

The Bushwhacking Blalocks

The Civil War adventures of this husband-&-wife guerilla team are filled with shoot-outs and revenge killings.

William McKesson Blalock, nicknamed "Keith," was born in Yancey County in 1838. While Blalock was still a child, his mother married Austin Coffey. Austin lived at Coffey's Gap in Watauga County. Apparently, Blalock spent his childhood and early adult years in this area, living with his mother and stepfather. He was physically described as being six feet tall, having a light complexion, blue eyes, and light hair. At the time of his involvement in the war, he was married to Malinda Pritchard and made a living as a farmer.(1)

Joins the Confederate army

Blalock's first experience with the Civil War came early in 1862. He was persuaded by James D.

Moore to assist the Confederate cause by joining North Carolina's Twenty Sixth Regiment. At the time of his enlistment, the regiment was camped at Kinston, North Carolina, miles away from the mountains on the coastal plain of the state. When Moore recruited Keith for Confederate service, Keith insisted that his wife, Malinda, be allowed to join also. He refused to join unless she came along too. Moore agreed to the condition. Malinda dressed as a man, went by the name Sam Blalock and claimed to be

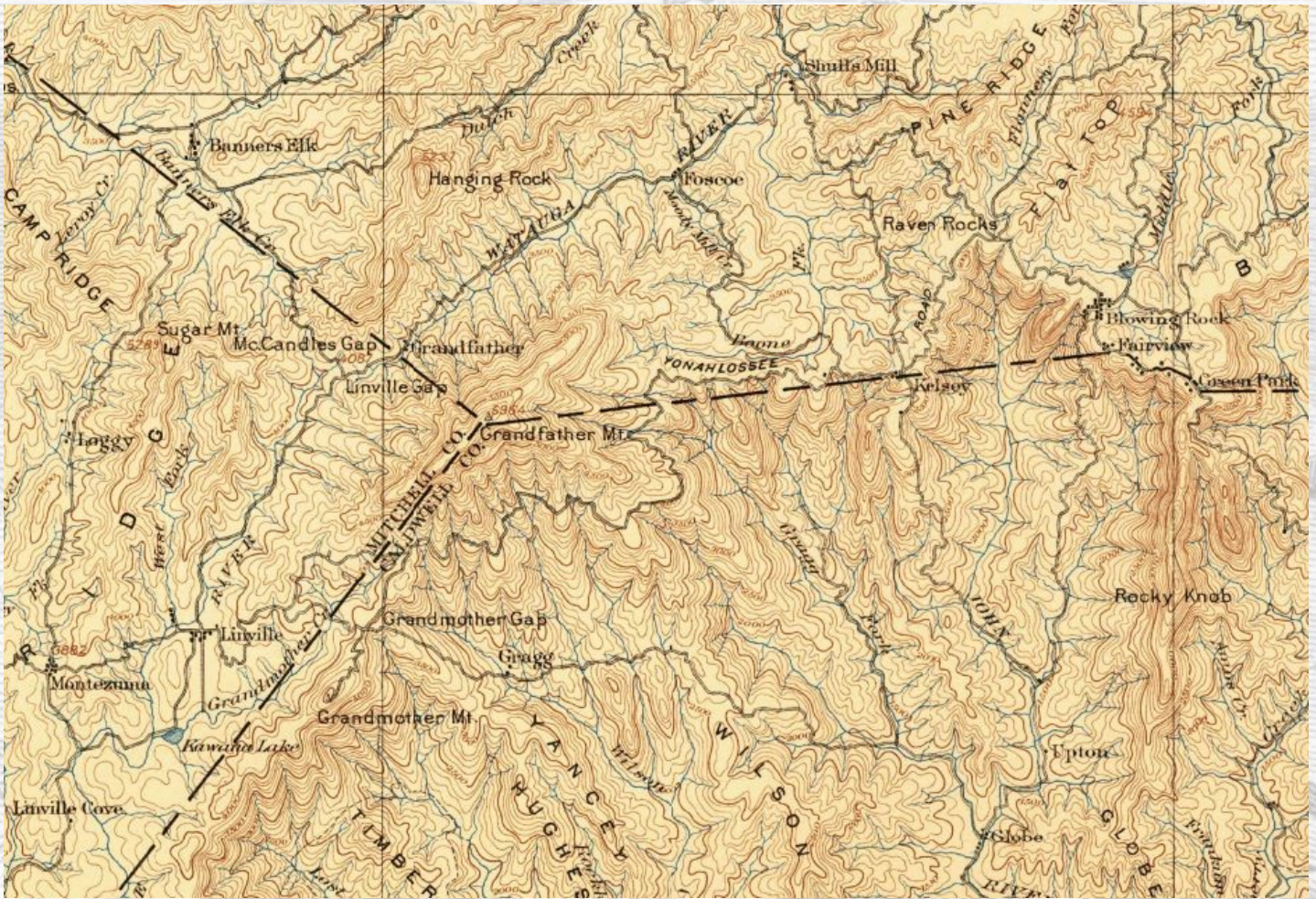


Keith's brother. The two tented together. Her regiment described her as about age sixteen, a "good looking boy," five feet four inches tall, one hundred thirty pounds with dark hair. Her abilities as a soldier were questionable. One source notes, "She drilled and did the duties of a soldier as any other member of the company, and was very adept at learning the manual and drill." Other evidence indicates that she did her duty "when she could not frame excuses to avoid it. It is said she was an adept at excuse making." Malinda's true identity was never discovered until she proved to Colonel Zebulon Vance, after Keith's discharge, that she was a woman. She promptly was allowed to join her husband. (2)

Blalock's devotion to the Confederacy was short-lived, however. He enlisted on March 20,

1. Weymouth T. Jordan, Jr., ed., *North Carolina Troops 1861-1865 A Roster Volume VII Infantry* (Raleigh: Division of Archives and History, 1979), 535; John Preston Arthur, *A History of Watauga County, North Carolina* (Richmond: Everett Waddy Co., 1915), 161; and "Army of the United States Certificate of Disability for Discharge" • Manuscript copy in "Legendary Bushwhacker Keith Blalock" by Marriion W. Ward in "Appalachia in a Social Context: Student Papers" Spring 1988, Carl A. Ross, ed., 189.

2. Jordan, 535; James M. Ray, "History of Asheville and Her Heroes," *The Confederate Veteran Magazine* 6 (June 1898): 263; George C. Underwood, Assistant Surgeon, "Twenty-Sixth Regiment," in *Histories of the Several Regiments and Battalions from North Carolina in the Great War 1861-65*, Walter Clark, ed. (Goldsboro: Nash Brothers Book and Job Printers, 1901), 330.; and interview with Howard Coffey by Kelly Coffey.



Map showing locations mentioned in the story

1862 and was discharged on April 20, 1862 "by reason of hernia and poison from sumac." Other sources state that his illnesses were self-inflicted by rubbing poison oak on his body in order to obtain a discharge. After his discharge, Blalock returned to the mountains where his more irregular military activities began. (3)

Joins the Union army

Keith Blalock's loyalties changed between 1862 and 1864-enough to motivate him to join the Union army. Blalock enlisted in the Tenth Regiment Company D of the Michigan Calvary on June 1, 1864 at Strawberry Plains, Tennessee. (4) The degree to which he engaged in regular military activities with this regiment is questionable. Although he enlisted in June 1864, he was not "mustered into service" until June 23, 1865. His record states that he was "not accounted for on any record of the regiment on file prior to June 1865." The same report states that he was present for duty May, June, July, and August 1865 and was discharged in October 1865 by reason of a medical disability. (5) Even though he was not present for duty prior to May 1865, the disability discharge he received was for wounds sustained *before* he reported for duty. He received those injuries on August 30, 1864 and on January 15, 1865. In addition, at least one of the wounds Blalock received was a result of raids he made on private homes in the Globe area. His military records even state that he received the wounds "near Lenoire [sic] in Caldwell County North Carolina." (6) Apparently, Blalock's activities in the Union army were unlike those of a regular soldier. Nevertheless, the Union army valued his duties, regular or not. Some sources state that Blalock was a "recruiting officer" for the Tenth Regiment. His duties included guiding Union loyalists

3 Jordan, 535 and Arthur, 161.

4 Ward, "Certificate of Disability for Discharge," 189.

5. Ward, "Letter from War Department, Adjutant General's Office, March 12, 1879," 191.

6 Ward, "Declaration for Invalid Pension," 194.

from North Carolina into East Tennessee where they would join the Federal army. A letter from Lewis Selgrade, a sergeant in Company D (Blalock's company), makes reference to a "guide" named "Blaylock." (7) Blalock's duties as a guide would explain his extensive absence from the regiment and his discharge for injuries sustained while in the line of duty even though he was not with the regiment at the time. However, Blalock's activities involved more than guiding Unionists across the lines.



Keith and Malinda hid out on Grandfather Mountain.

Pursued by the Home Guard

After Blalock was discharged from the Confederate army in April 1862, he returned to the Globe area. Confederate sympathizers in the area, known as the Home Guard, apparently considered Blalock a deserter and attempted to arrest him. He and his wife, Malinda, eluded the Home Guard by hiding out on Grandfather Mountain. They lived in primitive conditions, often under rocks and in small caves. The Home Guard's pursuit of Blalock at this time resulted in at least one gun battle where

Blalock was shot in the left arm. Blalock held Robert Green, who was one of the pursuers, responsible for his wound and promptly shot him in the leg one day when he met him on the road between the Globe and Blowing Rock. (8)

Blalock was aided in his activities by other Union sympathizers. One source notes that he "headed a gang of bushwhackers [that] operated from Mitchell and the edge of Caldwell into East Tennessee and communicated with the Federal army." (9) The size and cohesiveness of this group is unclear. One source states that the group consisted of twenty members. (10) Other sources mention only one other person besides Blalock at certain incidents. (11) An account of one event names Blalock's accomplices as Levi Coffey, Sampson Calloway, Edmund Ivy (a Confederate deserter from Georgia), Adolphus Pritchard and a man named Gardner from Mitchell County. (12) Malinda is often mentioned as being a regular member of the bushwhackers. The make-up of the group probably varied from one incident to another.

Many members of Blalock's adopted family, the Coffeys, had Confederate sympathies. Two of Austin's brothers, William and Reuben, were members of the Home Guard. Blalock and a fellow bushwhacker

7 Lewis Selgrade to William J. Palmer, November 21, 1864, *Official Record of the War of the Rebellion*, ser. I, vol. 45, 990.991 and Arthur, 161.

8 Arthur, 161; Nancy Alexander, *Here Will I Dwell: The Story of Caldwell County* (Published by the author, 1956), I, 37 and Howard Gragg, interview by Marriion W. Ward, 187.

9 W.W. Scott, *Annals of Caldwell County* (News-Topic, 1930), 156.

10 Rebecca Moore Estes, interview by Dell Wilson in Ward, "Legendary Bushwhacker,"

181. Mrs. Estes was present at one of Blalock's raids,

11 Sam Coffey, interview by Nat T. Winston in *All the Good Times* Authentic Records, 1966 and Arthur, 185.

12. Arthur, 168.

named Perkins captured William and escorted him to a local gristmill owned by James Gragg. (One source mentions that Blalock had had problems getting his corn ground because Gragg was a Confederate sympathizer.) When Blalock and Perkins reached the mill with Coffey, they made Coffey straddle a bench. Perkins shot and killed him. One source indicates that Blalock and Perkins had spent several nights with Coffey before they killed him. One can only speculate as to the circumstances leading to this incident. Coffey may have sheltered Blalock, regardless of his political leanings, because he was a relative. A quarrel may have broken out over their differences and led to the killing. Another possibility is that Coffey was held for several days against his will and then shot. (13)

Raid on the Moore house

Ill feelings were present between Blalock and James D. Moore, the Confederate officer who originally recruited him. Moore considered Blalock a deserter and a traitor. In the spring of 1864 Moore was at home in the Globe, recovering from a wound he received at Gettysburg. Blalock, along with his men and Malinda, attacked the Moore house. A shoot-out resulted with Carroll Moore, James' father, receiving an injury. Blalock and his band were driven off by those at the Moore house. Malinda was shot in the shoulder and several of the men were also wounded. (14) Not to be defeated, Blalock attacked Moore's house again several weeks later. During this raid, Blalock had nineteen men with him. In the house were Jesse and Carroll Moore, members of the Home Guard. Jade, Billy, and Pat Moore were there. All these were boys, not old enough to fight in the war. Carroll's daughter, Rebecca, and her daughter were also present. Rebecca's memory of this incident is the main source for this narrative. Most of the action took place in an orchard near the house. When the bushwhackers attacked, Jesse and the three boys ran from the house into the orchard. Carroll was still recovering from the wound he received in the first attack and did not leave the house. Blalock and his men surrounded the place. Some were on a hill behind the orchard and a group was in the road below it. While in the orchard, Jesse was shot in the heel. The boys ran up the hill to escape but were fired on by the bushwhackers. They ran back down the hill and received fire from both groups of Blalock's men. Pat was shot in the thigh while the other two boys got away. Jesse managed to get a shot at Blalock. The ball struck the muzzle of Blalock's gun, causing it to split with a fragment going into Blalock's eye. Perhaps because of this injury, Blalock and his men left, but not before they stole the Moores' horses. Rebecca came from the house and helped Jesse get back inside. With the help of two servants, she carried Pat into the house. (15)

Raid on the Green home

Near the time of his second raid on Moore's house, Blalock and his men were at a house in Foscoe. The band at this time is noted to have consisted of the men previously named. Perhaps because of the raids that had occurred, the Home Guard came to the house and attempted to arrest the men. A gun battle ensued with Levi Coffey being shot in the shoulder by Benjamin Green. Blalock's band escaped. After already having one bad experience with the Greens, Blalock needed little incentive to get revenge on the family. The group rode at night to Lott Green's home near Blowing Rock. Lott was a member of the Home Guard also. Present in the house were Green, his brother Joseph, and his brother-in-law, Henry Henley. Lott was expecting a doctor that night and opened the door when the bushwhackers arrived. When he saw who was actually there, he quickly slammed the door. Blalock demanded that the men surrender. Henley asked how they would be treated. Blalock replied, "As you deserve, damn you." Henley fired at the bushwhackers from the house and hit Calloway. Blalock and his men ran, with the Greens pursuing them.



James D. Moore

13 Coffey; Gragg, 187 and Arthur, 166.

14 Underwood, 331 and Alexander, 137.

15. Estes, 181-182; Coffey; Scott, 156; Underwood, 331; Arthur, 166 and Alexander, 137.

The bushwhackers ran to a house at nearby Sandy Flat and barricaded themselves inside. Henley shot and killed Ivy as he ran from the house. Henley was then shot and killed by Blalock who escaped with the rest of his men. (16)

Austin Coffey murder

Perhaps as a result of these killings and unrest, a portion of Colonel A.C. Avery's battalion under Captain James Marlow came into the area early in 1865. Some sources refer to this group as the Home Guard rather than as part of the regular army. The group consisted of Confederates, regardless of their designation. Marlow's company came through Coffey's Gap and arrived at Austin Coffey's house on February 26th. They arrested Thomas Wright, a relative of Coffey. John Boyd, one of Marlow's men, said to the captain, "Why don't you arrest Austin Coffey? He's a Union man, and he has kept and fed Union soldiers." Marlow gave Boyd permission to arrest Coffey. Coffey's son, David, recalls, "My father was standing at the side of the house talking to my mother, but he never finished what he was saying to her. Boyd and his men came up [and] arrested him." A man named Johnson was also at Coffey's house. He was a recruiting officer for George Kirk. Before Marlow and his men arrived, Johnson had left for McCaleb Coffey's house, which was nearby. After Marlow left Austin's house, Wright's wife and Austin's wife ran to McCaleb's house to warn them. Johnson fled and was fired upon by Marlow's men but he escaped. Most of the group then pursued him. John Boyd, along with a few other men, went inside McCaleb's house and found Sampson Calloway. Calloway was recovering from the wound he had received earlier when Blalock had raided Lott Green's house. Calloway was left alone and Boyd and his men went on their way.

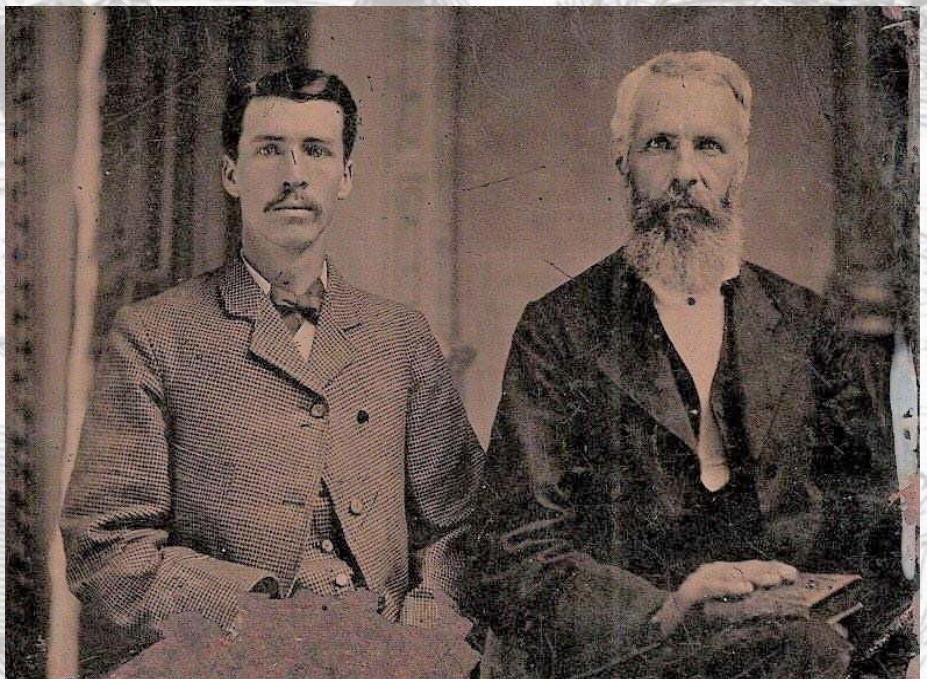
Austin Coffey and Thomas Wright were taken to a location between Blowing Rock and Shulls Mills. David Coffey details the fate of Austin,

My brother-in-law, Thomas Wright, had escaped and Captain Marlow ordered that my father be killed as retribution for Thomas' escape. They kept my father tied to a tree all night, but just before dawn they untied him to allow him to rest. He lay down in front of the campfire and rolled his coat up under his head for a pillow, without taking it off, and fell asleep in that position. A fellow who went by two names, Glass and Anders, volunteered to shoot my father, and killed him as he slept before the campfire. The body was taken to a thicket near the camp and hidden. It was a week later before we found the body.

Another one of Austin's sons, J. Filmore Coffey, recalls that he met one of Marlow's men, John Walker, several years after the war. Walker told Filmore that Austin was taken to an abandoned house that night. Walker was instructed to kill him while he slept but Walker refused. Another man volunteered and shot Austin in the head. His body was dumped in the woods. (17)

Revenge on John Boyd

The end of the war did not bring an end to the violence in the Globe area. Blalock considered Boyd the perpetrator in his stepfather's death, regardless of whether or not he actually shot him. Blalock vowed that he would kill John Boyd. On February 8, 1866, almost a year after Austin's murder,



Keith Blalock & Austin Coffey

16. Arthur, 168; Coffey and Alexander, 137.

17. Rupert Gillett, "Old-Timers Love to Tell of Watauga Bushwhacking Hero" *The Charlotte Observer* September 18, 1927, 11; J.G. de Roulhac Hamilton, ed., *Correspondence of Jonathan Worth* vol. II (Raleigh: Edwards & Broughton Printing Company, 1909), 726; Arthur, 167-168 and Scott, 156.

Blalock avenged the killing. His stepbrother, David, recalls,

I was just a small boy then, and like a boy I knew little of diplomacy. I had heard that Blalock intended to get Boyd, but I did not think of it at the time. He came home that morning and told our mother something. From her agitation and the way she walked the floor afterwards, I realize now that he must have told her he was going to get Boyd. Keith came out of the house, and asked our brother-in-law, Tom Wright, to go with him to the Globe, as Keith's dog had a deer at bay down there. He said this, of course, because several bystanders who overheard him would have prevented his going had they known his real purpose, but I blurted out, "Why Keith, you haven't got a dog." Keith gave me a look I'll never forget, and then he and Tom left for the Globe. They met Boyd just after dusk in a little clearing near the Globe. Keith said, "Is that you Boyd?" Boyd answered, "Yes" and struck at Keith with his staff. This staff was a stout hickory stick with a knot in one end of it. A man of ordinary strength could have killed an ox with it. When Boyd swung at Keith with it, Keith shielded his head with his arm and caught the blow on his wrist. Then he retreated fourteen steps, with Boyd following him and striking at him with the club every step. Finally, Keith got room enough to level his rifle and shot Boyd.

Blalock was indicted for John Boyd's murder and sent to the Provost Marshal in Morganton. He was also examined before a Judge Mitchell in Statesville. Blalock testified that the murder was committed in self-defense since Boyd struck him first. Blalock was pardoned by the governor before he went to trial. As for Austin's killers, a grand jury found true bills against them and they were brought to trial in Watauga County. The outcome is uncertain since the court records burned in a courthouse fire but tradition says they were acquitted. (18)

The remainder of their lives

Blalock settled into a less violent lifestyle when the war and its aftermath ended. He and Malinda moved to Mitchell County and ran a store. Perhaps because of the notoriety he might have gained during the war, he ran for the state legislature as a Republican. He was defeated.

Around 1892, Blalock and Malinda moved to Texas. They returned about 1901 to Mitchell County where Malinda died in 1903. Blalock married Martha Holifield in 1908. In July 1913, he was seriously injured when he was driving a railroad push car and wrecked near Pineola. He lived about a month after the accident and died August 11, 1913. Keith and Malinda Blalock are both buried in Montezuma, Avery County. (19)



John Boyd is buried in the Tolbert cemetery not far from where he was killed near the Globe.

18 Gillett, 11; Scott, 156; Alexander, 137; Arthur, 185; Hamilton, 726 and Coffey.

19 Underwood, 331; Alexander, 137; James M. Ray, "History of Asheville and Her Heroes," *The Confederate Veteran Magazine* 6 (June 1898): 263; Ward, 186; "Declaration of a Widow for Accrued Pension" Manuscript copy in "Legendary Bushwhacker Keith Blalock," 190 and Martine Pritchard Davis, Mrs. Paul Blalock, interviews by Marriion W. Ward in "Legendary Bushwhacker Keith Blalock," 187.