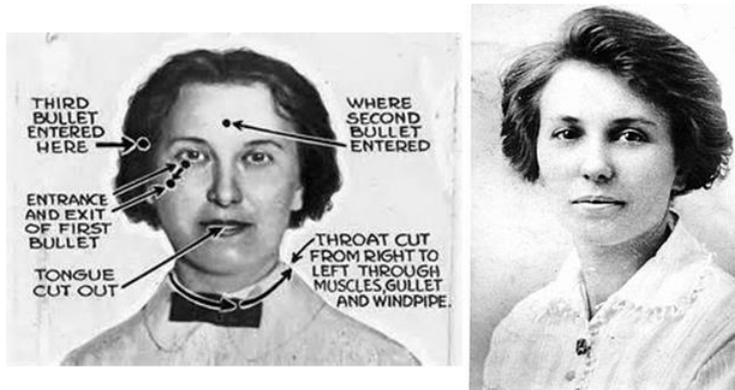


# MASSACHUSETTS LAWYERS WEEKLY

## The dead minister and his dead girlfriend

By: [R. Marc Kantrowitz](#) October 15, 2015



The bodies were discovered on the morning of Sept. 16, 1922, a Saturday. It was striking how they were laid out, seemingly choreographed: both serenely on their backs as if sleeping, her head gently resting on his right arm, her left hand on his right knee. His face was shielded by a Panama hat, as if he were sleeping on the beach. His right hand was just under her shoulder and neck.

Both were shot through the head. He, one time; she, three. Torn love letters and cards lay scattered between them. Propped up against the man's left heel was his business card — the Rev. Edward W. Hall, pastor of the New Brunswick New Jersey Episcopal Church. His wallet sat nearby on the trampled ground.

As word quickly spread, a surging crowd overran the crime scene, grabbing evidence as souvenirs and muddling the surroundings. Still, a .32 caliber bullet and a two-foot-long iron pipe were recovered. Removal of the blood-soaked scarf wrapped around the female victim's neck revealed an army of maggots reveling in her exposed bloodied throat, split ear to ear.

Those in the pastor's parish quickly surmised who the unidentified woman was: 34-year-old choir member Eleanor Mills, who had been carrying on with Hall for more than four years. Despite being married to a school janitor and church sexton 10 years her senior with whom she had two school-aged children, the slender and attractive Mills led an unsatisfied and frugal life. She found solace in the town's pastor, age 45, who was married to the very wealthy and slightly older Frances Noel Stevens Hall.

Suspicion initially focused on the surviving spouses. James Mills, unambitious and middle-aged, married Eleanor when she was just 17. On the Thursday night before the gruesome discovery, Eleanor left her house three times to call her lover. After the third call at 7:40, the pastor told his

wife that he had to check some medical bills on behalf of Eleanor. When he didn't return, Frances Hall went to the church at 2:30 a.m. to search for him. Her odd and unemployable 50-year-old brother, Willie, who lived with her, accompanied Frances to the church. That morning, she called the police anonymously, asking whether any casualties had been reported. Informed that none had, she continued her search.

Meanwhile, Eleanor's husband also searched, also starting at the church. When he didn't find her, he eventually went to work but left shortly thereafter to continue looking for his wife. He saw Frances Hall at the church and asked if she thought the two had eloped. Frances replied that she thought they were dead, and they each continued to look.

The police investigation, already hindered by compromised evidence, went nowhere. Jurisdictional issues added to the state of disarray. While witnesses and theories were aplenty, none proved conclusive. In the hope of securing a lead, Eleanor Mills' body was exhumed and autopsied; surprisingly, one had not been performed earlier. Of note was the violence to her throat, which included a severed windpipe and esophagus, though somehow the doctor missed that her tongue had been cut out. It was concluded that Mills had been shot before she was mutilated and that the couple died where they had been assaulted.

Four years passed before a simmering match grew into a firestorm. The now estranged husband of the Halls' maid, Louise Geist, claimed that Geist had informed Frances Hall that her husband and Eleanor Mills were planning to marry. Mrs. Hall paid the maid \$5,000 to keep quiet.

Once the story broke, the papers raced to outdo each other in trying to solve and sensationalize the case. The New York Times, which devoted 60 front pages to the original crime in 1922, would now feature 90 on the recent developments.

With pressure mounting, the case was re-opened. In short order, Frances Hall, her brothers Willie and Henry, and her Wall Street stockbroker cousin Henry Carpender were arrested and charged. The main witness against them was Jane Gibson, dubbed the "Pig Woman" due to her avocation of raising hogs on the very property where the bodies were discovered. She had testified before the grand jury earlier. The fact that it did not return an indictment seemed to underscore her reputation as one who did not tell the truth, further evidenced by her constantly changing version of what she allegedly saw that night.

Still, there was some other minor supportive evidence thought by the prosecutors sufficient to convict the defendants.

They were wrong. Those testifying for the prosecution in the case against Frances Hall and her two brothers (Carpender's had been severed) numbered 87. The defense countered with 70, not including the Pig Woman's mother, who screamed from the front row, "She's a liar, liar, liar!" when her daughter was called to the stand.

Few were surprised at the jury's verdict of not-guilty.

## **Epilogue**

The crime was never solved. Theories abounded, including that the murders were committed by either the local Ku Klux Klan bent on sending a message to the morally deficient; by a former lover of Eleanor; by jealous rivals vying for the attention and love of the pastor; by thrill-seekers or robbers; and by James Mills, who knew of his wife's adultery.

Given the posing of the victims, their love letters strewn about, and the excessive and brutal violence on Eleanor's body, one might surmise that, in the end, perhaps the state and the Pig Woman were right all along.

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