

Reuben Abel & Wm. Sinclair

The year was 1863. The war was already two years old, and the county of Prince William was within enemy lines. As difficult as everyday life was, the friends, family and neighbors of two inmates in the state penitentiary were doing everything they could to get them pardoned. Life at the prison didn't change much during the war. It was still a place light on correction and heavy on punishment.

During an argument on August 25, 1860, Reuben Abel drew a knife, stabbed and mortally wounded Thomas Luther Abel. John Groves, James Sutherland and R. W. Wheat witnessed the fight. All agreed that Reuben Abel was the aggressor and killed an unarmed man.

Reuben was in the county jail from the night of the killing until the October 8, 1860, when he was led to the bar in the custody of the jailor only to have his case postponed. This scenario would be repeated throughout the next year at least 5 times. The absence of Eppa Hunton, the commonwealth attorney, with no replacement being available caused most of the delay. In the October Court term of 1861, he was again led to the bar in the custody of the sheriff. At this time with only a small jury pool the following jurors were selected to hear the case: John Sullivan, Thomas J. Simpson, James H. Moore, William Florance, Minor Fairfax, William H. Butler, John H. Purcell, Robert C. Weir and James Florance. After hearing the evidence the jury agreed that Reuben was not guilty of murder but was sentenced to three years in the penitentiary for voluntary manslaughter.

William Sinclair the other Prince William County inmate in the penitentiary had been there since his murder conviction in May 1858.

In October 1862 Edmund Berkeley, a major in the 8th Virginia, wrote the first of two letters, trying to gain the release of Sinclair. "I am lying here wounded near home & am harassed daily by hearing of raids made by squads of Yankees picking up our sick & wounded men through this county. They took one of our sick Lieutenants out of a bed at my house some 2 weeks ago & forced him off on horseback & he dropped from his horse & died before they had gotten 20 miles. If I could get a proper man to make up a party in these mountains I could put a stop to it completely." Berkeley went on to say that Sinclair was a very determined man and a splendid rifle shot, who could raise other mountain men to follow him. The governor took no action; therefore, in March 1863 Edmund Berkeley wrote a second letter in support of Sinclair. Berkeley pleaded his case by stating again that Sinclair is a stout able bodied man, a good rifle shot and would make a good soldier to fight his country's enemies.

In answer to the pardon of Reuben Abel, Governor Letcher wrote the following: "The prisoner is upwards of sixty years of age, badly ruptured, infirm and in ill health, and a charge upon the institution. Since his confinement his conduct as a prisoner has been good. He has four sons in our army who have proved themselves good soldiers, and who now ask for the pardon of their father. In consideration of the good conduct of the sons, the age and infirmity of the father I direct that he be discharged."

In the case of William Sinclair the only response was DENIED.

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