

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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Circa 1906 Photo

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THE WILLSON HANGING Part III The Legendary Aftermath

On June 27, 1888 when George W. Willson was hanged for the murder of his wife not one of the jurors who convicted him in July 1887 accepted the invitation to attend the morbid event. Both County Judge Signor and County Clerk Ross also declined. One headline in a Buffalo paper read "George Willson of Albion Strangled for Strangling His Wife." Not once at any time during his trial or appeals or the seventeen months he spent in the county jail did Willson ever admit to killing his wife, not once. The day prior to his execution when asked by a reporter ".....did you kill your wife?" He answered, "As God is my judge, I am an innocent man, I never killed her, and I will die without a stain on my soul." He also mentioned that one of the witnesses ".....lied about me and it is he who is sending me to the gallows.....I don't think the doctors testified fairly.....I had good lawyers, but they might have been better...I have made no confession nor have I anything to confess....I am innocent and was convicted on false testimony." And so George Willson left

this life leaving doubts about his guilt with the people of Orleans County. Surely the Baptist minister did all he could to save Willson through petitions signed by many of his parishioners. This indicates some of the public feeling of the time about capital punishment. Incidentally, the Willson children, except one who died, were adopted.

District Attorney William P. L. Stafford carried out his duty to the fullest degree. Perhaps a zealot, he must have figured that by winning the Willson case it would be easy to move up to more success. In the Fall of 1894 Stafford ran on the Republican ticket for County Judge against W. Crawford Ramsdale. Stafford's platform in part, dealt with his success as District Attorney. However, due to the Willson case, public sentiment turned against him and his well-laid plans backfired. He lost. It must have been a difficult thing to swallow considering the fact that Orleans County was predominately Republican. As a result he blamed his own co-religionists in the Albion Baptist Church for double-crossing him by lack of support. It's also possible that he was irked by the Baptist minister's meddling in the Willson case.

I should point out that Stafford lived in the house pictured here which is located on South Main Street at West Park Street in Albion. This show place had been bequeathed to him by his father-in-law Newton Proctor. At the time St. Joseph's Church which was located on North Main Street in Albion had become too small for the number of communicants. During 1895 the Rt. Rev. Msgr. Biden was casting about for a new and better location to build a larger church. The property surrounding the Court House Square where the other six churches had already been built was owned by Protestants. Enough said! Stafford now saw his chance to get even. He offered his property to Father Biden for a mere \$8,000, a pittance, considering that the residence had cost four times that amount to build. Father Biden jumped at the chance. When the terms of sale were complete it was with the explicit proviso of Stafford that the new Catholic Church be built on Park Street, next to the Baptist Church and as close to the street as possible so that it would block the view of the Baptist Church from Main Street. And what's more, they did it! Oh, sweet revenge! As this photo which was taken from Main Street proves, only the very top of the Baptist steeple shows in the upper right hand corner because the Catholic Church blocks the view.

And all men kill the thing they love,
By all let this be heard,
Some do it with bitter look,
Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave men with a sword!

Wilde - Ballad of Reading Goal

Wanting nothing more to do with Albion, Stafford moved in disgust to California. In fact, he had his two dead children exhumed from Mt. Albion Cemetery and re-buried out there. St. Joseph's Church was completed in 1896 and the former Proctor-Stafford residence became the Rectory. In appreciation for such desirable property Father Biden requested his successor Msgr. Sullivan to ring the church bells in mourning whenever a member of the Proctor or Stafford families (Protestant) were laid to rest as a token of gratitude to a great benefactor - a Baptist.

The End