

Swarthmore College  
Spring 2008  
TTH 2:40-3:55pm  
Trotter 203

## History 48

Bruce Dorsey  
Trotter 214 x8095  
Office Hours: M. & W. 2:00-4:00  
T. & Th. 12:30-2:00

### MURDER IN A MILL TOWN: A WINDOW ON SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE EARLY REPUBLIC



### 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.

For a more detailed account of these events, see David Richard Kasserman, *Fall River Outrage: Life, Murder, and Justice in Early Industrial New England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986). See also, William G. McLoughlin, "Untangling the Tiverton Tragedy: The Social Meaning of the Terrible Haystack Murder of 1833," *Journal of American Culture*, 7 (Winter 1984), pp. 75-84.

## 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*.

The principal readings for the course are the primary-source documents and the secondary source readings on Blackboard. Students will print out the primary-source documents and bring them to class for every Thursday discussion. *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

## 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) will adversely affect the final grade for the course.

## 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.

This is a Writing (W) Course. We will devote attention to the craft, form, and styles of historical writing, and students will revise one of their first two papers for their final assignment (See "Final Examination" below at the bottom of this syllabus.)

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

## OUTLINE OF THE LECTURES AND READING ASSIGNMENTS

### WEEK 1:

Jan. 22 -- Introduction:

Jan. 24 -- Lecture: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EARLY REPUBLIC AND THIS CASE

#### Readings:

1. Paul Johnson, "The Modernization of Mayo Greenleaf Patch," *New England Quarterly* (1982), 488-516.
2. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun* (2001), 12-25, 278-91.
3. Jeanne Boydston, "The Woman Who Wasn't There: Women's Market Labor and the Transition to Capitalism in the United States," *Journal of the Early Republic* 16 (1996), 183-206.

### WEEK 2:

Jan. 29 -- Lecture: THE CHANGING NATURE OF WOMEN'S WORK

Jan. 31 -- Reading Assignments:

#### Documents:

1. Catherine Williams, *Fall River: A Narrative*, Preface, & pp. 3-15, 65-86, 107-08 (Letter No. 5), 167-70.
2. Gurdon Williams, *Brief and Impartial Narrative of the Life of Sarah Maria Cornell*, 1-16.
3. Orestes Brownson, "Laboring Classes," *Boston Quarterly Review* 3 (July 1840).
4. *The Lowell Offering* -- "Factory Girls," (Dec. 1840); "Letters from Susan," (June 1844); "Pleasures of Factory Life," (Dec. 1840); "The Spirit of Discontent," (1841).
5. "New Song of the Factory Girl." (Broadside/Ballad)
6. "The Factory Girl." (Broadside/Ballad)
7. Newspaper accounts: "Mr. Hallett . . .," *Fall River Weekly Recorder* (May 22, 1833); "Factory Girls," *Ibid.* (June 26, 1833); "Factory Labor," *Ibid.* (September 11, 1833).

#### Readings:

1. Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood*, 19-62.
2. Barbara Tucker, *Samuel Slater & the Origins of the American Textile Industry* (1984), 139-62.
3. Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work* (1979), ch. 3 (excerpted).

#### Supplemental Readings:

1. Thomas Bender, *Toward an Urban Vision* (1975), 19-51, 201-14.

### WEEK 3:

Feb. 5 -- Lecture: GENDER AND SEX IN THE EARLY REPUBLIC

Feb. 7 -- Reading Assignments:

#### Documents:

1. Luke Drury, *Report of the Examination*, pp. 3-6, 13 (Harriet Hathaway) - 16 (Elijah Cole), 38-39 (J. Merrill only), 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).
3. Hallett, *Supplementary Edition*, pp. 12-14 (Dr. Thomas Wilbur).
4. Hallett, *Arguments of Counsel*, pp. 25-28, 61(bottom)-70.

#### Readings:

1. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood*, 63-100.
2. John D'Emilio & Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (1988), 38-52.
3. Karen Hansen, *A Very Social Time: Crafting Community in Antebellum New England* (1994), 114-36

#### Supplemental Readings:

1. Nancy F. Cott, "Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850," in *A Heritage of Her Own* (1979), 162-181.
2. Cornelia Dayton, "Taking the Trade: Abortion and Gender Relations in an 18th-Century New England Village" *William and Mary Quarterly* 48 (1991), 19-49.
3. Clare A. Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730-1830* (2006), 309-22.

#### WEEK 4:

Feb. 12 -- Lecture: RELIGIOUS REVIVALISM (THE SECOND GREAT AWAKENING)

Feb. 14 -- Reading Assignments:

##### Documents:

1. Catherine Williams, *Fall River: A Narrative*, 68, 75-76, 101-25, 169-70.
2. G. Williams, *Brief and Impartial Narrative of the Life of Sarah Maria Cornell*, 12-14 (Letter to Eliza)
3. Letters of Sarah Hodgdon and Wealthy Page (1830); Letters of John and Elizabeth Hodgdon (1840) in Thomas Dublin, ed., *Farm to Factory: Women's Letters, 1830-60* (1981), 42-47, 49-50.

##### Readings:

1. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood*, 126-59.
2. William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings and Reform* (1978), 98-122.
3. Tucker, *Samuel Slater and the Origins of the American Textile Industry*, 163-85.
4. Susan Juster, "'In a Different Voice': Male and Female Narratives of Religious Conversion in Post-Revolutionary America," *American Quarterly* 41 (1989), 34-62.

##### Supplemental Readings:

1. Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class* (1981), ch. 2.
2. Christine Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (1997), 193-205.

#### WEEK 5:

Feb. 19 -- Lecture: MENTAL ILLNESS AND THE ASYLUM MOVEMENT

Feb. 21 -- Reading Assignments:

##### Documents: (READ AGAIN)

1. Drury, *Report of the Examination*, 39 (Mary Ide) - 41 (Lydia Pervere), 43-44 (Sarah Honey only), 45-46 (Abraham Merrill only).
2. Hallett, *A Full Report of the Trial*, 110-31 (Charles Hodge).
3. Hallett, *Arguments of Counsel*, 25-28, 61(bottom)-70.

##### READ ALSO

4. *The Lowell Offering* -- "Editorial: The Suicide," (July 1844).
5. *Report of the Trial of Abraham Prescott* (Concord, N.H., 1834), 3, 8-13, 53-54.

##### Readings:

1. David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum* (1971), 109-29, 335-38.
2. Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady* (1985), 1-17.

##### Supplemental Readings:

1. Gerald Grob, *The Mad Among Us: A History of the Care of America's Mentally Ill* (1994), ch. 2.
2. Howard I. Kushner, *American Suicide* (1991), 13-34.

#### WEEK 6:

Feb. 26 -- Lecture: SEDUCTION THEME IN EARLY AMERICAN CULTURE

##### Documents:

1. G. Williams, *Brief and Impartial Narrative of the Life of Sarah Maria Cornell*, 16-24.
2. "Maria, or the Seduction," *Philadelphia Minerva*, Mar. 4, 1797.
3. "Matilda," *The Nightingale, or A Melange de Literature* [Boston], May 17, 1796.

##### Supplemental Readings:

1. Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett* (1998), 205-29.

2. Daniel A. Cohen, "The Beautiful Female Murder Victim, ..." *Journal of Social History* 31 (1997), 277-306.

Feb. 28 -- **FIRST PAPER DUE IN CLASS. (DISCUSSION)**

#### **WEEK 7:**

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

Mar. 6 -- Reading Assignments:

##### Readings:

1. Patricia Cline Cohen, "'Unregulated Youths: Masculinity and Murder in the 1830s City.'" *Radical History Review* (1992), 33-52.
2. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (1982), ch. 17, "The Anatomy of a Wife-Killing," 462-493.
3. Karen Halttunen, *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination* (1998), ch. 4.

**Written Assignment: Write a two-to-three page essay critically evaluating the social and cultural interpretations of murder 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:

1. Catherine Williams, *Fall River: A Narrative*, 87-99.
2. Thomas F. Norris, "To the Public."
3. Deposition of Nancy Stanley.
4. Drury, *Report of the Examination*, 36-37 (Joseph Merrill only), 38 (Merrill cont.).
5. "Mr. Avery's Statement," in T. Merritt, et al., *A Vindication of the Result of the Trial*, 9-22.
6. "Death of Sarah M. Cornell." (Broadside/Ballad)
7. "Lines Written on the Death of Sarah M. Cornell." (Broadside/Ballad)
8. G. Williams, *Brief and Impartial Narrative of the Life of Sarah Maria Cornell*, 16-24.
9. Harvey Harnden, *A Narrative of the Apprehension ... of the Rev. E. K. Avery*, 1-34.
10. Samuel Woodworth, "Dr. Stramonium," from *Melodies, Duets, Trios, Songs, and Ballads* (1831)

##### Readings:

1. E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood* (1993), 10-30.
2. Bruce Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women* (2002), 14-28, 102-31.

##### Supplemental Readings:

1. Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women* (1982), ch. 1.
2. Donald M. Scott, *From Office to Profession: The New England Ministry, 1750-1850* (1978), 52-75, 169-173.

#### **WEEK 9:**

Mar. 25 -- Lecture: THE METHODIST COMMUNITY

Mar. 27 -- Reading Assignments:

##### Documents:

1. Catherine Williams, *Fall River: A Narrative*, 143-67.
2. Nathan Bangs, *A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (1838), 265-76.
3. James Porter, *An Essay on Camp Meetings* (1849), 40-67.

4. Barton Stone, *Biography of Elder Barton Stone, Written by Himself & An Apology for Camp Meetings* (1820).

Readings:

1. John H. Wigger, "Taking Heaven by Storm: Enthusiasm and Early American Methodism, 1770-1820," *Journal of the Early Republic* 14 (1994), 167-94.
2. Tucker, *Samuel Slater and the Origins of the American Textile Industry*, pp. 163-85 (Read again).

Supplemental Readings:

1. Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (1989), 49-66, 81-93.
2. Russell Richey, *Early American Methodism* (1991), 21-32.

**WEEK 10:**

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

Apr. 3 -- Reading Assignments:

Documents:

1. "The Closing Scene of the Rev. E. K. Avery's Trial," *Christian Advocate and Journal and Zion's Herald*, June 14, 1833
2. *Report of a Committee of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 3-12.
3. Aristides, *Strictures*, 3-16, 32-45, 54-70, 83-100.
4. (Newport) *Rhode Island Republican* (November 6, 1833).
5. Timothy Merritt, et al., *A Vindication of the Result of the Trial*, 23-39, 51-52, 56-74.
6. Hallett, *A Full Report of the Trial*, 33-34 (Dr. Foster Hooper).
7. Hallett, *Supplementary Edition*, 10-11 (Dr. Foster Hooper only).

Readings:

1. David Brion Davis, "Some Themes of Counter-Subversion," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (1960), 205-224.
2. Gordon S. Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style," *William and Mary Quarterly* (1982), 401-441.

Supplemental Readings:

1. Paul Goodman, *Towards a Christian Republic* (1988), 105-119; 163-92.

**WEEK 11:**

Apr. 8 -- Lecture: JUSTICE AND PUBLIC OPINION

Apr. 10 -- Reading Assignments:

Documents:

1. Catherine Williams, *Fall River: A Narrative*, 29-32, 127-142.
2. Hallett, *A Full Report of the Trial*, 4-13, 17-18
3. Hallett, *Supplementary Edition*, 25 (William Simmons) - 27 (Allen Wardwell).
4. Hallett, *Arguments of Counsel*, 4-11, 55-59.
5. Harnden, *A Narrative of the Apprehension ... of the Rev. E. K. Avery*, 34-36.
6. Newspaper accounts: (Newport) *Rhode Island Republican* (July 17, 1833) through *Pawtucket Chronicle* (August 2, 1833).
7. "A Very Bad Man" (Political Cartoon/Broadside; New York, July 1833)
8. "A Minister Extraordinary Taking Passage & Bound on a Foreign Mission to the Court of his Satanic Majesty!" (Political Cartoon/Broadside; New York, August 1833)
9. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1838), 246-76.

Readings:

1. Paul A. Gilje, *The Road to Mobocracy* (1987), 3-35, 97-112.
2. Halttunen, *Murder Most Foul*, ch. 4 (Read again).

Supplemental Readings:

1. Michael Stephen Hindus, *Prison and Plantation: Crime, Justice, and Authority in Massachusetts and South Carolina, 1767-1878* (1980), ch. 4, "Trial by Jury," 85-98.

**WEEK 12:**

Apr. 15 -- Lecture: THE EMERGENCE OF THE PROFESSIONS  
**SECOND PAPER DUE IN CLASS.**

Apr. 17 -- Reading Assignments:

Documents:

1. "Medical Evidence in the Trial of the Rev. E. K. Avery for the Murder of Sarah M. Cornell," *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* (July 3, 1833), 333-40.
2. Drury, *Report of the Examination*, 6-9, (Elisha Hicks), 12 (Dr. Foster Hooper only), 33-34 (Lucy-Ann Borden).
3. Hallett, *A Full Report of the Trial*, 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*, 10-11 (Dr. Foster Hooper only).
5. Hallett, *Arguments of Counsel*, 3-4, 17-19, 70-76, 86-87.
6. Aristides, *Strictures*, 63, 67-68, 83-86.

Readings:

1. Bernard Riznik, "The Professional Lives of Early Nineteenth Century New England Doctors," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 19 (1964), 1-16.
2. Laurel Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale* (1990), 36-71, 248-61.

Supplemental Readings:

1. Mary Roth Walsh, *"Doctors Wanted, No Women Apply": Sexual Barriers in the Medical Profession, 1835-1875* (1977), ch. 1.
2. James C. Mohr, *Abortion in America* (1978), 46-85, 274-283.

**WEEK 13:**

Apr. 22 -- Lecture: A REVOLUTION IN TIME

Apr. 24 -- Reading Assignments:

Documents:

1. Hallett, *A Full Report of the Trial*, 21, 51 (William Hamilton) – 58 (Charles Carr), 60 (Robert P. Lee) - 65, 83 (Abner Tallman) - 89 (George Davol), 132 (John W. Elliot) - 134 (Abraham Merrill), 141-53 (Samuel Palmer).
2. Hallett, *Supplementary Edition*, 5, 8 (George Brownell) - 9 (Russell Anthony), 14 (Wm. Fales only).
3. *The Lowell Offering* -- "Gold Watches," (1842).
4. Nathan Bangs, *A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, pp. 267.

Readings:

1. E.P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past and Present* (1967), 56-97.

**WEEK 14:**

Apr. 29 -- Lecture: HISTORY AND FICTION

Readings:

1. Richard Slotkin, "Fiction for the Purposes of History," *Common-Place* 1 (2000).

Supplemental Readings:

1. Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (1987), ch. 1.
2. Bryant Simon, "Facts and Fictions in the Archives," *Rethinking History* 5 (2001), 427-35.

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

**THIRD PAPER DUE IN CLASS.**

**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 revised paper is due anytime between the end of classes and May 17 at 4pm.