SYNOPSIS OF THE AVERY/CORNELL MURDER CASE

On December 21, 1832, John Durfee discovered the body of a young woman hanging from the pole of a haystack on his farm in Tiverton, Rhode Island. A local Methodist minister identified the victim as Sarah M. Cornell, a "factory girl" who attended his church and who had come to the area only a few months ago to work in nearby Fall River, Massachusetts. Cornell, it turned out, was pregnant, and letters in her trunk suggested that another Methodist minister, Ephraim K. Avery of Bristol, Rhode Island (a married man with several children), was the father of her child. A jury of local citizens, called together by the coroner to conduct an inquest, initially ruled the death a suicide. But additional evidence caused them to change their verdict to homicide. A second search of Cornell's belongings had turned up a scribbled note dated December 20th: "If I should be missing enquire of the Rev Mr Avery of Bristol he will know where I am . . . S M Cornell."

While the coroner's jury took steps to revise its verdict, John Durfee and a companion set off for Bristol to see to Avery's arrest. The local Justices of the Peace (John Howe and Levi Haile) refused to extradite Avery to Tiverton and insisted that a hearing on the charges be conducted in Bristol. In the meantime, prominent citizens of Fall River called a meeting of the community, at which a committee was formed to gather evidence and aid the prosecution in its efforts. The Fall River committee's assistance proved to be of little avail, however, because Justices Howe and Haile determined that there was not sufficient evidence to link Avery to the crime. On January 7, 1833, they set the minister free.

Perhaps because he feared for his life at the hands of outraged citizens, Avery fled town and went into hiding in New Hampshire. The Fall River committee immediately sprang into action. On the basis of what was claimed to be new evidence, the committee secured a second warrant for Avery's arrest, tracked him down in hiding, and brought him back to Rhode Island to stand trial before the state's Supreme Court in Newport. The trial, which began in early May, 1833, and lasted for approximately a month, attracted national attention. The prosecution presented a mass of circumstantial evidence connecting Avery with the murder. The defense, aided by both the manpower and wealth of the Methodist organization, presented an equally massive body of evidence aimed at demolishing the character of the victim and reviving the possibility that she had in fact committed suicide. In the end, members of the jury found the arguments of Avery's skillful attorneys sufficiently convincing that they rendered a verdict of not guilty. Less than two weeks later the Methodist church issued its own report, completely exonerating Avery of the charges of murder and adultery.

Popular outrage at the outcome of the trial made it impossible for Avery to continue to live and preach in the area. In October he moved to upstate New York. A couple of years later, he resigned from the ministry and moved to Ohio where he took up farming. He died in 1869.

REQUIRED READINGS:

Students are expected to purchase the following books at the College Bookstore:
Catherine Williams, *Fall River: An Authentic Narrative*.
Nancy Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood*.
Melton McLaurin, *Celia, A Slave*.

The principal readings for the course are the primary-source documents in a packet available from the History Department. All of the required secondary readings are on electronic reserve at http://tries.brynmawr.edu/coursepage.asp?cid=208 Bookmark it! *Supplemental readings* are listed each week for students who wish to dig deeper into the historical context for these events and topics. Students expecting to produce outstanding work in the course (and a corresponding grade) should read the supplemental readings and incorporate them into their papers.

Two other books about contemporary murder scandals include:
I have ordered a handful of copies of these two books at the Bookstore for your optional reading, if you so desire.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

Students are expected to read all of the assigned documents and secondary materials carefully each week, and to attend and actively participate in class discussions. Grades will be based on performance in class as well as on the paper assignments.

Students are required to attend all classes for the successful completion of the course. Unexcused absences will result in a lower final grade. Discussion meetings are an essential feature of this course. Failure to attend any discussion meeting (without permission from the instructor) may result in the student being automatically dropped from the class.

PAPER ASSIGNMENTS: (approximately eight (double space, typewritten) pages.)

1. Write a short biography of Sarah M. Cornell. Your biography should not be merely a chronology of the events of her life. Rather, you should be careful to set your narrative in the context of the changes that were occurring in the larger environment in which Cornell lived and worked.

2. After the jury acquitted Avery of murder and the Methodist Church declared him innocent of all wrongdoing, there was a tremendous popular outcry. Why? Why did the case evoke such a high level of passion? Why did both sides tend to view events in conspiratorial terms? Write an historical essay that explains and interprets this social drama.

3. Write a story or play about some aspects of the Cornell/Avery murder case. Append to your account a short (two-three page) discussion of the difference between this assignment and the previous two. Did you use the historical materials in a different way for this assignment? Did your thought processes change? Which assignment(s) do you feel gave you the most insight into the period's history?

In addition, there will be a short written assignment on the readings for week 7. See week 7 below for details.

PAPERS MUST BE HANDED IN BEFORE CLASS BEGINS ON THE DATE DUE. NO EXTENSIONS WILL BE GRANTED.

I will be happy to read drafts of the papers prior to the due date. Please give me some advanced warning and allow for 24-48 hours before I can return the draft to you.
OUTLINE OF THE LECTURES AND READING ASSIGNMENTS

WEEK 1:

Jan. 21 -- Introduction:

Jan. 23 -- Lecture: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EARLY REPUBLIC AND THIS CASE

Readings:

WEEK 2:

Jan. 28 -- Lecture: THE CHANGING NATURE OF WOMEN'S WORK

Jan. 30 -- Reading Assignments:

Documents:
2. Gurdon Williams, Brief and Impartial Narrative of the Life of Sarah Maria Cornell, pp. 1-16.
4. "New Song of the Factory Girl." (Broadside/Ballad)
5. "The Factory Girl." (Broadside/Ballad)

Readings:
3. Thomas Dublin, Women at Work, ch. 3 (excerpted).

Supplemental Readings:

WEEK 3:

Feb. 4 -- Lecture: GENDER AND SEX IN THE EARLY REPUBLIC

Feb. 6 -- Reading Assignments:

Documents:
1. Luke Drury, Report of the Examination, pp. 3-6, 13 (Harriet Hathaway) - 16 (Elijah Cole), 39 (Mary Ide) - 42 (Samuel Boyd), 43-44 (Sarah Honey only), 45-46 (Abraham Merrill only), 49-64.
2. Benjamin F. Hallett, A Full Report of the Trial, pp. 65 (Harriet Hathaway) - 69 (Lucy Hathaway), 72 (Amy Durfee only), 78 (Elijah Cole) - 79 (Ruth Lawton), 85 (Grindall Rawson) - 87 (Benjamin F. Sanders), 110-31 (Charles Hodges), 134 (Abraham Merrill) - 140, 142 (Abby Hathaway) - 143 (Josiah H. Ormsby).

Readings:

*Supplemental Readings:*

**WEEK 4:**

Feb. 11 -- Lecture: WOMEN AND THE SECOND GREAT AWAKENING

Feb. 13 -- Reading Assignments:

*Documents:*

*Readings:*

*Supplemental Readings:*
1. Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class*, ch. 2.

**WEEK 5:**

Feb. 18 -- Lecture: MENTAL ILLNESS AND THE ASYLUM MOVEMENT

Feb. 20 -- Reading Assignments:

*Documents: (READ AGAIN)*
1. Drury, *Report of the Examination*, pp. 39 (Mary Ide) - 41 (Lydia Pervere), 43-44 (Sarah Honey only), 45-46 (Abraham Merrill only).
   READ ALSO

*Readings:*

*Supplemental Readings:*

**WEEK 6:**

Feb. 25 -- Lecture: SEDUCTION THEME IN EARLY AMERICAN CULTURE

*Supplemental Readings:*
Feb. 27 -- **FIRST PAPER DUE IN CLASS. (DISCUSSION)**

**WEEK 7:**

Mar. 4 -- Lecture: **MURDERS & INTERPRETING AMERICAN SOCIAL HISTORY**

Mar. 6 -- Reading Assignments:

**Readings:**
1. Melton McLaurin, *Celia, A Slave*.

**Written Assignment:** Write a two-to-three page essay critically evaluating the social meaning of murder as interpreted by these three historians. Due on Thursday, Mar. 6.

**SPRING VACATION: MARCH 11 & 13**

**WEEK 8:**

Mar. 18 -- Lecture: **NEW MASCULINE IDENTITIES**

Mar. 20 -- Reading Assignments:

**Documents:**
2. Thomas F. Norris, "To the Public."
3. Deposition of Nancy Stanley.
4. Drury, *Report of the Examination*, pp. 36-37 (Joseph Merrill only), 38 (Merrill cont.).
6. "Death of Sarah M. Cornell." (Broadside/Ballad)
7. "Lines Written on the Death of Sarah M. Cornell." (Broadside/Ballad)

**Readings:**

**Supplemental Readings:**

**WEEK 9:**

Mar. 25 -- Lecture: **THE METHODIST COMMUNITY**

Mar. 27 -- Reading Assignments:

**Documents:**
Readings:

Supplemental Readings:

WEEK 10:

Apr. 1 -- Lecture: THE PARANOID STYLE OF AMERICAN POLITICS

Apr. 3 -- Reading Assignments:

Documents:
1. Report of a Committee of the Methodist Episcopal Church, pp. 3-12.
3. (Newport) *Rhode Island Republican* (November 6, 1833).

Readings:

Supplemental Readings:

WEEK 11:

Apr. 8 -- Lecture: JUSTICE AND PUBLIC OPINION

Apr. 10 -- Reading Assignments:

Documents:

Readings:

Supplemental Readings:

WEEK 12:

Apr. 15 -- Lecture: THE EMERGENCE OF THE PROFESSIONS
SECOND PAPER DUE IN CLASS.
Apr. 17 -- Reading Assignments:

Documents:
2. Drury, Report of the Examination, pp. 6-9, (Elisha Hicks), 12 (Dr. Foster Hooper only), 33-34 (Lucy-Ann Borden).
3. Hallett, A Full Report of the Trial, pp. 30 (Dr. Foster Hooper) - 43 (Dr. Thomas Wilbur), 47-49 (Susanna Borden), 52-53 (Ruth Cook only), 99-109, 193-207.
4. Hallett, Supplementary Edition, pp. 10-11 (Dr. Foster Hooper only).

Readings:

Supplemental Readings:

WEEK 13:

Apr. 22 -- Lecture: A REVOLUTION IN TIME

Apr. 24 -- Reading Assignments:

Documents:
2. Hallett, Supplementary Edition, pp. 5, 8 (George Brownell) - 9 (Russell Anthony), 14 (William D. Fales only).

Readings:

WEEK 14:

Apr. 29 -- Lecture: HISTORY AND FICTION

Supplemental Readings:

May. 1 -- A Visual Tour of Fall River and Avery/Cornell Case.

Final Examination: No final exam in this course, instead students must rewrite one of their first two papers, incorporating new perspectives and interpretations from the material in the latter portion of the course. The THIRD PAPER is due anytime before the scheduled Final Exam.

Final Exam Date: _____________________________________ THIRD PAPER DUE