

The Shelton Laurel Massacre ^[1]

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The Civil War took a tremendous toll on the South. Though somewhat isolated, the Appalachian region was no exception. More so than other areas of North Carolina, mountain citizens visibly split their allegiance between the Union and the Confederacy. One area where the divide was especially problematic was the border counties of Yancey and Madison.

Tensions were so high in Yancey that the county actually split in two, with the pro-South, eastern-part breaking away and forming the separate county of Mitchell. There was little cooperation within communities, and local governments were frequently ineffective at carrying out their responsibilities. Most able-bodied men were miles away fighting the war, so their services and support were unavailable. The weak and helpless were vulnerable to the elements – both of nature and of man. One event, the Shelton Laurel Massacre in Madison County, personified the hatred, division, and desperation present in the mountains during the Civil War.

As the War continued, [rations](#) ^[2] were in short supply and the promises of government agencies to provide staples like salt were not being kept. Salt was especially essential. It was used to preserve meats and butter, and for tanning hides. Its availability could mean the difference between survival and starvation. Large quantities were necessary. It took 50 pounds of salt to preserve one 500-pound hog. The South had little access to salt. That held doubly true for the isolated mountains. The winter of 1862-63 was especially harsh. As circumstances worsened, concern changed to frustration. Eventually desperation turned the winter violent.

Late in 1862, an assortment of men, most of them residents of the Shelton Laurel Valley in Madison County, came together. They were comprised of Union sympathizers and Confederate deserters. When it became apparent that promised government rations were not going to be delivered, the men decided to take matters into their own hands. Journeying through Madison County, the group made their way into Marshall. They made various raids onto private property, stealing what they desired and destroying what they did not.

Eventually, they entered the home of Colonel Lawrence Allen, commander of the 64th North Carolina [infantry](#) ^[3], who was in Virginia. However, his wife and two children were home. The raiding band of marauders terrorized the small family, stealing food and supplies.

Marshall's citizens were outraged. The 64th set out to apprehend the men in the Shelton Laurel Valley. Most of the raiders fled. On January 19, 1863, fifteen men, aged 15 to 60, were rounded up. It was later determined only five of the fifteen were involved in the Marshall raid. The men were arrested and marched off. Somewhere along the way two of the men escaped. The remainder were then executed by firing squad. The bodies were then placed in shallow graves.

Discovering the horrific results of the massacre, Shelton Laurel residents removed their executed friends and relatives from the hastily constructed grave. They were eventually buried together in a single grave near the very location of their execution. Today, a granite marker memorializes the site. The events that occurred in Shelton Laurel were characteristic of the divide and struggle for control that took place in North Carolina during and after the Civil War. Most citizens either remained supporters of the Confederacy or supporters of the Union. There are still deep divisions of loyalty present in Madison County. One local resident commented, "I know families in this county that are just as proud of (being descended from) the ones who killed those men as the people out here are of those who survived."

So the next time you hear the nickname "Bloody Madison" remember it recalls the events of a war that divided and destroyed families, friends, and communities. It is a difficult, often painful, recollection – but one that is nonetheless part of our history.

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[LEARN NC North Carolina History: A Digital Textbook](#)^[18]

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[Shelton Laurel Massacre](#) ^[19], a short film created by students at Western Carolina University in 2007.

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Primary Sources:

[February 16, 1863 Letter](#) ^[21] from A. S. Merrimon to Governor Zebulon B. Vance where Merrimon describes has learned about what we now know as the Shelton Laurel Massacre.

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