

Shoot-out at Bond Schoolhouse:

A Little Civil War Skirmish That Had Big Repercussions

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From *Tar Heel Junior Historian* 48: 1 (fall 2008).

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For over one hundred years, people in Yadkin County believed that documents with important information about the February 12, 1863, shootout at Bond Schoolhouse had been destroyed. Recently, in a trunk owned by a descendant of Jesse Dobbins, the original warrants for the arrest of Dobbins and thirteen others were discovered. For the first time, the names of all the men inside the schoolhouse that fateful day became known. After the shootout, Dobbins and several other men fled Yadkin County, crossing the mountains in midwinter to join the Union army. When he later wrote about his life during the Civil War (1861–1865), Dobbins did not reveal who had shot two members of the county militia at the schoolhouse. Had he been guilty of murder?

Accounts of the shootout go something like this. An unnamed man rode into Yadkinville, the county seat, on his horse early that February 12 morning. At the courthouse, the man found Captain James West, leader of the county's Confederate militia, and told him, "Captain West, those draft dodgers you've been looking for are hiding in the Bond Schoolhouse." This local school was named for Johnny Bond, one of the founders of Deep Creek Friends (Quaker) Church. Children took classes in the little log building near the church for three or four months each year.

People in North Carolina (especially in places like Yadkin County) had different opinions about secession and the war. Many believed it was wrong for the state to leave the Union. Others, including the Quakers, did not believe in fighting or in slavery. Opposition to the war increased when the Confederate Congress enacted the conscription, or draft, law. The Congress thought this step was necessary to replace thousands of soldiers who had died of disease or been killed in battle. Men who were drafted often did not like being forced to serve in the Confederate army. If a drafted man did not go willingly, he could be arrested and sent to the army to fight or even sent to prison. If he deserted from the army and got caught, he could be executed. Over the course of the war, desertion became a big problem.

That cold morning, West gathered a group of about fifteen men and started toward the school. (Some accounts say about fifty men. Names of all the militia members who were there remain unverified.) A light snow had blanketed the ground the night before. As the group approached the home of Daniel Vestal, a Quaker, West called a halt for a brief rest. He dismounted from his horse and knocked on the front door, to ask if his men could get drinks of water.

Mrs. Vestal came to the door, looked at the militia in her yard, and said that would be fine. While one man drew a bucket of water from the well, she asked, “Where are thee going this cold morning?” West replied, “Ma’am, we are going to arrest some draft dodgers hiding out in the schoolhouse.” Mrs. Vestal frowned and looked West in the eye. “Yes,” she said, “and thee will get thy head shot off thy shoulders, too.” West laughed, thanked her for the water, and rode on.

As the men got closer to the school, they could see smoke rising from the chimney. West motioned for them to load their muskets. Then he banged on the door and shouted, “Open up. You’re all under arrest.” He took the sixteen men in the school by surprise. Not all of them were Quakers, and most carried loaded rifles. One had escaped from the county jail. Another had deserted from the Confederate army. They planned to leave the county and cross the mountains into Tennessee as soon as the weather warmed up.

When the door opened to reveal West, someone inside fired a gun. Mrs. Vestal’s words had almost come true—he was knocked backward with a bullet in his head. The two sides exchanged more shots. When the firing stopped, four men lay dead: West and John Williams of the militia, and Solomon Hinshaw and Eck Allgood, draft dodgers inside the school. Several men on both sides were hurt.

Dobbins and some of the other men climbed out a window, fleeing into the mountains. After twelve days, they reached Lexington, Kentucky. There, Jesse and his brother, William, joined the Union army. When William died in the fall of 1864, Jesse blamed the hardships of their flight across the mountains in weather so cold that their clothes froze to their bodies.

After the war, Jesse returned to Yadkin County. One day when he rode in to Yadkinville, the sheriff tried to arrest him for West’s murder. Dobbins pulled loose from the sheriff’s clutches, jumped on his horse, and rode to Salisbury. Union soldiers were stationed there to maintain order, under Federal Reconstruction plans for the South. Dobbins returned to Yadkinville with Federal soldiers, including a colonel. The colonel asked the Yadkin County clerk of court, “Don’t you people know the war is over?” He then ordered the clerk, “Get your old records and burn them.”

The clerk gathered the court docket books that contained indictments for the deaths at the school. Before the clerk could put the books in the fireplace, though, the colonel changed his mind. “Better save those books for future reference,” he said, “but you can cancel all the charges of murder against Dobbins and the others.”

The charges were dropped. Dobbins settled down with his wife and their family. He made a good living—in farming, milling, and other businesses. He built a large frame house that stood until just a few years ago. He was one of the founders of the Republican Party in Yadkin County (and the county has remained Republican ever since).

All through his life, though, many local people blamed Dobbins for the deaths of West and Williams. Those Willard boys may have fired the actual shots, some folks said, but

Dobbins never got a chance to clear his name. No trial was ever held. When Dobbins was found dead at his mill in 1883, rumors went around that he had been killed by someone who held a grudge over the shootings. But his doctor said that Dobbins probably had a stroke.

In the spring of 2008, a North Carolina Civil War Trails marker was placed at the Deep Creek Friends Church, in remembrance of the shootout at Bond School and those who died there. Were the men in the school right to resist the draft and use guns to defend themselves against the militia? What would you have done?

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