



John G. Freeze, *A History of Columbia County, Pennsylvania* (Bloomsburg, PA: Elwell and Bittenbender, 1883)

[442]

THE TRIALS

THE MILITARY COMMISSION; On the 17th of October, 1864, a Mock Court (called 'a Military Commission') was organized at Harrisburg for the trial of the prisoners. It was composed of three Army officers, to-wit: Colonel Charles N. Provost, Colonel J.M. Frink and Captain Lee, with Captain Francis Wessels as Judge Advocate. It convened under the orders of 'the General Commanding the Department of the Susquehanna,' that is without any authority at all except one wholly usurped and lawless. The members went through the form of taking an oath, and business began.

The first case called for trial was that of John Rantz (which was supposed to be the best or strongest one for the prosecution) and the charges and specifications against him were produced. They were, in substance, that he had confederated with others to resist the draft (what draft was not mentioned) and had formed or united with a secret society commonly known and called the "Knights of the Golden Circle," the object of which was to resist the execution of the draft, and that he had publicly expressed disloyal sentiments and opinions with the object of defeating and weakening the power of the Government in its efforts to surpress the rebellion. In brief, he was charged to be a conspirator, an organizer or member of an unlawful secret association, and a man of disloyal speech.

For the defendant, John G. Freeze, Hamilton Alricks and A. J. Herr Esqs, appeared as counsel, the two latter being members of the Harrisburg Bar, and Mr. Herr District Attorney for Dauphin County.

[443] CONVICTION OF RANTZ. – The trial of John Rantz proceeded for several days and was concluded on the 24th of October. *He was found guilty and was sentenced to pay a fine of one thousand dollars and to undergo an imprisonment in Fort Mifflin for the term of two years.* The witnesses examined against him were Nathan J. Hess, Adam Lutz, Richard Stiles, and Edward M'Henry.

[447-449] EDWARD M'HENRY AS A WITNESS: - This person was a non-reporting drafted man and was unquestionably guilty of active opposition to the enforcement of the conscription laws, and that both by speech and conduct. He was arrested on the 19th of September 1864 in a state of intoxication and placed in the jail at Bloomsburg. There he was visited by two of the leading radicals in town. He was taken on to Harrisburg and held in confinement there until the 22nd of October, when he was released upon condition that he would become a government witness. The negotiation with him was finally concluded by Col. Albright, and he was suddenly transformed from a culprit to a patriot, was put on government pay, and became the main support and instrument of the prosecution, in all the trials which subsequently took place. Upon his testimony, mainly, all the earlier convictions were had, and therefore an examination of that testimony, of the contradictions to which it

was subjected and of his general character and credibility, become important in our investigation.

In the Daniel M'Henry trial on the 14th of December, he testified as follows:

Edward M'Henry sworn: - I am a carpenter and reside in Benton Township, Columbia county, know Daniel M'Henry; I was at [John] Rantz's barn about the 14th of August last. The meeting was to resist the soldiers at Bloomsburg from taking the drafted men. The meeting was gathered when I got there at 11 o'clock; I supposed 100 to 125 there. There were some speeches made, Samuel Kline made the first one: He advised them to form into squads or companies to resist the soldiers; nothing else said. Daniel M'Henry was the next speaker, I understood him to say; these were critical times; he thought they were unanimous in resisting the draft, the people were unanimous in resisting the draft and the soldiers.' That is all I recollect of his saying this day; I gave them a little speech; I spoke in favor of resisting the soldiers; I told them the old men were encouraging it, and as we were drafted and had not reported, we could do no better than resist; I said more but don't recollect. I did not hear any other speech. Daniel M'Henry spoke a couple or three minutes; the speaking was about 2 or 3 o'clock in the afternoon. A portion of the meeting was armed; I suppose about one half were. The meeting formed into squads – almost all. There were five squads, Samuel Kline was Captain of one squad, Jacob Shultz of another, a young man from near Orangeville of another, Elias Kline another. I was the other. The squads elected their Captains. These squads did not afterwards resist the soldiers that I know of; from what I understood the soldiers were too strong. Part of the squads went to the mountain to keep out of the way. I heard the story that the soldiers were coming to burn and destroy property. Some believe it and some did not. We resisted the soldiers to prevent the drafted men from being taken.

I attended so called 'secret meetings'; I was a member, I joined in the spring of 1863 in Jackson Township, near the Union church. We were required to take an oath, which was, 'to support the Constitution of the United States and resist the conscription act.' William E. Roberts administered the oath to me. . . . I heard him [D. M'Henry] say that they ought not to furnish a man or a dollar towards the war; I don't know whether he was on the stand or not; I do not recollect that he said anything about the draft in his speech.

Cross-examined: Can't say I was arrested for the same offence as that charged on the defendant. I was a drafted man and did not report; I can't say who arrested me or where I was arrested. The first I knew I was in the county jail, and I was drunk; I was in confinement from the 19th of September till the 22nd of October; I got my liberty. Col. Albright told me that if I would make a clean breast of the difficulties up Fishingcreek, as far as I knew, I could have my liberty. I was not drunk at Rantz's. I don't remember having said at Rantz's that we would trim the apple trees and would turn the ditches. I did not understand that the meeting at Rantz's was occasioned by fear of the Harleyville boys. . . . A question submitted here by counsel for the Defendant, but objected to: I do not recollect that I threatened that I would convict Daniel M'Henry; I do not recollect that I said in the cars coming to Harrisburg I knew what to say and would say it. . . . I told men we were drafted, had not reported and the best thing we could do was to resist. . . .

[451] THE WITNESS RICHARD STILES:- This person, who may be ranked in position if not importance next after Ed. M'Henry, was a swift and willing witness for the prosecution, and though his revelations of fact were not very important nor at all reliable in their details, they were well intended to secure the party objects of the prosecutions.

. . . . Stiles testified that he heard of the Rantz meeting on the 14th of August, but was not there; that he attended a meeting at the Ash's School House about the last of March 1864, at which twenty to twenty-five men were present; he believed the school directors called the meeting to know whether the people would be willing to be taxed to raise a bounty for volunteers. . . . "Rantz was opposed; advised people to keep their money and buy arms to fight at home." . . . He said lawyer Freeze had told him, Illinois was about seceding and the State of New York was about to go out of the Union. Rantz said, Abolition leaders had seven pockets and never were satisfied till they all got them full of money.

Stiles then detailed a conversation he had with William Appleman in the Spring of 1863, in regard to secret meetings, as follows: - 'I said to him "I heard you had a secret meeting at Ash's School House.' I told him I understood they were sworn to resist the draft; I understood him to say they were not sworn at all; he said they did take upon themselves an obligation to support the constitution of the United States and the State of Pennsylvania. I told him I had been straightly informed the object was to resist the draft, and if so, they would all be arrested and put into prison; and he replied, 'there would not be prisons enough to hold us.'