

## James H. Wilson

(1830 – 15 Jul 1859)

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*The Evening Star, July 14, 1859*

### **A Dreadful Accident**

This forenoon, between 10 and 11 o'clock, while the gunner's crew at the Washington Navy Yard were engaged in their usual battery practice, a sixty-four pounder -- an army gun -- which had been fired once only there (though it had evidently been often fired before) burst, killing James Wilson and William Nokes. The former was a seafaring man, married with one child. The latter was a married man, and was preparing to become a gunner in the service. He leaves no children.

The accident also wounded ten men--eight severely and two slightly--as follows: Richard Gormley (cut about the head;) Charles Stuart (badly cut about the head;) Roderick McMillan, (collar-bone broken;) P. Ludwig, (splinter in the side;) Andrew Wilson (cut about the face and head;) J. Roach, (ditto;) Elijah Beacham (badly hurt;) Dennis Leary, John Conner, and John Holland (slightly hurt.)

Mr. Wilson was killed instantly, half his head being blown off; and Mr. Nokes lived but five or ten minutes after the accident; the lower part of his face and head was blown off. The force of the accident threw Mr. Wilson's body a distance of thirty feet, and Mr. Nokes and Mr. Beacham ten or twelve feet. All who were injured were on the gun platform, which is elevated ten feet from the ground. Some of the fragments of the gun were cast more than two hundred yards, to the great danger of the workmen around.

At 1 p.m. the presence of the coroner to hold an inquest over the remains of Messrs. Wilson and Nokes (who were most estimable and valuable men in all their relations in life) was momentarily expected. Indeed, all the gunner's crew are necessarily picked men.

Hopes of the recovery of all the wounded are entertained by Dr. A.W. Miller and the medical officers of the Yard in attendance.

Everything possible to relieve the condition of the wounded, has been done by the officers of the Yard.

*The Evening Star, July 15, 1859*

### **The Navy Yard Tragedy -- Further Particulars**

The whole community was shocked greatly by the unfortunate affair which occurred yesterday morning at the Navy Yard, and which resulted in the almost instantaneous death of two estimable men, and the serious injury of eight others, two of whom are fatally wounded, it is feared. The two dead men were placed in boxes lined with lead, and packed in ice, and put under a proper guard in the western ship house, near the scene of the accident, with the national banner thrown over them. A crowd of sympathizing friends collected in and about the building, remained there for hours, and until the arrival of the Coroner, discussing and lamenting the dreadful circumstances which had sent their two companions thus suddenly into eternity. The scene of the accident also possessed a sad attraction for many others, who viewed with horror the wide-scattered fragments of the battery, and the bloody traces upon the surrounding ruins, where the killed and wounded had been thrown by the force of the explosion.

About twenty-five feet from the elevated platform where the gun stood, and in a western line from it lay the largest detached portion of the gun. Its pathway to the place where it lay was easily traceable. It had carried away in its flight the roof of the low battery on its right, and converting the entire structure into a perfect wreck, had lighted upon the top of a gun on the lower battery, making an

indentation in the solid iron nearly large enough for a man's fist to lay in; it then took a slide downwards splintering the carriage of the gun in its descent, and imbedded itself in the hard ground at the extreme western end of and just outside the battery. This piece of metal cannot weigh less than 4,000 lbs. Two other pieces—one weighing probably 2,000 lbs., and another still smaller—were thrown eastwardly about seventy-five yards, passing in their flight immediately over the roof of the eastern lower battery, and finally resting on the wharf, within a short distance of the water. At the right of the elevated battery hung the mass of splintered timbers and twisted irons of the gun carriage. The stout oak timbers had been riven into fine splinters., Upon the platform lay broken couplings, the displaced and broken carriage ways, and the forward portion of the gun, which rested in the port-hole of the battery, the broken edges blackened and scorched by the gunpowder. The awning which had protected the gunners in their practice from the rays of the sun, was torn into shreds and blown in all directions and to a great distance.

### *The Wounded*

The wounded, as fast as discovered, were conveyed out of the Yard to their own homes, where they were immediately cared for by the Surgeon of the Yard, and various physicians who had repaired to the spot at the first intelligence of the tragedy. The Officers of the Yard, and all others who could be of service to the unfortunate sufferers, administered all the aid in their power towards their relief.

### *The Inquest*

On the arrival of Coroner Woodward, a jury was empanelled (as follows) to investigate the circumstances of the death of the two deceased: Thompson Van Reswick, J.M. Padgett, Wm. L. Ross, J.F. King, James Cull, Thomas Plumsell, Wm. Beron, J.M. Busher, A.F. Berry, Charles Kimble, Thomas A. Golson, John Brower. The jurors having been sworn in both cases and examined the dead bodies, proceeded to the Centre house, the officers of the Commodore and other officers, where they heard the testimony of the eye witnesses.

Captain John A. Dahlgren having been sworn, testified that the gun which burst was a 64-pound cannon, one of the regular guns of the service, which had been sent to him by the bureau, bearing all the marks of inspection and acceptance for the use of the U.S. Navy. The marks of the inspecting officer showed the gun to have been accepted as in every way reliable for the use of Government, after the usual proofs of its capacity. Witness had no reason whatever to apprehend danger from the firing of it, as it had been fired but twenty-five times before the time when it burst. It had been discharged but twice today. It was loaded with the regular service charge of 16 pounds of powder and a solid 64-pound shot. This morning the usual order had been passed for the usual practice, and one shot had been fired to see if it was all right. It was loaded a second time with due and full observance of all the preliminaries and with all of the usual care in every particular, when it was discharged it burst, with the result already related. Witness had placed picked and careful men, as usual, in charge of it and is entirely satisfied that every care was practiced, and the record of the clerk shows this fact, and that the bursting may be attributed to accident alone, which no one could have foreseen or avoided. Every time a gun is discharged a record is kept of every particular. The charge is weighed and gauged, and sent home, and the shot is always in its right place before the gun is discharged. This must be so, for the man who rams the charge home has spaces marked on his rammer, and when the charge is rammed home he observes the mark on the rod and calls it out to the clerk, who records it, and if it varies in the least from what the record calls for the fact is instantly detected. The gun having been fired but twenty-six times it was not inspected before using it, as the service requires every gun to be warranted to stand one thousand rounds, and it is never usual to examine a gun till it has been fired at least fifty times. Mr. Norton was present and duly recorded as usual every detail of the loading of the gun, and this record is before the jury for their inspection precisely as made. Mr. Boarman, the foreman of gunners, has been

with witness ever since he commenced firing guns. He has been foreman ten years, and is one of the most thorough gunners in the service, and perfectly trustworthy. A gun of this kind should stand at least eight hundred rounds without bursting. This gun was about nine years old. It was cast in 1850, at the West Point foundry. Could not have been accepted by the Bureau nor paid for had it not been properly inspected and proved.

Mr. R.A. Boarman testified that he was present at the firing of the gun. That previous to her being fired she had been loaded in the usual manner, with an entire observance of all the cautious requisite; that at the second round she exploded, and the first thing witness saw after that was Wilson, who was blown directly through the air before witness's face to a point some forty feet distant. Witness next saw Nokes lying on another man whom witness supposed also to be dead. Witness ran to the opposite side of the gun and saw Gormley and others wounded. Spoke to Mr. Thompson about taking away the killed and wounded. Witness then ran to the assistance of such of them as required aid. Witness is entirely satisfied that there was no negligence in loading or firing the gun, and that any neglect or mistake would be instantly detected. Witness can only account for the accident by supposing that the metal of the gun was bad. It was one of those tidings which no man could foresee or avoid. Witness knows that she was a new gun, and that she was well fortified; and is entirely satisfied that she exploded through accident, and not from any known cause. There were thirteen men on the battery at the time, and they were ranged about the gun precisely the same way they would have been had they been on board ship at close quarters.

John Holmes testified that he was present, but was so stunned by the explosion that he saw nothing of it. Saw the gun loaded, and it was regularly charged, in every respect. Witness thinks there could not by any possibility, have been carelessness in the matter.

A.C. Sterrett stated that he was present on the battery when the gun exploded; was standing at the after eccentric and saw it charged. All the usual precautions were taken in loading it that are usual in the service. The cartridge was weighed by Mr. Ludwick; it was sent home to the chamber; and the shot (a solid 64-pound one) was also in its right place, as the gauge on the ram-rod showed. When the gun was discharged the first time today, she recoiled more than usual, and remarks were made by the men about it. None, however, apprehended the least danger. The extra recoil was caused by the compressures not being sufficiently secured, and when she was again loaded, a breeching was placed on her to assist the compressures. Witness does not think any word was sent to the captain about apprehended danger from the gun on account of the unusual recoil. There may have been, but witness was not privy to it, if such was the fact.

Richard Gormley testified that he was not at the gun when she was fired the first time; the first discharge was between 9 and 10 o'clock a.m., and witness was then on the look-out; at the second discharge, which was between 9 and 10 o'clock, witness was ordered to the battery, and took his stand on the port side of the gun, near the forward compressure; witness never apprehended the slightest danger; there was not a man there but what would have left the battery instantly had any danger been suspected; the order was given to fire, and the gun snapped; at the second snap, however, the gun exploded, and witness was knocked entirely off the battery by the shock and rendered senseless; witness remembers no more until he recovered consciousness in the dispensary whither they had taken him; witness heard that Capt. Dahlgren had been notified of the unusual recoil of the gun; heard Wilson say that the usual recoil of this gun should be three feet, and that the cause of the unusual recoil in this instance was the verdigris on the brass ways of the gun carriage; Denty had taken witness's place on the ship-house and witness took his place at the gun; the charge was the usual charge for this class of guns, viz; 16 lbs. Of powder, as was shown by the regular marks placed upon it in the magazine by the person who put it up, and a 64 solid shot; had there been any more or any less weight, or had the charge been out of its place in any degree, it would have been instantly detected by the gauge on the ramrod; witness has been about guns a great deal, and is acquainted with the whole management of them, and

knows that the recoil is governed by circumstances; the recoil could have no connection whatever, with the bursting of a gun; it is governed by the manner in which the compressures and fastened, and by the material of the carriage; if the carriage is rough the recoil would be less , if smooth, it wold be more; there is no regularity about it.

Capt. Dahlgren (recalled) stated that this gun had been on the lower battery, and had followed on the practice batter's 11-inch Dahlgren. The slide was a 10-inch one, and of course was shorter than a 11-inch slide. This circumstance made the recoil seem greater, because it brought the breech back against the cross-piece of the slide. Witness was informed by Mr. Norton of this circumstance, and ordered a breeching to be placed upon the gun, which was done. The recoil of a gun depends on a variety of circumstances. This gun had been, when on the lower battery, placed on rough pine skids, where of course the recoil would be much less than it would be on metallic slides. There would be no connection between the recoil of a gun and the cause which would burst it. The only cause for the bursting in this case, that witness could think of, would be that the metal was bad. Witness thinks this the worst gun he ever saw, as it would be supposed to stand the usual number of rounds (1,000), and it is never considered necessary to examine a gun after it is proved, until at least fifty rounds are fired from it.

A.B. Norton testified that at the time the gun was discharged he was standing in his proper place to note the particulars of the discharge. That the gun emitted a peculiar sound, which went to the rear and in the air instead of, out of the muzzle of the gun. On the instant witness heard a sharp, cracking, rushing sound, and on looking in the direction saw the carriage going over the side of the battery. Saw the men lying around wounded, and thought that three of them were killed, as one had, fallen upon another at some distance from the gun. Ran to their assistance. The loading and all that pertains to the loading of a gun was conducted with as much caution as witness ever knew to be used. There was nothing omitted nor anything overdone, every particular of the loading was duly recorded by witness, and there was no cause to apprehend an explosion. When the charge was rammed home the ramrod showed it to be 105 inches, and this was called out to witness, who recorded it. The man, in calling it out, did not even stop to think whether this gauge was the same as at previous times. After the accident, witness compared this gauge with that recorded when the gun was first used, years ago, and found it to be registered 105. This shows that the charge was in its place. Witness has been present before when the gun has been fired twenty-four times. She was never fired, except twice at the foundry where she was made, but what witness was present and recorded her every round. The recoil of a gun depends upon the condition of the carriage, its smoothness, and unusual recoil would never be taken as an indication that a gun was about to explode. The first shot fired today was fired to see if the gun was all right for the practice to go on. Witness informed Captain Dahlgren of the unusual recoil, and received orders to have a breeching placed on her. The powder was such as has been approved for use in the service. Witness saw it weighed by Ludwick, who was badly wounded by the accident. Each cartridge is weighed and put up in the magazine, and immediately before being placed in a gun is again weighed, to be certain that there is nothing wrong. (In answer to a question of one of the jurors.) It would be almost impossible for any fulminate from the laboratory to find its way into the magazine, and the man who would attempt to effect such a collusion for malicious purposes would himself be in imminent danger of being blown up.

Capt. Dahlgren (recalled) gave further information about the care used by the Bureau in the selection and acceptance of all guns for the service, the manner of inspecting and proving them. The inspection is conducted by the officer with the greatest care and precision, and if everything is found to be right, the initials of the inspecting officer are stamped on the trunnion of the gun, and the letter P underneath them, showing that the gun has been duly proved. There is no possibility of ascertaining anything more about a gun than is ascertained by means of this rigid inspection and proof; and if the metal is bad, or if some unknown flaw is there, it cannot by any possibility be detected. Witness would

never think of inspecting a gun warranted to stand one thousand rounds, which had only been discharged twenty-six times. This gun was weak, and that is all that can be said about it. The maker is one of the best gun-makers in the country, and has the highest reputation before the Bureau. There are no better guns than those made at the West Point Foundry, where this was made.

Mr. Wm. H. Thompson gave further testimony as to the extreme precaution always used in the laboratory and in the magazine and confirmed the testimony of Mr. Norton, that it would be impossible by any sort of collusion to introduce fulminate into a cartridge; it could only be done in taking the cartridge from the powder-cart to weigh it immediately before charging the gun, and these would be attended with the greatest danger. In this case, the man who weighed the powder, (Ludwick) was on the platform when the gun was discharged, and dreadfully wounded.

[A cartridge shot and primer, such as are used in the 64-pounder guns was here brought to the jury, who stood around the table while Captain Dahlgren went through a minute description of the manner in which the guns are loaded and discharged.]

### *The Killed*

James H. Wilson was a man about thirty-five years old, who never had any knowledge of who his parents were, and had no relative that he knew of in the world. He was partially raised in Brooklyn, N.Y., and has been in the United States service here about nine years. He was a man of unusual abilities, and stood high in the service as an expert and intelligent gunner. He has been for years the keeper of the battery, and he was universally esteemed by his mates and by the officers.

Nokes was a young man, new in the service; had but been in the Paraguay expedition in the character of yeoman. He had been placed in the gunner's department about two weeks ago, on account of the fair promise he gave, under the observation of Capt. Dahlgren, of becoming a first class gunner in time.

It was rumored yesterday that the wives of both of the deceased were absent from home on an excursion at the time of the accident. Such was not the case, they both being at their homes. It is understood that every effort will be made by the officers of the yard to have their afflicted families, who are poor, properly provided for by the Department.

### *The Wounded Today*

At ½ o'clock p.m., today, our reporter visited Charles Stuart, J. Roche, R. McMullen, and Elijah Beacham, the four most seriously wounded men of yesterday's accident.

Stuart was suffering greatly with severe spinal injuries, but was on the whole doing well.

Roche, McMullen and Beacham are in one room at their boarding house, and at the time of the visit were as easy as could be expected, though apparently in great suffering.

Roche is severely wounded about the breast and head, and his eyes are rendered nearly sightless. The attending physician speaks confidently of the restoration of the sight of one eye, but has not yet decided upon the other. He was asleep, and apparently in great pain, as was evinced by unnatural murmurings and nervous motions of his limbs.

McMullen had his collar-bone broken in two places, and very severe injuries about the head, one side of which is badly scalped. The broken bone has not yet been set, and though cheerful, the patient suffers extremely.

Beacham lies in a somewhat critical condition from internal injuries. The physician speaks hopefully of all the wounded, so that there is no present fear of their injuries taking a fatal issue.

Ludwig and Andrew Wilson are both doing well.

At 1 o'clock the hands employed in the yard answered to the roll call, and were then dismissed, to give them an opportunity of attending the funeral of the killed, which takes place this afternoon, at 4 o'clock.

*The Evening Star, July 16, 1859*

The Funeral of James H. Wilson and James Nokes, the two men killed by the explosion the day before yesterday, took place at the Navy Yard yesterday afternoon—that of the former being at Christ church (Episcopal) where Rev. Mr. Morsell officiated and that of the latter at the residence of his father, on Eighth street, opposite the marine barracks, under the ministration of Rev. Mr. Ryan of the M.E. Church. At each place there was a large assemblage of people, the friends and companions of the deceased men, and the services were naturally of much impressiveness. On the arrival of the hearse containing the remains of Wilson, at the church, it was met at the door by the rector, who read from the beautiful burial service of the Episcopal Church, as follows: “I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth, and though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God; whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another; though my veins be consumed within me,” etc. The procession moved up the aisle amid deep silence, in which the half-suppressed anguish of the bereaved widow was heartrending to witness. Arrived at the altar, the rector read a portion of the Scriptures appropriate to the occasion, beginning: “Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first fruits of them that slept.” After which an eloquent sermon, appropriate to the occasion, was preached from the text: “But he that taketh warning; shall deliver his soul.” Ezekiel, 33, 5.

The services concluded, the procession moved on towards the Congressional Burial Ground, where the remaining portion of the ceremony took place. Among the crowded audience at the church we noticed the several officers of the yard, and among the pall-bearers were several of the men who had stood on the fatal batter, and had received slight wounds by the explosion. It was contemplated for the two funerals to meet after the services, and proceed in one procession to the burial ground, but, owing to the heavy fall of rain which occurred as the exercises concluded, the remains of Nokes were not taken from the house, but that portion of the funeral rites were postponed till this morning at 10 o’clock.