

This Week in Saratoga County History

The Trial of Catherine and Elizabeth Nolan

Submitted by Russ Vandervoort July 13, 2022

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*Catherine and Elizabeth Nolan on trial
New York World, April 24, 1895*

Part 2 of our story begun last week.

On July 11, 1894, both Catherine and Elizabeth Nolan had been placed in the Ballston Jail accused of poisoning their brother John. It was now April 1895; jury selection was about to begin for the trial of Catherine. The two girls had been incarcerated for well over 200 days. Jury selection took over 3 days and played to a packed house. On April 24, the actual trial began.

The press was focused on the accused. A reporter from The Albany Argus refers to it as the Famous Waterford Poisoning Case and described Catherine as follows. "She was becomingly attired in black and was apparently in good health and spirits. She is not a prepossessing young woman, although not by any means ugly. She has a shrewd, but not very intelligent face frequently covered by her fan, with nothing very criminal about it, and the ordinary observer could not believe that she could perpetuate the foul crime laid at her door. She heard the charges read against her and showed no emotion."

The Prosecution claimed that the poison was given to John in a cup of tea. Catherine had told the Coroner's Inquest that she later had drunk from that same cup, without washing it, and had

suffered no ill effects. The defense claimed that if the prosecution cannot prove that the motive of the crime was to collect on the insurance, there is no case.

Many witnesses and experts were called to testify. The insurance agent testified to the innocence and legitimacy of the insurance policies and that all family members were in attendance at the time of purchase. The Coroner and Union College chemist Professor Perkins presented their findings on the presence of arsenic in John's body. Perhaps the most damning piece of evidence was provided by the local druggist John Cole, who testified that two days before the poisoning he had sold arsenic to Catherine Nolan. The defense later had John H. Pynes sworn and report that he was a mill owner and had in his employ both Catherine and John Nolan of Waterford. Catherine was subject to fits and had experienced several at work. He further reported that there were two Catherine Nolan's who lived in Waterford and both worked in his mill. The other Catherine had red hair. John Cole, the druggist, was recalled and asked if the Catherine he sold arsenic to had red hair? He said, no!

Almost two days of the trial were taken up in courtroom experiments by chemists for both prosecution and defense on the properties of arsenic, tea, sugar, and milk and how each would react and appear when heated and stirred or unstirred. This was a tedious demonstration and the results were inconclusive.

After summation and closing arguments, the case went to the jury. The time was noted at 12:09. The Nolan's were originally from Ballston Spa and many, including the recently deceased, were interred there in St. Paul's Cemetery. Most of the crowd had not left the courthouse when about 12:20, someone shouted, "Good Heavens, here comes the jury!"

They returned with a full acquittal for both girls, even though Catherine was the only one on trial. After the jury was polled and all answered for acquittal, confusion reigned in the courtroom. It had been packed each day of the trial and the streets were packed as well. Elizabeth was escorted in from jail to be released, the many women in attendance were elated, there were cheers in the street, and the court was never formally adjourned. Adding to the confusion, Isaac Groff of Saratoga Springs, the jury foreman, approached the bench and commandeered the gavel. Gaining attention, he announced "These poor girls have been in jail for ten months, they have neither money nor property to commence life with again." He thought it only right that all in attendance should give money to assist the girls. Inside and out of the courtroom hats were passed. A good many dollars and many coins were placed into the hats and presented to the girls.

The New York World Reporter, Mrs. McQuirk, was at Catherine's side to calm her in the courtroom and cure her of her sobs and tears. She had watched the case with intense excitement. She returned to her own chair and sobbed uncontrollably.

If the girls were innocent how do we account for the death of brother John Nolan? The mother, father, another sister poisoned? Sister Mary had been ill, perhaps poisoned, but did not die from her illness. She was remanded to the County Alms House as a reluctant witness. There is no final word on why so many family members passed in a span of eight months. However, there is a theory on John.

John liked to drink. The family seemed to have an ongoing issue with mice, rats, and bed bugs, hence the quantities of arsenic and other poisons in the house. John loved whiskey. The bed bug poison, which contained arsenic was stored in a whiskey bottle. John had discovered the whiskey bottle and had consumed its contents. Even if this were the case, are we to believe that the prior three were accidental as well?

One hundred and thirty years later, one has to question the wisdom and believability of storing bed bug poison in a whiskey bottle. Somehow it appears that the Nolan girls were able to win the hearts, minds, and sympathies of the greater public. Was justice served, or did these girls murder their family members for the insurance money? Maybe Lizzie Borden's fan had mystical qualities that aided in her acquittal, as it had for its original owner.

At the conclusion of the trial, the Nolan girls moved into their attorney Keatch's residence in Lansingburgh, vowing that they would never return to Waterford again.

Sources: The Currier (Lansingburgh) July 12, 1894

The Albany Argus July 12, 1894

The Albany Argus March 21, 1895

The Albany Argus March 23, 1895

The New York World April 24, 1895

The Mechanicville Mercury October 27, 1894