

Life under Union occupation

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY L. MAREN WOOD

Diary of Alice Williamson, March–September 1864. Original in the Special Collections Library, Duke University.

As you read...

Alice Williamons was a sixteen year old girl who lived in Summer County, Tennessee. The county was taken by the Union in 1862, and although it was reclaimed briefly by the Confederacy, the county was occupied by Union forces for the duration of the war. Summer County became an important Union military stronghold because a major railroad and the Cumberland River ran through the county. Troops were stationed in the county to protect the railroad and to police the local population.

General Payne was notoriously brutal, and although some Union generals acted in a similar manner, not all ruled with such violence. Payne was eventually replaced by another general who upheld the rule of law and ended the arbitrary executions of men in Summer County.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How many executions did Williamson record in her diary? What crimes were these men accused of committing?
2. How were these men executed? Why do you think General Payne chose this method?
3. How did Williamson describe the men who were executed?
4. What did Williamson say about the Confederate cause?
5. What was Williamson's attitude towards free blacks?
6. What did Williamson say about Northerners, including the "Yankee" troops?
7. In addition to the summary (immediate and without trial) execution of young men, what other hardships did Williamson and her community endure?
8. Why do you think General Payne and other Union officers and soldiers treated southerners this way?
9. How do you think the experiences of people like Alice Williamson affected their attitudes after the war towards the North, the U.S. government, and freedmen?



Figure 1. Union soldiers outside a house in New Bern, North Carolina, during the occupation.

March 10th

Old Payne dined at Mrs. Hales today: every one despises him but are afraid to show it. Yesterday he went up the country a few miles to a Mr. Dalton's whose son came home from the Southern Army the day before and had the same day taken the Amnesty Oath¹. Riding up to the door he enquired of Mr. Dalton if his son was at home but before he answered his son came to the door. Old Nick then told him to get his horse and go with him. After insulting the father he carried his son a half mile away and shot him six times. One of Payne's escort hearing the young man groan with pain placed a pistol to his temple and remarked, I will stop that, sir, he shot him again. But this is nothing new this is the fifth man that has been shot in this way, besides numbers that have been carried off by scouts and never return.

March 11th

I learn today that Gen. Payne had no charge against Mr. Dalton, so he told his (Dalton's) father. After killing him he rode back to the house and told Mr. D. that his son was in sight — he could bury him if he wished. Today a gentleman (Col. E____) was in Paynes office when he was trying a young man about sixteen years old and the only support of an aged father who was with him. His crime was being a rebel. Payne sent the young man to jail telling the guard to bring him out at seven *o'clock*. The father actually fell upon his knees before the heartless tyrant but was heartlessly bidden to rise and go home, the young man has never been heard of since.

March 12th

Weather moderate; so is old Payne, but as weather is changeable our general is too.

Mar. 30th.

I have started to school and have not had time to write for Mrs. Cage keep the pupils busy for fear of having to sit on the disgrace bench with that horrid old dunce cap. The ball came off with great splendor. Old Dilsy (Mrs. Payne) came down Monday. Every negro in the country was pressed Monday to work on the fortifications to keep that thief Morgan² out — so the Gen. says

April 7th.

Another soldier was shot yesterday. The yankees went to jail and brought him while a citizen was standing near. He said the soldier was very poorly clad but his countenance was that of a gentleman. When the guard brought his horse to him (a broken down one from the camp) he asked what they were going to do with them. On being told to “Mount that horse and say no more...” he did so remarking that he supposed they were going to shoot him. They took him to the river to shoot him but finding some gentleman there — Mr. H. & M. they said they had gone in a hornet’s nest to shoot and went somewhere else. When they carry them out to shoot them they give them a worn out horse and tell them if they can escape they may: they say they “have fine fun chasing the boy with fresh horses” I am sorry I did not commence my journal when old Payne first came; he was worse then than now.

April 8th

The young man that was shot Friday was from Sumner but no one can find out his name. Mrs. A and W was going from Col. G. and me! I think carrying him out to the pines. They say he wore a look of calm despair. The Yankees pretended that they were tired and sat down on the side of the road but made the soldier stand in the pike: he stood with arms folded across his noble heart (for well I know he was a noble Southron and eyes bent toward the ground as a pale as death while the yankees taunted him with such remarks as ‘I will have his boots;’ another would name something that *he* would.

Apr. 26th

Weather beautiful. Yanks behaving like *human beings* with a few exceptions. Today a Yankee officer made his appearance in the school room accompanied by a Northern being whom I supposed to be a man, as he was not a gentleman; he came to look at the church saying that he was president of a school and that six of his assistants had just arrived and was going to teach the “freedmen” He says he will have 3 or 400 scholars and will need the largest house in town. What a learned city — or rather yankee nest — this will be. I suppose some of us citizens will get a situation as assistant teacher in the “Freedmens University”.

Ap 30th

Gen. Payne leaves tomorrow for Nashville. I recon we will have rest now for awhile.

May 9th

Capt Nicklen come back today and the “Freed pussons of cullers” commensed their school today. They were dressed in style with their white swiss and hats. The citizens look for the tavern to be burnt every night

May 16th

Mrs. Cage has gone to Nashville. The scholars went to school this morning expecting her up on the train Before the train come the President of the contraband school came over with twenty negro men and took every bench in the school house except one that was greasy; the girls told him to take that, it was good enough for negroes: but no, he said it would “soil the ladies dresses.” The girls took that and threw it into the street. Mag King took the broom and threatened to break his head if he came up the step again: he seen she was determined and left.

June 10th

The country is overrun with Yanks: they are camped in the woods in front of us and have already paid us several visits killed sheep, goats and chickens Our new yankees are very neighborly. They come over to see us every few minutes in the day. Some came today and demanded their dinner at two o'clock but did not get it. They went off cursing us for being d__n rebels

Aug 19

No news. Jimmie H. was brought down on the cars yesterday to be buried at the old homestead. Two sisters are all that remain of that once large family: they were driven South and know nothing of his early death. He died at Camp Douglass³.

Sept 16

Todays paper brings sad news “Atlanta has certainly been taken: Sherman has ordered every man, woman and child from that place Payne has been ordered from Paduca because he treated the citizens so bad. Why couldn't he have been ordered from here, he did a thousnd times worse here than there I suppose there a few union men at Paduca.

Sept 20th

The citizens are running in every direction trying to get to the Southern army The yankees are drafting everyone between the age of seventeen and fifty I wonder what the deserters will do now

Sept 21st

No letters from Rush or Jo yet: we are very uneasy

Sept 22

Gen. Payne stayed at Paduca 56 days and shot 67 men: he is under arrest Paduca is a union place. The noblehearted patriots who suffered here will never be cared for save by those at home whom their wrongs have made desolate. A company of negroes have just passed well armed they are going out to forage & steal I suppose.

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Notes

1. To avoid being arrested or executed, many former Confederate soldiers who returned to Union-occupied towns swore allegiance to the United States. By taking the oath, these men promised never again to support the Confederacy, and they vowed to uphold the Constitution of the United States. You can read a version of an Amnesty Oath on the Duke Libraries (see <http://www.learnnc.orghttp://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/williamson/annotations/amnesty.html>) website.

Because this young man had taken the oath, he should not have been executed.

2. John Hunt Morgan was an officer in the Confederate Army. He was originally from Kentucky, which remained part of the Union. Morgan recruited a number of men from his community and joined the Confederate Army in Tennessee. He led the 2nd Kentucky Cavalry to victory in important battles in Tennessee and Kentucky. Morgan gained a reputation for being aggressive and violent, and led raids into Kentucky and Ohio that terrified residents. In the South, he was considered a great war hero.
3. Camp Douglas was a Union prisoner of war camp near Chicago. Known as the North's Andersonville, it had the highest death rate of any northern army prison.

About the author

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