

The Murder of George E. Green

It was Christmas Day 1856 in Brentsville when a wagon driven by Constable B. F. Pattie and two guards arrived at the jail with a family of five people. Among the five were a grandmother, a mother, and three children. Earlier in the day all were charged with the murder of George E. Green. The sheriff fearing for the safety of the prisoners as well as security for the jail had deputized guards to make sure they would stand trial.

George Green was the owner of a 238 acre farm, about 16 miles NW of Brentsville at Haymarket. He was a farmer, school teacher and a slave owner. At the time of his death he was either fifty-three or fifty-four years old.

Nelly age about sixty was the oldest and the most outspoken of the three female and two male prisoners. She was a grandmother as well as the mother of Betsy. Betsy was the mother of the other accused, Jim her oldest son and her twins Elias and Ellen.

On Christmas Eve about 8 o'clock in the evening "one of George Tyler's women" came running to the house saying his neighbor George Green's house was on fire. He got a horse and started toward the burning house. He had only gone a short distance when he came onto Elias, one of the accused. He inquired of Elias, where is Mr. Green? Elias responded that he was in the house. He then ask why he could not get out of the house and the accused answered he didn't know. On arriving at the house he met up with Luther Lynn and "Gusty" Hutchison. Upon seeing the burned body of Mr. Green in the fire and talking among themselves for about an hour, they decided to go home and come back when it was light.

The next morning around 9 o'clock about 20 people showed at the crime scene and a jury of inquest was formed, with Dr. Ewell acting as Coroner. Members of the inquest agreed to question the slaves separately. Dr. Ewell asked Nelly to tell all she knew about the murder of Mr. Green. "She said they had done it", meaning the five prisoners. Nelly also said that he was a bad master and they were tired of living with him. She said the other four prisoners went into the house and caught him and she hit him with an axe. She then said the deceased got up and ran off out of the house, they pursued him with shovels, axe and sticks till they killed him. After killing him, they dragged him back put him in the house and set fire to it.

George Tyler, one of the inquest jurors, asked Elias how they came to kill their master. He said he was such a bad master they could not live with him and decided to kill him. The four, Betsy, Jim, Ellen and Elias, were to go in and tie him and Nelly was to come in and knock him in the head. Elias said when they went in to the house that Mr. Green was lying down before the fire. All four of them jumped on him and commenced tying him. They got him partially tied and Nelly came in and struck him with the axe. By some means he got loose and got axe from her and run out of the house. The five defendants finally caught up with him and after a very violent fight, they were able to overpower and kill him. They then dragged him back and put him in the shed room and set fire to the house.

Luther Lynn asked Elias & Nelly why they had killed their master. Nelly replied that he would not let them go to meetings, starved them and did not clothe them. Luther later testified in court that he examined the slave living quarters and found in their cabin two pieces of bacon, two spare ribs, some sausage meat, some lard, right smart sugar and coffee, probably twenty pounds of sugar, some molasses and tea. They were also well clothed and in fact he said he never saw a more comfortable Negro house. It was weather boarded and sealed inside, had two beds down stairs and two up stairs. There was also an unusual quantity of wearing apparel hanging up.

Jim was questioned in jail and said they wanted to be sold to another owner. They all agreed to go in the house and confront their master but were afraid to say anything about selling them until they took hold of him. Mr. Green always had his gun convenient where he could put his hand on it. If any noise occurred at night it was his

practice to go out and shoot low on the ground. He said it was not convenient for them to get in between where the gun was and Mr. Green. When they subdued and tied him up, they asked him to sell them. Mr. Green replied that he would refuse to sell them and added that they would all be hung for what they had done.

A Court of Oyer and Terminer was convened, for the trial of Nelly, Betsy, James, Elias and Ellen, Negro slaves the property of the late George E. Green. All were charged with having willfully deliberately and with malice aforethought, killed and murdered the said George E. Green, on the night of the 24th December 1856. Eppa Hunton Commonwealths Attorney appeared as counsel for the Commonwealth and the Court assigned Charles E. Sinclair Esq. as Counsel for the Prisoner Nelly; Douglass Tyler Esq. as counsel for the prisoner Betsy; Nathaniel Tyler Esq. as counsel for the prisoner James; J. M. Forbes Esq. as counsel for the prisoner Elias; and John P. Philips Esq. as counsel for the prisoner Ellen. Some of the inquest jurors testified at the trial to tell what was relayed to them and what they saw. They were all cross-examined but no record was found of any of the defendants testifying at the trial. The court after a short deliberation came back with a guilty sentence and all five were to be hung on Friday the Thirteenth of February 1857.

Many letters and petitions were written for and against the pardoning of Elias and Ellen the young twins. The most unusual of these petitions came from a medical student at the University of Virginia who wanted the bodies of all five condemned slaves turned over the university and would even come to Brentsville to get them. His argument for getting the bodies after the executions seems to be summed up by an excerpt from his letter – “anatomy without subjects for demonstration is fruitless as Geometry without diagrams & this is our case just now.”

The three older slaves, Nelly, Betsy and Jim were executed. Elias and Ellen the young twins were given a reprieve of the death penalty by Governor Wise, because of “their youth and feeble intellect.” Their punishment however was ordered to be “sale and transportation beyond the limits of the United States.”

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