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Bill Dark

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Dark, John William (Bill)

John William (Bill) Dark (1835?–1863)

John William (Bill) Dark was a bushwhacker in north-central Arkansas during the Civil War. From June 1862 to January 1863, he served as captain of Company A, Coffee's Recruits, a guerrilla band that attempted to thwart Federal advances in northern Arkansas, as well as to conscript state troops. Dark soon gained the reputation as a cruel and ruthless plunderer who preyed on citizens of [Searcy](#), Izard, and Van Buren counties.

Bill Dark was born in Arkansas sometime around 1835. Most of his short and violent life remains shrouded in mystery, and what is known about Dark comes through oral history. He was apparently a handsome and literate young man with long red hair. In 1850, the first time his name appeared in an Arkansas census, fifteen-year-old Dark was living in City Hotel on Main Street in [Little Rock \(Pulaski County\)](#) with his mother, Dilla Dark, and a government clerk named James Hutchins. In late 1857, Dark, employed as a printer in Little Rock, was indicted for the murder of Hardy Foster. Details of the murder were not recorded, but in early 1858, Dark's legal counsel, consisting of four leading Little Rock attorneys, including future governor [Henry Massie Rector](#), successfully petitioned for a change of venue to neighboring [Saline County](#) on the grounds that the citizens of [Pulaski County](#) were prejudiced against Dark and that he could not receive a fair trial. In October 1858, Dark was found guilty of second-degree murder and sentenced to five years in the state penitentiary in Little Rock.

In 1861, Dark, who was identified in an 1860 state penitentiary report as an "invalid" and marked for bad behavior, was paroled on condition that he join the Arkansas war effort. He enlisted for twelve months as a private in Company F, First Arkansas Mounted Rifles. Following his one year of service, Dark left the regular army and joined with an irregular band led by Missouri Confederate John Trousdale Coffee. By that time, many regular Confederate units in the state had been ordered east of the [Mississippi River](#), leaving Arkansas vulnerable to the Union advance from Missouri. In an attempt to halt that advance, Confederate general [Thomas C. Hindman](#), commander of the Trans-Mississippi District, used guerrilla bands such as Colonel Coffee's—a group of about 1,200 men that one Union general described as "the most despicable, rough, ragged rascals ever congregated together"—to destroy assets that might fall into enemy hands. This "slash and burn" policy—along with the order to conscript more troops—was not popular among the independent and rugged subsistence farmers of north-central Arkansas. Over the course of 1862, the Civil War in Arkansas disintegrated into a nasty and bloody guerrilla war.

It was within that environment that Dark, who sometime after 1861 married Rachel Adeline George of [Izard County](#) and settled near Timbo (Stone County), acquired a reputation for ruthlessness. According to oral history, Dark and his men terrorized those citizens left behind in

the chaos of war: old men, women, and children. Dark was accused of murder, theft, plunder, and torture. “Lost Cause” romantics attempting to portray the Confederacy and Confederate soldiers as noble and good have incorrectly remembered Dark as a Unionist sympathizer and “jayhawker.” The historical record, however, remains clear. Dark was a Confederate bushwhacker who implemented the slashing and burning ordered by General Hindman.

Dark died in early 1863 at the hands of Jim Berry, a fifteen-year-old member of a Unionist-sympathizing home guard in [Van Buren County](#). Several versions of Dark’s demise exist. The most colorful, if questionable, story of Dark’s death was one articulated by singer and songwriter [Jimmy Driftwood](#). According to Driftwood—in a 1953 newspaper article and then in a 1972 song—Berry was helping a widow who lived along the Little Red River at a place called Kenner Slough kill and clean a hog. Dark and his men appeared on the scene, racing across the river. Armed with a cap-and-ball pistol, Berry ran behind the widow’s cabin, and as Dark turned the corner behind the cabin, the young home guard member fired his weapon, hitting Dark between the eyes and killing him instantly. According to some evidence, however, Dark and his men were the ones being ambushed. One woman reportedly kicked Dark’s corpse in the teeth, while another cut his finger off to retrieve a stolen ring. According to local tradition, his body was buried face down in a nearby unmarked grave under a walnut tree at Kenner Slough.

For additional information:

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