

Saltfleet Township was site of first woman executed for murder in Ontario

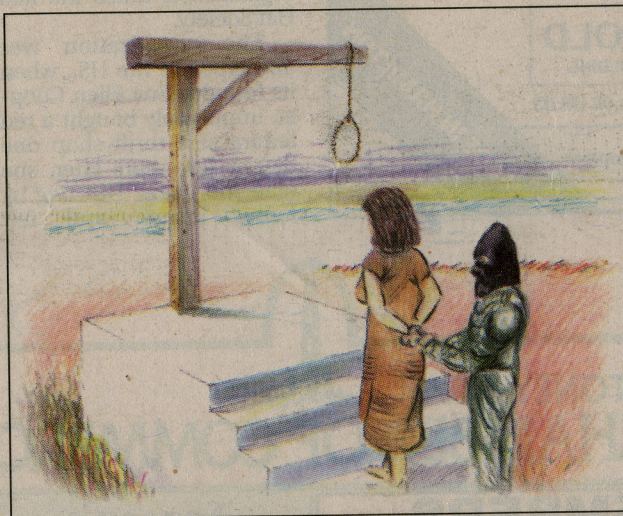
BY PADDY FITZSIMON-CHITTY
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

Inhabitants of Saltfleet Township opened their newspapers 200 hundred years ago to read of a murder in their community. The deceased was poisoned by his young wife and her lover. No, the lady was not Evelyn Dick, and the year was not as recent as that in which the infamous lady disposed of her husband. It took place nine months after the first white child was born in Scarborough and 12 years before Laura Secord took her famous trek through the woods. The year was 1801, and present day Ontario was known as Upper Canada.

The elderly victim was Loyalist Bartholomew London. He left his wife in Pennsylvania, claimed land as a United Empire Loyalist having suffered imprisonment, and settled in Canada in 1789 with his four children. At the time of his death, he had a well-cultivated farm in Saltfleet and children living nearby.

Mr. London made three grave mistakes: he married his young widowed housekeeper Mary Osborn, then pregnant; hired George Nemire, an acquaintance of his new wife, to work as a farm hand; and made a new will leaving most of his estate to Mary and her children. As in any good modern soap opera, the ingredients for disaster were in place, and it wasn't long before a love affair began, and a murder plan was hatched.

The first attempt on Mr. London's life was by bludgeoning with a shoe-hammer, resulting in a skull fracture. When that failed to kill him, the couple resorted to poisoning with vitriol (sulfuric acid). That too failed. The third and successful attempt was three doses of rat bane administered in whiskey. Death was finally achieved on February 17, 2001.



This is an artist's depiction by Lee Munn of the Aug. 17, 1801 hanging of Mary London in Saltfleet Township.

The lovers may have gotten away with murder had rumours circulating in the settlement that something was amiss, not reached a neighbouring physician. When the doctor went to Mr. London's residence, he met and recognized George Nemire as the man representing himself as Mr. Kerr of Long Point to whom he had sold a quantity of vitriol, and who had made inquiries as to the dosage necessary to poison a man. Mrs. London and Mr. Nemire were subsequently arrested.

Six months later, the population of Upper Canada was titillated with the printed proceedings of the murder trial by the editor and printer of the Niagara Herald, Mr. Silvester Tiffany. He reported that prior to the trial, the couple "reciprocally charged each other with the blame." Nemire implicated a third party whom the reporter would not name. He also stated that it was Mary London who had lured him into an adulterous affair, urged him to borrow a gun and shoot her husband, and admitted poisoning her first husband, Osborn. Mary London also implicated others.

The trial took place on August 14, 1801, and lasted eight hours. Surgeons who examined the corpse unanimously reported that in their opinion, London's death resulted from poison and not the blow to the head. Although evidence as to who administered the poison was circumstantial, the jurors delivered a verdict of guilty, and the couple were sentenced to be hung.

On returning to her cell after sentencing, Mary London exclaimed, "I am guilty, I gave the poison and knew it." She further stated that she did not know the father of her six-day-old child.

The executions took place on August 17, 1801. With the final words, "may this be a warning to you all," and praying for God to have mercy on her soul, Mary London passed from this world and into history as the first woman executed for murder in Ontario.

Paddy FitzSimon-Chitty was born and raised in Hamilton. She has a B.A. in Anthropology from McMaster University. An active volunteer for many years, she currently serves as a genealogical librarian and a Trillium Award judge. Apart from her passion for writing, her interests include: genealogy, early Ontario history, nature, gardening, and watercolour painting.