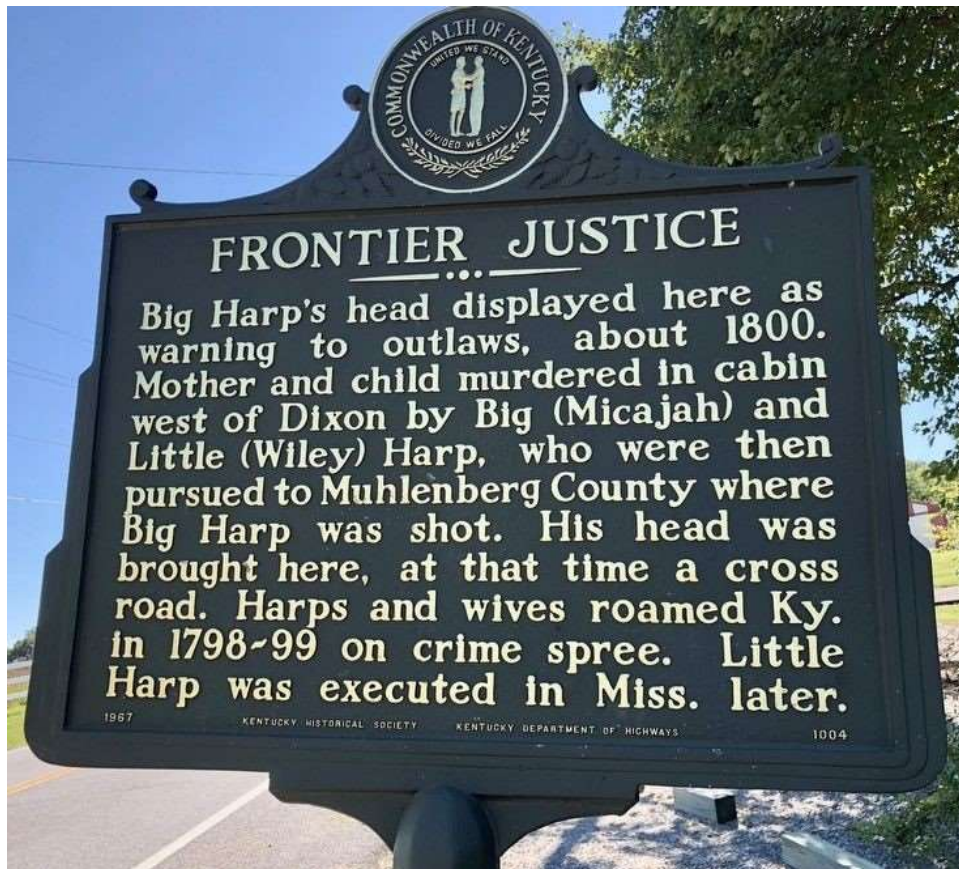


# Accounts of the Harpe Brothers

By Jerry Long  
c.2024



Marker is near Dixon, Kentucky, in Webster County. Marker is on Alternate U.S. 41, one mile south of State Route 56, on the right when traveling south. Erected in 1967 by the Kentucky Historical Society and Kentucky Department of Highways. (Marker Number 1004.)



**The Kentucky Encyclopedia, John E. Kleber, editor,  
The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, KY, 1992, p.410:**

HARPE BROTHERS. No case matches the heinous record of frontier murders committed by Micaja ("Big") and Wiley ("Little") Harpe, who killed wantonly in Kentucky, Tennessee, and Illinois in the 1790s. They were born in 1768 and 1770, respectively, in North Carolina and migrated to Beaver Creek near Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1795. There they began their bloody trail of murders on their way through Kentucky to Cave-In-Rock, Illinois. They killed young and old, male and female—even babies—and strewed human carnage along their path. On August 20, 1799, the Harpes spent the night, along with Maj. William Love, in the loft of Moses Stegall's cabin, about five miles east of Dixon, Kentucky. During the night they smashed Love's head with an ax. The next morning, they slit the throat of the Stegall baby, killed its mother, and burned the cabin. When Stegall returned, he formed a posse, and they caught Big Harpe in Muhlenberg County at a site later named Harpe's Hill. They cut off his head, brought it back to Hopkins County in a saddlebag, and impaled it on a lance at a location about three miles north of Dixon, now known as Harpe's Head. Little Harpe escaped, only to meet the hangman at Gallows Field, Jefferson County, Mississippi, on February 4, 1804.

See Otho A. Rothert, *The Outlaws of Cave-In-Rock* (Cleveland 1924).

J.T. Gooch



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 15 August 1999, pp.1A & 2A:**



State's first plagued region 200 years ago

By Keith Lawrence, Messenger-Inquirer

As he lay dying on a Muhlenberg County hillside 200 years ago this month, one of Kentucky's first serial killers had only one regret.

He had left a trail of 30 to 40 bodies - maybe more - across the Kentucky and Tennessee frontier. And for that, he expressed no sorrow.

But the man they called "Big Harpe" wished he hadn't swung his baby by the heels and bashed its head against a tree.

"It cried," he explained to the posse that surrounded him, listening to his dying words. "And I killed it. I had always told the women, I would have no crying about me."

Bob Purdy, a retired Owensboro policeman who teaches law enforcement at Owensboro Community College, says this month's bicentennial marking the end of the Harpe Brothers' reign of terror is important.

"They were Kentucky's first serial killers, and it's unique to study them as such," he said last week. "These days, we look for simple answers to violence - too much violence on TV, parental inattention, too many guns.


"But what we're experiencing today is not new. We've always had an aberrant element in society - people like the Harpes."

The Harpes may have been brothers named Micajah and Wiley. Or they may have been cousins named William and Joshua.


Historians are divided on their relationship and even their first names.  
 But they agree that Big Harpe and Little Harpe created terror on the American frontier from 1798 to 1799.

## The Harpes' Bloody Legacy In The Region

- 1 The Harpes killed three or four people at or near this infamous river pirate hideout.
- 2 After murder sprees in Tennessee and southern Kentucky, the brothers move to a cabin in Henderson County.
- 3 Three people are killed at the Stegall home— a man, woman and four-month-old baby. Two more murder victims are found along a trail the next day.
- 4 A posse catches up with Big Harpe in Muhlenberg County, then kills and beheads him. Little Harpe escapes.
- 5 The severed head is displayed on the main road three miles north of Dixon.



Micajah  
**BIG HARPE**



Wiley  
**LITTLE HARPE**

Sources: *The Outlaws of Cave-In Rock* and *Letters From The West, 1828*

Craig O'Bryan, Messenger-Inquirer

### Harpe's Head

Their names have largely been forgotten today - except for a few landmarks.  
 Legend says Tennessee's Harpeth River was named for them.

In Muhlenberg County, the spot where the posse gunned down Big Harpe 200 years ago is still called Harpe's Hill. And a state historical marker near Harpe's Head in Webster County marks the spot where the outlaw's severed head was hung in a tree as a warning to others who might follow his footsteps.

Schley Cox of Owensboro discovered the Harpes in Walt Disney's 1956 movie, "Davy Crockett and the River Pirates," when he was a kid. And he's been a serious student of their lives and crimes for the past 15 years.

Today, he's working on a novel about their exploits.

"The Green River was right on the edge of the frontier in 1799," Cox said. "This area was more of a wide-open frontier than Dodge City ever was. There was no law to speak of. And when people like the Harpes came to your neck of the woods, you either killed them or ran them out. If you ran them out, they went somewhere else and did it again."

What the Harpes did was kill - senselessly and viciously. Men. Women. Children. Even infants.

One story says in the summer of 1799, the Harpes found an African American boy riding a horse to a mill in southern Kentucky, carrying a bag of corn. They bashed his head against a tree, killing him.

And then, they rode off, leaving the corn and horse behind.

`They killed for no reason'

"They were true sociopaths," Cox said. "They killed for no reason."

There are essentially two stories about when the Harpe terror began. One problem with their history is the first real look at their lives was written by Judge James Hall of Shawneetown, Ill., in 1828 - nearly 30 years after Big Harpe's death.

And he mostly relied on the memories of witnesses.

T. Marshall Smith in 1855 wrote that the Harpes, who he said were natives of Scotland, fought on the side of the British in North Carolina during the American Revolution. He said they were in their teens in 1775 and rode in rape gangs, terrorizing women in the Carolinas.

Smith said after the Revolution, the Harpes joined a renegade band of Cherokee Indians in what is now Tennessee and attacked white settlements on the frontier.

That would have made them in their 40s in 1799. But when Kentucky posted a \$300 bounty on each of their heads that year, the wanted posters said Big Harpe was 30 or 32 and Little Harpe a few years younger.

By today's standards, Big Harpe wasn't so big. Only 6 feet tall. But Cox says the average American man in 1799 was "only a little over 5 feet tall."

Sometime between 1795 and 1797, historians agree, the Harpes turned up in what is now eastern Tennessee with three women they had kidnapped.

Sally Rice, Susan or Susanna Wood, and Maria Davidson became their common-law wives. Sally and Susan belonged to Big Harpe, Maria (also known as Betsey Roberts) was Little Harpe's. [correction by J. Long: Sally Rice was the wife of (Little) Wiley Harpe and Betsey Roberts the wife of (Big) Micajah Harpe.]

From horse thieves to killers

In 1798, a neighbor charged the Harpe's were horse thieves.

A few days later, a man's body - historians are unclear if it was the neighbor or someone else - was found in the Holstein River, ripped open and filled with rocks. The Harpes were suspected. But they fled the area before they could be charged.

On the Wilderness Road into Kentucky, they killed a pair of travelers from Maryland and then a young Virginian traveling alone.

"Record keeping was pretty poor back then," Cox said. "Reporting was even poorer. They are known to have killed 30 to 40 people. But they would field dress the body, remove the intestines and fill the cavity with rocks and then sink them in water. They also stuffed bodies in hollow trees. There's no telling how many travelers just disappeared and were never accounted for."

On Christmas Day 1798, a Kentucky posse caught the Harpes and jailed them in Danville. But they escaped March 16, leaving their pregnant wives behind in jail. The women were freed a month later.

In the spring of 1799, the Harpes killed a man near Edmondton, another on the Barren River below Bowling Green and a 13-year-old boy near Columbia.

A frontier militia launched an assault on the outlaw bands along the Green and Ohio rivers that spring, killing a dozen and driving the rest across the Ohio to Cave-in-Rock, Ill., a notorious hideout for river pirates.

Historians believe the Harpes killed three or four people in Illinois that spring.

#### Too mean for the pirates

But they were too mean even for the pirates. One day, the Harpes stripped a man naked, tied him to a horse and drove the horse over a cliff above the cave in the rock. It narrowly missed the pirates below. And they invited the Harpes to leave - now.

So, they headed back to Knoxville, Tenn., more than 300 miles away, and killed two men there. On July 22, they murdered a boy. And then, two more men within a week.

"They usually beat them to death or used knives," Cox said. "Sometimes, they used guns."

At the beginning of August, back in Kentucky, they killed a man in Clinton County. Then, a man and his son. Then, two brothers, their families and their servants eight miles from Adairville.

They killed the black boy with the corn about that time. And then a white girl. And then, near Russellville, where an outdoor revival had just ended, Big Harpe killed his own baby for crying.

From there, they headed for Henderson, moving into a cabin on Canoe Creek, about eight miles south of town.

Around Aug. 20, the Harpes hit the road again. A man named James Tompkins mistook them for preachers and invited them to lunch. After Big Harpe had asked the blessing, Tompkins lamented he was out of powder for his gun and hunting was getting scarce.

Big Harpe, in a show of generosity, poured him a teacup full of powder from his own horn. Three days later, the act would cost him his life.

#### Beginning of the end

The Harpes had planned to attack the home of Silas McBee, a justice of the peace. But the dogs scared them off and instead, they stopped at the home of Moses Stegall, about five miles east of Dixon.

His wife offered them a bed for the night but said they'd have to sleep with Maj. William Love, a teacher who was spending the night.

That night, the Harpes murdered Love, allegedly for snoring, and tomahawked Mrs. Stegall for screaming and her four-month-old baby for crying. And to cover the crime, they burned the cabin.

By morning, McBee had formed a posse of seven men from the neighborhood and set out in pursuit. The next day, they discovered two more murder victims along the trail, neighbors who had come to help put out the fire.

Later that day, the posse crossed Pond River and found the Harpes' last camp with Maria Davidson still there. Under questioning, she pointed the way Big Harpe and his wives had gone.

The posse caught up with the three about two miles away in Muhlenberg County. Harpe galloped away, leaving his wives behind. And the posse fired at him, striking him once in the leg.

A man named John (or Samuel) Leiper fired and missed. Then, he borrowed Tompkins rifle and galloped after Big Harpe.

Harpe, knowing Leiper's rifle was unloaded, turned to fire at him. But Leiper fired Tompkins' rifle - with the powder Harpe had given him earlier - hitting Harpe in the spine.

Harpe rode slowly away, bleeding badly. Finally, the posse caught him, pulled him to the ground and sat waiting for him to die. One of them brought the dying man a drink of water in one of his boots.

#### Frontier justice

But justice wasn't gentle on the Kentucky frontier.

There are discrepancies about what happened next. Some say Stegall shot and killed Harpe. Some say Stegall cut off the outlaw's head with a butcher knife, while Harpe was still alive.

And some say Stegall did it to silence Harpe before he named Stegall as an accomplice in some of his crimes.

At any rate, Harpe's headless body was left beside the trail on what is now Harpe's Hill in Muhlenberg County near Graham until it was finally devoured by animals.

Cox says the posse put Harpe's head in a saddlebag and forced one of his wives to carry it on the road back.

"It was probably pretty ripe in the August heat," Cox said.

There are also two versions about what happened to the head.

One says it was placed in the forks of a tree on the main road three miles north of Dixon - some 40 miles northwest of Harpe's body. The other says it was impaled on a lance near the same spot.

Cox says the skin was eventually stripped from the head by birds. "Sometime later, an old woman supposedly made a potion from the skull," he said.

Little Harpe escaped to Mississippi, where he was recognized and hanged in Jefferson County Feb. 4, 1804. To serve as a warning to others, his head was also cut off and impaled on a stake alongside the Natchez Trace.

Sally Rice Harpe returned to her father's home near Knoxville, where she later remarried and moved to Illinois.

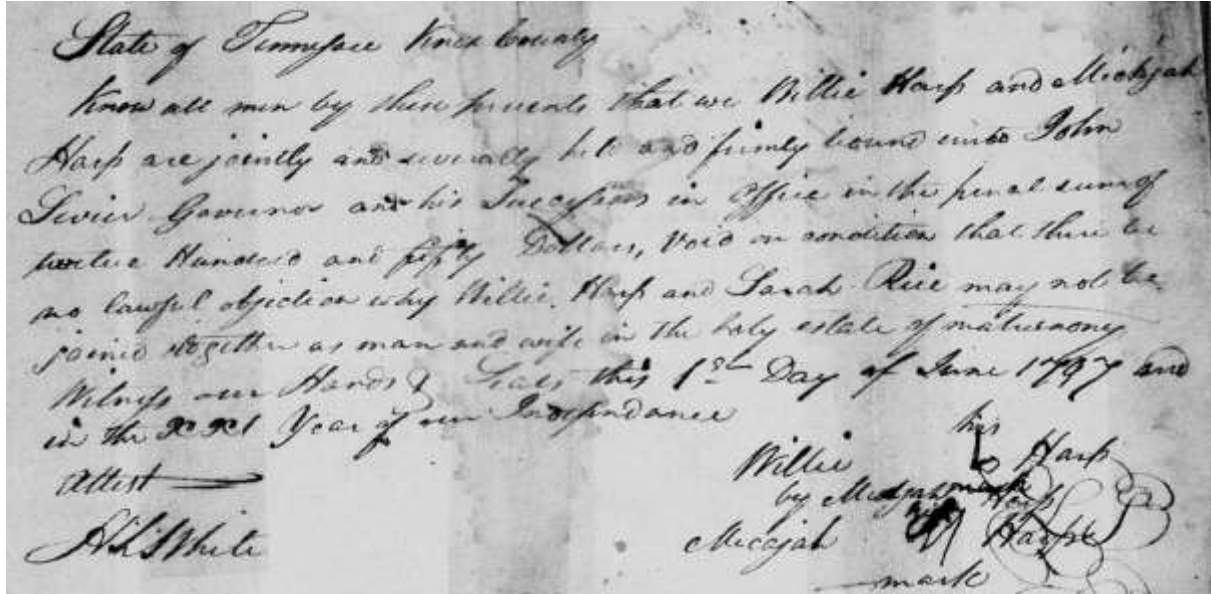
Susan Wood Harpe and Maria Davidson Harpe settled near Russellville for several years. Maria remarried and moved to Illinois. Susan moved back to Tennessee.

"I don't think we'll have a memorial service for them," Cox said. "But I think it's important that we remember the Harpes."

"It's a fascinating story," Purdy says. "The beginnings of the serial killers. It just shows that these people have been there throughout history."



**Knox County, Tennessee marriage bond:**



Marriage bond for Willie Harp & Sarah Rice issued on 1 June 1797 in Knox County, Tennessee. This is Little Harpe – Wiley Harpe; co-bond on the marriage document was by Wiley’s brother, Big Harpe – Micajah Harpe.



**The Palladium, Frankfort, KY, Thursday, 21 March 1799,  
p.3, Thursday, 28 March 1799, p.3 and 4 April 1799, p.4:**



**MERCER COUNTY**

WALTER E. STRONG a Justice of the Peace in and for said county, to all Sheriffs and Constables within the commonwealth of Kentucky.

WHEREAS complaint is this day made before me upon oath by John Biegler, jailor of the Danville district Jail that MICAJAH ROBERTS and WILEY ROBERTS, labourers, who were committed there for murder did on the evening of Saturday last escape from said Jail, and are now going at large ; these are therefore, in the name of the commonwealth, to require you and every of you in your respective counties, towns and precincts, to make diligent search by way of Hue and Cry for the said Micajah Roberts and Wiley Roberts, and them or either of them having found, to seize and retake and safely convey or cause them to be conveyed back to the Jail aforesaid, and there to be kept until they shall be discharged by due course of law.

Given under my hand and seal this 12th day of March 17, 1799.

Waller E. Strong (S)

N. B. MICAJAH ROBERTS is a man about thirty-five years of age, six feet high, dark complexion, black hair very thick, hanging' very low over his forehead, and he is a very ill looking fellow.

WILEY ROBERTS is supposed to be a little older than Micajah, and two or three inches lower, has a downcast look, swarthy complexion, is a light made man, and is a very ill looking fellow a well, as the other, each has a case hardened House-lock on their leg with an iron chain about three feet long; and Wiley has on hand cuffs.

[Note by J. Long: When the Harpe Brothers were arrested & incarcerated in 1797 they tried to disguise their identity by giving the false names of – Micajah & Wiley Roberts. It is interesting to note that one of the common law wives of (Big) Micajah Harpe used the alias of Betsy Roberts.]



**Kentucky Gazette, Lexington, KY, Thursday, 18 April 1799, p.2:**

A report is in circulation, that a youth of twelve or fourteen years of age (the son of a Mr. Trabue, on Green river), has fallen a victim to the murderers of Mr. Langford, since their escape from Danville jail.



**The Palladium, Frankfort, KY, Thursday, 15 August 1799, p.3:**

The supposed murders of the late Mr. Langford, Micajah Harp and Wiley Harp, who a short time since broke out of Danville jail we are tarry to learn have added to the black catalogue of their crimes. Authentic information has been received that on the 22d day of July, they killed William Ballard in Knox county, State of Tennessee and on the 23d Isaac Coffey. On the 29th they killed James Brazel, near Wolf River in Cumberland Mountain on the 31st murdered John Tully in Stockton Valley. — They were seen the 2d this instant on Marrowbone, a north branch of Cumberland River. We are happy to hear they are closely pursued, and sincerely hope they will ere long meet the punishment which the atrocity of their crimes demand.





**Kentucky Gazette, Lexington, Ky., Thursday, 15 August 1799, p.2:**

Lexington, August 16.

About the Middle of July there was a man killed by the name of Hardin, about three miles below Knoxville; he was ripped open and stones put in his belly, and he thrown into Holston river. On the 22d day of July, another was killed by the name of Coffey, on Beaver creek, about eight miles from Knox. On the 24th another was killed by the name of William Ballard, near Knox. On the 25th, two men, supposed to be the Harps, that were in the Danville jail, were seen to cross Clinch river at Davidson's ferry, fifteen miles from Knox, and were generally supposed to be the men that did the above murder – When they crossed the said river, they were on horses – one had a gun and saddle the other had neither. On the 29th they overtook two brothers, by the name of flames and Robert Brasel, travelling from near Knox. to Stockton's valley, in Cumberland county, Kentucky, and the supposed murderers challenged them of perpetrating the above murders by the name of Harps, who had murdered two men near Knox, and ordered the Brasels to surrender, until the balance of their company should come up – they immediately seized James Brasel who was walking and had a gun and tied him, and ordered Robert who was on horseback and had no arms, to dismount, which he did – they then presented a gun at him, but he dodged round a horse and made his escape. Soon after he met with a company and returned to the place, where he found his brother James dead, much beaten and his throat cut. The company that was with Brasel, consisted of three men and one woman; they had but one gun, and travelled towards Knox. In about ten miles, they met the same murderers, with a considerable quantity of plunder, whereas when they first met them, they had none, but being well armed, the company was afraid to attack them. These murderers were seen by several people, riding the road towards Stockton's valley. On Thursday the last day of July, they killed a man by the name of John Tully, in Stockton's valley, near Thos. Stockton's. The succeeding night they passed by old Mr. Stockton's going towards their father's in law, old Mr. Roberts.

The above report is from Mr. Wood and Nathaniel Stockton, who were present at the finding of Tully's corpse

The big man is pale, dark, swarthy, bushy hair, had a reddish gun stock – the little thin man had a blackish gun stock, with a silver star with four straight points – they had short sailors coats, very dirty, and grey great coats.

August 5. This day .Wm. Wood and Nathaniel Stockton made oath before me, a justice of the peace for Green county, that the above information they believed was just and that they had been with Robert Brasel, who give them the information. The said Wood is a man of an exceeding good character.

DANIEL TRABUE J .P. G. C.



**The Palladium, Frankfort, KY, Thursday, 22 August 1799, p.3:**

By a gentleman who arrived in town last evening we are informed, that those villains who broke the Danville Jail, (the Harps) have added two more murders to their black catalogue of crimes, since our accounts of last week; they went into a house belonging to a Mr. Graves, killed him and son, and took their bodies from the house and threw them over a fence in some weeds, where they were found two or three days after by the smell. — *Guard. Freedom.*



**Kentucky Gazette, Lexington, Ky., Thursday, 5 September 1799, p.2:**

Lexington, September 5.

The two murderers by the name of Harps, who killed Mr. Langford last winter in the wilderness, and were arrested and broke the Danville jail, – killed a family on Pond river, by the name of Stagle, on the 22d day of August, and burnt the house ; a party of men pursued and overtook them and their women; the Harps parted ; Micajah Harp took two of the women off with him, the men pursued him, and in riding about 10 or 12 miles caught him, having previously shot him. He confessed the killing of Mr. Stump on Big Barren ; he also confessed of their killing 17 or 18 besides – they killed two men near Robertson’s Lick, the day before they burnt Stagle’s house. They had with them eight horses and a considerable quantity of plunder – seven pair of saddle bags, &c. They cut off his head ; – The women were taken to the Red Banks. The above took place on Pond river, in the county of Muhlenberg.

[Note: Red Banks listed in the preceding account is now the city of Henderson, KY.]



**Lancaster Intelligencer, Lancaster, PA, Wednesday, 16 October 1799, p.3:**



We are happy in having it in our power to announce to our Readers, the apprehension and death of Micajah Harp. The circumstances, as far as we can learn, are as follow : Micajah and his Brother Wiley called at the house of Moses Stegall, near the Red Banks (he being from home) and prevailed on his Wife to give them accommodations for that night. They retired early ; but, about midnight, arose and murdered a Mr. Love, who slept in the room with them : They then rushed down stairs, damned Mrs. Stegall for a damn'd Bitch, said she had put them in bed with a man who had fits, and immediately put her and her Child to death. Mr. Stegall returned in the morning, when he, finding his Wife and Child murdered, went, accompanied by a Mr. Leiper, in pursuit of the Murderers ; whom they soon came up with and fired on, wounded Micajah and took him: The other escaped.

This information was received by a Gentleman immediately from the Red Banks, who saw the body of Harp after Mr. Stegall had taken his head. Other informants add, that prior to the death of Harp, he confessed that he, aided by his Brother, had committed murders to the number of 27 ; among whom was Mr. Johnson, of Hawkins county, whose body was found in the Holston river : In this murder he implicated, as his Accomplices, two men (the Madcap's) who are now confined in the jail of this county against whom it is hoped some proof will ere long appear, and rid the Community of those Pests to society.

[Note: The previous two contemporaneous accounts establish that Micajah Harpe was captured and killed in 1799. They also validate that the names of the Harpes were Micajah and Wiley (not William & Joshua) and that they were brothers not cousins.]



**Lancaster Intelligencer, Lancaster, PA, Friday, 14 May 1824, p.4:**

From the Port Folio.

Many years ago, two men named Harpe appeared in Kentucky spreading death and terror wherever they went. Little else was known of them, but that they passed for brothers, and came from the borders of Virginia. They had three women with them, who were treated as their wives, and several children with whom they traversed the thinly settled parts of Virginia into Kentucky, marking their course with blood. Neither avarice, want, nor any of the usual inducements to the commission of crime, seemed to govern their conduct. A savage thirst for blood – a deep rooted enmity to human nature, could alone be discovered in their actions. They murdered every defenceless being who fell in their way, without distinction of age, sex, or colour. In the night they stole secretly in the cabin, slaughtered its inhabitants, and burned their dwellings – while the farmer who left his house by day, returned at night to witness the dying agonies of his wife and children, and the conflagration of his possessions.

Plunder, as I have said, was not their object; they took only what would have been freely given them, and no more than was necessary to supply the immediate wants of nature; they destroyed without having suffered injury, and without the prospect of benefit. A negro boy riding to a mill, with a bag of corn, was seized by them, and his brains dashed out against a tree: but the horse which he rode, and the grain that he carried, were left unmolested. It seems incredible that such atrocities could have been often repeated in a country famed for the hardihood and gallantry of its people; but that part of Kentucky which was the scene of these enormities, was then almost a wilderness, and the vigilance of the Harpe's for a time ensured impunity. Mounted on fine horses the plunged into the forest, eluded pursuit by frequently changing their course, and appeared unexpectedly to perpetrate new horrors, at points distant from those where they were supposed to lurk. On these occasions, they sometimes left their wives and children behind them; and it is a fact honourable to the community that vengeance for these bloody deeds, was not wreaked on the helpless, but in some degree guilty companions of the perpetrators. Justice, however, was not long delayed. A man named Leiper, in revenge for a murder committed on Mrs. Stegal, the wife of a neighbour, pursued and discovered the assassins. The Harpes had only time to mount their horses and fly in different directions. Accident aided the pursuer. One of the Harpes was a large, and the other a small man; the first usually rode a strong powerful horse, the other a fleet but much smaller animal, and in the hurry of the flight they had exchanged horses. The chase was long and hot; the smaller Harpe escaped by the superior powers of his horse, but the less nervous animal who bore his brother, being overburdened began to fail at the end of about thirty miles. Still the miscreant pressed forward; for although none of his pursuers were near but Leiper, who had outridden his companions, he was unwilling to risk a combat with a man as strong, & perhaps bolder than himself, and who was animated with a noble spirit of indignation against a shocking and unmanly outrage. At length in leaping a ravine, Harpe's horse sprained a limb, and Leiper, as the phrase is, gathered him, (i. e. overtook him.) Both were armed with rifles. Leiper fired and wounded Harpe through the body; the latter, turning in his saddle, leveled his piece, which missed fire, and he dashed it to the ground, swearing that it was the first time it had ever failed him. He then drew a tomahawk, and waited the approach of Leiper, who nothing undaunted, unsheathed his long hunting knife and rushed upon his desperate foe, grappled with him, dashed him to the ground,

and wrested his only remaining weapon from his grasp. The prostrate wretch, exhausted with the loss of blood, conquered, but unsubdued in spirit, now lay prostrate at the feet of his adversary. Expecting every moment the arrival of the rest of his pursuers, he enquired if Stegal was of the party, and being answered in the affirmative, he exclaimed, "then I am a dead man" "That would make no difference," replied Leiper, calmly, "you must die at any rate, – I do not wish to kill you myself, but if nobody else will do it, I must" – He then questioned him on the motives of his late atrocities. The murderer attempted not to palliate or deny them, and confessed that he had been actuated by no inducement but a settled hatred of his species, whom he said he had sworn to destroy without distinction, for some fancied injury, he expressed no regret for any of his bloody deeds, except that which he confessed he had committed upon one of his own children. "It cried," said he, "and I killed it,---I had always told the woman, I would have no crying about me!" he acknowledged he had amassed large sums of money, and described the place of concealment, but as none was ever discovered, it is presumed that he did not declare the truth. Leiper had fired several times at Harpe, during the chase, and wounded him; and when the latter was asked why, when he found Leiper pursuing him alone, he did not dismount and take a tree, from behind which he could have shot him, he replied, that he did not suppose there was a horse in the country equal to the one which he rode, and was confident of making his escape. He thought, also, that the pursuit would be less eager so long as he abstained from shedding the blood of any of his pursuers. On the arrival of the rest of the party they despatched the wretch; who died, as he lived, in remorse less guilt, His head was severed from his body, and placed in the fork of a tree, where it long remained a revolting object of horror. The spot is still called Harpe's Head, and a public road which passes it, is called the Harpe's Head road. The chase commenced near Highland Lick in Union (then Henderson) county, and ended a short distance from Greenville in Muhlenburg county. The distance between these two points on a straight line is from thirty to forty miles.

The other Harpe made his way to the neighbourhood, I think, of Natchez where he joined a band of robbers, headed by a man named Miller, whose villainies were so notorious that a reward was offered for his head. Harpe took an opportunity, when the rest of his companions were absent, to slay Miller, and putting his head into the bag, he carried it forward and claimed the reward. The claim was admitted, the head of Miller was recognized, but so also was the face of Harpe, who was arrested and executed.

In collecting oral testimony with regard to circumstances long past, a considerable variety will often be found in the statements of different persons. In this case I have found none except as to the fact of the two Harpes having exchanged horses. A day or two before the fatal denouement, they had murdered a gentleman named Love, and had taken his horse, a remarkable fine animal, which "Big Harpe" undoubtedly rode when he was overtaken. It is said that "Little Harpe" escaped on foot, and not on his brother's horse.

After Harpe's death the women came in, and claimed protection. Two of them were wives of the larger Harpe, the other one, of his brother. The latter was a decent female, of delicate prepossessing appearance, who stated that she had married her husband without any knowledge of his real character, shortly before they set out for the west – that she was so much shocked at the first murder they committed that she attempted to escape from them, out was prevented, and that she had since made similar attempts. – She immediately wrote to her father in Virginia, who came for her and took her home. The other women were in no way remarkable. They afterwards married in Muhlenburg county.

These horrid events will sound like fiction to your ears, when told as having happened in any part of the United States, so foreign are they from the generosity of the American character,

the happy security of our constitutions, and the mortal habits of our people. But it is to be recollected, that they happened twenty years ago, in frontier settlements, far distant from the civilized parts of our country. The principal scene of Harpe's atrocities and of his death, was in that part of Kentucky, which lies south of Green River, a vast wilderness, then known by the general name of the Green River country, and containing a few small and thinly scattered settlements, the more dense population of the state being at that time in its northern and eastern sections. The Indians still possessed the country to the south and west. That enormities should sometimes be practiced at these distant spots, cannot be a matter of surprise; the only wonder is that they were so few. – The first settlers were a hardy and an honest people, but they were too few in number, and too widely spread, to be able to create or enforce wholesome civil restraints – Desperadoes flying from justice, or seeking a secure theatre for the perpetration of crime, might frequently escape discovery, and as often elude or openly defy the arm of justice.



**Historical Sketches of Kentucky, Lewis Collins, Lewis Collins,  
Maysville, Ky. and J. A. & U. P. James, Cincinnati, Oh., 1847,  
in Hopkins County chapter on pp.352-354:**

About twenty miles from the town of Henderson, at a point just within the line of Hopkins county, where the roads from Henderson, Morganfield and Hopkinsville intersect, there is a wild and lonely spot called "Harpe's Head." The place derived its name from a tragical circumstance, which occurred there in the early part of the present century. The bloody legend connected with it, has been made the foundation of a thrilling border romance, by Judge Hall, of Cincinnati, one of the most pleasing writers of the west. The narrative which follows, however, may be relied on for its strict historical truth and accuracy, the facts having been derived from one who was contemporary with the event, and personally cognizant of most of the circumstances. The individual to whom we allude is the venerable James Davidson, of Frankfort, a recent treasurer of Kentucky. Colonel Davidson was a distinguished soldier in the last war with Great Britain, and had filled the office of treasurer for many years. His high character for veracity is a pledge for the truth of any statement he made.

In the fall of the year 1801 or 1802, a company consisting of two men and three women arrived in Lincoln county, and encamped about a of from the present town of Stanford. The appearance of the individuals composing this party was wild and rude in the extreme. The one who seemed to be the leader of the band, was above the ordinary stature of men. His frame was bony and muscular, his breast broad, his limbs gigantic. His clothing was uncouth and shabby, his exterior weatherbeaten and dirty, indicating continual exposure to the elements and designating him as one who dwelt far from the habitations of men, and mingled not in the courtesies of civilized life. His countenance was bold and ferocious, and exceedingly repulsive, from its strongly marked expression of villainy. His face, which was larger than ordinary, exhibited the lines of ungovernable passion, and the complexion announced that the ordinary feelings of the human breast were in him extinguished. Instead of the healthy hue which indicates the social emotions, there was a livid unnatural redness, resembling that of a dried and lifeless skin. His eye was fearless and steady, but it was also artful and audacious, glaring upon the beholder with an unpleasant fixedness and brilliancy, like that of a ravenous animal gloating on its prey. He wore no covering on his head, and the natural protection of thick coarse hair, of a fiery redness, uncombed and

matted, gave evidence of long exposure to the rudest visitations of the sunbeam and the tempest. He was armed with a rifle, and a broad leathern belt, drawn closely around his waist, supported knife and tomahawk. He seemed, in short, an outlaw, destitute of all the nobler sympathies of human nature, and prepared at all points for assault or defence. The other man was smaller in size than he who led the party, but similarly armed, having the same suspicious exterior, and m countenance equally fierce and sinister. The females were coarse, sunburnt, and wretchedly attired.

The men stated in answer to the enquiry of the inhabitants, that their names were Harpe, and that they were emigrants from North Carolina. They remained at their encampment the greater part of two days and a night, spending the time in rioting, drunkenness and debauchery. When they left they took the road leading to Greene river. The day succeeding their departure, a report reached the neighborhood that a young gentleman of wealth from Virginia, named Lankford, had been robbed and murdered on what was then called, and is still known as the "Wilderness Road," which runs through the Rock-castle hills. Suspicion immediately fixed upon the Harpes as the perpetrators, and Captain Ballenger, at the head of a few bold and resolute men, started in pursuit. They experienced great difficulty in following their trail, owing to a heavy fall of snow, which had obliterated most of the tracks, but finally came upon them while encamped in a bottom on Greene river, near the spot where the town of Liberty now stands. At first they made a show of resistance, but upon being informed that if they did not immediately surrender they would be shot down, they yielded themselves prisoners.

They were brought back to Stanford, and there examined. Among their effects were found some fine linen shirts, marked with the initials of Lankford. One had been pierced by a bullet and was stained with blood. They had also a considerable sum of money, in gold. It was afterwards ascertained that this was the kind of money Lankford had with him. The evidence against them being thus conclusive, they were confined in the Stanford jail, but were afterwards sent for trial to Danville, where the district court was in session. Here they broke jail, and succeeded in making their escape.

They were next heard of in Adair county, near Columbia. In passing through that county, they met a small boy, the son of Colonel Trabue, with a pillow case of meal or flour, an article they probably needed. This boy it is supposed they robbed and then murdered, as he was never afterwards heard of. Many years afterwards human bones, answering the size of Colonel Trabue's son at the time of his disappearance, were found in a sink hole near the place where he was said to have been murdered.

The Harpes still shaped their course towards the mouth of Greene river, marking their path by murders and robberies of the most horrible and brutal character. The district of country through which they passed was at that time very thinly settled, and from this reason their outrages went unpunished. They seemed inspired with the deadliest hatred against the whole human race, and such was their implacable misanthropy, that they were known to kill where there was no temptation to rob. One of their victims was a little girl, found at some distance from her home, whose tender age and helplessness would have been protection against, any but incarnate fiends. The last dreadful act of barbarity, which led to their punishment and expulsion from the country, exceeded in atrocity all the others.

Assuming the guise of Methodist preachers, they obtained lodgings one night at a solitary house on the road. Mr. Stigall, the master of the house, was absent, but they found his wife and children, and a stranger, who, like themselves, had stopped for the night. Here they conversed and made inquiries about the two noted Harpes who were represented as prowling about the country. When they retired to rest, they contrived to secure an axe, which they carried with them into their

chamber. In the dead of night they crept softly down stairs, and assassinated the whole family, together with the stranger, in their sleep, and then setting fire to the house, made their escape.

When Stigall returned, he found no wife to welcome him; no home to receive him. Distracted with grief and rage, he turned his horse's head from the smouldering ruins, and repaired to the house of Captain John Leeper. Leeper was one of the most powerful men of his day, and fearless as powerful. Collecting four or five other men well armed, they mounted and started in pursuit of vengeance. It was agreed that Leeper should attack "Big Harpe," leaving "Little Harpe" to be disposed of by Stigall. The others were to hold themselves in readiness to assist Leeper and Stigall, as circumstances might require.

This party found the women belonging to the Harpes attending to their little camp by the road side; the men having gone aside into the woods to shoot an unfortunate traveler, of the name of Smith, who had fallen into their hands, and whom the women had begged might not be dispatched before their eyes. It was this halt that enabled the pursuers to overtake them. The women immediately gave the alarm, and the miscreants mounting their horses, which were large, fleet and powerful, fled in separate directions. Leeper singled out the Big Harpe, and being better mounted than his companions, soon left them far behind. Little Harpe succeeded in escaping from Stigall, and he, with the rest of his companions, turned and followed on the track of Leeper and the Big Harpe. After a chase of about nine miles, Leeper came within gun shot of the latter and fired. The ball entering his thigh, passed through it and penetrated his horse, and both fell. Harpe's gun escaped from his hand and rolled some eight or ten feet down the bank. Reloading his rifle, Leeper ran up to where the wounded outlaw lay weltering in his blood, and found him with one thigh broken, and the other crushed beneath his horse. Leeper rolled the horse away, and set Harpe in an easier position. The robber begged that he might not be killed. Leeper told him that he had nothing to fear from him, but that Stigall was coming up, and could not probably be restrained. Harpe appeared very much frightened at hearing this, and implored Leeper to protect him. In a few moments Stigall appeared, and without uttering a word, raised his rifle and shot Harpe through the head. They then severed the head from the body, and stuck it upon a pole where the road crosses the creek, from which the place was then named and is yet called Harpe's Head. Thus perished one of the boldest and most noted freebooters that has ever appeared in America. Save courage, he was without one redeeming quality, and his death freed the country from a terror which had long paralyzed its boldest spirits.

The Little Harpe, when next heard from, was on the road which runs from New Orleans, through the Choctaw grant, to Tennessee. Whilst there, he became acquainted with and joined the band of outlaws led by the celebrated Mason. Mason and Harpe committed many depredations upon the above mentioned road, and upon the Mississippi river. They continued this course of life for several years, and accumulated great wealth. Finally, Mason and his band became so notorious and troublesome, that the governor of the Mississippi territory offered a reward of five hundred dollars for his head. Harpe immediately determined to secure the reward for himself. Finding Mason one day in a thick canebreak, counting his money, he shot him, cut off his head, and carried it to the village of Washington, then the capital of Mississippi. A man who had been robbed about a year before by Mason's band, recognized Harpe, and upon his evidence, he was arrested, arraigned, tried, condemned, and executed. Thus perished the "Little Harpe," who, lacking the only good quality his brother possessed, courage, was if any thing, more brutal and ferocious.



**Collins' Historical Sketches of Kentucky: History of Kentucky, Vol. II,**  
**Lewis Collins & Richard H. Collins, Collins & Co., Covington, KY, 1878,**  
**pp.345-347 is taken from the preceding chapter from Lewis Collins' 1847 edition;**  
**the following additional account appeared in the Hopkins County chapter on pp.347- 352:**

ANOTHER ACCOUNT. – During a visit to Bowling Green, Ky., in the summer of 1871, an old citizen inquired the authority for the foregoing sketch, observing that in several particulars it was different from the commonly received version in that region, and omitted some matters of considerable interest. We joined with other friends in earnest solicitation that the Hon. Joseph R. Underwood—then in his 81st year, but as eloquent and vigorous a practitioner of law as before he took his seat as one of the Judges of the Court of Appeals, nearly forty-three years before—would write out a statement of that startling tragedy, as he had learned its details on the very scene of its bloodiest chapter. He did so, and we publish it in his own language, somewhat abridged. We give the two accounts, as the details were differently reported in other neighborhoods, where parts of the bloody scenes were enacted.

"In October, 1838, I called on John B. Ruby, a surveyor living in Hopkins county, Ky., to engage his services in surveying lands. On the way, and not more than a mile from his residence, I passed the farm on which had lived and died John Leeper, celebrated as the capturer of the famous outlaw, Big Harpe. Wishing to learn all I could of the matter, I inquired of Mr. Ruby how long he and Leeper had lived neighbors, whether they were intimate as friends, and whether Leeper had frequently told him the particulars attending the capture and death of Harpe.

"My excitement and anxiety grew out of the following facts: When a small boy, my home was with my maternal uncle, Edmund Rogers, near Edmunton in Metcalfe county. When my uncle brought me from Virginia, I was informed that a little mill-boy, named Trabue, had been met on his mill path by the Harpes and murdered, and that a man named Dooley had been murdered by them, a few miles above my uncle's residence, on the creek upon which his residence was situated. These things made a deep impression on my young mind and heart. Not long after, I was put to school in Danville, Ky., and there was informed of the murder of Lankford on this side of Cumberland Gap, in what was then called the Wilderness, by the Harpes; their arrest and imprisonment at Danville; their breaking jail and flight through the Green river country, murdering as they went. I had previously heard of the murder of Love, and Stigall's family, and burning the house over their dead bodies.

"Mr. Ruby informed me that he had lived in the neighborhood forty years, almost in sight of Leeper's residence; that they were intimate friends; that Leeper was as honest as any man that ever lived, brave and truthful, and had often related to him and others the particulars attending the capture and death of Big Harpe. After dinner we went to the residence of Mr. James Armstrong, and there I wrote, as Mr. Ruby dictated, the following facts, detailed to him by Leeper and other pioneers:

"There were two Harpes, brothers, one a large, athletic man named Micajah, the other small and active, named Wiley. They were scarcely ever called by any other names than Big and Little Harpe. Big Harpe had two wives, Little Harpe but one. These women had children, but how many, I did not learn. Their wives were detained with the children at Danville for some time after their husbands broke jail and fled. When released, they moved and located about eight miles from the present site of the town of Henderson, Ky., where they lived in the winter of 1798-9 and ensuing spring, and passed themselves as widows. In the summer of 1799, Big and Little Harpe traveled through what is now Hopkins county, on their way to join their wives. The country on the south side of Green river was a wilderness, with but few scattered settlers. (The word settler has a



technical meaning, in consequence of the Legislatures of Virginia and Kentucky granting lands to those who settled and improved the wilderness.) The Harpes rode good horses, were well dressed in broad-cloth coats, and armed with rifles and holsters of pistols. The wild, uninhabited condition of the country was their apology for such equipments. They stopped for dinner at the house of a settler, named James Tompkins, who resided near Steuben's lick—named after Baron Steuben, of revolutionary memory. (Mr. A. Towns told me of a tradition among the early settlers, that the old Baron had visited Kentucky soon after the close of the war, and had been wounded by the Indians at this lick, hence its name.) While resting themselves and enjoying the hospitality of Mr. Tompkins, the Harpes passed themselves as Methodist preachers, and one of them said a long grace at the dinner table. The conversation related mostly to the general character of the country and the great quantity of game it furnished. One of them asked whether he hunted and killed many deer? Mr. Tompkins replied, he did when he had ammunition, but for some time past he had been without powder; that it was difficult to obtain a supply, and, consequently, abundant as were the deer, he had no venison to eat. Thereupon the Harpes, with affected generosity, made a liberal division of their stock of powder with Mr. Tompkins. It will be seen in the sequel, that, by a most singular providence, Big Harpe was mortally wounded by his own powder, thus given to Tompkins.

"After dinner the Harpes resumed their journey toward the Ohio river. The first cabin passed was that of Moses Stigall, then occupied by his wife and child, he being from home. Stigall's settlement was five miles from that of Tompkins. The next settlement was Peter Ruby's, eleven miles from Stigall's. My informant, John B. Ruby, was at the house of Peter Ruby, and saw the Harpes as they passed. They were seen no more until after they had joined their wives and children.

"There were only two families living between Peter Ruby and the residence of the Harpe women, near the site of the city of Henderson. It may be that the Harpes passed around these two families so as to conceal themselves from observation. It is supposed they had determined to remove, from Kentucky and locate somewhere in the South. It is certain, that on joining their wives, they lost no time in packing up and leaving. They camped for the night, a few miles from the residence of Stigall, who owed one of the women a dollar. Stigall met the party in the flats of Deer creek, as he was going to the Robinson lick, north of the Ohio, for salt, and told the woman to call on his wife, and tell her to pay the dollar. He said his wife did not know where he kept his money, and, accordingly, sent proper directions. One or all of the wives of the Harpes went to the house of Stigall, and told his wife what her husband had said. She found his purse, which contained about \$40 in silver, out of which she paid the woman the dollar due her. The wives told their husbands how much money seemed to be in the pile poured out of the purse, and this led to the perpetration, during the following night, of one of the most horrible tragedies ever witnessed on earth.

"Mrs. Stigall was a young woman with only one child. A man named Love was staying that night at the house. The two Harpes left their camp and went to the house of Stigall, got the money, murdered his wife and child and Mr. Love; then set the house on fire, and burnt up the murdered bodies and all that was in it. Two men named Hudgens and Gilmore, were returning from the lick with their packs of salt, and had camped for the night not far from Stigall's. About daylight the Harpes went to their camp, and arrested them upon pretense that they had committed robbery, murder, and arson at the house of Stigall. They shot Gilmore, who died on the spot. Hudgens broke and ran, but was overtaken by the Harpes and put to death. These things were stated by the women after Big Harpe's death.

"News of these murders spread through the scattered population with rapidity. Alarm and excitement pervaded every heart. The men assembled to consult and to act. The conclusion was universal, that these crimes were the deeds of the Harpes. Large rewards for their heads, dead or alive, had been publicly offered. The pioneers of the wilderness resolved to capture them. A company was formed, consisting of John Leeper, James Tompkins, Silas Magby, Nevill Lindsey, Mathew Christy, Robert Robertson, and the infuriated Moses Stigall. If there were any others, Mr. Ruby had forgotten their names. These men, armed with rifles, got on the trail of the Harpes and overtook them at their camp, upon the waters of Pond river; but whether in the present boundary of Hopkins or Muhlenburg county, I have not satisfactorily ascertained. About a quarter of a mile from camp, the pursuing party saw Little Harpe, and a man named Smith, who had been hunting horses in the range, conversing near a branch of water. (This word "range" was used by the early settlers of Kentucky to designate the natural pasturage of canebrake, wild pea-vine, and grass on which their live stock grazed.) Little Harpe charged Smith with being a horse-thief, and blew in his charger—a small implement with which the hunter measures his powder in loading his gun). The shrill sound, their usual signal for danger, soon brought Big Harpe to see what was the matter. The pursuing party and Big Harpe arrived at the branch, in opposite directions, nearly at the same time. Big Harpe came mounted on a fine gray mare, the property of the murdered Love, which he had appropriated. The pursuers, not doubting the guilt of those whom they had overtaken, without warning, fired upon them, badly wounding Smith, but not hitting either of the Harpes. Big Harpe was in the act of shooting Smith as those in front among the pursuers fired. He had already cocked his gun and told Smith he must die. But surprised by the volley, and by the rushing up of the persons, he reserved his fire, whirled Love's mare and galloped off to his camp. Little Harpe ran off on foot into a thicket, and was not seen afterward.

"On reaching Smith, the pursuers were detained, listening to his explanation. He was regarded as an accomplice of the Harpes, but soon demonstrated his innocence, and his life was spared. The pursuers hastened toward the camp, and saw Big Harpe hastily saddling the horses and preparing to take off the women with him. Seeing their rapid approach, he mounted Love's mare, armed with rifle and pistols, and darted off, leaving the women and children to provide for themselves. They were made prisoners; and Magby, a large, fat man, unfitted for the chase, and one other, were left to guard them. Love's mare was large and strong, and carried the 200 pounds weight of her rider, Big Harpe, with much ease, and he seemed to call on her to expend all her strength in his behalf. Tompkins, rather a small man, rode a thorough-bred, full-blooded bay mare of the best Virginia stock, and led in the pursuit. He had chased thieves before, and the only account he gave of one of them was, "that. he would never steal another horse." Nance, his mare, exhibited both speed and bottom in this race of life or death. The other horses were nothing like equal to Nance, or to Love's mare, and their riders being large men, Big Harpe might entertain hopes of escape. In the first two or three miles he kept far ahead, no one trailing in sight except Tompkins. There was no difficulty in following, through the rich mellow soil of the wilderness, the tracks made by the horses of Harpe and Tompkins. Leeper was second in the chase, and the rest followed as rapidly as possible. As the race progressed, Big Harpe drove into a thick forest of large trees upon a creek bottom. As he approached the stream to cross it, he encountered a large poplar tree, four or five feet in diameter and one hundred feet in length, which had been blown down, its roots being at the perpendicular bank of the creek and its top extending back so as to make an angle between the creek and the tree of about forty degrees. The bank was so high and perpendicular that it was impossible to descend and cross the creek with safety, and alike dangerous to attempt jumping over the tree. He retraced his steps to the head of the tree, and there met Tompkins face

to face, with some thirty steps between them. Each reined up his foaming steed and stopped. Neither attempted to fire. Tompkins told Harpe that escape was impossible, and he had better surrender. "Never!" was the brief reply. At that moment Leeper was in sight. Harpe dashed off at full speed, while Tompkins tarried for Leeper. As soon as he came up, he said, "Why didn't you shoot?" Tompkins replied "that his mare was so fiery he could not make a safe shot upon her, and he would not fire unless he was sure of execution."

"Leeper had fired upon the Harpes and Smith at the branch, and finding that his ramrod could not be drawn in consequence of its having got wet, told Tompkins he could not reload, that his horse was fast failing, and that Harpe would escape unless Nance could catch him. Tompkins replied, "She can run over him upon any part of the ground." Leeper said, "Let us exchange horses and give me your gun and shot-pouch, and I'll bring him down, if I can overtake him." They dismounted, exchanged horses and arms, and Leeper dashed forward after Big Harpe. The noble mare proved her ability to "run over him upon any part of the ground."

"Leeper crossed the creek, and, after passing through the thick tall trees in the bottom, came in sight of the fleeing Harpe as he reached higher ground, with its prairie grass and scattered trees. 'The gray mare was (not) the better horse.' Nance gradually gained upon her. When Leeper got up within thirty yards, Harpe warned him 'to stand off, or he would kill him.' Leeper replied, "One of us has to die, and the hardest fend off.' As the woods became more open and interposed fewer obstructions, Leeper thought he had 'a good chance. Suddenly putting Nance to her full speed, he rushed up within ten steps of Harpe, threw his leg over the mane and the bridle over Nance's head, jumped to the ground, took aim, and fired. Harpe reined up, turned, presented his gun, and it snapped—all without dismounting. Leeper afterwards said, 'If Harpe's gun had not snapped, the ball would not have passed within twenty yards of me, so badly was it aimed.' Harpe then threw his gun down, wheeled the gray mare, and pushed on his course. From these circumstances, Leeper 'knew he had hit him.' He caught and remounted Nance, and soon overtook Harpe, who told him to keep off, or he would shoot him with a pistol. In a few seconds, Harpe ceased to urge the gray mare forward, and put both his hands to the pummel of the saddle to hold on. Leeper rushed alongside and threw him to the ground. Two balls had entered near his back-bone, and come out near the breast-bone. Harpe begged that he might be taken to justice, and not be put to instant death. Leeper told him his request was useless; that his wound was fatal, and he must soon die. Tompkins and the other pursuers came up, one by one. Stigall immediately presented his gun, with a view to blow his brains out'; but Harpe moving his head backwards and forwards, so as to prevent it, Stigall placed the muzzle against his body as he lay on the ground, and shot him through the heart.

"Thus perished the most brutal monster of the human race. His head was cut off by Stigall. Whether the body was buried or left a prey for wolves, I did not learn. The party intended to use the head in getting the large rewards which had been offered by the Governors of Kentucky and Tennessee, but the heat of summer rendered its preservation impracticable. A tall young tree, growing by the side of the trail or road, was selected, and trimmed of its lateral branches to its top, and then made sharp. On this point the head was fastened. The skull and jaw-bone remained there for many years—after all else had been decomposed and mingled with the dust. The place where this tree grew is in Webster county, and is known upon the map of Kentucky as "Harpe's Head" to this day.

"Moses Stigall's character was very bad; he was afterwards killed for aiding Joshua Fleehart in running off with Miss Maddox. Peak Fletcher and a brother of the young woman followed the runaways, and overtook them in the now state of Illinois. They were found at night

in a cabin, which was cautiously and silently approached; and, at a given signal, Maddox and Fletcher fired upon Fleehart and Stigall through the chinks, and killed them. Miss Maddox was sitting at the time in the lap of her lover, with an arm around his neck.

"Thus the narrative made by Mr. Ruby is ended. But I deem it proper to add some facts which I learned from the late Major Wm. Stewart, of Logan county, who was one of the most extraordinary men I ever knew:

"At Russellville, on the 4th of April, 1839, Major Stewart told me that, in the years 1794-5, he was doing business for Jo. Ballenger, in Stanford, Ky. (When I was a boy I often heard this man spoken of and called Devil Jo. Ballenger.) In one of these years Ballenger raised a party, captured the Harpes, and committed them to jail in Stanford, for the murder of Lankford in the wilderness between the Crab Orchard and Cumberland Gap. They were afterwards removed to Danville for safer keeping; there broke jail, and got off, with their wives and children, and located them a few miles from the site of the city of Henderson. After that, they left the country, and were gone until the summer of 1799. Stewart confirmed the statement already made as to the murder of the youth Trabue, and of Mr. Dooley. They also murdered a man named Stump, on Big Barren river, below Bowling Green.

"In 1799, after Big Harpe was killed and Little Harpe had fled from the State, their wives and children were brought to Russellville, in Logan county, where the women were tried as accomplices of their husbands, and acquitted. Stigall and a party of his associates intended to murder the women, after their acquittal. This evil design was detected, and its accomplishment prevented, by the wise conduct of Judge Ormsby, and of Major Stewart, who was then sheriff. The judge ordered the sheriff to put them in jail, as though it would never do to turn such characters loose upon society, but secretly told Stewart he might remove them, after night, to any place of safety. Accordingly, Major Stewart put them in jail, but, soon after dark, removed them, and hid them in a sink. The next night he sent them about five miles from Russellville, to a cave, where he kept them supplied with food. Stigall and his party remained in Loan county some days after the trial of the women, hunting for them in every direction. Major Stewart said each of the three women had a child; that Big Harpe's two wives were coarse women, but that Little Harpe's wife was a beautiful young woman, and had been well raised. The wife of Little Harpe, after he was hung in Mississippi, married a highly respectable man, and raised a large family of children all much esteemed for honesty, sobriety, and industry. I asked the Major the name of the man she married. He could not be induced to divulge it, because a silly world might take occasion to reflect upon her children in consequence of her connection with Harpe.

"Major Stewart said the women seemed grateful to him, and related with apparent candor the story of their lives and their connection with the Harpes. They told him their husbands had once been put in jail at Knoxville, Tenn., upon suspicion of crime, when they were innocent; when released, they declared war against all mankind, and determined to murder and rob until they were killed. They said they might have escaped after the murder and robbery at Stigall's, but for the detention at the branch where Smith was shot. Big Harpe, expecting to be pursued, proposed that the three children be killed, that the others might flee without that incumbrance. His two wives and brother consented, after some discussion; but the wife of Little Harpe took her child off to the branch, where she had seen a projecting, shelving rock, under which she placed it, and laid down at its outer side, determined to remain and die with her child. As her husband came to the branch to let her know they had concluded to put the children to death, he saw Smith, the horse hunter, approaching. He moved towards him, and sounded the shrill whistle on his 'charger'—the understood signal of impending danger. Big Harpe almost in a moment made his appearance at the

branch mounted on Love's mare, when the firing commenced. Smith was shot down, and the Harpes fled. Big Harpe did not go directly to the camp, but circled around it, fearing the pursuers might already have taken it. These sudden and unexpected events saved the lives of the children, by allowing no time for their execution. Little Harpe's wife and child hastily returned to the camp, when the firing took place a little distance below the shelving rock, and were made prisoners, with the wives and children of Big Harpe.

"What I have written was communicated to me as coming directly from eye-witnesses and participators in the transactions related."

"Harpe's Head" became so noted a place that even the line of Union county, when formed, was made to run by it "in a direct and straight line."—[4 *Littell's Laws*, p. 213.



**An Illustrated Historical Atlas Map of Daviess County, KY.**  
**Leo McDonough & Co., Edwardsville, IL, 1876, p.41:**

JAMES L. JOHNSON.

James L. Johnson is a native of Livingston County, Kentucky, where he was born October the thirtieth, 1818. On his father's side, Judge Johnson comes from an old Virginian family. His father, James Johnson, was from Prince William County, and came to Kentucky in the year 1801. The home of the family had been in Virginia from an early date. James Johnson, Mr. Johnson's father, was born in the year 1784, and was consequently seventeen on coming to Kentucky. About the year 1806, he married Jane Leeper, of Livingston County. Her family, originally from South Carolina, had come to Kentucky in the time of the early Indian troubles. Three of her uncles, Neal by name, had taken an active part in the struggle of the colonies for their independence. They held the rank of Colonel in the army of patriots, and all died bravely in the service. Captain John Leeper, whose name appears in the history of Kentucky, was a relative of Judge Johnson's. To him belongs the credit of killing Harpe, a noted freebooter and robber, who committed a number of atrocious murders in different parts of the State. Harpe made his appearance at Stanford, in Lincoln County, in the fall of 1801, or 1802, hailing from North Carolina. He was accompanied by another man and three women. Leaving that neighborhood they murdered a young gentleman of wealth from Virginia, named Lankford. Near Columbia, in Adair County, they killed a small boy, the son of Colonel Trabue, who met them carrying a pillow case of meal, or flour. The further course of the ruffians was marked by atrocities of the most barbarous character. The wife and children of a Mr. Stagall, with whom they had obtained lodgings for the night, under the guise of Methodist preachers, Mr. Stagall being absent from home, fell victims to their greed for blood. Distracted with grief and rage on his returning to his home, Stagall immediately repaired to the house of Captain Leeper for assistance in avenging the murders. Four or five neighbors also joined in the pursuit. It was agreed that Leeper, one of the most powerful men of his day, and fearless as powerful, should attack "Big Harpe, leaving his comrade, who was known as "Little Harpe," to be disposed of by Stagall. The murderers fled on being overtaken. Leeper singled out Big Harpe and started in pursuit. After a chase of about nine miles, Leeper came within gunshot, and fired. The ball penetrated Harpe's thigh, and horse and rider fell to the ground. On the arrival of Stagall, he raised his rifle without a word, and shot the wounded outlaw through the head. The head was then severed from the body and raised on a pole by the roadside. The wild and lonely spot where

occurred this tragedy, about twenty miles from Henderson, just within the line of Webster County, is known to this day by the name of "Harpe's Head."

James Johnson had a family of six children by his marriage with Jane Leeper, and four by a subsequent marriage. One of the children by this latter marriage was General R. W. Johnson, a graduate of West Point, and a distinguished Union soldier during the war of the rebellion James Leeper Johnson, the subject of this sketch, was born, as has been mentioned already, in Livingston County, the year 1818. He lived in the neighborhood where occurred his birth till he was eighteen years of age, securing as good an education as could be acquired in the common schools of that region of country. Spending a short time with a brother living in a County adjoining Daviess, Mr. Johnson came to Owensboro in the year 1836. He at first studied under the instruction of one George Scarborough, a Massachusetts man and an excellent teacher, now living at Vineland, New Jersey, whose school was the best at that time in this part of Kentucky. On quitting school he was employed for two years in the office of Circuit and County Clerk, those positions then being filled by Mr. John S. McFarland. While in the Clerk's office he began the study of law under the direction of the Hon. Philip Triplett, one of the first and most distinguished lawyers of Daviess County, and at that time a Member of Congress. In 1841 Mr. Johnson was admitted to the bar, and opened an office at Owensboro, in connection with Mr. James Weir, now President of the Deposit Bank. The firm was successful in the practice of law, and at the same time Mr. Johnson mingled prominently in politics. In his political views, he was a Whig, and a warm admirer and supporter of Henry Clay. In 1844 he was a candidate for the legislature, and was elected a member of that body. He served one term, and returned to Owensboro, where he resumed the practice of law.

In the presidential campaign of 1848, Judge Johnson's name appeared on the Taylor electoral ticket. The following year he was elected to Congress for the district in which Daviess County was embraced. He took his seat in December, 1849, and was thus a member of the celebrated thirty-first Congress, or Compromise Congress, which passed the memorable compromise resolutions of Henry Clay, who was then a Senator from Kentucky. This Congress also has the reputation of being the longest ever held, not adjourning its sessions till October, 1851. While serving his term as Member of Congress, Mr. Johnson was married to Miss Harriotte N Triplett, the daughter of Philip Triplett, his old preceptor at law. Mr. Triplett was the second resident lawyer of Owensboro, Phil. Thompson alone, of the legal fraternity, outranking him as to the date of his residence in the town. He was an able lawyer, and achieved success both in civil and criminal practice. He represented Daviess County in the legislature, was a member of the convention which formed the present Constitution of the State of Kentucky, and served two, or three, terms in Congress. For many years he was the partner of William R. Griffith, and was instrumental with him in securing the settlement of vacant lands in Daviess County. He was a fluent speaker, but known for his logic rather than his rhetoric. He was lively in his disposition, generous and open-hearted, and as a business man he was famed for his liberality. Mr. Triplett had been born in Madison County, Virginia, and was raised in the City of Richmond, where he lived before coming to Kentucky.

On returning to Owensboro, Mr. Johnson again took up his profession. A few years subsequently he gave up the active practice of law, and devoted his attention more closely to agricultural pursuits. During the late war between the North and South he held Southern sentiments. In 1869, he received the appointment, from the late Governor Thomas F. Bramlette, as Judge of the Judicial District in which Daviess County is included. He held this position for the unexpired term of Judge James Stuart, the present incumbent.



**History of Henderson County, Kentucky,  
Edmund L. Starling, Henderson, Ky., 1887, pp.523-524:**

SKETCHES AND RECOLLECTIONS.

Incidents in the History of the People, Sad, Humorous and  
Interesting.

A BLOODY LEGEND.

SKETCH OF BIG AND LITTLE HARPE.

READERS of this article will recall the blood-curdling stories told them of the Harpes, who, in the early settlement of Henderson County, were the terror of the pioneer. Many persons in this and adjoining counties remember how, in their childhood, these stories awakened the keenest sense of fear, and were the occasion of almost agonizing sensations as they passed along the wilderness roads, ever on the lookout to be accosted by these terrible men. Their deeds of daring and desperate designs placed them at the head of all early desperadoes. Their history in this portion of Kentucky has long ago and repeatedly found its way into the histories of Kentucky and other States, in pamphlets and the newspapers of the country, and at one time even dramatized for the American stage. But it was so desperate and appalling to all rational sensibilities that it was abandoned by the drama.

In giving a history of these desperately wicked men, I shall be as brief as possible, knowing full well that only a faint idea can be given in the brief space allotted. The Harpes, consisting of "Big" Harpe and his two wives, Sally Harpe and Betsy Roberts, and "Little" Harpe and Susanna, his wife, came into Kentucky from East Tennessee in the year 1798. They had lived in Tennessee, and at one time were confined in the Knoxville jail on suspicion of crime, when they were innocent. Upon being released they declared war against all mankind, and determined to rob and murder until they themselves were killed. Their appearance was wild and rude in the extreme. Big Harpe was above the ordinary stature, bony and muscular, his clothes dirty and shabby, distinguishing him as a man wholly unused to the courtesies of civilized life. His countenance was so repulsive that every indication of villainy was plainly marked thereon. He wore no covering on his head, so the natural protection of thick, coarse hair, of a fiery red, uncombed and matted, gave evidence of the rudest exposure. He was armed with a rifle, knife and tomahawk. He was a veritable outlaw, destitute of every touch of human nature, and prepared, at all points, for assault and defense.

Little Harpe was a smaller man, but, in other respects, the counterpart of his co-worker in crime, and with him frequently engaged in riotous drunkenness and debauchery. Their travel through the wilderness roads of Kentucky was marked by human blood. They were captured and confined in the jail at Danville, but soon after made their escape, and started *en route* for the mouth of Green River, marking their path by robberies and murders of the most horrible and brutal character. The district they traveled was wild and thinly populated, and for this reason their outrages went unpunished. They seemed inspired with the deadliest hatred against the whole human race, and such was their implacable misanthropy that they were known to kill where there was no temptation to rob. One of their victims was a little girl, found at some distance from her home, whose tender age, and helplessness, would have been a protection against any but incarnate fiends. Every human met by them prior to their arrival at Green River became a victim to their

implacable thirst for blood. The Harpe women had preceded their husbands to Henderson County, and had settled about six miles from the town, in the direction of Madisonville, where they lived during the winter of 1798, '99, and passed themselves as widows. Micajah, or Big Harpe, and Wiley, or Little Harpe, pushed their way on into Henderson County, where they soon after rejoined their wives, and started in the direction of Tennessee. They remained some time in what is now known as Hopkins County. This county, at that time, was a wilderness, with but a few scattered settlers. The Harpes rode good horses, and at that time dressed well, in the clothes of their murdered victims. They were all the time heavily armed, and the condition of the country was their apology for such equipments. The following is a condensed history of their devilish deeds done in Henderson County, as narrated by Mr. John B. Ruby to Judge Underwood, many years ago: ...

[pages 525-529 is taken from Richard H. Collins' account given in his book, Historical Sketches of Kentucky (1874) and is not repeated here... ]

[part of pages 528-529] ... [Big Harpe] then asked for a drink of water. Leeper walked away to a branch close by, and, taking off one of his shoes, filled it with water and started on his return to the wounded outlaw. At this time James Tompkins, Stigall, and others, dashed up, and, without ceremony, Stigall dismounted, drew his knife, and severed Big Harpe's head from the body; and thus perished the most brutal of all brutal monsters. A tall young tree, growing by the side of the trail, or road, was selected, and trimmed of its lateral branches to the top, and then pointed. On this point the head was fastened, the skull and jaw bones remaining there for many years, after all else had mingled with the dust. Near by stood a large tree in which was plainly cut the initials of the dead outlaw, "U. H.," which were plainly visible up to a few years since. The place where this tree grew is in the present County of Webster, at the intersection of the Henderson and Morganfield and Madisonville roads.

It will be remembered that the three Harpe women were left at the camp, prisoners, in charge of two of the Leeper party. Immediately after the killing of Big Harpe the women, with their children (each woman had a young child), were brought to the town of Henderson and confined in the little log dungeon, then located on the river bank, near the present bridge.

On the fourth day of September, 1799, a Court of Quarter Sessions was called for the examination of Susanna and Sally Harpe and Betsey Roberts, committed as parties to the murder of Mrs. Stigall, James Stigall, an infant, and William Love, a school teacher, on the twentieth day of August. The trial was held by Justices Samuel Hopkins and Abram Landers. They were found guilty and remanded to jail. Subsequently the women were taken, under order of the Court, by Andrew Rowan, Sheriff, and Amos Kuykendall, John Standley, Green Massey, Nevil Lindsay and Gibson Harden, to Russellville, Ky., there to await the action of the Grand Jury. They were tried at Russellville and cleared.



**A History of Muhlenberg County, Otto A. Rothert,  
John P. Morton & Company, Inc., Louisville, KY, 1913, pp.435-441:**

#### APPENDIX A

#### JUDGE HALL'S STORY OF THE HARPES

ABOUT a year after Muhlenberg County was formed, Big Harpe, one of the most brutal outlaws in the West, was killed. The following is a copy of the first written account of this affair.



It was published in 1828 by Judge James Hall, of Cincinnati, in his "Letters from the West." At least four versions of the story of the Harpes have been printed since Judge Hall's was published. I reprint his account because it is the oldest, and as his books are rare it has become the least accessible version. Collins, in his "History of Kentucky," under the head of Hopkins County, gives two versions; Allen's "History of Kentucky" has one; T. Marshall Smith, in his "Legends of the War of Independence and of the Earlier Settlements in the West," published in 1855, gives another. Judge Hall's being the oldest, as already stated, is probably the truest. T. Marshall Smith's is by far the longest and most interesting. None of these, nor do any of the oral versions, agree on the details of any important point. Nevertheless all are, in a general way, the same.

Judge Hall's statement that the two wives of Big Harpe remained in Muhlenberg does not agree with local traditions nor with any of the other printed versions. T. Marshall Smith gives the names of the two Harpes as Bill and Joshua and shows that they came originally from North Carolina, were cousins, Tories and sons of Tories, and that neither had more than one wife. Writing about the unfortunate women who became the involuntary wives of the heartless Harpes, he says: "Susan Woods (wife of Bill Harpe) told them (deputy sheriff of Logan county and others) in the most humble and suppliant terms her own sad story and cruel sufferings. Maria Davidson (wife of Joshua Harpe) confirmed her statement, and related her own intolerable sufferings. . . . They both lived in the county of Logan many years after, where they were often seen, known and conversed with by the author of this narrative, and who received from the lips of Susan Woods herself most of the facts narrated in the foregoing pages, in reference to herself, Maria Davidson and the two Harpes, from the time they became so unhappily connected with them. . . ."

Edmund L. Starling, in his "History of Henderson County," published in 1887, says that on September 4, 1799, a court of quarter sessions was called for the examination of the three Harpe women, then committed in the Henderson jail as parties to the murder (on August 20, 1799) of Mrs. Moses Stigall, her infant son, and William Love, a school-teacher, and that the three prisoners were found guilty and remanded to jail, but were subsequently taken, under order of court, to Russellville, there to await the action of the grand jury, where they were tried and acquitted.

Joseph R. Underwood, in his account compiled in 1871, based on information supplied in 1838 by John B. Ruby, of Hopkins County, and published in Collins' history, writes: "The pursuers, armed with rifles, got on the trail of the Harpes and overtook them at their camp, upon the waters of Pond river; but whether in the present boundary of Hopkins or Muhlenburg county I have not satisfactorily ascertained."

Local tradition says Big Harpe crossed Pond River at Free Henry Ford and was killed in Muhlenberg County, near what has since been known as Harpe's Hill. An oak tree four feet in diameter, which until 1910 stood on the bank of Boat Yard Creek near the Slab Road leading from Harpe 's Hill to Free Henry Ford, has always been pointed out as the tree under which John Leeper or Lieper, Moses Stigall or Stegal, and the other members of the pursuing party, killed Big Harpe, and under which the headless corpse of Big Harpe lay until it was devoured by wild animals. Clara Garris, who became the wife of James Stanley, and who during her long life lived near Harpe 's Hill, frequently pointed out this spot, declaring that Big Harpe was killed near this tree and that when a child of about ten years she saw his headless body lying there.

#### THE HARPES.

Many years ago, two men, named Harpe, appeared in Kentucky, spreading death and terror wherever they went. Little else was known of them but that they passed for brothers, and came from the borders of Virginia. They had three women with them, who were treated as their wives,

and several children, with whom they traversed the mountainous and thinly settled parts of Virginia into Kentucky, marking their course with blood. Their history is wonderful, as well from the number and variety, as the incredible atrocity of their adventures; and as it has never yet appeared in print, I shall compress within this letter a few of its most prominent facts.

In the autumn of the year 1799, a young gentleman, named Langford, of a respectable family in Mecklenburgh county, Virginia, set out from this state for Kentucky, with the intention of passing through the Wilderness, as it was then called, by the route generally known as Boon's Trace. On reaching the vicinity of the Wilderness, a mountainous and uninhabited tract. which at that time separated the settled parts of Kentucky from those of Virginia, he stopped to breakfast at a public house near Big Rock-castle river. Travellers of this description—any other indeed than hardy woodsmen—were unwilling to pass singly through this lonely region; and they generally waited on its confines for others, and travelled through in parties. Mr. Langford, either not dreading danger, or not choosing to delay, determined to proceed alone. While breakfast was preparing, the Harpes and their women came up. Their appearance denoted poverty, with but little regard to cleanliness; two very indifferent horses, with some bags swung across them, and a rifle gun or two, composed nearly their whole equipage. Squalid and miserable, they seemed objects of pity, rather than of fear, and their ferocious glances were attributed more to hunger than to guilty passion. They were entire strangers in that neighborhood, and, like Mr. Langford, were about to cross the Wilderness. When breakfast was served up, the landlord, as was customary at such places, in those times, invited all the persons who were assembled in the commons, perhaps the only room of his little inn, to sit down; but the Harpes declined, alleging their want of money as the reason. Langford, who was of a lively, generous disposition, on hearing this, invited them to partake of the meal at his expense; they accepted the invitation, and ate voraciously. When they had thus refreshed themselves, and were about to renew their journey, Mr. Langford called for the bill, and in the act of discharging it imprudently displayed a handful of silver. They then set out together.

A few days after, some men who were conducting a drove of cattle to Virginia, by the same road which had been travelled by Mr. Langford and the Harpes, had arrived within a few miles of Big Rock-castle River, when their cattle took fright, and, quitting the road, rushed down a hill into the woods. In collecting them, the drovers discovered the dead body of a man concealed behind a log, and covered with brush and leaves. It was now evident that the cattle had been alarmed by the smell of blood in the road, and as the body exhibited marks of violence, it was at once suspected that a murder had been perpetrated but recently. The corpse was taken to the same house where the Harpes had breakfasted, and recognized to be that of Mr. Langford, whose name was marked upon several parts of his dress. Suspicion fell upon the Harpes, who were pursued and apprehended near the Crab Orchard. They were taken to Stanford, the seat of justice for Lincoln county, where they were examined and committed by an inquiring court, sent to Danville for safe keeping, and probably for trial, as the system of district courts was then in operation in Kentucky. Previous to the time of trial, they made their escape, and proceeded to Henderson county, which at that time was just beginning to be settled.

Here they soon acquired a dreadful celebrity. Neither avarice, want, nor any of the usual inducements to the commission of crime, seemed to govern their conduct. A savage thirst for blood—a deep-rooted malignity against human nature, could alone be discovered in their actions. They murdered every defenceless being who fell in their way, without distinction of age, sex, or colour. In the night they stole secretly to the cabin, slaughtered its inhabitants, and burned their dwelling—while the farmer who left his house by day, returned to witness the dying agonies of his wife and children, and the conflagration of his possessions. Plunder was not their object:

travellers they robbed and murdered, but from the inhabitants they took only what would have been freely given to them; and no more than was immediately necessary to supply the wants of nature; they destroyed without having suffered injury, and without the prospect of gain. A negro boy, riding to a mill with a bag of corn, was seized by them, and his brains dashed out against a tree; but the horse which he rode and the grain were left unmolested. Females, children, and servants, no longer dared to stir abroad; unarmed men feared to encounter a Harpe; and the solitary hunter, as he trod the forest, looked around him with a watchful eye, and when he saw a stranger, picked his flint and stood on the defensive.

It seems incredible that such atrocities could have been often repeated in a country famed for the hardihood and gallantry of its people; in Kentucky, the cradle of courage, and the nurse of warriors. But that part of Kentucky which was the scene of these barbarities was then almost a wilderness, and the vigilance of the Harpes for a time ensured impunity. The spoils of their dreadful warfare furnished them with the means of violence and of escape. Mounted on fine horses, they plunged into the forest, eluded pursuit by frequently changing their course, and appeared, unexpectedly, to perpetrate new enormities, at points distant from those where they were supposed to lurk. On these occasions, they often left their wives and children behind them; and it is a fact, honourable to the community, that vengeance for these bloody deeds was not wreaked on the helpless, but in some degree guilty, companions of the perpetrators. Justice, however, was not long delayed.

A frontier is often the retreat of loose individuals, who, if not familiar with crime, have very blunt perceptions, of virtue. The genuine woodsmen, the real pioneers, are independent, brave, and upright; but as the jackal pursues the lion to devour his leavings, the footsteps of the sturdy hunter are closely pursued by miscreants destitute of his noble qualities. These are the poorest and the idlest of the human race—averse to labour, and impatient of the restraints of law and the courtesies of civilized society. Without the ardour, the activity, the love of sport, and patience of fatigue, which distinguish the bold backwoodsman, these are doomed to the forest by sly laziness, and hunt for a bare subsistence; they are the "cankers of a calm world and a long peace," the helpless nobodies, who, in a country where none starve and few beg, sleep until hunger pinches, then stroll into the woods for a meal, and return to their slumber. Frequently they are as harmless as the wart upon a man's nose, and as unsightly; but they are sometimes mere wax in the hands of the designing, and become the accessories of that guilt which they have not the courage or the industry to perpetrate. With such men the Harpes are supposed to have sometimes lurked. None are known to have participated in their deeds of blood, nor suspected of sharing their counsels; but they sometimes crept to the miserable cabins of those who feared or were not inclined to betray them.

Two travelers came one night to the house of a man named Stegal, and, for want of better lodgings, claimed under his little roof that hospitality which in a new country is found at every habitation. Shortly after, the Harpes arrived. It was not, it seems, their first visit; for Mrs. Stegal had received instructions from them, which she dared not disobey, never to address them by their real names in the presence of third persons. On this occasion they contrived to inform her that they intended to personate Methodist preachers, and ordered her to arrange matters so that one of them should sleep with each of the strangers, whom they intended to murder. Stegal was absent, and the woman was obliged to obey. The strangers were completely deceived as to the character of the newly arrived guests; and when it was announced that the house contained but two beds, they cheerfully assented to the proposed arrangement: one crept into a bed on the lower floor with one ruffian, while the other retired to the loft with another. Both the strangers became their victims;

but these bloody ruffians, who seemed neither to feel shame, nor dread punishment, determined to leave behind them no evidence of their crime, and consummated the foul tragedy by murdering their hostess and setting fire to the dwelling.

From this scene of arson, robbery, and murder, the perpetrators fled precipitately, favoured by a heavy fall of rain, which, as they believed, effaced their footsteps. They did not cease their flight until late the ensuing day, when they halted at a spot which they supposed to be far from any human habitation. Here they kindled a fire, and were drying their clothes, when an emigrant, who had pitched his tent hard by, strolled towards their camp. He was in search of his horses, which had strayed, and civilly asked if they had seen them. This unsuspecting woodsman they slew, and continued their retreat.

In the meanwhile, the outrages of these murderers had not escaped notice, nor were they tamely submitted to. The Governor of Kentucky had offered a reward for their heads, and parties of volunteers had pursued them; they had been so fortunate as to escape punishment by their cunning, but had not the prudence to desist, or to fly the country.

A man, named Leiper, in revenge for the murder of Mrs. Stegal, raised a party, pursued, and, discovered the assassins, on the day succeeding that atrocious deed. They came so suddenly upon the Harpes that they had only time to fly in different directions. Accident aided the pursuers. One of the Harpes was a large, and the other a small man; the first usually rode a strong, powerful horse, the other a fleet, but much smaller animal, and in the hurry of flight they had exchanged horses. The chase was long and hot: the smaller Harpe escaped unnoticed, but the other, who was kept in view, spurred on the noble animal which he rode, and which, already jaded, began to fail at the end of five or six miles. Still the miscreant pressed forward; for, although none of his pursuers were near but Leiper, who had outridden his companions, he was not willing to risk a combat with a man as strong and perhaps bolder than himself, who was animated with a noble spirit of indignation against a shocking and unmanly outrage. Leiper was mounted on a horse of celebrated powers, which, he had borrowed from a neighbor for this occasion. At the beginning of the chase, he had pressed his charger to the height of his speed, carefully keeping on the track of Harpe, of whom he sometimes caught a glimpse as he ascended the hills, and again lost sight in the valleys and the brush. But as he gained on the foe, and became sure of his victim, he slackened his pace, cocked his rifle, and deliberately pursued, sometimes calling upon the outlaw to surrender. At length, in leaping a ravine, Harpe's horse sprained a limb, and Leiper overtook him. Both were armed with rifles. Leiper fired, and wounded Harpe through the body; the latter turning in his seat, levelled his piece, which missed fire, and he dashed it to the ground, swearing it was the first time it had ever deceived him. He then drew a tomahawk, and waited the approach of Leiper, who, nothing daunted, unsheathed his long hunting-knife and rushed upon his desperate foe, grappled with him, hurled him to the ground, and wrested his only remaining weapon from his grasp. The prostrate wretch—exhausted with the loss of blood, conquered, but unsubdued in spirit—now lay passive at the feet of his adversary. Expecting every moment the arrival of the rest of his pursuers, he inquired if Stegal was of the party, and being answered in the affirmative, he exclaimed, "Then I am a dead man!"

"That would make no difference," replied Leiper, calmly. "You must die at any rate. I do not wish to kill you myself, but if nobody else will do it, I must." Leiper was a humane man, easy, slow-spoken, and not quickly excited, but a thorough soldier when roused. Without insulting the expiring criminal, he questioned him as to the motives of his late atrocities. The murderer attempted not to palliate or deny them, and confessed that he had been actuated by no inducement but a settled hatred of his species, whom he had sworn to destroy without distinction, in retaliation

for some fancied injury. He expressed no regret for any of his bloody deeds, except that which he confessed he had perpetrated upon one of his own children. "It cried," said he, "and I killed it: I had always told the women, I would have no crying about me." He acknowledged that he had amassed large sums of money, and described the places of concealment; but as none was ever discovered, it is presumed he did not declare the truth. Leiper had fired several times at Harpe during the chase, and wounded him; and when the latter was asked why, when he found Leiper pursuing him alone, he did not dismount and take to a tree, from behind which he could inevitably have shot him as he approached, he replied that he had supposed there was not a horse in the country equal to the one which he rode, and that he was confident of making his escape. He thought also that the pursuit would be less eager, so long as he abstained from shedding the blood of any of his pursuers. On the arrival of the rest of the party, the wretch was dispatched, and he died as he had lived, in remorseless guilt. It is said, however, that he was about to make some disclosure, and had commenced in a tone of more sincerity than he had before evinced, when Stegal advanced and severed his head from his body. This bloody trophy they carried to the nearest magistrate, a Mr. Newman, before whom it was proved to be the head of Micajah Harpe; they then placed it in the fork of a tree, where it long remained a revolting object of horror. The spot, which is near the Highland Lick, in Union (then Henderson) County, is still called Harpe's Head, and a public road which passes it, is called the Harpe's Head Road. [following picture on page 91]



THE SO-CALLED HARPE'S "HOUSE"  
On Harpe's Hill, near Pond River

The other Harpe made his way to the neighborhood of Natchez, where he joined a gang of robbers, headed by a man named Meason, whose villainies were so notorious that a reward was offered for his head. At that period, vast regions along the shores of the Ohio and Mississippi were still unsettled, through which boats navigating those rivers must necessarily pass; and the traders who, after selling their cargoes at New Orleans, attempted to return by land, had to cross immense wildernesses, totally destitute of inhabitants. Meason, who was a man rather above the ordinary stamp, infested these deserts, seldom committing murder, but robbing all who fell in his way. Sometimes he plundered the descending boats; but more frequently he allowed these to pass, preferring to rob their owners of their money as they returned, pleasantly observing, that "those people were taking their produce to market for him." Harpe took an opportunity, when the rest of

his companions were absent, to slay Meason, and putting his head in a bag, carried it to Natchez, and claimed the reward. The claim was admitted; the head of Meason was recognized but so also was the face of Harpe, who was arrested, condemned, and executed.

In collecting oral testimony of events long past, a considerable variety will often be found in the statements of the persons conversant with the circumstances. In this case, I have found none, except as to the fact of the two Harpes having exchanged horses. A day or two before the fatal catastrophe which ended their career in Kentucky, they had murdered a gentleman named Love, and had taken his horse, a remarkably fine animal, which Big Harpe undoubtedly rode when he was overtaken. It is said that Little Harpe escaped on foot, and not on his brother's horse. Many of these facts were disclosed by the latter, while under sentence of death.

After Harpe's death the women came in and claimed protection. Two of them were the wives of the larger Harpe, the other one of his brother. The latter was a decent female, of delicate, prepossessing appearance, who stated that she had married her husband without any knowledge of his real character, shortly before they set out for the west; that she was so much shocked at the first murder which they committed, that she attempted to escape from them, but was prevented, and that she had since made similar attempts. She immediately wrote to her father in Virginia, who came for her, and took her home. The other women were in no way remarkable. They remained in Muhlenburgh county.

These horrid events will sound like fiction to your ears, when told as having happened in any part of the United States, so foreign are they from the generosity of the American character, the happy security of our institutions, and the moral habits of our people. But it is to be recollected that they happened twenty-seven years ago, in frontier settlements, far distant from the civilized parts of our country. The principal scene of Harpe's atrocities, and of his death, was in that part of Kentucky which lies south of Green river, a vast wilderness, then known by the general name of the Green river country, and containing a few small and thinly scattered settlements—the more dense population of that state being at that time confined to its northern and eastern parts. The Indians still possessed the country to the south and west. That enormities should sometimes have been practiced at these distant spots, cannot be matter of surprise; the only wonder is that they were so few. The first settlers were a hardy and an honest people; but they were too few in number, and too widely spread, to be able to create or enforce wholesale civil restraints. Desperadoes, flying from justice, or seeking a secure theatre for the perpetration of crime, might frequently escape discovery, and as often elude or openly defy the arm of justice.



**The Morning Call, Allentown, PA, 2 January 1927, p.28;  
Greensboro News, Greensboro, NC, 2 January 1927, p.12C:**

**Historic Road Where Bandit's Head  
Was Impaled on Tree Is Wiped Out**

Madisonville, Ky., Dec. 28. – A Kentucky road., once distinguished from other mud roads because it wound through the hills and woods of this part of the state like a trail of blood, has just become a civilized highway at last.

Concrete has wiped out the bloody trail in the mud.

With the last mud gap in the Dixie Bee line highway, north and south route from Canada to Florida thru the Middle West, paved, it marks the completion of improvements necessary to make the transcontinental trail a year round highway.

But to the natives of Hopkins and Webster counties, in western Kentucky, steeped in the legend and folklore of the bloody reign of terror which occurred about the year 1800, it has a greater significance than the mere completion of U. S. Highway No. 41.

It means the erasure from the map of a name that can make the blood chill – The Harpe's Head Road.

### Spot Is Marked.

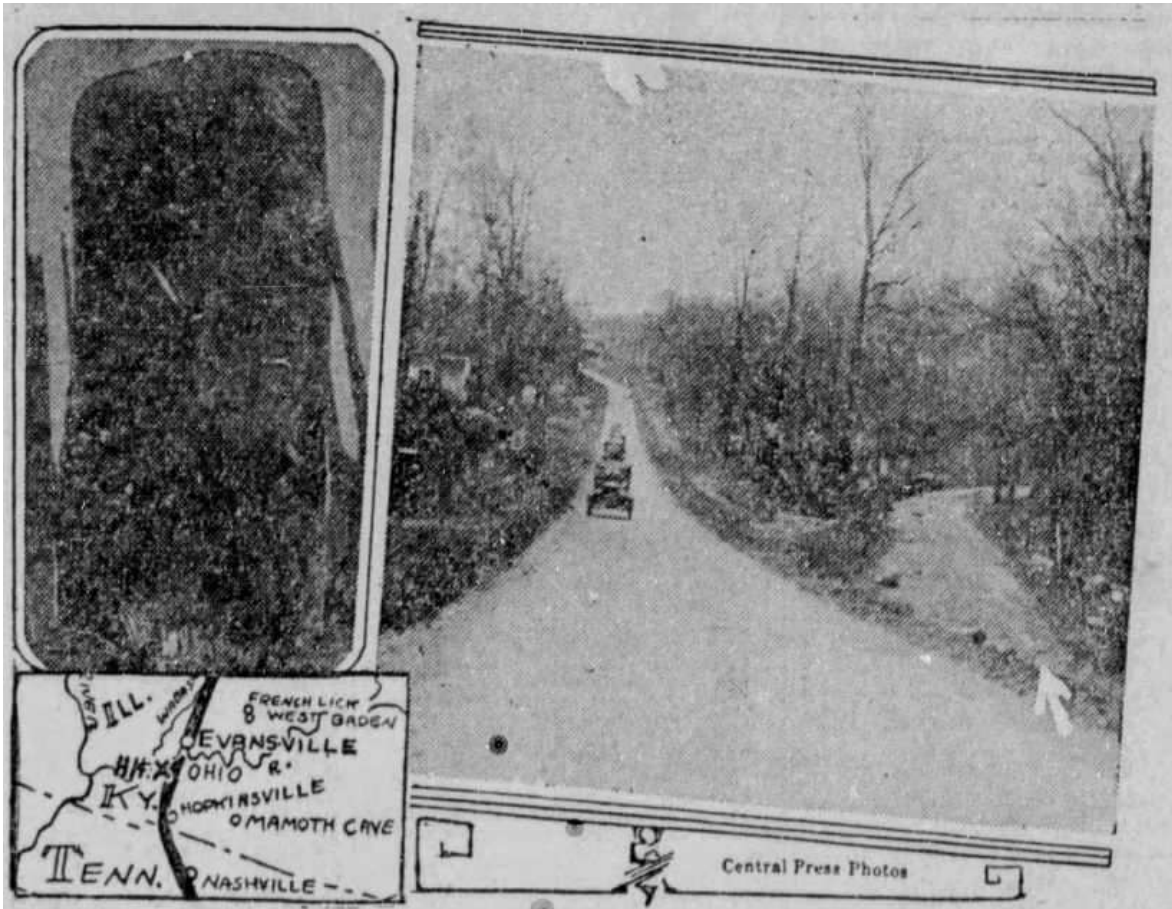
For just to the east of Dixon, is a crude stone monument which marks the spot where once stood a tree shorn of its branches and sharpened at the top that it might hold the skull of a human being.

That being was Big Harpe, leader of a band of murderers.

Harpe's head on that, tree, in full view of those who passed along the road, bleached in the sun for many years as a warning to those who would follow his bloody footsteps; and as an ensign of victory hoisted by a terror stricken populace which at last got the upper hand.

The story of the Harpes is an old one, forgotten by the world outside of Western Kentucky.

About the year 1800, there roamed through this region, a band of outlaws headed by Big Harpe and Little Harpe, brothers. They robbed wantonly, set fire to homes after pillaging them, killed the men and ravished the women without mercy, and apparently for the simple sport of it.



### News Traveled Slowly.

Being sparsely settled, it was sometimes many days before the residents of one part of the territory heard of the outlawry committed by the Harpe band in a nearby community. It was then too late for the pursuing posse to give aid, and the people of the ravished communities were too few and too much frightened to give chase.

Then came the reckoning that was climaxed with the decapitation of Big Harpe and the impalement of his head on a tree at the side of a road which marked the trail of his most atrocious activities.

A man – his name is forgotten in the dust of time whose entire family had been murdered by the Harpe band, and who had sworn with his hand, on the Bible, to avenge their death, came across the murderers' trail after long weeks of seeking.

Big Harpe was on a powerful stallion, but his pursuer was on a swifter mount. The chase was short after the pursuing band sighted the outlaws. The avenger shot down his man, slashed off the head of the leader with his hunting knife, and then triumphantly climbed the tree nearest by and hoisted the signal of victory.

### Brother's Fate.

Little Harpe, the less blood-thirsty of the two brothers, escaped and fled into Mississippi, where he lived unrecognized for several years. Then one day he, too, was identified, confessed his crimes and was hanged.

Last year the people of Providence in Webster county caused a stone monument to be erected at the spot where the Harpe's Head tree had stood many years before. This simple marker of sandstone bears only the inscription "H. H. 1925". It cost only \$4 to hew and set the stone. The man who set the monument was a native of the county whose father had told him of seeing the head in the tree.

The stump of that tree was uprooted to make possible the widening of the road necessary to the preliminary grading work on this part of the Dixie Bee Line. Parts of the stump are preserved in museums in various towns of this region.

So, while the Harpe's Head road has passed out of existence in the march of progress, its legend will not be forgotten. The people of Western Kentucky will not let such a signal victory pass into oblivion as that dramatic conquest of the most notorious band of outlaws the state ever has known.



**Ravalli Republic, Hamilton, Montana, Sunday, 19 February 2023, p.2A:**

### First serial killers in America

... So, what happened to the three “wives” of the notorious Harpes? On the day that Big Harpe was killed in August 1799, the women were left at the camp. In September, all three were rounded up and charged with being accomplices in the murders of Mary Stegall, her infant son, James, and Captain William Love. However, the jury took pity on the women and found all three innocent, believing they had been held as captives.

Sally Rice Harpe soon returned to the Knoxville area to be with her father. She later married a highly respected man and together, raised a large family. Susan Wood, also known as Susannah



Roberts, stayed in the Russellville area, where she remarried and lived a respectable life. She died in Tennessee. Maria Davidson, who was by then known as Betsy Roberts, married a man named John Huffstutler in September 1803 [ed. note – this marriage of Betsy Roberts was recorded on 27 September 1803 in Logan County, KY]. By 1828, they had moved to Hamilton County, Illinois, where they raised a large family and lived until their deaths in the 1860s.

The Harpes had killed a documented 39 people, but were suspected of killing up to 50...



### **Review by Jerry Long:**

The account of the Harpes given by Judge James Hall (1793-1868) in his book, Letters from the West (1828, 385 pages) can be viewed on the Internet site, Internet Archive (archive.org). Hall's chapter, "The Harpes", appears on pages 265-282. His account is largely replicated in Otto A. Rothert's book, A History of Muhlenberg County (1913) included herein.

Judge James Hall also penned the book, The Harpe's Head: A Legend of Kentucky (1833, 299 pages). This volume and T. Marshall Smith's book, Legends of the War of Independence and of the Earlier Settlements in the West (1855, 397 pages) can also be viewed on the Internet site, Internet Archive (archive.org). Britannica.com describes Hall's 1833 volume as a "novel". A novel is defined as a fictitious prose narrative of book length, typically representing character and action with some degree of realism. T. Marshall Smith's expanded account of the Harpes in his edition is also a novel. Due to the fact that the accounts given by Hall in 1833 and Smith in 1855 can be seen as novels (legends) not historical exposes they were not duplicated here. The latter two accounts (novels) have greatly clouded historical research and documentation on the Harpes. There have been thousands of articles penned about the Harpes and unfortunately many do not consider the fact that the Hall and Smith accounts are expanded and embellished accounts and are not to be interpreted literally.

