

The Palmyra Massacre

By Kathy Stam Penn

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In recent years, as a nation, we have begun to question the presence of Confederate memorials in public squares throughout the South. These are usually of southern generals and I understand the reasons people of today might want these statues removed. But there is one memorial that has the names of two of my ancestors who were "Confederate sympathizers". It stands in front of the Marion County Court House in Palmyra, Missouri. It is made of granite with a life-sized soldier on top. On the face is inscribed the names of ten men. One is Willis J. Baker and the other, Hiram F. Smith.



I first visited Palmyra in the northeastern part of the Missouri in 1970. My sister and I accompanied our father to a Stam family reunion at the American Legion park in Watseka, Illinois, and on that trip traveled to Marion County, Missouri and visited this memorial in front of the Palmyra Courthouse and learned the following story from my mother's cousin, Leland Smith of Nashville, Tennessee. During the Civil War, under the command of General John McNeil, the Union forces quickly occupied the northeastern part of the state of Missouri. The occupied area was a hotbed of rebellion and quickly put under martial law. In the summer of 1862, President Abraham Lincoln sent out General Order 19 that required all able-bodied men in Missouri to serve in the Union Army. This was a deep cut to all of the Southerners who had moved into this part of the country. It made outlaws of all of the young men who refused service to the Union Army. It increased the already great tension between neighbors.

Colonel Joseph C. Porter of Lewis Co, Missouri, was an officer in the "Missouri Home Guard" of irregular guerrilla troops of Southern sympathies. They staged skirmishes throughout the state, living off the land and the loyalties of other Southerners sympathizers. In the fall of 1862, Porter and his forces entered the town of Palmyra, stormed the garrison, occupied the town for a couple of hours, and took as hostage, Andrew Allsman, a sixty-year-old carpenter who acted as a spy for the Union forces. Porter later released Allsman in the woods, knowing he would be killed. His body was never found.

In response, General McNeil ordered that ten local farmers, all known Southern sympathizers, be arrested and held hostage for the return of the body of Allsman. My great-great-great-grandfather, Willis Baker, was on the list. The first of this line of the Baker family in America was Martin Baker, a merchant from Plymouth, England, who came in the early 1600s to Virginia. Over the generations, his family resided in New Kent, Hanover, Chesterfield, and Charlotte counties, Virginia. After the Revolution, Martin Baker of Charlotte County, received a military warrant, took up a patent, and was an early settler in Kentucky. He arrived in 1787, with his young family, after a thrill ride on a flatboat down the Ohio river.

Martin Baker died in 1812 in Nicholas Co, Kentucky. His son, John, born in Virginia, left Kentucky in 1837 and moved his family to Northeast Missouri, following the migration of Daniel Boone and many other Kentuckians. The Bakers had been tobacco farmers and slave holders in Virginia and Kentucky, but the climate of Missouri required they grow corn. John Baker became a judge in Lewis County, Missouri, and raised his family there. He died in 1850. His oldest son, Willis J. Baker, my great-great-great-grandfather is the subject of our story.

The early days of the Civil War were not civil in Northeast Missouri. Until that time, the Southerners occupied the upper class. They had land, money and slaves. The newcomers were resentful. Ezekiel Pratt and his wife were abolitionists from New England and their sympathies were with the Union forces. Under martial law Southern sympathizers were not allowed to own guns. Northerners were encouraged to form themselves into groups to disarm the Southerners. The Southerners were quickly impoverished as the Union Army requisitioned their guns, horses, saddles, cattle, pork and grain. Frustrations were growing as food became scarce and one couldn't even shoot a squirrel to eat.

On July 8, 1862, Ezekiel Pratt came to the Baker home while the men were away. He ignored the protests of Willis's wife, Henrietta, and took a gun that belonged to Willis's son, Ambrose. Sixteen-year-old Ambrose suffered from a withering of his right arm and leg, but was a crack shot. When Willis and his sons came home and discovered the theft, oldest son, John A. Baker, went to the Pratt home, searched for the gun, terrorized Mrs. Pratt, and beat up a protesting hired man.

The next day, Pratt appeared, approaching the Baker farm with two other men, acting as seconds. John A. Baker, grabbed another gun and pistol and ran to meet them. Willis, and Henrietta, now hysterical, were witnesses from the porch. A few delicate words were exchanged and the men approached each other as duelists. Pratt shot

first, missed, jumped from his horse and jabbed his fixed bayonet into John's leg. John shot and wounded Pratt. The seconds fled. John put Pratt on a sled and drove him to a neighbor's house to be tended. He died from his wounds and was left on the road.

John Baker may have gone to his brother Edmund's home to have his stab wound tended. He then disappears from history. Edmund Baker was my great-great-grandfather. Union forces arrived on the 30th of September, and arrested Willis Baker and charged him with the death of Ezekiel Pratt and threw him into the jail at Palmyra.

Edmund Baker's wife, Anna Mariah Smith had a brother, Hiram. They and their other siblings were orphaned when, after their mother died in 1844, their father headed for the gold fields of California in 1849, leaving them with family. He wrote one letter home and was never heard from again. Hiram Smith was supposed to be a seminary student at the time of these events but there is no proof of it.

Meanwhile, back in Palmyra, one of the other Southerners arrested as hostages for the missing man, Allsman, was a young man named William Humphrey with a wife and small children. His lovely wife, with a little girl in tow, went to the Provost Marshall's office and begged the Provost Marshall, William Strachan, to release her husband. Strahan put the little girl outside his office. Others noticed this small child crying outside while he had his way with the mother. He did release her husband, but then he had only nine hostages. He walked into the jail, saw Hiram Smith praying with his sister's father-in-law, Willis Baker, and told Smith he would be the replacement.

On October 18, 1862, the ten men were taken out to the fair grounds and executed by firing squad.

Willis Baker and Hiram Smith died that day. Henrietta, Willis's wife lived until 1875 without her senses. John A. Baker, a bushwhacker, may have joined the guerrillas and died a several years later as an outlaw. Edmund is supposed to have joined the Confederate forces and fought in battles in Missouri, but the research is difficult to verify. Edmund and his wife Anna, moved to Carroll County, Missouri, for a while but finally settled in Southwest Kansas where they raised their family of thirteen children and remained for the rest of their lives. Edmund was a horse doctor living about twelve miles from Indian Territory. The



EDMUND AND ANNA MARIAH BAKER

Osage Indians were frequent customers as were the Dalton gang and other outlaws who were old friends of the Bakers from Missouri, hiding out in the Indian Territory.

The story of the Palmyra Massacre is not well known because it brings shame to the Union Army and the North who were the victors. You only find out about it if you go looking for it. So, what about this memorial? I don't have any emotional attachment to this story; it is so long ago. And because, at the same time in Kansas, another story is to be told about another of my great-grandfathers, an abolitionist. I figure if this memorial to the Palmyra victims brings angst to anyone's heart its destruction may be considered, but from where else would we know this story?

This story is culled from Leland Smith's The Baker's Gone Ahead second edition. Self-published. Cherry Tree Publishers, Nashville, 1999.