Murder and Women in 19th-Century America
Trial Accounts in the Yale Law Library
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An exhibition curated by

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Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale Law School
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Emma Molina Widener retired in December 2014 after twenty years teaching college Spanish at the University of Texas, Austin Community College, the University of New Haven, Yale University, and most recently at Southern Connecticut State University. Her bachelor’s degree is in political science and public administration from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. From the University of Texas at Austin she has a master’s in library science, a Certificate of Advanced Study in Latin American libraries & archives, a master’s in Latin American Studies, and A.B.D. in Spanish literature. She worked as a librarian at El Colegio de Mexico and at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México before going to the Office of the President of Mexico, where she was in charge of the Presidential Library.

Michael Widener is the Rare Book Librarian at the Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale Law School, and is on the faculty of the Rare Book School, University of Virginia. He was previously Head of Special Collections at the Tarlton Law Library, University of Texas at Austin. He has a bachelor’s degree in journalism and a master’s in library & information science, both from the University of Texas at Austin.

Unless otherwise noted, all quotations in the descriptions are from:


In 19th-century America, cheap pamphlets disseminated all sorts of popular culture to a mass audience, everything from religion and politics to sex and violence. Publishers understood that, like today, sensationalism sells. Murder trials provided sensational content, and especially murder trials where women were the victims or the accused.

Thomas McDade’s *Annals of Murder*, covering murder trials up to 1900, lists 1,055 murder trial publications from the 19th century. For the period up to 1860, Morris Cohen’s more comprehensive *Bibliography of Early American Law* lists over a thousand murder trial titles, more than half of all criminal trials and more than all civil trials combined. Most are from the northeast U.S., where the publishing industry and its biggest markets were located.

In looking through these pamphlets, one can’t help but notice the parallels with today’s prime-time TV programming. Indeed, some of them are fiction in disguise. They are a rich resource for studying popular culture and the history of the book, as well as legal history. Trials involving women are especially valuable for the study of 19th-century gender roles.

Perhaps no genre of 19th-century legal literature is better served by research tools than murder trials. McDade’s *Annals of Murder* and Cohen’s *Bibliography of Early American Law* provide superb indexes and colorful descriptions, as you can see from our captions. Online databases such as Gale’s *Making of Modern Law: Trials* and HeinOnline’s *World Trials* enable full-text searching.

*Emma Molina Widener*

*Michael Widener*
“To bookmen dealing with the literature of American crime, one reference work is of towering importance: Thomas McDade’s bibliography, *The Annals of Murder*. Even in the wider field of Americana, its value can scarcely be minimized. Indeed, so well conceived and executed is it, and so engaging in its own right, that it might fairly be said to be one of the finest genre bibliographies in American book collecting.”

– Patterson Smith, “Thomas McDade and *The Annals of Murder*”

“[My wife’s] comment on seeing the draft of the manuscript perhaps best characterizes this work: ‘It doesn’t have much plot, but what a cast of characters!’”

When Sarah Cornell was found hanging from the frame of a haystack in Tiverton, Rhode Island, it might easily have been called suicide but for a note she had left in her bandbox saying, ‘If I should be missing, enquire of the Rev. Mr. Avery, of Bristol, - he will know where I am.’ This was the beginning of the Reverend’s troubles and one of the most famous nineteenth-century cases.” – McDade, Annals of Murder

“During Avery’s trial, the paternity of the victim’s unborn child was an issue. In spite of considerable evidence against him, Avery was acquitted, and the case gave rise to many publications – a few being objective accounts, but most with a bias either for or against Avery.” – Cohen, Bibliography of Early American Law

“A typical product of Barclay in purple prose, long after the event.” – McDade, Annals of Murder

Unidentified report of the Ephraim Avery trial, including woodcut illustration of the haystack were Sarah Cornell’s body was found. Caption on page [5]: Trial of the Rev. Ephraim K. Avery. Library’s copy lacks all before page [5] and all after page 38. Bound with: Ephraim K. Avery, Explanation of the circumstances connected with the death of Sarah Maria Cornell (Providence: W.S. Clark, 1834). McDade 38; BEAL 12299.
The trial of Robert Bush for the murder of Sally Bush, his wife: who was found guilty and sentenced to be hung at Springfield, Nov. 14th, 1828, but committed suicide on the 12th (Springfield, Mass., 1828). McDade 151.

“Bush killed his wife with a shotgun at Westfield, Massachusetts, while apparently dosed with opium. He used a mixture of tobacco and opium to kill himself in jail.” – McDade, *Annals of Murder*
"Clough was infatuated with Mrs. Hamilton, a widow who did not return his affection. In a fit of frustration he stabbed her to death. The case attracted wide attention at the time, as is evidenced by the various pamphlets." – McDade, *Annals of Murder*
The Manheim tragedy: a complete history of the double murder of Mrs. Garber & Mrs. Ream, with the only authentic life and confession of Alexander Anderson (Lancaster, Pa.: H.A. Rockafield, 1858). McDade 7; BEAL 12274.

“The prisoners, Anderson and Henry Richards, were chimney sweepers, one a negro, the other ‘a mulatto speaking the German language,’ who, while drunk, tried to get money from their victims; then in a struggle, knocked them in sensible, raped them, and cut their throats. A convincing piece of evidence was the splash of blood on Anderson’s trousers which matched the rest of the stains on a shoe he left at the scene of the crime.” – McDade, Annals of Murder

“This is ‘true confession’ or more significantly, ‘authentic African American autobiography.’ Possibly unique in American crime literature of the period, Alexander Anderson provided the publisher, H. A. Rockafield, with an account of his life, and confession, as he wanted it told, and did so by legal contract ... The signed, sealed agreement is reproduced in the publisher’s foreword, as is a detailed statement about the authenticity of the account.” – Robert H. Rubin Books (June 2013)

“Though Rosenzweig was charged with murder, the case is actually one of abortion. He was found guilty of manslaughter, and there is a brief report of the trial.” – McDade, Annals of Murder

“A rare, typically lurid production of the Barclay Company, which developed a cottage industry for titillating true crime pamphlets. This one takes place in and near Stratford, Connecticut. It is the story of a beautiful woman’s love gone wrong. ... Neighbors heard the final screams of Rose and, as they exclaimed, ‘It was no owl that we heard last night. It was the death cry of Rose Ambler.’ Much material is printed on the dramatic testimony of witnesses, and the investigation and details of the crime.” – David M. Lesser Books (Mar. 2010)
The beautiful victim of the Elm City: being a full, fair, and impartial narrative of all that is known of the terrible fate of the trusting and unfortunate Jennie E. Cramer (New York: M.J. Ivers & Co., 1881). McDade 666.

“This is a New Haven, Connecticut, case in which Jennie Cramer was found dead, face down in water. [This work goes] only as far as the coroner’s charge against Malley. He was cleared and the death may have been accidental. Edmund Pearson [Dime Novels, Boston 1929] credits this case with starting the famous series of dime novels in which was introduced one of the most celebrated detectives of paperback fiction: Old Cap Collier.” – McDade, Annals of Murder

“Had a thunderbolt from a cloudless sky dashed to fragments the noblest elm in the City of New Haven, it could not have so startled the inhabitants as did the announcement that a young lady of their own acquaintance had probably been cruelly outraged, and either done to death in a most fiendish manner, or else driven to take her own life to drown the recollection of the barbarous treatment she had received from two reputed respectable citizens.” – Preface
Poor Mary Stannard! A full and thrilling story of the circumstances connected with her murder: history of the monstrous Madison crime (New Haven: Stafford Printing Co., 1879). McDade 449: “This work covers only the preliminary hearing.”

“Mary Stannard was a servant girl who worked for the Reverend’s family. She had told several friends that she was pregnant by Hayden and tried to make plans for an abortion, although it would seem from the evidence that she was not really pregnant. She arranged to meet Hayden in a field where she went to pick berries and where she was found with her throat cut. Hayden was arrested but was released after a hearing. When arsenic was found in the girl’s stomach he was rearrested and tried, but the jury disagreed and he was released. A very interesting case.” – McDade, Annals of Murder

“This account has only the testimony of Hayden and his wife and part of the closing speeches.” – McDade, Annals of Murder
Trial of Herbert Hiram Hayden for the murder of Mary Stannard: clippings from newspapers of 1879-1880. Scrapbook of clippings from New Haven and New York City newspapers collected by Professor William Henry Brewer of the Sheffield Scientific School, 1879-1880. One of two scrapbooks on the Stannard murder in the collection.
The sad case of Mrs. Kate Southern! The beautiful, virtuous Georgia wife, who, being maddened to insanity by the outrageous taunts of a bad woman who had enticed her husband away, killed her (Philadelphia, Pa.: Old Franklin Pub. House, 1878). McDade 894.

“This actual case arose from the murder of Narcissa Canart in Picken, Georgia. Public sentiment was unusually high and favored the defendant. This work is a mixture of fact and fiction.” – McDade, Annals of Murder
Life and confession of Ann Walters, the female murderess; also the execution of Enos G. Dudley, at Haverhill, N.H., May 23d, 1849; to which is added the confession of Mary Runkle, who was executed for murder ([Boston?]: Printed for the proprietor, 1850). McDade 1036; BEAL 4189.

“The Walters item is undoubtedly fictitious, reporting a dozen murders. The Dudley case, a wife murder, seems genuine. The Runkle case is reported in Life and Confession of Mary Runkle [a first-person recital that sounds like fiction].” – McDade, Annals of Murder

“These accounts of the criminal activities (including several murders) and the execution of Ann Walters are generally considered to be fictitious. The accompanying accounts of other murders seem more credible, but may also be fictitious.” – Cohen, Bibliography of Early American Law
"An unusual case at Goosecreek, South Carolina, in which the wife’s lover murdered her husband outside the house and put the body in bed with the wife who attempted to conceal the crime. He was convicted and hanged. She, with Southern consideration for womankind, was acquitted." – McDade, *Annals of Murder*
Trial of Mrs. Margaret Howard, for the murder of Miss Mary Ellen Smith, her husband’s paramour, in Cincinnati, on the 2d of February last (Cincinnati, Ohio: [copyright by E.E. Barclay], 1849. McDade 490; BEAL 12721.

“Mrs. Howard stabbed her husband’s mistress to death. She was acquitted on the ground of insanity.” – McDade, Annals of Murder
Trial, conviction, and confession of Mary E. Thorn, who was sentenced to be hanged at Portsmouth, Va., November 28th, 1853, for the murder of Thomas Brady and family (Norfolk, Va.: [William C. Murdock], 1853). McDade 980; BEAL 5197. “Written at her request and according to her dictation, and prepared by the publisher, William C. Murdock.”

“According to this work Thorn was a servant girl who poisoned Brady, his wife, and four children by putting laudanum in their coffee. It appears to be a fictional case, although some of the reported evidence sounds real. There are, however, two other editions of this same work in which the subject is Mary B. Thorn and Portsmouth becomes Portsmouth. In one the date of execution changes to May 17, 1854, and in the other the date is December 22, 1854.” – McDade, Annals of Murder
“The Carsons had been married nine years when John Carson left home in 1810. Not having heard from him for two years, his wife married Smith. Carson returned and, in trying to dispossess Smith of his wife and home, was shot by Smith. The judge practically directed Smith’s conviction and he was hanged. Mrs. Carson, who was a rugged individual in her own right, tried to kidnap the governor to save Smith. After his execution she joined a gang of counterfeiters and subsequently died in prison.” – McDade, *Annals of Murder*
The life and confessions of Mrs. Henrietta Robinson, the veiled murderess, who was sentenced to be hung August 3d, 1855, at Troy, New York, for the murder of Timothy Lanagan, and who is still under indictment for the murder of Miss Jane Lubin (Boston: H.B. Skinner, 1855). McDade 805; BEAL 12954.

“An unusual arsenic poisoning in Troy, New York, of Timothy Lanagan and Catherine Lubee on May 25, 1853. Mrs. Robinson gave them the poison in beer. She sat throughout her trial in a heavy veil which won for her the cognomen of ‘Veiled Murderess.’ She died in the insane asylum’ [in 1905]. – McDade, Annals of Murder

“Henrietta Robinson, apparently insane, was convicted of poisoning Timothy Lanagan and Catherine Lubee. The drama of the trial was heightened by the defendant’s erratic conduct and her wearing a veil throughout the proceedings. The death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment over defendant’s objection and her claim that she preferred death. An appeal was taken to the Supreme Court of the United States for a new trial but was denied.” – Cohen, Bibliography of Early American Law
The poison fiend! Life, crimes, and conviction of Lydia Sherman, (the modern Lucretia Borgia,) recently tried in New Haven, Conn., for poisoning three husbands and eight of her children (Philadelphia: Barclay, 1873). McDade 866. Captions in English and German.

“Lydia Sherman admitted to poisoning two husbands and six children, but the true score was probably higher for her confession is ambiguous on several other deaths. Her motives were not precisely mercenary, nor did she murder out of spite or vindictiveness. She simply found a family an inconvenience, and poison such an easy solution. ... In prison she decided to ease her conscience and confessed, to an unsuspecting world, a whole series of poisonings.” – McDade, Annals of Murder
The trial and conviction of George S. Twitchell, Jr., for the murder of Mrs. Mary E. Hill, his mother-in-law (Philadelphia: Published by Barclay & Co. ..., 1869). McDade 1010. Purchased from Charles J. Tanenbaum Fund.

“Twitchell beat his mother-in-law to death with a poker, then threw her out a second-story window to simulate an accident. His wife was acquitted of the same charge.” – McDade, *Annals of Murder*

“The Borden case still ranks as one of the great American murder cases; to repeat the essential facts seems almost unnecessary. On August 4, 1892, Andrew J. Borden and his wife Abby were hacked to death in their home in Fall River, Massachusetts. Lizzie ... was tried and acquitted for the murder of her father and stepmother. It is difficult today to read the case and conclude that Lizzie was innocent. A number of elements in the case have made it a favorite of murder fanciers ... [and] make it a popular case for study and supposition. It also provoked some anonymous scribbler to create that undying jingle which enshrines the case in American folklore:

Lizzie Borden took an axe  
And gave her Mother forty whacks;  
When she saw what she had done --  
She gave her Father forty-one!

-- McDade, *Annals of Murder*

Abstract of *The Phillips History of Fall River* (1944-46).


A reconstruction of the Lizzie Borden trial, using testimony from edited transcripts of the trial, and during which the reader can assume the roles of judge and juror.
Emeline Houseman was the wife of Mary Bodine’s brother. She and her child were murdered on Staten Island, New York, and their house was burned. Bodine was reported to have sold articles stolen from the house. She was tried three times – resulting in a disagreement in Richmond County, a conviction in New York County which was reversed, and finally an acquittal in Orange County. The case made Mrs. Bodine so notorious that [P.T.] Barnum had a wax figure of her in his New York museum. This work is devoted chiefly to her earlier life.” – McDade, *Annals of Murder*
The early life and complete trial of Mary, alias Polly Bodine, for the murder of Emeline Houseman and her child (New-York, 1846). Back cover.
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