

Bethinking of Old Orleans

C.W.Lattin • County Historian

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William P. L. Stafford
District Attorney

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THE WILLSON HANGING Part II Conviction & Execution

The trial of George W. Willson for the murder of his wife Alice on January 19, 1887 commenced in Supreme Court at the Orleans County Court House on July 5, 1887. The Hon. Justice Albert Haight of Buffalo presided. The case was prosecuted by District Attorney William P.L. Stafford. Willson's attorneys who were appointed by the court were John H. White and Benjamin E. Williams.

Two hundred and eighty-one prospective jurors were examined before the final twelve were selected. My great grandfather Lattin was among those selected. The prosecution produced fifty-five witnesses; the defense fifteen, one of which was the defendant. One principal witness against Willson was his oldest daughter Mary. On July 14 the jury received the case at 6 P.M. and returned to the courtroom at midnight with the verdict, **GUILTY OF MURDER IN THE FIRST DEGREE.** The sentence which was passed on July 15 by Justice Haight committed Willson to be hanged by the neck on September 9, 1887. However, the sentence was not carried out then as the case would be argued before the Court of Appeals in April 1888 at which time the conviction was affirmed.

On May 28, 1888 Willson was brought before Supreme Court Justice Henry A. Childs at Albion and for the third time sentence was passed with the execution scheduled for Wednesday, June 27, 1888. During this time Willson had been incarcerated in the county jail. He was an ideal inmate and caused no problems. His expressed desire was to pay for all his own funeral expenses and not be a public burden. To meet these expenses he spend the time in his cell making macrame hair jewelry which he readily sold. In addition to this, a local photographer took his picture and he sold these portraits to curiosity seekers for fifty-cents. Prior to June 27 he purchased a new suit, shirt, shoes and accessories for the day of hanging as well as a fine casket with his own money. Rev. Dr. A.C. Osborn minister of the First Baptist Church in Albion became very close to Willson acting as his spiritual advisor. In fact, Dr. Osborn seemed to be Willson's only friend. In a last attempt to save Willson, Dr. Osborn obtained petitions, many from his parishioners, asking Gov. Hill to commute Willson's sentence to life imprisonment. But on June 26 the Governor by telegram indicated he would not intervene with the case. It is interesting to note that the prosecuting district attorney W.P.L. Stafford was also a member of Dr. Osborn's congregation.

On Saturday, June 23 the rented gallows arrived from Buffalo accompanied by a man to assemble it. This same gallows had been used by President Cleveland when he was Sheriff of Erie County. It was erected to the rear of the present Court House and was closed off with a high board fence. State law of 1835 prohibited public executions but prescribed who could attend. The platform was twelve feet square and seven feet above the ground surmounted by eleven steps. The rope with five and one-half feet of slack was five-eighths inch manilla which was made expressly for the purpose. Cards of invitation were sent by the Sheriff to the jurors, two clergymen, two physicians, County Judge, County Clerk, District Attorney and press.

On Wednesday morning, June 27 two detachments of Grand Army Guard encircled the jail and Court House to keep onlookers away. About 1500 showed up. At 9 A.M. Sheriff Searle read the death warrant to Willson. The prisoner then put on his new suit garnished with a red rose in the lapel. Shortly after 10 A.M. Sheriff Searle and others including the District Attorney lead Willson from the jail to the gallows. The prisoner carried a bouquet of pure white flowers presented him in the jail lobby by the wife of a deputy. Outside he crossed the enclosed sawdust covered yard and rapidly ascended the eleven steps. When asked if he had anything to say he replied "I have not." The Deputy Sheriff pinioned his arms and legs, put a black cap over his head and adjusted the noose around his neck. Rev. Osborn uttered a prayer and upon the word "Amen" at exactly 10:15 A.M. Sheriff Searle pulled the lever and George W. Willson dropped feet-foremost through the trap door, all 240 pounds. Death was pronounced at 10:26 A.M. and undertaker Onderdonk prepared the remains for burial which took place the following day at Ellicottville in Cattaragus County.

"It is sweet to dance to violins
When Love and Life are fair:
To dance to flute, to dance to lutes
Is delicate and rare:
But it is not sweet with nimble feet
To dance upon the air!"

Wilde -- Ballad of Reading Gao!

Part III "The Legendary Aftermath" will follow next week.