

Crime in Colebrook – The Taintor Murder Case

Colebrook traditionally goes years, even decades without recording one violent crime, but at the midpoint of the nineteenth century the town was plagued by not one, but two murders. The first was the senseless killing of Barnice White, a resident of Colebrook River in 1850. Just two years later, on September 28, 1852, Hiram Taintor, a man of about 60 years, a carpenter by trade and unmarried, was living in a building used as a cheese house for many years by the Hoyt Farm. This farmhouse and all the barns are gone now, but they stood about half way between Campbell's house at 122 Old Colebrook Road and Scheft's driveway at 138 Old Colebrook Road. It's a shame that this large old farmhouse was allowed to fall into disrepair in the 1950s and 60s, as it had been the home of the Reverend Jonathan Edwards, Jr., Colebrook's first pastor. Edward's wife was the sister of Aaron Burr, the vice president of the United States under President Jefferson, who used to vacation in the farmhouse across the road on the west side about opposite Scheft's driveway. A lot of history took place in this neighborhood.

Hiram Taintor was in the habit of getting water from a well in the yard of the farmhouse once frequented by Aaron Burr, but in 1852 occupied by a man by the name of Richard Loomis, and on that fateful evening was in the act of drawing water when Loomis attacked and killed him with a butcher knife.

At 2:00am the next morning, Reuben Rockwell, who among other things was an officer of the law, was aroused from his sleep by vigorous pounding on his door. It proved to be Richard Loomis and the object of his call was "to give himself up". Loomis claimed that Taintor forced his way into the Loomis house and a struggle resulted, ending with Taintor's death. The officers, upon examination, found blood scattered and daubed about the house and premises

It was later established that Loomis killed Taintor at the well and scattered and daubed the blood through the house in an attempt to create the impression that a desperate struggle had taken place in the house. This was to make believable his story that Taintor had invaded his home, and he was merely defending himself from the intruder. Even the unsophisticated officers of the law in Colebrook immediately saw through the ruse of carefully placed splotches of blood scattered about the house. It was obvious to them, based upon the amount of blood around the well, where the actual murder took place.

Little was known of the early life of Loomis, but it seems that the townspeople regarded him as not much better than a tramp or vagrant and of a very dubious character. He had for a housekeeper a female member of the Barkhamsted Lighthouse Tribe, and whose name, or at least the name she used, was Lizzie Chaugum.

Richard Loomis' motive for murder was his suspicion that Taintor was becoming too attentive to the housekeeper. This festered for a time and finally culminated with the murder.

The morning following the Taintor murder, two boys driving ox teams loaded with hemlock bark came over Stillman Hill on their way to the Dewey tannery on Marshall St. [I'm not positive, but I believe the site of this tannery was generally across the road from Kennedy's home at 24 Old Colebrook Road.] One of the boys was Hiram Smith; the other was Lorrin Cooke, who later on became governor of Connecticut. As the teams approached the North Place (today Snyder's home at 3 Stillman Hill Road

across the road from the red barn) Grandmother North came out of the house in a state of great excitement and blurted out the news of the murder.

On the first Tuesday of November, 1852 the Colebrook constables, or grand jurors, as they were called, handed down an indictment against Richard Loomis. Stripped of all the “saids” and “aforesaid” and reduced to plain English, it asserts “that Richard Loomis, armed with a butcher knife, valued at 50 cents, attacked and killed Hiram Taintor in a manner contrary to the statutes”. Then, as if doubting its own conclusions, it began all over again and asserts that “armed with a certain sharp instrument, the character and value of which is unknown, Richard Loomis attacked and mortally wounded Hiram Taintor and from these mortal wounds Hiram Taintor then and instantly died.” Still unsatisfied, it began all over again, and in substance declared, “that Richard Loomis, with a certain knife of the value of 12 cents, made an assault upon Hiram Taintor.” After specifying and enumerating as in the other cases every part of Taintor’s anatomy with which the knife could have possibly come in contact, declared “from which mortal wounds and cuts Taintor did languish, and languishing did live until 11 o’clock in the evening of the same, Hiram Taintor did die.” Then through inability to think of anything more, they let it go at that and solemnly signed their names to it. Whereupon the said Richard Loomis, being duly impressed in the premises, was obliged to believe that he was a thoroughly indicted man.

Loomis’ trial for murder was held at the Litchfield Courthouse beginning February 17, 1853. Chief Justice Samuel Church presided (the same judge who presided over the Barnice White case a couple of years before). Loomis pleaded not guilty.

At the termination of the trial, which lasted nearly a week, the jury rendered a verdict of guilty of murder in the second degree, and on February 25, Richard Loomis was sentenced to State’s Prison for life.

The records at the State’s prison show that Loomis entered the prison March 3, 1853, that he was convicted of murder in the second degree and sentenced for life; that he was 68 years old when convicted and that he died in prison August 27, 1858. Torrington is given as his birthplace. The History of Torrington mentions a Richard Loomis who belonged to one of the old families of that town. If this man is identical with the man who lived in Colebrook and the date of his birth as given in the History of Torrington is correct, then his age should have been 68 at the time of his death instead of at the time of his conviction.

The cheese house in which Hiram Taintor lived was long ago removed from its earlier location and made into a horse barn, which stood across the road from the Hoyt Farm. This would have placed it about where John Mangan’s feedlot is currently located on the west side of Old Colebrook Road.

Historic Bytes

Bob Grigg