

The Death of Private Robert Gay, Part 1

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Camp Morton — a name familiar to every Indianapolis Civil War buff and historian. If the name doesn't ring a bell, allow me to enlighten you. Camp Morton began life as an Indianapolis Civil War training camp for soldiers preparing to march off to war. Named in honor of Indiana Governor Oliver P. Morton, the facility became the city's most historic Civil War site when it was converted into a federal prison for captured Confederate soldiers in February of 1862. Camp Morton was roughly located in the area now bounded by Talbott Avenue to the west, Central Avenue to the east, 22nd Street to the north, and 19th Street to the south. Alabama Street runs through the center of what was the camp. The 36-acre site was originally owned by Samuel Henderson, the first mayor of Indianapolis. Known as "Otis' Grove," and occasionally as "Henderson's Grove," the property was originally thickly populated by black walnut and oak trees generously fed by at least four natural springs. A creek flowed through this property upon which, after it was dredged in 1837, become known as State Ditch. State Ditch was later nicknamed the "Potomac" by the prisoners of Camp Morton.



In 1859, the State of Indiana took possession of this tract of land for a new State Fairgrounds. By 1861, there were several buildings on the grounds designed for use as stables for livestock as well as a large dining hall and a two-story office building in the center of the Fairgrounds. In response to President Lincoln's call for volunteers, Governor Morton's newly appointed adjutant general, Lew Wallace, searched the city for a suitable location to train these new volunteers. The State Fairgrounds was the only suitable place found near Indianapolis for this purpose. An estimated 10,000 Union soldiers were trained at Camp Morton.

After the fall of Fort Henry and Fort Donelson in February 1862, there was a need in the north for prisons to detain the vast numbers of captured confederate soldiers. Governor Morton agreed to accept up to 3,000 prisoners for internment at Camp Morton. Additional barracks were hastily erected, some of which were not completed when the first group of prisoners arrived on February 22, 1862. The total number of confederate

prisoners that were sent to Camp Morton during these next few days totaled 3,700. Built to accommodate 3,000, by April it held over 5,000.

I want to share with you the sad, sad tale of one of those soldiers. However, this story is not about a Confederate prisoner. It's about 27-year-old Private Robert Gay of Company D, 71st Indiana Volunteer Infantry or maybe he was Private Robert Gay of the 6th Indiana Cavalry. (Even the official documents seemed confused about his affiliation as both branches are listed in the record.) There is a lot we don't know about him, but one thing is for sure, Private Gay was the first military execution in the Western theatre of battle. Gay was shot for desertion by a 20-man firing squad of men from his own regiment (71st Indiana Volunteers) behind Burnside Barracks south of Camp Morton on March 27, 1863.

If it weren't for bad luck, Robert Gay would have no luck at all. Born in Gallia County, Ohio in 1834 (according to the 1850 census) or in 1836 (according to military records) Gay's father died of unknown causes while he was still a boy. His mother Reba died in 1855 leaving her young son in the care and charge of his stepfather James Wright. The two did not get along and Robert soon relocated to Bowling Green in Clay County, Indiana where he became a school teacher. When Ft. Sumter was fired upon, beginning the Civil War, Robert jumped at the chance to enlist. There is some speculation that Private Gay trained for military service at Camp Morton. For some unknown reason, he decided to change sides from the Union to the Confederacy shortly after completing his training.

Unanswered questions surround Private Robert Gay, but what is unquestioned is the fact that this last move, jumping to the Rebel cause, would cost him his life. His story, as taken from the official military court martial document known as "General Orders No. 23," follows.

Headquarters. Indianapolis, Ind., on the 27th day of December, 1862, Charge-Desertion. Specification. In this: that Private Robert Gay, of Company D, Seventy-first Regiment Indiana Volunteers, duly enlisted and mustered into the service of the United States, did, on or about the 5th day of September, 1862, desert his company, his regiment and the services of the United States, and did take the oath of allegiance to serve the enemy, to wit, the Confederate States, so called, and to serve them faithfully against all their enemies or opposers whomsoever. All this at or near Richmond, Ky., on or about the 5th day of September, 1862.

To which charge and specifications the prisoner pleaded "guilty." The Court finds the prisoner guilty as charged, and does therefore sentence him...to be shot to death at such time and place as shall be fixed upon by the Major General Commanding. This case, which was referred for the action of the President of the United States...authorizing the punishment awarded to those found guilty of being spies or deserters, etc., to-be carried into effect upon the approval of the Commanding General in the field, the finding and sentence are approved; and the sentence, that Private Robert Gay...be shot to death, will be carried into execution on Friday, the 27th day of

March, instant, under the directions of the officer in command of the Post at Indianapolis, Ind.

Gray's confession of his guilt does not convey a full idea of its heinousness. He requested the privilege of taking the oath of allegiance to the Confederacy, and came back home with the written oath sewed into his clothes for perfect concealment, showing that he knew exactly the nature of his act and the importance of evading detection. When arrested, Gen. Carrington searched him and found the fatal document concealed in the leg of his pantaloons. There is, therefore, no room for sympathy or ground for doubt. He was fearfully guilty, and fearfully has he expiated his crime. After taking the fatal oath, he returned home to Clay County, and was there arrested. He was about twenty-seven years of age, rather above the average height, slender, and looked, as he said, by no means in robust health. Some days previous to his execution, Gay was sent from the Soldiers' Home, where he had been kept after his sentence, to the county jail. His conduct, both in the guard house and in the jail, so far as we have been able to learn, was unexceptionable.

He frequently spoke with great feeling to his fellow-prisoners of their way of life, and the necessity of reformation...after dinner, Friday, he called them all, including several "street walkers" of the vilest class, around him, and spoke so fervently and forcibly that he moved them to tears. He conversed much about religion with all visitors, and with the officers of the jail, and expressed his trust in the mercy of the Almighty, and his hope of salvation. He was taken from jail about half past 2 o'clock, and conveyed in a close carriage to the ground. On his way out, he retained his composure completely, conversed freely about his conduct and life, and seemed quite cheerful. Once he looked out of the coach window, and turning, with a smile, said to Mr. Cramer, "Do you think if I should jump out of the door I could escape from you?" "I rather think not," said the officer, and he went on with his conversation. This composure he retained to the last...When taken out of the carriage and walked to the place of execution, as he stood before the file of men who were to kill him he showed no mark of trepidation. Indeed, so perfectly steady were his attitude and step, and so unruffled his features, that several spectators never knew that he was the doomed man until the Sergeant Major began tying his hands.

Next week: The prisoner's dying words.

