

PHRENOLOGY AND PATTY CANNON by James Dawson

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As I wrote in my article about Patty Cannon in the Sept. 2022 issue of the Tidewater Times, Patty Cannon, kidnapper and murderer of Free Blacks and slaves, was certainly the Eastern Shore's Queen of Crime in the early 1800s. And as a final ironic twist for a murderer, Patty Cannon's skull ended up on public display on Broadway in New York City.

Phrenology was hot stuff in the mid-1800s, when America's foremost phrenologists, the brothers, Lorenzo and Orson Fowler, operated their American Institute of Phrenology with hundreds of skulls on display and also published phrenological journals and almanacs. Though now discredited and bogus, in its heyday in the 18th and 19th centuries, phrenology purported to be able to determine someone's character by examining the bumps and contours of their skull, which was divided into 37 different compartments for attributes such as amativeness (lust), philoprogenitiveness, (producing offspring), concentrativeness (being able to concentrate), inhabitiveness (staying in the same residence), adhesiveness (mutual adhesiveness of cells (whatever that is) and so forth.

In later years phrenology was used to support claims of the superiority of the White race, assuming that any race that had differently shaped skulls must be degenerate, but it has no scientific credibility now.

One of the Fowler's prizes was the skull of Patty Cannon.

In his definitive work on Patty Cannon, "The Monster's Handsome Face", Hal Roth wrote in the chapter "Patty Cannon's Skull" that, "Another study should be conducted to answer the question of whether Fowler included an evaluation of Patty Cannon's skull in his writings? Phrenological journals from the period would seem to be the logical place to begin the search." [p.,216] I took Hal up on his challenge and found some amazing material. There are even three wood cuts of Patty Cannon's and her sister Betsy's skulls.

One of their articles was in The Phrenological Almanac for 1841 was by Lorenzo Niles Fowler (1811-1896), which had been referenced as a source in other Patty Cannon publications, but apparently I was the first one to actually track down a copy and read it. Although the later part of it is mostly based on the notorious, and somewhat inaccurate 1841 pamphlet "Narrative and Confessions of Lucretia P. Cannon", the text of which has been reprinted by Roth and others, but this phrenological part which is not in any Patty Cannon book,

"These [wood] cuts are taken from the skull of a notorious woman, by the name of Patty Cannon. Her head was large — its shape low and broad, and chiefly developed in the occipital, basilar, and intellectual regions. Her moral sentiments, as may be seen by the cuts, were almost entirely deficient, and could have but little influence in restraining or regulating the propensities. The size and developments of the head are remarkable, and the character of the individual must have been especially marked and striking. According to phrenology we should infer the following characteristics- That she

would be selfish, sensual, deceitful, and cruel to the lowest degree, shrew'd, artfully sagacious in laying plans, groveling and sensual in her pleasures, and totally incapable of appreciating high-toned moral feeling, and being greatly wanting in true dignity, self-respect and refinement, she would be almost indifferent to the principles of justice as well as to human suffering; had a violent temper, great energy, tact, management and force of character; was courageous, bold, revengeful, licentious, cunning, and determined in the objects of her pursuits. The anterior lobe of her brain was very large, indicating a strong intellect; but the moral sentiments being so entirely deficient, her intellect would be chiefly employed in devising ways and means for gratifying selfish propensities. Causality and Comparison were uncommonly strong, giving originality, and with a large brain, enabling her to lay plans on a large scale, and successfully to adapt means to ends. With such phrenological conditions, she would exert an extensive influence over the lower order of minds, and could not be otherwise than distinguished for most of the above traits of character.

“The above is the substance of an examination given by L.N. Fowler of Patty Cannon’s skull at Georgetown, Del., in February 1840. He had no knowledge whatever of the character of the individual at the time, and to that remarkable exactness of the examination, many individuals who knew the life and character of Patty Cannon, leave their testimony...” [“The Phrenological Almanac for 1841 Embellished with Fifty Engravings Illustrative of the Science of Phrenology”; by L.N. Fowler; N.Y.; pps. 37-39]

Some locals dug up Patty’s skull and took it to Fowler when he was lecturing there, not telling him whose skull it was, with the challenge that they would give it to him for his museum, if he could discern the character of whose skull it was. Supposedly, his evaluation convinced them and they presented him with the skull. But there is no way of knowing how much the Fowlers’ later more detailed phenological examination of Patty Cannon’s skull was influenced consciously or subconsciously by their knowing whose skull it was.

The following is from Orson Fowler’s book “Hereditary Descent” published in 1848. Only brief excerpts have been published before and it has never been reprinted in full, as far as I know, which is curious because it is loaded with biographical tidbits about Patty’s family and details about the gang’s kidnapping business not seen elsewhere:

PATTY CANNON AND HER FATHER AND BROTHER
by Orson Squire Fowler (1809-1887)

“This notorious woman shed human blood as lavishly as if it had been water. She procured and held in subjection a desperate gang, whose sole business was to perpetrate the robberies and murders she planned, in which she generally took the lead, and frequently perpetrated murders single handed in order to rob. One of this gang was afterwards executed, and under the gallows disclosed her atrocity.

“Her excessive Amativeness was her coy-duck [i.e. decoy] with which to allure victims within her reach, and retain them till he could dispatch them. She fitted out a kidnapping vessel to Philadelphia, and with negro stool-pigeons who mingled with the

colored people of the city, and under various pretences decoyed them on board, she kidnapped and transported first to her prison castle and thence into slavery hundreds of free negroes. Those who were decoyed on board, but were too old or infirm to bring much, were unceremoniously drowned. And infants, captured with their mothers, which by their crying endangered her safety, were mercilessly knocked in the head with a loaded whip made for this express purpose. Several infant skeletons were disinterred in her garden after her capture. For years after her crimes were publicly known, this resolute woman and her desperate gang kept the officers of the law at bay, but was finally captured after a desperate resistance, and committed suicide in prison. A more atrocious robber and murderess probably never existed, at least in our country.

"Her Destructiveness, and also Acquisitiveness, as well as Amativeness, were enormous, as seen in the accompanying engravings of her skull, which can be seen in the author's cabinet.*

"The father of this human fiend, becoming exasperated with a neighbor about some money matters, went into a shop where this enemy worked, and picking up a suitable piece of timber, struck him on the head and killed him, for which he was executed.

"Her brother committed a crime which the laws then punished with death, and followed his father to the scaffold, being every way a very bad man.

"Her sister Betsey, who married Bat. [Bartholomew] Twiford, was one of the most violent tempered, implacable, and revengeful of women, notoriously licentious, and known to be guilty of every crime but murder, of which she was suspected. Her tongue was the most bitter and sarcastic imaginable, and she was unparalleled, far and wide, for the most foul-mouthed abuse and shocking profanity.

"Her Amativeness and Destructiveness, like those of her sister Patty, were extraordinarily developed, as seen in the following engraving. The resemblance of these skulls to each other is striking.

"One of the descendants of one of these women was tried in Delaware about 1840, for some aggravated crime- I think for murder.

"The mother of these depraved women was large and fleshy, and good-natured, yet accused of manifesting undue Amativeness. This passion she transmitted to her daughters, who inherited also their Destructiveness from their father, and hence their wantonness, revengefulness, and murderous ferocity."

*For a more particular account of this extraordinary woman, see the Phrenological Almanac for 1841, or Journal for 1840.

[O.S. Fowler, "Hereditary Descent Its Laws and Facts Applied to Human Development"; Fowler and Wells; N.Y. 1848. pps. 154-156]

Note: Patty Cannon's modest dwelling was hardly a prison-castle!

The Fowlers also had Patty Cannon's sister Betsy's skull and the skull of Ebenezer Johnson Sr. This Ebenezer was Joe Johnson's father (Joe Johnson was Patty's brother-in-law and her co-kidnapper). As to how Fowler got the skull George

Alfred Townsend, author of *The Entailed Hat* and the first Patty Cannon biographer, stated,

“Several years before the rebellion... the phrenologist Fowler, lecturing in that part of the country, having obtained the skull of Patty Cannon in Georgetown, [Del.] wanted also the skull of old Johnson, her confrere and possible guardian, and he was not molested in disinterring it to take to his museum, where both skulls are now to be found. The two holes were found in Johnson’s skull and one of the bullets, the other having passed through and been found in the house.” [Cincinnati Enquirer, Feb. 6, 1882]

There was apparently nothing the Fowlers would not do, even grave robbing, in their pursuit of pseudo-science! Fowler seems to have confused Ebenezer Johnson Sr. with his son Joe Johnson who was a kidnapper, but while Ebenezer Johnson Sr. was part of Patty Cannon’s gang, it was really his son Joseph who was more the mastermind. But since Joe Johnson was alive and well, having escaped to Texas, his skull was not available for display. Joe Johnson was never caught or prosecuted.

While Fowler was exhuming skulls, he also got the skull of Patty’s sister Betsy for good measure, although Betsy was never charged with being part of the Cannon kidnapping ring.

It is interesting that while Fowler noticed that Patty and Betsy’s skulls were strikingly similar, he did not explain why Patty led a life of crime, while Betsy, who was probably not a nice person, was never convicted of any crime.

Ebenezer Sr., on the other hand, had several judgements against him for theft and was shot by a posse at Betsy’s house near Twiford’s Landing on the Nanticoke River about 1814-1817.

So where were they buried? Patty Cannon was thought to have been buried in a small graveyard for criminals in the Georgetown, Del. jail yard. Roth reports a theory that Betsy may have been buried in the Twiford family graveyard near Sharptown, Del, since Betsy had married Bartholomew Twiford and was part of that family, but probably not. Twiford died and then she married John Gillis who dumped her when he found out her unsavory connections with the Cannon gang. Then she “took up” with someone named Bill Russell and vanished from the record.

So where could Betsy and Ebenezer Johnson have been buried so that Fowler the phrenologist could have easily dug them up from a place that no one cared about to display in his museum? I think the logical place was the Georgetown Potters Field which was behind the Alms House. Ebenezer was a known felon and Betsy was definitely a disreputable character so they may well have ended up there.

Unlike the graves in Easton’s Potters Field which were not marked or recorded, the pauper graves in Georgetown were marked and recorded, unfortunately the records only go back to 1847, too late to have listed Betsy or Ebenezer who died about 1815, So barring any new discoveries, that will likely remain a mystery.

It has long been assumed that the Patty Cannon skull recently in the possession of the Dover Public Library in Delaware was the same Patty Cannon skull that the Fowlers had. But, based on eyewitness descriptions of the skulls that I also recently discovered, the Dover Patty Cannon skull is not the Fowler Patty Cannon skull.

But more about that skullduggery in my future article.