



Murder, Mayhem and a Wandering Mare

by Joan Paris

No one witnessed the violence and no gunshot sounded, but someone was definitely murdered –and lying in the cool murky waters of the Chicopee River in Wilbraham on Saturday November 9, 1805.

A riderless horse was discovered saddled and bridled in John Bliss' mowing lot up on the mountain in North Parish at mid afternoon. Main Street townsfolk noticed the same stray earlier in the day on the afternoon of November 9th.

The next day, when no one claimed the horse, townspeople began to investigate the saddle and the attached leather valise. Posted mail from the saddlebags identified the horse's rider as Marcus Lyon, 23, from Woodstock Connecticut and traveling from Cazenovia, New York. Several other letters were addressed to gentlemen in Palmer, Monson and Woodstock Connecticut. It was presumed that Marcus traveled from New York to Route 20 in Wilbraham to meet business associates or friends.

An eyewitness to later events in the day, Ezekial Terry, a congregational minister of North Wilbraham whose territory included the murder scene [*A Brief Account of the Murder of Marcus Lyon, Palmer 1806*] reports that with torches and lanterns, several men from town examined the wooded area "on the great road" [Route 20] by the bank of the River- 1 mile east of Spec Pond.

The body of Marcus Lyon was found on Sunday evening, November 10th; 150 yards east of the John Bliss pasture on North Mountain Road- 65 yards south of the 11 mile Brook Bridge and taken to Sykes tavern, 1/2 mile away, on the north corner of Maple and Chapel Streets for a post-mortem. He had been pistol-whipped and shot in the chest. The sheriff assembled a posse.

Domenic Daley and James Halligan, sailors from Boston, had been seen traveling just behind Marcus Lyon on the Turnpike Road (Old Bay Road) in Wilbraham. Witnesses saw the men leaving Wilbraham at "a quick pace." (Merrick, 1963)

They were tracked to Cos Cob landing in Greenwich Connecticut and brought back to Springfield-then Northampton for trial. The trial began and ended on April 24, 1806.

The Honorable Justices Samuel Sewall and Theodore Sedgwick presided. Attorney F. BLAKE, esquire, of Worcester, led a defense team of four attorneys and made a passionate and elegant plea for their defense.

Following the testimony of 24 witnesses for the prosecution and key testimony by 13-year-old, Laertes Fuller, who identified the men, the prosecutor rested and the defense called no witnesses.

Two witnesses for the prosecution were from Glover Blacksmithery -1/2 mile from the murder scene, Thomas Glover, presumably the owner, and Jeremy Bliss. The John Bliss house was located ¼ miles from the scene as the crow flies and 3/8 mile by road. [The blacksmith shop was on the south side of present day Mountain Road near the home of Mrs. Maria Baldwin-whose husband, Joseph, had built the home for her on or near the Revolutionary site of the blacksmith shop] (Peck, 1913)

Neither witnessed a crime. They both testified to witnessing the hasty retreat of two men leaving Wilbraham near the scene of the crime. (Trial Proceedings, 1806)

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The jury delivered a guilty verdict after deliberating less than an hour and Judge Sedgewick delivered the court's decision, "...there to be hung by the neck until you are dead...May God Almighty Have Mercy on Your Soul." (Camposeo, 1978)

As devout Irish Catholics, the men summonsed Father John Cheverus of South Boston to attend to them spiritually and the first Catholic Mass to be performed in Northampton, possibly in all of Western MA, was held at the jail.

Although Northampton had only 2,500 residents in 1806, 15,000 people assembled on June 5, 1806 to watch the men hung at the Gallows Plains (the old main entrance to the Northampton State Hospital). They pleaded their innocence to the gathering crowd until their day was done.

Domenic Daly proclaimed his last dying words in writing: "We solemnly swear we are perfectly Innocent of the Crime for which we suffer ...we blame no one; we forgive everyone; we submit to our fate as being the will of the almighty; and beg him to be merciful to us ..." (Terry, 1806)

A 21-stanza poem was written as a ballad in tribute to this event. The murder of Marcus Lyon was the only murder to have occurred in Wilbraham's 234 years. The event contributed significantly to the town's folklore and history, just as the story of Timothy Mirick, who was bitten by a rattlesnake and died up on Wilbraham Mountain had.

Undocumented folklore holds that Marcus Lyon's real killer delivered a deathbed confession. The uncle of Laertes Fuller, the prosecutor's 13-year-old key witness, was said to have succumbed to his guilt in the eleventh hour, just prior to his death.

There was never any mention of an appeal offered to Daly and Halligan, or a judicial review of their death sentence. Daly and Halligan were posthumously granted a full pardon by Governor Michael Dukakis in 1984.

Primary and Secondary Sources

1. Excerpt from Chauncey E. Peck, *The History of Wilbraham, Massachusetts; prepared in connection with the celebration of the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the incorporation of the town, June 15, 1913* (Wilbraham, MA, 1913) 183-189.
2. James M. Camposeo, "Anti-Catholic Prejudice in Early New England: The Daley-Halligan Murder Trail" *Historic Journal of Western Massachusetts* vol. 6, no. 2 (1978): 5-17.
3. <http://www.historic-northampton.org>
4. Hon. Robert Sullivan "The Murder Trial of Halligan and Daley-Northampton, Massachusetts, 1806" in *Massachusetts Law Quarterly* vol. XLIX, no. 3 (1964): 211-224.
5. Melvin G. Williams, "The Ballad of Marcus Lyon: The Story Lives On" in *New York Folklore*, Vol. 14, nos. 1-2 (Winter-Spring 1988): 123-131
6. *History of Wilbraham*, by Charles L. Merrick (1963)