

The murder of "Chicken" Stephens

"Life in North Carolina: The Murder of Senator John W. Stephens -- A Terrible Scene -- Shall His Assassins Be Amnestied?" *New York Times*, February 26, 1873.

As you read...

John Walter "Chicken" Stephens was a Republican state senator and justice of the peace from Caswell County. Stephens worked to encourage blacks to vote for the Republican Party, which infuriated many of his white neighbors, who considered him a scalawag — a traitor to the South.

On Sunday morning, May 22, 1870, Stephens was found in a storeroom of the county courthouse, brutally murdered. It was assumed that the Klan had been responsible for the murder, and several Klansmen were arrested by state militia, questioned, and then released.

AMNESTY FOR THE KLAN

In 1871, Democrats again controlled the General Assembly, and they impeached Governor Holden and removed him from office. In 1872 and 1873 they passed amnesty laws that pardoned anyone who had committed any violation of state law, excepting only rape, in his duties as a member of a secret political organization such as the Ku Klux Klan. Some men who had been convicted of crimes were released, and Stephens' murderers were never brought to justice.

The article on this page was printed in the *New York Times* after the State Senate passed an amnesty bill in 1873. The article reminded readers of the brutal nature of Stephens' murder, and asked, "Shall his assassins be amnestied?"

THE CONFESSION OF JOHN LEA

One of the men arrested after Stephens' murder, former Confederate Captain John Lea, was asked repeatedly in later years about his involvement. He supposedly answered each time, "You all can wait until I die." In 1919, Lea gave three state officials a statement about the murder, insisting that they pledge not to open the statement until Lea died.

When Lea finally died in 1935, the statement was made public. In it Lea had written that "Stephens had been tried for arson, and extortion, found guilty and sentenced to death by the KKK." Lea described the murder, named the twelve men responsible, and concluded that "Stephens had a fair trial before the jury of twelve men." Lea, like many members of the Ku Klux Klan, considered the Klan to be the rightful government of North Carolina during Republican rule in Reconstruction. And Lea, certainly, never regretted his actions.



Figure 1. The Caswell County courthouse in Yanceyville was the scene of a brutal Ku Klux Klan murder in 1870.

RALEIGH, N. C., FEB. 25 — ...Mr. Bowman, Republican... related from the sworn evidence of one of the parties present the particulars of the murder of Senator John W. Stephens, of Caswell, which occurred in June, 1870; and that warrants had been issued for the guilty parties. He stated that a public Democratic meeting was in progress in the court-house at Yanceyville, the county seat of Caswell; that Stephens was in attendance on that meeting; that a prominent Democrat of Caswell approached Stephens with a smile, and asked him to go down-stairs with him. Stephens assented, and they went into a room formerly occupied by the Clerk of the Court of Equity; that as soon as they entered the room the door was locked; that there were in the room eight white men and one negro. Stephens was surprised to find the room full of men, and was struck with horror when a rope, fixed as a lasso, was thrown over his neck from behind, and he was told by the spokesman of the Kuklux crowd that he must renounce his Republican principles; that he believed they were right, and that the Republic would prosper if they were carried out; that he could not leave the country and State, because his all was there; that the colored people looked upon him as a leader, that they depended on him, and that he could not desert them. Stephens was then told that he must die. He then asked to be allowed to take a last look from the window of the office, at his home and any of his family that might be in view. The request was granted, and when Stephens stepped to the window he beheld his little home and his two little children playing in front of his house. He was then thrown down on a table, two of the Kuklux holding his arms. The rope was ordered to be drawn tighter, and the negro was ordered to get a bucket to catch the blood. This done, one of the crowd severed the jugular vein, the negro caught the blood in the bucket, and Stephens was dead. His body was laid on a pile of wood in the room, and the murderers went up-stairs, took part in the meeting, and stamped and applauded Democratic speeches.

On the web

The Confession of John Lea

<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nccaswel/misc/confession.htm>

Full text of the confession given by former Confederate Captain John Lea of the murder of John Stephens, opened after Lea's death in 1935.

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