

The Shameful Secret of the Four Corners Women

Text and illustration by Patricia B. Manchester

There are a few who reside in Tiverton, Rhode Island and the surrounding area who have not, at one time or another, experienced at first hand an unwritten law of that town: that on a warm summer day when you are en route to or from Little Compton or Tiverton beaches or just out for a pleasant drive along winding tree-lined roads, you will inevitably end up at Tiverton Four Corners and be "obliged" to stop and sample the popular local delicacy known as Gray's ice cream.

The parking lot of Gray's Ice Cream Store is invariably crammed with carloads of happy vacationers who have likewise fallen prey to that same unwritten law, but no one seems to mind. The scene is one of family and friends and good old country fun. It would be difficult to imagine that on another such fine day on this spot, nearly 200 years ago, an event of much more serious import was unfolding.



Drawing of the historic John Almy House in Tiverton, R.I. with its slanted ("not upright") whipping post.

Long ago, Four Corners was the "downtown" section of Tiverton, the place where the major farm roads converged, and the location of the two general stores, the Red Store and the White Store. From approximately 1719 to 1812, on the land which is now Gray's parking lot at the southeast corner of the Four Corners intersection, there stood a lone upright stone post. It was not meant to support a mailbox, as the postal service of that era was far from sophisticated; nor was it a hitching post, for it was too large and angular to easily accommodate a horse's reins.

In 1797 the John Almy House was erected on the same lot. The stone pillar was not moved, but was instead carefully preserved in its original location. To the early citizens of Tiverton this was not unusual at all as the post served a most sacred purpose to the townspeople: it was the public whipping post.

For a span of almost one hundred years, the court of Tiverton meted out justice with an iron hand, sparing no one, male or female, from the possible sentence of public reprisal at the whipping post. The following items are from original records of Job Almy (1681-1767) of the

"Court held at my owne house, in Tiverton," the same being in the possession of Herbert C. Almy, Fogland Road, Tiverton. Bristol SS.

Memorandum--December ye 6th,:1718:

At A COURT held at my house in Tiverton Sohena Hope Complt Against Ruth Cashaway Indians both of Tiverton &c: Both partyes being present. ye Complain-t Made Oath yt ye sd Ruth Cashaway did very much abuse her Strikening ofher sd Susanah on her head & face & yt it was done on ye Lords Day And Mergory Cashaway & Robby Zakorin madeoath to ye Above written as Also ye Sd Ruths own Confession--It is Considerable yht the Said Ruth is Sentenced to pay afine of five Shillings or be whiped Seven lashes on her naked back wel laid on: for Breach of Sabath. & to pay afine of three shilling & four pence or be whiped five lashes on her Naked back for a Breach of ye peace & tp pay Cost of prosecution & so Stand Committed untill sentence be performed Cost allowed 12/2

Job Almy Justice Ps

Memorandum December 6: 1718

--Then recd. of Ruth Cashaway 5 Shilling: for breach of Sabath: & 3/4 for breach of ye peace--

Job Almy Justice Ps

Memorandum July 7:1772 It appearing by Nathan Tobes own Confession that he was Drunk for which I sentence him to pay afine of five Shillings or to be Whipt teen lashes on his Naked back well laid on. and it also appearing that time Jane his wife brought them Rum into the fields the time when her arm was hurt for which I do also Sentence her to be whipt teen lashes on her Naked back well laid on

Per Me Job Almy JJS

The above Sentences are all satisfied by Whipping

These incidents serve to set the stage for that fateful incident which I have mentioned, occuring at the place which is now Gray's parking lot. It was some time after the American Revolution and before the War of 1812 that a woman was bound to the stone whipping post. Although she was not the first of her gender to be punished in this manner, her name, unlike the aforementioned, has not been noted for posterity. The scenario went some like this:

She stood with back bared, terrified and ashamed, softly bemoaning her plight and no doubt rueing the unfortunate circumstances which had brought her to such a sad state of affairs. All around her thronged the ladies of Four Corners in various attitudes of distress, denouncing in much greater volume than she the outrage about to be inflicted upon one of their own kind.

Nearby stood the sheriff who had been appointed by the court to do the flogging, eyeing the scene with a practiced air of detached indifference. And idling around were men who seemed a little amused at the clamorous display of the womenfolk and more than a little interested in the shapeliness of the victim's back.

This, then, was the sight that first met the eyes of the Governor as he rode homeward by way of Tiverton Four Corners -- a sight which would have set a lesser man to prod his mount in the opposite direction in all due haste. But Isaac Wilbour was a man of substantial character, being the only man from S'Cunnet (now known as Sakonnet) who ever sat in the Governor's chair, was sent to Congress and appointed to the State Supreme Court. He was a good and honest Quaker, dedicated to the law and to justice, and so he rode on calmly with not a hint of astonishment in his smooth features.

As the Governor approached, the noise of the crowd grew to a deafening roar. The ladies recognized him and, flooding out into the road, barred his way. They surrounded his horse in a

wave of angry churning humanity and demanded to know just what was the meaning of this! The ladies were not averse to severe tongue-lashings to keep errant members of their sex within the confines of propriety, but to have a lady's back exposed and bloodied in public for a little harmless mischief-making -- that was too much to be borne!

The Governor listened patiently to the ladies' complaint and nodded sympathetically. Slowly he reached into the pocket of his frock coat and withdrew a booklet containing the laws of Rhode Island. After turning several pages with great deliberation, during which time the crowd murmured expectantly, Isaac Wilbour found the section he wanted, and read aloud: "The condemned shall be tied to an upright post and flogged according to the sentence of the court." Then he closed the volume with an air of finality, slipped it back into his pocket, and solemnly told the ladies that this was the law and that as the Governor he had sworn an oath to uphold the law.

They roared their disapproval as with one voice. If that was the law, then the law was not just and the Governor, as a minister of said law, had already outstayed his welcome. Isaac Wilbour was not ruffled in the least. With a poise born of inner serenity and hard-earned wisdom, he leaned from the saddle and, in the softest whisper, addressed those women closest to him: "But ladies, if it happened that there was no upright post, how could the law be carried out?"

For a moment the atmosphere was electrified and then the ladies of Tiverton and Four Corners were galvanized into action. They shoved aside the unfortunate sheriff, as if he were a mere fly in the sweet ointment of their revenge -- indeed, after one look onto the eyes of those emboldened angels of mercy, said sheriff lifted not a finger to stop them. They swarmed upon the victim and unbound her from the post, restoring both clothes and dignity in one fell sweep. And then, with the limitless strength born of righteous fury, those women did huff and puff and push and shove and pull and drag until that "upright" post showed a definite slant! With a cry of triumph, the ladies gave one more mighty final effort -- and the post fell with a loud crash, never to rise again.

What caused the ladies of Four Corners to so vehemently oppose this disciplinary action when countless other females had endured the humiliation of public flogging? As we may read in the court records of that time, one Ruth Cashaway was sentenced to seven lashes for fighting on the

Sabbath and five lashes for breach of the peace; luckily she was able to pay the alternative fine of 8 shillings 4 pence. Another woman, Jane Tobes, was not so fortunate and suffered ten lashes, "well laid on," for bringing rum to her husband in the fields.

From the viewpoint of a much more permissive society, we judge these stories as ludicrous. To us, the punishments hardly fit the crimes, in fact to us they are not crimes, at all. Perhaps in a much smaller way, the Tiverton ladies were awakening to the absurdity of their judicial system and to the very real need for social change. Or perhaps they were just reacting to a situation which had become, to them, intolerable. As they had no substantial voice in government, their only recourse was to take matters into the hands of the people, and quite literally, that is exactly what they did.

Governor Wilbour, who for his part had precipitated the unusual turn of events, was indeed an open-minded and progressive man. His mild reaction to the situation should not be mistaken as leniency, however, for Isaac Wilbour was not soft in matters of justice. Yet he was not at all concerned that "due process of law" could no longer be served, perhaps because he had seen too many atrocities inflicted upon the innocent in the name of justice.

As a Quaker, Wilbour was undoubtedly aware of the numerous persecutions suffered by his fellow believers at the hands of fanatics who clothed themselves with false righteousness in the robes of the law. Many Quakers were persecuted while visiting friends or relatives in neighboring colonies, for in Rhode Island the greatest measure of religious freedom was enjoyed by all. This freedom was the legacy of Roger Williams, Rhode Island's founding father, and has been perpetuated by those farsighted social administrators who followed in his path. Isaac Wilbour, as one of these, was only doing his part to keep his beloved state free from the quagmire of social injustice which springs from ignorance, narrow-mindedness, and misguided religious and political fervor. It is certain that deep in the heart of that gentle public servant reposed the hope of discipline without debasement, community without forfeit of individual rights, and, with a little understanding, peaceful co-existence for all.

Rhode Islanders owe a great debt to Isaac Wilbour and the Four Corners ladies, for from that day forward, no woman has ever again been publicly flogged in the state of Rhode Island.

FAMILY NEWS

MARION DAVENPORT ALMY
(1233-5144-75)

Marion D. Almy of Providence, Rhode Island, died 19 August 1993, just one week before her 98th birthday. She was born in Providence August 26, 1895, the daughter of Herbert and Lydia Frances (Kelton) Almy.

Marion was a secretary for the Providence Washington Insurance Co. before retiring. She was a member of the Society of Mayflower Descendants, being a descendant of both Richard Warren and John Howland, passengers on the ship Mayflower on the voyage that terminated at Plymouth, Massachusetts in December 1620.

CHARLOTTE ELVA LAWTON
(1252-9831-12)

My last Newsletter to Miss Lawton was returned with the notation "Deceased. Return to Sender."

Charlotte, who preferred to use her middle name Elva, was born August 5, 1893 in West Middletown, Pennsylvania, the daughter of Ira Eugene and Charlotte (Miller) Lawton. She descended from Mary Almy who married Joseph Lawton in 1795. In tracing the ancestry of Mary Almy she accumulated records through five or six generations, mostly RI Almys. This became the basis of *"The Descendants of William Almy of Portsmouth, Rhode Island."* Early in my research I became aware of her work and obtained a copy of her genealogy from her. We corresponded and she received copies of all my newsletters. I do not know the date of her death, but she must have been close to 100 years of age.

MATTHEW STEVEN DuHAMEL
(1239-2145-2D11-11)

Matthew Steven DuHamel was born on August 16, 1993, in Worcester, Massachusetts. The proud parents are Steven Jr. and Kirsten DuHamel. Also as proud are grand-parents Steven and Arlene DuHamel and great-grandparents George and Laura DuHamel.

Reported by George H. DuHamel (1239-2145-2D1) who wrote "as you can see, he is the 1st son of the 1st son. of the 1st son, of the 1st son."

ADRIAN LEE ALMY
(1233-3252-311)

Adrian Lee Almy, 84, of Carlsbad, New Mexico, died May 1, 1993, at Guadalupe Medical Center. He was born April 21, 1909, in Altamont, Kentucky, the son of Samuel Willett and Mary Lee (Fuson) Almy. His mother died three days later from the childbirth, and his father, who worked for the Santa Fe Railroad, brought him to Deming, New Mexico, one year later. He graduated from New Mexico Tech in Socorro in 1929 with a B.A. in geology, and from the University of Utah in Salt Lake City in 1932 with a master's degree in metallurgy.

He married Jutta Engelhardt in Deming on February 14, 1935. In 1940 they moved to Carlsbad after living and working in Bolivia for three years. He worked as a mining engineer in New Mexico, Arizona, Mexico and Bolivia for 45 years. He was employed by International Minerals and Chemical Corporation for 34 years before retiring in 1974.

KAITLIN NICHOLLE CHESNEY
(1232-4013-4211-11)

Annette, wife of George Burgess who passed away in 1988, reported that she had remarried and she is now Annette Fuld.

She reported the birth of her great-granddaughter, Kaitlin Nicholle Chesney, born May 21, 1993; the daughter of Bridget (Burgess) and Kenneth Chesney.

MICHAEL JOSEPH PRATT
(1407-1532-2112)

Lois Almy (1407-1532-3) of Little Compton, Rhode Island, reports that Michael Joseph Pratt was born September 5, 1992, to Deborah and Stephen Pratt of Carver, Massachusetts.

TAYLOR TWINS

Karin (Danielson) Taylor reports that she and her husband Bob had twin boys on December 22, 1992: Luke Robert Taylor, born 7:50 am (Almy No. 1233-3252-4131-11) and Benjamin Daniel Taylor, born 7:51 am (Almy No. 1233-3252-4231-12).

I received the announcement to the right from Richard James Almy (1408-6524-112) of Riverside, California, concerning his mother who resided in Santa Fe, New Mexico. (Announcement reduced for Newsletter.)

Dear Friends of Ruth and Wes Almy

I regret to inform you that Ruth Almy, my mother, passed away at 1:30am. at St. Vincents Hospital April 17, 1993.

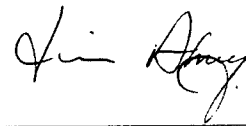
My mother fell four weeks ago in her apartment and cracked her pelvis. She was transferred to Assisted Living in stable condition, with little pain and a good prognosis. Thursday April 15, she was admitted to St. Vincent Hospital. Doctors suggested that I sit tight, she was doing well, would recover quickly and recuperate with help at La Residencia.

Saturday morning, April 17th, I was notified that my mother had quietly passed away.

The family has scheduled a memorial service in her behalf at the First Presbyterian Church of Santa Fe, Sunday afternoon at 2:00pm, June 6, 1993. You are invited to pay tribute to Ruth Almy at this service as we fulfill her wishes.

My parents devoted their lives to the Presbyterian Church working with the poor in the inner city churches of Cincinnati, the Presbyterian Restoration Fund and the Synod of Colorado. My mother was especially creative and talented in the arts, a devoted wife and partner to my father, and mother to her children.

Ruth supported the Liturgical Arts and the Esperanza Home for Battered Women and Children in Santa Fe. She wants no memorial fund to be established in her name, and hoped that gifts of money, instead of flowers and cards, be given to these agencies in her memory to further their activities.



CONTRIBUTIONS

Following is a listing of those cousins who have sent in contributions, since the last issue of the Newsletter, to help defray the costs of printing and mailing these Newsletters. This help is most appreciated. Many thanks to you all.

<u>Name</u>	<u>Almy Number</u>	<u>Residence</u>
Mrs. Adrian Lee Almy	1233-3252-311	New Mexico
Richard R. Almy	1233-5143-242	Virginia
Sylvia Nichols	1233-5147-233	Virginia
Marion Jane Jones	1239-2165-171	California
Richard J. Almy	1408-6524-112	California

Your Cousin (1408-3312-112), Merwin F. Almy, 17835 SW Shasta Trail, Tualatin, OR 97062-9408