

Murder Most Vile

In the early days of the expedition as the forces were preparing for their trek through the wilderness, an episode occurred at Tacconnet -- location of Fort Western -- a murder. The event is chronicled in the journals of the participants on the march. Following is the story told through their experience.

Webmaster

Sunday, 24th [September 1775]. Early this morning was called to attend a wounded soldier, who was shot through the body last night by a malicious drunken fellow belonging to the army. The hemorrhage was great inwardly, which soon occasioned his death.

Journal of Dr. Isaac Senter

Sept. 24. Occupied in getting our men and Provisions up from Gardiner's Town. After Capt. Topham and myself went to bed at a neighbor's house, some dispute arose in the house between some of our soldiers, on which we were requested to get up and appease them. I got out of Bed, and ordered them to lie down and be at rest; and on going to the door, I observed the flash of the priming of a gun, and called to Capt. Topham who arose likewise and went to the door, was fired at, but was missed, on which he drew back, and I with Topham went to bed, but the felon who had fully determined murder in his heart, came again to the door and lifted the latch, and fired into the room, and killed a man lying by the fireside. On suspicion, we took up a man, but did not prove to be the murderer.

Sept. 25. The perpetrator of the above facts was taken by a Sergeant, who, thinking he was a deserter, questioned him accordingly, and who came to understand that he crossed the river opposite to the place where he killed the man, and gave himself up to the mercy of the Sergeant, who brought him back and was sentenced to die.

Sept. 26. We began our march. The above perpetrator, by name Jn^o McCormick, was to suffer at 3 o'clock, but was reprieved at that time to be sent back to Gen. Washington.

Journal of Capt. Simeon Thayer

24th, Sunday. Last night a man was shot at a Public house about half a mile above here. One Ryder is taken on suspicion, confined till night, then set at liberty, then taken a man belonging to Capt. Gutteridge's (Goodrich's) Company and confined.

25th Today the General Court Marshall set, Examined the man and evidence. He confessed that he shot the gun; saith he was in liquor. The man that was buried to-day died yesterday; he belonged to Norwich in Connecticut, his name was Bishop.

26th To-day the criminal was took to the gallows, Conducted by a strong guard, with a Halter about his neck, placed on the stage, under the gallows, was reprieved till General Washington could see him, put him in irons and ordered to be sent to Cambridge.

Journal of Ephraim Squier, Enos' Division, Scott's Company

September 25

at "fort weston"

"In the after noon a man belonging to Capt Goodrich's Company, James Mcarn being [in] liquor shot Serj't Bishop belonging to Capt Williams Company"

Journal of Jeremiah Greenman, Ward's Company

September 25, Monday

This morning I was on quarter guard. A Court Martial sat on the trial of the murderer, brought him in guilty and sentenced him to be hung.

September 26, Tuesday

This morning a gallows was erected, the murderer brought out and sat upon it about half an hour, then was taken down to be sent back to Cambridge to have another trial.

Journal of Caleb Haskell

September 21 [1775]. This day we arrived at Fort Western, where we tarried until the 25th in order to make farther preparations for our voyage up the river, and our march through the wilderness.

While remaining in this place I was called to witness a scene which to me was awful and very affecting; the more so I presume as it was the first of the kind I ever beheld. A civil, well behaved and much beloved young man, belonging to Captain Williams' company was shot. He lived but about twelve hours, and died in great horror and agony of mind at the thought of going into eternity and appearing before his God and judge. He was from the north parish of New London and had a wife and four or five children.

The supposed murderer, was James McCormick. The circumstances of his being out all night, and his guilty looks and actions, were pretty convincing proof against him. He was tried by a Court-Martial and sentenced to be hanged until dead, his gallows erected, and all things prepared for his execution. Our Chaplain conversed with him respecting his crime, the awful punishment he was soon to suffer, and the more awful and never ending punishment that would await him in the eternal world if he did not repent and believe in Christ. He would not confess himself guilty of intentionally murdering the young man; but that he intended to have killed his captain, with whom he had the night before a violent quarrel. He was brought to the gallows, a prayer made, and the time for his execution almost arrived, when Colonel Arnold thought best to relieve him and send him to General Washington. I have been informed, that he died in gaol before the day of his execution arrived.

Journal of Abner Sticking

Fort Western, 27th Sept. 1775

To Capt. Moses Nowell:

Sir---You are hereby ordered to receive from Capt. James Clarkson, one James McCormick , a criminal condemned for the murder of Reuben Bishop, and him safely convey under a proper guard, to his excellency Gen. Washington at Head Quarters.

I am your humble servt.

B. ARNOLD

Fort Western, 27th September, 1775.

To his Excellency General Washington,

May it please your Excellency:

I have ordered James McCormick, the criminal condemned for the murder of Reuben Bishop, on board the schooner Broad Bay, Capt. Clarkson, with directions for him to be delivered to Capt. Moses Nowell, at Newburyport, who has orders to send him to your Excellency. The criminal appears to be very simple and ignorant; and in the company he belonged to, had the character of being a peaceable fellow. His place of residence is North Yarmouth, was drafted out of Col. Scammon's regiment, Capt. Hill's company, where his character may be fully known. I wish he may be found a proper object of mercy; and I am

With the greatest respect

Your excellency's most obed't humble servt.

B. ARNOLD