

THE COAL-KILN MURDER: HAMILTON'S FIRST MURDER MYSTERY

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Hamilton has for some time held the dubious distinction of being the location of an unusually large number of bizarre murders. In one of the earliest, whole families became embroiled in a conflict which contained all the characteristics of an absorbing mystery novel. The actual story contained in the historical record was replete with noble heroes unjustly accused of a heinous crime by a ruthless villain, an impetuous population all too willing to zealously throw the innocent to the lions, and a series of episodes that serve to chill and thrill—all leading to an explosive climax. The following is an attempt to recreate events from the sketchy and often conflicting evidence presented in nineteenth century newspaper accounts.

Prior to recounting the details of the story, it may be instructive to provide a brief background about the interaction between Hamilton residents, and the legal system, in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. The wealthiest resident in Barton Township in the 1820's was William Terryberry. He owned over 800 acres of land, a number of houses between Ancaster and the Grand River, at least two inns, and displayed his affluence by driving around in a carriage virtually dripping with silver ornamentation.¹ William Terryberry was also a notorious criminal. In the period between 1819 and 1832 he had been charged with the following offences: murder (found not guilty but had to post a bond of \$1,000 to keep the peace for one year), assault (guilty, and imprisoned for 3 months), nuisance (twice), larceny, riot, and felony.² It is therefore evident that people from all walks of life at this time were brought into contact with the legal establishment.

How was justice administered in those days? The Gore Assizes took place in the spring and fall of each year, and were held in the log court house on John Street South. Thomas Ralston recalled:

The time of holding court was like a fair — booths were erected on the vacant space next to John Street, where the hungry and dry could obtain ginger-bread, pumpkin pies and spice beer. Jurymen, witnesses and clients came long distances and had to stay during the sitting of the court at their own expense — no allowance being made either for jurymen or witnesses — for two or three weeks. On these occasions the taverns were filled, and an immense quantity of whiskey drunk; it was very cheap — three cents brought half a pint, ten cents a quart and eighteen cents a gallon, when purchased by the barrel.³

The principal party in the early murder mystery was the Young family. The name Young was Anglicized from the German Jung after the family arrived from the Rhineland to the tar camps on the Hudson River, New York. Theobald

Young soon moved to less restricting surroundings on the Schoharie River, where his eldest son Adam was born in 1717. Some years later they migrated to the present town site of St. Johnsville on the Mohawk River, and finally in 1768 to their 12,000 acre patent south of the river. Here Adam farmed, speculated in land, manufactured potash, and ran an Indian trading post at the head of the Susquehanna River.

A son Daniel, the father and grandfather of the major participants in the saga to follow, was born in 1755. The prosperity of the family was cut short by the American Revolution when all enlisted with the British in the Indian Department and Butler's Rangers. Daniel served in both units and rose to become a sergeant in the latter corps. On the reduction of the Provincials in 1784 he married Elizabeth Windercker and moved with his parents and brothers to Indian Land on the Grand River, Seneca Township, Upper Canada. In 1795 he relocated to Barton Township, near Ryckman's Corners, where he and his wife took Loyalist grants. In the following years he became an officer of the Masonic lodge, a township assessor, served as a captain in the 5th Lincoln Militia during the War of 1812, and fathered a brood of 12 children.⁴

The year 1827, however, was to cast a shadow across the fortunes of the Young family. A disastrous chain of events was set in motion with the theft of some turkeys from the farm of Peter Hess, a farmer who lived on the Mountain near the Youngs. Hess, thoughtfully, warned Samuel Potts, the proprietor of Potts Inn in Hamilton, to be on guard for anyone attempting to sell him turkeys. After dark on the evening of April 11, Jesse (William) Masters, a young man who worked for the Young family, appeared at the back door of the tavern. Despite being refused three times, Masters persisted in his demands to speak with the owner Potts. Eventually, the latter and his servant John Thomson became suspicious and agreed to meet with Masters in a shed in the back of the inn. Masters said that he had brought the turkeys as per an agreement two weeks previous and, after some dickering, a suitable price for the birds was arranged — the payment to be part then and part later. At that point another man rode up and gave the bag of turkeys to Masters, all-the-while remaining in the shadows, and the deal was consummated.

Later that evening Masters reappeared at Potts Inn, in the company of John Snyder plus George and Frederick Young, who were in the process of transporting a load of hay down the Mountain to Burlington Bay. There, in the presence of the above plus Samuel Potts, Peter Hess, Andrew Bradt and others, Masters confessed to stealing the turkeys. He accused John Young and his nephew Christopher Young with instigating the crime, and assisting him in the actual theft.

Hess could not be persuaded to drop the charges and went to obtain a warrant, requesting John Snyder to watch Masters. While they were imbibing at the inn, George and Frederick Young (brothers of John Young) attempted to cajole Masters into coming with them to the Bay and to help unload the hay. Snyder, however, advised him to remain at the inn, suspecting that the Youngs would attempt to, "get him out of the way". George and Frederick Young insisted that Masters go home with them as he was a servant in their employ. Frederick actually attempted to drag him out, but Snyder intervened. Peter Hess

was unable to obtain the warrant that night, so all concerned went to the Terryberry Inn on Mohawk Road, where Snyder inexplicably left Masters with the two Youngs. That was the last time Snyder saw Masters.

There was a substantial motive for the Young family wanting Masters to be eliminated. Without his testimony the two Youngs could not be convicted of having stolen the turkeys. In those early days, conviction in such an offence could lead to banishment from the Province — or hanging.

Later in April or May of 1827, the authorities were prepared to arrest Masters for the theft of the turkeys. The local constable and Wm. T. Barnes of Brantford first went to the farm of Masters' employer, Daniel Young, hoping to find him there. At first they were refused entrance, but Daniel eventually admitted them. The constables then found themselves confronted by John Young (aged 25) and Christopher Young (aged 21) the youngest son and eldest grandson respectively of Daniel Young. The two burly young men were prepared to do battle should the occasion warrant it, as their sleeves were tucked up and they were brandishing clubs. Not finding Masters there, and not having a warrant for the Youngs, the officers left, deciding to make inquiries at other farms in the neighbourhood of Ryckman's Corners; and no doubt subscribing to the point of view that discretion is the better part of valour.

In the company of John Young, first they went to Andrew Brad's (the father-in-law of John Young's sister), then to the abode of Jacob Sypes (the brother-in-law of Young). At Sypes place they observed someone, believed to be Masters, running toward the house. It proved to be a young man called Sheeler (a major participant in the subsequent events), who was subsequently offered five dollars to divulge Masters' whereabouts. Although Sheeler said he could do so, his employer Sypes advised him to hold his tongue. Finally, the officials went to the farm of John's brother James Young (aged 27) who informed them that Masters had left the night before. It must have appeared to the constables that the solidarity and stonewalling behaviour displayed by the extensive Young family was, to say the least, suspicious.

At this point the matter was dropped, as it was generally assumed that Masters (with the encouragement of the Youngs), had fled to the United States. However, a few months later, an individual came forward and gave startling testimony that led to a charge of murder being issued against John, Christopher, and James Young.

William Sheeler (aged 21) was employed as a hired man on the farms of the Youngs and Jacob Sypes, and had known the Young family for six years. One November day, while intoxicated, Sheeler divulged information that implicated himself as an accessory to the murder. In a conversation with the magistrate Wm. T. Barnes he asked whether a person who was called upon to assist in a murder, but who merely remained at the edge of the wood while the deed was done, could escape hanging. The upshot was that Sheeler made a formal confession.

The circumstances, according to William Sheeler, were as follows. On Good Friday, John Young came to see him at Sypes' farm where he then lived. Young asked him to accompany him to the house of Daniel Young. On arrival, John

entered the house of his father and left Sheeler to wait outside. In a few minutes John came out with Jesse Masters, the hired hand of the Youngs. The three of them proceeded across a field towards a coal-pit (kilm) where the Young family burned wood to make charcoal. Shortly after leaving the house, Sheeler observed Christopher Young taking another route towards the same destination. When the three arrived at a fence at the edge of the woods, about an eighth of a mile from the coal-pit, John Young told Sheeler to wait there while he and Masters went over the fence and into the woods. At about this time, Sheeler spied Christopher Young heading through the woods, toward the same coal-pit, where he waited, pacing back and forth, for about two hours. John Young then returned alone, soaked to the skin, ostensibly from crossing a nearby creek. Sheeler naturally asked what had become of Masters. Young replied that he had sent Masters away.

William Sheeler confronted Young with the fact that Masters (not being any too brave) would be too afraid to go off into a dark, cloudy night alone. Sheeler also reported that he had heard groans like someone choking, and the sound of a fierce struggle coming from the area of the coal-pit. Sheeler judged that Masters must be dead.

At this point apparently John Young confessed to the lurid and ghoulish deed, and divulged that he had "hard work to do it". It was Sheeler's opinion that since the Youngs had not entered the woods with any weapon, they may have used the axes they sometimes left there after chopping wood.

According to Sheeler, the two of them returned to the house by 10 or 11 o'clock, and Chris arrived soon afterwards. Sheeler was then warned by John, "If you tell I will kill you, and if not me some of the rest will". His reason for disposing of Masters was, according to Sheeler, anyone who would behave as Masters did (i.e. implicating the Youngs in the theft of the turkeys) should be killed.

Although not entirely consistent in his repetitions of the story, Sheeler was very convincing. He had, after all, risked his own neck by voluntarily confessing to a crime in which he was a passive participant. The story gained further credence from the fact that the Youngs had both motive and opportunity. Sheeler admitted that fear of the large and powerful John Young had kept him from going to the authorities earlier.³

It soon became apparent that the Youngs would be jailed on a charge of murder. Realizing that the only way to clear himself would be to find Masters, John Young determined to cross over to the States at Buffalo and conduct a search for the alleged victim. With arrest imminent, John saddled his horse and set out from his father's farm. No sooner had he reached the road to Hamilton (Upper James Street) than he was given chase by a constable, who had been observing the house from a nearby taven (probably at the corner of Upper James Street and Stonechurch Road). A desperate race then ensued. John had a lead of about a quarter of a mile but the constable was gaining ground. The latter aimed his "horse pistol" at Young, and shouted for him to surrender. John ignored the demand. Down John Street they galloped. Young made a sharp right turn onto King Street (at Sheldon's Corner) and the constable fired. The bullet missed its mark.

The grueling pace took its toll on the stamina of both horses, and the constable turned into Carey's barn to seek out a fresh mount. Fortunately for the constable, he found there a race horse called Skuball. It took only a few minutes to transfer the bridle, saddle the speedy steed, and return to the chase on the Niagara Road.

Meanwhile luck was not with John Young. While striding at full speed past the First Methodist Church his girth snapped, and he was catapulted on to the ground. In short order he was able to execute a hasty repair job on his girth, and resume his mission. Not a moment too soon! As Young re-emerged on to King Street, the officer appeared in the distance from around a bend in the road. But Young's horse was spent. Realizing his predicament, John jumped to the ground at Crosswaite's (2½ miles past Hamilton) and made a bee-line for the woods.

The constable fired a token shot, but was loath to expose himself to the dangers of ferreting out a desperado from the tangled underbrush. So, the officer returned to the jail, giving the warrant to the high constable. This individual hastily saddled his horse and headed down the road to the Niagara frontier. En route, he secured help in the person of constable John Gage. The two rode all night; and by early morning their horses needed rest and feed. At last, they came upon a barn in Chippewa that would serve their needs.

Sometime earlier however, after travelling all night on foot, John Young was overcome with fatigue, and he looked for a secluded place for a bed. Unfortunately for him, the place he chose was the same barn into which the two constables now led their exhausted horses!

The captors found a fresh horse and plunked Young upon its back with his legs tied together under the horse. Thus, the three began the homeward trek — John Gage riding in the rear with his rifle on half-cock and the high constable leading John Young's horse by the bridle.⁶ John Young was subsequently jailed, joining his accuser Sheeler in the Hamilton gaol. In the alleged murder of Jesse Masters, Young was initially charged as principal, with Sheeler as an accessory.⁷

Daniel Young was understandably concerned about the welfare of his youngest son, so took out advertisements in the *Gore Gazette* asking for information relative to the present whereabouts of Masters.

INFORMATION WANTED

Disappeared from the Township of Barton on the 12th or 13th April last, a young man by the name of Jesse (or William) Masters, about 18 or 19 years of age, about 5 feet 8 inches high, thick set, brown hair, and blue eyes, with a small scar on his nose; he was left handed and rather hump-backed. If said young man is still alive he will confer a favor on the subscriber by either coming forward or letting him know where he is; and any information respecting him will be thankfully received as John Young (son of the subscriber) is now in jail accused of the murder of the said Jesse (or William) Masters.

Barton 3 April 1828

Daniel Young

Editors of newspapers in this province and the United States are requested to give the above item an insertion.⁸

If the statements of William Sheeler and his father William Sheeler Sr. are to be believed, the Youngs had attempted to muzzle the younger Sheeler. Apparently James Young, brother of John, had approached the father of the jailed Sheeler, asking him to persuade his son to deny his previous statements. The younger Sheeler also asserted that while they were both in jail John Young told him that, "if he held his tongue they would get off, and he [Young] would give him [Sheeler] fifty acres of land near the Grand River."⁹

At the Gore Assizes in early September, John Young and his nephew Chris Young were put on trial for the murder of Jesse Masters. Apparently Sheeler must have turned Queen's evidence, since he was not mentioned among the accused.

Samuel Potts, John Thomson, Wm. T. Barnes and John Snyder began the day-long trial testifying about the turkey incident. William Sheeler then provided a lengthy testimony concerning the events alleged to have occurred at the coal-pit.

Much of the attention of the court centered around the charcoal pit itself. Michael Burkholder and John Davis told the court that they came upon the pit by accident the previous fall, and formed suspicions concerning the offensive odour emanating from it. Davis stated that the smell resembled that of a human body in a state of decomposition. When he returned to the pit in the spring he noticed that the smell was no longer so pronounced. At some point, a group including John Snyder and Wm. T. Barnes, went to the coal-pit to plow it up. The disagreeable smell was so strong that they abandoned the project.

At the trial, in his charge to the jury the judge cast aspersions upon the inconsistent and improbable story. Since the evidence concerning the alleged murder was primarily based upon the testimony of one individual whose reputation was far from unblemished, the judge advised the jury to consider, especially in the absence of a body, that the whole thing was a fabrication and that Masters was still living.

The jury brought in a verdict of not guilty. The judge then advised the prisoners to spare no effort in the recovery of Masters as in no other way could their innocence be widely believed.

Interest in the trail was intense, especially in consideration of the fact that, "the family of the prisoners is well known, in the district,"¹⁰ and had, "numerous connections in the neighbourhood".¹¹

After John Young's acquittal the subsequent rejection and suspicions of friends and neighbours weighed heavily upon the shoulders of the Young family. In their desperation, James and John reportedly sold their farms (although the land records do not confirm this) and, with the financial support provided a subscription taken up by their supporters, began an adventurous journey with the intention of clearing their names. For several months the brothers combed

the countryside, in what must have seemed like a search for a very small needle in a very large haystack.

It is difficult to imagine the emotional intensity — something between joy, relief and ecstasy — which occurred when they met up with their elusive prey at last.¹²

However, details are far from clear. One article, based on certain "facts" in an "old book", reported that the two Youngs in disembarking from a boat at Tonawanda, New York, looked up to find Jesse Masters standing on the wharf.¹³ This version is likely a fabrication, as the *Gore Balance* reported an entirely different scenario.

The July 1st edition of 1830 reported that Masters had visited their offices, telling the reporter that, "he has been living in an interior town of the United States, where he had no opportunities of obtaining information on the subject upon which the Youngs were tried. The first intimation he had of it was from James Young himself, who succeeded in finding out his residence after a long pursuit."¹⁴ An earlier edition, 24 June 1830, reported that on Monday June 21st Young and Masters arrived in Hamilton.¹⁵

The documents are silent on the initial reaction of the public, who were perfectly convinced that the Youngs were guilty. Perhaps angered by being made the fool, or as a release mechanism to deal with the guilt they felt, the public now directed its venom towards William Sheeler, held in gaol as much for his own protection as for any other reason.

At Gore Assizes for September, 1830, William Sheeler was tried for perjury. He was, "convicted and sentenced to eight months imprisonment in the Hamilton jail, during which time he is to take two airings on an elevated platform, probably designed as a preservation of health..."¹⁶

If Thomas Ralston's memory is accurate, Sheeler was required to stand in the pillory (stocks) for two hours at a time and suffered pelting with eggs. No doubt, this sport provided some much needed diversion in pioneer Hamilton.¹⁷

ADDENDUM

Much of the story took place on the Young farm east of Highway 6, north of Rymal Road, on the banks of Red Hill Creek. The site of the house that was home to the major participants in the Coal-Kiln Murder is located in what is today a field of barley, and is surrounded by plow scattered artifacts that can be dated to the first half of the nineteenth century. The coal-kiln has not yet been pinpointed.

Little is known of the subsequent events in the lives of Masters and Sheeler. Masters dropped from the records. Apparently Sheeler later moved to the Caledonia area, but further details are unavailable.

The three Youngs remained in the area and, while not achieving any conspicuous affluence, or other forms of worldly success, they were able to steer clear of any further contact with the criminal courts.

James Young inherited the lion's share of the Young farm, raised 7 children there, and was buried in the small family cemetery on Upper Wellington Street.

John Young married a close relative, and resided on leased Indian land near Caledonia with their two sons.

Chris Young married twice, sired at least 10 children, purchased large blocks of Indian land in and around Caledonia, farmed, tried his hand at inn keeping, and eventually became a reeve for Seneca Township.

Even a hundred years ago, the second hand accounts of the Coal-Kiln Murder were notoriously inaccurate. On 24 June, 1898, an article entitled "A Barton Murder" appeared in the *Hamilton Spectator*.¹⁸ One of the readers of this summary of events (originally taken from the *Dundas Banner*) was David Young Sr. from Seneca on the Grand River. Incensed at the inaccuracies and apparent fabrications in the story, he contacted the offices of the *Grand River Sachem* which printed his corrected version. Although David Young was related to the principles involved, any memories of events that transpired 60 years previous could be blurred distorted. Young was only 9 years old when the three Youngs were charged with the "coal-kiln murder."¹⁹

David Young first attempted to clear up the many confusions that had arisen concerning the relationships of the Youngs to one another. Inaccuracies were evident even in the original articles in the *Gore Gazette*, where Christopher was called Christian; and later writers assumed that Christian was the father of the two others. Christopher was also referred to as the cousin of John and James. The truth was that James and John were brothers, uncles to Chris Young who was the son of their eldest brother Peter Young. Chris, at the time of the trial, worked for his uncles although his residence was at the Grand River. David Young went on to state that, at the time John Young was arrested, Chris Young could not be located. He was at that time working for Col. William Nelles, and gave himself up on the day of the trial. Primary documents support this contention.²⁰

Young also corrected the earlier *Spectator* article which named the accuser as a man called Shields. Young remembered that his name was Shuler, pronounced Sheller and that, "his descendants are very well known by many in the country round about."²¹

David Young caps off his series of recollections with a statement concerning the relationships between the Youngs and Sheeler. He said that, "There was certainly no love for their accuser on the part of the Youngs, and so great was Shuler's fear of them, that the jailer's wife disguised him as a woman when his term of imprisonment expired."²²

A startling coincidence has led to further confusions. There were two murder cases involving residents of Barton Township named James and John Young. In the year of 1876, a murder took place along Highway 6 south of Caledonia. Two men were captured and accused. Tried and convicted, they were sentenced to hang, but escaped from the Cayuga jail, hiding for months in a barn on the Mountain (being brought provisions by their girlfriends). They were

discovered (a shoot-out ensued), and returned to jail. One man was hanged and the other sent to the Kingston penitentiary.²² The murderers were James William Young, and his uncle John Young. John was the nephew of James and John Young of 1828 fame, and James William was their great nephew.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

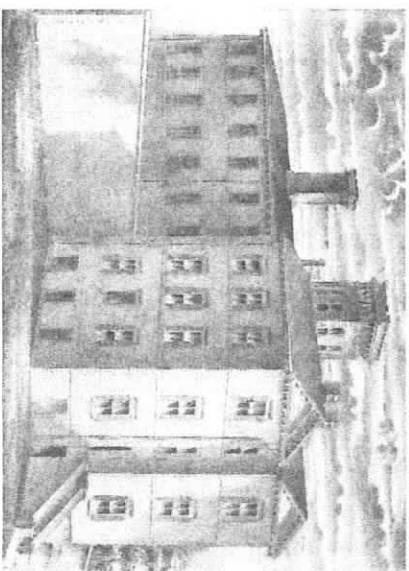
- 1) For his career see the *Dictionary of Hamilton Biography*, vol. 1, 1981, ed. T. Melville Bailey, et al., p. 192.
- 2) Archives of Ontario, MS 530 (2), RG 22, Court of Oyer and Terminer, Minute Books 1810 to 1735, Gore and Niagara Districts, 19 Aug. 1819; 9 Sept. 1826; 23 Sept. 1829; 29 Aug. 1831; 24 Sept. 1832; 28 Sept. 1832.
- 3) Hamilton Public Library, Special Collections. Thomas Ralston, *Hamilton as it Was Something Over Half a Century Ago. (Remarkable Incidents Told by One Who Was There and Who Knows All About Them)*, undated newspaper clipping.
- 4) Bailey, op. cit. "Daniel Young", pp. 216-217.
- 5) "Gore Assizes. Trial of John Young and Christopher Young, on an Indictment for Murder", *Gore Gazette*, Vol. 2, No. 29 (13 Sept. 1828), p. 114.
- 6) Thomas Ralston, op. cit.
- 7) "Charge of Murder", *Gore Gazette*, Vol. 1, No. 52 (23 Feb. 1828), p. 207.
- 8) "Information Wanted" *Gore Gazette*, Vol. 2, No. 7 (12 April 1828), p. 207.
- 9) *Gore Gazette*, 13 Sept. 1828, p. 114.
- 10) *Gore Gazette*, 13 Sept. 1828, p. 115.
- 11) *Ibid.*, 23 Feb. 1828, p. 207.
- 12) Hamilton Public Library, Special Collections, *Tinsley Scrapbook*, Vol. 5, pp. 36-37.
- 13) *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- 14) *Gore Balance*, Vol 1, No. 30 (1 July 1830).
- 15) *Ibid.*, No. 29 (24 June 1830).
- 16) *Ibid.*, No. 40 (9 Sept. 1830).
- 17) Thomas Ralston, op. cit. Ralston reported that the, "pillory above and stocks beneath were erected on the vacant space between the log jail and John".
- 18) "A Barton Murder", *Hamilton Spectator*, (24 June 1898), p. 2.
- 19) *Gore Gazette*, 13 Sept. 1828, p. 114.
- 20) "That Barton Murder", *Hamilton Spectator*, (27 July 1898), p. 8.
- 21) *Hamilton Spectator*, 27 July 1898, p. 8.
- 22) Mabel Burkholder, "Famous Murder Mysteries. A Dark Deed On the Caledonia Road," *Hamilton Spectator*, 17 April 1948, p. 17.



James Young 1800-1884 (one of the co-accused) and his wife Christina 1797-1890, photographed at a later date.



Dorothy Hutton, Caledonia



Historical Atlas

Wentworth Co. Gaol, Hamilton, Ont.