

The Assassination of Shiloh Constable John Nimrod Ferguson

by Timothy Dean Hudson

John Nimrod Ferguson was born in Butts County Georgia on 2 October 1838, the son of Thomas Jefferson Ferguson and Hannah McCallum. The family moved to Spalding County Georgia in the 1840s, and John married there in 1862 to Martha Rebecca Weldon. After service in the Confederate Army during the War, John farmed in Georgia until about 1870, when he moved his family to Shiloh, where both he and his father bought farms. In the mid-1880s, the Shiloh citizens elected John as their constable.

On 16 December 1887, Ferguson went from his home near Shiloh to Stein's Bluff, on Bayou Corney near Farmerville, on a routine trip as constable to make collections. After finishing his business there, he headed back home along the Farmerville/Shiloh Road with \$16 in his pocket. Near the Mt. Tabor community, several men lay waiting for Ferguson's approach. The group included four men: Columbus Straughter, Wiley Bragg, John Neal Johnson, and Thomas Johnson.

As Ferguson reached Mt. Tabor about sundown, at least one of the assailants repeatedly fired his gun at Constable Ferguson's head. He died instantly, with his *"head being really shot away."* The men appear to have fled the scene immediately, without disturbing the money Ferguson carried. Several local citizens found his body, and despite a thorough investigation, authorities could find no clue as to the perpetrators or motive.

For the next decade, Ferguson's murder remained shrouded in mystery. Then, in the latter 1890s, Straughter and Bragg had a disagreement about who had actually committed the crime, and a few details about murder leaked to Samuel D. Nutt, a Shiloh farmer. Determined to solve the case, Nutt went to Arkansas to visit Wiley Bragg. When Nutt confronted Bragg and accused him of murder, he made a full confession that implicated himself, Straughter, and John Neal Johnson.

Bragg claimed that the three men waited for their victim on the roadside, and as Ferguson approached, Columbus Straughter fired his shotgun at him, causing him to fall from his horse to the ground. As Ferguson lay prostrate on the ground, Straughter fired a second time, causing instant death. Bragg claimed Johnson had a gun but did not fire, and he had no gun himself. After the killing, Bragg claimed the three men went to their respective homes. Bragg's statements fit well with the only nearby witness, who heard exactly two shots and saw two men running across a field.

Bragg claimed that although robbery motivated the villains to waylay Ferguson, he was not their intended target; they mistook him for George Washington Moore, a Shiloh farmer. One of the

men had a grievance against Moore, and they knew he planned to travel from Shiloh to Stein's Bluff that same day to sell a large amount of cotton, and then return home with the money. Since Moore and Ferguson had a resemblance and had similar horses, and the weather on that December day was bitterly cold, causing Ferguson to button his heavy overcoat around his neck, adding to the mistaken identity.

After his confession to Samuel Nutt, the sheriff had Bragg, Straughter, and John Neal Johnson arrested and placed in the Farmerville jail. A reporter for *"The Gazette"* visited the prisoners, and Bragg made an identical statement to him as he had previously confessed to Nutt. Straughter and Johnson, however, denied it and proclaimed their innocence. Their trials began the morning of Thursday, September 29th and arguments lasted until Friday afternoon. Shortly after the judge empaneled the jury, Bragg withdrew his plea of not guilty and entered a plea of guilty without capital punishment. The jury found John Neal Johnson not guilty but failed to agree on Slaughter, resulting in a mistrial. At his second trial, the jury disagreed over capital punishment, and so the court sentenced Bragg and Straughter to life in the State Penitentiary.

After their sentencing, a reporter for *"The Gazette"* visited them in jail, hoping to get a true statement of the killing. Although both men admitted to their presence at Ferguson's murder, Bragg continued to blame Straughter, while Straughter blamed Bragg. Oddly, at this interview, Bragg seemingly recanted his earlier statement that George W. Moore was their intended target. This time, he agreed with Straughter: the intended target of the assassination was Ferguson. Both men claimed that John Neal Johnson was a party to the killing, but in a later interview with Johnson, he claimed that Thomas Johnson, now deceased, was also present. The veracity of these widely conflicting versions of the events leading to the death of John Nimrod Ferguson will likely never be sorted out.

On the morning of Saturday, November 26th, three sheriff's deputies, John W. Taylor, Ruffin G. Pleasant (Shiloh native and Louisiana's future Governor), and Karl Pleasant, took Bragg and Straughter from the Farmerville jail by steamboat on their journey to the State Penitentiary in Baton Rouge, where they spent the rest of their lives. On Monday, December 5th, the Union Parish Policy Jury gave Samuel D. Nutt the \$200 reward offered for the conviction of Ferguson's assassins a few months after the event occurred back in December 1887. As *"The Gazette"* put it, *"it was nothing but just that Capt. Nutt should have it."*

