

William J. Sinclair

William Sinclair, a man about 30 to 35 years old, six feet tall and very strong, pleaded not guilty, but that appeared to be just a formality as everyone knew he would be convicted. Eppa Hunton, the prosecutor, was so sure of getting a guilty verdict that he charged Sinclair with first degree murder. The trial lasted two days and he was indeed found to be guilty. The defense attorney, assigned to Sinclair, immediately ask the sentence to be put aside and a new trial granted. The judge said he needed time to consider the request and said he would rule the next day. The next day the Judge ruled the verdict should be set aside and a new trial ordered. This was only one of the events that went into making William Sinclair's tenure in the Brentsville Jail perhaps the longest since it was built.

The 30th of January 1855 was a cold snow covered day. William Sinclair had been hunting and decided to stop at Triplett's Bar in Gainesville before he went home. Upon entering the bar, James Hewitt, his son William Hewitt and William Corum invited him to have a drink. After a few drinks it was suggested to Sinclair that he should buy for the group. He replied that he didn't have any money but he had a rabbit if Triplett would take it. Triplett agreed and gave him a ½ pint of whiskey. This group, the only customers, sat at a table for about an hour and talked about hunting with Sinclair who stated that his rifle was the only friend he needed.

Haywood Triplett, the owner operator of the tavern, with no one spending any money announced he was cold and wanted to close and go home for dinner. After some grumbling the group left the bar and Triplett closed the bar for the day. He left the group outside assuming they would leave and went to his residence about 50 yards away. After about an hour Triplett heard voices and sent his children to look out and see what was happening. There was a shot and the children returned and said Mr. Hewitt had been shot. He went outside and observing the rifle in Sinclair's hand thought maybe they were pulling a ruse on him to come and reopen the bar. People were yelling "murder stop the murderer." As Triplett started towards the group, he saw Sinclair going across his fence running in the direction of Bull Run Mountains. There was some talk at the trial by the defense attorney that Hewitt could have been perceived as a threat because he was in possession of a club. This was countered by the knowledge of the community that Hewitt was an old man that walked with a cane.

It is not known the date that William Sinclair was captured but it was not immediate because the state issued wanted postings with a reward offered. We do know according to records that he was in the Brentsville Jail from sometime in the middle of 1856. In October 1856 he was scheduled for trial but it was postponed until the next term "for reasons appearing to the court." His first degree murder trial finally got under way 11 May 1857 and as stated before this conviction was overturned. He was scheduled to go to trial for second degree murder in October 1857 but as in

his first trial “for reasons appearing to the court” this trial was continued until 10 May 1858 at which time he was convicted again. So it would appear he was incarcerated at Brentsville about two years before being sent to the State Penitentiary for 5 years after the second trial.

It must be noted that William Sinclair was somewhat of notorious sort that would rival anyone in years to come. A few years previous William shot the husband of his sister in one of his arms, making him an invalid forever.

Ron Turner