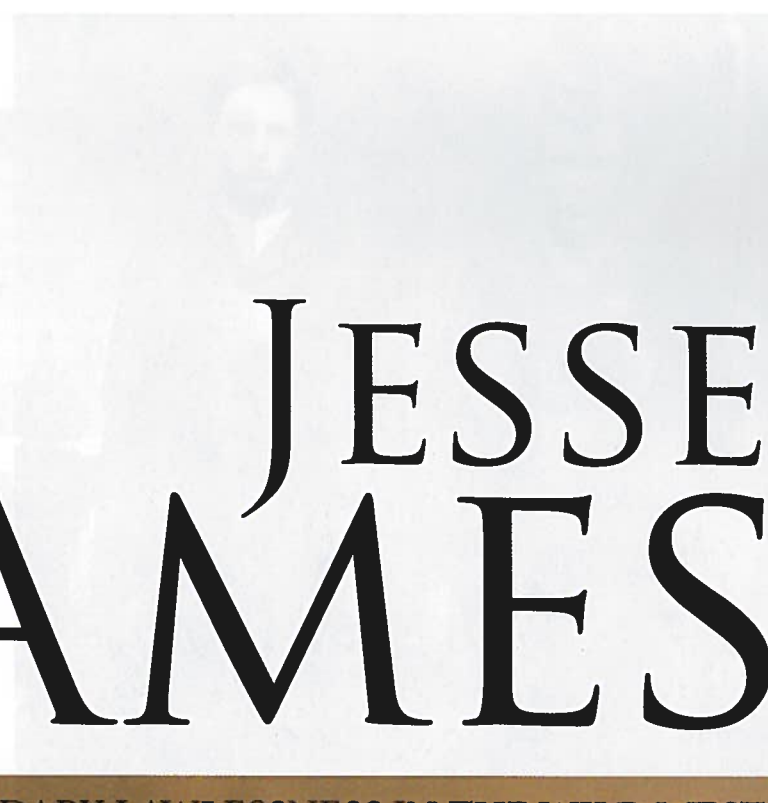


“Just able barely to mount a horse and ride about a little in the spring of 1866, my life was threatened daily, and I was forced to go heavily armed. The whole country was then full of militia, robbing, plundering and killing.”

—JESSE JAMES



JESSE JAMES

1847-1882

LEGENDARY LAWLESSNESS IN THE WILD WEST.

BY Nathan Lee Adamus

THE RISE OF A SCOUNDREL

Jesse Woodson James' rise to outlaw status began during the Civil War. In 1861 at the onset of the war, Missouri was a border state between the northern and southern territories. The state attempted to remain neutral, but most of the population favored slavery, particularly in Clay County, where James was born. The political tension resulted in the formation of guerrilla squads that were divided between secessionist "bushwhackers" and Union militias, or "jayhawkers." The two sides frequently participated in heinous crimes that included torture, raids and the murder of innocent civilians.

James' family sided with the Confederates, and Jesse's brother Frank joined the bushwhackers, later leading his own notorious James-Younger Gang. In 1863, Union soldiers raided the James family's farm, where young Jesse still lived, in an effort to dispose of Frank and his gang, who had garnered a reputation for their raids and robberies. Upon finding Frank was not home, the soldiers arrested his mother, tortured his father and, according to legend, whipped Jesse. His mother never let him forget the humiliation, and Jesse's hatred for the Union grew.

In 1864, Jesse, then 16, joined his brother and became part of a bushwhacker regime led by William "Bloody Bill" Anderson, who was known to chop off the heads of his enemies with a pirate sword. On September 27 of that year, Frank and Jesse joined 80

guerrillas, disguised as Union soldiers and led by Anderson, in descending upon the town of Centralia, Washington. Historians estimate that 22 unarmed Union soldiers were executed or wounded in what is now known as the Centralia Massacre, or the Armistice Day Riot.

Many of the dead were tortured and humiliated, and some reports tell of the heads of many victims being cut off and placed on the bodies of other soldiers. The Union attempted to retaliate and in the ensuing battle, 122 Union soldiers, including Union

"He wanted to quit the business, but he said he had to make a living, and as the whole world seemed to be pitted against him, and he couldn't do anything else, he kept on with it."

—GEORGE T. HITE,
JESSE JAMES' COUSIN. QUOTED BY
FRANK TRIPLETT, 1882.

LASTING LEGACY

NAME:

Jesse James

DATES ACTIVE:

1847-1882

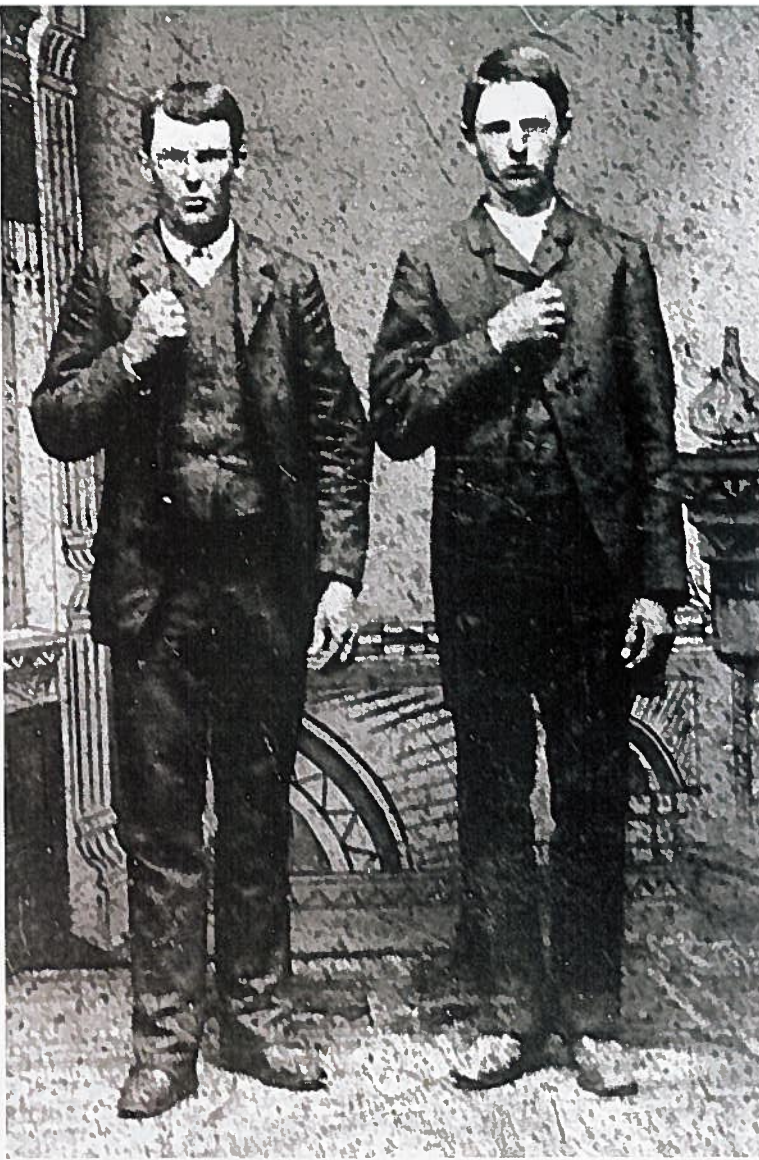
AREAS ACTIVE:

Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Minnesota, Virginia, West Virginia

CLAIM TO FAME:

Jesse James gained infamy through his many bank heists and train robberies.

OPPOSITE Jesse James, half-length portrait, facing front, holding handgun in left hand at his waist.



Major A.V.E. Johnston, were killed. According to Frank James, his brother Jesse fired the fatal bullet.

CRIMINAL ACTIVITY

After suffering two chest wounds (one during his escapades under Bloody Bill, the second in an encounter with a Union cavalry patrol near Lexington, Missouri), Jesse was forced to abandon bushwhacking. He retired to his uncle's home in Harlem, Missouri, where he eventually married his nurse and first cousin Zerelda "Zee" Mimms.

Although no longer active in guerrilla warfare, Jesse and Frank were still sought by radical Republicans for their crimes during the Civil War. The two brothers began to fight back, often targeting wealthy Republicans in order to make a political statement.

In February 1866, the Clay County Savings Bank in Liberty, Missouri, which was owned by former Republican militia officers, was robbed. Many historians credit this as the first daylight armed bank robbery in US history. It's also cited as the first James brothers bank robbery, but historians are in disagreement, some believing that Jesse was still recovering from his injuries at this time.

While he was linked to other robberies and crimes between 1866 and 1869, it wasn't until December 7, 1869, that Jesse James truly became notorious after he robbed the Daviess County Savings Association in Gallatin, Missouri. During the robbery, Jesse shot and killed a cashier, Captain John Sheets. Jesse mistook Sheets for a militia officer who had, years earlier, killed his friend Bloody Bill.

Because Sheets had ties to some wealthy Missouri

FRIENDS AND FOES

After the robbery in Gallatin, Missouri, Frank and Jesse James met with Kansas City Times editor and former Confederate cavalryman John Newman Edwards. Edwards was awed by the James brothers' exploits and used his column in the Kansas City Times to paint the two as noble champions of Confederacy for their self-proclaimed war against Republican corruption and oppression in Missouri. Jesse continued to write Edwards up until his death. However, the contents of the letters and Edwards' writings have come under scrutiny as an attempt to boost Jesse's folk hero status.

"Jesse James is the only American bandit who is classical, who is to this country what Robin Hood or Dick Turpin is to England, whose exploits are so close to the mythical and apocryphal."—CARL SANDBURG

JESSE JAMES' WEAPON OF CHOICE

Although Jesse James was known to use a shotgun from time to time, his preferred weapon was the Colt .45 Peacemaker. James had two Peacemakers strapped to his side at all times and was rarely seen without them.

Samuel Colt designed the Colt .45 in 1873 in an effort to fix some of the problems that plagued his earlier revolvers such as the .36 caliber 1851 Navy Colt revolver and the 1860 .44 caliber Army Colt. Both guns were marred by flaws and would routinely jam when dirty. The Colt .45 was more reliable and did more damage than its predecessors, making it the gun of choice for outlaws in the late 1800s.

The Colt Peacemaker was Jesse James' weapon of choice.



LEGACY IN POPULAR CULTURE

Jesse James is arguably the most notorious outlaw of the Wild West. Although too extensive to list here, the legendary outlaw has made numerous appearances in literature, comic books, music, and television. His likeness has appeared in no less than 26 major films, including the 2007 indie film *The Assassination of Jesse James* by the Coward Robert Ford starring Brad Pitt as Jesse James.

Although many historians feel that he was no more of an outlaw than many other Wild West criminals, James became the epitome of a "raider." With the aid of John Newman Edwards, he glamorized the life of an outlaw and robber and perhaps instigated public fascination with the lives of ne'er-do-wells.



JESSE JAMES HOME

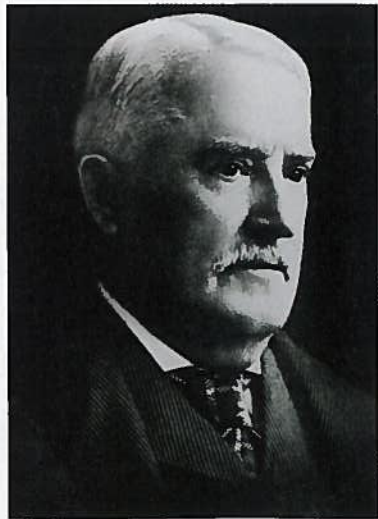
businessmen, the crime received significant public attention and newspaper coverage. After the robbery, Missouri Governor Thomas T. Crittenden labeled Jesse an "outlaw" and set a reward for his capture, marking the true beginning of Jesse's "career."

Over the next 20 years, Jesse and the James Gang reportedly were responsible for the robberies of more than 20 banks and railroads. According to legend, Jesse and his rotating team of bandits operated like Robin Hood, taking money from the rich and giving it to the poor. Historians, however, estimate that the gang acquired well over \$250,000 during their reign of terror and kept the money for themselves.

Rumor has it that Jesse left his family penniless upon his death, the whereabouts of his ill-gotten fortune uncertain. ●

ABOVE Jesse James' home in St. Joseph, Missouri, where he was killed by Robert Ford in 1882.

BELOW Missouri Governor Thomas J. Crittenden, who placed the reward on Jesse James' head that led to the outlaw's assassination by Robert Ford.



\$500 REWARD

For the Arrest and Conviction of

JESSE JAMES

St. Louis Midland Railroad

THE DEATH OF A LEGEND

From 1876-1881, the James Gang suffered significant losses during a number of botched robberies. By 1881, Frank was growing tired of the gunslinger lifestyle and moved to Virginia where people were less likely to recognize him. Jesse decided to stay in Missouri, despite his face appearing on nearly every "wanted" poster in the area.

With the gang severely depleted, Jesse needed new blood he could trust. He linked up with a former acquaintance named Charley Ford, who had accompanied Jesse on prior Union raids. Charley's younger brother Robert (Bob), who was eager to live the outlaw lifestyle glorified in the local papers, also joined the gang. With the gang rejuvenated, James began planning a robbery of the Platte City Bank.

Unbeknownst to James, the two brothers he felt were trustworthy were secretly planning to collect the \$10,000 reward that had been placed on Jesse's head by Governor Thomas T. Crittenden. During preparation for the robbery, James picked up a newspaper to find out that Dick Liddil, a friend of the Ford brothers, had confessed to the murder of Jesse's cousin "Wood" Hite. In fact, both brothers were present at Hite's murder and were brought in for questioning. Crittenden promised them the \$10,000 reward and a full pardon if they killed Jesse James.

According to Robert, James appeared suspicious after reading the article in the paper, but instead of confronting the two brothers, he simply stood up, set his revolvers on a sofa, and began dusting a painting that was hanging over the mantle. Robert took the opportunity to draw his pistol and fired one shot into the back of Jesse's head.

The two brothers were initially charged with murder when they showed up to receive their \$10,000, but were later pardoned by Governor Crittenden. They received only \$500 of the \$10,000 Crittenden had promised them. Charley would later commit suicide and Bob was killed in a tent saloon he owned in 1894.



Robert Ford and the revolver he used to kill Jesse James.

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