

## The Darker Side: The Middle Road Tragedy

By Matthew Wilkinson

### A COURT ROOM. A RESTAURANT.

Women Bring their Luncheon  
and Eat Where Men are  
On Trial for Murder.

CORY — GIVES HIS EVIDENCE.

The Blood Stained Boot Found  
in the House Did Not Belong  
To Williams, He Said.

A NUMBER OF WITNESSES TESTIFY

BRAMPTON, March 14.—At the Williams murder case yesterday Clayton Osborne was examined. He described how he had taken some papers from the post-office to the Williams' place on Saturday, and found the premises locked up, of his discovery next day that the horse, Celtic, was missing from the barn, and of his perceiving the tracks of a cutter leading out of the gate, with the footprints of a man in direct line behind it. A telephone wire was down and it looked as if the cutter had driven over the wire.

The effort of the defence is directed to showing that the cutter of the murdered man left the house after the next storm of Saturday night, and this the counsel for the prisoners think should show that either the murder was not committed on Thursday night or Friday, or that the horse and cutter was stolen after the tragedy.



In Late 1893 and early 1894, fear gripped the residents of Port Credit, captivated local residents, and made headlines in newspapers, for it appeared that a murderer was on the loose.

On Wednesday, December 14, 1893, William James Williams (about age 72) and his wife Eliza (nee Norris) had returned to their home and farm along the Middle Road, just north of Port Credit, after taking produce and butter to market in Toronto. On Saturday, December 17, a neighbour, young Clayton Osborne, noticed that the farm seemed deserted. He, along with another neighbour, Ross Goldthorpe, went to the house and found it locked tight with apparently no one at home. Upon entering the barn, they found the livestock starving. After feeding the horses and cattle and fearing something had happened to the Williams, Goldthorpe and Osborne notified the local police.

On Sunday, December 18, Osborne once again watered and fed the cattle, and when he was finished took a moment, opened a window sash and peered into the house, where he was startled to see Mr. Williams face down on the kitchen table with a coat over his head. Osborne then ran to the next farm, that of William Moody (who was William's brother-in-law), and notified Moody. Moody, together with Richard Burrell, Dennis Hogan and William Rutledge immediately went to the house and forced entrance, where they found the bodies of William James Williams and Eliza Williams.

Mr Williams was found in an armchair at the kitchen table, his head bashed by what appeared to be boot, which was also found at the scene. The blow appeared to have been inflicted from behind with Williams having had no chance to defend himself. In the adjacent pantry was found the body of Eliza, stretched on the floor, having been repeatedly hit in the head by what appeared to be a heavy potato masher. After the coroner, Doctor



**MR. OSLER PROMPTS MR. MCFADDEN.**  
 tracks made in the snow and then rained upon and tracks made during a rain-storm.

**Hurst In the Box.**

High Constable Hurst gave his theories of how the murder had been committed. Some of the wounds, he thought, had been made by a boot, others by the potato-masher, and others again by some iron instrument.

Frederick Death and Benjamin Fieldhouse testified that Walker had worked for them in 1892, and Daniel Shehan, a Toronto newsboy, stated that on the Monday after the murder he was talking about it to Walker, who said very emphatically that the hired man had not done the deed.

**C. T. Long's Evidence.**

Charles T. Long testified that he had an interview with the prisoner MacWherrill in Brampton jail, and the latter told him that he had bought the horse he disposed of to Butcher Lawrie from two men at Scholes' hotel, at the



Dixie, visited the scene with Detective William Greer, autopsies and interviews with neighbours established a likely scenario that the Williams' were murdered late Friday evening on December 16.

The immediate theory was that the murderer struck after the couple had just finished their evening meal after returning from Toronto. The husband was killed first, while his wife had gone outside to fetch water. The killer, it was suspected, then waited for the Eliza to return inside before surprising her. Reportedly the house was locked tight, and all windows closed and blinds drawn, likely by the murderer. The motive appeared to be robbery, as personal items were astray, pockets emptied, and a horse and cutter were found to be missing from the stable. The murdered couple were rumoured to have had some money, and although they did not have any children, a hired man was known to have lived with them. Suspicion immediately fell on the hired man, who went by the name of "Jack". Detectives were soon able to identify him as John Cory, but his whereabouts were unknown.

As for the Williams', William James was noted to have been crippled by rheumatism, while Eliza, about age 50, was noted as being bright and bustling, and managing not only the household, but also looking after much of the farm stock. On December 21, 1893, James and Eliza Williams were laid to rest.

Also on December 21, the missing horse and cutter were located at a hotel in Toronto. Also on that day John Cory, the missing hired hand, was located and taken into custody by Constable Hurst. Testimony by Cory indicated that he had left Williams' employ at the end of November, and he positively identified the horse and cutter belonging to the Williams'.

As the inquest continued, an interview with local resident Eliza Ann McKay recalled a young Englishman who knocked on her door

**BRUTAL DOUBLE MURDER.**

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**A Horrible Tragedy Near Port Credit.**

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**BATTERED TO DEATH.**

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**The Murderer Came Towards Toronto.**

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**HIRED MAN SUSPECTED.**

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**James Williams and His Wife  
the Victims.**

on the Thursday before the murders inquiring about the Williams and asked where they lived.. Two other local residents, John Hickey and George Death, also remembered an Englishman (with a fugitive look to him) stopping at their respective houses inquiring for the Williams'. As a result, the detectives began to look for other suspects, and evidence soon led them to William Walter McWhirrell and an accomplice, John Walker. These men were arrested and charged on December 27, and together with Cory and another hired man, George Butcher, were brought to trial.

During their first appearance in the court room, Walker looked as if he thought the whole trial was a joke, while McWhirrell on the other hand appeared completely unconcerned about what was happening - even remarking openly that there was no evidence that could prove he was ever at the Williams' home.

The Crown alleged that McWhirrell (also spelled MacWherrell) committed the murders

and that Walker helped him after the act to cover his tracks and helped to pawn items stolen from the Williams' house. Over a dozen witnesses confirmed having seen McWhirrell walking along Middle Road, Hurontario Street, and in Port Credit the day of the murders, and others identified him as being the "Englishman" who had knocked on their doors inquiring about the Williams'. It became theorized that Walker, who appeared to be only half-witted, was a tool whose main role in the crime was to dispose of the goods taken from the Williams' house, and that McWhirrell was the main culprit. Many residents of Port Credit recalled seeing McWhirrell in the weeks before the murders frequenting several inns and bars in town and inquiring about local farms and residents, and many people assumed he was looking for work.

However, there were some holes in the Crown's case against McWhirrell: although blood was found splattered on the walls, curtains and floors of the Williams' house, no blood stains on the clothes that McWhirrell was supposedly wearing the night of the murder. Also, no items from the Williams' were found with McWhirrell, although he did confess to trying to sell the horse and cutter that belonged to the Williams. Evidence given by Walker indicated that McWhirrell had taken that horse and cutter, while McWhirrell implicated Walker and Cory.

McWhirrell maintained his innocence throughout the trial, saying that he was in the area simply looking for work, and while he did walk along Middle Road and Hurontario Street and visited farms in the vicinity looking for work, he did not go to the Williams' property. He also maintained that he only knew John Walker through meeting him, with

John Cory, at the Lakeview Inn in Port Credit. Several eyewitnesses disputed this casual acquaintance, suggesting that the two had been seen together multiple times in the weeks before the murders, and that Walker was a close friend of Cory and Butcher.

In later testimony reported on the newspaper, McWhirrell changed his story slightly, stating that he talked to Mr. Williams about a job because he had heard that Williams was looking for a hired man. Upon discovering that the job was not available, he had asked Williams for the time and for the quickest route back to Toronto. McWhirrell even described his trip back into the city, the tram car ride and his visit to the Fitzgerald hotel for a drink, and his conversation with the bar tender about how he was in Port Credit looking for work. However, Walker testified against McWhirrell while Cory and Butcher, the principal Crown witnesses (although they were also charged), refused to give any testimony.

Shortly after this testimony McWhirrell, due to the evidence against him, was found guilty and was sentenced to be hung on June 1st, 1894. Walker was found guilty as being an accessory after the fact, while Cory and Butcher were released. There was a suspicion in Port Credit that McWhirrell was not the right man. Many still suspected that Cory, Butcher, Walker, or a man named Robert Dutton were in league, as they all worked as hired men on farms along the Middle Road just north of Port Credit. Walker's reportedly met with foul play, as he was found murdered in Toronto in March of 1894. Cory, upon his release, reportedly left Ontario, while Dutton made his way to the United States.

On April 2nd, 1894, word reached Port Credit that Robert Dutton was arrested for murder in Montana and confessed to the murder of James and Eliza Williams. The confession was investigated by Detective Greer of Toronto, and was found to be false. He determined that McWhirrell and Dutton knew each other and that Dutton was attempting to cast doubt on McWhirrell's guilt.

One of the biggest mysteries surrounding the Middle Road Tragedy is the true identity of William Walter McWhirrell. McWhirrell was identified as an alias, and that other aliases included William Maguire and John Callahan. His true identity was never discovered.

William Walter McWhirrell, as he was only known by his alias, was originally sentenced to be hung, but this was changed to a life sentence after Dutton's arrest and confession cast sufficient doubt. After serving 6 years in prison William Walter McWhirrell died in the Kingston Penitentiary hospital on September 21, 1899 from a suspected heart attack.

Soon after his death a woman by the name of Gertrude Truman of Hamilton, Ontario claimed that dead convict was her husband, Victor Truman. Whoever he was, the funeral took place in Hamilton on September 26, 1899. He was buried under the inscription "Victor M.W.D. Truman" and his stone simply reads "At Rest". Gertrude Truman maintained that her estranged husband was innocent of the crimes for which he had been incarcerated, and implicated Cory as the guilty party.

Cory seemingly is the only one connected to the Williams and each of the other implicated in the crime: he had worked for the Williams (in November of 1893), knew McWhirrell (who died in 1899), Walker (died suspiciously in 1894), Dutton (executed in 1895), and was friends with fellow accused George Butcher.

The Middle Road Tragedy could well be called the Middle Road Mystery.