

0. JESSE SEES A HANGING - Story Preface

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This photo depicts Jesse James as he appeared around 1864. Published by the Taylor Copying Co., in St. Louis, the image is maintained at the [Library of Congress](#) where it has this title: "Jesse James, half-length portrait, facing front, holding handgun in left hand at his waist." Public domain (due to expired copyright.)

Frank and Jesse James liked their stepfather, [Dr. Reuben Samuel](#), who taught the boys how to shoot and ride horses. Their family life was negatively impacted by [the war](#), however, as the social fabric of Missouri began to fall apart.

By the early summer of 1863, a Clay County resident (who supported the Union) described what life had become in northwest Missouri:

This part of the country is truly in a deplorable condition . . . we are continually annoyed by "bushwhackers" [Confederate partisans] who are prowling thro the country, annoying and plundering the citizens, without respect to party, and on the other hand, by our own [Union] troops, who are sent out as [scouts](#) under non-commissioned officers and irresponsible attachees of the army, and who are continually committing deeds of outrage upon the citizens, without respect to party or authority of law, that every Union man should be ashamed of. . . (Letter published in the *Liberty Tribune*, 26 June 1863, [quoted by Ted Yeatman](#) in *Frank and Jesse James: The Story Behind the Legend*, page 34.)

At about this time, [Frank James](#) joined a group of Confederate guerillas led by [William Quantrill](#). As he told the *Louisville Courier-Journal* in a September 29, 1901 interview:

I met Bill Gregg, Quantrill's First Lieutenant, in Clay County and . . . joined Quantrill at the Webb place . . . This was in May 1863. I will never forget the first time I ever saw Quantrill . . . He had none of the air of the bravado or the desperado about him . . . he was a demon in battle. (29 September 1901 interview with Frank James in the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, [quoted by Ted Yeatman](#) in *Frank and Jesse James: The Story Behind the Legend*, page 35.)

Although Jesse was not part of his brother's group, he - and [their mother](#) - gathered information for them. In late May, Union militia seeking to learn the whereabouts of Frank and his comrades, stopped by the James-Samuel farm. Members of the patrol planned to use whatever means they could to get what they needed.

Jesse's step-brother, John T. Samuel, was present that day, although he was just eighteen months old. Through the years, he'd heard his family members talk about the hanging. What he had learned differed widely, in some respects, from the dramatic story his mother had always told, so John waited until after Zerelda's death to give his account:

Jesse was out plowing in a field . . . when some Northern soldiers came to the place to look for Frank. Jesse was only sixteen [actually only fifteen]. They beat him up. Then they went to the house and asked where Frank was. Mother and father didn't know[or pretended not to], but the soldiers wouldn't believe them. They took father out and hung him by the neck to a tree. After a while they took him down and gave him another chance to tell. Of course he couldn't. So they hung him up again. They did that three times. Then they took him back to the house and told my mother they were going to shoot him. She begged them not to do it, but they took him off in the woods [north of the house] and fired off their guns . . . but they didn't shoot him. They just took him over to another town and put him in jail. My mother didn't know until the next day that he hadn't been shot because the soldiers ordered her to remain in the house if she didn't want to be shot too. (Quoted by [Ted Yeatman](#) in *Frank and Jesse James: The Story Behind the Legend*, page 39.)

A member of the Union patrol, Lt. Rogers, talked with a reporter about the incident. The interview was published in the *Saint Joseph Morning Herald*:

The old gentleman [Dr. Samuel] protested that he knew of no armed men in the vicinity, but the Militia judged him to be speaking falsely, and at once procured a rope, placed it about his neck, gave him one good swing, and by that time his memory brightened up, and he concluded to reveal the hiding place of the rebels. He led the boys into the woods a short distance, and there, squatted upon the ground in a dense thicket, was discovered the whole band. (Quoted by Ted Yeatman in Frank and Jesse James: The Story Behind the Legend, page 40.)

One member of "the whole band" was Dr. Samuel's stepson, Frank James. He got away, but Dr. Samuel was in a Saint Joseph jail. A letter from three of his neighbors, asking that Dr. Samuel be released, tells us something about life in the James-Samuel household:

In the case of Dr. Reuben Samuel, held as prisoner by the military, to report at Saint Joseph, we, his neighbors desire to state that we regard him as a peaceable, quiet and inoffensive man, who would harm no one. He is, we hesitate not to state, under the control of his wife [and] stepson [i.e., Frank James], and is really afraid to act contrary to their wishes, on any thing. This fear, we believe, caused him to make a false statement which he would not, otherwise have done. We know of no man who is more peaceably inclined and who is more inoffensive. We therefore request you to discharge him. (6 July 1863 letter to the Saint Joseph provost, quoted by Ted Yeatman in Frank and Jesse James: The Story Behind the Legend, pages 40-41.)

Dr. Samuel was released but, it is said, his voice suffered from the hanging for the rest of his life. As for the stepson - who'd witnessed what had become a common method of extracting information in an increasingly lawless state - who can say how the event influenced his future actions?

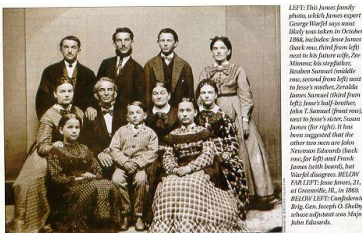
See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

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Media Stream



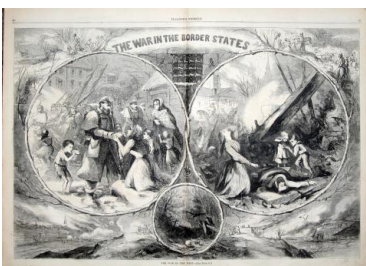
LEFT: This James family photo, which James expert George Harfield says must have been taken in October 1868, includes Jesse James (dark suit, third from left) next to his future wife, Zoe Minear. The photographer, Jonathan Sumner (middle row, second from left) went to Jesse's mother, Zerelda James Sumner (third from left) James's half brother, John S. Sumner (first row, next to Jesse's sister, Susan James (far right). If true, James suggested that the other two men and John Foreman Edwards (back row, far left) and Frank James (with beard), but Harfield disagrees. (ILLUSTRATION: Jesse James, 21, at Cassville, Mo., in 1868. (RIGHT) LEFT: Confederate Brig. Gen. Joseph G. Shelby, whose adjutant was Major John Edwards.

Jesse James and Family, circa 1868

Image, courtesy Jesse James Museum.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Jesse-James-and-Family-circa-1868>



"The War in the Border States," by Thomas Nast

Image, Library of Congress.

From *Harper's Weekly*

January 17, 1863

Image, Pages 40-41.

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Union Scouts Surprise a Confederate Camp

Image, Library of Congress.

From *Harper's Weekly*

April 4, 1863

Page 217

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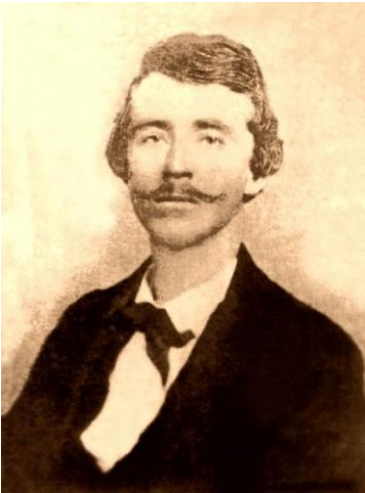
This rare portrait was taken in Nashville, Tennessee, at the close of the Civil War. It shows (left to right) Charles F. (Fletcher) Taylor of Platte County, Wisconsin, a member of the Quantrill Guerrillas; Frank James in Confederate uniform showing three stars on the collar; and Jesse James, not yet 16.

Frank James in Confederate Uniform

Image, courtesy Jesse James Museum.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Frank-James-in-Confederate-Uniform>



William Quantrill

Image, Library of Congress.

Information and quote from, "[The West](#)," a PBS web page.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/William-Quantrill>



Zerelda James Samuel

Image, Library of Congress.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Zerelda-James-Samuel>