

Bethinking of Old Orleans ²⁻¹⁷⁻⁸³

C.W.Lattin • County Historian



George W. Willson

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THE WILLSON HANGING Part I - George Murders Alice

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In the history of Orleans County there has never been but one execution which took place here. The year was 1888 and George W. Willson was hanged by the neck for the murder of his wife. This fascinating tale and how it subsequently influenced the placement of a significant Albion landmark, will be told here in three weekly installments. Credit is due Mr. Donald L. Smith of Holley for his research in 1972 of facts contained in this series.

George W. Willson was born in Cattaraugus County, N.Y. in the year 1852. In 1871 he moved to Orleans County where he worked as a farm laborer. On April 10, 1872 he married 18-year-old Alice Pierson who resided near Riches Corners. In 1883, Willson became a coachman, gardner and custodian for Mr. Ezra T. Coann, a banker. George lived with his wife, three daughters and two sons on Washington Street in the Village of Albion.

During the 1880's he (George) displayed a keen interest in other women. His last affair commenced in March in 1886 with 17-year-old Laura Thompson of Kuckville who was then employed as a maid and housekeeper in Albion. As a result of the relationship his marriage became weakened and frequent arguments with Alice resulted. He'd been heard to refer to her on several occasions as a *!\$#.

On January 14, 1887 Laura's father, Elisa Thompson, received a letter written by Alice Willson complaining of Laura's association with her husband. On January 17 Laura's father showed the letter to Warren and Emily Donalds for whom she was then employed. Laura's father was upset about the accusations and cautioned her of the consequences of such a relationship with a married man. Elisa also talked to Ezra Coann about his employee's conduct. Coann later advised George that he was bringing discredit on his employer for not behaving like a family man. On Tuesday evening, January 18 George Willson visited Laura in her room at the Donalds residence unbeknown to them. It was then that he first learned of the letter his wife Alice had written to Laura's father. Willson remained with Laura until 2 A.M. that morning, Wednesday, January 19, 1887. He then returned home and sometime within the following two hours George wrapped a towel around his wife's external breathing passages and asphyxiated her. He was twice her size and she was unable to repel him. At 5 A.M. he alerted a neighbor that his wife was ill and would they help. The neighbor of course, found Alice dead on a bed. Dr. Tousley Lewis was then summoned to the house and immediately suspected foul play. The county coroner was then sent for and upon examination of the body at 8:00 A.M. instructed that it not be moved. In spite of all this, Willson reported to work as usual that day and drove Mr. Coann to the bank. He then drove in the Coann sleigh to Riches Corners and informed his mother-in-law of Alice's death. As he drove by the Donalds residence, he was seen blowing a kiss to Laura.

At 9 A.M. a ten-man coroners jury was summoned and examined Alice Willson's body. The coroner then ordered an autopsy and post-mortem examination which was performed in the kitchen of the Willson residence beginning at 3:15 P.M. January 19. District Attorney William P.L. Stafford attended and it was determined by 6:00 P.M. that death was caused by suffocation. At about 8 P.M. Constable Edwin VanStone arrested George Willson at his home on a charge of murder in the first degree. He went willingly, was arraigned before Justice L.R. Sanford and waived his right to a preliminary hearing and was ordered held for the Grand Jury. The prisoner was then committed to Orleans County jail where he would wait until the Grand Jury met. On Friday, January 21 Alice was buried after a funeral service which was conducted at the Methodist Church in Albion. On the eleventh of February 1887 the Grand Jury indicted George Willson for murder in the first degree.

"And then, till Christ call forth the dead,
In silence let him lie:
No need to waste the foolish tear,
Or heave the windy sigh:
The man had killed the thing he loved,
And so he had to die."

--Wilde - Ballad of Reading Gaol

Part II "Conviction and Execution" will continue next week.