

Spring 2018

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Recommended Citation

Cegielski, Emily (2018) "The Obituary of a Folklore: The Relation of John Newman Edwards and Jesse James," *ESSAI*: Vol. 16 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol16/iss1/10>

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The Obituary of a Folklore: The Relation of John Newman Edwards and Jesse James

by Emily Cegielski

(English 1102)

On April 3, 1882, Jesse James, the famous American outlaw, was murdered. Jesse James was a classic Robin Hood figure. Swashbuckling robber supposedly stealing from the rich and giving to the poor, he was a notable part of American folklore during the 19th century. James' obituary was written by John Newman Edwards was an editor for the *Kansas City Times* during 1872-1882, who also wrote other articles for the historical bandit. Edwards writes in the obituary in 1882, "No one among all the hired cowards... dared face this wonderful outlaw... until he had disarmed himself and turned his back to his assassins, the first and only time in a career which has passed from the realms of an almost fabulous romance into that of history" (1882). He continues on to explain how marvelous James was despite his murderous actions:

We called him outlaw, and he was, but Fate made him so. When the war (American Civil War) came he was just turned of fifteen. The border was all aflame with steel, and fire, and ambuscade, and slaughter. He flung himself into a band which had a black flag for a banner and devils for riders.

Newman claims it was because of James' strenuous childhood that he was forced into the lifestyle of a criminal, but he was not a bad man. The obituary then focuses on the "flawed-ness" of the State, by using Jesse James as an example of a victim of prejudice. Towards the end, Edwards rants about how James was murdered unjustly due to the political state of Missouri:

Those who conspired to murder him (Jesse James)... have succeeded, but such a cry of horror and indignation at the infernal deed is even now thundering over the land... Others again among the murderers are sanctimonious devils who plead the honor of the State, the value of law and order, the splendid courage required to shoot an unarmed man in the back of the head; and these will be stripped to their skin of all their pretensions, and made to shiver and freeze, splotched as they are and spotted and piebald with blood, in the pitiless storm of public contempt and condemnation...

Newman says that the death of Jesse James couldn't be overlooked because it was a crime itself. The State of Missouri supposedly went out of its way to end James, pulling from every resource possible, even if it meant illegal activity:

But here the law itself becomes a murderer. It leagues with murderers. It hires murderers. It aids and abets murderers. It borrows money to pay and reward murderers. It promises immunity and protection to murderers. It is itself a murderer-- the most abject, the most infamous, and the most cowardly ever known to history.

Newman explains that Missouri is a progressive and functioning state, but due to the State's response of putting a reward on James for whoever killed the outlaw, Newman believed Missouri was willing to sell out. In Newman's eyes this meant the State was willing to bend the law in order to terminate Jesse James:

Missouri, with a watchful and vigilant marshal in every one of her principal towns and cities. Missouri, with every screw and cog and crank and lever and wheel of her administrative machinery in perfect working order. Missouri, with all her order, progress and development, had yet to surrender all these in the face of a single man--a hunted, lied-upon, proscribed and outlawed man... that the majesty of the law might be vindicated... Why, the whole State reeks to-day with a double orgy--that of lust and that of murder... Tear the two bears from the flag of Missouri. Put thereon, in place of them, as more appropriate, a thief blowing out the brains of an unarmed victim, and a brazen harlot, naked to the waist and splashed to the brows in blood.

John Newman Edwards exclaimed his opinion very clearly in the obituary of Jesse James. Obituaries normally reflect on the person's life and accomplishments. The person who has passed is complimented for their values and morals. Jesse James's obituary did praise him; however, it was also a platform for Newman to express his feelings on Missouri and exaggerate the life of Jesse James. John Newman Edwards claimed that "fate" made Jesse James a criminal, and that the State gave up its good name because of Jesse James' death, and Newman also dramatized the obituary for his political agenda. Jesse James is still a mystery to this day. Many of those who claim to know about Jesse James only know the folklore of Jesse James. Clarity needs to be brought on who Jesse James really is.

For the obituary to be fully understood, the history of Jesse James needs to be explored. Jesse James was born in Kearney, Missouri, on September 5, 1847. As far as James's early life, not much can be legitimized as fact. Different sources present his father, Reverend Robert James, as leaving the James family to join the California Gold Rush (History.com Staff), or even the James family getting attacked by Union soldiers (Biography.com Editors). Jesse James is the closest thing to a living folklore. Both sources do agree on the fact that Jesse James and his brother, Frank, in their young teenage years, joined the Confederate army during the Civil War. History.com states, "As Confederate sympathizers, both Jesse and Frank joined William Quantrill's vicious Missouri guerrilla force..." (History.com Staff). The Civil War was a malicious war that affected all Americans. Jesse James was majorly exposed to the brutality of the war and potentially participated in the violence as a guerilla soldier. The war came to a long awaited end with the Union claiming victory. The Confederate States had to bend to the new legislation, which meant cultural revision. Jesse and Frank, hard from the war, did not want to succumb to the new era of freedom for all men. Instead of accepting defeat and living a simple diligent life, the two brothers rebelled. Jesse James and Frank James banded together and started a group of ex-Confederate soldiers to pursue the work of delinquents. *Time Magazine* mentions, "After the war, reeling from the South's defeat, they (Jesse and Frank's gang) roamed from Iowa to Alabama and Texas, robbing banks, holding up trains, and looting stagecoaches, shops, and unlucky passers-by" (Time Staff). Years went by and the two brothers continued their escapades. Jesse James ended up marrying his first cousin, Zerelda. James was considered a "family man" with two children, even though he was a criminal (Biography.com Staff). Eventually Governor Crittenden of Missouri was tired of James' shenanigans. The Governor offered a generous reward for whoever captured Jesse James. On April 3, 1882, Bob Ford, a man who had briefly worked with the James brothers, put a bullet through Jesse James' head and ended the life of notorious bandit.

Newman, in the obituary, says that Jesse James was bound to a life of crime because he was so young when he entered the war. On the contrary, a writer for the website, *Civil War Saga*, addresses that during the Civil War it wasn't unusual for boys to serve. The ages of boy soldiers ranged from twelve to seventeen. Their duties mostly consisted of being drummer boys (musicians), giving medical assistance, and delivering messages back and forth for their armies. Casualties still

took place in this specific age group because they engaged on the battlefield despite their age (Brooks). Jesse James was an anomaly in these circumstances. Indeed he was exposed to violent guerilla warfare, but such exposure is not a legitimate excuse for the crimes James committed. Typically, the boy soldiers who survived the war went back to their families or continued to serve in the military. After the war was over James could have returned to a simple life of a farmer or whatnot. Instead he actively chose to kill, steal, and destroy. These are not the qualities of a good man.

The war had come to an end and the South had to begin to reform and integrate a new ideology. Despite Missouri being advancing in technology and social reform, the state could not handle the nuisance Jesse James. The Governor of Missouri, Thomas Crittenden, was sick and tired of the James brothers and put a reward of five thousand dollars for whoever could catch the troublesome duo. Hanes, writer from *History.com*, says, “Even for a murder, a \$5,000 reward was large by 1881 standards, equivalent to over \$113,000 in today’s dollars”. Crittenden’s goal was to get the brothers in jail, because they had become a liability issue:

Over the preceding 12 years, the James gang had pulled off an average of one heist about every six months. At the time of the (reward) poster’s issuance, Frank and Jesse were charged with two train robberies, one bank robbery and a murder in the last two years alone. Nevertheless, the pair remained at large. Crittendon wanted the brothers brought to justice, and the large reward provided great incentive to lawmen and citizens alike to deliver the James brothers to jail. (Hanes)

Crittendon couldn’t afford to lose anymore money or lives to Jesse James. Newman in the obituary claimed that Missouri illegally went about getting rid of Jesse James. In reality Crittendon never warranted the murder of Jesse James. The governor merely wanted James in jail so that he could be managed and dealt with. A large reward was offered for Jesse James and how he was to be “caught” was not quite clarified. Despite that, for Newman to accuse Missouri for being unlawful based on a murder of a criminal is a large accusation. There is not enough evidence for Newman to say the good name of Missouri was lost because Jesse James was murdered.

The other key component to this mysterious folklore is the obituary writer himself. The claims he makes are very opinionated. Comprehending what Newman is trying to get across in the obituary is a little difficult without first knowing who John Newman Edwards is. According to *Historic Missourians.com*, Newman was born in Virginia but lived in Missouri for most of his life. The Civil War began and Newman declared himself as a Confederate. He served as a soldier in the war. Part of his duty was to write informative war reports. Newman, having a flair for the dramatic, presented the Confederates as gallant heroes even though no one was a hero in this war. Years later after the war, Newman co-founded the *Kansas City Times*. This is the time period when he wrote the flashy articles and obituary about Jesse James. John Newman Edwards passed away a couple years after Jesse James in 1889 (Trout).

John Newman Edwards has a history of writing questionable and biased articles from the beginning of his writing career. He began writing about violent soldiers and applauding them for their “good deeds” to make the Confederates appear as the superheros. After his time as a soldier he had to find a way to encourage Confederate ideology. Confederates had taken a huge dive because the Union won the war. Newman was unwilling to change his thinking and was going to find a way to spread his beliefs. The perfect forum for sharing his opinion was to discreetly integrate biased information into the news. During the eighteen hundreds the best means of information was newspapers. Everyone read the news, so Newman co-founded and wrote for the *Kansas City Times*. If Newman had directly written articles filled with prejudice, there would not have been a positive response. Instead he picked his cover story to inspire Confederate morale. That cover story was Jesse

James. Based on the history of Jesse James, he was not a significant man. What made him significant was the fantastical articles written about him. Without the articles written by Newman, Jesse James would not be the legend that he is today. Newman's goal was to "re-instill pride in the Confederates" (Trout). The figure of Jesse James represented fighting against the state for tight implications of law and ethics. Newman hoped creating this figure would encourage more Confederates to rejoin being involved in politics. John Newman Edwards created the folklore of Jesse James.

Overall the obituary of Jesse James is highly biased and opinionated. Newman claimed that it was "fate's" fault Jesse James was a criminal, when he was actually a malignant man who did not want to work for a living. The obituary also explained that Jesse James was murdered under illegal actions and incentives. The governor did in fact offer a reward for Jesse James, but he did not directly claim a death sentence on Jesse James' life. Newman also had a political agenda in the obituary to rekindle the pride of the Confederates by creating an iconic Robin Hood figure for the Confederates to sympathize with. The obituary was faulty; however, despite logistical facts, John Newman Edwards succeeded in creating one of the most famous American folktales based on the life of Jesse James.

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