

The Doctor, the Preacher and the Body in the Barrel

When 30-year-old Louisa Phenix took sick and died in the spring of 1855, she left husband George and three young children bereft and motherless on their Millbrook farm. Her burial might have ended her story, just another tragedy of early death and orphaned youngsters, one so commonly told in the mid-19th century.

But Louisa did not rest easy. Days after her burial, someone uncovered her coffin, cut off one end of the wooden box, and dragged poor Louisa out. They cut off her head and arms and left a hatchet in the grave before apparently refilling the hole.

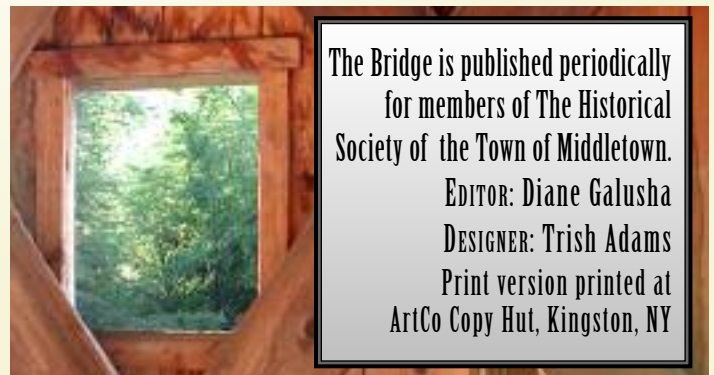
The desecration was only discovered when a woman washing in a stream (believed to be the Bull Run) at the back of the office of Dr. Aaron D. Reed smelled something foul. The stench was coming from a partially submerged barrel in which were found the remains of Louisa Phenix who had died 10 or 12 days previously, in late April.

Dr. Reed was nowhere to be found. A pocket diary (written in shorthand) belonging to Griffin Corners minister J. P. Cowles was found at the gravesite. And the head and arms of the corpse were later found in Clovesville, according to reports in the *Bloomville Mirror* and the *Delaware Gazette*, which said that Cowles had been arrested and held on \$500 bail. The charge, and the location of the cemetery were not revealed.

Cowles, the *Gazette* stated, had “commenced the study of medicine with Dr. Reed.” Perhaps this was a training



George and Louisa Phenix (Phoenix) lived on a farm off Cross Mountain Road (the crooked one), off Millbrook Rd. — 1856 Gould Map



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continued on page 2

continued from page 1

exercise? (Cadavers were commonly used by doctors and those aspiring to be doctors for study and practice, and they were sometimes supplied by grave raiders for a fee.) A resident writing to the *Mirror* about the incident, offended as much by the contamination of the water as by the ‘grave robbery,’ said the “mutilation . . . was more like the work of dogs than surgery.”

For his part, Cowles, writing on May 22 to correct ‘mis-statements’ in the *Mirror*, said he had not been studying medicine with Dr. Reed, nor did he have any connection to him. The notebook found at the grave was not 12 to 18 inches down but rather was “said to be found on top of the grave.” Lastly, the preacher asserted, the head and limbs of the unfortunate Louisa were not found in Clovesville “or any other place.”

Not exactly a full-throated denial or a loud denunciation of those besmirching his reputation.

We don’t know what became of the legal case, but Cowles carried on as a clergyman, officiating at the marriage of Chester Cook and Mary Merwin at West Shandaken (Pine Hill) on May 29, just three weeks after the incident.

We don’t know when Dr. Reed returned to town, or whether he was ever charged.

Nor do we know whether Louisa was eventually reunited with her head and arms, though we assume she was laid to rest for the second time in a new, intact coffin. But where? If she was given a headstone, no one has found or recorded it.

Research into public and family records have taught us something about the rest of the story.

Aaron DeLong Reed, born in Roxbury in 1824, was living at the Akerly Hotel in Margaretville in 1855 when he was listed as a “doctor.” The 1856 Gould map shows “Dr. D. Reed” on Walnut Street two doors up from Main Street. The directory of business people on that map also lists his brother, S(mith) W. Reed as a doctor.



J. P. Cowles was a candlemaker, a preacher, and, he claimed, a doctor. In his will he ordered that “MD” be inscribed after his name on his monument at Spring Grove Cemetery, Hartford, CT. Find-A-Grave

Smith Reed had studied medicine with his older sibling before heading to Vermont Medical College where he graduated in 1854. He returned to Margaretville to practice for a time with Aaron, before the latter, perhaps operating under a cloud of suspicion, moved to Cincinnatus, Cortland County with his wife, Mariam Hubbell Reed and their daughter Eva May. A second daughter, Ida, was born in Cortland County in 1857.

Dr. Reed served as physician to two regiments of the NY

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4 The Doctor, the Preacher and the Body in the Barrel

their two sons were reportedly left “destitute.” From then on J. P. and Hannah led separate lives.

In June 1866 he swung through Delaware County on a lecture tour, this time as a doctor who gave a series of lectures on his new discovery in “Physiological Science.” In 1870 he lived in Ottawa, IL with a boarder described as a ‘spiritual medium.’ Then he moved to Camden, Maine and later to Hartford, CT where he died in 1896.

Ten years before his passing, J. P. Cowles penned his last will and testament. In it, he directed that his casket be closed, and that “no one be allowed to see my face after I am deceased except those needing to care for my body before being placed in the casket.” He wanted “no clergyman or religious body (to) have charge of my funeral” and directed that “MD be attached to my name (on the cemetery monument) showing my profession.” In a codicil added in 1895, he bequeathed to a woman in Hartford several books, including “Spiritual Therapeutics or Divine Science,” “The Encyclopedia of Death and Life in the Spirit Worlds” and other esoteric titles.

One directive in the will remains a mystery:

“I order and direct that any sealed or closed packages that may be found among my possessions with directions on them ‘to be burned without opening’ that such disposition shall be made of them.”

What could J. P. Cowles have been hiding?

And who disturbed the eternal sleep of Louisa Phenix?



Smith Reed, Dr. Aaron’s brother, had a long and respected tenure as a local physician, and lived in a Walnut Street house that has been the residence of many physicians and dentists and still stands. Grant Collection, DCHA

This article by Diane Galusha is an expansion of one first published in the Delaware County Historical Association newsletter September 2020 written by DCHA staff member Samantha Misa.

Fifth, I order and direct that any sealed or closed packages that may be found among my possessions, with directions on them "to be burned without opening," that such disposition shall be made of them.

What was J. P. Cowles hiding by directing in his will that sealed boxes found among his belongings be burned?

As you no doubt know, our original plan for a covered-bridge styled addition to the hall on Cemetery Road was reluctantly shelved because of the anticipated price tag. After looking at many other options we decided that a more modest expansion of the hall will provide room for the archives, a small office, an accessible rest room and some display space. In early 2021 we engaged the services of engineer Paul Gossen of Vega to draw up plans for an 800-square-foot year-round addition to be named the Nicholas J. Juried History Center for the generous benefactor who has contributed \$100,000 towards the project.

This summer it became clear that, due to years of moisture from the ground, the floor in the hall is sagging in spots and has become a hazard. So, before we build

an addition, we need to fix the hall floor. The Board has opted to replace the wood floor with a concrete floor and eliminate the problem going forward. This job, to be paid from operating funds, will be done by Dean Hunter in the spring.

Meanwhile, we have watched the Building Fund grow over the past four years as donations have continued to come in from many generous contributors. Thank you! It is exciting to now be finalizing plans for the addition. We anticipate putting the project out to bid in mid-2022. It's been a slow process, but we are making progress!

Thank you, members and donors, for your patience and your continued faith in our efforts to create a History Center we can all be proud of.



Amy Taylor, an HSM trustee, enjoyed a chat with Chuck D'Imperio as he signed a copy of his book, *Unknown Museums of Upstate New York* following his presentation at the HSM annual meeting and luncheon October 23.

The Fairview Public Library garage has proven to be an excellent space to store and process our priceless collection as we make plans for a permanent archives. We have begun recording items in a database, and we are developing a library of regional and local history books.

Additions to the collection include a community quilt made by women of Arkville for the 1976 Bicentennial; more than 50 MCS and Roxbury yearbooks, a pair of slates from the Weaver Hollow school, scrapbooks pertaining to the local women's bowling league, an 1880s diary and a 1902 Margaretville village census, plus many more items.

Our friends at Nor'easters Metal Detecting Club came for the fifth straight Relic Hunt and made a very generous donation of \$5,000 to the Building Fund after searching for buried history in the Fleischmanns area.

HSM teamed up with forest historian Dr. Michael Kudish to offer a history hike in Kelly Hollow, not once, but twice due to high demand. The research that was done on the sawmill, railroad and homesteads in that area of Millbrook will be a lasting contribution to local history.

Our 7th Living History Cemetery Tour in July was

another rousing success. An amazing number of volunteers — 41 this year — made it happen and we are grateful! Our summer Jumble Sale netted more than \$1500.

We have collaborated with other historical societies and museums on Middletown-related research projects. Our website has served as the conduit for genealogy and history questions from people all over the country. They provoke research that adds to our knowledge of families in town.

In 2021 we helped facilitate the Mountain Athletic Club's installation of a historic marker in Fleischmanns — the 16th marker in Middletown — and for the third year, we sponsored a county grant to promote a rally of vintage cars in recognition of the 1903 Automobile Endurance Run along what is now NYS Route 28, the Catskill Mountains Scenic Byway.

We continue to be grateful to the Town of Middletown and Village of Margaretville for their annual support.

Thank you to Jackie Purdy who donated the hand stitched quilt for our annual raffle. It was won by Wendy Courtney of Putnam Valley.



Denny Herzberg collects vintage vehicles and Victrolas and showed them off to visitors at a unique event for HSM supporters in August.

A PLEA FOR OBITUARIES

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has had the unfortunate effect of discouraging the writing of obituaries. Many people have passed away without funerals or memorial services, and, for whatever reason, without obituaries recounting their families, professions, interests and community contributions.

Obituaries publicly recognize and celebrate a life. They also document personal and shared history that is so very important to future genealogists and researchers. If you or someone you know has experienced the loss of a loved one and you would like some help crafting a meaningful written tribute for distribution to friends, family and the media, please contact Diane Galusha, 845-586-4973.

Don't trash our history!

Cleaning house? We are eager to accept family albums, scrapbooks, deeds, business records, postcards and other items that relate to Middletown's history. Please call or email us if you have something that needs a loving home. We promise to preserve it for posterity. 845-586-3630; history@catskill.net.

We collected information and photographs on 33 district schools from Middletown and periphery and mounted an exhibit at the 2021 Cauliflower Festival. These are the students of District 9, Pink Street School, in Denver. The four kids in the middle are Floyd and Frank Shultis, Mary Lawrence and Lucy Kelly.



Blythe Carey of Highmount was among volunteers who helped clean 16 headstones at eight area cemeteries in a new fundraising effort.



FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS

Sixty-one years ago, Margaretville had a bustling shopping scene, so much so that stores stayed open late on Fridays – in January even! Here is an item from Page 1 of the Catskill Mountain News Jan. 13, 1961:

“The following stores in Margaretville will be open Friday evenings until 9 o’clock and close Saturday evenings at 6 o’clock: A & P, L. Bussy & Co., Inc., Victory Markets, Margaretville Hardware, Margaretville Bakery, Margaretville Furniture Store, Margaretville Department Store, Marsico’s Department Store; Bernice’s Apparel Shop, Tubbs’ Sport Shop, Sanford’s Hardware. The drug stores will operate under the same arrangement they have been open in recent years.”

This photo is from the 1940s, when Main Street was just as busy after dark.



THE 58¢ POST

THE 58¢ POST is an exclusive feature for members who receive *The Bridge* via e-mail. Because your newsletter requires no stamp, you get an “extra”!

HUGE
Bargains
TREMENDOUS
Savings

plus
S. & W.
GREEN
STAMPS

TREAT YOUR FAMILY TO ONE OF THESE TOP QUALITY

PORK LOIN ROASTS
CUT FROM CHOICE, TENDER YOUNG PORKERS

Choice Tender
RIB CUT
PORK ROAST lb **35¢**

Delicious Meaty
LOIN CUT
PORK ROAST lb **47¢**

CENTER
CUT
PORK
CHOPS lb **79¢**

Short shank, top quality, 4 to 8 lbs. avg.
Smoked Picnics
Best Val Brand, Military smoked, delicious

Sliced Bacon
SUPREME COURT BRAND, NEW, FINEST

HERE IS SOMETHING
BELIEVABLY GOOD!
FRIDAY PREPARED,
PURE PORK

WHOLE

39¢ Tasty Sliced
Pork Liver

49¢ Country-Style
Spareribs

Serve with our recipe
Sauerkraut **25¢**

FRYERS

These advertisements appeared in the same January 13, 1961 edition of the *Catskill Mountain News* quoted above in “Friday Night Lights.” Above is a small sample of what Victory Market was offering discerning shoppers that winter. The Margaretville Dept. Store’s ad (right) makes note of the ‘open late’ hours on Friday nights.

Great January

CLEARANCE

BARGAINS THROUGHOUT THE STORE
25% TO 50% OFF

WATCH FOR
JANUARY WHITE SALE
COMING NEXT WEEK

Sheets • Blankets • Pillow Cases • Pillows • Towels

Margaretville Dept. Store

PAUL KOPPER, Mgr. PHONE 0381

“We’re Always Happy to Serve You”
—Open TU 9 P. M. Friday—Close Saturday 6 P. M.—