

Peace or Trouble: The Demise of William Paul

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"I am an innocent man as I shall answer to my God."¹ These were the last words spoken by William Paul, the last man executed by hanging in the state of Ohio. Paul was executed on 29 April 1896, less than two years after he was convicted of murdering his father-in-law. Paul's crime was described by local reports as a murder "most diabolical in its conception and hideous in its execution, disclosing in the murderer most depraved brutal instincts."² The events leading up to the murder were catalysts for small town gossip. Rumors of an incestuous relationship, an illegitimate pregnancy, and familial conflict created a whirlwind of controversy surrounding the conviction and execution of William Paul.

William Paul, one of seven sons born to James and Sallie Paul, was born in 1861 and raised in Brown County, a rural area bordering the Ohio River in southern Ohio. Paul married Frances Yockey, the daughter of a local farmer named Joseph Yockey. Living with William and Frances was her younger sister Anna Yockey. Anna, fifteen years of age, became pregnant during the summer of 1893, and William Paul was accused of being the father.³ Subsequently Paul began to receive "white-cap notices," which were bundles of switches and threatening letters used to intimidate persons who were believed to have committed immoral acts.⁴ The increasing tension over the situation forced Paul to travel to Kentucky, where he stayed for an undisclosed amount of time. Upon learning that the "white-cap notices" were sent by a neighbor named Henry Swearingen, Paul obtained a pistol and made threats against both Swearingen and Joseph Yockey.⁵

Paul returned to Ohio in July, 1894 and was seen in the vicinity of Joseph Yockey's house on

the evening of 14 July. A resident saw Paul walking towards Yockey's residence around eight o'clock that evening, carrying a bundle of clothes and brandishing his pistol. The resident, named Spencer Spears, related that Paul was agitated and proclaimed that "he would not go to the penitentiary and would not be arrested."⁶ Paul then continued on to his father-in-law's house, where he stopped about one hundred and fifty yards short of the property and removed his shoes and socks. Three of Joseph Yockey's sons stated that as they were about to turn their work horses out to the pasture around nine o'clock, they saw William Paul standing by the chimney of the house carrying a pistol. The sons retreated to the back of the house and Joseph Yockey met Paul at the front door. Frances, who had moved back into her father's house, also confronted Paul at the door and, seeing the pistol, begged him leave. Paul exclaimed, "It is either peace or trouble," and fired at Yockey, the pistol flash so close to Yockey that his clothes caught fire.⁷ Yockey was killed instantly, the bullet passing from his lower back through his heart and right lung and exiting his right shoulder blade.

Paul then fled to the wilderness, where he stayed until after Yockey's funeral. He then surrendered to local authorities and was tried and convicted for the murder of Joseph Yockey. He was sent to the Ohio Penitentiary Annex on 8 April 1895. After a little more than a year at the annex, Paul was hanged on 29 April 1896. Paul's calm demeanor immediately before his execution prompted one writer to compare him to the stoic Indian characters of a James Fenimore Cooper novel.⁸ When told that the governor would not stay his execution, Paul replied, "If the Governor of the state of Ohio

wants to bear the everlasting stain of hanging an innocent man, I can meet death bravely.”⁹ Only when the death sentence was read aloud did Paul convey a sense of desperation. Still, after the pronouncement of the death warrant Paul loudly proclaimed, “I am ready to meet death. It seems strange to me, however, that they should hang an innocent man. The murderer of Mr. Yockey is still at large.”¹⁰ Then, after his final declaration of innocence in the eyes of his God, William Paul fell to his death.

Whether Paul committed the murder was a source of controversy. Speculation surrounded the crime, and many local inhabitants seriously doubted that Paul killed Yockey.¹¹ Paul argued that Yockey was accidentally shot by one of his sons during a fight that ensued on the evening of 14 July. Others questioned the legitimacy of the claims that William Paul was the father of Anna Yockey’s child. These conjectures, however, were insufficient in keeping William Paul from becoming the last man hanged in the Ohio Penitentiary.

Bibliography

Fogle, H. M. *The Palace of Death, or the Ohio Penitentiary Annex*. Columbus, Ohio: privately printed, 1908.

Public Defender (West Union, Ohio)

End Notes

¹ *Public Defender*, (West Union, Ohio), 30 April 1896.

² *Ibid.*

³ The word “pregnant” was not used in newspaper reports concerning the crime. Instead, Anna was described as being “ruined,” or “in a delicate condition.”

⁴ H. M. Fogle, *The Palace of Death, or The Ohio Penitentiary Annex* (Columbus: privately printed, 1908), 131-2.

⁵ *Public Defender*, (West Union, Ohio), 22 July 1894.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Fogle, *Palace of Death*, 133.

⁹ *Public Defender*, (West Union, Ohio), 30 April 1896.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Fogle, *Palace of Death*, 132.