands of the sheriff.”*

*“From the minutes of the County Court of Buncombe, October 1793, it appears that it was “Ordered by court that Thomas Hopper, upon his own motion, have a certificate from the clerk, certifying that his right ear was bit off by Philip Williams in a fight between said, Hopper and Williams. Certificate issued.” This was necessary in order that the loss of a part of his ear might not cause those ignorant of the facts to conclude that the missing part had been removed as a punishment for perjury or forgery.”*

## Your Petitioners Humbly Pray

Sondley tells us that Jane Erwin, Andrew Erwin’s wife, went to Raleigh to seek a pardon for West, arranging for relays of horses to bring the pardon if obtained. We have no way of knowing if the horse relay actually took place, but it would have been a good idea. The 250-mile journey from Raleigh to Asheville would have taken days.

The only way a message or document from the governor could reach Asheville was by horseback or horse-powered conveyance. The telegraph came to Asheville on July 28, 1877. The first train pulled into Asheville from Salisbury on October 3, 1880.

As for who traveled to Raleigh to persuade Governor Williams to intervene, the most likely candidate was Hamilton Kyle, a member of the grand jury that indicted West.

According to an item dated May 5 in the Raleigh Register, a member of the grand jury traveled to Raleigh to lobby the governor for a stay of

execution for West to allow for further investigation of the crime. From the article:

*“He procured a petition from a few of his neighbors, & at his own expense, set out for this city, in order to lay the case before the Governor,”*

Kyle not only wrote G. (grand) Juror next to his signature in the April 20 Kyle, Hamilton et al. petition, but he is named as the bearer of a letter sent by Andrew Erwin, who also signed that petition.

In the letter, Erwin says that the Kyle brothers, it appears that one was on the grand jury, and the other was on West’s trial jury, could make the case for West better than Erwin could in a letter.

In a strange twist, Erwin discloses that they deliberately kept the petition a secret from West. From the letter:

*“We could have procured a much greater number of signers to the petition had we have risked letting West know any petition of any kind had gone forward that in order that he may make a confession should it still be possible that he is guilty. We are determined to keep the result of the petition an entire secret from him.”*

They believed Henry West to be innocent and were aware of new evidence that pointed to another suspect, and yet they kept the possibility of pardon from him that he might confess on the gallows if he was guilty. It’s a mindset that is difficult to grasp in the 21st century.

## A Declaration on the Gallows

If done correctly, a hanging is supposed to be a quick and relatively painless death. However, if the rope is too short, the noose will slowly strangle the condemned. If the rope was too long, it could pull the head

free of the body. Multiple methods evolved over time, including the short drop, pole method, standard drop, and long drop.

The goal is to cause a severe subluxation of the C2 and C3 vertebrae or “hangman’s fracture” that crushes the spinal cord and disrupts the vertebral arteries.

Unfortunately for West, before 1850, the short drop was the standard method of hanging; it killed by strangulation.

May 6 arrived, and West was conveyed to the scaffold. He climbed steps and, standing on the trap with the rope around his neck and the sheriff beside him, West declared: "I had no part in the murder of Craig, either in thought, word, or action."

Fortunately for all concerned, a rider arrived with a letter from the governor granting a respite until June 3. If James Patton really was present, fiddling with his pocket watch and arguing with the sheriff about whether or not it was indeed noon, then he saved West’s life along with the Kyles and Andrew Erwin.

From the Thursday, May 26, 1808, Raleigh Minerva:

*“Since the suspension of execution, petitions from most of the respectable men of that county, including the whole of the petit jury, but one who was absent, have been presented to Governor Williams, praying a pardon of West, which we are happy to state has been granted.*

*“The petitioners express their belief, from what has transpired since the trial of West, of his innocence. Indeed, it would appear unlikely that he should have perpetrated the murder, as he was at the time engaged to be married to the daughter of the deceased and to whom it is yet believed, will be married.”*



## Epilogue

Frustratingly, neither Henry West nor Thomas Rogers turn up again in any newspapers or documents we could find. We cannot tell you if West went on to marry Craig's daughter or if Rogers was tried for the murder, and if so, whether he was found guilty or not guilty.

All we can say for certain is that West dodged the gallows because concerned citizens and jurors made an impressive effort, which included hand-carrying a petition to Raleigh, and because Governor Williams granted him respite that arrived barely in the nick of time.

Should this be a lesson for today? The strength and validity of our criminal justice system depend on its accuracy — its ability to convict the guilty and to clear the innocent. Yet, we know that wrongful convictions happen.

*(Editor's Note: Several sources incorrectly state that David Stone was governor during West's trial and near execution. Stone was elected governor in 1808 but was sworn in on 12 December 1808. Today N.C. governors take office in January. The Thursday, May 26, 1808, Raleigh Minerva is incorrectly indexed as the Tuesday, April 26, 1808, Raleigh Minerva on newspapers.com.)*

## 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.

### 3. The Unconquerable Nancy Franklin



The Colonel Allen House, Marshall, N.C., was ransacked by Union sympathizers from Laurel in 1863. Photo by Warren LeMay (Flickr: Public Domain).

*“The real war will never get in the books.” — Walt Whitman, American poet, essayist, and journalist.*

"Nancy Franklin is perhaps one of the most remarkable women of the war. If one-half of the stories told about her are true, she must have been a real heroine," said M. E. Weeks, pension examiner, in his February 17, 1875, letter to James H. Baker, Commissioner of Pensions. There can be no question raised as to her loyalty to the Union during all the war. After her three sons were murdered, she became desperate and was one of the most efficient spies in the whole Union Army. She is a thoroughly immoral woman, however, and is certainly a hard case."

Nancy Franklin always had a challenging time of it. She lived in a remote mountainous corner of North Carolina. She survived at least six

childbirths and an unknowable number of injuries and illnesses at a time when a poor harvest, a bad winter, or a combination of both could prove deadly to a person, family, or even a community.

She was born Nancy Shelton in 1825 in the White Rock community of Shelton Laurel in what is now Madison County. Her parents were Roderick Shelton and Rachel Moore Shelton. She was the third of 10 children. She would lose multiple family members at the Shelton Laurel massacre in 1863; more on that later.

Her story has been told many times in books and newspaper articles. Unfortunately, many, if not most, of these accounts get critical details of her story wrong. In this chapter, we will work to piece together a more accurate version of Nancy's story. It's the story of a strong, tough, and sometimes violent woman who weathered a time when chaos and horror roamed freely through the region.

## The Murder of Drury Norton

Nancy married Drury Norton sometime around 1840, at 16, and over the next decade, gave birth to two daughters and four sons: Catherine, Balis, James, George, Josiah, and Delana.

In May of 1854, a brawl led to Drury's death. We have some details of the incident from N.C. Supreme Court records. Drury had been working some new ground with his father-in-law Roderick Shelton and brother-in-law Lewis Shelton. The record states that Norton "had drunk freely in the morning, but after his day's work and eating his dinner (lunch), he had become sober."

When he got home from the field, he found another brother-in-law, James Shelton, and Shelton's friend, Tilman Landers, waiting there.

Some words passed between the men, and Landers spit tobacco juice in Norton's eyes, and Norton threw liquor in his face. Then James Shelton threw him out of the door. Norton picked up a maul (basically a wooden

sledgehammer), and Shelton jumped over a fence and came up with an axe. Norton jumped into the house through a window; Shelton struck at him with the axe but hit the window facing instead; after this, they threw stones at each other.

At this point, Norton threatened to go and get a warrant. He traveled a half-mile to the house of his neighbor, Gunter, and asked to borrow a gun, but the man refused. Norton returned home; as a precaution, he went through the orchard. It was here that someone struck him on the head, most likely with a rock. He was found attempting to crawl home. Norton's skull was fractured. He died three days later on a Sunday.

James Shelton and Tilman Landers fled to Tennessee. Governor David Reid offered a \$200 reward for Shelton and \$150 for Landers. We could find no details of their capture, but they were tried in Buncombe County in April 1855. James Shelton was found guilty of murder and Landers of manslaughter. Shelton appealed, and the N.C. Supreme Court reversed the decision because the only witness to the fatal blow was the deceased, who could not be cross-examined. Shelton lived to be 80. Tilman Landers only reached 40 and appears to have served in both Confederate and Union armies.

Nancy was left to tend a farm and provide for six children, ranging in age from three to 13 years old. The emotional trauma of seeing her husband attacked, chased, and dying slowly from a fractured skull must have been extreme.

On March 7, 1857, she married George Franklin. It would be a troubled relationship. Reports say that George was a poor provider, a drinker, and consorted with other women. In an 1883 deposition, Nancy's son, George Norton, stated that George Franklin "never has been stout."

The June 24, 1869, Asheville News has a brief item about the case of State vs. Nancy Franklin for stabbing a woman named Susan in a fit of jealousy the previous fall. It goes on to note: "The wound inflicted was a

severe one, and for a while, the life of the injured woman was thought to be in danger.”

Nadia Dean, in *Murder in the Mountains*, notes that Nancy was also charged with assaulting a woman named Mary Wilson in 1866 and attacked a third woman in 1870. The couple divorced around 1876.

## The Shelton Laurel Massacre

The next traumatic event in Nancy Franklin’s life would be as historic as it was tragic: the Shelton Laurel Massacre. According to Dean, Nancy lost six kinsmen in the Shelton Laurel massacre. She may have even witnessed the shooting or been involved in retrieving the victims’ bodies from a shallow trench in which they were hastily and haphazardly buried and helping rebury them. One way or another, she lived through its aftermath.

A Confederate regiment led by Lieutenant Colonel James A. Keith executed 13 men and boys, ages 13 to 60, who were suspected of participating in the Marshall Salt raid and being Union sympathizers. Several Shelton Laurel women, young and old, were tortured to extract information about their sons’ and husbands’ whereabouts. It was one of the most horrific crimes of the war.

From the July 15, 1863, Memphis Bulletin report on the massacre:

*“Old Mrs. Sallie Moore, seventy years of age, was whipped with hickory rods till the blood ran in streams down her back to the ground, and the perpetrators of this were clothed in the habiliments of rebellion and bore the name of soldiers!”*

The massacre was in retaliation for the looting of salt stores in nearby Marshall and the ransacking of Lt. Colonel Allen’s home. His two children were sick with scarlet fever and died a few days later. Many feel that his children’s death may have been a factor in the maltreatment

handed out to the people of Laurel. The Confederate government had been hoarding salt, essential for preserving meat to get through the winter. They went so far as to place the salt in depots and guard it with troops.

From “Atrocity at Shelton Laurel” by Philip Gerard in Our State magazine:

*“Brigadier General W.G.M. Davis reports on February 2, “I think the attack on Marshall was gotten up to obtain salt, for want of which there is great suffering in the mountains. Plunder of other property followed as a matter of course.”*

## The Laurel Raid

Ten years after watching her first husband die and less than two years after losing family members in one of the worst war crimes of the Civil War, on September 27, 1864, Nancy Franklin experienced the worst day of her life.

All four of her sons were home from the war. George and James were on leave from the 2nd Regiment, Company E, North Carolina Mounted Infantry (Union) from Bulls Gap, TN. Balis was also in Company E of the 2nd, but it is unclear if he was on leave. Even his brother George could not say for sure in an 1883 deposition. Josiah had been a member of the 3rd Regiment, North Carolina Mounted Infantry (Union) but had been captured in a recent raid on Strawberry Plains, TN, by Confederates and given parole due to his youth.

(Editor’s Note: My great uncle, Alfred Lemuel Dockery, was a sergeant in Company C of the 2nd North Carolina Mounted Infantry. - AD)

The April 20, 1886, House Report on Nancy Franklin (No. 1793) summarizes the raid on the Franklin farm as follows:

“The evidence shows that the three sons were at home on a short furlough. They were about getting breakfast in the morning; the house was surrounded by the rebels; the boys ran out of the house ... Bayliss and Josiah were shot down by the rebels. James was shot down some distance from the house. They were buried in one grave without a coffin. The house was also burned down.”

Confederate Major Charles M. Roberts, 14th NC Battalion Cavalry, was mortally wounded in the engagement and died two days later. Even badly outnumbered and taken by surprise, the Norton boys extracted a toll from their attackers. George Norton, in his 1883 deposition, estimated the rebel force at about 140 men.

“I was at one of my uncles, about 3 miles away from the scene of their death, but I suppose it was not more than 2 hours after the shooting that I came over and saw them dead – all them,” said George Norton.

From the October 11, 1864, Charlotte Democrat newspaper:

*“We are pained to learn that Maj. Charles M. Roberts, of the 14th Battalion, was severely wounded last Tuesday (September 27) on Laurel while leading a party of his men against some bushwhackers who had taken refuge in a house. Maj. Roberts died last night, at 9 o'clock. No truer or braver man has fallen in this war. We trust an able pen will do justice to his memory - Asheville News, (Sept.) 29th.”*

Other written works, including several books, offer a far more detailed account of the raid on the Franklin farm and its aftermath, but do they provide accurate details, or are they just myths refined by a century of circulation? One thing we have learned in our journey writing about historical crimes is that what you write about an event or incident usually comes down to what you can document. What if you don't have documentation and you elect to rely on “the story widely told today?”



Well, that's what science fiction and fantasy writer Manly Wade Wellman did in this 1956 story, "With Your Teeth in a Throat!" published by the Raleigh News and Observer. The story got the entire front page in Section III of the Sunday paper and featured vivid illustrations by N&O staff artist Bill Ballard.

The problem is the oral accounts he relied on were wrong.

Wellman's most egregious errors, which he repeated in his book, *The Kingdom of Madison: A Southern Mountain Fastness And Its People*, published almost two decades later, was claiming that Nancy Franklin and her sons were Confederate sympathizers and that their farm was attacked by a detachment of Union troops, and telling the story of a shooting at Mars Hill College that almost certainly never happened. There is also a score of minor errors in his work, including getting the names of Nancy's sons wrong.

## The Myth of the Murdered Mason

This brings us to the myth of the murdered mason, which supposedly happened in 1867 at Mars Hill College. According to the story, Mars Hill College was rebuilding after the war, and workmen, particularly brick masons, came from far and wide. One of these bricklayers had been one of the "Yankees" that Wellman claims Nancy Franklin told her boys to "run off." But Nancy's sons were Union soldiers, and her farm was raided by Confederate troops.

This particular raider had shot at Nancy point-blank, and the bullet had cut off a lock of her hair. He bragged about missing this seemingly easy shot to his coworkers, and some students overheard the tale and brought it to the attention of Nancy's brother, who she was living with at the time, James Norton. But while Nancy had a brother named James, his last name was Shelton. Also, Nancy and James may not have been on the best of terms after Drury Norton's murder.

“James Norton” gave one of the students a five-dollar gold piece to point the man out and traveled with him to Mars Hill. There, he confronted the raider, “brought out a long-barrelled revolver,” and shot the brick mason in front of a dozen witnesses and then hurried away. The mason died three days later.

Eventually, the killer was captured and jailed in Marshall, where “One legend says that he was cheered for hours outside the barred windows.” But no one wrote about it. The prosecutor managed to get a change of venue to Burnsville in Yancy County. However, researchers have not to date found a record of the trial.

Interestingly, when James Shelton killed Drury Norton in a deserted orchard in 1854, there was a story in the newspapers within days and a reward offered for his capture within weeks. When he and Landers were tried for the killing, additional reports were published. However, we have not found any contemporary newspaper articles about a shooting in broad daylight in Mars Hill for which we are told there were eyewitnesses or articles about or records of the Burnsville trial.

The story goes on to say that when James Norton was tried in Burnsville. Nancy Franklin saddled a gray mare and rode twenty miles to testify on her brother’s behalf. (White Rock to Burnsville is 20 miles traveling in a direct line, which, as anyone who has ever been to Madison or Yancy county will tell you, is impossible, and 40 miles using roads.) Her testimony was so heartfelt and moving that grown men cried, and the jury acquitted the defendant even though it was clear he was guilty.

According to Wellman’s article, Judge James L. Henry interrupted her recital with a shocked question.

*"Madam," he said, "you tell us that you told these young boys, one of them not much more than a child, to open fire and kill those men. How could you do that? Didn't you tell them to live law-abiding, Christian lives?"*

*"Yes, Your Honor," she flashed back. "I told them to live law-abiding, Christian lives. I brought them up, to tell the truth and be honest. But I also told them if you have to die, die like a damned dog with your teeth in a throat!"*

However, Dan Slagle's research indicates that James L. Henry did not become a judge until 1868. And no contemporary newspaper reporter took down and published this immortal quote.

Since the time Wellman wrote the article and book, many documents have surfaced that contradict the story he was told. Unfortunately, Wellman's book has been used by several authors as a documented source to continue this historical game of telephone.

C. Beale Fletcher's 1959 article "Revenge Dear for Nancy Norton" in the Asheville Citizen-Times correctly identifies Nancy and her sons as pro-Union but repeats most of Wellman's other mistakes.

Paludan's 1981 book *Victims: A True Story of The Civil War* repeats the story of the Mars Hill killing and cites Wellman as the source. Ironically, on the same page, Paludan chronicles James Shelton's and Tilman Lander's assault on Drury Norton, never realizing that Drury Norton was Nancy Franklin's first husband and that James Shelton was her brother. Trotter's 1988 book *Bushwhackers* has the Norton boys as Confederates and repeats the story of the mason's fate. Inscoe and McKinney, in their 2003 book, *The Heart of Confederate Appalachia: Western North Carolina in the Civil War*, make this passing reference:

*"In Madison County, a laborer working on a construction project at Mars Hill College bragged to fellow workers about his role as part of a home guard unit that had murdered three brothers and nearly killed their mother. Days later, the mother's brother, James Norton, approached the work site in broad daylight, announced his relationship to the laborer's*

*victims, and shot the man. Norton was tried for murder but acquitted.”*

The myth of the murdered mason is a story with no documented foundation that will live forever.

## Epilogue

For more than 20 years, Nancy Franklin doggedly pursued a pension as a dependent of her murdered sons. In 1886, she finally got it when the bill (H. R. 7365) for the relief of Nancy Franklin was passed. Nancy Franklin died on January 5, 1903, in Greene County, TN, at 78.

While C. Beale Fletcher’s 1959 newspaper story got about as much wrong as right, the legendary dancer, dance instructor, and author of instructional dance books did perhaps the best job of summing up at least a decade (1854–1864) of Nancy Franklin’s life in one sentence.

“The only moral to this story is that violence begets violence and that if you lived in Shelton Laurel, North Madison County, during the Civil War, you couldn’t win for losing!”

We’ll cut him some slack on the article’s title, “Revenge Dear for Nancy Norton.” Editors wrote the headlines back then. Unfortunately, it implies that Nancy’s desire for revenge led to her sons’ deaths. It’s not clear that she was at home when her farm was attacked, and it seems unlikely she would have directed her three sons to chase off 140 attackers. Whether she ever suggested that they “die like dogs with their teeth in a throat,” it seems unlikely anyone on Laurel would have surrendered after the Shelton Laurel massacre less than two years prior.

Everything Nancy Franklin ever had cost her dearly. Her first husband was clubbed to death with a rock and died over a period of days. She and her second husband had irreconcilable differences. She lived through the terror of the Shelton Laurel massacre, losing multiple family members. She lost three sons, ages 21, 19, and 15, and had her house burned down all in one day. But somehow, she found a way to continue both during the war and after. She was unconquerable.

*(Editor's Note: We are indebted to Dan Slagle for making available to us multiple documents that we would not have otherwise had access to. We could not have told this story as accurately or as well without his assistance.)*