

Emerging Civil War

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“I aimed a bullet at his heart”

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The men filed out into an open field and formed a square with one opened end to it. A lone soldier slowly marched the length of the route and upon the completion of the circuit walked to a small stake in the middle. December 4, 1864. The day chosen for him to die. A dozen stepped forward, half with loaded rifles. Upon the command “Ready, Aim, Fire,” the twelve discharged their pieces, the man fell into his grave, and the soldiers filed back into their camps.

Joshua Stamey unwillingly joined the Confederate army on September 15, 1864. The forty-two year old miller preferred to stay in Burke County, North Carolina with his wife Fanny, four daughters, and a son. The Confederate government—a construct framed in the minds of the secessionists as one they built to protect the rights of individuals and their respective states—determined otherwise. To mend the losses from Grant’s unrelenting pressure on Richmond the Confederacy continued to actively conscript men throughout the south, especially the Carolinas, to protect their capital. The rights of the citizens the southern states seceded to protect appeared to fade as the overall strategic picture grew bleaker.

Stamey found himself conscripted as a private into Company D of the 11th North Carolina Infantry and forced to report to the front lines at Petersburg. Stamey’s service record show that he deserted to rejoin his family before the end of October but was caught in his escape. On November 23 a court-martial decided this reluctant participant in the Civil War should be shot. Few in his unit probably even knew of this soldier until they witnessed his execution. Only a lieutenant seemed to care much for the condemned, commenting on the Shetlands he raised in their shared home county.

“It was my sad lot to help shoot him,” remembered John C. Warlick who served on the firing squad, “I aimed a bullet at his heart.” The officers hoped these public executions would redouble the commitment of the remaining troops, but the coming months proved that many in the Army of Northern Virginia abandoned all hope that the Confederacy could prevail. Between February 15 and March 18, 1865, Robert E. Lee reported 2,934 desertions and undoubtedly the true number is even greater.

Whether Stamey’s death improved the discipline of his unit can only be speculated upon, but his stolen life proved to bolster the Union cause with at least one new recruit.

On January 25, 1865, Joshua's younger brother Martin enlisted into the Union army at Knoxville, Tennessee. The thirty-three year old farmer joined the 3rd North Carolina Mounted Infantry (Federal) and stayed with the unit until mustering out in August. Years later, while applying for a pension, Martin declared the motivation for his service against the southern government: "the Confederates murdered my brother Josh because he refused to fight for them. Josh was as good a boy as ever lived."