

## The Assassination of Captain Watkins

By 1861 most white residents of the South River were pro-slavery secessionists who at least sympathized with the Confederacy, but there is one notable exception. Thomas H. Watkins served in the cavalry contingent of the Purnell Legion, a loosely organized collection of pro-Union Maryland cavalry, artillery, and infantry companies. Watkins mustered in as a Captain, commanding Company B, on September 20, 1861.<sup>1</sup> The Watkins family were outspoken about their unionist sympathies. His father, Dr. Benjamin Watkins, was elected to attend the Union State Convention in 1864, where the delegates voted their support for the North's war effort.<sup>2</sup>



Captain Thomas Watkins' pocket revolver, [The Horse Soldier collection](#)

The Union army besieged Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia at Petersburg in 1864, and both sides settled into trench warfare. Among General Grant's forces was the Purnell Legion and the 39<sup>th</sup> United States Colored Troops.

Captain Thomas Watkins and his Company B cavalry troopers were dismounted and armed as infantry to fill the trenches around Petersburg.<sup>3</sup> Serving in V Corps, 2<sup>nd</sup> Division, Watkins and his men took part in continuous assaults on the Confederate lines. Watkins may not have known that a fellow South River resident, Corporal James H. Dorsey, was in the trenches with the 39<sup>th</sup> United State Colored Troops, assigned to IX Corps, 4<sup>th</sup> Division.

<sup>1</sup> Maryland State Archives, *History and Roster of Maryland Volunteers, War of 1861-6, Volume 1*, Archives of Maryland Online, Volume 367, page 785, accessed December 12, 2017, <<http://aomol.msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc2900/sc2908/000001/000367/html/am367--785.html>>.

<sup>2</sup> "Union County Convention," *Baltimore Sun*, February 18, 1864, page 1.

<sup>3</sup> "Patriotic," *The Cecil Whig*, June 11, 1864, page 2.



Unidentified soldier of Purnell's Legion, [Pennsylvania Civil War Soldiers and Their Uniforms](#)

Watkins' and Dorsey's paths crossed at the Battle of Globe Tavern. General Grant sought to cut railroad links between Petersburg and the outside world. Globe Tavern sat along the vital Wheldon Railroad, which ran to the only major seaport still in Confederate hands: Wilmington, North Carolina. The V Corps, including Captain Watkins, was ordered to seize and destroy the line. The Confederates launched a heavy assault against the Union forces, led by Heath's Division. Among Heath's rebel soldiers was Watkins' neighbor Daniel Duvall, serving as a private in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Maryland. In the melee Captain Watkins took a wound to the scalp.<sup>4</sup> Private Duvall was also wounded in the left temple.<sup>5</sup>

Badly mauled, the V Corps was reinforced overnight by the IX Corps, including Corporal Dorsey. He and his fellow African American soldiers shouldered their Springfield rifles fought for two more days

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<sup>4</sup> *The Weekly National Intelligencer*, August 25, 1864, page 2; *Baltimore Sun*, September 15, 1864, page 4;

<sup>5</sup> "Daniel Duvall," 2<sup>nd</sup> Maryland Battalion Muster Roll, September and October, 1864; Register of Chimborazo Hospital, No. 2, Richmond, Virginia.

over the rails leading into Petersburg.<sup>6</sup> I can't help but wonder if the wounded captain staggered or was carried past the corporal as Dorsey headed into the fray.

Watkins was evacuated to Philadelphia on the steamer *Augusta* with several other wounded Maryland officers, where he was treated at McClellan Hospital. A largely recuperated Captain Watkins returned to the South River that Fall.<sup>7</sup>

Peace for Watkins was fleeting. During his recuperation, he had an altercation with a Confederate spy, guerilla fighter, and horse thief named John H. Boyle. Boyle had served under General George H. Steuart at Gettysburg, even earning a commendation in his fellow Marylander's official report: "I am greatly indebted for valuable assistance rendered, and of whose gallant bearing I cannot too highly make mention."<sup>8</sup>

By the time Boyle made his way back to the South River, he was a mere horse thief, operating under the thin veil of the Confederate cause to justify his crimes. Captured by Watkins after a chase, Boyle slipped his bonds and attacked Watkins, nearly killing him. Watkins was carried to his father's home for recovery.<sup>9</sup> Though he made a clean escape, Boyle pursued a vendetta against the prominent Unionist, sending Watkins death threats. While stewing over his hatred of Watkins, Boyle became entangled with John Wilkes Booth and his fellow conspirators in their designs on Abraham Lincoln that would ultimately culminate in the assassination of the president. In his confession George Atzerodt named Boyle as one of the conspirators, and Dr. Samuel Mudd, who treated John Wilkes Booth's broken leg in the wake of the assassination believed that Boyle was one of the assassins.<sup>10</sup> Part of Dr. Mudd's defense was his "fears of the vengeance of that desperado."<sup>11</sup>

Six months after Boyle's escape, while Watkins sat by his hearth with a newspaper, Boyle burst into his home with a gang of partisans and shot him dead. The gang then fired at both Watkins' wife or sister, and a doctor who had come to check on Watkins' four-month-old child before making their escape.<sup>12</sup> Boyle was later captured in Frederick, coincidentally on the day Lincoln died.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> "39<sup>th</sup> USCT," *The Siege of Petersburg Online*, accessed December 15, 2017, <<http://www.beyondthecrater.com/resources/units/union-u/union-inf/us-vol-inf/039th-usct-infantry/#fn-24576-5>>.

<sup>7</sup> *Baltimore Sun*, August 27, 1864, page 2; November 27, 1864, page 4

<sup>8</sup> Report of Brigadier-General George H. Steuart, Gettysburg," in *Southern Historical Society Papers, Volume 8*, ed. Reverend J. William Jones, Tufts University, accessed December 15, 2017, <<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:2001.05.0121:chapter=3.26>>.

<sup>9</sup> John Bakeless, *Spies of the Confederacy*, Dover: New York, 2011, page 89; "Serious Injury of Captain Watkins," *Baltimore Sun*, September 15, 1864, page 4.

<sup>10</sup> Professor Douglas O. Linder, "Trial of the Lincoln Assassination Conspirators, 1865: George Atzerodt's Confession," *Famous American Trials*, University of Missouri Kansas City Law School, 2002, accessed July 28, 2017, <<http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/lincolnconspiracy/atzerodtconf.html>>; John Davidson Lawson, *American State Trials: A Collection of the Important and Interesting Criminal Trials which Have Taken Place in the United States*, Volume 8, F.H. Thomas Law Book Co., St. Louis, 1917, page 486.

<sup>11</sup> Lawson, *American State Trials*, page 486.

<sup>12</sup> *Alexandria Gazette*, March 28, 1865, page 3; "The Murder of Captain T. H. Watkins," *Baltimore Sun*, April 1, 1865, page 1;

<sup>13</sup> "Correspondence of the Baltimore Sun," *Baltimore Sun*, April 19, 1865, page 4.

Watkins' murderer John Boyle was pardoned for "war-related activities."<sup>14</sup> Boyle escaped further justice until an unknown vigilante caught up with him some fifteen years later, killing him in Tougaloo, Mississippi.<sup>15</sup> It was speculated at the time that Boyle's violent death was "just retribution" the assassination of Watkins.<sup>16</sup> When called in to investigate, the famous detective Allan Pinkerton said Boyle was "one of the worst men he ever knew...He regards his death as a good riddance."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Cathy Randall, "Alexander's first assignment as Maryland's Attorney General, 1865," *Alexander Randall Diary Excerpts*, accessed July 27, 2017, <<http://cathyrandall.tumblr.com/post/80716954709/alexanders-first-assignment-as-marylands>>.

<sup>15</sup> *The Comet*, June 26, 1880, page 3.

<sup>16</sup> *Baltimore Sun*, July 3, 1880, page 3.

<sup>17</sup> *The Comet*, August