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THE ASSASSINATION OF GENERAL WILLIAM NELSON SEPTEMBER 29, 1862, AND ITS RAMIFICATIONS

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Louisville, Kentucky

Mid-September, 1862, found Louisville a city of turmoil, excitement, confusion, and fear. The city, normally a large town of 68,000 inhabitants, peaceful, commercial, conservative, had grown almost overnight to twice that number. Refugees and soldiers swarmed the place, cramming every hotel, boarding house, warehouse, and vacant lot, some even sleeping in the streets.

Official sources inaccurately indicated that Lieutenant General Braxton Bragg, with a Confederate army numbering more than 60,000 veteran troops, was marching rapidly toward the Ohio. Wild rumors reaching Louisville described the Confederate force as a lean, hungry, gray host, as fierce as that of Attila. This army, according to reports, was sweeping the country clean of everything, and destroying with fire and sword! Rumors persisted that Louisville was its objective and that Major General Don Carlos Buell, with the only Union force capable of halting Bragg, would probably be unable to arrive in time to save the city from destruction!

Under the circumstances, many of the people became highly excited, some panic-stricken. Local volunteer companies enlisted to defend the city and began drilling. Raw recruits poured in from states to the North—Ohio, Indiana, Illinois—in great confusion. Major General William Nelson, called the "Bull," came in to take charge of the city's defenses. He raged like a lion, swore like a pirate, and drove as relentlessly as Simon Legree; but things began to move.

Forts were hastily erected to guard all the principal roads. Rifle pits were opened to connect the forts. Slaves, transients, and nondescripts were empressed to dig trenches about the main part of the city, and two pontoon bridges to span the Ohio were quickly begun.

Nelson drove like a Juggernaut. The women and children were ordered to take the ferries for Indiana, and soon carriages, horses, wagons, wheelbarrows, pedestrians, and dogs cluttered the approaches to the river. The editor of the Louisville *Daily Journal* observed that "a run on the banks of Indiana" was in rapid progress. Nelson swore that he would burn the city to the ground before he would surrender it. The frightened property owners shuddered; they wondered if Bragg would be more terrible than Nelson.

In addition to the fright, excitement, and confusion disorders developed. Looting and thieving were prevalent, fires of incendiary origin were numerous; inebriation was common, and loosemoraled jades plied their trade brazenly and profitably.

On Wednesday, September 24th, a stirring editorial appeared in the *Journal,* anticipating the most direful calamity:

"Before this article meets the eyes of our readers," it stated, "this city may be attacked by the rebels and its streets reddened with blood. . . . The priceless heritage of liberty must be preserved at any sacrifice. . . . Let all worldly matters be laid aside. . . . Meet with alacrity at the places where you are required to rendezvous, and take with you the weapons which have been preserved as heirlooms in your families. . . . Never let it be said that the proud commercial capital of the State was surrendered to the invaders. Never while we have living men or dead bodies to form as brestworks against them. . . . To arms and out!"

In the midst of this turmoil, fear and sentimentality, Buell arrived with his army and posted troops about the city.

Buell, as soon as he had seen to the defenses of Louisville, rapidly prepared an army adequate to meet the combined Confederate strength. The task was herculean, but with the energetic aid of his friend and subordinate, General "Bull" Nelson, a mighty army was ready to take the offensive within a few days.

Just as the final preparations were being completed, and the army awaited the order to march, two unfortunate events transpired in Louisville, events which not only profoundly stirred the people of the city, but affected the destiny of both Buell and the army.

Seven-thirty, Monday morning, September 29th. In the palatial dining hall of the fashionable and aristocratic Galt House, then at the northeast corner of Second and Main streets, distinguished guests were eating and chatting about the exciting news of the day. A gray-haired, impressive figure hurried from the lobby through the doorway. It was United States Senator John J. Crittenden. He rushed to the side of his son, Major General Thomas L. Crittenden, who was eating.

"General Davis has just shot General Nelson!" announced Senator Crittenden. The tones of the resonant, oratorical voice, though low, were heard through the entire room. There was no mistaking the connotation of the dramatic notes. The guests felt a surge of horror grip their nerves. For an instant a hush, then excited exclamations; a general hubbub, and then a rush toward the door to the lobby. Well might there be excitement and dismay. Here was tragedy.

A short time thereafter, Colonel J. C. McKibben, aide of General Henry W. Halleck, Chief of Staff at Washington, appeared at General Buell's apartment, on the second floor of the Galt House, and handed the small commanding general a dispatch from the War Department. It was an order for Buell to hand over his command to Major General George H. Thomas.[1] Although such an order at such a time would perhaps strike most men with a combination of wrath, consternation, and anguish, the stern countenance of the reticent soldier remained unchanged. The order was from a superior officer and would be obeyed with dispatch.

The shocking news of the two momentous events, coming at that critical time, spread rapidly, and mingled feelings of surprise, consternation, wrath, even some pleasure, were expressed over the city.

Regret and resentment were unmistakably felt by U. S. Senators John J. Crittenden and Garret Davis, as well as Congressmen Robert Mallory and George W. Dunlap. These men on the same day hastily dispatched a telegram of protest

to President Lincoln, a telegram which probably expressed the sentiments of most Kentuckians:

"We grieve to announce to you," the dispatch ran, "that this morning General Nelson was killed in an encounter with General Davis. About the same time intelligence was received that General Buell was superseded and directed to pass over to General Thomas his command. These two events have caused great excitement and something of dismay. General Buell has, in very high degree, the confidence of this state and of the army. His removal, especially at this critical moment, will be dispiriting to the people and to the army. The latter, be assured, prefer him to any leader you could send. . . ."[2]

Under the circumstances General Thomas, a very able, as well as ethical officer, protested to General Halleck, and Buell was ordered to disregard the dispatch relieving him. The feelings of Buell might well be imagined, although no complaint came from him.

The *Journal* of the following morning, September 30th, announced the death of Nelson and described briefly, somewhat inaccurately, the circumstances. General Nelson, according to the account, had died at 8 A.M., of the 29th. Near the clerk's desk, in the main hall of the Galt House, he had slapped General Davis in the face. After this encounter, Nelson had walked through the west door and into the passage leading to the ladies' reception room. As he turned from that point, with the evident intention of going upstairs, he had been confronted by General Davis, who had discharged a pistol when within eight or ten feet of him, the shot taking effect in his right breast. The wounded man had reeled as he was struck, but walked into the room adjoining the parlor, where, according to the *Journal's* account, he was laid on a mattress on the floor. He had expired within fifteen minutes after receiving the bullet.

This newspaper did state, however, that although "roughness of demeanor was his customary appearance," yet Nelson was not without "the softer graces of character or the gentler tastes of refined life. He was pre-eminently a generous man. His heart was open to the appeal of suffering, and he loved music passionately, comprehending it as a master."

The *Journal's* account is brief, probably by intention. George D. Prentice, the editor, appears to have been in constant fear that Nelson would burn the city. Announcement of Nelson's death caused many of the property owners to breathe a sigh of relief, and Mr. Prentice may have been one of them.

The most accurate relation of the Davis-Nelson affair has been recorded by Brigadier General James B. Fry, then Colonel and Buell's Adjutant and Chief of Staff.[3] Fry knew both antagonists well. He had been first lieutenant in the company in which Davis was second lieutenant during the Mexican War.

General Fry described Davis as "a small, sallow, blue-eyed, dyspeptic-looking man, less than five feet nine inches high, and weighing only about one hundred and twenty-five pounds." Fry thought him "brave, quiet, obliging, humorous in disposition, and full of ambition, daring, endurance, and self-confidence."

Mr. Lloyd Lewis in his admirable biography, *Sherman, Fighting Prophet,* says that Davis was "reputed the most talented swearer in the whole Federal force." He presents that encounter as a thing of mighty "God-dam-you sirs" throughout.[4]

Events Leading to Nelson's Death. When the Army of the Ohio was moving on Chattanooga, during the summer of 1862, General Buell, his communication lines in Kentucky having been cut, dispatched General Nelson, in whom he had marked confidence, to the Bluegrass State. Nelson was a man of commanding presence, keen intellect, vast and exact knowledge, and had won promotion to Major General for unusual efficiency and bravery in the Battle of Shiloh. In the vicinity of Richmond, on August 30th, as will be recalled, Nelson's raw forces were soundly defeated by the veteran army of Major General E. Kirby Smith. During the last stand of the Union soldiers, on the outskirts of Richmond, Nelson, while making frantic efforts to rally his wavering forces, sustained a painful wound, and had to be carried to a hospital.

In his report, Nelson charged that Brigadier General Mahlon D. Manson, an Indiana man, by disobeying orders, was responsible for the Federal defeat. That officer had been in

command during the engagements outside of Richmond before Nelson's arrival. The charge was not only deeply resented by Manson but apparently by the entire state of Indiana, including her fractious and dictatorial governor, Oliver Perry Morton.

With Louisville threatened by both Smith's and Bragg's armies, Nelson was ordered to that city to prepare it for defense.

Brigadier General Jefferson C. Davis, having been sent previously to his home in Indiana from Buell's main army on sick leave, heard of Louisville's plight and went to Cincinnati to offer his services to Major General H. G. Wright, who had been recently appointed head of the newly created Department of the Ohio, which included Kentucky.

Davis was ordered to Nelson in Louisville. There he was received with pleasure, as veteran officers were scarce. The leonine commander, Nelson, immediately entrusted Davis with the task of organizing and arming the citizens of the city and the recruits pouring in. This was, under the circumstances, a most difficult task.[5]

"Nelson's quarters and offices were in the Galt House, at the north end of the west corridor, on the first or main floor. His Adjutant General's [Kendrick's] office was in room No. 12, and his Medical Director's [Dr. Irwin's] office in room No. 10. After Davis had been for a day or two on the duty to which he had been assigned, he called in the afternoon at headquarters."

After customary salutations, Nelson inquired concerning Davis' progress. To these inquiries Davis replied with a careless and unconcerned, "I don't know."

Nelson then asked: "How many regiments have you organized?"

And again Davis replied: "I don't know."

Then with mounting irritation, Nelson questioned him concerning the number of companies organized. To all of which Davis responded in the same careless and disgusted tone: "I don't know."

Nelson then snapped more testily: "But you should know." And, rising from his chair, declared menacingly: "I am disappointed in you, General Davis. I selected you for this duty

because you are an officer of the Regular Army, but I find I have made a mistake."

Davis, now standing, coolly gazed into Nelson's eyes and very deliberately declared: "General Nelson, I am a regular soldier, and I demand the treatment due me as a general officer."

The doors being open, Dr. Irwin, who was in the adjoining room and had heard the conversation, at this point was called in by Davis to witness the conversation. To this Nelson expressed approval. The meeting continued, becoming more tense each moment. Davis, in measured tones again demanded the courtesy due his rank.

To this Nelson roared out: "I will treat you as you deserve. You have disappointed me; you have been unfaithful to the trust which I reposed in you, and I shall relieve you at once." Pausing a moment, he added: "You are relieved from duty here, and you will proceed to Cincinnati and report to General Wright."

Davis replied heatedly: "You have no authority to order me."

Nelson then turned toward the Adjutant General, and said: "Captain, if General Davis does not leave the city by nine o'clock tonight, give instructions to the Provost Marshal to see that he shall be put across the Ohio."

General Fry here interpolated with the statement that: "Upon such occasions Nelson was overbearing and his manner was peculiarly offensive."[6] We may well suppose that the air was hot with mighty oaths.

Davis, though highly incensed, proceeded to Cincinnati, where General Wright placed him in command of the troops in front of Covington and Newport, Kentucky. Shortly after Buell's arrival in Louisville, Wright ordered Davis to report there once more.

On the morning of September 29th, Davis appeared at the Galt House, accompanied by Governor Morton, Captain _____ (an old Mexican war friend from Indiana), and by Thomas W. Gibson, formerly of Indiana but then practicing law in Louisville.

Just as Davis and his friends entered the lobby of the hotel, General Nelson emerged from the breakfast hall and strode

to the clerk's desk, where he inquired whether General Buell had breakfasted. "He then turned, leaned his back against the counter, faced the assembled people, and glanced over the hall with his clear black eye." He was singularly striking, with shaggy curly black hair, heavy black beard, dark complexion, high cheek bones and straight nose. "In the prime of life," runs Fry's account, "in perfect health, six feet two inches in height, weighing three hundred pounds, his great body covered by a capacious white vest, his coat open and thrown back, he was the one conspicuous feature of the grand hall."[7]

It was there, at the desk, that Davis and his friends encountered him. According to General Fry's account, Davis approached, charged Nelson with having insulted him at their last meeting, and demanded satisfaction. Nelson told him abruptly to go away. But Davis pressed his demand till Nelson roared out: "Go away, you d—d puppy; I don't want anything to do with you!"

Davis had taken from a box on the counter one of the visiting cards kept there for common use. This card, he had crumpled during the altercation into a small ball, perhaps unconsciously, in the excitement. Upon hearing Nelson's insulting words, he flipped the paper ball into Nelson's face. Thereupon Nelson, with the back of his hand, slapped him in the face, and turning to Governor Morton he demanded: "Did you come here, sir, to see me insulted?"

"No, sir," the Governor answered, as Nelson walked away toward his room.

Nelson's room, it will be remembered, was on the office floor, and at the north end of the corridor which extended along the west side of the building. "A doorway connected this corridor with the grand or office hall, and near that doorway started a staircase which leads from the hall to the floor above." Buell's room was on the second floor; it was reached by this stairs.

Following the slap, Davis turned to his Mexican War friend and asked for a pistol. The Captain, not having this weapon, quickly secured one from Thomas W. Gibson and gave it to Davis. "In the meantime Nelson had passed from the office hall into the corridor which led to his room, had walked toward his room, then turned back and was near the foot of the stair-

case and in front of the doorway leading to the office hall when Davis reached the threshold from the office. They were face to face and about a yard apart, Davis with a pistol in his hand, Nelson entirely unarmed. Davis fired and Nelson walked on up the stairs."[8]

As Buell, whose room was near the head of that stairs on the second floor, had not gone down to breakfast, Nelson probably was en route to that room when he had encountered Davis.

Nelson, although shot either through the heart or one of the large vessels connected with it, was able to walk up the stairs and reach the hall between the head of the stairs and Buell's room before falling.

Those who gathered around carried him into the room nearest the spot where he fell and placed him on a mattress on the floor. The wound closed quickly, but the internal bleeding was rapid, causing him to sink very fast. He breathed heavily and with difficulty.

"Send for a clergyman," he murmured hoarsely to Mr. Silas F. Miller, proprietor of the hotel, who was kneeling at his side. "I wish to be baptized. I have been basely murdered." These were his first words, states Fry.

The Rev. J. J. Talbott, minister of the Calvary Episcopal Church, at Guthrie and Third streets, was summoned. At the same time Buell's Medical Director, Dr. Robert Murray, was called from the National Hotel, southeast corner Fourth and Main streets. Meanwhile Nelson's good friend, General Thomas L. Crittenden, arrived at his side, whispered, "Nelson, are you seriously hurt?"

"Tom, I am murdered," was the answer.

Rev. Talbott arrived and received Nelson into the Church, but Dr. Murray could do nothing. At half-past eight, less than an hour after the shot was fired, Nelson died.[9]

Immediately after the fatal encounter, Colonel Fry was ordered by General Buell to place Davis under arrest. This done, Fry accompanied his prisoner to the latter's room to hear the facts of the case, according to Davis' desire.

After it was known in the hotel that Nelson had died, feeling mounted rapidly against Davis, especially among the officers of Nelson's corps and the Kentucky officers of the army in general. It was realized quickly that Governor Morton could

have prevented the tragedy—but did not. Apparently the murdering of General Nelson had been the purpose of the visit from Indiana. Buell, however, quickly discountenanced violence and prevented an outbreak. Particularly incensed were Generals Crittenden and James S. Jackson, both Kentuckians, and Brigadier General Wm. R. Terrell, an Ohioan. Reports were freely circulated that the "fire-eating" General Jerry Boyle and Governor Morton had engaged in a bloody fist fight in the Galt House; this, however, was quickly denied in Indianapolis.[10]

It may be desirable, perhaps, to say a few words concerning Governor Oliver Perry Morton, considered one of Indiana's greatest governors. He was a powerful man physically; brave, daring, dictatorial, and able—even a touch of the sinister, totally unmoved by violence and bloodshed—a man of high prejudices, a tough conscience and indomitable power of will. He was radically and violently a Union man and an aggressive, almost fanatical abolitionist; he craved power and apparently reveled in cataclysmic violence. Morton had little, if any, faith in, even heartily despised, most Kentucky leaders. He was ever fond of considering himself governor of both Indiana and Kentucky, as he had considered Governor Beriah Magoffin a traitor —and perhaps thought James F. Robinson little better. He continually meddled in Kentucky affairs; even tried to retain control of Indiana troops in Kentucky. He intrigued against and conspired to overthrow General Buell, who was a Democrat and a Kentuckian by adoption, and to supplant him with a more radically Northern general, who would be certainly a Republican. He had disliked Nelson, a Kentuckian and a Democrat, for a long time. Morton's power in Indiana was as great as that of a dictator, and his influence upon the Lincoln administration at Washington was boundless. He appeared to be an intimate of the sinister Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton.

The history of the case subsequent to Nelson's death was ignominious. As General Buell stated: "The dignity of a State was abused by the attitude of its governor in the affair, and the authority of the general government was even more degraded by its condonement of the act—a condonement made

virtually, if not actually, at his direction."[11] It might be added that the honor of Louisville and of Jefferson County was in no wise elevated by the part which their authorities took, or failed to take, in the affair.

The time being critical, Buell was unable to spare officers to try Davis. His paramount duty was to prepare his army as rapidly as possible to take the field against Bragg. While on the march toward Perryville, however, he did send a telegram to General Halleck, at Washington, appraising him of Nelson's death, Davis' arrest, and suggested that the War Department appoint a military court to try the prisoner.

The suggestion was not acted upon, however. No court was arranged by the Washington authorities. General Wright, not only did not instigate a trial, but ordered Davis' release. He gave as his reasons: First, that no charges had been prepared; second, that he believed Davis had acted in self-defense; and third, that he thought Buell was of the same opinion.[12]

These reasons for releasing General Davis were of course fantastic. Charges had been preferred; the idea of self-defense had not the slightest basis of fact; and General Buell regarded the tragedy as barbaric murder. However, the public received the impression that Nelson alone was responsible for his death —and clung to it.

The civil authorities acted as infamously as the military. General Davis was indicted for manslaughter in the Jefferson Circuit Court, at Louisville, October 27, 1862, by a grand jury, and admitted to bail in the sum of $5,000. The case was continued from time to time until May 24, 1864, when it was stricken from the docket.

In commenting upon the failure of justice in the case, General Fry wrote: "There is reason for belief that Morton's influence was exerted to prevent proceedings against Davis."[13] It was known that the governor, soon after the death of Nelson, had made a trip to Washington to talk to Lincoln and to other authorities. The opinion of Indiana and of her governor was perhaps expressed by the *Indianapolis Daily Journal* on the day following the assassination: "We know enough of the characters of the two men," the statement ran, "to be very sure that Nelson acted with most unbearable insolence, and that Davis was not insulting or ungentlemanly in his language . . .

(Nelson) was overbearing, harsh, inconsiderate, and impatient, with no regard to the feelings of others, and none for the ordinary decencies of life. He was heartily hated by every man he ever commanded, and not a few have threatened that if they ever got into battle with him they would not be under him long."[14]

Another powerful influence was that of the Hon. James Speed, of Louisville, able lawyer, friend of President Lincoln and later Attorney General in the President's Cabinet. As Davis' counsel, he was undoubtedly responsible for getting the case taken from the docket of the Jefferson Circuit Court.

Many other reasons favored Davis' going free: In the first place, one after another of Nelson's friends were prevented from bringing justice to bear. Both Generals Jackson and Terrell were highly incensed at the assassination and might have acted, but both of these officers were killed in the Battle of Perryville, October 8, 1862. Then, too, Buell, who was Nelson's good friend, was removed from command under a cloud, apparently the victim of a treacherous conspiracy, shortly after the assassination. Moreover, the aging John J. Crittenden, another friend of Nelson, was retiring from public life, and Senator Garret Davis was soon to be threatened with expulsion from the U. S. Senate for anti-administration statements. The once powerful old conservative group to which Crittenden, Buell, James Guthrie, and Nelson belonged was being supplanted by the radicals and abolitionists. Besides Kentucky, the residence of Nelson's friends, was distrusted more and more by influential Northerners; she was, they asserted, alive with Southern Democrats; Kentuckians' idol, Buell, the Radicals pointed out, even had been closely associated before the War with President Buchanan, John B. Floyd, and even Jefferson Davis. Furthermore, Morton, in insisting that he have his way in the West, could show that Kentucky had given the Republicans only 1,366 votes in 1860; while Indiana had cast perhaps 60,000 for Lincoln. The Western clique—soon to control the nation—was rising—the Shermans, Grant, Sheridan, Ben Wade, Zach Chandler, Oliver Morton—the conservatives and Democrats were being supplanted. Even Generals McClellan, Thomas and Meade, all Democrats, would

suffer under the power of this clique. Justice would not be done.

Nelson's funeral was conducted in the Calvary Episcopal Church, at Third and Guthrie streets. The pallbearers were Major Generals Alexander McD. McCook, Thomas L. Crittenden, and Gordon Granger; Brigadier Generals James Jackson and _____ Johnson, and Captain Jenkins of Nelson's staff. His remains were interred in Cave Hill Cemetery. Later, August 21, 1863, they were taken to Camp Dick Robinson, which he had established, and subsequently removed by his relatives to Maysville, in Mason County, where he was born. The Louisville *Daily Democrat* wrote of him: "He was a noble specimen of the human race—brave, reckless, and impulsive—ever ready to sell his life to the enemy."[15]

FOOTNOTES

[1] *Indianapolis Daily Journal,* October 1, 1862.

[2] *The War of the Rebellion, Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies,* etc. Also carried in Louisville *Daily Journal,* September 30, 1862.

[3] James B. Fry, U. S. Army, *Killed by a Brother Soldier,* A Chapter in the History of the War. Published for The Military Service Institution, by G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1885. A pamphlet of 15 pages.

[4] Lloyd Lewis, *Sherman, Fighting Prophet.* New York, 1932. Pages 348, 349.

[5] James B. Fry, *op. cit.,* page 3.

[6] *Ibid.,* pages 4, 5.

[7] *Ibid.,* page 5.

[8] *Ibid.,* page 6.

[9] *Ibid.,* page 6.

[10] Louisville *Daily Journal,* September 30, 1862.

[11] James B. Fry, *op. cit.,* page 7.

[12] *Ibid.,* page 8.

[13] *Ibid.,* page 8.

[14] *Indianapolis Daily Journal,* September 30, 1862.

[15] Louisville *Daily Democrat,* September 30, 1862.