

# Insurrection against slaveholders recounted

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During the late 1850s "vigilance committees" were formed by slaveholders who were afraid their slaves were being unduly influenced by abolitionists, often disguised as peddlers.

In the year 1860, other groups of alarmed citizens in rural communities of York, Chester and Lancaster districts in South Carolina organized themselves to "guard against abolitionists and their emissaries, every member to give immediate notice of any one whose conduct is suspicious."

The Yorkville Enquirer printed a story in January 1861 about a threatened insurrection in Bethesda township. W.E. McConnell of McConnellsville, an eyewitness, reported on the excitement. He said the insurrection was discovered by his brother, John D. McConnell, while chastising a slave known as Dave.

It seems that John McConnell became suspicious when Dave exclaimed, "It is hard to be tied like a dog." When McConnell threatened Dave with more punishment if he did not tell where he got his ideas,



Dave revealed the names of the leaders and their plans.

The leader was a white man named Thomas Pugh who was also a member of the Turkey Creek Minute Men, a local militia group of which the McConnell brothers were also members. Dave said when the Turkey Creek Minute Men were called to muster, the plan was for Thomas Pugh to pretend sickness and as soon as the men had all left, Pugh would head the blacks.

Pugh had chosen to be called colonel and Dave was promised the rank of captain. Pugh operated a grog shop and gave Dave whiskey whenever he wanted it. McConnell upped the ante. He offered Dave whiskey plus a reward to betray Pugh. Dave accepted.

McConnell's plan was to have Dave go to Pugh's place on Saturday night along with a detachment of Minute Men (also known as the Home Guard) who would stay in the background until needed. The squad was made up of J.W. Moore, W.E. McConnell, C.K. Williams, James W. Love, Reuben McConnell, P.W. Lindsay Jr., and A. Jackson Todd.

John D. McConnell and James E. McKnight blacked their faces and went with Dave to Pugh's house. Dave knocked on the window and Thomas Pugh answered. Dave asked: "Do you have any of that good stuff?" Somehow, Pugh knew that he had been betrayed. He returned with a shotgun and revolver. Pugh fired. Dave received about 25 shots in the thigh.

At this point McConnell fired and hit Pugh in the foot. Other members of the Pugh household grabbed weapons. John Pugh and his wife defended the front door with a rifle and a shotgun. Jack Pugh had a rifle sticking out the north window. Pugh's sister defended the south side.

An estimated 30 or 40 shots were fired. McConnell's squad retired to reload and then rushed the house. Pugh had barred the doors but the squad battered them down. The Pughs were captured. McConnell reported it was all the older men of his squad could do to keep the younger men from killing the Pughs on the spot.

The Pughs were taken to the York County sheriff but he refused to receive them. The Pughs were taken back to McConnellsville, where the Bethesda Vigilance Committee tried them and sentenced each to 50 lashes on the back. Also, the left side of each head was shaved.

After this, all were put on a train to a free-state destination. A train trip of this nature was known as "going by Adams express" in reference to ex-President John Quincy Adams' role in support of abolitionism during the 1840s.

*Louise Pettus is a retired history professor from Winthrop University. Her column appears Saturdays*