

THE ZOUAVE CAVES: AN INVESTIGATION OF MURDER, MYSTERY, AND REBELLION IN APPALACHIA

Dr. Michael Jessee Adkins

Ohio University, United States of America

ABSTRACT

Three soldiers were murdered in rural Appalachia during the American Civil War. Shocking accounts of the controversial way they were killed were published in newspapers and the stories inspired generations of local folklore. John Costallo, John Cerbe, and William Collins were casualties of the war and their story is unique because their bodies may have been buried as many as four times. Their final resting place is a longstanding mystery but many people believe the soldier's bodies were hidden in a place known as the Zouave Caves. This article examines historical narratives, provides new insight gained from interviews, and identifies a site where the soldiers may have been buried. Recommendations for future research and archaeological fieldwork are offered as ways to honor the fallen Union servicemen and bring closure to the mystery shrouding their final burial place.

Keywords: Zouave Caves, Civil War, Historical Archaeology, West Virginia

INTRODUCTION

The Appalachian hills are hiding a secret history of murder, mystery, and rebellion. As a child, I heard fascinating stories of Civil War soldiers killed and buried on an Adkins family farm located in rural West Virginia. As a researcher, I turned toward the literature to understand what happened on an obscure winter day in 1861. This article examines historical records, presents information gained through new interviews, and describes a recent field investigation of caves where the bodies of Civil War veterans may have been hidden.

The Civil War was a violent and turbulent time in American history. The Appalachian region was no exception. "Throughout the Civil War, Wayne County and the surrounding area remained in a constant state of conflict. Every town, village, and home was continually at the mercy of an opposing military force, be it Union or Confederate" (Thompson, 2010, p. 100). The Adkins family played a role within the context of this conflict. The family predominantly originated from Surrey County, England and eventually became rooted in the Beech Fork area of what is

now Wayne County, West Virginia (Adkins, 1990). One of the central figures of this story is a woman named Helena Gilkerson. She was the daughter of Charles Adkins, known as Blind Charles because he became blind at some point in his life. Helena married Leander Gilkerson and they lived on a farm in rural Wayne County. Three Union soldiers are believed to have been killed, buried, exhumed, and then hidden in a cave on part of the farm that has been passed-down through the Adkins family.

John Costallo, John Cerbe, and William Collins were shot in rural Appalachia during the Civil War (Southern Chivalry, 1863). They were Union soldiers and two of them were Zouaves. Inspired by French military forces, the Zouave units in the American Civil War period were known to boast flamboyant and brightly colored uniforms (Smith and Youngusband, 1996). They were also great entertainers who perfected spectacular displays of military drills and ceremonies. Their skills were little more than fancy dancing and they paled in comparison to the guerrilla warfare tactics adopted by rural Appalachians. As the three Union soldiers advanced within the Beech Fork area, they encountered a brazen group of rebel forces who were able to seize control of the situation and ultimately kill the Union forces. The events surrounding the deaths are obscure, controversial, and mysterious. Many of the facts have been lost in time. However, some written evidence remains and a strong family tradition of passing down stories through oral histories has allowed for new investigative insight into the circumstances and locations associated with key events that occurred in 1861.

METHODS

This investigation included a literature review, interviews with a relative of Helena Gilkerson, and fieldwork at the Zouave Caves. The combination of data gathered from these activities contributes to the body of academic knowledge regarding the deaths of the three soldiers and informs the historical narrative. The goal of this research was to gain a better understanding of the state of existing research concerning the three soldiers and offer recommendations for efforts to bring closure to the mystery involving where they were finally buried.

A literature review was conducted to determine the state of existing research. Two newspapers from the Civil War era published accounts of the killing of the three Union soldiers (Murder of Two of Piatt's Zouaves, 1862; Southern Chivalry, 1863), other written accounts exist (Frye, 2002; The Fight at Barboursville, n.d.), and a few researchers have discussed the Zouaves in recent years (Geiger, 1991; Lowry and Cohen, 2000; Dickinson, 2003). This manuscript presents a literature review encompassing the existing research and focuses on block quotations from the authors to provide the first holistic account of the historical records. Since very little information has been published concerning this topic, the use of block quotes allows readers to gain a complete understanding of the historical narratives.

Rayburn Adkins was invited to participate in a series of interviews because he is a relative of a key person associated with the historical narrative, information has been passed to him through a family tradition of oral history, and because he knew the location of the Zouave Caves. He was interviewed on June 8, 2018, June 29, 2018, and July 28, 2018 using a semi-structured interview format where I invited him to tell the story of the Zouave Caves and I asked him a series of follow-up questions based on information gained through the literature review and other spoken accounts. This process followed Seidman's (1991) three step interview process. The first interview focused on gathering biographical information, kinship data, and establishing a rapport. The second interview focused on gathering a detailed account of the narrative associated with the Zouaves. The third interview served as a reflective exercise reexamining and clarifying the data gathered.

The actual site of the Zouave caves was also examined on June 8, 2018, June 29, 2018, and July 28, 2018. An effort was made to identify the global positioning system (GPS) coordinate associated with the site, gain a directional orientation of the site through the use of a compass, measure key rock features using a surveying tape, produce imagery of the site, and take field notes which included a sketch of the main features. The goal of gathering such data was to compile enough information to provide a description of the main rock features and produce a video.

LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the most detailed accounts of the incident was published in the February 22, 1862 edition of the New York Illustrated News (Murder of Two of Piatt's Zouaves, 1862). Sergeant J.F.C. Hillen of Piatt's Zouaves produced a sketch (below) of the incident and it was published in the paper. It shows a Zouave soldier lying dead on the ground and a second Zouave tied to a tree. Three men are shown firing rifles at the Zouave tied to the tree while four other men stand closely behind the shooters.



Figure 1: Sketch by J.F.C. Hillen

The article provided the following information:

An obliging correspondent, writing to us from Camp Toland, Barboursville, Va., Jan. 16, 1862, says: I have just returned with J.F.C. Hillen from the spot represented. The sketch of the scenery is very accurate. The circumstances of this cruel murder are these:

A few days ago, John Costallo and John Cerbe, Co D, with a loyal Virginian named Collins, attached to Co. G as a guide, were sent after a detachment of 2nd loyal Virginia calvary, whom our colonel desired to be nearer our lines; when about 16 miles from camp they suddenly came upon a party of rebel militia, who fired, wounding the Virginia guide.; Costallo and Cerbe instantly returned the fire, but before they could reload, they were overpowered and taken to a Mrs. Gilkinson's. Next morning the rebels consulted upon the disposal of their prisoners; some were for sending them to Richmond, some to their own headquarters, at Logan C.H., some for killing them, and Mrs. Gilkinson, to the eternal disgrace of Southern female friends, wished one to be killed on her porch, so that she could dance in his blood.

The killing was done in the following manner, communicated to me by H. Mays, in our hospital, a short time before he died, from a wound he had just received while attempting to escape from the guard-house. These are his dying words:

In the morning we took one up the run, a quarter of a mile from Mrs. Gilkinson's Mill, tied his legs, and fixed him to a tree. Bill Prichet, Lew Prichet, Isam Miller, and Stevens walked off a piece, and shot at him till they killed him. *Question.* Did you shoot? *Answer.* No, I and three others stood by; we all went back to Mrs. Gilkinson, got the other Zouave, brought him up the run, and he was killed. *Q.* Did you try to prevent them being shot in this manner? *A.* Yes. *Q.* Did either of the poor fellows say anything while they were being so slowly and cruelly murdered? *A.* Yes; for as we took the last one up the run, past the first one shot, who lay at the tree, he stopped, looked at the dead body, and said: Oh, God! don't murder me that way; I can die like a soldier, but for God's sake, don't murder me, shoot me here! And he unbuttoned his Zouave jacket, and tore open his shirt. *Q.* Did you not persuade your men to have mercy, and grant the poor fellow his wish? *A.* Yes; I said I would see him safe to Logan; but they fixed him to a tree, and shot him. *Q.* How many times was he hit before he died? *A.* They had about three shots apiece at him. *Q.* Did most of the balls hit him? *A.* Yes. *Q.* Did they shoot him after he was dead? *A.* No. *Q.* What became of Collins, the Virginian? *A.* They kept teasing him up at Mrs. Gilkinson's till near noon, then took him away up the run, and killed him. I did not shoot once; all the shooting was done by the two Prichets, Miller, and Stevens. Prichet said they were to see who could hit nearest his heart without killing him. *Q.* How many times do you think the boys were hit? *A.* All the men shot 3 times; they hit every time. My name is Mays. I live on the Beech Fork. It is true.

The wretch soon died. Since writing the above our scouts have returned. They have killed Lew Prichet, and got thirteen prisoners, amongst whom we are in hopes to find all the abettors in the above horrible affair. (p. 250)

The February 7, 1863 edition of the Harper's Weekly newspaper (Southern Chivalry, 1863) reprinted most of the story from the New York Illustrated News (Murder of Two of Piatt's Zouaves, 1862). The Harper's Weekly centerfold shows a spectacle of sketches covering wartime atrocities. The upper left corner displays an image of the murder of the Zouaves with the caption "Murder of two of Piatt's Zouaves, 34th Ohio" (Southern Chivalry, 1863, p. 88). The left side of the drawing shows five armed men standing together with two of the men pointing their rifles toward a Zouave soldier tied to a tree on the right side of the sketch. A dead Zouave soldier can be seen lying on the ground, face up, between the shooters and the tied Zouave.

Marshall University's special collections are housed in the Morrow Library located in Huntington, WV. One of their collections consists of the Fred B. Lambert Papers. Lambert was a local historian and genealogy enthusiast who collected and produced a wide variety of historical documents. One such document, titled *The Fight at Barboursville* (n.d.) contains perspectives of Civil War veterans describing the war as it related to their local community (including one by William L. Johnson). The origin, author, date, and full context of the manuscript is ambiguous. However, it may be a transcript of a newspaper article because the cover of the notebook containing the manuscript is labeled "Ironton Register- Civil War Articles, Some Missing, Huntington Advertiser 1875". *The Fight at Barboursville* (n.d.) manuscript contains a typed account of the incident involving the Zouaves and this account has been cited by other researchers (Geiger, 1991; Dickinson, 2003; Lowry & Cohen, 2000). Although the full bibliographic context of the manuscript is unclear, *The Fight at Barboursville* (n.d.) conveyed the following description of the killing of the three Union soldiers:

Two zouaves and Bill Collins were murdered, on Beech Fork, on Leander Gilkerson's farm, (now and then). Robert Mays and I were on Robert Adkins' farm, and heard the bushwhackers halt these men. Collins lived on Madison Creek. Eight or nine of crossed the hill, and saw two of them dead and the third man wounded. When we got in sight, and saw the bushwhackers dressed in the blue uniforms which they had taken from the Zouaves, George saw that we were about to shoot at him and his companions, and he said 'Boys, don't shoot; these are our boys.'

We went on, and saw the wounded man, and they said they had sent two more to headquarters. Robert Mays was displeased and said he wanted them buried right, and the bushwhackers agreed to let all the men there look at them. We found them buried behind a root and covered up with leaves and chunks. We then buried them in the same place, a little better, and came on down and found a wounded man guarded under a beech tree.

We started from there, and they said they were going to take him to headquarters. He was a zouave. I told them they had killed a man with whom I had slept many times. Stevens said: 'How come you so sharp?' We passed on two hundred yards, and I heard a gun fire. I started home and met the guards of the wounded man without their prisoner. The Zouaves were carrying a dispatch to or from Wayne Court House, to order back a scouting party of sixty, because news had come that Ferguson was in Wayne, with his company. This is what the wounded man said and proved it, by a letter. The Zouaves came after the bodies, and were directed to the spot, by Randolph Adkins and Ira, but they were gone. Robert Mays was accused of this – ran and was shot. He was innocent;

he was two miles away. They were trying to make him tell the facts, but he did not know them. After seeing the bodies, he walked the floor, and cried and sang. (p. 1-2)

Joe Geiger (1991) offered the following account of the murder of three Civil War soldiers who were members of the Union forces:

One Confederate, John D. Mays, was captured and sent to prison. It is possible that the Union troops involved in this brief encounter were members of the 34th Ohio. William L. Johnson, who fought with the militia in Barboursville, recounted after the war the story of two members of the 34th who were killed while the regiment was stationed in Cabell County... This incident occurred on December 18, 1861. The two soldiers of the 34th Ohio Infantry who were murdered on Beech Fork were John L. Cerbe and John Castelow, both of from Company D. William Collins of Cabell County had enlisted in Company G of the 34th less than a week before he was killed. (p. 62)

Jack Dickinson (2003) is an author, historian, and Bibliographer of the Rosanna Blake Confederate Collection at Marshall University's Morrow Library. His insight into the Zouaves was based on direct access to historical records and oral history data. Dickinson's (2003) research helped to clarify the location where the incident occurred and publish the story of the Zouave Caves. His (2003) account follows:

In December of 1861 there occurred one of the controversial incidents of the war. The controversy is not over the circumstances of the incident itself, but over where the incident occurred. In October of 1861 the 34th Infantry (US) set up their winter camp at Barboursville, in Cabell County. This unit had adopted the Zouave uniform, and the men were known as 'Piatt's Zouaves.' They were routinely on patrol combing the countryside for Confederates. On one of these forays, three men of the regiment were captured. They were Privates John Crebe and John Castelow, both of Company D, and William Collins of Company G. Collins was a new recruit from Cabell County... The controversy has arisen over the exact location of this incident. When the New York Illustrated News published an account, they gave the location as Cabell County. William Johnson's account, however, puts it on Leander Gilkinson (Gilkerson's) farm, which was definitely on the Wayne County side. Oral tradition passed down through the Gilkerson family states that when the bodies of the executed soldiers were moved, they were dropped down a pit or buried in a nearby cave, which is today known as the 'Zouave Cave.' The other part of the oral tradition is that the 'abuse' of a local woman is what brought on the executions. The identity of the abused woman has not survived. In early 1862, Capt. Jim Smith of the 5th WV Infantry skirmished with some of 'Jenkins' Calvary' in Logan County. He reportedly killed one of the Confederates named Stevens, who was 'one of

the party who murdered three of Piatt's Zouaves. He reportedly killed one of the Confederates named Stevens, who was 'one of the party who murdered three of Piatt's Zouaves in such a shocking manner.' This may have been Pvt. James Stevens from Wayne County, who was from Milton J. Ferguson's Company of the 16th Virginia Cavalry. (p. 82-83)

Verna Ann Frye, the Great Great Niece of Helena Gilkerson, wrote a detailed manuscript describing the Adkins Family history and copies of her manuscript were given to given to several of her family members. She spent many years researching historical facts, genealogy, public records, and published data in an effort to pass the information to future generations. Frye (2002) described the incident involving the Zouaves the following way:

This story goes back to the Civil War days when three union soldiers were killed on Beech Fork. Two of the men were called Zouave troops. Two of the men were killed first and the other man was wounded and tied to a tree before he was later on shot and killed. All three men were buried but were later removed and took to the caves that became known as the Zouave Caves. The story has been told that a Union patrol was sent out to look for the missing soldiers and looked around the area where they were buried but left after finding a dead animal nearby. The men that killed the Union soldiers got worried that the patrol might come back and find the dead men so they removed their bodies and put them across horses and took them back in the hills and threw them down in some caves. They later became known as the Zouave Caves. The location on Beech Fork where this took place was on the farm that later became known as the Harlan G. Adkins farm. (buried in our garden) Sometime later after this happened, a Union Regiment burned the house down that belonged to Leander and Helena (Adkins) Gilkerson, daughter of 'blind' Charles Adkins. The house was located on the land that is now owned by Ida and Garson Ramsey family. The adjoining farms were once the same estate owned by Leander and Helena (Adkins) Gilkerson. It has also been said that one of the men that was killed was related to my mother Geneva (Collins) Adkins. The other two were Zouaves. The Zouave Caves are located on the property now owned by Leland Hugh Adkins 'Hughie' son of Harlan G. Adkins. The caves have long since caved in and no longer exist. (p. 55)

ORAL HISTORY

I interviewed Rayburn Adkins on June 8, 2018, June 29, 2018, and July 28, 2018 to learn more about the Union soldiers killed on Beech Fork. Rayburn is the Great-Great-Great-Nephew of Helena Gilkerson and he noted the Adkins Family has a long history of passing down information through a tradition of oral history. He recalled many family members who told stories with great detail to include key dates when events occurred. The story of the Zouaves, as

it was told to him, began with the capture of Helena Gilkerson's nephew Rayfield Lenting Blankenship (known by his friends and family as Rafe). Union forces captured Rafe because he was associated with the Confederate organizers and three Union soldiers were escorting Rafe to an encampment in Barboursville. However, Rafe convinced his captors to stop at his Aunt Helena Gilkerson's house so he could tell her where he was being taken. Once the party arrived at Helena's house, the Union forces were immediately confronted with gunfire because family members "came out shooting." One Union soldier was killed during the initial firefight and the other two Union soldiers fled the scene. The second soldier was shot at a creek-crossing and the third soldier was captured near the Rife Schoolhouse and later shot via a summary execution while tied to an elm tree. The bodies were buried in a temporary grave on Helena Gilkerson's farm but later removed and reburied in the location that became known as the Zouave Caves. Gerard Adkins was one of the family members who was believed to help move the bodies to the caves. I asked Rayburn why Frye (2002) believed the caves had "caved in and no longer exist" (p.55). He noted that the part of the actual Zouave Cave was previously much deeper than it is today and older family members spoke of throwing rocks down a hole in part of the cave to see how long it took to hear the rock eventually make a splashing sound when hitting water. He believed this deep hole within the cave has filled-in through natural processes.

I asked Rayburn about the Southern Chivalry (1863) article stating "Mrs. Gilkinson, to the eternal disgrace of Southern female friends, wished one to be killed on her porch, so that she could dance in his blood" (p. 87). He said that history is often written from the perspective of the winners of a conflict. The relationship between the Harper's Weekly newspaper and the Union Army during the Civil War is similar to the relationship between Fox News and the modern Republican Party. Therefore, the article may have greatly exaggerated the facts or invented them. In any case, the Union forces in Wayne County, during the Civil War, represented a violent group of outsiders. It was common for military forces to move throughout the country and seize supplies from local people. Resistance to the whims of such forces was often met with serious consequences. Indeed, Rayburn noted during the interview and Frye (2002) described in her manuscript, an event where the home of Helena and Leander Gilkerson was burned to the ground by Union forces after the three Union troops were killed. Rayburn recalled the story by noting that Union soldiers forced Helena Gilkerson to stand on a rock in her yard, typically used as a stepping stone for mounting horses, and watch her home burn. The site where the house burnt was known to churn-up remnants burnt wheat within the plowed soil for many years following the burning of the house, presumably because of a cache of wheat stored there.

Bases on Rayburn's description, the Helena Gilkerson homestead was likely located somewhere within a 500 foot radius of GPS coordinate 38.242507, -82.311913. Helena and her husband Leander Gilkerson did not have any biological children but they raised more than a dozen kids

and passed much of the land associated with their farm on Beech Fork to members of the Harlan G. Adkins family where a new homestead was established at GPS coordinate 38.241012, -82.309539. Rayburn also mentioned that Leander Gilkerson was a Confederate organizer and he may have been imprisoned for some time during and/or shortly after the Civil War. Helena and Leander left the Beech Fork area after their home was burned and operated a boarding house in Huntington, West Virginia.

Rayburn mentioned hearing a story of a law enforcement officer, possibly a Wayne County Sheriff, who assumed responsibility for relocating the human remains buried within the Zouave Cave because people were looting the site and collecting bones for souvenirs. This may have happened during the early 1900's. This part of the oral history indicates the remaining bones were buried in an unmarked common grave within the Charles Adkins Cemetery (later renamed Mars Cemetery) located within a 200 foot radius of GPS Coordinate 38.230467, -82.312043. The cemetery site was examined on July 28, 2018 and most of the graves were distinguished by natural unmarked stones standing in vertical positions. This site is one of the oldest cemeteries in the region and only a few graves are marked using traditional masonry headstones. The cemetery itself was substantially overgrown with vegetation and battered by fallen trees.

FIELD INVESTIGATION

The location of the Zouave Caves is well known among members of the Adkins family and other members of the surrounding community. Rayburn Adkins escorted me to the site on June 8, 2018. He and others know the location because the information was passed down through the tradition of oral history. I returned there again on June 29, 2018 and July 28, 2018 to conduct fieldwork and confirm the location to be within a 100 foot radius of GPS Coordinate 38.236776, -82.299794. The fieldwork was limited to gathering descriptive data to include measurements and imagery. A video of the site was produced using a GoPro camera and published online (Adkins, 2018). No effort was made to dig at the site or enter the 12 foot deep Zouave Cave.

The site is called the Zouave Caves (plural) because the area consists of a few small caves, several rock cliffs, and some visually appealing rock formations. The actual Zouave Cave (singular) is the main cave where the bodies of the 3 Civil War soldiers were allegedly hidden. The rock formations in the area are uneven and often jagged. Due to the irregular nature of the rocks, all measurements describing the site are approximant. Efforts to measure the vertical cliffs were especially difficult due to the height of some of the formations and the limitations of not having climbing equipment. However, the site of the Zouave Caves consists of the following main features:

The most noticeable feature of the site is a large freestanding rock formation rising approximately 18 feet tall. This feature serves as a natural landmark and can be visible on satellite imagery. The West side of the rock is 13 feet wide, the South side of the rock is 41 feet across, and the Eastern side tapers to a tip measuring 1 foot wide. A dirt road, suitable for all-terrain vehicles is located on the South side of the rock.

The second noticeable feature is a large vertical rock cliff that is part of the hillside. This vertical rock cliff is located 25 feet north of the freestanding rock formation. The largest part of the vertical rock cliff is approximately 14 feet tall on its Western most edge. It stretches for 85 feet across along a general West to East axis and tapers to only about a foot tall on the far Eastern edge.

The vertical rock cliff contains a small cave formed by a section of rock that broke off from the main vertical rock cliff. The opening of the cave is 1 foot and 8 inches wide and 8 feet and 6 inches tall on the West side. The interior through-section of the cave stretches for 30 feet. The other opening of the cave is 1 foot and 4 inches wide and 7 feet tall on the East side. The cave is large enough for an average adult to pass through. The two entrances are obscured from each other when looking through the cave due to a bend at the middle point of the cave.

The most historically significant feature of the site is a large hole-like cave structure located approximately 54 feet Northwest of the freestanding towering rock formation. The large hole-like cave structure is the actual Zouave Cave where the bodies of the Civil War soldier were allegedly buried. It's exterior crack-like opening measures 24 feet wide along a West to East axis and 2 feet wide along the North to South axis. The hole itself is at least 12 feet deep and the interior of the cave widens to approximately 4 and ½ feet wide along the North to South Axis.

CONCLUSIONS

This article is the first publication to identify the location of the Zouave Caves and describe the features of the site. The oral history provided by Rayburn Adkins also serves to inform the historical narrative. The existing literature confirms three Union soldiers were killed in rural Appalachia during the Civil War (Murder of Two of Piatt's Zouaves, 1862; Southern Chivalry, 1863; The Fight at Barboursville, n.d.; Geiger; 1991, Lowry and Cohen, 2000; Frye, 2002; Dickinson, 2003). However, the final burial site for the soldiers is currently unknown because they may have been buried as many as four times. One account indicates the soldiers were initially "covered up with leaves and chunks" then reburied "in the same place, a little better" (The Fight at Barboursville, n.d., p. 2). Frye (2002) and Dickinson (2003) indicate the bodies were later placed in what became known as the Zouave Caves. The oral history provided by Rayburn Adkins suggests the bodies may have been relocated from the caves to a nearby

cemetery and placed in a common grave without an identifying headstone. Given this situation, a future effort to honor the fallen veterans by locating their final resting place is needed. John Costallo, John Cerbe, and William Collins are veterans who died serving their country. Their story is an important part of American history and their service can be honored through efforts to locate their burial site.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Additional research is needed to determine if, in fact, Civil War soldiers were buried in the Zouave Caves. Therefore, an archaeological study of the Zouave Caves is warranted to determine if sub-surface features and/or human remains exist at the site. Additionally, an effort to identify and study burial records associated with the Mars Cemetery (formerly known as the Charles Adkins Cemetery) may yield important information if such records exist. Moreover, it is possible for law enforcement records to exist if the human remains were relocated from the caves to the cemetery as described in the oral history. A robust effort to determine if such records exist is needed. Finally, the bibliographic data associated with *The Fight at Barbourville* (n.d.) manuscript should be identified to better understand the context, origin, author, and date associated with the document. A study examining all of these areas may identify the final burial place for the Union Soldiers and honor their service by offering closure to this longstanding historical mystery.

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