

## **Jackson Simmons, Notorious Scamp, Scoundrel, and My Ancestor**

By Donna Cox Briggs

My absolute favorite genealogical sentence of all time came from a reporter who wrote a story about my great, great, great grandfather. The reporter wrote, "By the time he was killed by a train in 1904, Jackson had married, fathered children in and out of wedlock, joined the Confederate Army, deserted from the Confederate Army, been tracked by the Confederate Home Guard, joined the Union Army, gone deaf during battle, been branded a traitor, served jail time, been sued for bastardy simultaneously by two deaf sisters and gone broke trying to regain the Union pension he lost after neighbors mounted a campaign to label him a traitor and a malingerer." That sentence pretty much sums up the life of my third great grandfather, Jackson Simmons.

To start his story at the beginning of his life is impossible. Even though he was born in 1839 and should be easy to find in the 1850 census records, I just can't find him, which means I have no clue who his parents were! The 1860 Federal Census shows him as a farm laborer on the Ratliff farm in Washington County, near Double Springs.

Jackson married into the Ratliff family, taking as a bride, Sarah Jane Ratliff. Just a few short months after their marriage, the Civil War began, but it was a while before it came to the East Tennessee area. Jackson and Sarah Jane welcomed a daughter, Mary Ann, and before she was a year old, Jackson had left the family to join the Confederate Army. He became sick while away, and deserted the army, returning home for a few months. He must have been afraid that the local home guard would capture him, because he went back to the Confederate unit just before they went to Vicksburg, Mississippi. There they saw their first real battle in the summer of 1863, and several of the Confederates were captured, including Jackson. The Union Army agreed to let them return home, if they took the oath of allegiance to the United States. Jackson was on his way back to East Tennessee, but the war was not over, and there was a lot of tension in the area.

It appears that the Confederate soldiers later attempted to regroup, because in October 1863, Jackson was declared "absent without leave," and by December he was listed as being a "deserter." Jackson came home to East Tennessee, where he hid out for a few months. Then, in July of 1864, he enlisted in the Union Army! When Jackson left Sarah Jane this time, she was 8 months pregnant with their second child, James Frank. After the war ended, Jackson returned home to the divided community of Double Springs.

Jackson received a pension from the Federal government for his service in the Union army. This brought on the ire of his Confederate neighbors and fellow church members at the Double Springs Baptist Church. Several conspired to have his pension taken away, informing authorities that Jackson's disability (slow loss of hearing) was the result of his service in the Southern Army as a gunner in the Artillery. Jackson claimed it was the result of "standing picket in rain, sleet, and snow while with the Yankees." G. W. Irwin had this to say about the members of Company F: "said regiment were regarded by both sides as a band of robbers." Mr. Irwin, like Jackson was a Confederate at Vicksburg, a member of the 60th Tennessee Infantry. Unlike Jackson however, he refused parole, and ended the war in a POW at Camp Douglass, Illinois, which was

known for its deplorable conditions and bad treatment of the prisoners. Mr. Irwin would have been understandably angry and bitter.

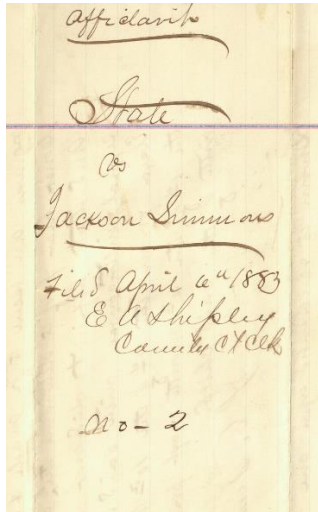
G. W. Irwin said that Jackson “was a gunner in Lynch & Latrobe’s battery,” and was at Vicksburg. He said that Jackson was so jarred by the “cannonading at Vicksburg that blood ran out of both ears.” Mr. Irwin and Jackson were both members at Double Springs Baptist Church, and Irwin was “brought up in the Double Springs Baptist Church for willfully swearing falsely against Jackson.” In other words, he was called out in front of the other members for his lies about Jackson. He asked for Jackson’s and the church’s forgiveness.

Another neighbor, W. W. Epps, wrote to the pension board, and had this to say about Jackson:

Haws + Roads Perm  
Sept 20<sup>th</sup> 1883  
Hon<sup>ble</sup> Mr. Dudley, Commissioners of Pension  
Dear Sir  
Jackson Simmons is such a Notories  
Scamp I hardly know what to say  
I have known Jackson Simmons  
for the last 16 years He has  
bin a little hard of hearing all  
since I knew him, he was only  
with the 100 days pretended Federls  
but He was more a 100 days Rogue  
then soldier, and the bal of his  
time was with the Confederates  
he Simmons was more noted for  
his theft then for soldier  
Strictly Confidential  
Yours Truly  
W. W. Epps P.M.  
Haws + Roads  
Washington Co  
E. Tenn

“Jackson Simms is such a notories scamp I hardly know what to say. I have nown Jackson Simmons for the last 16 years. He has bin a little hard of hearing all scince I new him. He was only with the 100 days pretended Federls but he was more a 100 days rogue then soldier and the bal of his time was with the Confederates. He Simons was more noted for his theft then for soldier. Strictly Confidential. Yours Truly, W. W. Epps P.M. (Postmaster) Haws X Roads...” (spelling left uncorrected)

A copy of this letter is in Jackson’s pension file.



In 1883, Jackson was brought before the Washington County Court for not one, but TWO bastardy suits! The two women, Sarah and Amanda, were deaf sisters who lived in the same area. Jackson argued that he was not the father of Sarah's child, but the courts determined that he was and he was forced to pay the obligatory \$90 to ensure that the child would not become a charge of the county. He was ordered to appear in court on 11 May 1883 for the suit brought by Sarah, but he didn't show up and forfeited his bail.

In my seven years at the county archives, I've become quite accustomed to seeing Jackson's name on court cases such as this one—the second suit against him in the April term of County Court.

It's impossible to say what Jackson's life was like for the next twenty years. There is no paper trail to be found after 1883 and before his death in 1904. Jackson's tombstone is located in the Double Springs Baptist Church Cemetery in Sullivan County, near where he and Sarah Jane lived, just over the county line in Washington County. The inscription reads, "Killed in Jonesboro, Tenn. May 3, 1904 By train."

I often wondered about his death, and what had actually happened. Our office has a subscription to Newspapers.com, and when I was learning how to use it, I did a search for "Jackson Simmons" with no location listed. It was at that moment that I found what happened and even more surprisingly, where, what time and why it happened!

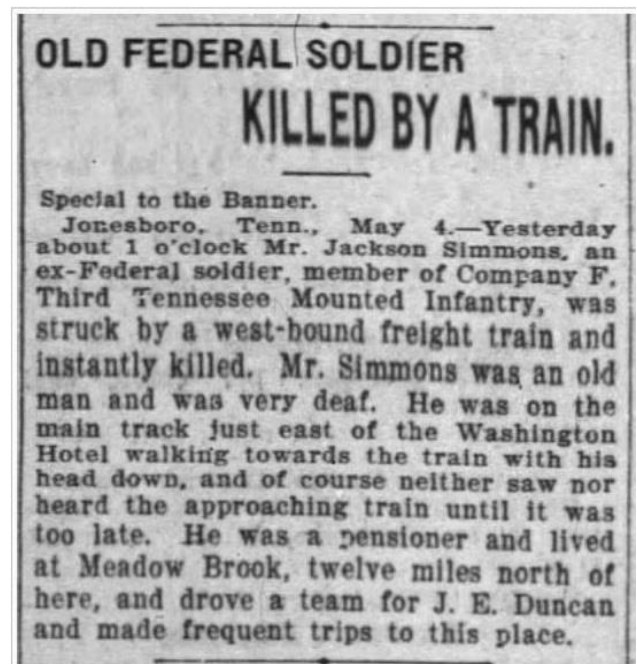
## OLD FEDERAL SOLDIER

### KILLED BY A TRAIN

Special to the Banner.

Jonesboro, Tenn., May 4.—Yesterday about 1 o'clock Mr. Jackson Simmons, an ex-Federal soldier, member of Company F, Third Tennessee Mounted Infantry, was struck by a west-bound freight train and instantly killed. Mr. Simmons was an old man and was very deaf. He was on the main track just east of the Washington Hotel walking towards the train with his head down, and of course neither saw nor heard the approaching train until it was too late. He was a pensioner and lived at Meadow Brook, twelve miles north of here, and drove a team for J. E. Duncan and made frequent trips to this place.

Nashville Banner, 04 May 1904, Wed, p. 5  
(J. E. Duncan was a local store-owner)



We are fortunate to have digital copies of the Sanborn Fire Maps in our files. I immediately went to the map for Jonesborough and located the exact spot of the Hotel Washington, located just behind the courthouse next to the railroad tracks. The Heritage Alliance in Jonesborough had several photos of the hotel and shared them with me. The area is less than a hundred yards from the back door of my office, the Washington County Archives. After more than twenty years of research, a good portion of Jackson's story was finally revealed.



Photo courtesy of Heritage Alliance

A photo of the Hotel Washington. The railroad tracks can be seen to the left of the building with steps going up to them.



Me at the railroad tracks (2020) in the approximate area where Jackson was killed in 1904.



Jackson and Sarah Jane share a tombstone in the Double Springs Church Cemetery, Sullivan County, Tennessee.