

REMEMBERING THE INFAMOUS PATTY CANNON  
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Patty Cannon is certainly Delmarva's Queen of Crime. She and her son-in-law Joe Johnson were alleged to have run a slave and free black kidnapping operation at their tavern near the Maryland and Delaware border in the early 1800s. The tavern was located in the community of Reliance, previously known as Johnson's Crossroads, which straddles the state line on Delaware Route 20, west of Seaford. Recently I found long forgotten notes I had made of an interview I did in 1979 of an elderly friend of mine, James Wheedleton, who had known someone who had actually seen Patty Cannon when he was a boy. It's not often you get to meet someone who knew someone who saw Patty Cannon as she died in 1829.

Patty Cannon was born in 1759, 1760 or 1769, depending on the source. She was said to have been the daughter of Lucius P. Hanly or Hanley who was a smuggler and apparently hanged for kidnapping a slave. She married Jesse Cannon of Delaware, who was a kidnapper. Patty's daughter Mary married Harry Bruinton (or Berenton), who was convicted and hanged for kidnapping and murder. Mary then married Joe Johnson, who was also into kidnapping and murder. It was likely either Patty or Joe who masterminded the Reliance operation. Joe took off down south after Patty's arrest. Patty Cannon died in jail before she was tried, on May 11, 1829. Her death was said to have been caused by arsenic which she had hidden in the hem of her skirt. It was quite the family.

She was also quite the sensation. A very rare pamphlet was printed in 1841, *The Narrative and Confessions of Lucretia P. Cannon- The Female Murderer* that described Patty as committing "several of the most Atrocious, Barbarous and Infamous murders ever committed by one of the Female Sex." The title page of which was illustrated with a lurid engraving of Patty throwing a Black baby into a fire.

This Narrative is not known for its accuracy, as Patty was arrested but died in jail before being tried and never, as far as we know, actually confessed to any of the crimes she was charged with. Nor was her name Lucretia, as the only other name she is referred to in the old records is Martha. Likely the author of the Narrative was attempting to tie Patty Cannon in with another infamous femme fatale, Lucretia Borgia.

Much has been written about her, both fact and fiction. One of the best known accounts is in George Alfred Townsend's novel *The Entailed Hat*, published in 1884. After seemingly every scrap of this story had been found, imagine my recent surprise when I found notes of an interview I had done in 1979 of an elderly friend who, when he was a boy, knew someone who had seen Patty Cannon when he was a boy.

As we will see, this account is probably more fiction than fact. Still it was not often that one could know someone who knew someone who'd seen the infamous Patty Cannon, so they were definitely worth preserving.

But first, here is most of what we know about Patty Cannon, which historian H. C. Conrad discovered in the Delaware Archives from 1829.

"Much excitement now prevails in the county in consequence of the discovery of the bodies of several persons interred on the premises of the celebrated Patty Cannon, who lives upon the line of the state and whose house has been for a long time the resort of all the kidnapping and negro traders in this part of the Peninsula.

"About a week since, a person who was ploughing in the orchard adjoining the house of this woman, observed the ground to sink in a particular spot, which induced him to suppose that money might be found there. Upon going home he communicated the fact to several others. who in the hope of some valuable prize went to examine it. They dug up the earth until they came to a chest, which upon opening, to their astonishment contained the bones of a man with some remains of clothing.

"The chest has been identified as one formerly in the possession of Mrs. Cannon and the deceased is supposed to have been a Southern [slave] trader, who about ten years ago suddenly disappeared from the neighborhood.

"In consequence of this discovery, the people in the vicinity were in dread to make further search, and a few days since, in the enclosure they dug up the bodies of three other persons, one of them a child with the skull fractured. The bones of the child and one other were found in the same pit, the child uppermost.

"Mrs. Cannon has since been arrested and is now confined to Jail to await a further investigation by the Grand Jury. A man by the name of Cyrus James, who was raised by Mrs. Cannon and who has been intimate of her family ever since is likewise imprisoned. He was present at the disinterring of the bodies and directed the persons engaged in it where to find them.

"It is said that he stated before the Justice who committed Mrs. Cannon that he saw the mortal wound inflicted upon the child that was found and that Mrs. Cannon on another occasion carried out a black child not yet dead, in her apron, but it never returned..."

Her indictment read that she had been "seduced and instigated by the Devil." Patty Cannon died in jail on May 11, 1829 before coming to trial. Naturally, the stories spread widely and some thought she murdered as many as 11 people.

Fast forward 150 years: James Wheedleton and I were friends. Not only did he live in Trappe, and we not only shared the same first name, but the same birthday as well, June 10. Plus he was full of interesting stories and was great fun to talk to. He had lived most of his life in Caroline Co. and somehow the subject of Patty Cannon came up. I made notes of the following interview in 1979 when he was 72 and completely forgot about it until just recently when I came across it written on the endpapers in my copy of Ted Giles' 1965 pamphlet Patty Cannon Woman of Mystery. This is the stuff of legends even if the facts are a bit thin, but remember this was told to me as the 60+ year-old memories of someone else's 80+ year-old memories. And both individuals were boys at the time.

Jan. 29, 1979

"Talked this evening with Mr. Wheedleton about Patty Cannon. He knew someone who knew Patty Cannon- Matt Cannon (no relation) who remembered hiding in his father's grain wagon and elsewhere when Patty Cannon came into sight. He was 8 or 9 then and was in his 90s when Mr. Wheedleton knew him when he (Mr. Wheedleton) was a boy. Mr. Wheedleton is 72 now.

"Matt Cannon was scared of Patty Cannon. She always dressed in buckskin boots, vest and especially a buckskin hat, flat brim pushed up in front with a brogue? holding it up. Wheedleton used to work on a farm rented from Bird Truitt which was part of Patty Cannon's land. Had a granary where Patty Cannon killed Johnson with a sword. He lay there for a time and blood stains were still visible. Mr. W. was curious and crawled under floor and there were more stains there. Rub them with a brick & [still] looked almost fresh. Matt Cannon swore this was true. Johnson was [the] only white man Patty Cannon killed. tho' she killed slaves- shot then & turned them face up with her foot to see if they were dead. Granary was three rooms- hand hewn beams, just windows connecting the rooms. Wasn't always a granary.

"Mr. W. knew of trees where you could dig down in bark & find staples she used to chain slaves to- some trees only had one staple because she often had one armed slaves. Patty Cannon also traded slaves- had a big stone wharf to be built for her- flat stone slabs laid out. He found it- sunk down in mud a few yards from steamboat wharf there called Bird Truitt wharf. Said Minnie Cole if she was still alive had an oil portrait of Patty Cannon. W. saw it in an old trunk. Patty Cannon had it done in England on one of

her many trips there- maybe 8 x 12. Showed her with one squinty eye and one pop eye.

“She wasn’t pretty, but not bad either- a curious face. Long chin, good teeth (false?) showed between her lips. Dark brown hair pulled in a bun behind her head to allow for hat. Matt Cannon swore this was her, may have had her name & date in script at bottom. It was stolen from Patty Cannon’s house and hung in post office/store there so people would know what she looked like. Matt Cannon later got it.

“Said she was strong as a mule & could straddle a horse just like a damn monkey. Swore she traded a slave once for a chew of tobacco.

“Patty Cannon’s home burnt down. The one in Reliance was her & Johnson’s store. House was on Md. & Del. border etc. furniture in one side so moved to other side depending on whether Cambridge or Sharptown sheriff came. Ted Giles confirmed some of this, but Giles talked to Wheedleton’s brother who hadn’t & poked around as much as W. Had specially inscribed copy to himself of this book from Ted Giles. Patty Cannon was short, wharf was not on Tick Island the way his brother told Giles.”  
[Others identified Tick Island as being Patty Cannon’s island where slaves were chained to trees and had seen the staples driven into tree trunks to hold the manacles.]

In truth, Patty Cannon was a woman of mystery as biographer Ted Giles put it. She was born in 1759, 1760, or 1769 either in Canada or on the Eastern Shore. Her maiden name was Hanley and she is called Martha or Patty in the old records. She married Jesse Cannon and later was either the evil mastermind of a free Black kidnapping ring or an innocent bystander, depending on which version you want to believe. Wheedleton was correct, Patty did dress in men’s clothes and was stronger than most men. It was rumored that she had personally killed up to 11 people and was in fact arrested, but died in jail before her trial in 1829, and was said to have been buried in the prison yard. In 1840, a phrenologist O.S. Fowler claimed to have the skulls of Patty Cannon and Ebenezer Johnson display in his museum in New York. What was said to be her skull was once in the Dover Public Library

Patty, Joe Johnson and his brother Ebenezer were charged with the murder of a slave dealer who stopped at the tavern and bragged that he had \$15,000 to buy slaves with. Possibly it was his grave that was accidentally discovered in 1829. It really was not a good idea for a stranger to go flashing money around at Patty Cannon’s place.

Patty Cannon was thought to have participated in the kidnapping and sale of slaves and free blacks in the early 1800s in the Johnson Crossroads (later Reliance) area of Caroline Co., Dorchester Co and Delaware. Kidnapping probably also included murder which she or her son-in-law Joe Johnson was guilty of.

Ted Giles does not mention a Matt Cannon, but he did note that two locals, Job Russell who was born in 1821 and died in 1911 at age 90, and his friend George Lovell both remembered seeing Patty Cannon when they were boys, but Job Russell died when Mr. Wheedleton was 3 years old, so Mr. Wheedleton didn’t know him. Patty Cannon was certainly a person of interest, as Giles put it, so obviously others remembered her as well. Mothers used to frighten noisy children that Patty Cannon would get them if they didn’t behave. She was also described as being a she-demon in one early account.

No one has ever written about a portrait of Patty Cannon, and she certainly did not have it done in England while on several of her trips there, as she is never known to have had her portrait painted let alone to have gone to England. However, a portrait is not totally impossible, as there were itinerant portrait painters traveling the roads in those days. Nevertheless a Patty Cannon portrait seems highly improbable and if one ever existed, would certainly have been mentioned by others. More likely, someone there found an old portrait and assumed it was Patty.

There was something exotic about Patty Cannon and it was thought that she had some "gypsy blood" in her. Patty was described as being attractive and certainly did not look like Popeye the Sailor man with one squinty eye and one pop eye. Those details were probably added later to heighten the scare factor. She was said to have been stronger than most men and could lift a 300 lb. flour barrel with ease or wrestle a man to the ground and hog tie him, which came in handy if you were in the slave kidnapping business.

That she straddled a horse probably meant that she rode a horse like a man instead of side saddle like refined women did then.

It is unlikely, though that Patty once traded a slave for a chew of tobacco, as slaves were much more valuable than that sometimes commanding prices of hundreds of dollars.

Patty Cannon did not kill Joe Johnson, who was her son-in-law and who survived her. However Joe Johnson was said to have killed a man named King in a house in the area, so perhaps that was the source of the confusion. Also, in the novel *Patty Cannon Administers Justice* Patty shoots and kills Johnson, so that deliberate fiction also adds to the confusion. And not only that, but the Cannon/Johnson gang were responsible for the death of a Black boy named Joe Johnson whom they had kidnapped and sold.

Hal Roth, in his definitive book on Patty Cannon *The Monster's Handsome Face*. wrote that Tick Island has been identified as Patty Cannon's Island and described it as being above Sharptown in the big S curve of the Nanticoke River, on the Maryland and Del. border but Roth noted that not everyone agrees exactly on what is Tick Island. Others thought that it was the nearby smaller Prickle Pear Island, not Tick Island, that was Patty Cannon's Island. Perhaps it was both. By the way, these weren't actual islands, but sandy hills with pine trees on them surrounded by marshes which are called cripples in Eastern Shore lingo.

Several people mentioned the rusty chains stapled to trees on the island and Hal Roth even pictures one of them in his book *In Days Gone By* on p. 107, but the story that single chains were meant for one-armed slaves is silly and is more likely evidence of a child's fantasy than any reality, as one chain could obviously hold a two-armed slave. But that kidnapped Blacks were chained to trees there before they were sold down south, there is no doubt. The chains were stapled low to the ground, not up high. Those big old trees were cut down years ago, so don't bother looking for them now. Blacks were also chained in the attic of the so called Johnson's Tavern. Roth also mentions Galestown Store keeper Elijah Wheedleton (1923-1994) whom Ted Giles had interviewed, and his son Mike who currently loved exploring that area.

Joe Johnson escaped down south.

I have identified most of the people that Mr. Wheedleton mentioned:

Matt Cannon: To date nothing has been found on Matt Cannon- I checked Caroline Co and Dorchester Co. tombstone records. If he was in his 90s (say 95) when James Wheedleton was a 10 year old boy and then if he was 8 or 9 when he saw Patty Cannon he would have been born about 1820. Matt possibly could have met Patty Cannon who died in 1829, and if not certainly knew people who did know Patty. I did find a Matthew Cannon listed in the Wilmington, Del. News Journal April 26, 1905 who accidentally started a forest fire near Woodland near Seaford, but no other information. There was a Black man named Matt Cannon in the early 1900s in the area, but he was too young to have seen Patty Cannon.

Minnie A. (Callaway) Cole, is buried in Hillcrest Cemetery in Federalsburg- born 12/14/1888 died July 22, 1989 aged 100. She would have been 91 in 1979.

Bird Truitt: A July 25, 1928 Wilmington, Del. News Journal mentions the Bird Truitt farm as being near Sharptown which is in the right area. There was a Truitt's Wharf on the Nanticoke River which was a steamboat landing.

James B. Wheedleton (06/10/1908 -05/11/1980), son of Ollie Lee Wheedleton (1879-1952) born Bethlehem, Md. His relation to Elijah Wheedleton is unknown. They were not brothers; possibly they were cousins. James B. Wheedleton's brothers were Albert and Lee.

Elijah Wheedleton (1923 -01/31/1994) farmer and storekeeper on Galestown; born in Reliance, son of Harry and Edith Wheedleton. There was also an earlier Elijah Wheedleton who was born about 1771.

The best book about Patty Cannon is Hal Roth's THE MONSTER'S HANDSOME FACE. It is the best for trying to separate fact from fiction, but there is definitely more Patty Cannon fiction than fact. Jerry Shields never finished his book on Patty Cannon.

But fact or fiction, Wheedleton's account is an interesting addition to the Patty Cannon canon (if you will pardon the pun), as it is not everyday that one could know someone who knew someone who saw the infamous Patty Cannon.

#### References:

Giles, Ted; PATTY CANNON, Woman of Mystery illustrated by John Moll Easton, Md. 1965;  
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