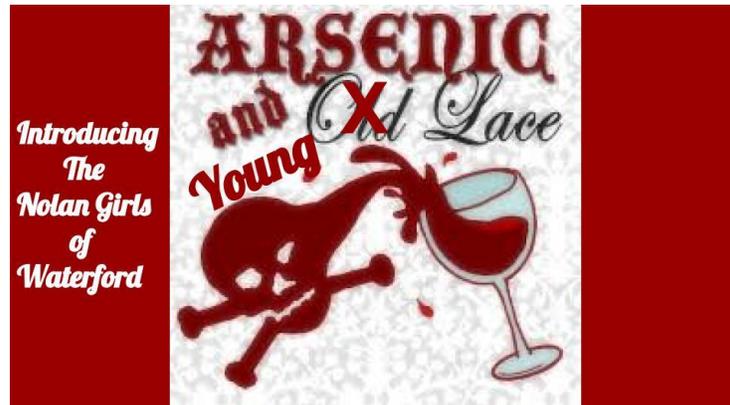


This Week in Saratoga County History

Arsenic and Young Lace

Submitted by Russ VanDervoort July 6, 2022



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The Nolan Family immigrated from Ireland and settled in Stillwater, Ballston, and after the Civil War, Waterford. The Nolan's were a large family, a good many had served in the war, and most enlisted for the rewards of the bounty paid to the volunteers. Michael Nolan, the father of the Nolan girls, had enlisted in the storied 77th Infantry Regiment based out of Saratoga. The 77th fought in many of the war's epic battles. Michael had enlisted for 3 years and served out his full term, never shirking duty and never being wounded. It is likely he thought himself possessing the luck of the Irish after his wartime experiences. Prior to the war he resided in Stillwater and was employed as a farm laborer.

After the war, by the time of the 1880 Census, now 38, he was in Waterford employed as a machinist. He and his wife Ellen, 36, raised a family of 5, 4 girls and 1 boy. As the 1890s approached things looked well for the family. Two decades had passed and 3 of the children were now old enough to have taken jobs in the many mills in Waterford. All appeared to be well in the family.

Ella, the oldest daughter, now 21, and second daughter Catherine, at age 19 are employed. The only son, John, now 17 joined them at the mill. Their social activities appeared to change. Ella, it seems was unaffected. Catherine is engaged to be married, but her intended announces he will not marry her while her mother is alive. John has fallen in with a drinking group and developed a love for whiskey. It is now 1893. Up to this time, all signs point to a late 19th-century lifestyle running a natural course. Soon things would change.

On October 23, 1893, Michael, age 51 suddenly dies. Twenty days later, on November 12, his wife Ellen suffers the same fate. Ella Nolan, the oldest sister also dies around the same time. Her

passing is mentioned by the media. No date is mentioned, and she never appeared in another census. An unexplained exposure to embalming liquid is thought to be the cause of these deaths. Three in an eight-month period. Michael had a \$1,000 installment life insurance policy and other properties. By mid-February 1894, Catherine filed the paperwork to administer her father's estate after he died intestate. With the recent events, she was now the senior Nolan.

John's attraction to whiskey had become a problem and he was frequently jailed as a result. In one case, he was arrested for abusing a horse of Waterford Liveryman Storm and placed in the Ballston jail. He was there three days before he was deemed sober enough to stand before the judge. Younger sister Mary, 16, was placed in the County Poor House along with her unnamed, 10-week old child, born out of wedlock. John's activities, the youngest sister, Mary's illegitimate birth, and the three recent family members' deaths, certainly demonstrate a family in turmoil.

On June 8, 1894, only brother John died. He became ill after dinner and died after several days. Dr. Roland Stubbs, the Waterford Coroner, suspicious of all the recent deaths, was able to force himself into the Nolan house and assemble a Coroner's Jury. Various poisons were found in the family home. Catherine and Elizabeth stated that the house had a severe rat, mouse, and bed bug infestation, thus the need for the assortment of poisons in the home

Collected evidence was sent to Professor Perkins, a Union College chemist, and the presence of arsenic was confirmed. It also came to light that all family members were insured, the others for lesser amounts than the father. Subsequently, sisters, Catherine and Elizabeth were charged with John's murder and placed in the county jail to stand trial for the death of their brother.

News of this event spread quickly, not only locally, but throughout the country. "Pretty and Perhaps Poisonous" read one headline. "Poisoned for Money, Two Sister Indicted," read another. Saratoga County and Ballston Spa were bracing for what still another paper referred to as "The Famous Waterford Poisoning Case."

Calvin E. Keach of Lansingburgh and Irving W. Wiswall of Ballston Spa took on the defense of the Nolan girls. Calvin Keach was awarded by a court order an allowance of \$100 to hire an expert on poisons. The prosecution team consisted of Saratoga County District Attorney John Persons assisted by ex-judge Jesse S. Lamoreaux, Horace McKnight, and Charles R. Capp. It should be noted here that the actual trial began on April 24, 1895 and a verdict was reached on April 29, 1895. Five months later on September 21, 1895, DA Persons was discovered unexpectedly dead in his doctor's barn, reportedly of heart failure at age 33.

Due to widespread interest in the case, the courtroom and even the area around the courthouse were packed with curious onlookers each day. The girls were tried separately with Catherine, the eldest, tried first. She appeared in court in mourning clothes and shielded her face with a fan. Mrs. McQuirk, a reporter from the New York World, provided her with the loan of the fan reported to have been used by Lizzie Borden at her trial. Borden was acquitted. Will Lizzie's fan work the same for Catherine and Elizabeth? Find out next week.

