

## **The Horrible Massacre at Shelton Laurel, North Carolina<sup>2</sup>**

THE next thing I have to relate is the horrible massacre at Shelton Laurel, North Carolina. The place where this dreadful slaughter occurred is located in Madison County, North Carolina, adjoining Washington and Greene Counties, in Tennessee, and my road, when I was traveling backward and forward to Knoxville, passed directly through it. This settlement lies between two large mountains, one of which is called Sugar-loaf, and the other one is called White-rock Mountain, and it is twenty-five miles from any place of trade; it is situated far out in the recesses of the mountains, and a beautiful valley it was before the dark and dismal cloud of rebellion arose up in our beloved and happy country. It was first settled by several old hunters, whose names were Shelton, Heusley, and Tweede; and in order to enjoy their favorite amusement of hunting to the fullest extent, they sought an abode in this remote and desolate mountainous region of country. The population in this valley had increased very rapidly; and before the rebellion there were between eighty and one hundred voters in the settlement, and all of them being strong Union men, they totally discountenanced the idea of enlisting in the rebel service. Shortly after the passage of the notorious conscript law by the rebel government, a heartless and blood-thirsty wretch, by the name of James Keith, came into this retired settlement with a small number of rebel soldiers, and told the citizens if they would submit to the authority of the Southern Confederacy and give up their arms they should never be troubled any more, and that they might go forward in the pursuit of their usual avocations without any farther molestation during the continuance of the war. This scoundrel, at the time of his first visit to this settlement, was occupying the position of a rebel colonel, and, consequently, the doomed citizens of this valley were the more easily circumvented by his lying tongue; doubtless thinking that a man who occupied such an elevated position in the rebel service could not possibly be so perfectly destitute of every feeling of humanity as he afterward proved himself to be.

On this occasion Keith succeeded, by his persuasive and false promises, to induce forty of these hard mountaineers to come to his encampment and deliver up their old rifles; these unfortunate men were immediately put into an old house, and a strong guard stationed around them, where they remained until he had enticed all the unsuspecting men to enter his trap that he possibly could, and then started with them to Ashville, North Carolina, where they were confined in a gloomy prison-house until a number of them were released from their miserable bondage by the hand of death, and the balance of them enlisted in the rebel army, from which they afterward deserted and made their way to the Federal lines.

On the 19th of January, 1863, Keith made another visit to this section of country for the purpose of hunting conscripts, accompanied by some four or five hundred rebel soldiers, and Samuel E. Irving, who lives in Washington County, near the red banks of Chucky River, was one of his officers. He now ordered his men to kill all the men and boys they might capture, and his companion in wickedness and infamy, Samuel E. Irving, at once sanctioned the terrible order, saying that "it was right to kill all the boys, in order to prevent them from growing up to be Federal soldiers and bushwhackers for the Southern soldiers to have to fight." These reckless fiends soon succeeded in capturing seven men

---

<sup>2</sup> Ellis, Daniel; *Thrilling Adventures of Daniel Ellis*, Chapter XLVII, Harper & Brothers, 1867

## Incidents at Shelton-Laurel, N.C.



HORRIBLE SCENES DURING THE REBELLION.

and six boys, and some of these men were far beyond the age which the conscript law had designated for the performance of military service, and, besides all this, they were not captured while scouting in the mountains, but they were arrested while they were engaged in their peaceful domestic employments.

These prisoners were retained in custody for three days, subjected to the insults and foul abuse of their rebel captors, and then Keith informed them that he was going to send them to Knoxville. When they started with their prisoners through the mountains, one of the little boys said to his father, "They are taking us a near way to Knoxville, are they not?" His father replied, "My son, they are going to kill us." The little, trembling captive then said, "Oh, father, surely they are not going to kill us; these men have been raised in a Christian land, and I hope they have better hearts than to murder us without any provocation!" This poor little innocent boy did not know that human feeling and human sympathy had been expelled from the hearts of his oppressors. Ah! little did he think that the young flower of his existence was doomed to be so early blighted by the cold and chilling frost of death!

The rebels marched their prisoners along the main road for a distance of three miles, and then turned up a hollow and went to a sinkhole about three hundred yards from the main road, where they stopped. They now told their prisoners that they might have ten minutes to pray, and, when the time had expired, they at once tied the poor men two and two together, placed them in a line to shoot them, and pulled their hats down over their eyes. They were now ordered to kneel down, and all of them obeyed the order, with the exception of David Shelton, who, when the order was given for him to kneel, indignantly replied, "I would kneel to my God, but I shall not kneel to devils!" The shooting now began, and thirteen men and boys were recklessly and brutally murdered by this inhuman

## Incidents at Shelton-Laurel, N.C.

gang of rebel desperadoes.

One of the little boys, when his turn came to be shot, said to the rebel murderers, "Oh, do not shoot me in my forehead, for I do not wish my blood to spoil these little curls, which my dear mother has combed and kissed so often, while she called me her darling boy." One of the fiends now shot him in the breast, but the ball failed to kill him; he crawled toward his murderers, begging them in the most piteous and heart-rending manner to have mercy on him, and to spare his life. Keith now ordered them to fire again, and several of them shot at him, but none of them hit him, for they declared that, when they presented their guns, they became so blind they could not see the little boy. Keith, with his black heart inflated to the utmost extent, with devilish malignity drew out his pistol, stepped toward him, and shot him in the head, holding the pistol so close that the very curls were burned off, which the little boy, in the simplicity of childish innocence, so earnestly desired to save from destruction. Oh, how can the miserable wretch who perpetrated this flagrant outrage expect to escape the frowns of the Almighty in this world, and also in the world to come! If he has succeeded in escaping from the measure of punishment which his monstrous crimes in this world so richly merit, he may rest assured that he will meet with his just reward when death shall have terminated his earthly existence, and transferred his guilty soul into the awful presence of the great Eternal, whose infinite mind can alone comprehend the infinitude of eternity. Truly has it been said by an eminent poet, that

"Man, proud man, dressed in a little brief authority,  
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven's throne  
That make the angels weep."

And the truth of this sentiment is most admirably verified in the conduct of Keith on this occasion ; for, during the period of his "brief authority," he perpetrated numerous crimes, sufficient in atrocity not only to excite the tears of pitying angels, but also to cause the whole angelic host to plead with all their eloquence for his vile name to be erased from the everlasting records of heaven, and for his soul to be cast into the dismal lake which burns with fire and brimstone, where there shall forever be " weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth."

While several of the men and boys who were murdered on this occasion were struggling in the last agonies of death, one of the rebel demons in human shape, who was armed with a hoe instead of a gun, would chop them on their heads with it, saying, "I never saw men so hard to kill." And, before they had ceased to struggle, the rebel soldiers began to throw them into the sinkhole, where they piled them up in a promiscuous heap, and covered them over with leaves. Some of the poor men who had not yet expired convulsively stretched out their feet from beneath the covering of the leaves, at which time some of the murderers would say, "Lay still, you old Lincolnite!" while others would say, "Where is the man with the hoe?" At this suggestion, the hardened wretch, true to the instincts of his vile nature, coolly walked up and commenced chopping with his hoe on the heads and the legs of the slaughtered victims; and my informant, who was an eye-witness, and one of the party, told me that, when the unfeeling monster discontinued his bloody work, the hoe was completely covered with the blood and brains of the murdered men and boys!

The dead bodies remained in the sinkhole for three weeks, and they were then taken out for the purpose of being more decently interred. The hogs had mangled them in a

## Incidents at Shelton-Laurel, N.C.

shocking manner, and they would have devoured them entirely, had not the people in the neighborhood put them up in order to prevent such a dreadful result. The frightened citizens were afraid to remove the bodies of the murdered victims until the rebel Jupiter, in the person of the villain Keith, gave his permission for them to have the rites of burial. It was during the season of winter, and the weather was very cold when this massacre occurred; but notwithstanding, when a few weeping mourners went to remove the bodies of their murdered relatives and friends, they found that all their joints and limbs were as flexible and pliant as if the warm blood of life was still coursing through their veins. This occasioned a great deal of astonishment; and it was certainly a very remarkable phenomenon in natural science to witness the life-like appearance of these dead bodies after they had been reposing in the cold and icy arms of death for a period of three weeks. And now the terrible fate which was meted out to the wives and mothers of these poor men and boys remains to be related. They had followed on after the rebel murderers to learn the fate of their sons and husbands, and after the massacre was accomplished, they were then caught by the rebels. Some of these poor defenseless women were then stripped of their clothing, they were tied up, and their naked backs were lashed until the blood trickled down to their feet, while the balance of them were hung up by the neck until they were nearly dead. They were then taken down, and their tormentors then left them tied until their feet and hands were frozen to such a degree that their nails all came off.

When the wives and mothers of these murdered men and boys approached the demon Keith to request him that they might be permitted to remove the dead bodies, so that they might bestow upon them the last sad rites of burial, he spoke to them in a very angry manner, saying, "You may go and remove the bodies, but you shall not put them in coffins nor in boxes." They then asked him if they might wrap them in blankets before they committed them to the cold embrace of the grave. He answered them in a very peremptory manner, "No, you shall not take a single blanket to wrap one of them in, for I want all the blankets I can get for my soldiers."

The poor women, with their heads bowed down with sorrow and grief, went on to engage in their melancholy task, followed by two degraded and brutal rebel soldiers, one of whom called himself Doctor Roberts, and the other villain passed under the name of Williams. And while the women were removing the mangled bodies of the murdered men and boys, these two rebel barbarians employed themselves in singing indecent and unbecoming songs; they also told the women that, if they pretended to shed a tear, they would run their bayonets through them. Some of the women fainted while they were engaged in this dreadful task.

The following are the names of the men and boys who were murdered on this occasion by the black-hearted Keith and his reckless outlaws : James Shelton, David Shelton, Azariah Shelton, William Chandler, Wade H. Moore (fifty-four years of age), Roderick Shelton, David Shelton, Jr., James Shelton, Jr., William Shelton, Joseph Woods, Allison King, Halen Moore, and James Metcalfe.

The following are the names of the women who were hung up by their necks until they were nearly dead by these merciless scoundrels: Mrs. Riddle, who was seventy years of age ; Mrs. Moore, who was fifty-four years of age ; Nancy Hall, and Nancy Shelton. After Keith and his band of murderers had almost entirely ruined the people of Shelton Laurel, he left the country ; and I have been informed by a number of the citizens who

## Incidents at Shelton-Laurel, N.C.

reside in that neighborhood that the next rebel destroyer that visited that doomed section of country was the redoubtable General Alfred E. Jackson, or General "Mudwall" Jackson, which is the title under which he was generally known during his military career in the rebellion. In his expedition to this section of country he was accompanied by his son, who passed under the appellation of Captain Jackson. When Jackson arrived, he ordered eight or ten families to be moved into one house, and in this way he had nearly all the houses vacated, with the exception of a few which contained the women and children, and these he had closely guarded. He ordered all the vacant houses to be burned to ashes, and he also gave orders for all the stock in the country to be destroyed. He adopted this method, he said, in order to starve the Union men out of the mountains, so that they would be compelled to come in and join the Confederate army. It was now February, the snow was deep, and the weather was extremely cold.

The rebel soldiers would build up large fires out of fence-rails, and lay around them, while the shivering women and children in the houses were not permitted to have any fire at all. Sometimes the little children would go to the fires where the rebel soldiers were, to warm their aching hands and feet; the rebels would then compel them to stand so close to the burning flames that the little innocent creatures would scream out in severe agony of suffering; and, when their mothers would approach to rescue them, the rebels would present their pistols, and tell them, if they attempted to relieve their children, they would blow a ball through them. The poor women would therefore be compelled to stand and witness the dreadful suffering and the cruel torture of their children without being able to afford them any relief, while the rebel miscreants would laugh loudly, and exhibit the utmost demonstrations of delight at the shocking and savage spectacle which the suffering children presented when the hot flames of fire were burning their tender flesh. The women and children suffered greatly for something to eat, for the rebels devoured all their provisions. At times, while the rebel soldiers would be cooking and eating, the poor little famished children would softly approach them and beg for a piece of bread; but they would receive an abrupt denial, and the rebel scoundrels would say to them, "You must do without bread, or else you must go to Old Abe for it ; we want all that we have for ourselves!" Very frequently it occurred that, for a whole day together, these poor women and children could not obtain any thing at all to eat.

This gang of rebel soldiers remained in this neighborhood for eighteen or twenty days, and then returned to Greenville. After all their active operations, they only succeeded in murdering one man. But before leaving they went to the house of a poor widow by the name of Lucinda Carter, and killed fourteen hogs, and laid them in a pile on the floor of her dwelling-house ; they then killed her house-dog, and laid it on the top of the pile of hogs. They arrested several women, and took them on to Greenville with them, where they were detained for several days, subjected to gross abuse and indignity, while their little children remained at their gloomy and desolate homes, suffering all the terrible afflictions which cold and hunger could produce.

Shelton Laurel having now been thoroughly ravaged and despoiled of all its internal resources, the people who resided there were consequently in a dreadful extremity, for nearly all of their humble habitations were burned to the ground, the grain and stock were all destroyed, and many poor families were left in a perfect state of starvation.

After Jackson left this section of country in the winter of 1863, the notorious Colonel James Keith, Captain William Keith, and Riley Keith, were detailed in the fall of the

## Incidents at Shelton-Laurel, N.C.

same year to hunt for conscripts in the mountains of North Carolina, and also in the adjoining counties in the State of Tennessee. These scoundrels visited Shelton Laurel again in the month of September, and burned a number of houses belonging to Union men. They murdered John Metcalfe by shooting him in the head and running their bayonets through him six times. They also murdered Robert Hare by shooting him three times. Their next victim was Marion Franklin. He was plowing in the field, perfectly unconscious of his dreadful doom, when one of the rebel outlaws walked up to the fence and shot him in the hip. When the ball struck him, he ran to a large stump which was surrounded with bushes and laid down ; there he remained for a short time, writhing and groaning with severe agony of pain, until his murderers came up, and relieved him from his misery by shooting him in the breast.

These infamous murderers went coolly and calmly along in their horrible work of destruction and death. The next victims who had the misfortune of falling into their hands were Tilman Landers, Absalom Brucks, and a little boy, all of whom they caught at Mrs. Ruth Shelton's stable, and were unceremoniously murdered on the spot. They caught David Shelton at his house, and hung him until he was dead, and then dragged him to a laurel thicket, where they covered him over with leaves. A few women afterward removed his body, and gave it a more humane burial. In the month of July, 1864, these rebel demons caught five more men in Shelton Laurel, and murdered all of them in a most shocking and barbarous manner. The five men whom they murdered on this occasion were Isaac Shelton, Hampton Burget, old David Shelton, William Shelton, Jr., and William Fillmore, making, in all, forty-seven men and boys who were brutally murdered by Keith and his vile assassins at different times during the progress of the iniquitous rebellion. The reader will doubtless think that this depraved scoundrel run the conscript law with a vengeance. Oh, what a terrible record this will be for him to meet with in eternity, where he will have to appear before the great Omnipotent Judge of the universe, confronted by forty-seven immortal souls, who by him, and through his instrumentality, were deprived of their earthly existence, and suddenly hurled into the eternal world! The awful groans of his murdered victims will surely haunt him while he lives in the world, plant thorns upon his death-bed, and, when he sinks down into the dismal regions of everlasting despair, they will forever afford a keen torture to his guilty and never-dying soul. When he was engaged in his abominable work of murdering his fellow-men, he doubtless forgot to remember that

"There's a divinity that shapes our ends, Rough hew them as we may;"

and when he shall have been summoned to appear before the inflexible bar of the infinite Jehovah, where he will meet his murdered victims face to face, and when they shall severally arise and reproach him with the awful crime of murder, he will then stand, like a convicted criminal, trembling beneath his oppressive load of guilt; and the only response which he will then be able to make to the dreadful accusations of his accusers will be, guilty ! guilty!! guilty!!!

**This is a partial document.**

**The full document may be found at:**

**<http://www.pddoc.com/skedaddle/events/shelton-laurel.htm>**