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JOHN CALDWELL COLT: A NOTORIOUS ACCOUNTANT

Abstract: John C. Colt was the author of a successful bookkeeping text which had many school adoptions and at least 46 editions. During an argument with Samuel Adams, his publisher, over the cost of his 5th edition, Colt killed Adams with a hatchet. Convicted of murder and condemned to execution by hanging, Colt committed suicide in prison in 1842. His text, *The Science of Double Entry Book-keeping*, first published in 1838, continued in print until 1856.

John Caldwell Colt was the author of a very successful book-keeping text which was published from 1837 to 1855 in at least 46 editions (so designated, although "printings" would have been more appropriate). He was born in Hartford, Connecticut in 1810 and died November 8, 1842.

The Colt Family

Colt was descended from John Coult who, with his wife Mary Fitch, emigrated from Colchester, England, and landed at Boston on September 4, 1633. He settled in Cambridge, Massachusetts (then Newton) and had a son John Colt (the name alteration appeared at this point) in 1658.

Benjamin Colt, the son of John, served in the Revolutionary War and later became a farmer in Hadley, Massachusetts. He married Lucretia Ely to whom Christopher Colt was born in 1780. Christopher left the family farm and sought his fortune in Hartford, Connecticut, where he married Sarah Caldwell, the daughter of Major John Caldwell, a wealthy leading citizen of Hartford.

Christopher and Sarah had six children: Margaret, 1806, Sarah Ann, 1808, John Caldwell, 1810, Christopher, Jr., 1812, Samuel, 1814

(the inventor of the Colt revolver) and James Benjamin, 1816. Christopher entered partnership with Michael Scott in the ownership of The Four Sisters, a sailing ship engaged in the West Indies trade. Business at first prospered but the War of 1812 weakened the partnership (and Major Caldwell's undertakings as well) and in 1820, after the Land Panic of 1819, the business went into bankruptcy. Christopher then established one of the first New England silk mills, in Ware, Massachusetts. This also was an unsuccessful venture. On June 16, 1821, his wife Sarah died of tuberculosis. Christopher was remarried March 12, 1823; his wife, Olive Sargent, the daughter of a prosperous Hartford merchant, was very careful with money and resented the large Colt family. John, aged 12, spent two years with an uncle on a farm at Burlington, Vermont.

Education and Business Experience

At the age of 9 John Colt had spent a year at the Academy of Reverend Daniel Huntington in Hadley, Massachusetts. While at Burlington he attended school and was a good student. After leaving the Vermont farm he returned home and requested permission of his father to attend Captain Partridge's Military School in preparation for entrance to West Point Academy. Instead, under the influence of Olive, his father had him apprenticed at the age of 14 to a store of the Union Manufacturing Company in Marlborough, Connecticut. John performed well and was transferred to Manchester, New Hampshire, as an assistant bookkeeper. After a year he returned to Hartford and entered an academy taking classical studies, to which he applied himself diligently, but after three months was withdrawn by his father. According to one account he then became a cabin boy on an Ohio River steamer.¹ He next appeared in Baltimore in 1827 where he became a teacher of mathematics in a ladies' seminary and also an assistant teacher in a Baltimore high school. When 18 he was offered the position of engineer-in-charge of the construction of a section of the canal of the North Branch of the Susquehanna River.

After a year of hard work in this position he enrolled at Wesleyan College in Wilbraham, Massachusetts, but, not long afterwards, his sister Sarah Ann, who alone of the children had remained at home, committed suicide by taking arsenic. She was 21 and John 19. Much affected by this, John enlisted in the Marines on July 8, 1829, with the intention of serving on the U.S.S. Constellation which was then being commissioned. However, he fell ill with a fever and was hospitalized for several weeks. After release, disliking the food, the

companionship, and the duties, he requested a letter from his father advising the Marines that he was under age. His father refused, counseling him to serve his term and become a man proud of having done his duty. John forged his father's name to a letter which he had his brother Benjamin mail from Hartford. He was discharged from the Marines as a private on September 30, 1829.² Rywell states that he then followed the Mississippi river boats as a professional gambler. During a stopover in Cincinnati he was challenged by a wealthy young planter to a duel over a shared mistress. Sensibly, he returned to the river boats and found another mistress.³

In 1830, John was employed as a clerk in the office of Dudley Selden, Esq., a cousin who later defended him in his trial for murder. After a year he left to study engineering at the University of Vermont. An opportunity presented itself and John Colt withdrew to become a partner in a Great Lakes trading venture. This was successful and he purchased a farm in Michigan. However, the harsh winter weather adversely affected his health (he suffered from "weak lungs" all his life) and he left to tour the South. He travelled in Mississippi, Texas, and Florida, ending at New Orleans where he gave a series of chemistry lectures and speculated in land.

From 1834 to 1837, John spent his winters in New Orleans and his summers in Louisville, Kentucky, and Cincinnati, Ohio, where he taught accounting and operated what is believed to have been the first United States correspondence school. He wrote his bookkeeping text during these years and it was published by Nathan G. Burgess in Cincinnati. Here John also lectured in Dorfeville's Western Museum and later became manager of Frank's Museum. In 1838 he began a partnership venture with Burgess, operating as Colt, Burgess and Company. The firm had only one publication, *Delafield's Antiquities of America*, which was not financially successful and the firm lost over \$1,000.⁴ During 1838 and early 1839 Colt lectured on bookkeeping in Philadelphia and Boston.

John went to New York City in April, 1839. He rented an office from Asa H. Wheeler who had a large room in the Granite Building on the corner of Broadway and Chambers Street. Wheeler, a teacher of writing and bookkeeping, shared his room by closing large folding doors to set up Colt's smaller office. Colt employed himself revising his text and preparing bookkeeping lectures for the fall term. He also went about the publication of a new edition with Samuel Adams, of Scathered and Adams, as the publisher. It was this association with Adams that led to disaster.

John Colt's Trial and Death

According to R. M. Devens in a work published in 1876, the victim, Samuel Adams, was "a highly respected printer" to whom Colt had "for some time owed . . . a bill for printing, which he was unprepared to pay. The final call made by Adams, at Colt's room on Broadway, for a settlement of the account, resulted in a tragedy rarely equaled in the annals of crime."⁵

Devens does not say just how the killing was done but gives a detailed account of how it was discovered.

The mysterious absence of Mr. Adams was the subject of universal comment in the newspaper press. The discovery of the murder was made through the instrumentality of Mr. Wheeler, who occupied a room adjoining that of Colt. About four o'clock, p.m. on the day of Mr. Adams's disappearance, Mr. Wheeler thought he heard an unusual noise in Colt's room, and was induced to go to the door and rap. Not receiving any answer, he looked through the key-hole, and saw two hats standing upon a table, and Colt kneeling upon the floor, as if scrubbing it. After waiting a little while, Mr. Wheeler peeped into the key-hole again, and saw Colt still engaged in the same operation. This excited his suspicions, and he caused a person to watch at the door all night. In the morning, Colt was seen to take a box, about four feet long and two high, down stairs. The box was directed to somebody in St. Louis, via New Orleans. Mr. Wheeler gave information of these facts to the mayor, who immediately instituted search for the box; it was found, after some difficulty, on board of the ship Kalamazoo, and in it the body of Mr. Adams, wrapped up in sail-cloth and sprinkled with salt and chloride of lime.⁶

Colt was arrested, charged with murder, and tried. At the trial, a confession by Colt was read in which the killing was described.

Samuel Adams called on Friday at my office . . . between the hours of 3 and 4 o'clock. . . . When he entered my office, I was sitting at my table . . . and was . . . engaged in looking over a manuscript account book . . . that is, I was reading over the entries and re-considering the arithmetical calculations belonging to the entries, &c. Mr. Adams seated himself in a chair near the table, . . . I spoke of my account, which he had at my request handed to me

ten or twelve days before. I stated to him that his account was wrong, and read to him at the same time the account, as I had made it out on another piece of paper, and requested him to alter his account as I had it. He objected to it at first, saying that I did not understand printing. He however altered his figures as I read them from my account, as I made the remark that I would give \$10 or some such sum if I was not right. After he had altered his figures, and on looking it over, he said that he was right at first, and made the remark that I meant to cheat him. . . . Word followed word till it came to blows. The words "you lie!" were passed, and several slight blows, and until I received a blow across my mouth, and one which caused my nose slightly to bleed. I do not know that I felt like exerting myself to strong defence. I believe I then struck him next violently with my fist. We grappled with each other at the time and I found myself shoved to the wall, with my side next to the table. At this time he had his hand in my neck handkerchief, twisting it so that I could scarcely breathe, and at the same time pressing me hard upon the wall and table. There was a hammer⁷ upon the table which I then immediately seized hold of, and instantly struck him over the head. . . . The seizing of the hammer and the blow was instantaneous. . . . At the time I only remember of his twisting my neck handkerchief so tight that it seemed to me as though I lost all power of reason The first sense of thought was, it seems, as though his hand or something brushed from my neck downwards. I cannot say that I had any sense of reflection till I heard a knock at the door. Yet there is a faint idea still remains that I shoved him off from me, so that he fell over; but of this I cannot say. When I heard the knock of the door, I was instantly startled, and am fully conscious of going and turning the key so as to lock it. I then sat down, for I felt weak and sick. After sitting a few minutes, and seeing so much blood, I think I went and looked at poor Adams, who breathed quite loud for several minutes, threw his arms out and was silent. I recollect at this time taking him by the hand, which seemed lifeless, and a horrid thrill came over me, that I had killed him. . . .⁸

Colt was convicted, and the fatal day arrived when he was to pay the extreme penalty of the law for his crime. The scaffold was

erected—the whole city surged with excitement—the crowd gathered around the prison was immense.

At eleven o'clock, Rev. Dr. Anthon visited Colt's cell, in company with Colt's brother, for the purpose of marrying the murderer to his mistress, Caroline Henshaw. The ceremony was performed, Colt manifesting a deep interest in their child.⁹

He had some other visitors in the early afternoon, and then he desired to see the sheriff, who went into his cell. Colt then told him emphatically that he was innocent of the murder of Adams, and that he never intended to kill him; he also said that he had hopes that something would intervene to save him from being hung, and begged the sheriff not to execute the sentence of the law upon him. The sheriff told him to banish all hope of that kind, for he must die at four o'clock.¹⁰

However, he did not die upon the scaffold. After paying a final farewell to some friends, he asked to be left alone until the last moment. This was about two o'clock. His cell was closed, but it was thought that he might try to commit suicide, and at twenty minutes to three the deputy sheriff checked and found him walking up and down. After that no one entered his cell until five minutes to four.

On the keeper opening the door, Doctor Anthon, who was first, threw up his hands and eyes to Heaven, and uttering a faint ejaculation, turned pale as death and retired . . . there lay Colt on his back, stretched out at full length on the bed, quite dead, but not cold. A clasp knife, like a small dirk knife, with a broken handle, was sticking in his heart. He had stabbed himself about the fifth rib, on the left side . . . he had evidently worked and turned the knife round and round in his heart after stabbing himself, until he made quite a large gash. His mouth was open, his eyes partially so, and his body lay as straight on the bed as if laid out for a funeral by others.¹¹

Self Defense, Manslaughter or Murder

It seems probable that John Colt, because of the sensational publicity of the case, did not get an impartial trial. Colt's actions in attempting to avoid detection seem to have been given more weight

than the actual struggle. Witnesses testified that Adams had a violent temper. According to Colt's confession, Adams struck the first blow to which Colt retaliated. Adams then attempted to choke Colt by twisting the neckerchief about his throat. Caroline testified to black and blue marks on John's throat in the days following the struggle.

The hatchet used, the rope bound around Adams' throat and later used to bind the body and the box into which the corpse was forced were in Colt's office and had all been seen by several witnesses before the day of the killing. The instant availability of the instruments of death and body-disposal seem to rule out a premeditated murder. Indeed, the first vote of the jury was 5 for manslaughter and 7 for murder.

The cold-blooded handling of Adams' body cannot have failed to influence the jury. In the first place, Colt struck Adams three blows of the hatchet, claiming, of course, that the first blows did not cause Adams to release his stranglehold. Colt's handling of the body was barbaric. He tied a rope around Adams' neck to stop the profuse bleeding. He disrobed the body and stuffed the hat and clothing into the building's indoor privy where they were quickly found in the course of investigation. He retained a gold watch, however, claiming intent to return it to Adams' family at a later date. Colt then bound the knees to the neck of the corpse to fit into the box. The body was wrapped in a piece of sailcloth and packed in salt before having the drayman deliver the box to the New York Harbor wharf.

Another fact that received adverse publicity for Colt was his living with Caroline Henshaw and her having a child out-of-wedlock. Despite the name of the child, Samuel Colt, Jr., no question of the actual parentage of the boy was raised in any of the *New York Herald* accounts of the trial or of John Colt's death. As is suggested below, John may not have been quite the villain he was portrayed to be at the time.

John's Wife, Caroline

Samuel Colt had brought Caroline Henshaw to North America by Atlantic Packet boat. During the one month trip they became romantically attached and, upon arrival in the United States, were married secretly¹² to keep the knowledge from Samuel's parents, who would have been quite upset by his marriage to a foreigner who could not speak English. Caroline spoke French, German, and Polish fluently but Samuel considered that he would be more fa-

avourably received in Washington, D.C., if he appeared to be unmarried; he believed that Caroline would hinder his social and government contacts, by which he was attempting to secure contracts for his revolver and repeating rifle as well as his invention of submarine batteries. As a result, Caroline was neglected and left behind in Philadelphia.

Here she met John, and in 1839, three months after his arrival in New York, Caroline went to New York City and lived in a boarding house. On May 11, 1841 she moved in with John in a room at 42 Monroe Street.

John taught Caroline English and grew very fond of her, although she was already carrying Samuel's child. It has been suggested that after the trial Samuel found John's sentence of death a way out of some of his difficulties. John was much indebted to Samuel for his support and for supplying funds for payment of legal and other costs of the trial and imprisonment. He was also fond of Caroline and interested in the child's welfare and readily agreed to a prison marriage in his Tombs cell just hours before his self-inflicted death. The child, born December 17, 1841, was named Samuel Colt, Jr.; it appears that Samuel intended that the name be changed to Samuel Caldwell Colt later but, probably due to Caroline's strength of character, this was never done.

After John's death Samuel provided for Caroline and the child, perhaps with the help of earnings of John's still successful text. Samuel arranged for her to relocate in Germany where Caroline became Miss Julia Leicester, niece of Col. Colt, Bonn, Germany, and Samuel, Jr., nephew of Col. Colt.¹³ In 1857 Caroline married a young Prussian nobleman and army officer, Baron Frederick Von Oppen, and disappeared from known connections with the Colt family.¹⁴

John Colt's Suicide (?)

A rumor spread through New York City that John Colt did not die on November 18, 1842 as reported, but escaped prison dressed in Caroline's clothes just before the scheduled 4:00 p.m. hanging. A fire destroyed the cupola and a portion of the front building of the Tombs prison just at the time set for the execution. There were, also, reputed attempts by John's family and friends to bribe the Sheriff (said to have been offered \$1,000 which he accepted and turned over to the city officers) and deputy keepers (said to have been offered \$500 or \$1,000 each). The rumor continued that the hastily assembled coroner's jury, which returned a verdict of death

by suicide, contained not one person who had seen John Colt prior to that time. This is difficult to believe after the widely publicised trial. In addition, Rev. Dr. Anthon, who married John and Caroline, was stated to have been the first to discover the body in the cell at five minutes to four. Nevertheless, the rumor persisted, and a few years later was revived when Samuel M. Everett, while riding through the Santa Clara Valley in California, thought he recognized John Colt on a large ranch with a blond wife and two beautiful children.

But this man, whom Everett was certain was his old friend, John Colt, stated his name to be Don Carlos Juan Brewster; Everett apologized, and the next day continued his journey.¹⁵

After John's suicide his body was reputedly released to his family and interred by them in an unknown location. In the fall of 1850 Samuel Colt purchased a lot in Greenwood Cemetery. Caroline later stated that Samuel Colt had promised to convey this lot to her, presumably as a family plot for John and his family.¹⁶ Perhaps John Colt's body may have reached its final resting place here.

FOOTNOTES

¹Rywell, p. 74.

²There is some confusion about Colt's service in the Marines. Edwards gave exact dates of enlistment and discharge "as a private." (p. 116) However, Rohan stated that John rose from private to corporal to 1st sargent (pp. 38-39). Rywell also stated that Colt was promoted to 1st sargent (p. 74).

³Rywell, p. 74.

⁴*New York Herald*, January 27, 1842. Testimony of N. G. Burgess.

⁵Devens, p. 531.

⁶Devens, p. 531.

⁷(authors' note) Colt used the word "hammer" but the trial testimony clearly established that it was a hatchet.

⁸*New York Herald*, January 28, 1842.

⁹Devens, p. 531.

¹⁰Devens, p. 532.

¹¹Devens, p. 532.

¹²(authors' note) John Colt's later marriage to Caroline raises the possibility that no legal marriage took place.

¹³Edwards, p. 309.

¹⁴Rywell, p. 139.

¹⁵Edwards, p. 183.

¹⁶Rywell, p. 139.

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