

# THE ASSASSINATION OF WILLIAM LETCHER

This is a letter written by Virginia Congressman John Letcher in 1856 to an unknown "Mr. Caruthers". It is evidently a reply to an inquiry about the death of William Letcher, who was a prominent Patrick County Whig and a great grandfather of J.E.B. Stuart. This tells a slightly different story from the traditional one. John Letcher was Governor of Virginia during most of the Civil War and was a nephew of William Letcher.

August 2, 1856

Mr. Caruthers:

*I received your message & in obedience to your request I venture to send you the following slight sketch of William Letcher. My materials are necessarily very scant, from the lapse of time & the absence of all letters & records of any kind whatever. But notwithstanding that I am obliged to rely upon tradition for the circumstances which I am about to relate; yet, the source from which I derive them is perfectly reliable and authentic.*

*William Letcher's parents were Irish. His father was a merchant in the City of Dublin in Ireland. He emigrated to America a long time before the Revolution, but it is not known exactly how long. He established himself as a merchant in the City of Petersburg, Virginia, where he was unfortunately burnt out by fire, & lost all his property. He had three sons and some daughters. In consequence of his losses, his sons were under the necessity of earning their support by the labors of their own hands, after having received a common English education. William Letcher was one of these sons. He left Petersburg after he was grown, and came to the county where he married Miss Elizabeth Perkins of "Perkins Ferry," not very far from Danville. He served as a volunteer in the Battle of the Shallow Ford of the Yadkin, near the little village of Huntsville. This was a battle between the Whigs and Tories in which the latter were defeated.*

*After his marriage, he wished to remove farther west. Kentucky was then the "Far West" as California and Oregon now are.*

*The Advance Guard of the Pioneers of that day went on to Kentucky; what might be determined the Rear Guard stopped, some in the Western Counties of Virginia & some at the foot of the Blue Ridge. Mr. Letcher was one of the last mentioned. He chose for his residence a spot in the southwest corner of Patrick County, Virginia called from time immortal the "Hollow." It derives its name from the circular bend which the mountain makes around it. The Blue Ridge makes a semi-circular sweep, half way around it to the west, & the Slate*

*It is well that the present generation should know the arduous struggle that their forefathers endured to secure them their present ease & security from danger. Thousands of Whigs were shot down in their own houses, or hung up in them, of whom the world has never heard, & whom very names are now forgotten. It is well that these things should be held in remembrance. Civil War may again lift up its abhorred head among us, & therefore it is well that we should count the cost, & appreciate the value of the inestimable jewel in our possession.*

*John Letcher*

This is an exact copy of a paper found in Father's private papers, written to a Mr. Caruthers. . . . August 2nd. 1856.

Virginia Lee Letcher

HAIRSTON.ORG

out of his mouth when he fell mortally wounded, shot through the body by the treacherous stranger. Ah, Who can paint the anguish of this once happy wife as she rends the air with her frantic shrieks.

The frightened negroes hearing the report of a gun in the house, rush in & surround their dying master. He lived long enough to say, "Hall is the cause of this" & soon after expired in great agony. The assassin fled immediately on the discharge of his gun; but justice overtook him speededly; he was caught in some of the lower counties of North Carolina & hung in chains. He was never permitted the honor of burial. It was said that a paper was found in his pocket, signed by a British officer, offering a reward of so many guineas for every Whig he killed. The name of this Tory was Nichols. As the news of this murder spread throughout the country, an electric thrill of horror was felt at first, & then the cry for vengeance arose. The Whigs were so much exasperated that they hung the Tories up like dogs whenever they could find them. The writer of this article was told by an eyewitness, that he saw a long string of them hung at Mt. Airy, Surry County, N. C. where Mr. Edward Bonner now lives, & that their wives being present cried and lamented the fate of their husbands; whereupon the Whigs gave them a good whipping all around for crying over such a set of rogues and murderers. Hall, the instigator of Mr. L's murder attempted to make his escape with his family to Kentucky but "vengeance is mine saith the Lord." I will repay it." And it was soon repaid; for the Indians fell upon them in crossing the ford of the Holston River and made a massacre of the whole family, men, women and little children. And the Indians fell heir to his ill-gotten wealth. Mr. Letcher left one child, a daughter, an infant of a few weeks old at the time of her father's death.

Her mother was married a second time to Col. George Hairston of Henry County, Virginia. In this gentleman the orphan found a tender father. This daughter afterwards married a gentleman by the name of David Pannill. They lived in Pittsylvania County, Virginia & died leaving only two children, a son & a daughter, one of whom lives on the spot where Mr. Letcher met his untimely fate. There are two surviving brothers of Mr. Letcher mentioned in the preceding part of this narrative; one of them settled in Kentucky & is the ancestor of Governor Letcher of that state, & the other settled in Rockbridge County, Virginia, the ancestor of Honorable John Letcher of that county. Both of these gentlemen hold a high position in society from their talent and integrity & have distinguished themselves in the Nations Councils. But the tragic end of their uncle's life is not forgotten by any of them.

He fell not on the unvanquished plain  
where victory hovers o'er the slain,  
It was a traitor's deadly blow,  
That laid his manly bosom low.

Mountain & Little Mountain on the east and south.

The Ararat with its waters, as clear as crystal, & as swift as the arrow shot from the bow, traverse this whole valley from north to south, & then empties into the Yadkin. On one of the gently swelling hills, that lifts its head on the banks of this stream, Mr. Letcher established his home in the year 1780.

With the assistance of his negros, he built his house & planted his crop.

He was blessed with a competency, which he had gained by his own industry and honesty. He brought to his house a young and beautiful bride, to whom he was devotedly attached. He looked forward to long years of happiness & usefulness in the bosom of domestic felicity & "Hope sweetly to his heart, the anthem sing." But a serpent lurked in his path for whom he felt too much contempt to take any precautions against. Mr. Letcher had frequently been warned that his life was in danger from the Tories; but being naturally fearless, & coming from the lower counties of Virginia, where there were few Tories that they dared not show themselves, he underrated the danger & laughed at fear. He had helped defeat them once, & he thought them too cowardly to attack him. He thought he could as easily brush them from his path as any other reptile or insect. He was very active in hunting them out of their hiding places & frequently would go out, alone with his gun in his hand into the most inaccessible recesses of the mountain, provisions enough cooked for twenty men, but not a creature was to be found except for one old woman, the cook, & she refused to give any information on the subject. He knew that it was for the Tories, who hid in the daytime, & then came in the hut at night & ate their meals in silence & secrecy.

About two miles below Mr. Letcher on the same stream, there lived a man by the name of Hall who was a Tory, & whose house was a rendezvous for all the Tories. They came there to hide the plunder of which they robbed the Whigs, & also to refresh themselves from their fatigues. Mr. Letcher had said that he would lose his life before they should lay a finger on his property. Hall told the other Tories of this, & of Mr. Letcher's active search for them, & also that none of that party were safe unless he (Mr. L.) was put out of the way. Mr. Letcher and his family were still unsuspecting of danger when on the morning of the 2nd Day of August, 1780 he stepped out after breakfast to look at his cornfield near the house. After a short time had elapsed a stranger presented himself at the door of the house with a gun in his hand & inquired for Mr. Letcher. Mrs. Letcher politely asked him to walk in. Whilst they were still speaking, Mr. L. entered & was in the act of handing the stranger a chair when he (the stranger) presented his gun & said, "I demand you in his Majesty's name." What do you mean by that, was the response of Mr. L., but scarcely were the words