

The Murder of Sheriff George Mumford and the Trial of the West Gang

Wilson, NC-1911

The photos in this series document scenes and locations during the trial of Louis West for the murders of a jailer named Glover and Sheriff George Mumford. The following story is taken from the book "The Rise of a Southern Town: Wilson, NC" by Patrick Valentine published in 2002, page 188.

Before the outbreak of the World War, the most exciting event in Wilson, commanding much newspaper space, was the murderous escape and subsequent re-arrest and trial of the notorious West gang out of Fayetteville. Louis West and his fellow black outlaws were captured and jailed in Wilson early in 1911 for a robbery committed in Dunn, only to murder their jailer and escape. Deputy Sheriff George Mumford was wounded and lying on the ground during the gunplay when West, passing by, shot him twice in the head. Mumford died "at the hands of a common criminal, absolutely worthless," exclaimed the Wilson Times. (Note: One photo is of the Mary Young House, which was said to be a "house of ill repute" and Sheriff Mumford had been tipped off that the West Gang was holed up inside. He was there to capture them when the violence broke out.)

The deputy left 6 orphans as his wife had already died, and his plight excited attention. There followed 2 weeks of fervid newspaper headlines, confused stories of possible sightings, and their final arrest in Hamlet, NC. Despite the racial overtones, black Wilsonians congratulated Wilson on the lack of white hysteria.

The murder trial, with Joseph Shepard Adams presiding, attracted spectators from neighboring counties as well as interested local blacks. Found guilty, West's last words were "Hope you all good luck. I have no hard feelings against anybody. I have got to go. I hope to meet you all in heaven." Episcopal bishop Henry Beard Delany baptized him just before his electrocution. Wilson then dedicated a memorial to the slain officer.