



THE LEGEND OF LONZ PENNINGTON

Kentucky fugitive made his mark in Johnston County history

By John A. Small
News Editor



It is the kind of story one might almost expect to find recorded in the annals of that typically mythic frontier town of Sipokni West.

Except that *this* story really happened.

Its authenticity has been borne out by research which has uncovered written evidence, in the form of several published historical narratives and an assortment of family genealogical sites on the Internet. A telephone interview with the curator of the

Muhlenberg County (Ky.) Public Library's historical annex provided additional support for the most salient features of the story.

And while the greatest part of that story took place outside Johnston County – for that matter, beyond the borders of what would one day be the state of Oklahoma – its impact upon our local history is real and lasting.

Because if not for this story, the people of Tishomingo would probably be getting their water from a different source today. Same water, but different name...

A Hanging In Christian County

The date was May 1, 1846, and the people of Christian County, Ky., had gathered to watch what the history of that area records as the first legal hanging in the county – and the first public execution of a convicted white man in western Kentucky.

The condemned man was no stranger to folks in the area. Most knew him simply as “Lonz,” born in 1811, the younger of two sons of a wealthy and influential resident who, among other things, had once served as the local high sheriff and justice of the peace.

Lonz had been convicted of murder following a manhunt that extended down into Texas and finally ended in the Chickasaw District of the Choctaw-Chickasaw Nation, Indian Territory. One report published years later would claim that the case actually made national headlines for some months, even going so far to say that it had been “analogous to the 1932 Lindbergh kidnapping.”

Though still a popular topic of discussion today in Christian County, Ky., the story of Lonz's capture and hanging has been forgotten in the area where his flight from justice actually ended. The only reminder can be found in the fact that his name came to be used by local settlers of the time to designate the location where the capture occurred.

That particular incident took place at the banks of Pennington Creek near Tishomingo.

And “Lonz's” full name, as it happens, was Edward Alonzo Pennington.

The Fiddling Gambler

According to an article penned by Kentucky historian William Henry Perrin in 1884, Edward Alonzo Pennington “was intelligent, shrewd, of fine appearance, well educated, and with his natural faculties trained almost to the perfection of the scent of the Siberian bloodhound.” Thanks to the education provided by his wealthy father, he was also a proficient musician with a fondness for playing the fiddle.

But he was also said to be ambitious and quite ruthless, with a passion for gambling – particularly horse racing. He married young and settled on a farm in the northeastern part of Christian County, where he reportedly built his own race track and took to associating with men who, in Perrin's words, “were not of the highest order.”

Perrin and other historians relate that Pennington would often make frequent trips up into Illinois – often remaining away from home for weeks at a time – under the pretext of buying horses. Initially few doubted the honesty of his transactions, as he always came back with a number of horses, some of which he kept while the others were driven south to be sold to planters and traders.

In time, however, rumors began to surface about the real nature of Pennington's “business travels.” Some noted that his travels south to sell horses seemed to coincide with the disappearance from the area of young Negro boys “who were never heard of afterward,” presumably sold into slavery. Others noticed that every time Pennington returned from Illinois, a shower of counterfeit money soon followed.

Some eventually began to suspect that Pennington and some of the men with whom he associated were members of that group of lawless characters known to gather at Cave-In Rock in southern Illinois. Today a popular state park – and best known to pop culture historians as the site where scenes from Walt Disney's *Davy Crockett And The River Pirates* and the classic MGM western *How The West Was Won* were filmed – this picturesque locale on the banks of the Ohio River first gained fame as a haven for an assortment of bandits and pirates between the 1790s and the 1870s.

“They counterfeited, stole horses, robbed and murdered with impunity,” Perrin wrote of those who used the area as their stronghold throughout this lawless period. “The whole Western frontier was flooded with spurious gold and silver coins and bank bills, until it became known far and wide as ‘Cave-In Rock Money.’”

Despite the suspicions, however, no public accusations were made against Pennington during this period. By all accounts he was shrewd enough to cover his trail; on those occasions when his business dealings resulted in some form of litigation, his knowledge of the law – and his ability to gather “the right kind of evidence” – usually won him an easy victory.

But Pennington's fortunes changed when he encountered Simon Davis...

“A Man Of Good Character...”

While the various accounts of the Pennington story by Perrin and others differ slightly in some specifics, there are certain details in which they all agree. One of those details all seem to agree upon is that Simon Davis was a man of good character.

Davis was an Irish stonemason who arrived in Hopkinsville



some time in 1838 or '39 and married Elvira Pyle, one of three orphans raised by a local Baptist minister. Elvira had inherited some land from her natural father, and she and Davis settled there to make their home. According to Charles M. Meacham's 1930 book *Meacham's History Of Christian County Kentucky*, the property in question was described as “a few acres of corn and oats just planted, a sorrel mare and two other head of stock, some farm tools and a Negro girl slave valued at \$300.”

In April of 1845, Elvira Pyle Davis died without children, and her inheritance passed by law to her legal heirs. Meacham's book states that, a few days after Elvira's death, “the Negro girl ran off and went to another claimant, and there came to be unfriendly contention between Davis and his wife's relatives over the slave girl and the farm.”

In mourning, nearly broke and anxious to put the tragedy behind him and get on with his life, Davis went into town on May 8, 1845, with the intent of trying to dispose of his holdings; he stated that he was going to leave the county and resume working as a stonemason. According to Meacham, Davis had found a man named Bradley who agreed to pay him \$150 for the girl whose ownership was under dispute; Bradley paid \$75 upfront and agreed to give a note for the rest.

Meacham's book reports that Davis and Pennington – who had learned of Davis' situation – were both seen together at the annual muster for that part of the county, which was held the following day at the Pleasant Hill Church. At some point, the story goes, Pennington had agreed to pay Davis \$300 for all of his property, declaring he would “go to law to hold it.” Pennington had reportedly also met with Bradley, who “agreed to take \$20 profit and give up the girl.”

Bradley and others would later testify that they had seen Pennington and Davis leaving the muster together – Pennington having apparently told Davis that he would have to go to his father's home to get the money needed to complete that transaction, thereby allowing Davis to leave the county sooner than originally planned.

It was the last time Simon Davis was seen alive...

The Search For Simon's Killer

Lonz Pennington took charge of the Davis farm and everything on it. The fate of the runaway Negro girl is unknown, but Pennington is said to have told townsfolk that Davis had gone off to some town in Illinois.

The story Pennington told had it that Davis had departed Christian County riding on the back of his blaze-faced sorrel mare. Had it not been for that particular detail, the story might have ended there. But a few months later another resident, apparently familiar with the horse in question, reported having seen the mare in the possession of a man named C.F. Cisney in a neighboring county.

Cisney (spelled “Cessna” in Perrin's version of events) had been one of the men seen with Pennington at the Pleasant Hill muster, along with another man named Sheffield. Upon hearing that he'd been seen with Davis' horse, the suspicions of some in the community were raised anew; soon one of those residents, a Colonel James Robinson, called a meeting of his neighbors at the Antioch Church with the intent of launching an organized investigation.

Committees were formed, one of which was dispatched to search for and arrest Cisney. Shortly thereafter Cisney was taken into custody, brought before a magistrate in Hopkinsville and searched; when no incriminating evidence was found on his person he was kept under guard for two days, but made no confession.

On July 12 another meeting was held at the Antioch Church, attended by men not only from Christian County from neighboring Hopkins, Todd and Muhlenberg counties. These men formed a group that was initially known as the “Safety Society,” but later referred to as the Regulators.

“They were organized to enforce the law and not to encourage the mob spirit,” Meacham wrote. “There was a membership fee of one dollar, to provide a fund for pursuing criminals where necessary.”

Cisney was brought before the group during the July 12 meeting, but he still refused to talk. The same committee which had taken him into custody brought him out into the woods; two of those men rode off into the bushes and came back soon afterward with some stout hickory switches, which they laid at Cisney's feet.

Then they produced a rope, and Cisney had a sudden change of heart. “Tears rolled down his pallid cheeks, and voluntarily he agreed to talk,” Meacham reported.

Cisney told the men that he had been with Pennington and Davis when they left the muster, and that he had held their horses while Pennington and Davis had stopped at one point to talk. It was then, Cisney said, that Pennington had struck Davis with a heavy stick and killed him, then threw the body into a cave in the forest not far from the Greenville road.

He directed the group to the cave, where Davis' body was indeed found; at that point Cisney was returned to town and

placed in the local jail. The group then rode to Pennington's home, where his wife informed them that Pennington had gone to Paducah for some horses and would be returning soon, so the Regulators sent out another group to meet him as he returned.

As it happened, Pennington had taken a different route and was met by a man named Gordon, who informed him that Davis' body had been found and that Cisney had blamed him for the murder. Pennington rode on to his home and, finding it guarded, managed to sneak into his pasture just long enough to change horses, then rode away into the night.

The search for Pennington continued in the area for several days before finally being abandoned. The regulators had no way of knowing at that point that he had headed toward the Mississippi River, where he reportedly caught a boat and eventually made his way to Texas...

Enter The Bourland Brothers

On July 26, 1845, Edward Alonzo Pennington was indicted for the murder of Simon Davis, with Cisney named as an accessory. Not long afterward, Cisney managed to escape and was never recaptured.

The Regulators maintained their organization but found little to do, the community having settled into a period of law-abiding order and quietude. Governor Gabriel Slaughter offered a reward for Pennington's capture; but it would be another six months before the next chapter in the story would be written, courtesy of a man named Col. William Bourland.

In January, 1846, Bourland – a former Kentuckian who now lived in Texas and had recently been defeated in his bid to be elected to the Congress of that recently admitted state – returned to Christian County to visit his brother, Dr. Reece Bourland. It was during this visit that he learned of the Davis murder; William Bourland had known Pennington and told his brother of an occasion during his campaign when he thought he had seen Pennington in a small town in Lamar County, Texas.

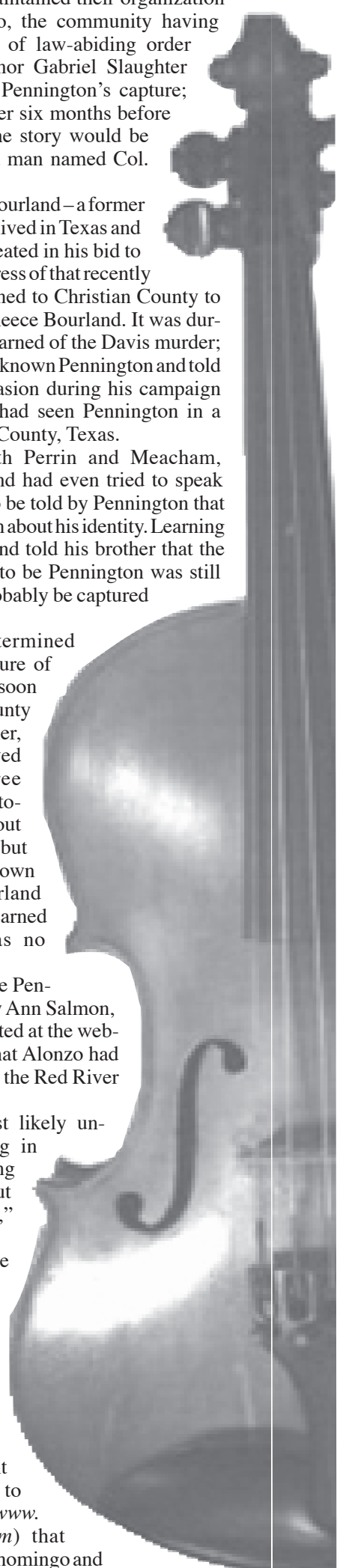
According to both Perrin and Meacham, Congressman Bourland had even tried to speak to Pennington, only to be told by Pennington that Bourland was mistaken about his identity. Learning of the reward, Bourland told his brother that the man he had believed to be Pennington was still in Texas and could probably be captured with little difficulty.

The brothers determined to undertake the capture of Lonz Pennington and soon set out for Lamar County – where another brother, James Bourland, served as sheriff. The three brothers quickly put together a posse and set out to capture the fugitive; but when they reached the town where William Bourland had seen him they learned that Pennington was no longer in the area.

A descendent of the Pennington family, Nancy Ann Salmon, wrote in an article posted at the website *Genealogy.com* that Alonzo had left Texas and crossed the Red River into Indian Territory.

“Alonzo was most likely uneasy about remaining in the same place too long and decided to hide out among the Choctaw,” she wrote.

Although at least one version of the story states that Pennington was recaptured while still in Texas, most accounts agree that the capture actually took place in Indian Territory. In fact, it is one such account on a website devoted to the Bourland family (www.bourlandcivilwar.com) that specifically names Tishomingo and



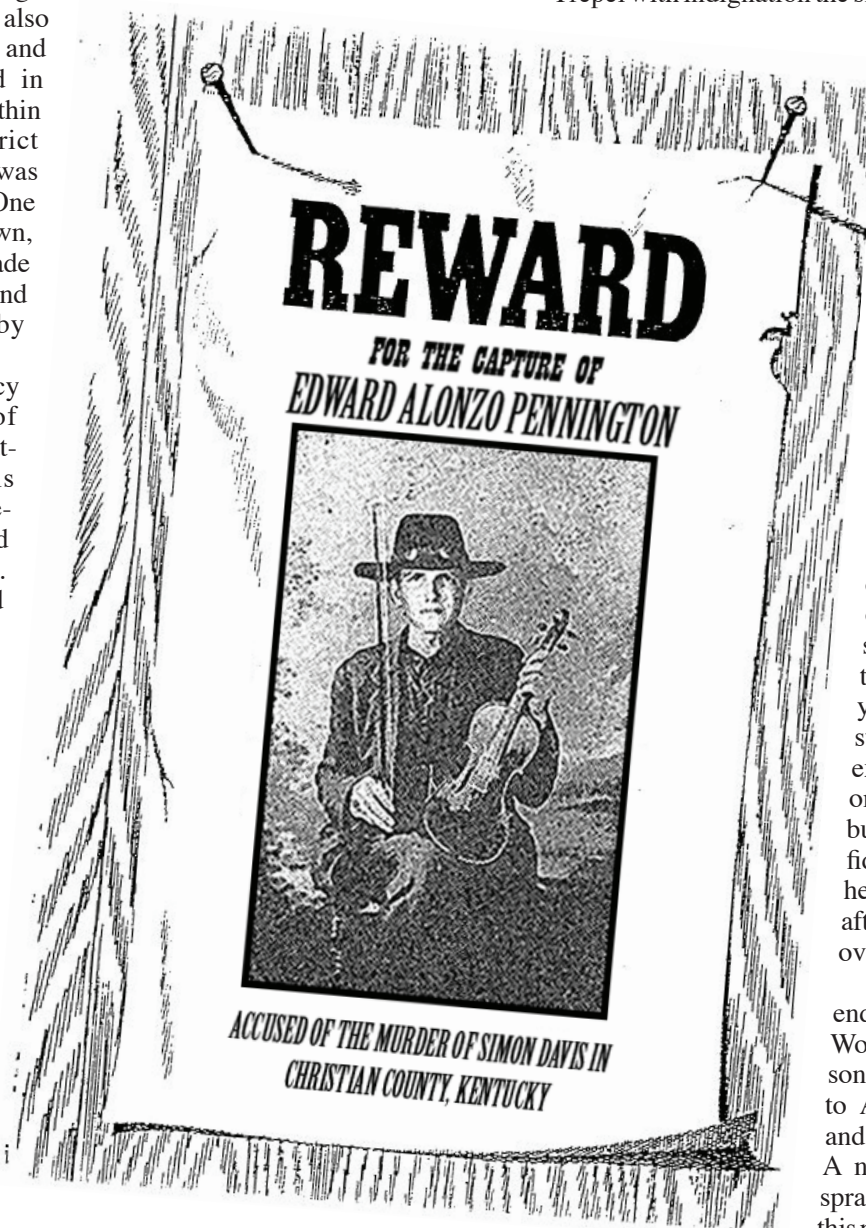
Pennington Creek as the site of his capture.

That website also mentions the involvement of yet another member of the family, a Reuben Bourland of Doaksville, I.T. It is the only account found by the *Capital-Democrat* to date in which Reuben is mentioned by name.

The various accounts appear to agree that, upon learning of Pennington's flight north, the Bourlands also crossed the river north and eventually succeeded in locating the house within the Chickasaw District in which Pennington was said to be staying. One morning just before dawn, the Bourland group made a rush on the house and caught Pennington by surprise.

According to Nancy Salmon's version of events, Pennington "attempted to draw his pistol but saw that resistance was useless and surrendered himself. In fact, he professed himself to be thankful that a man of Dr. Bourland's stature had found him."

Other accounts state that Pennington was playing the fiddle for a group of local Indians whom he had befriended at the time of his capture, and that the Indians agreed to release Pennington into the posse's custody only after receiving assurances from the Bourlands that Pennington would receive a fair trial.



Back To Kentucky

With Pennington now in their custody, the Bourland posse first crossed the river back into Lamar County, then from there traveled by horseback to Shreveport, La. Upon the group's arrival in Shreveport, Pennington is said to have refused to dismount and instead began to harangue the crowd with loud cries of his innocence. As the accused murdered pled for intervention from the public, he was forcibly removed from his horse and carried aboard the steamship *Yazoo*, where he was placed under close guard for the trip back to Kentucky.

One day during the trip a terrible storm blew up on the Red River, causing much noise and confusion among the passengers as the ship lurched about on the choppy waters. Pennington took advantage of this confusion and tried to escape, positioning himself on his bed so that his head was on the pillow, his back against the wall and his feet up against the ceiling. He struck his feet against the ceiling several times and nearly succeeded in kicking a hole before one of his guards caught him in the act.

When questioned, he claimed that the closeness of his confinement had made him stiff and sore, and that he was only attempting to stretch himself for relief.

On March 14, 1846, Alonzo Pennington was finally returned to Hopkinsville and placed in the county jail, where he remained for the next 47 days. The Bourland family website states that Dr. Reece Bourland collected the \$1,000 bounty that had been placed on Pennington's head, but does not indicate whether or not he shared the reward with any of the brothers who assisted him on his quest, which had reportedly taken 54 days and 3,200 miles to accomplish.

Pennington was formally charged with the murder of Simon Davis and his trial proceedings began soon afterward. He hired James F. Buckner, a noted attorney in the area, to serve as his defense attorney; Buckner put forth a spirited but ultimately doomed fight on behalf of the accused, and for his troubles received a number of death threats during the trial from residents who were convinced of Pennington's guilt and were determined to see him pay.

In a lengthy statement later quoted in its entirety in Perrin's 1884 article, Buckner recalled that he had warned beforehand against representing Pennington.

"As I walked down the street with Pennington's wife, who was a lady above reproach and knew nothing of her husband's free-booting proclivities, I was halted on every side and warned to keep out of the case," Buckner recalled. "I told them that any criminal was entitled to a trial, and if Pennington did not employ counsel the court would appoint someone to defend him, and I was not going to ask the public for permission to defend a man in a court of justice."

"...On The Side Of Mercy"

The trial of Edward Alonzo Pennington lasted three days, most of which reportedly consisted of prosecutor John McLarning parading a number of witnesses providing mostly circumstantial evidence.

Several of those witnesses described having seen Pennington and Davis together at the Pleasant Hill muster. Richard Bradley told of having purchased the Negro girl for \$150 in Pennington's presence. Several who had been present when Davis' body was found provided details of the discovery, while another man told of Pennington coming to his mother's home the night of the murder and spending the night.

At one point a man named Davis Compton told of a conversation he'd had with Pennington a week before the body was found, in which Pennington had reportedly asked if Compton had heard stories about his supposedly having killed Simon Davis; when Compton admitted that he had, Pennington supposedly responded that he had recently seen Davis building a chimney in Clarksville.

According to Meacham, those witnesses called by the defense "testified about unimportant details." Pennington himself was not called to testify. When the time came to make closing arguments, prosecutor McLarning's was brief and to the point; he reviewed the chain of evidence, quoted the law, and asked for conviction.

Buckner's closing argument was another matter altogether. According to Meacham, Buckner "expressed his embarrassment at being in a case so unpopular, spoke of the excitement and prejudice against his client, spoke of the danger of convicting on circumstantial evidence alone, reviewed the evidence, pointed out some discrepancies in it, quoted Latin phrases, charged that Cisney may have killed Davis himself, asked for sympathy for

Pennington's good wife who sat by him, and concluded by saying, 'If you err let it be on the side of mercy.'"

McLarning replied briefly, first complimenting Buckner for his diligence in representing his client. He then denounced Buckner's comments regarding public prejudice against Pennington, denying accusations of a "lynch law" mentality.

"I repel with indignation the slanderous charge that such intentions and feelings ever did exist to any extent in Christian County," McLarning announced.

And with that the judge turned the case over to the jury, which wasted little time in declaring Pennington guilty. Sentence was pronounced on April 6; Pennington was to be hanged on May 1.

Pennington's Farewell

There's an old legend out of Scotland about an outlaw named MacPherson, who was hanged in the town of Banff in the year 1700. The legend states that, just before his execution, MacPherson sat on the coffin that had been built for him, playing his fiddle and singing a song he had composed himself; afterwards he broke the fiddle over his knee.

Like so many other legends and tales from the Old World, the story of "MacPherson's Farewell" made its way to America to become part and parcel of local tradition. A number of similar stories sprang up in the early days of this nation, with different variations reported to have occurred

in various locations ranging from West Virginia to Oregon; many of these tales were later collected by UCLA professor D.K. Wilgus in a 1965 paper entitled "The Hanged Fiddler Legend in Anglo-American Tradition."

One of those tales recounted by Wilgus – confirmed both by Nancy Salmon's genealogical article and by information provided to the *Capital-Democrat* by Coni Wallace of the Muhlenberg County (Ky.) Library History Annex – revolves around the hanging of Alonzo Pennington.

It is generally believed that Pennington – a highly educated man, and a talented fiddler into the bargain – was familiar with the "Hanged Fiddler" tale and, in a final expression of theatricality, chose to bring the story to vivid life on that final day of his own.

"He made certain that people would remember him, as if it were not already a certainty," Wallace said in a recent telephone interview.

The story has it that, during that period between April 6 and May 1, Pennington wrote his last will and testament in his jail cell and in other ways prepared for the end. In the morning hours of May 1, he was formally led from his cell to the place of execution; a wooden beam placed across two oak trees held the knotted rope in readiness.

"He was asked his final request, and he wished to play his fiddle for the crowd," Salmon wrote. "He performed a rather plaintive melody called 'Pennington's Farewell,' complete with words he had written himself."

Other accounts suggest that Pennington's fiddle tune was strictly an instrumental piece, and that the words recalled by Salmon's version

of events were in fact a rhyme which Pennington recited to the crowd after he had finished playing.

Wallace was able to provide the C-D with a copy of that rhyme, which were also recorded in a chapter about the hanging by Kentucky historian Otto Arthur Rothert in his book *A History Of Muhlenberg County*:

"Oh, dreadful, dark and dismal day,

How have my joys all passed away!

My sun's gone down, my days are done,

My race on earth has now been run."

Students of music history may recognize the couplet as a standard "goodnight" form typical of 17th century ballads. According to Wilgus, it is also the opening stanza of an early American folk song entitled "Frankie Silvers," about a North Carolina murderess who was hanged in 1833.

Such facts would appear to reinforce the argument that Pennington was familiar with such tales and decided to put them to his own use on the day of his execution.

Justice Served

With what some today might call the "pre-show entertainment" now completed, it was time for the main event: the execution of Edward Alonzo Pennington. J. Milton Clark, the acting sheriff of Christian County at the time, bestowed upon jailer Newton Allen the responsibility of carrying out the execution.

Allen placed the rope around Pennington's neck and placed the condemned man over the trap that would launch him to his just reward. But being a man of kindly feelings, Allen found that the thought of actually sending a man to his death made him physically ill; when the time came to actually do the job, he wasn't sure he could and at one point asked that the respon-

sibility be turned over to one of Clark's deputies.

In the end, however, the jailer managed to overcome any misgivings and discomfort, and stepped forward to fulfill his responsibility. Allen sprang the trap, the trap dropped...

...And the rope broke. It had to be done all over again.

While the rope was being readjusted, Meacham's account relates, Pennington addressed the crowd again, once more professing his innocence and declaring that it had indeed been Cisney who had actually murdered Simon Davis.

But his pleas fell upon deaf ears. The rope was placed around his neck again, and the second fall was effective. Lonz Pennington was dead.

The Legacy

In the years following Pennington's execution there were at least two books written about his flight from justice and eventual recapture and execution.

The first appeared in 1846, not long after the execution had been carried out. This 80-page account – published under the unwieldy title *The Life, Flight, Capture, Trial and Execution of Edward Alonzo Pennington, the Murderer of Simon Davis* – was published in Cincinnati, Ohio, and was purported to be written by none other than Pennington himself.

Wallace, for one, doesn't believe Pennington was actually the author.

"I doubt it very much," Wallace told the *C-D*. "For one thing, it just doesn't read like a genuine first-hand account. And it is presented as a confession, when in fact Pennington was still arguing that he was innocent on the day he was executed. We don't know who the actual author is, but I'm certain it was not Lonz Pennington."

The second book, published in 1850, was a fictionalized version of events entitled *The Story Of Lonz Powers*, written by a young attorney from nearby Muhlenberg County named James Weir. An aspiring novelist, Weir had once lived in Christian County and apparently hoped his thinly disguised version might catapult him to literary fame.

It did not. While the book did generate some curiosity among local residents who were familiar with the real story, it failed to catch on with readers elsewhere. Weir was criticized both for his "bombastic, moralizing style" and for adding an entirely fictional romantic subplot that distracted from the main thread of the tale.

In addition, according to Meacham, the book was "interspersed with essays on many subjects foreign to the narrative... (the book) was of some historical interest but of little value, since the real facts were colored and distorted to conform to the ideas of an amateur novelist."

After writing two more novels which proved even less successful than *The Story Of Lonz Powers*, Weir reportedly set aside all dreams of literary immortality and concentrated on his law career. Meacham's book states that, after moving to Davies County in Kentucky, Weir "became a distinguished lawyer and lived to be an old man, prominent and highly respected."

Since then the real story of Lonz Pennington has been told and re-told by succeeding generations of Kentucky historians, and today remains as important an aspect of the history of that state's Christian and Muhlenberg counties as the life of "Alfalfa Bill" Murray or the birth of the modern Chickasaw Nation is to us in Johnston County.

Outside Kentucky, however, it quickly became just one more in a long list of obscure American folk tales, resurfacing only occasionally in such works as Wilgus' 1965 article – and even then mentioned only in passing.

This has started to change in recent years, in part due to the musical success of one of Pennington's descendants. His great-great-grandson, Eddie Pennington of Princeton, Ky., is a renowned guitarist known for his "thumb-picking" style of playing – the same style popularized by Merle Travis and later developed by such instrumentalists as Chet Atkins. His promotional literature also gives prominent mention to his infamous ancestor, the "fiddler who was unjustly convicted of a crime and played a tune as he sat on his coffin watching the hangman prepare the noose."

Eddie Pennington has played at such venues as The Kennedy Center

in Washington D.C. and the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, Ga., and in 2001 the National Endowment of the Arts honored him with its National Heritage Fellowship Award – the organization's highest award for traditional musical artists. His son, Alonzo Pennington, was named after Lonz and has become a popular fiddle player in his own right.

One Last Coincidence...

As his descendants and local historians work to keep the legend of Lonz Pennington alive, Johnston County is now able to lay claim to its own chapter of the story as the site where the fugitive – who may or may not have been guilty – was finally recaptured.

Given other legends surrounding our area – such as the tales of Belle Starr and other desperadoes having used Devil's

Den as a place to hide from the

law – it somehow seems appropriate that the creek that flows past Devil's Den into Tishomingo should have been named for such a man.

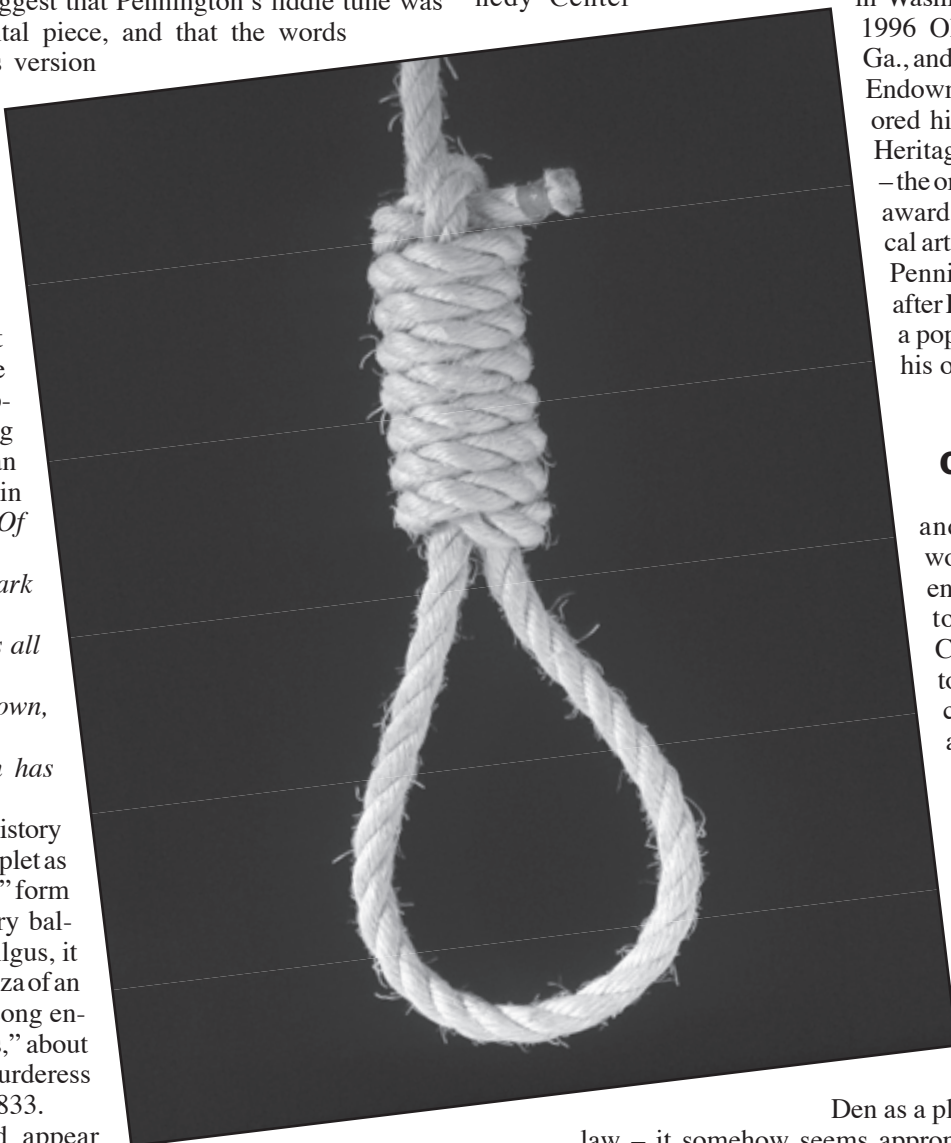
Which, at last, brings up one more interesting footnote to the story – one of those marvelous coincidences that a writer just could not make up...

At the beginning of this account mention was made of Sipokni West, the old west attraction in Reagan owned and operated by local resident Johnny Shackelford. As has been reported here many times, Sipokni West has become a popular tourist site and has been used several times for location shooting on Western film and television projects.

Well, as it happens – and this comes directly from Charles Meacham's account – the judge who presided over the trial of Edward Alonzo Pennington and ultimately sentenced him to be hanged...

...Was a man named *Shackelford*.

Now how's *that* for historical irony...?



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