

OPINION

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Beautiful cigar girl gets snuffed



By R. Marc Kantrowitz

Much like Paris Hilton and all the Kardashians, Mary Cecilia Rogers' notoriety was neither burdened by talent nor achievement. What Mary had was uncommon beauty and charisma, both of which served as lightning rods for the attention and affection of men.

Born in 1820, she lived comfortably in Connecticut until several tragedies struck, including the death of her father and three of her half-brothers. The bank panic of 1837 forced her and her mother, Phoebe, to sell their property and relocate to New York City.

Within a short time of arriving there, Mary was working in John Anderson's Tobacco Emporium. The store primarily catered to writers, reporters and those working in the city's nearby government offices. Word of mouth quickly blanketed the immediate area, while enthralled newspapermen and poets wrote of "the beautiful Seegar Girl." One proclaimed her smile as being a glimpse of heaven.

As her fame grew, Mary became uncomfortable in the limelight. So when one of her half-brothers struck it rich and opened a boarding house for his mother and Mary to run, she jumped at the opportunity. Within a year, that brother would die, too.

Ensnared in her new surroundings, Mary continued to attract a bevy of suitors. Two stood out. Alfred Crommelin was a boarder at the house who was tall and courtly with a polite manner. While initially encouraging his attention, Mary subsequently set her sights on Daniel Payne, a common worker, and they soon were engaged despite the misgivings of Phoebe.

On Sunday, July 25, 1841, at 10 in the morning, Mary went to Payne's apartment and told him she would be visiting her aunt and that he should meet her upon her return early that evening.

Mary never made it to her aunt, who had no inkling of the intended visit and wasn't even home that morning.

On Wednesday, Mary was found dead, floating in the Hudson River.



LAW 'n HISTORY



An autopsy was performed. Mary's face had been brutalized. Finger indentations ringed her bruised neck, which hid a garrote of lace from her clothing embedded in her skin. Her hands had been tied. Raw skin on her back indicated that she had been dragged. Fabric from her clothing had been ripped away; one piece used as a gag, another used to pull her. Bruises and abrasions covered her "feminine regions."

The press led the charge to find her killer or killers, writing whatever it took to sell newspapers. An inept police force followed behind.

A host of different people — including Payne, Crommelin and Anderson — were questioned. All had alibis, and with no arrests, frustration set in. That is, until Frederica Loss entered the picture.

Loss was the owner of a tavern just north of where Mary's body had been discovered. Two of her sons were running an errand when they stumbled on an isolated thicket. The tightly confined area contained the ripped clothing of a woman and a handkerchief with the initials "MR."

They gathered the clothing and gave it to their mother. Inexplicably, she waited seven days before contacting the authorities, who immediately pounced on the scene. It was clear what they were viewing: the site where Mary had been murdered.

In addition to writing, Judge R. Marc Kantrowitz sits on the Appeals Court. He can be contacted at rmarcantrowitz@comcast.net. The above column is based, in large part, on "The Beautiful Cigar Girl" by Daniel Stashower.

Curiosity-seekers swarmed the area. One visitor, a now-morose and suicidal Daniel Payne, calmly trudged to where his fiancée had met her demise. He took a swig of poison from a vial he had purchased earlier, his body started to quiver, and soon he was dead. He wasn't the only one.

As one of Loss' sons cleaned his shotgun, it discharged and fatally struck his mother. One son was overheard telling another that the great secret would now come out.

It did. Abortions were being performed in her inn. A magistrate charged Loss' sons, all "profligate and worthless characters," as being responsible, along with their dead mother, for Mary's death. Her "murder" was a cover-up for a botched abortion.

The charges went nowhere as nothing could be proved. Indeed, the evidence pointed in other directions. At the top of the list: If Loss were involved, why would she have brought a world of attention upon herself by turning over the victim's clothes?

Epilogue

The murder of Mary Rogers was never solved. Theories abounded. In a sensational fictionalization of the homicide, "The Murder of Marie Roget," Edgar Allen Poe wrote his story as the real one unfolded. Poe never named a culprit. He did, however, have a particular interest in the event. He, too, was a customer of Anderson's Tobacco Emporium and a great fan of the beautiful Mary Rogers. **MW**