

Wilbraham, Massachusetts

Massachusetts is a special place for the history of our nation; from the landing of the Pilgrims in Plimouth to the battles of the Revolutionary War in Lexington, Concord and Bunker and Breed's Hill. The birthplace of many of our founding fathers, Massachusetts has served as a focal point for the discovery, creation and preservation of our country and our democratic way of life.

The oldest building in our country is located in the historic North End of Boston. Boston, as well as many of its neighboring communities, serve as host to many historic homes and buildings. Through the restoration and study of these structures, one can almost rebuild the history of our State as if these buildings were giant pieces in a life-size historical puzzle.

Every city and town in Massachusetts probably has a few buildings or structures that serve to support the historical development of that town which in the end supports the historical development of our State and country. In the interests of cultural preservation, it is very important that each community attempt to identify and restore these structures to strengthen our ability to honor and keep safe our heritage. Although Boston is the capital and heart of Massachusetts, many towns and cities have historical significance and all have

contributed in some way or another to the development of our State's and country's character.

Wilbraham, Massachusetts which is located eighty one miles southwest of Boston is no exception. Originally part of the city of Springfield, Wilbraham was first known as the Outward Commons. It wasn't until 1731 that the first settler, Nathaniel Hitchcock, moved here permanently. Not long thereafter, more families decided to make this area of Springfield their home. "By 1741, the population numbered some 30 families, and the area now Wilbraham and Hampden (approximately) was established as the Fourth Precinct of Springfield" (www.wilbraham.com,1997). Wilbraham continued to operate as a section of Springfield until 1763. At that time the General Court agreed with a petition that Wilbraham become its own distinct town.

Life in Wilbraham was agricultural in nature and remained mostly tranquil and uneventful until the year 1805. It was in this year that a most unfortunate occurrence happened that brought much attention to this area. It was on November 9th of this year that twenty-three year old Marcus Lyon of Woodstock, Connecticut was murdered in the town. This incident would eventually cause unrest among the people of Western Massachusetts. Unbeknownst to many, this murder would set into motion a series of controversial social, political and religious actions that would disrupt this tranquil area of the State.

The Murder of Marcus Lyon

On the afternoon of November 9, 1805, a bridled and saddled horse was found wandering the streets of Wilbraham. It was not until the next day, when no one claimed the horse, did the townspeople begin

to fear foul play. The body of Marcus Lyon was found the evening of November 10th. He had been pistol whipped about the head and shot in the upper torso. His body was found in the Chicopee River weighed down with stones.

The body of Marcus Lyon was taken to Sikes Tavern on the corner of Maple and Chapel Streets. There an inquest was formed. The sheriff questioned nearby townspeople to obtain information on who may have committed this crime. From the witnesses' accounts, it was determined that two men dressed as sailors were seen leaving Wilbraham at a quick pace. These men were seen traveling behind Marcus Lyon on the Turnpike Road (Old Bay Road) in Wilbraham. (Merrick, 1963)

The two men were Dominic Daley and James Halligan. Daley and Halligan were Irish, Catholic seamen from South Boston. Both were traveling through town on their way to catch a ferry in Connecticut in hopes of reaching their final destination of New York. These two men were tracked by a posse to the Cos Cob landing section of Greenwich Connecticut. They were arrested and taken back to Springfield. Daley and Halligan were then moved to Northampton, Massachusetts to await trial. Northampton served as the seat for the circuit of the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts. (Merrick, 1963)

Their trial began on April 24, 1806 and lasted only one day. The trial was presided over by the Honorable Justices Theodore Sedgwick and Samuel Sewall. The case was prosecuted by the Attorney General of the Commonwealth James Sullivan and Special Prosecutor John Hooker. Daley and Halligan were assigned a defense team of four lawyers, headed by Francis Blake of Worcester. This defense team was appointed two days before the trial began. Not one of the lawyers on

the defense team was afforded the opportunity to visit the scene of the crime. (Camposeo, 1978)

The prosecution presented twenty four witnesses. Although all testified seeing Daley and Halligan in the vicinity of the murder, no one actually witnessed this occurrence. The key testimony for the prosecution was a thirteen year old boy named, Laertes Fuller. After the prosecution presented its case, the defense had no witnesses to call. Francis Blake, lead attorney for the defense, addressed the jury for just over three hours. When he was finished, it was approximately ten o'clock that evening. The jury deliberated for less than one hour before returning a verdict of guilty. (Camposeo, 1978)

Judge Sedgwick delivered the decision of the court. Finding them guilty, the judge declared "...there to be hung by the neck until you are dead, and that your bodies be dissected and anatomized. May God Almighty Have Mercy on Your Soul." (Camposeo, 1978)

The date of execution was set for June 5, 1806. Daley and Halligan were hung in the Gallows Plains, which is today the main entrance to the Northampton State Hospital. "Although the population of Northampton was only about 2500 in 1806, 15,000 persons assembled in the town on June 5, 1806 to view the hanging of Daley and Halligan." (Camposeo, 1978).

Significance of Marcus Lyon Murder to Western Massachusetts

If viewed superficially, the Marcus Lyon murder may appear to be somewhat insignificant when compared to other crimes of this nature. This event, however, was significant to the town of Wilbraham as well as Western Massachusetts in more than a few ways. First, the

murder of Marcus Lyon was the only murder to have taken place in the town of Wilbraham in its 234 year existence. This fact alone makes this murder significant to the town's history, folklore, and culture.

It appears as if many significant events in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were marked by the writing of ballads.

Ballads appear to be a way of documenting a historically significant event while also contributing to the field of poetry and music.

Wilbraham, Massachusetts was blessed with two famous ballads. The first recounted the story of Timothy Mirick who was bitten by a rattlesnake and died. The other ballad gave tribute to Marcus Lyon after his murder. So the Marcus Lyon murder also had an impact on the arts as a 21 stanza poem written in tribute to this event. Wilbraham, an otherwise quiet community, has made a significant contribution to the poetry that has evolved from the Western part of the State.

Another impact of this murder is the presence of a predominant societal prejudice against Irish Catholics. This might possibly be the first occurrence of this in Western Massachusetts. The widespread immigration of Irish Catholics to Boston, Massachusetts no doubt had a negative impact on the social and economic environment of this area. Blatant discrimination against these newcomers to America had become commonplace in the Eastern part of the State. As Wilbraham and many other communities of Western Massachusetts were predominately agricultural in nature, as well as some distance from Boston, immigration to this area was limited. Although the Western part of the state had not directly experienced this heavy influx of Irish immigrants, they were most likely aware of its impact due to close political and social connections to the State capital. It is quite possible that Daley and

Halligan served as scapegoats for the murder of Marcus Lyon due to their symbolic representation of the "plague" that would eventually infest the predominantly Protestant, Brahmin societies of Western Massachusetts.

The prosecution of Daley and Halligan as a result of a capital offense is another example of the controversial issue of capital punishment in the state of Massachusetts. Although undocumented, local folklore accounts for a deathbed confession from the actual murderer of Marcus Lyon. Coincidentally, this eleventh hour confession came from the uncle of Laertes Fuller, the prosecution's key witness. (Camposeo, 1978). There is no mention in any of the documentation of this murder of an appeal or judicial review of the sentence of death. Today, the appeal of a capital offense is automatic in the State of Massachusetts. This case clearly stands as yet another example of the controversy that surrounds capital murder cases - certainly a notorious one for this time as well as for this State. Due to these reasons and possibly some present-day political ones, Daley and Halligan were granted a full pardon from Governor Michael Dukakis in 1984.

Ironically, the trial of Daley and Halligan represents the indoctrination of Catholicism west of the Connecticut River. While awaiting their day of execution, Daley and Halligan had written a letter to Father John Cheverus of South Boston. The purpose of the letter was to request Father Cheverus' presence in Northampton as the convicted Catholics feared their last words being spoken by Protestants. Fr. Cheverus made the journey from Boston to Northampton so he could offer Daley and Halligan religious counsel as well as the sacraments of Confession, Eucharist and Last Rites. Held in the Northampton jail

house, this was the first Catholic Mass performed in Northampton and quite possibly Western Massachusetts. Interestingly, Fr. John Cheverus later served as Bishop of Boston and was then called to France by the Pope and eventually became Cardinal Jean Le Fevre de Cheverus of Bordeaux. A residence hall at Boston College is named in his honor. (Donovan, 1997)

Significance of the Blacksmith Shop to the Marcus Lyon Murder:

As one can see, the murder of Marcus Lyon and the subsequent trial of Dominic Daley and James Halligan is very significant to the history of Wilbraham, Northampton and the Western Massachusetts region. Preserving the memory of this event and any historical artifacts from this case is crucial to honoring the heritage and folklore of this area.

There are only two structures still standing today which have a connection to this historical event. The courthouse in Northampton and a blacksmith shop in Wilbraham. The blacksmith shop in Wilbraham was part of some key testimony in the trial. Two separate witnesses specifically mention this structure in their accounts of the occurrences on that fateful day. This testimony is worth mentioning as it gives credence to the authenticity of this building and the historical value of this blacksmith shop.

Both witnesses were present in the blacksmith shop which was located near the scene of the crime. The first witness, Thomas Glover, (a worker and possibly owner of the blacksmith shop) presented the following testimony during the trial:

"On the ninth of November, I was at work at a blacksmith's shop opposite Sikes' or Calkins' and saw a man pass who had on a mixed colored homemade great coat - about an hour after, I saw two men walking very fast to the westward - They had brown great coats on and one of them had a bundle and walked much faster than the other could conveniently - he now and then ran a few steps and hopped to keep up." (Proceedings of the Trial, 1806).

The other key testimony was offered from witness, Jeremy Bliss: "On the ninth of November I was at the blacksmith's shop of Thomas Glover in Wilbraham - While I was there I saw a man pass by westward with a flock of sheep - Soon after, I saw two men passing in the same direction - They walked very fast-Their faces I could not see." (Proceedings of the Trial, 1806). Bliss was also a member of the posse who captured Halligan and Daley at Cos Cob landing in Greenwich Connecticut.

A tavern was also mentioned in their testimony as a reference point to where the blacksmith shop was located. The site of the Sikes tavern is on the north side of Maple Street; at the time of the murder it was called the Original Boston Road. The History of Wilbraham by Chauncey Peck makes reference to this tavern: "On the north side of the street. Two houses owned by H.W. Cutler. They were built in 1877 by the late Henry Cutler. This is practically the site of the old Sikes tavern of colonial times. Marcus Lyons body was left here, and the inquest was held here, when the tavern was managed by a Mr. Calkins." (Peck, 1913).

The Peck history also makes reference to the plot of land and the actual blacksmith shop itself: "On the south side (referring to present-

day Mountain Road). Home of Mrs. Maria Baldwin. House built by her husband, Joseph Baldwin on the site of the Glover tavern. The barn stands on, or near the site of a Revolutionary blacksmith shop, probably the one where several witnesses observed the movements of Halligan and Daly, murderers of Marcus Lyon." (Peck, 1913).