

## The Twisted Life of Charles Latimer

Grant County and Potosi particularly was untamed frontier territory in 1844. A wide open community of merchants, river men, drunkards, slave-owners, and brawlers was revealed to the visitor, and many of those who visited wrote in not so endearing terms of the town. Of course, most were decent hard working citizens and immigrants trying to make a new life in the “pale of settlement” beyond which the countries natives held sway and you traveled at the risk of your life. This frontier brought from all over the world opportunists who had a temperament as wild as the land. Charles Latimer was one of these.

He was born in Great Britain on August 28, 1810 and baptized at All Saints Church, Oxford on 18 February 1811. His father, Edward Latimer was a wealthy wine merchant and Master of Heddington Manor, Oxford. In 1823 Charles went to Westminster School, where he was made a King’s Scholar in 1824, but he left in 1826 at age 16 to seek his fortune in the wider world. He did not attend a university as his older siblings had, but directly entered upon the study of law. He was made a Freeman of the City of Oxford on 23 July 1832, meaning that he could enter into business and vote in that city. Charles emigrated to America in May of 1836 and died in Potosi on February 23, 1844 at the age of 33. How he came to his end, and what he did in those eight years made both a sad and remarkable story.



Headington House, Heddington Manor - the Latimer family home

When his death was reported in the Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette on June 29, 1844 he was described thusly:

*“Mr Charles Latimer united in his own person a rare combination of qualities. He possessed a sound mind in a sound body. His mental powers were broad and massive,*

*and his acquirements and information extensive. He had great decision of character; and though his will was powerful, and his feelings strong, he was remarkable for coolness and self-possession. He was ingenuous and candid in the highest degree, and his kindly and cheerful spirit endeared him to those who enjoyed his unrestrained intercourse and intimacy.”*

Our local legend is that it was in his strong feelings and “candid” nature, along with alcoholic tendencies and a streak of paranoia that he found his troubles and eventually his death.

When he came to America it was rumored that he went to Canada to participate in the “Patriots’ War”, a rebellion to establish an independent republic led by Robert Nelson, William Lyon Mackenzie and others. These “Patriots” invaded Canada from the United States in 1838 and were defeated by the British colonial government. After the defeat Latimer acted as an agent for Mackenzie’s publication, *Mackenzie’s Gazette* selling subscriptions, and pushing Mackenzie’s cause in Chicago.

Latimer next appears as a lawyer in Rockford, Illinois in 1841. In those days in the Rock River valley of Illinois a secret criminal organization plundered the citizens of the then sparsely populated country. There were few agencies of law enforcement to stop them. The members of this organization covered their crimes by appearing to be regular farmers and townsmen. By secret contacts they managed the theft of horses and goods and conveyed them to nearby fellow gangsters, so that they did not seem absent for long when the crimes occurred and suspicion did not fall upon them. They also managed a counterfeiting operation. John, William, and David Driscoll and their family members of DeKalb County were the managing directors of this enterprise, planning, directing and controlling the activities of the gang. Their activities encompassed most of the country from Texas to Ohio.

Eventually a vigilante group called the Regulators was formed, composed of respected citizens and led by one John Campbell. Charles Latimer and two other lawyers were members of this group. The regulators took the law into their own hands, horsewhipping those found engaged in horse stealing and other crimes. Eventually they confronted the Driscoll’s who were ordered to leave the country. Rather than capitulating, the Driscoll’s called a meeting of the syndicate and David and Taylor Driscoll were given the task of assassinating Campbell. On Sunday June 27, 1841, after he and his family returned from church late in the day, Campbell was shot through the heart by David Driscoll who had hidden in the brush nearby. Campbell’s wife recognized the fleeing assassins. After Campbell’s funeral the men of Rockford, roused to murderous wrath, took up their guns and rode to avenge Campbell’s death. They caught John and William Driscoll, but not David or Taylor.

With hundreds of locals of all professions present, including ministers, lawyers, sheriffs, and justices of the peace an impromptu “trial” was held in at a place called Washington Grove. Several lawyers spoke for the Driscoll’s and Charles Latimer spoke “for the people.” In the history of Ogle County Illinois his speech is detailed:

*“Latimer, for the people, made a vehement address, saying that nothing but blood would palliate the crimes that had been committed, that as long as the gang of outlaws were permitted to remain on the earth, no community would be safe from their depredations and crimes. The Driscoll's if not the head centres and authors and instigators of the untold robberies and murders that had been committed in the country, were at least accomplices, and had shared in the plunder. He maintained that the people were justified in taking the course they had, that their safety demanded it, that the murder of Campbell must be avenged, and that if the actual murderers could not be found, those who planned the foul deed must suffer in their stead, and concluded by urging the immediate execution of John Driscoll and his son William. These arguments had the effect of stilling the clamors of those were called the "weak-kneed", and to dispel from the minds of the prisoners all hopes of a stay of proceedings.*

*The men were formed in line, numbered, and divided into two death divisions, as nearly equal as the number would permit, fifty-five in one division and fifty-six in the other. One division was detailed to the execution of the old man, and the other to the execution of William. The old man was lead forth first; his eyes were bandaged, and he was made to kneel upon the earth. All things in readiness, the signal to fire was given, and the old man fell to the earth, riddled and shattered to pieces with the charges of fifty-six rifles.*

*William's fate came next. In the last hour, abject fear overcame his former boldness, and his hair turned almost white. In a semi-conscience condition he was lead forth, and in a few minutes his body was riddled by the discharges from the other fifty-five rifles, and lay bleeding and quivering by the side of his father.”*

One hundred and eleven of these regulators were indicted, tried, and acquitted for the lynching of the Driscoll’s, but not everyone in the community approved of the act. The Rockford Star was vehement: *“And had it come to this that in a land of civilization and Christianity, blessed with as wholesome a code of laws as man's ingenuity ever invented, a few desperadoes shall rise up and inflict all manner of punishment, even DEATH, upon whomsoever they please? Shall all Civil Law be sacrificed and trampled in the dust at the shrine of Mobocracy?* After the issuance of the Star criticizing the regulators, the office of that publication was broken into, and the type scattered and trampled. The Editor and publisher, Mr. Knappen sold out and left town. The History of Rockford and Winnebago County reveals: *“Thirty years later Mr. Thurston (Henry Thurston owner of the Rockford House- a boarding house) divulged the fact that D. S. Haight, Charles Latimer and Adam Keith were the*

*perpetrators of this mischief.”*

Perhaps Latimer's practice suffered as a result of his part in this vigilantism and vandalism. At any rate, he moved to Grant County Wisconsin and in seeming mockery of justice, again took up the practice of law in Potosi.

In Rockford the report was: *“February 23, 1844, Charles Latimer, a former lawyer and well known citizen of Rockford, was shot at Potoski, Wisconsin.”* The name of the small town was misspelled. What had happened? The accounts vary considerably but the history of Grant County (1881) describes the events leading to his death as follows: *“The death of Charles Latimer in February, 1844, at the hands of one Gloster, at Potosi, created at the time much local excitement and was characterized as “the most tragical occurrence that has disgraced this portion of the Territory for years.” Latimer was an Englishman by “birth, and had fled from Canada in consequence of his participation in the patriot war. He was a lawyer by profession, a man of brilliant parts and a ripe scholar, but unfortunately addicted to intemperance and the abuse of the American eagle. The former habit was viewed according to the custom of the time, with a great deal of tolerance, the latter with quite the reverse.*

*On the evening, about the middle of February in the saloon of Clark & Woods, Latimer became involved in a discussion on the right of foreigners to vote, and during the discussion he animadverted somewhat severely upon American character and customs, when he was knocked down by Gloster, who was present. Latimer continued his remarks and was again knocked down, he making no show of resistance. Soon after this, having in the meantime indulged in more liquor, Latimer approached Col. White and charged him with being the cause of his having received a black eye. The Colonel was a professional gambler, a Kentuckian by birth, and a man of fine physique and polished manners, who had the reputation of having upon more than one occasion “winged his man.” The tone used by Latimer was highly insulting, and the Colonel immediately knocked him down. This was on Saturday night. On the following morning Gloster went to Latimer, begged his pardon, and they parted apparently good friends. On Monday morning, a note was received by Col. White from Latimer asking for the satisfaction usual among gentlemen. The challenge was accepted, and weapons rifles, at one hundred yards agreed upon, the time being set for the next morning. Gloster acted as the friend of Col. White, Latimer being also provided with a friend who acted as his second. At 3 o'clock on the morning of the intended meeting, the two principals were arrested and held to bail. This however, only resulted in changing the place of meeting from Wisconsin to Iowa Territory. Promptly to the hour all were on hand, and the principals posted. At this juncture, Samuel Morris, an Acting Constable of the county, James F. Chapman, Justice of the Peace, Maj. John R. Coons, and one or two others appeared upon the scene to assert*

*the majesty of the law and act as peacemakers. Being worthy citizens and men of honor, averse to all such bloody proceedings, they went earnestly to work to stop the combat and succeeded. After much solicitation, both parties agreed to refer the dispute to a committee, who after a review of the case, decided that it was a misunderstanding all around, and no apologies were necessary on either side. The reconciliation having been effected, they returned to town and all might have been well had not malicious busybodies whispered in the besotted ear of Latimer that Gloster had further intentions against his person. Maddened with the fumes of the poisonous liquor, each day added to his frenzy until the erstwhile talented gentleman was reduced to an irresponsible maniac. On the night preceding the fatal encounter, Latimer was again informed that Gloster had used menacing language against him. In the state of delirium which then enveloped him, this was like touching a match to powder, and after passing a sleepless night, Latimer armed himself with a Bowie knife and two horse pistols, one of which, in his deranged condition of mind, he loaded with powder and the other with ball and sallied forth to met his foe. Intercepting Gloster as he was going to breakfast, he fired at him once, but as the pistol was only loaded with powder it simply burned and blackened his face. Gloster cried that he was unarmed and asked his antagonist not to kill him, and the latter told him to go and arm himself Gloster hastily withdrew, and some time afterward re-appeared armed with a double-barreled shotgun. Latimer had been impatiently awaiting his return, whittling a pine stick with a Bowie knife in the meantime, and as his eye caught sight of the man approaching with the gun in his hand advanced with raised pistol. His gait, however, was unsteady, and his aim uncertain. Gloster cocked his gun and raised it to his shoulder, but retreated step by step until he came to an open culvert where the branch runs near the corner of Lewis' store. Here he stopped and warned Latimer and his friends that if he advanced a step nearer he would fire. The words were unheeded, and a second later, poor Latimer lay weltering in his gore. Samuel Wilson who was his friend and intimate, and who, during the morning had made several unsuccessful attempts to dissuade him from his purpose, received him in his arms as he fell and conveyed him to a place nearby where he expired. The authorities were strongly censured for not preventing this untimely meeting. Gloster surrendered himself to the officers, and, upon examination, was acquitted on the ground of self-defense. He remained but a short time in Potosi after the commission of the deed; and died a few years later in Chicago.”*

At home in Great Britain the incident was seen differently; “Several weeks since a rumour reached Oxford that Mr. Charles Latimer, son of Edward Latimer, Esq., of Heddington House, near this city, had fallen in one of those fatal affrays which are the disgrace of some portions of the United States... This tragical affair is veiled in mystery. Of the circumstances which led to it nothing is known here beyond the vaguest rumour, and from the Report to which we have referred, it would appear, that *even on the spot the facts are unknown, and that it is attempted to screen the living*

*at the expense of the dead.* Mr. Charles Latimer united in his own person a rare combination of qualities. He possessed a sound mind in a sound body. His mental powers were broad and massive, and his acquirements and information extensive. He had great decision of character; and though his will was powerful, and his feelings strong, he was remarkable for coolness and self-possession. He was ingenuous and candid in the highest degree, and his kindly and cheerful spirit endeared him to those who enjoyed his unrestrained intercourse and intimacy.”

There is certainly sufficient character assassination in the American newspaper accounts to agree with the British sentiment that in conveying the story, Latimer was portrayed as a crazed alcoholic maniac, perhaps wrongly. The Grant County Herald maintained that “*He has sustained the reputation of a peaceable citizen, of a talented lawyer, and an honest man,--but he was intemperate, and this will account for his strange, reprehensible conduct.*” This has the sound of an “us versus them” apologia. He was a foreigner, he insulted our country, he was a drunk who pickled his brain so much that he became a mad, paranoid, and lunatic. Surely all this was his fault; the survivors said so, but was it so?

In Rockford Latimer was a founding member of the Whig Hill Lyceum, a debating society. No doubt his forensic abilities were formidable. Rev. Edward Mathews, the abolitionist, who was himself threatened and run out of Potosi by its pro-southern thugs spoke well of Latimer even though he was against abolition: “*I announced a lecture, or, if any wished to defend slavery I invited them to discuss the question at the meeting. Mr. [Charles] Latimer, a lawyer, an Englishman—from Oxford, my native city—arose and remarked that as one state could not make laws for another he did not see how those who were endeavouring to procure emancipation could reconcile their movements with the doctrine of state rights ... I regret to add that Mr. Latimer died by the hand of an assassin in Potosi.*” Latimer was a man who loved civilized debate. He fell at the hands of men who, being of southern extraction, held to the code duello for any perceived affront, and yet the story is that Latimer challenged his killer and hunted him down. Of course the other side is that Latimer was impetuous and, though a lawyer a veteran of gross acts of lawlessness in the “Prairie State.” He had been a party to an extra legal execution, but he had also seen enough bushwhackers and banditti to know that safety could not be assumed on friendly assurances. Perhaps Gloster and White were spreading rumors in an attempt to draw him out for easy execution. Latimer had not even loaded his weapons correctly according to the accepted account. It seems highly unlikely that a man going out to risk his life would be so careless. There is no allegation that Latimer was drunk at the time of his death, rather he supposedly went to confront Gloster in front of a saloon. Gloster then procured a loaded double barrel shotgun from within the saloon, and allegedly fired on Latimer only when backed into an area from which retreat was impossible. It is alleged that Latimer, seeing the man armed with a shotgun strode toward him and shot

first with his recklessly prepared pistol. This would be obvious suicide and makes no logical sense.



Double Barrel Shotgun Ca. 1840

We will probably never know the full and accurate details of the death of Charles Latimer. He left his country and came to a wild frontier, becoming in the process as wild as country itself. He was not a lawful man, feeling that in a land with no law a person could take the law into their own hands. In time, he fell victim to the lawless character of the frontier which was Grant County in those days.