

The Attack on Union Scout William Huddleston

William Huddleston was deposed on 1 February 1865 to describe the events he experienced and witnessed three months earlier, on 1 November 1864. That deposition has been edited for clarity and length.

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“I am forty-seven years of age. Was born a slave and held as such up to the time the Federal forces occupied Middle Tennessee. As soon as the Federal forces came, I went with General Davidson as servant. Have been connected with the Federal army . . . from the time I first went with General Davidson up to the present. Have served in the capacity of guide for [Federal] scouts.”

Huddleston, his wife, and their child were awakened just after daybreak on 1 November to find their Winchester, Tennessee, house surrounded by guerrillas. The bushwhackers forced him outside, removed the leather saddle girth from one of their horses, formed a ring, and began to beat Huddleston on his bare back. Most of the lashes were administered by the guerrilla commander, Major Hays, a Confederate deserter who had returned to the area to settle old scores, steal, and kill those civilians who opposed his power. The Union army, while garrisoned in nearby Decherd and winning the larger war, was unable to fully control the local area or capture Hays and his men. But lately the U.S. command had begun to counter Hays’s power, and with Huddleston to guide their forces, they might yet capture the guerrilla leader or defeat his followers. This potential threat is what brought the bushwhackers to Huddleston’s door on November 1st. They were determined to make an example of him to anyone who considered aiding the occupation forces, and they would prevent the ex-slave from guiding any further forays by Union troops.

By the time Hays finished beating Huddleston, hundreds of blows later, the freedman was unable to stand: “they then let me rest on my hands and knees for a few moments. . . My back was burning.” Huddleston recalled “there was no effort made by any of the citizens to stop it, although there were quite a number on the street.” In fact, he observed three young women putting “biscuits and sweet cakes in the haversacks” of the guerrillas and saying “hurray for our men” as he was led off. No one did anything to oppose Hays and his men, Huddleston explained, “although they saw me and were perfectly cognizant of the horrible barbarity.”

Then Major Hays was ready to leave. The prisoner was placed under the control of another Confederate deserter, Captain Samuel Nance, who decided to take this opportunity to make a visit to his older sister and her neighbors in Winchester. Before departing, Nance ordered fellow-guerrilla Willis Taylor to gather four men and take Huddleston to a location outside of town. Nance later returned from his social call to

make sure Taylor understood his assignment: “take to the Mountain, boys, and dispose of him.”

Huddleston recalled: “When we reached the Mountain, [Taylor] says ‘this is far enough.’ Then, speaking to me, he says ‘now you God damned son of a bitch, if you have anything to say, say it now. You have two minutes to live.’ I asked him if two minutes was all. He answered, ‘yes, by God, it is.’ I then said, ‘Well, crack away when you get ready.’ I was standing on the ground on the lower side of the hill and Taylor was sitting on his horse on the upper side. As soon as I said, ‘crack away,’ he fired, the ball striking me just above the right corner of the right eye. . . , forcing the eyeball out on the cheek, where it hung by the membranes surrounding it. The ball ranged downward, passing through the roof of my mouth, destroying my palate and lodging just against the skin on the left side, so close to the jugular vein that it could not be cut out, [and] where it now is [lodged]. As soon as the pistol was fired, I fell forward and partially raised myself on the left side, but thinking they might fire again, I fell forward again as though dead. One of the four then dismounted and struck me twice on top of the head with the butt of his gun, and once atop the face. They then rode rode their horses on me as I lay on the ground, the [circles] of the horseshoes leaving their imprint on my person, which is still visible. They then rode off and left me for dead.”

Somehow, he survived. He lay there unconscious for a time. Awakening, “I could not see at all, the blood from my wounds had clotted in my left eye, so I could not open it. I had heavy whiskers, and from the hair of my head to my whiskers was a mess of clotted blood so thick that when I was [eventually] treated, they had to cut off my whiskers. I remembered passing a flat rock which had a hollow in it filled with water, and as I was suffering for want of water, began to crawl around hunting for it. After crawling round over the rocks and cliffs, I found myself on level ground in woods. I crawled on for some time when I heard men talking. Fearing they were Guerrillas, I crawled under some brush . . . and lay still until I could no longer distinguish voices. I then crawled off until I came to a fence. I pulled myself up by the fence and crawled into the field. . . as I released by hold on the fence I pitched forward on my face. I then crawled through the field, over and through briars, and into the woods again. After I had crawled for some distance, I hears someone chopping with a small ax or hatchet. Knowing that the guerrillas could not be chopping, I called to them.”

The woodchopper, H. R. Shores, heard his call and came to Huddleston. As Shores approached, Huddleston begged to be put out of his misery: “please knock me in the head,” he asked. Shores, a prewar slaveholder, instead called to a man nearby, “Joe, in the name of God come here. Here is that poor black man those thieving scoundrels took by here this morning, with his head half shot off but living.” According to Huddleston, “I again asked him to knock me in the head.” Shores refused to kill him. Daring to hope for help, Huddleston “asked him if he could take care of me.” But Shores refused to do this, too, explaining that his eleven-year-old son had been accused of reporting bushwhackers, and the guerrillas had threatened to shoot him. Shores and Joe then “took me and laid me in the road and told me that was the straight road to

Winchester. I asked which way it was and they said, 'your head is lying straight toward Winchester.'"

Huddleston "then crawled off in the direction indicated until I came to a plank fence. I felt along the fence until I found a gate. I shook the gate and called and asked them to please let me come in and warm and lie down." An unknown woman came out. She refused him shelter or aid, explaining "the bushwhackers would find it out and burn her house." Huddleston lay there for a while, then "asked her to allow me to crawl round the back part of the house and hide, as I was afraid the Bushwhackers would come down the road and find me and kill me." She replied, "I cannot help that, and I would rather you get away from my gate." Huddleston crawled away.

"After crawling some considerable distance, a man passed me in a buggy. I called to him and asked if he would please to take me to Winchester. He replied that he would not, as the Guerrillas would think he was taking sides with the Yankees and destroy his property." Huddleston crawled a bit farther, then passed out beside the road.

He was lying beside another fence. A woman came outside and, fortunately, recognized him, "William, in the name of God, is that you?" He confirmed his identity, but had to ask hers. "She replied, 'it is Mrs. McGee, don't you know me?'" She left briefly, called to a neighbor (Baldie Henderson), and they returned. She said to Henderson, "Look, in the name of God Almighty, how that poor man is abused." Henderson replied, "Yes, it is awful that our country is going on at such a rate." Mrs. McGee spoke with Henderson, emphasizing "that I must be taken care of and sent to Decherd or Winchester, and asked if he would not assist." For the first time, Huddleston had grounds for hope, especially when Henderson remarked that "he had some property, but would assist, let it cost what it would." Finally, Huddleston encountered two people who were not cowed by the bushwhackers.

About that time, a man came along in a buggy. His name was Hosea Green. When Baldie Henderson asked if Green would take Huddleston to a doctor in town, his reply was familiar: "he replied he would not, as they would blame him for taking sides with the Yankees, and destroy" his property. Then, Mrs. Green asked "if he had no human feeling, to let a man lay there and die like a hog in the road. He replied, he had human feelings, but did not want his property destroyed. Mrs. Green then replied, she wished to God she was a man, she would have that buggy." Perhaps shamed by her declaration, Baldie Henderson came up with a compromise that might get Bill Huddleston to a doctor and save Hosea Green's reputation and property. Henderson's brother, Mark, was willing to drive Huddleston to town in the buggy. The Hendersons would place the injured man with a doctor and leave immediately. If Green's horse or buggy were recognized, the fearful farmer could claim they had been stolen from him, and that he did not know who had saved Huddleston.

"They drove me to Winchester and took me out of the buggy and laid me on the sidewalk in front of the house in which I lived," Huddleston summarized. Soon, Dr. J.

C. Shapard “saw me, volunteered his services, had me removed to the house and dressed my wounds, and attended upon me regularly, until I was removed to Decherd by orders of Thomas Wood, Special Agent, in order to avoid being killed by the Guerrillas, as they had sent word they was coming there to kill me.” Another doctor took charge of Huddleston in Decherd, and tended his wounds until he was able to move about, roughly two months later. In his deposition, Huddleston named a variety of Union soldiers and support personnel who aided him in his recovery period, often giving or loaning him money.

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Source: Union Provost Marshal file of individual citizens, C345, roll 135; transcribed and reprinted in Franklin County Historical Society, *The War of 1861-1865: A Franklin County Perspective* (Winchester, TN, 1998), pp. 79-82; edited for clarity and length.