

## *Chittenden County Courthouse Chronicle #8*



By Connie Cain Ramsey

### **The Ghost of Mildred Brewster.**

If you happen to visit Montpelier's Washington County Courthouse you will notice the building's brick, four-pillared, Greek revival design and elegant curvilinear stairway leading to the upstairs courtroom. You may also notice the flood of 1927's high water mark just above your head in the lobby. You will not, however, notice the courthouse's most omnipresent inhabitant, Mildred Brewster, because she's invisible. Mildred is a ghost.

I was able to, over the phone, speak with court workers and solicit stories about things going bump in the day, reports of inexplicable sounds of glass shattering, of voices in conversation in an empty courtroom and things strangely found out of place. The staff chalks these events up to the ghost of Mildred.

But upon my visit, I found the staff's sudden silence and eerie reluctance to talk about the ghost of Mildred much more frightening than their stories.

### **A Restless Young Lady**

Mildred Brewster grew up in the late 1800's in rural Huntington, Vermont, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Wesley Brewster. Her mother died at a young age. Her father, Wesley, was a prominent and successful farmer, amassing a fortune of \$30,000., nearly one million in today's dollars.

Although Wesley did all he could to make Mildred happy, his daughter was not content on the family farm, and she grew increasingly bored and restless. Wesley sent Mildred off to nearby Burlington, a relatively sprawling city that he hoped would entertain and tame her. She attended Burlington High School but never graduated. She then waited tables in the city's bustling downtown area.

Still feeling unfulfilled, Mildred returned to Huntington and taught school, but quiet Huntington was still not for her, she needed another move. Mildred decided to try Montpelier, so at 20 years of age she travelled to Vermont's capital city where she boarded at the same home as a young, handsome granite worker named John "Jack" Wheeler.

### **The Love Triangle**

Jack Wheeler, age 22, had already fallen for a 17-year-old local girl named Anna Wheeler, who shared his surname but the two were unrelated. Undeterred by Jack's feelings for Anna, Mildred began to show signs of affection toward Jack, he took note but reportedly paid no attention. Soon Anna and Jack were engaged, but this only encouraged and deepened Mildred's quest for Jack's affections. The love triangle grew in intensity, until one late May day in 1897. Anna and Jack were to attend the Decoration Day Celebration in nearby Barre, Mildred was not invited by Jack and was furious.

Mildred went to Anna's home early that morning, begging Anna to give up her betrothed, telling Anna that she herself had a claim to Jack. Anna refused. The two ladies then walked side-by-side toward the Jack's home. Along the way Mildred pulled out a pistol and fired point blank into Anna's head before turning the gun on herself.

By the end of the day Anna was dead and Mildred was clinging to life.

### **Mildred on Trial for Murder**

The gravely-injured Mildred made a slow but sure recovery. She was

indicted on a charge of murder but was too ill to be present at the indictment. Instead, she was confined to a room at Montpelier's Heaton Hospital, with the bullet still lodged in her head.

A Grand Jury was formed, but there was trouble during the proceedings. Mildred was not present and the illegal presence of a stenographer during the testimony of a government witness prompted Mildred's lawyers to ask for an invalidation of all findings. The Vermont Supreme Court, as well as lawyers for both sides convened at Heaton Hospital in January, 1898. Mildred was there, but sat silently and wheelchair-bound. Three weeks later, the Supreme Court ruled that the trial could continue. The following May, a somewhat healthier Mildred Brewster arrived at the Montpelier courthouse, accompanied by her faithful father. The packed courthouse was overflowing with sobbing, sympathetic women as the tragic, triangular tale of Mildred, Anna and Jack was laid out for all to hear.

An expensive and excellent defense team, a hopelessly heart-broken and maimed defendant, combined with the tears of hundreds of women in attendance created a national spectacle and media attention.

By the end of the trial the twelve male jurors were persuaded to be compassionate toward Mildred. On May 5, 1898, Mildred was acquitted of Anna's murder by reason of insanity, a rare defense at the time, and sent to Waterbury State Hospital.

### **Mildred Remains Restless**

Mildred had been confined to the Waterbury State Hospital for ten years when a childhood friend and her husband, Mr. and Mrs. W.J. Ross of Hartford, Vt., petitioned for her guardianship. Mildred was released to them in the spring of 1908, but her freedom was to be short lived. The Rosses observed signs of Mildred's stubbornness, amorous proclivities, and the type of behavior that got her into trouble in the first place, and returned Mildred to the hospital a few months later.

She remained at The State Hospital for an additional eight years until Judge Frank L. Fish, gave custody of Mildred to a former Waterbury Hospital nurse who had once cared for her, and now resided in Bellingham, Washington. County Sheriff Frank Tracy accompanied Mildred on the cross country trip.

### **Mildred Never Heard From Again?**

Records of Mildred at the Washington County Courthouse and Vermont State Hospital have been sealed, and Mildred has never been seen or heard from in Vermont again... ... or has she?

*Jack Ramsey contributed to this article.*

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*University of Vermont Special Collections*

*Clover, The courthouse picture I have is too large to put into this document*

**Sources:**

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*this last one opens up a ton of newspapers from all over the country, there is a lot of contradicting info, I used the most common stories and tried to be positive*

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/search/pages/results/?state=&date1=1836&date2=1922&proxtext=mildred+brewster&x=18&y=15&dateFilterType=yearRange&rows=20&searchType=basic>

*As printed:*

<http://bjpne.ws/1u49M45>