

History

## BOOK CLUB NEWSLETTER

Dover Public Library, Issue 23.2, May 2018 *Editor's note. This is a reminder of the 23rd meeting of Dover Library's History Book Club. If you have comments, historical events you wish to have shared, articles to be published, please call 335-8344 [larry.koch.2008@comcast.net](mailto:larry.koch.2008@comcast.net).*

# PATTY CANNON

## "She Devil of Delmarva"



**On Thursday at 4:00, May 17th, The Dover Library's History Book Club will focus on the REAL Patty Cannon. The infamous slave trader lived in Maryland and Delaware, and terrorized free blacks and ordinary citizens as well. A 1841 pamphlet noted "And we can truly say, that we have never seen recorded a greater instance of moral depravity, so perfectly regardless of feeling, which should inhabit the human breast."**

**We are used to hearing about notorious outlaws in the American West, but Patty's field of operations in Delmarva is far closer to home. Questions remain: -How did she evade the law? How does she compare with our nations' other criminal and serial murderers? Join us and find out in the library for "the best talk in Dover."**

# PATTY CANNON'S SKULL

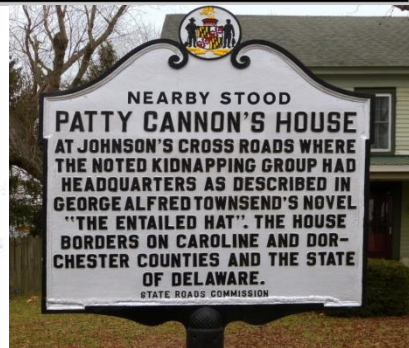
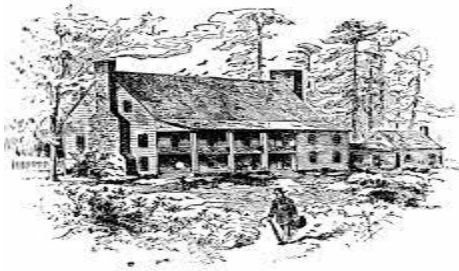


Collection of Dover Public Library, Delaware  
 (Photo: News Journal (Wilmington Delaware), 1977, date unknown)



A lifelike mannequin of infamous slave trader Patty Cannon can be seen at the new Seaford Museum, along with evidence of the various charges against her.

Crossroads (Wilmington, De.), Sep. 3, 2003, Sec. K, p. 1



Lucretia P. Cannon and her gang firing at the Slave Dealers.—Page 13.

## NARRATIVE AND CONFESSIONS, OF LUCRETIA P. CANNON,

WHO WAS TRIED, CONVICTED, AND SENTENCED TO BE HUNG AT GEORGETOWN, DELAWARE, WITH TWO OF HER ACCOMPLICES.

CONTAINING  
 AN ACCOUNT OF SOME OF THE MOST HORRIBLE AND SHOCKING MURDERS AND DARING ROBBERIES EVER COMMITTED BY ONE OF THE FEMALE SEX.



Page 16.

NEW YORK:  
 PRINTED FOR THE PUBLISHERS  
 1841.

# History Book Club Page

## Agenda for this meeting

Introduction.....	4:00 .....	3 min
Speaker (s) 4:05.....		40 min
Other books read, .....	4:30.....	10 min
Discussion.....	4:40 .....	15 min
Evaluation/Future Events.....	4:55.....	5 min

## Future meetings

June - Minorities in sports before Jackie Robinson June 21  
July - Ancient History ..... July 19

We had our planning meeting on the 19th of April, and we thank all who attended.

Topics selected INCLUDE , Landmark Supreme Court Decisions (To be held in the fall)  
Medicine and History, with emphasis especially on varied plagues, Westward expansion  
Inside The United States State Department

We expect all of these will be on the usual date and time-the third Thursday at 4:00. If you have any potential presenters who would be available on any of these topics give Larry a call, who will be trolling for speakers. In any case at this point I am optimistic about our topics and our ability to find people who will be available and will update members hopefully in the next issue.

## This Issue

Our topic is Patty Cannon, and our presenter is Mary Pauer- a member, educator and author. Mary resides at a farm in Bridgeville, an area of the State where Patty and her gang were active.

I have included an article on "The Legend of Patty Cannon," by Dana-Kester McCabe to provide a common background. I will be away for this meeting, which will be chaired by Beth Jelish, who has been active in the Dover Library's History Book Club from the beginning. Enjoy!

# The Legend of Patty Cannon

by Dana Kester-McCabe

There is hardly a person who has lived on Delmarva for any length of time who has not heard the tale of Patty Cannon. She was a notorious gang leader and serial killer who died in 1829 while awaiting trial in Georgetown, Delaware. Those are the facts we know. The rest of the legends of this wicked creature cannot be confirmed, and yet they persist in our oral tradition and have inspired several books.

Perhaps most well known by locals is "The Entailed Hat" by George Townsend. Then there is *Patty Cannon Administers Justice*. Prior to these, the first book came out in 1841 and was more of a pamphlet. The authors never refer to her as Patty but its title and very long subtitle tell it all: *The Narrative and Confessions of Lucretia P. Cannon. Who was tried, convicted, and sentenced to be hung at Georgetown, Delaware, with two of her accomplices. Containing an account of some of the most horrible and shocking murders and daring robberies ever committed by one of the female sex.*

According to its authors Clinton Jackson and Erastus E. Barclay, Lucretia Hanly had a disreputable beginning which led to a criminal life. Her story begins in Montreal with that of her father, one L.P. Hanly. He was of noble birth originally from England and was already the black sheep of his family for marrying a prostitute. A family friend from home named Alexander Payne, newly moved to Quebec, ran into him and discovered he was living in a brothel and heading up a gang of thieves and smugglers. Hanly, hoping to prevent Payne from reporting his disgraceful life to his family across the Atlantic snuck into Payne's room in the middle of the night and brutally murdered him with an ax. For this he was convicted and hanged.

Lucretia was his youngest of several daughters. By the time she was sixteen she and her mother conspired to have her marry a wheelwright by the name of Cannon from lower Delaware who fell ill while traveling in Canada. He became besotted with Lucretia who nursed him back to health. Once recovered, he brought his young bride south to live with him on the Nanticoke River near Laurel.

For three year's things seemed to go fine. But Cannon's health again deteriorated and soon he passed away. In fact, in later years his wife confessed that she had slowly poisoned him. Scholars guess that the Lucretia in this story was actually our Patty since so most of the rest of its details match our local history. The authors of this particular book probably took literary license trying to connect her by name to the famous poisoner Lucretia Borgia.

After her husband's untimely death Patty moved nearby to Johnson's Crossroads where the borders of Dorchester and Caroline Counties meet on the Maryland and Delaware line. This is the town now known as Reliance. There she ran a tavern which was a meeting place for criminals of all sorts. Soon she had become the ring leader of her own gang of thugs. From time to time Patty was hauled into court for not paying her debts and other charges. Somehow she mostly escaped punishment.

Many accounts of Patty's exploits suggest that she got away with murder because no one could believe that a woman could do such things. Patty was described as beautiful, dark, and very entertaining. She also had a reputation for being as strong and agile as any man. When witnesses finally came forward they said that it was not uncommon for her to dress like a man and join her crew on their violent adventures.

In 1808 importing new slaves to America was banned by the government. Patty and her gang saw this as an opportunity. They began supplying slaves to plantations facing labor shortages. They sent decoys to Philadelphia to befriend free blacks, especially children, who were then kidnapped, and shipped to Alabama and Mississippi for sale.

Patty became more cruel and violent as she got older. It is believed that she was quick with a knife and herself killed a number of people in her tavern. Philadelphia's mayor had received many complaints about missing blacks who had been taken from that city. He even offered a reward for finding the children.

Eventually the truth caught up with Patty. Her ill gotten gains had allowed her to own some farmland which she leased out. One of her tenants uncovered one of her victim's bodies while plowing the fields there. This was the evidence the sheriff needed so that he and his deputies could search the property finding further evidence of their crimes. Patty and two of her henchmen were finally arrested.

Their confessions led to the recovery of several children who had been sold south. I wish I could say the Cannon Gang were the only ones committing such crimes in the region. They were not. I wish I could say such crimes stopped once the Cannon gang was caught. They did not until the advent of the Civil War decades later.

One newspaper story says that Patty was between sixty and seventy years old when she was jailed. Patty and her gang's murderous career is said to have taken the lives of about two dozen people. As in life so in death Patty's tale continued along a sordid path. One account has her dying in jail of natural causes. Another claims that she swallowed poison rather than face the hangman's noose.

Patty's horrible story does not end there. When I interviewed ghost storyteller Mindie Burgoyne, she said that Patty's skull was retrieved from a pauper's grave when a parking lot was being built. Someone asked if they could keep it and were surprisingly given permission to do so. The skull passed through a number of owners, finally being put on display at the public library in Dover, Delaware. It is apparently illegal to display human remains so the library eventually took down their exhibit. They gave the skull its own special box which Mindie has seen, along with the purported skull itself. She also says that the area where Patty Cannon lived and committed her crimes is one of the most haunted places on Delmarva.

There are two historical markers in Reliance commemorating where she carried on her despicable trade. The most recent book about this villain is nonfiction: *Delmarva's Patty Cannon - The Devil on the Nanticoke* by local author Michael Morgan. And, in recent years she has served as the center of two more works of fiction. *Spartan Gold* by Clive Cussler and Grant Blackwood, tells the story of a modern day treasure hunt for the hidden proceeds of her terrible enterprise. Author James McBride features the evil Patty Cannon in his acclaimed historical novel, *Song Yet Sung* which tells the story from the point of view of the slaves and kidnapping victims. It won an NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Literary Work of Fiction.

