

The Murder of William Pierce Mabry of Shiloh

by Timothy Dean Hudson

Born in Georgia in 1825, William Pierce Mabry married Catherine H. Cook in Chambers County, Alabama in 1847. About 1855, they moved to Louisiana and settled near Shiloh. Initially, they lived in Claiborne Parish, where he built carriages and wagons, but in the latter 1860s, they moved closer to Shiloh and farmed in Union Parish. By the 1880s, Shiloh residents regarded Mabry as a *"highly esteemed citizen."*

In late April, William C. Henderson, a married man with a young daughter who served as a Baptist deacon, claimed that Caroline Smiley, *"a poor, defenseless negro woman"* who had previously worked for Henderson but then worked for Mabry, owed Henderson a debt that she would not pay. Henderson *"recently had some trouble with Mabry,"* reportedly regarding a young black farm worker Henderson had hired who refused to come live on his farm. Henderson then *"secretly gathered together a lot of fellow ruffians, and conspired with them..."*

At Pisgah Baptist Church services held on Sunday morning, April 19th, Henderson approached Jack Melton and asked him to come to his house to discuss business on Tuesday night. When Melton arrived on the night of the 21st, before inviting him in, Henderson asked if Melton would go with a crowd to whip Caroline. Melton replied, *"I might,"* and so Henderson summoned him into the house. Melton later reported, *"When I went into the house, I found Walter Ferguson [sic] and Calvin Skinner there. I asked Henderson if that was the crowd; he replied that it was. I at first refused to go with them and started to Mr. Bennett's, but they begged me to go with them."* Henderson was then forty years old, but the other three were young men: Skinner was twenty-seven, Melton twenty-three, and Ferguson, only twenty.

The group made plans to go to Caroline's cabin on Mabry's farm late that night, armed with pistols, and to *"take her out of her cabin, and whip her until their brutal natures were satisfied."* When they arrived at Caroline's cabin, she was asleep inside with her two little boys and two small grandchildren. The four ruffians walked into the yard, and Henderson called out for her, telling Caroline he wanted to talk with her. She recognized his voice and quickly put on her dress. At first, she did not open the door, but, frightened for the young children's safety, she decided to attempt to run for help.

Caroline Smiley suddenly threw open the door *"...and ran screaming towards the house of her employer, old man Mabry."* She made it some thirty yards before she stumbled and fell. Ferguson ran up to her and struck her on the head with a stick. The four *"chivalrous gentlemen,"* as Judge

Trimble termed them in *"The Gazette,"* then carried her back near the house, where Henderson struck her in the eye with his pistol and the others began unmercifully whipping her. Caroline's screams had awakened Mabry, and he soon ran out of his house and towards her cabin, yelling, *"Heigho! What is the matter? What are you doing there?"* One of the men exclaimed, *"Old Mabry has come,"* and Skinner took off running around the corner of the cabin towards Mabry, who yelled, *"Stop!"*

Skinner shot Mabry in the chest, and the elderly man fell to the ground, landing face-down. The four men then ran off into the woods, while Caroline staggered on towards Mabry's house. The yelling had awakened Mabry's son, Joseph, who lived in a house nearby, and he reached his father's side a few minutes after the shooting. Joseph Mabry felt his father's still-warm body, but he turned him over to find him dead, with a bullet hole directly through his heart and blood running from his nose, mouth, and chest.

The next day, Caroline made depositions identifying Henderson and Ferguson, but she did not know the other two men. Sheriff Benjamin F. Pleasant arrested Henderson and Ferguson on Thursday and took them to the Farmerville jail. A few days later, he arrested Melton and Skinner, all charged with murder. District Court Judge Young scheduled a preliminary hearing for Wednesday and Thursday, April 29–30.

Writing the day before the evidence became public at the hearing, Judge Trimble described Henderson as a *"thrifty, energetic farmer...we have always known him favorably, and cannot believe he is guilty of the charge, judging from the past conduct of the gentleman and from our knowledge of him."* Due to his age and reputation in the community, Mabry's senseless murder had created a sensation, with the Farmerville streets presenting *"quite an animated appearance"* and the courtroom *"densely crowded"* during the trial. Jack Melton turned state's evidence and testified against the others, claiming, *"Mr. Mabry was my best friend, and when I went there, I had no intention of harming him."* At the conclusion of the preliminary hearing, the court released Melton on a bond of \$150 to appear and testify at the trial in July. The court released Henderson on a bond of \$1000 and Ferguson on \$500. Judge Young remanded Skinner to jail without bond.

The District Court session in July lasted two weeks, causing bustle and excitement in Farmerville. Before the trial, the district attorney decided to not prosecute Melton and Ferguson, but he proceeded with murder charges against Henderson and Skinner. The state's only witness to Mabry's murder, Caroline Smiley, was a black woman, and despite her eyewitness testimony, this did not prove sufficient to convict white men of murder in that era. When the trial closed on Friday night, July 31st, the jury found Henderson and Skinner not guilty.

As a final epilogue to the Mabry murder and trial, on the night of Friday, 23 December 1887, an unknown assailant went to Calvin Skinner's residence and fired a shotgun loaded with buckshot into him, killing him instantly. Skinner's accomplices all left Shiloh soon after their trial, living out their lives elsewhere.

No one was ever charged with Skinner's murder, nor did the sheriff or governor issue any rewards for information. Law enforcement officials apparently believed that Skinner had received his just due.

