

The Infamous Fewell Trial -- Part I

Lucien Fewell, better known as Rhoda, left Lynchburg, Virginia by train. It was the 30th day of August 1872. He had only one thing on his mind, to put an end to all the talk in Prince William County as to why the family hadn't sought the expected revenge on James Clark who was incarcerated in the Brentsville Jail. Fewell managed to exit the train at Bristow without being noticed and by his own admission hid in the woods on the way to Brentsville to avoid being seen by anyone passing.

James Clark was arrested in Fredericksburg on August 22 and transported to Bristow by train and then by wagon to the Brentsville jail. He was kept under heavy guard because of the nature of the accusations against him and the public outcry for revenge. But on August 30th there were no guards and the jail was unlocked. Clark was lying half asleep on the bed, when he was roused by the opening of the door. When he looked up, he saw Rhoda Fewell pointing a pistol at him through the cell door. Clark jumped up and ran to the corner on the right-hand side of the door. As he was running, Fewell fired at him and missed. He then ran to the other side of the door and Fewell again shot and missed. Fewell then put the pistol all the way through the door in an attempt to acquire a better angle but Clark at that point grabbed the pistol, which was the size of a navy pistol, and tried to wrest it from Fewell. He failed, and Fewell then drew a second, smaller pistol and shot him in the chest. The injured Clark heard a voice that he recognized at that point. It was Maj. Thornton, pleading with Fewell to quit shooting.

Little did anyone know at the time of the shooting that this was to become the most famous trial in Brentsville history, pitting an ex-governor of Virginia against two well known Confederate Civil War generals. The defendant, the notorious son of the founder of Manassas and a well respected family in the community, would be on trial for killing the former Commonwealth's attorney of Prince William County, the son of a prominent Baptist minister and editor of a Warren County newspaper. The following is a serialized account of this trial was covered in most of the nations newspapers.

Alexandria Gazette 29 Jul 1872

Prince William County News from the *Manassas Gazette* --

Our village has been considerably excited since Sunday morning last, when it was ascertained that a young daughter of one of our most prominent citizens had left home without the knowledge of her parents, and taken the northern bound freight train going into Alexandria.

Imagine the sensation this young woman's disappearance must have caused in the small town. Manassas had begun to grow after the Civil War and would later become the county seat in the 1890s, but was still in its early stages of development in 1872. Several weeks passed, likely full of rumor and speculation by the locals, before more of the story was revealed.

Alexandria Gazette 24 Aug 1872

ARREST OF JAMES F. CLARK - James F. Clark, late Commonwealth's Attorney for Prince William County and the unanimous and persistent choice of the Prince William delegation in the last Senatorial Convention, of whose late exploits an extended notice appeared in Thursday's *Gazette*, arrived in Fredericksburg on the train from Washington last Thursday, but left that town immediately on a horse hired from the livery stable of Mr. Thomas Haydon, stating that he was going a few miles in the country. Yesterday morning he was arrested at the residence of his father-in-law, in King George County, about ten miles from Fredericksburg, by Sergeant Edrington on the charge of abducting and carrying away Miss Fannie Fewell, brought back to Fredericksburg and taken before a Justice of the peace, but waiving an examination, was committed to jail to appear before a Magistrate of Prince William county within thirty days, in default of bail to the amount of \$600. Last night, however, he employed counsel, who sued out a writ of habeas corpus, upon which he was brought before Judge Goolrick, this morning, and after an examination was remanded to jail to await a requisition from the authorities of Prince William County. The Judge afterwards reconsidered the case and determined to hold Clark for examination at 1 o'clock next Monday evening. It is understood that Clark left Miss Fewell with whom he eloped about a month since, in Washington, and her relatives have gone there to look for her. The arrest was made at the instance of Miss Fewell's father, who having heard that Clark had gone to Fredericksburg started immediately for that place, and Clark was so afraid that Mr. Fewell would shoot him on sight, that he refused to come on the street until that gentleman had been bound over to keep the peace. A few days ago a gentleman residing at Manassas received a letter from Clark asking particularly about Miss Fewell of whose elopement he said he had just heard.

By August 24, the names of the players in the drama were publicly known. Without doubt, the rumor mill continued to process the data. The prominence of those involved made the events even more shocking, as they were published in more detail two days later.

Alexandria Gazette 26 Aug 1872

THE CLARK AFFAIR - On Saturday morning last Mr. Benjamin Merchant, a brother in law of Miss Fannie Fewell, arrived in Washington, and with the aid of detective McElfresh succeeded in finding the young lady at Boyles Hotel, from which place she was taken to police headquarters. In answer to questions she stated that she was married to Clark in Washington, but was unable to name the minister or place where the ceremony was performed, nor could the officers find any record of such names on the marriage record in the office of the clerk of court. She appeared much affected on meeting her brother in law, and was crying bitterly as she left headquarters on her way to the railroad station. She passed through here, accompanied by her brother in law, on Saturday's evening train for her home at Manassas, but left that place this morning in a hack accompanied by her father and Judge Sinclair, who has been employed by her father as counsel, for Occoquan, to take the train for Fredericksburg, where Clark was to have been examined before Judge Goolrick at half past four o'clock this evening.

A second news item on this same day reported the results of the Judge's examination, as it was intended that Clark be returned to Prince William County.

Alexandria Gazette 26 Aug 1872

Prince William County Items from the *Manassas Gazette* - There was considerable excitement at Manassas on Saturday, upon the receipt of the intelligence of the arrest of Jas F. Clark, in Fredericksburg. It was reported that he would be brought up on the train and a large crowd assembled at the depot, and so much indignation was expressed that it was feared that summary punishment would be meted out to him. He did not come, however.

So, where was Clark? Questions about Clark and Miss Fewell's dealings were on everyone's lips, as many of the details were not yet known. The *Alexandria Gazette* answered some of these questions on the very next day.

Alexandria Gazette 27 Aug 1872

THE CASE OF JAMES F. CLARK from the *Fredericksburg Ledger*. - Since the publication in our last issue of the account of the elopement of James F. Clark with Miss Fanny Fewell, of Manassas, Va., several occurrences have taken place which deepened the interest which that account excited here, where both parties are known, and Clark especially, well known. To the astonishment of everybody, Clark appeared in Fredericksburg on Thursday, arriving by the 11 o'clock train, and procuring a horse at one of our livery stables, departed at once to the house of Wm. Lee, in Stafford, the father of his wife, where his wife and children have been living since his absence from the State. The family of Miss Fewell received intelligence on the same day that she was in Washington, and suspecting that Clark would leave her there and visit his family, sent a telegram of inquiry for him that morning. Receiving an affirmative answer, they asked for his arrest; but being informed that this could not be done on such slender authority, telegraphed that they would be here next day. On Friday, Mr. Fewell, father of the young lady, and Mr. Merchant, a connection of the family, arrived and after consultation with the Commonwealth's Attorney, obtained from Recorder Sener a warrant for Clark's arrest, on the charge of abduction of the daughter of Mr. Fewell. They arrested Clark at Mr. Lee's house, was placed in the hands of officer Edrington and without trouble, and whenever the subject was mentioned in the conversation along the road, Clark firmly asserted his innocence. He was brought in and arraigned before Recorder Sener in the afternoon. Messrs. John L. Marye Jr. and Charles Herndon appeared as his counsel and C. Wistar Wallace, Commonwealth's Attorney, for the prosecution. Mr. Wallace did not wish to proceed with the case until he could procure certain necessary witnesses. Mr. Marye replied that the only examination that could now be had was with the view to sending the accused to the county where the offense occurred, and the proceedings here would be widely disseminated, he wished to say that Mr. Clark pronounced the reports of this affair a most unfounded aspersion of his character and assured him, distinctly and unequivocally, that he had no connection whatever with the disappearance of the young lady, and no knowledge of her during his travels west, whither he had been merely on a voyage of exploration to select a place of location. As soon as he heard of the rumors connecting his name with this affair, he had turned from his business in the west and started home to face his accusers in Prince William, and is ready to go now, this moment, with the officers and these gentlemen.

Captain Wallace and Mr. Fewell said that was all they desired, and the case was therefore so disposed of, but it was deemed necessary to hear the evidence of Messrs. Fewell and Merchant before committing Mr. Clark to custody. The following is their narrative of the elopement and pursuit.

Mr. Fewell, the father of the young girl, has lived at Manassas since 1865. His daughter though only sixteen years of age, is said to be of great beauty and most engaging manners. Her mother has been dead for some years, and she has been brought up under every indulgence having been from her earliest years the pet of the household.

There never has been anything in Clark's conduct to arouse suspicions in the minds of any number of her family that he designed her ruin. They had heard of no intimacy between them except of a ride in a buggy a few days before he left Manassas. Clark never boarded at Mr. Fewell's house, as it has been reported, and left Manassas ten days before his daughter disappeared. She did not live with her father, but with her older sister, the wife of Mr. R. B. Merchant of Manassas, and from Mr. Merchant's house the elopement occurred.

On Friday night before her disappearance an old man with a hand trunk called at Mr. Fewell's Hotel on the arrival of the evening train, and feigning drunkenness, asked for liquor. He was directed across the street, whither he went. The next night he appeared again at the same hour

and with the same actions, but without the hand-trunk. The next night being Sunday night the 20th July, a freight train arrived at Manassas at midnight. Miss Fewell, as the train was coming in, passed the door of her brother in law's room and in answer to a question from him, replied that she was ill and was going out. As the night was bright, he thought nothing strange of this, and only desired her to take her maid servant with her. Becoming alarmed from her protracted absence. Mrs. Merchant went to look for her and could not find her on the premises. In the meantime her father, who is depot agent at Manassas, while on the platform attending to his duties had observed a female figure coming towards the train from the direction of Mr. Merchant's house, proceeded by a man carrying a hand trunk, but never for a moment suspected that it was his daughter. Having finished his business with the train, he went home and retired, and was waked up in a few minutes by Mr. Merchant, who informed him of his daughter's disappearance. They went together and searched the car, but in vain. The young lady was concealed in the water closet. The man with the hand -trunk occupied a seat in the car. He was seen afterwards in conversation with Miss Fanny by the train hands and was overheard telling her that "the Lieutenant would not stop in Washington," but would take the cars at the first station beyond. When the train arrived at Alexandria a carriage was in waiting and the young girl entered it and drove away. The watchman at the depot and the conductor of the train saw a man in the carriage, whom they described as a small man, with light hair and light moustache. He told the watchman he was a clerk in Washington, and had been seen waiting there with the carriage for two nights before. The hand trunk man told the watchman that he had been helping the young couple off. From Alexandria all traces of the fugitives were lost until the first depot beyond Washington was reached. The agent at this depot informed Mr. Merchant that a young couple answering the description had taken the train there the day before, and the agent accurately described both of them, even describing the dress worn by the lady, which was recognized by Mr. Merchant. Pursuit was made to Baltimore but without effect, and for the first time Clark was suspected.

After suspicion was directed to Clark, it was learned that he had given out that he had gone to Memphis and had ordered his letters to be sent there. On writing to the postmaster at that place it was learned that he had not been there at all, but had ordered his letters to be forwarded to Alton, Illinois. Further inquiries confirmed still more strongly these suspicions, and eventually convinced Mr. Fewell that Clark was the guilty man, who, by the agency of the mysterious man of the hand-trunk had seduced the young lady from her home. After her disappearance by the officiousness of neighbors, many facts were brought to the knowledge of her family which if they had been communicated before, would have prevented the sad occurrence.

At the close of the examination Clark was taken charge of by the officers for delivery to the authorities of Prince William County. Every preparation was made for departure by the night mail train, and the party was at the Exchange Hotel awaiting the hour to go; but about 9 o'clock, being made acquainted with the threats against his life by the incensed community at Manassas, Clark concluded that it would not be safe for him to get into their power, and applied to Judge Goolrick for a writ of habeas corpus. The writ was awarded, and the hour of 10:am Saturday morning fixed for the bearing. Clark was then taken to jail and locked up for the night.

Promptly at 10 a.m. Saturday the Judge took his seat, and Clark was brought before him. Officer Edrington made his return to the writ, showing his warrant of law by which he held the prisoner, and an affidavit of Recorder Sener, setting forth the agreement of the accused to go to Prince William was also filed. Mr. Herndon made a strong appeal for the accused, reiterating Clark's emphatic denial of complicity in the abduction of the young girl and stating that he would have been discharged; the day before for want of evidence but for his offer to go to Prince William. Owing to well founded apprehensions of violence he had reconsidered his determination.

After argument on both sides, the Judge remanded Clark to custody, but in view of the danger of bodily harm to which he was exposed, ordered him to be let to bail in \$600 to appear before a magistrate of Prince William within thirty days. He was allowed five days within which to furnish bail, and meanwhile is remanded to jail. But before the order had been entered, information was received here that Miss Fanny Fewell had been found in Washington and had exposed the whole

affair, charging it upon Clark, and that further evidence of his guilt would be supplied on Monday. The Judge accordingly reconsidered his order in regard to bail and determined to rehear the application for bail yesterday at 4:30 p.m.

Up to the hour of going to press the witnesses expected had not arrived, but were reported on the way, traveling by private conveyance. The result of this examination is awaited with much interest. The sentiment here is decidedly against Clark, but there is no disposition to condemn him unheard since the law has been appealed to for redress of the injury.

The families affected by this unfortunate affair have the sincere and heartfelt sympathy of this community. - See telegraphic dispatch for concluding proceedings.

All awaited the explanations of Clark and Miss Fewell with baited breath. Just imagine the crowd of people anticipating Clark's arrival in Prince William County, as well as the pair's testimony. But wait the people would, as another delay was to develop, as reported in the *Telegraph News*.

Alexandria Gazette 27 Aug 1872

TELEGRAPH NEWS - Special Dispatches to the *Gazette* - Case of Jas. F. Clark — Clark Remanded to Prince William— Miss Fewell's health— Other persons Implicated in Miss F.'s Elopement — Clark's Arrival at Manassas and Committal to Jail — Trial not yet set. Fredericksburg, Aug 27, - The examination of the witnesses in the Clark case, which was to take place here yesterday, was cut short by the illness of Miss Fewell, who had to be examined at her room by the Court and counsel, and during the examination was attacked so severely with hysteria that the examination was suspended. Her health not admitting of a renewal of the examination for several days, the case was submitted, upon the evidence already taken and published, and Clark was remanded to the custody of the jailer to be delivered to the authorities of Prince William County.

Sergeant Edrington left here with Clark last night. Miss Fewell's deposition implicates other parties at Manassas, of respectable standing, in the plan and accomplishment of her elopement.

MANASSAS, Prince William County, August 27 — Clark, in charge of officer Edrington, reached Brentsville this morning quietly, but exhibited signs of much fear. He was at once committed to the jail of the county, to remain there under a strong guard, until his trial, the time for which has not yet been set.

Fannie Fewell's health delayed the telling of her side of the story. Clark insisted he was innocent as he languished in jail at Brentsville. Much of this riveting story remains to be told in the first issue of the *Bell Ringer*!