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UPPER DARBY TRAGEDY OF MANY YEARS AGO – Story of a Delaware County Murder as Told by an Old Almanac

Phillip B. Green of Edgmont has in his possession a copy of the Piratical and Tragical Almanac for the year 1847. The book is in a good state of preservation and contains many interesting things. It contains an account of the murder of William Bonsall on the evening of May 22, 1824 at his home in Upper Darby Township, this county. The account of that murder written at that time is as follows:

Shocking acts of human depravity are so prevalent, that we are scarcely moved at the recital of a murder, unless it is characterized by some unusual circumstances. The following will necessarily give rise to feelings of no ordinary description.

On Saturday evening, the 22nd of May, 1824, four men called at the house of Mrs. Mary Warner in Upper Darby, Delaware County, Pa. and requested to see the man living in her family. (Mrs. Warner kept a store in part of the house and the young man referred to Wm. Bonsall, his wife and child, the latter about 16 months old, constituted the whole of her family). Mr. Bonsall, who was in bed at the time, came down and was greeted in a very cordial manner by his visitors; though he had never in his life seen them before; yet, unwilling to be inhospitable, he requested them to sit down. In a few minutes, one of the four men demanded of Bonsall his money. He replied that he had a dollar and a half, which they might take. At this moment one of the ruffians cut down a clothes line hanging in the kitchen, and drew it so tight about Bonsall's neck as to choke him. Bonsall lifted his hand to his throat to loosen the rope, when the tallest of the robbers made a pass at his arm with a razor, which laid open his arm to the bone from the shoulder to the elbow. Bonsall was then thrown into a chair and held by one of the ruffians, while the other directed Mrs. Warner, after tying her arms to light him into the store.

While this man was in the store taking such property as he could most easily carry off, the other continued with Mr. Bonsall. Just as Mrs. Warner was leaving the store, the man in the kitchen used some words to M. Bonsall, and then stabbed him several times in the abdomen with a shoe knife, much worn. This was done while sitting in a chair directly in front of him, in attempting to withdraw it, the blade stuck so strongly that the handle came off, and the knife was left in the body.

Two of the men had previously retired to the front door. The two men in the house, discovering Mrs. Bonsall and perceiving her delicate situation, threatened the most shocking barbarity, if she did not immediately conduct them to the place where her husband's money was kept; they were desired to take any and every article of property but to spare their lives; they accordingly took the whole of Mr. Bonsall's clothes, his military uniforms, excepted, and filled two large handkerchiefs with goods from the shop, and after insulting the dying Bonsall, they retired. Bonsall was in a few minutes a corpse.

It was noticed by Mrs. Warner that one of the robbers was a very large ill-looking man, dressed in a Wilmington-stripe roundabout – and from the appearance of his hands, he was supposed to be a shoemaker; a supposition confirmed by his having the knife already mentioned. The other active man was small had sandy hair and whiskers, and wore a brown goatee.

The very night before this occurrence, a marketman was robbed on the West Chester Road, and beaten in a most shocking manner; and as soon as the robbers had departed from Mrs. Warner's and the alarm was given, not a doubt was entertained that the

men in this deed were the same who had committed the former. The next day (Sunday) at about 12 o'clock four men crossed the bridge at Gray's Ferry, on their way to Philadelphia, and were supposed to be the murderers. If anything could go beyond the murder of the husband, it was the brutality of their threats to the wife. A reward was at once offered for the apprehension of the murderers.

On the Saturday following the murder (May 29th) three men were apprehended near Woodbury, N.J. on suspicion of being concerned in Mr. Bonsall's dreadful murder and committed to the jail of that place. Their names, as given by themselves, were James Wellington, Abraham Buys and Charles Washington Labbe. They were recognized as being old convicts. Wellington had been sentenced to imprisonment for life in New York, but afterwards pardoned on condition of his leaving the State. Buys was a large man, believed to be the same that wore the Wilmington-stripe roundabout on the night that the murder was committed. A silver chain, answering to the description of that stolen from Mrs. Bonsall, was found on his person. Wellington had clad himself in the clothes of Mr. Bonsall; but when high constable Hains arrived at Woodbury, he appeared in a different apparel. He denied having other garment in his possession, but search being made, the clothes of Mr. Bonsall were found stuffed in a stove pipe. Suspicion was at first excited against them by their attempt to pass a Mexican or Peruvian dollar. Other circumstances confirmed this suspicion and after they had left the village, they were pursued by some citizens and taken into custody.

The prisoners were subsequently tried in Delaware County and Judge Darlington pronounced sentence upon Michael Monroe, otherwise called James Wellington. (Buys was not convicted, though there was much excitement and much disapprobation expressed against the jurors at the time, in consequence of the verdict which they rendered in regard to both him and Labbe.)

After receiving his sentence, Monroe, alias Wellington, was remanded to prison. His death warrant was eventually received by the sheriff of Delaware, appointing Friday, the 17th day of December 1824, between the hours of ten o'clock A.M. and two P.M. as the time of execution.

The prisoner protested his innocence to the last, and previous to execution said, "I have heard it said that no innocent man was executed in this country, but it will lose that honor today."

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