

William A. Wilker

(- 15 Jun 1868)

The Evening Star, June 16, 1868

Suicide at the Marine Barracks

A Veteran Sergeant Shoots Himself--

Letters to his Commandant and Family

This morning about 2 o'clock, Mr. William A. Wilker, Quartermaster Sergeant United States Marine corps, committed suicide in front of the officers' quarters of the barracks, 8th street east, between G and I streets south, by shooting himself through the head with a heavy Savage revolver, large sized. Two of the watchmen at the Navy Yard -- Messrs. Overby and Batham -- in going to their homes, found his body lying on the porch, his feet resting on the door mat, and his head towards the south, and the pistol with which the deed was done lying near his right hand, with but one load discharged.

His body was taken into the barracks, and it was found that the pistol must have been placed just inside the right corner of his mouth, and the ball passed through and out the top of his head, carrying some of the brains through the crown. Subsequently the ball was found to have lodged in the top of the portico, and some of the blood and brains had been spattered there also. The deceased left the barracks on Friday last for Baltimore on business, and had not been seen since until he was found dead. He was dressed in citizens' clothes, and his clothes and boots appeared to be very dusty, as if he had been on a tramp for some time.

This morning, Justice James Lynch, of the eighth precinct, acting as Coroner, summoned a jury of inquest, before whom the following testimony was taken:

Ed. C. Thatcher, Surgeon--Witness examined the wound, and found that he put the pistol in his mouth, and the ball passed through the palate and out the top of his head.

W.H. Overby sworn--Witness is a watchman at the Navy Yard; discovered the deceased about ten minutes after two; thought it was some one drunk; saw that he was dead. Witness sounded a call, and Mr. Batham went to the station. Officers Fields and Nokes came, examined the body closely, and found that the hand grasped a piece of the stock of the pistol. Witness heard something like a report as he came up. A portion of his skull witness found near.

John Batham testified that he was with Mr. Overby, and corroborated his testimony.

Sergeant Major Dunn, sworn--Witness knew that Wilker had been away since Friday, and when awakened he went to deceased's house; asked Mrs. W. if he had been home, and received the reply that he had not. Witness thought from his position that he was facing the street when he committed the act. He was a man of temperate habits.

Lieut. Milstead testified that he found in the pockets of the deceased a small amount of money, two letters, box of cartridges, etc.

The first letter was addressed to General Jacob Zerlin, commanding Marine Corps, and is follows:

General--One of the most unfortunate men appeals to you, the appeal in this world, in behalf of his wife and children. Made reckless by the designs of that unfortunate oil company speculators, I find myself now involved beyond redemption; and unable to stand the sneeres of those who helped me on in my ruin, and too old to go to work or commence something new to support a large family, I, rather would leave this unhappy world. O! do not take the ration away from my wife, and should it be possible enlist my boys. Please, General, do so. It is I who has sinned, not they--and how I have suffered. Under a meek outside I fear Mr. ---- has a heart of flint; if otherwise, he ought to make an effort to secure for my family at least a portion of the 1,500 dollars which I only invested through his

representations. Would you please General, to show him this note. It is the last request of one now numbered with the dead. Wm. A. Wilker.

The other letter is addressed to his wife's sister "Miss Indiana Shanahan, care of Mrs. Mary A. Wilker, 418 G street, Washington, D.C." and on the inside envelope was written the following: "Read the inside letter yourself, better go away from home to do it." The letter reads:

Dear Puss--When this comes to your hand I will be no more in this world. I have been of late unfortunate in everything besides being persecuted by that detestable Major ----, who has taken the bread from the mouths of my family. I am too old for hard work or to commence something new, and it is impossible for me to stand the sneers of those who have worked my ruin. Break the sad news to Mary gently and may the Lord protect her in her hour of sorrow. O my dear children, to part from them is hard indeed. Mary will be entirely helpless; assist her in commencing a new life. I have written to Gen. Zielin to do for her all he can. You will have of course sell all you can spare and take a smaller house. I cannot say or write any more but say that the Lord may protect you.

Your unfortunate friend,

William A. Wilker

[It is but just to the officer alluded to, to state that neither he nor any other officer of the corps can stop the pay and emoluments of any enlisted man unless he is so directed by court martial, and it would appear that the deceased, in making this statement, was laboring under a wrong impression. Some months since some little difficulty occurred in regard to his intimate relations with the contractor, acting as his agent, and doubtless it was because of the action then taken by the officer he made this statement about being persecuted.]

There was among his effects a receipt of the Harnden Express Company, dated Norfolk, June 13th, for one package valued at \$100 addressed to his wife which is likely was given for his watch, which his wife received yesterday, and this would show that he must have left Baltimore last Friday evening.

The jury rendered a verdict that the deceased came to his death by his own hands, by shooting himself through the head, while laboring under a temporary depression of spirits, caused by an unfortunate speculation.

The deceased had been a sergeant in the Marines for 30 years past, and at the outbreak of the rebellion he held a similar position to the one he has held here at the Norfolk Navy Yard, but being a loyal man, when many of the marines there stationed united with the rebels, he made his way to this city, bringing nothing but his clothes, and sent for his family subsequently. He resided on E street, between 6th and 7th streets, and leaves a wife and two children--bright twin boys at 12 years of age. He was about 54 years of age, a native of Pennsylvania, and a member of Syracusan Lodge, No. 10, Knights of Pythias; Naval Lodge, No. 4, of Masons, and of the Schuetsen Verein, and among the many with whom he associated he was generally esteemed.

The Evening Star, June 18, 1868

Funeral

The funeral of Quartermaster Sergeant William A. Wilker, of the Marine Corps, took place yesterday afternoon from his late residence, on G street south, near 7th east, and was largely attended. Syracusan Lodge, No. 10, Knights of Pythias, headed by Heald's American Brass Band; Washington Naval Lodge, No. 4, F. and A.M., headed by field music from the barracks, and a committee from der Schuetzen Verein were in line. The remains were conveyed to the Congressional Cemetery, where the funeral services were conducted on the part of the Masons by W.M. James C. Dulin, and on the part of the Knights of Pythias by P.C. Clarence M. Barton.