

### ON THIS DAY IN WEST VIRGINIA HISTORY DECEMBER 16



**The last public hanging in West Virginia occurred on December 16, 1897, in Ripley.**

**CSO: SS.8.4, SS.8.23, ELA.8.1**

**Investigate the Document: (*Jackson Herald*, December 10, 1997; Jackson County Circuit Court, Case file regarding John Morgan, Ar2018)**

1. The last public hanging in West Virginia occurred on December 16, 1897, in Ripley. According to the document, what was the crime that John Morgan had been found guilty of?
2. Who does the court state shall carry out Morgan's execution?
3. Did the lewdness and the celebratory atmosphere surrounding Morgan's hanging inspire legislation that would outlaw public hangings in West Virginia? If so, why?
4. What is a "mattock"?
5. What did Morgan plead at his trial?
6. What was Morgan's ultimate motive for carrying out his heinous crimes?

**Think Critically:** Should the public and media be allowed to attend executions? Does the media today sensationalize events or paint negative pictures of certain regions? Why do you think the public hanging of John Morgan has remained significant? Did the criticism of the festive atmosphere surrounding Morgan's hanging signify an end to frontier justice?

THE MERTON LEGAL WRAPPER.

Manufactured by  
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State of West Virginia, Jackson County, to-wit;

At a Circuit Court continued and held in and for said County at the Court House thereof, on the 6th day of November in the year one thousand eight hundred and ninty-seven:

State of West Virginia |

vs. |

John Morgan. |

Upon an indictment for murder. |

This day came again the State by her Prosecuting Attorney, as well as the said John Morgan, who stands convicted of murder in the first degree, who was again placed at the bar of the Court in the custody of the sheriff of this County, and thereupon it being demanded of him if anything for himself he had or knew to say, why the Court here to judgment and execution against him, of and upon the premises should not proceed, he said he had nothing but what he had before said; Thereupon it is considered by the Court, that he be hanged by the neck until he be dead, and that execution of this judgement be made and done upon him, the said John Morgan, by the Sheriff of Jackson County on Thursday, the 16th day of December-- next, (1897) between the hours of ten in the forenoon and two in the afternoon of the same day, at the usual place of execution. And thereupon the said John Morgan is remanded to jail.

A Copy-- Teste:

M. C. Archer, Clerk.

The Jackson Herald WED. DEC. 10. 1897 PAGE C1

# THE LAST GALLOWS

## A HISTORICAL REVIEW OF WV'S LAST PUBLIC HANGING, DEC. 16, 1897

### Money was the motive... And John Morgan ends up paying society's ultimate debt

By DOUG SKEEN  
THE JACKSON HERALD

RIPLEY - It was a massacre unparalleled in the history of Jackson County and it had its origins with a debt of \$35 and led ultimately to the payment of society's greatest debt for convicted murderer John Ferguson Morgan.

One hundred years have passed, but the tragic story of betrayal, murder, and swift justice has been forever embedded in the annals of Jackson County history.

On December 16, 1897, the 22-year-old Morgan, a dirt farmer, hired hand and wanderer, met his fate on the gallows in a field along the Ripley-to-Charleston Turnpike. Morgan was sentenced to death by Judge Reese Blizzard after being found guilty for the brutal November 3 murders of Mrs. Chloe Greene, a 61-year-old widow, and her 27-year-old daughter Matilda Pfost, and 18-year-old son Jimmy Greene.

The events surrounding Morgan's execution have become the basis for legend and in the years that followed, the story was even put to music.

Newspapers of the day, including the renowned New York Sun, sent reporters to cover what would turn out to be West Virginia's last public hanging. People from surrounding counties, some even traveling for days,

camped on the grounds where the event was to take place. A crowd, estimated in the thousands, was present for the proceedings which took place where a parking lot for the Board of Education office is now situated.

The bawdy, carnival like atmosphere was unsettling for local officials and one of Jackson County's own, State Senator John S. Darst of Cottageville, sponsored a bill at the next legislative session which abolished public executions in the Mountain State.

Thus, John F. Morgan's date with eternity has been viewed by many historians as the end of frontier justice and the beginning of a new era in crime and punishment in West Virginia.

Adding to the terrible horror of the crimes was the fact that Morgan was someone the Greene family trusted. He had basically lived with them, on and off, over the past six years. They gave him food, shelter, and unfortunately their trust. Public outrage over the triple slaying was tremendous and fear of mob violence and lynching led to the unusually speedy trial.

Morgan's short life was one filled with tragedy and difficulty. His real father, A.M. "Marion" Raines, was shot and killed in Nicholas County in 1877 while resisting arrest. Marion

Raines had been forced to flee Jackson County in 1875 after gunning down the Reverend C.T. "Clem" Morgan on his farm near Gay.

Clem Morgan was a divorcee and allowed Raines and his wife to move in with him to keep house. Eventually, Raines believed the housekeeping had become more than just domestic chores and when John F. was just two days old, Marion Raines shot Clem Morgan as he was cutting briars. The April 29, 1875 edition of "The Jackson Democrat" called the murder a "Cowardly Assassination" and went on to detail the crime.

Mrs. Raines would later re-marry and young John Ferguson was given the last name of Morgan and he would live with his mother until her death in 1884.

From that time until 1891, he was pushed from place to place, residing with whomever he could. Finally, Morgan was taken in by Edward Greene and the youngster was treated like one of the family.

Greene, a widower and prominent farmer in the Grass Lick and Plum Orchard area, married the widow Chloe Pfost in 1876. He died in 1895 at the age of 95. Mrs. Greene's first husband was Francis M. Pfost, also a large landowner and farmer. The Greene's made their home on what was popularly called the "Pfof Farm."

Living in the household with Chloe Greene at the time of the murders were her daughters Matilda Pfost and Alice Pfost, and young son Jimmy Greene. Morgan had married Rebecca Hall a year earlier and lived in a small house just down the road but was a regular guest, often performing odd jobs for the family.

In the Spring of 1897 Mrs. Greene gave Morgan a horse. He in turn

swapped the animal to someone else for two younger horses, with the promise to pay an additional \$35 sometime in November.

Neighbors had reported strange actions by Morgan in days before the murders. A visit to the Greene house a week before the slayings did spark some conversation at the dinner table that perhaps John was wanting to steal the money from a recent sale of a horse. Still, no one in the family felt their lives were threatened and when Morgan arrived the evening of November 2, nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

According to a published report six years ago, Raines family lore states that Morgan supposedly made two stops to the Greene home the evening of November 2.

Ben Raines and Ben Anderson were said to have been with Morgan when he approached Chloe Greene about payment for some work he had done over the summer. The widow was said to have offered him \$5 and some clothing, rather than the nearly \$40 Morgan was requesting.

According to the story, Morgan left somewhat discouraged but decided later that night to return and accept the offer.

News of a possible earlier visit did not surface in the trial but Morgan did in fact spend that Tuesday night with the family. He had even requested that Matilda Pfost cut his hair and she agreed to do so, but only if Morgan would stay the evening. He did and slept in the same room with 18-year-old Jimmy Greene.

In the pre-dawn hours of Wednesday, November 3, Jimmy Greene left to feed the hogs. Morgan followed him and quietly picked up a mattock that was hidden in a corncrib

“ Morgan resumed his murderous assault by taking a hatchet from a nearby wood box and attacking viciously. ”

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In a few moments Morgan returned to the farmhouse and when questioned about the boy's whereabouts, replied that Jimmy had gone to check some traps. The girls stated their brother had no traps set and Morgan went outside and whistled and stepped back in, stating he heard Jimmy making his way home.

The sisters next went out with a lamp to fetch milk for breakfast. They soon returned and Matilda began kneading bread dough in the kitchen. Then, and once again without warning, Morgan resumed his murderous assault by taking a hatchet from a nearby wood box and attacking viciously.

Alice Pfost suffered a severe head wound but managed to escape to the nearby John Chancey farm and Morgan pursued her part of the way. As she made the journey, Alice could hear the cries of her sister and mother as they fought for their lives.

William Chancey, the neighbor's son, heard Alice's screams and quickly came to her aid. Chancey and Ed Southall soon rushed to the Greene home and upon arriving, they found the terrible carnage. Jimmy Greene lay dead beside the hogpen. Also dead was Matilda Pfost, who was found on the floor in the sitting room of the dwelling. Mrs. Chloe Greene was first attacked in a bedroom but made

her way out the front door and was found partially on the porch and into the yard. She was barely alive when help arrived but passed away a short time later.

Morgan on hearing the approach of Chancey and Southall, pitched the hatchet and fled the scene. He was caught at shotgun point at around 8 a.m. by another neighbor, George W. Shamblen.

Morgan would plead insanity at the trial. After his conviction and sentencing on November 6, he began issuing a series of confessions. The first appeared in the November 12, 1897 issue of The Jackson Herald and the final one just days before his hanging.

Authorities were able to determine that a small purse with some coins was missing from the Greene home. That purse was never found and a much hoped for reprieve from the Governor office never arrived for Morgan. Despite one escape by the prisoner, Sheriff J.O. Shinn kept his promise to the citizens of Jackson County and Morgan fell through the gallows as scheduled.

Spurred by the want for money, John F. Morgan unleashed a treachery and wickedness unmatched in the history of the county and in so doing, committed the most heinous crimes ever perpetrated in this area and forever earned a place in disgrace and infamy.

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100 YEARS AGO - The execution of murderer John F. Morgan became a rather macabre spectacle which drew thousands to the county seat the morning of Thursday, December 16, 1897. Morgan fell through the gallows which were constructed by Major C.H. Progler, a French speaking Swiss immigrant who was one of the town's leading citizens. Progler married the daughter of Nehemiah Smith, who as Sheriff in 1850, carried out Jackson County's only other execution by hanging murderer Charles Green. Sheriff J.O. Shinn carried out Morgan's execution prior to the arrival of the 12:40 train, reportedly to prevent any last minute reprieves from stopping the imposition of the sentence. The Sheriff had practiced applying the straps and tightening the noose on one of his deputies for several hours leading up to the hanging. The rope that was used was the same hemp which

was used in the hanging of four other murderers. Morgan, according to an article in the December 23, 1897 Morgantown Dominion-Post "died bravely" before "10,000 witnesses" and said to the crowd, "I bid you farewell. This is a warning to all young men not to go astray as I have. My God, I am sorry." Those standing on the platform who have been identified are Sheriff J.O. Shinn (extreme right), Rev. T.H. Rymer (third from right), and leaning over the railing at the extreme left was then deputy R.P. Shinn, brother of the Sheriff. During the next legislative session, State Senator John S. Darst of Cottageville motivated by many of the disgraceful aspects of the affair, successfully sponsored a bill which ended public executions in West Virginia. (Photo courtesy of E. DeWitt Williams/Jackson County Library)

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Wednesday, December 10, 1997--The Jackson Star News--A-7

### John Morgan swore he wouldn't hang on December 16, 1897 Sheriff J.O. Shinn said he would and invited public to attend

#### MORGAN

(Continued from A-1)

about the throat on one of his deputies. It was Shinn's first (and, as it turned out, last) hanging, and he wanted his role practiced and down pat.

Morgan was brought out dressed in black and rode to his death in a surry, followed by a wagon bearing his coffin. He was spared the indignity of riding with his casket, as had been inflicted on Jackson County's only other hanged murderer, twenty-one-year-old riverboat crewman Charles Green.

Thousands of curious spectators, gamblers and concessionaires jammed the streets, hawking everything from copies of Morgan's many "true and only" confessions to photographs of the condemned man to food.

The procession snaked through the crowd to the scaffold with Morgan singing hymns and praying aloud.

Once atop the 13 steps on the Indian mound and surrounded by the massive outpouring of spectators, Morgan bowed to all sides.

Assuredly, he thought of what had brought him to his sorry end.

He had come to the Pfost-Green farm on the night of Nov. 3--a family that considered him somewhat of an "adopted son." Morgan was invited in and during the course of the conversa-

arrived at the bloody scene less than 30 minutes after Alice Pfost had arrived at the Chancey farm.

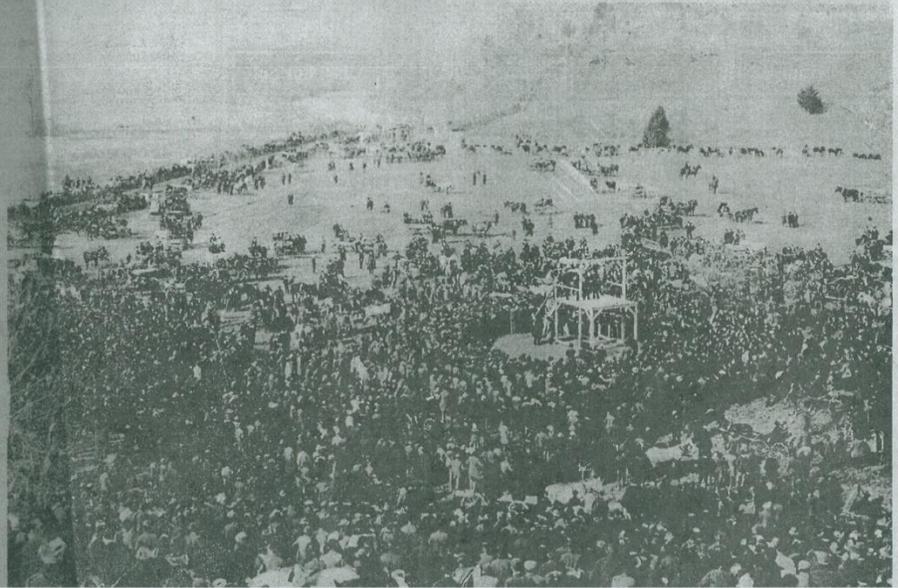
Chloe Pfost-Greene had been in the bedroom making beds when Morgan began his murderous attack in the kitchen. He had chopped through the door and attacked the widow, hacking her there and through the house to the porch, where she fell partially into the yard with four terrible head wounds. She was found alive by the men, but died shortly thereafter, as did her daughter Matilda.

When daylight came, the men found the body of Jimmy Greene and the bloody hatchet which Morgan had tossed into the family garden plot. It was believed that Morgan had still been searching for Alice Pfost, when he heard the sound of the men approaching and fled.

Morgan was cornered a short time later by G.W. Shambien, who spotted him in a field four miles away and overtook him on horseback armed with a shotgun.

Morgan offered no resistance and was tied, handcuffed and returned to the murder scene. He tried to convince his captors that he was insane, but later confessed in a sworn statement to Coroner D.A. Brown. It was the first "true and only confession" of many.

While his defense was insanity and his strange behavior was testified to by several witnesses including his wife, the motive for the murders was



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