

## TOO MANY SKULLS FOR PATTY CANNON by James Dawson

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In my two previous articles in Tidewater Times (Sept. and Nov. 2022) I gave the history of Delmarva's most notorious criminal, Patty Cannon, who, as the headline of a 1882 newspaper article put it, was "The Most Godless Female of the [19th] Century, Who Stole Free Colored People, Brained Their Infants, Murdered Negro Traders, Rode on Raids Astraddle Like a Man, Lost Her Chief Man by the Gallows, and Committed Suicide in Jail." [Cincinnati Enquirer Feb. 7, 1882]

Patty Cannon and her gang operated an underground railroad in reverse, kidnapping slaves and free Blacks and selling them to plantations in the south. Three bodies were discovered in the field behind Patty Cannon's house and on the testimony of Cyrus James, who worked for Patty, she was arrested in early April, 1829, and soon after her arrest came this notice:

"At the Court of Quarter Sessions recently sitting in Sussex County, the Grand Jury found three indictments against Patty Cannon for murder, and one against each of the brothers, Joe Johnson and Ebenezer Johnson [Jr.], for the same crime: Patty Cannon is in custody, and will be tried, we presume, at the Court of Oyer and Terminer, in October - and the others reside out of the State. - Journal" The Delaware Register, or Farmers, Manufacturers and Mechanics Advocate [Wilmington, Del. 16 May 1829]

Patty Cannon died in jail on May 11, 1829.

Just when it seemed that there was nothing left to find out about her, I discovered a number of interesting things, including more information about Patty Cannon's skull which ended up on display in Fowler's Phrenological Museum on Broadway.

In this long-forgotten account, George Alfred Townsend or "Gath" described his 1881 visit to see Patty Cannon's skull in Fowler's Phrenological Museum while doing research for his famous novel "The Entailed Hat or Patty Cannon's Times" published in 1884.

### "PATTY'S SKULL

"On Tuesday, January 4, 1881, I called at Fowler & Wells' Phrenological Museum on Broadway, New York, and after making a purchase asked a woman at the sales-counter if there was not in this museum the skull of Martha or "Patty" Cannon, a woman who died or committed suicide under sentence of death. She said there was, and took me to a case and brought out a portion of a skull. It contained the bridge of the nose and the eye-sockets and the whole forehead and crest of the head, and the back of the head to the bones of the skull. The sides of the head, however, were gone. It was of a light walnut color, and the woman said that it had been in the grave some time when Mr. Fowler obtained it, and being probably buried without a coffin or any protection the earth had destroyed a portion of it.

"I took up the skull, and at once observed its extremely low forehead, the depressed, almost level line on the top of the head, and the extremely large posterior,

which swelled toward the base of the brain to a perfect deformity, being a great bump or bone tumor, indicative certainly of sensuality if not of all the animal propensities. The saleswoman, who believed in phrenology, said that it was strong in causation or causitiveness, being a pretty broad skull at the forehead, although low, she said the organs of secretiveness were large; that it was the lowest forehead, perhaps, on a human being in the museum, and the cerebellum or lower back brain was a marvelous size. 'Mr. Fowler, who is still living,' said this woman, 'at about seventy-five years of age lectured in a little town in Delaware one night over thirty years ago, said they told him that they would give him a certain skull if he would describe the character of its possessor. This was the skull, and they admitted that he had determined the character well. He thinks a great deal of this trophy, and has another skull, belonging to Ebenezer Johnson, the guardian or pal of Patty Cannon and father of her son-in-law, which he also dug up and took to New York. Gath.'" [Cincinnati Enquirer; Feb. 7, 1882]

Ebenezer Johnson Sr. had been shot and killed sometime during a shootout about a property dispute about 1814-1817. Patty Cannon died in jail while awaiting trial in 1829. The date or cause of Betsy's demise is not known.

Townsend had briefly mentioned in "The Entailed Hat" that he had seen Patty Cannon's skull in Fowler's museum, but he gave no details, so this recently uncovered account is most revealing.

It is not known exactly how Patty Cannon died. She could have died a natural death in prison while awaiting trial, or possibly as legend has it, by taking poison she had secreted in the hem of her dress. It is not known why she had the foresight to have poison with her, but perhaps it was part of her kidnapping/murder tool kit and legend did have it that she poisoned her husband. Another legend has her escaping to Canada, but if that had happened, you would have thought that would have been big news! Or she could have died of natural causes due to age and disease.

Townsend wrote that, "For a while Patty Cannon, by her affability and sorrow, had easy times in jail and was allowed to eat with the jailer's family; but as the examination proceeded before the grand jury, and her menials hastened to throw their responsibility in so many crimes upon her alone, an outer opinion demanded that she be treated more harshly and some of the irons she had manacled upon her captives were riveted upon her own ankles. Very soon dropsy began to appear in her legs and feet, and, after it became evident to her that neither money nor friends were forthcoming in her defense, she fell into a passive despair..."

"The result was hastened by Patty Cannon's death, which happened, to the great relief of many respectfully considered people in that region, who had feared from the first that she would make a minute confession, implicating everybody who had dealt with her band." [Townsend; Entailed Hat, Tidewater Publishers, pps. 530- 531]

Patty Cannon's lawyer was Josiah Bayly, of Cambridge who was later the fifth Attorney General of Maryland.

Suicide or murder? Her depression could have led to suicide, or her death could have been of natural causes. The swelling of the limbs might have indicated a heart condition and certainly the Georgetown jail in 1829 must not have been the healthiest place for anyone. But murder is another possibility, because slaves were valuable property, and since it was illegal in Delaware to sell slaves out of the state where they

were worth more, you can bet that locals needing money availed themselves of the services of Patty Cannon and Co. to dispose of their human property for some quick cash. Therefore, perhaps some prominent citizens might have been nervous about what Patty might reveal on the witness stand, so it is at least possible (or at least not impossible) that her death was murder and not suicide.

But die she did, from whatever cause it was, before her trial, and there is general agreement that she was buried in the northeast corner of the county jail yard.

Fowler the phrenologist was lecturing in Georgetown in Feb. 1840 and was presented with Patty Cannon's skull, which was later put on display in his phrenological museum in New York City until the museum closed in the early 1900s. It is not known what became of the approximately 1,500 human skulls and plaster casts on display there.

It has been assumed that the Patty Cannon skull lately in the possession of the Dover Delaware Public Library was the skull that the Fowlers had, but recently discovered descriptions of the Fowler skull disprove that.

However, some apparently were not aware of that fact and still thought that her skull and accompanying skeleton were still in the jail yard, as evidenced by this startling article from 1881:

#### "PATTY CANNON

A MONUMENT TO BE ERECTED TO  
HER MEMORY.

A STRANGE LIFE FITLY ENDING IN SUI-  
CIDE, AND A BURIAL IN A NEGLECT-  
ED CORNER OF THE PRISON  
YARD IN GEORGETOWN.

"A movement has been started in Georgetown to solicit subscriptions for a monument to be erected over the grave of Patty Cannon. It is not to be built for the perpetuation of any virtue, but on the contrary, it is to be erected so that the burial place of one of the most remarkable, and at the same time the most blood-thirsty woman of her age, may not be entirely obliterated." [Democratic Messenger (Snow Hill, Md.) 12 Nov. 1881; p. 3]

However, in 1882 this article explains that the so-called monument was actually an equipment shed:

#### "WICKED PATTY CANNON

[Georgetown (Del.) Correspondent]

"Fifty yards from where I write stands the monument over the grave of Patty Cannon. Patty died while under sentence of death, and was buried in one corner of the jail lot in this town. There are a few who are of the opinion that she bribed the sheriff and escaped while some one else's remains were interred at the spot mentioned as a ruse to cover her flight. The monument over her grave is nothing more than a small shanty built to cover the new road machine bought by the town, but the town fathers once

selected and marked the spot as the site of Patty's grave, and since then the mark has gone by the name of "Patty's monument." [St. Paul Globe Oct. 9, 1882]

Of course, an equipment shed being Patty Cannon's monument was a joke.

At some point, due to remodeling and expansion of the Georgetown jail, two or at least three bodies that were buried there were exhumed by then Deputy Sheriff James Marsh and reinterred in the Potters Field cemetery behind the Almshouse.

And in 1902, another Patty Cannon skull was found,

#### "FOUND PATTY CANNON'S SKULL,

Georgetown, Del. July 31

"While excavating in the east corner of the Sussex county jail lot this afternoon, some prisoners unearthed the skull and a number of bones which are said to be those of Patty Cannon, the notorious slave trader, whose home was located on the Delaware-Maryland line at Johnson's Cross Roads in this county...

"The skull and bones are on exhibition at James A. Marsh's law office, and scores of persons are attracted there to see them. There seems to be no doubt of the bones being those of Patty Cannon, as the oldest citizens say no one was ever buried there except her." [Morning News, Wilmington Del. Aug. 1, 1902]

That said, the article was incorrect that only Patty Cannon was buried there, because several bodies had already been disinterred and moved to the nearby Sussex Co. Potters Field for paupers and indigent people, now on the grounds of the Shockley Center in Georgetown. It is still in use.

But in a few days there was a correction to that article:

#### MAY NOT BE PATTY'S BONES Two Other Persons Buried in Old Jail Lot in Georgetown Special to the Evening Journal.

"Georgetown, August 4.- There is some doubt that the bones excavated in the old jail yard here are those of the notorious Patty Cannon who, in the early part of last century, thrived in the neighborhood of Johnson's CrossRoads in North West Fork hundred of this county. It has erroneously been stated that Patty was convicted of murder, but such is not the case. In the April term of court in 1829 three indictments were returned against her, all of which were for murder in the first degree: One for the murder of a female child; another for killing a person unknown to the jury, and a third for the murder of a negro boy. In the last two bills she was indicted jointly with certain men.

"While she was waiting trial on these charges in the Sussex county jail she obtained poison in some manner and put an end to her life, and was buried in about the same place where the bones were found. However, this fact does not go to prove that these bones ever did service for Patty, as two other bodies bearing the earthly names of Harris and Piper were also laid to rest in or about this spot. As a matter of fact, the skull gives evidence of being that of a man, being rather large and set on a jaw bone which is altogether too heavy for a woman-or at least for the modern woman.

“Patty figured conspicuously in George Alfred Townsend’s story of “The Entailed Hat,” and many local stories are told of her great strength and endurance. Her name is still used in this county to scare small children into obeying parents.”

[The Evening Journal (Wilmington, Delaware) 4 Aug. 1902, Monday- p. 6]

Obviously, no one knew, or had forgotten that Fowler had gotten Patty’s skull in 1840, but presumably the rest of her was still there. The fate of Fowler’s Patty Cannon skull is unknown, but it is rather unlikely that it was later reburied in the Sussex jail lot as that area was slated for a courthouse expansion project.

When James Marsh moved to Denver about 1907, he gave his Patty Cannon skull to Charles Joseph of Sussex Co. and that skull hung on a nail in a rafter of his barn, then was moved to his attic. It was finally given by Joseph’s son Alfred to the Dover Library in 1961, where it was stored in a red hat box until it was loaned to Dr. Douglass Owsley of the Smithsonian, who has it now. Plans are that it be part of an exhibition on Chesapeake Bay culture.

While I have not examined the Dover Patty Cannon skull myself, author Hal Roth remarked that the most common remark by those who have seen it is that it seems too small to be hers. It should be noted that the old accounts describe Patty Cannon as a large and powerful woman and Fowler said that she had a large skull, which matched descriptions of her physique. Townsend wrote that Patty Cannon was a thick-set, large-breasted, powerful-necked athlete of a woman, and Hal Roth noted in his book on Patty Cannon “The Monster’s Handsome Face” that the skull in the Dover library appears to be too small and delicate to be Patty Cannon’s. She was reported to be stronger than most men and able to lift a 300-pound barrel of flour, or wrestle a man to the ground. When the Delaware historian the late Bill Frank saw the Dover Patty Cannon skull he wrote that it was “oh so small.”

It has been assumed that Fowler’s Patty Cannon skull somehow made it to Dover after Fowler’s museum closed, but the problems with that are that the Dover Patty Cannon skull was actually exhumed in Georgetown, Del. in 1902 and did not come from Fowler’s museum, which was apparently still open until at least until about 1909.

No one knows what happened to any of the hundreds of skulls there after it closed.

Both skulls were damaged and both are missing their lower jaws. However, some sections missing in the Fowler skull are present in the Dover skull, and some areas damaged in the Dover skull are present in the Fowler skull, so they cannot be a match. In both 1840 woodcuts of Patty’s skull there is so much damage to the nasal and upper jaw part of the skull below the eye sockets that the skull had to be propped up for it to sit level, while photos of the Dover Patty Cannon skull show it sitting upright without a prop. The left eye socket is damaged in the Dover skull, while the Fowler skull had both eye sockets. Also, Fowler said the skull he had was large, matching all the descriptions of Patty Cannon’s physique, while the Dover skull seems to be too small. There are clearly two skulls here, not one, so while Patty Cannon may have been a monster, she certainly did not have two heads.

Of course, neither of the skull’s may be Patty’s, but as Roth noted, the Fowler skull has a much better chance of being genuine than the Dover skull.

But as if two Patty Cannon skulls were not enough, George Alfred Townsend “Gath” said that he saw Patty Cannon's skull at the Fowler Museum in New York at the same time the skull was reported to be in Georgetown. It is possible that one of these was a plaster cast, as Fowler was known to have for sale a set of plaster casts of notable and notorious skulls for phrenological purposes.

“All the casts that were made directly from skulls, on the other hand, illustrated oddities, deficiencies, or exemplary examples of phrenological composition. Among the latter were Patty Cannon, Murderess, (“All the moral organs small...”), [Scientific American Invention, Technology, and National Identity by Susan Branson p. 150].

Apparently, Fowler also offered for sale sets of plaster casts of abnormal skulls, including Patty Cannon's. It would be great to find one of them on eBay!

Too many skulls!

Note: The Patty Cannon drawings are from The Illustrated Version of the Life and Death of the “Wretched” Patty Cannon” by Daniel G. Coston, Jr.; Sussex Prints; Georgetown, DE., 1976 and used with permission.