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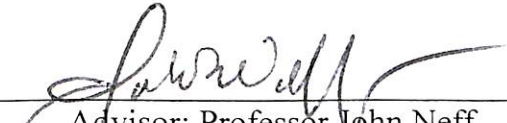
“DEEDS OF DEATH, AND BLOOD”: THE INTRODUCTION OF SENSATIONAL CRIME
REPORTING INTO NINETEENTH CENTURY PENNY PRESS

By Marta Toczyłowski


A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the
requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford May 2012

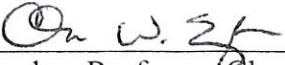
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Reader: Professor Anne Twitty



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ABSTRACT
MARTA TOCZYLOWSKI: SENSATIONAL CRIME REPORTING IN NINETEENTH
CENTURY PRESS
(Under the direction of Professor John Neff)

This thesis investigates the development of sensational crime reporting in New York in the early-Nineteenth Century. In order to fully understand the introduction of crime reporting into newspapers, I used a significant amount of secondary sources to understand the changes in the city, culture and the history of newspapers. I also took advantage of microfilm of newspapers from the 1830s and 1840s to look firsthand at the development of crime reporting in New York City newspapers. Through studying three significant murders and their coverage in the newspaper, I was able to establish and understand the development of a new type of news coverage—sensational crime reporting.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES.....	v
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER I: THE HISTORY OF NEWSPAPERS.....	6
CHAPTER II: REPORTING OF CRIME AND MURDER.....	16
CHAPTER III: THE PATTERN ESTABLISHED.....	29
CHAPTER IV: THE PATTERN CONFIRMED.....	51
CHAPTER V: THE PATTERN CHALLENGED.....	68
BIBLIOGRAPHY	82

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1:.....	38
FIGURE 2:.....	56
FIGURE 3:.....	80

Introduction

Because of improved printing technology, greater literacy rates, and an increasing urban population, newspapers were on the rise in the 1830s. With inexpensive daily papers, called penny papers, available to the average person on the street corner for just a few cents, newspaper editors looked to attract consumers by any means. After crime reporting was introduced into the United States in the 1820s, penny paper editors adopted this type of news as an easy and inexpensive way to fill the daily newspapers. However, beginning with James Gordon Bennett's coverage of the murder of prostitute Helen Jewett, newspapers shifted their manner of crime reporting, specifically in the portrayal of murder. What had previously been a standard of reporting that included sympathy for the victim, blame for the perpetrator and respect for the victim's family, changed in the Nineteenth Century. Penny papers now focused on the violence of the crime, background and alleged faults of the victim and the brutal savageness of the perpetrator. With each paper competing for circulation, crime reporting became more sensational even bordering on fiction, with drawings, horrific descriptions, and sensational theories. Overall, in early-Nineteenth Century New York City, penny newspapers began to focus on murder and violence in order to appeal to the growing audience and sell newspapers through a new type of news—sensational crime reporting.

In order to prove that penny papers introduced a new type of crime reporting, called sensational crime reporting, that focused on violence, background of the victim

and their faults, and the savage perpetrator, in the mid-nineteenth century. extensive research into murder cases as well as the background of newspapers was necessary.

The history of newspapers in America has been researched extensively. Beginning with the foundation of press in the United States in 1690, George H. Doulgas's book *The Golden Age of the Newspaper* provides an overview of the growth of newspapers from weeklies that were only available through subscriptions to dailies available by subscription and, eventually, the daily penny papers that were accessible to the average person on the street corner. Douglas lays the foundation for some of the reasoning behind the growth of the daily papers, noting that newspapers were more affordable, smaller sized and available more readily from street vendors. Douglas also provided the history of the many failed attempts at penny papers and eventually discusses the successful penny papers *The Sun*, *New York Herald*, and *New-York Tribune*. William E. Huntzicker's book, *The Popular Press: 1835-1865*, provides background as to the technological advancements that made newspapers more accessible. Detailing the progress of the printing press and the changing formatting of the newspapers, *The Popular Press* explains the advancing production technology as reflected in the changing product of the newspaper. *Just the Facts* by David T. Z. Mindich and Gerald Baldasty's *The Commercialization of News in the Nineteenth Century* provide background into the growing newspaper circulation as a result of the newspapers becoming a functioning business led by editors and supported by reporters, as well as the evolving content that appeared less in the daily papers.^{1 2 3}

¹ Gerald J. Baldasty. *The Commercialization of News in the Nineteenth Century* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992).

Crime reporting was first introduced to the United States in the 1820s and Andie Toucher's *Froth and Scum: Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and The Ax Murder in America's First Mass Medium* discusses the changing ways in which this new type of news was being reported and how newspapers began to introduce violence and scandal into news reporting. *Narrating the News* by Karen Roggenkamp argues that fiction was becoming a greater part of newspaper reporting, with stories appearing within the newspapers that blurred the line of fact and fiction for both the audience of the newspaper and the reporters and editors working for the papers.^{4 5}

The newspaper editors, their lives, and their effect on the daily penny papers has been extensively researched in several biographies such as Don C. Seitz's *The James Gordon Bennetts* and *The Man Who Made News* by Oliver Carlson. Providing some basis for the shift away from political news, the history of each newspaper editor shows both the financial and social reasons behind crime reporting appearing in their papers.^{6 7}

The city, itself, becomes an important component in understanding the evolution of crime reporting in the 1830s and several works including Karen Halttunen's *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination*, which discusses the changing urban areas and portrayal of crime in newspapers and fiction, and Christine

² David T. Z. Mindich, *Just the Facts: How "Objectivity" Came to Define American Journalism* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

³ William E. Huntzicker, *The Popular Press, 1833-1865* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999).

⁴ Andie Toucher, *Froth and Scum: Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and The Ax Murder in America's First Mass Medium* (University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

⁵ Karen Roggenkamp, *Narrating the News* (Kent: The Kent State University Press, 2005).

⁶ Don C. Seitz, *The James Gordon Bennetts* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Publishers, 1928).

⁷ Oliver Carlson, *The Man who made News. James Gordon Bennett*. (Duell, Sloan & Pearce: New York, 1942).

Stansell's *City of Women*, that explores the changing city and the new role of women in urban areas and how this shift in society led to violence and the idea of a woman's virtue being lost in growing cities. Through their work on women in New York City and the introduction of pain and violence into the media in growing cities, these works served as background information for the reasoning behind some of the changes in the city that were reflected in the newspapers.^{8 9}

Overall, through studying the changing aspects of society in the early 1830s—a growing urban population with increasing violence and even more marginalized men and women, increasing literacy rates and a shift away from political news all contributed to the development of crime reporting. Coinciding with these developments of society was improved technology and newspaper design that made daily papers more accessible to everyday people. With newspaper ready to reach large audiences, three major murders in New York City helped establish crime reporting and increase popularity of the penny press.

Many scholars have researched the murders of Helen Jewett, Mary Rogers and Samuel Adams as sensational cases of murder that received extensive coverage in the newspaper. *The Murder of Helen Jewett* by Patricia Cline Cohen is about the murder and trial, covering the possible perpetrators and coverage in the newspapers. *Who Murdered Mary Rogers?* by Raymond Paul and *The Mysterious Death of Mary Rogers* by Amy Srebnick discuss the murder but focus on the possible suspects and what actually happened to Mary Rogers. Finally, *Killer Colt*, a book on the murder of Samuel Adams

⁸ Karen Halttunen, *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination* (Harvard University Press, 1998).

⁹ Christine Stansell, *City of Women* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1982).

by Harold Schechter provides detail on the coverage of Adams murder in the paper. but focuses more on the life of John C. Colt and his family, especially his brother's invention of the Colt revolver.^{10 11 12 13}

Through studying three major infamous murder cases through their appearance and popularity in the newspapers, the development of sensational crime reporting is established. In 1836 with the murder of Helen Jewett, daily penny papers first started sensationalizing murder. By introducing new elements to crime reporting that detailed the violence of the murder, researched the background of Jewett and discussed the savageness of the perpetrator, the murder of Jewett became the basis of sensational crime reporting. While newspaper editors sensationalized the murder through competing for exclusive details and circulation, newspapers became more popular. After Helen Jewett's murder established a pattern for reporting on murder, Mary Rogers's case and its appearance in the newspapers proved the new elements of sensational crime reporting that focused on violence and scandal. Finally, the murder of Samuel Adams shows changes in the type of sensational crime reporting when the victim is male and, as newspaper editors shifted focus away from the victim to the perpetrator, trying to find reasoning behind the murder. Overall a new type of narrative was devised from the rise of the penny press and sensational murders.

¹⁰ Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett* (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1998).

¹¹ Raymond Paul, *Who Murdered Mary Rogers?* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc, 1971).

¹² Amy Gilman Srebnick, *The Mysterious Death of Mary Rogers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

¹³ Harold Schechter, *Killer Colt: Murder, Disgrace, and the Making of An American Legend* (Ballantine Books, 2010).

Chapter One: The History of Newspapers and Rise of the Penny Press

Newspapers had always been a way of distributing information in the United States, but it was not until the 1830s and the rise of the penny press—daily papers available for two to six cents—that newspapers became accessible to the average person. Whereas newspapers in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century were weeklies focused on politics and stock prices, appealing to wealthy merchants and businessmen, newspapers were now dailies, focused on stories appealing to all social classes. These new inexpensive papers were centered on trying to sell sensational news stories that would catch readers' attention. The penny press developed at a time of growth and change in America, which was eventually reflected in the content of the daily newspapers. The growing urban population and competition for circulation in New York City created a new type of news—sensational crime reporting—that focused on violence and scandal.

Newspapers were introduced to America in 1690 with the publication of the Boston paper *Publick Occurances*. Before the introduction of the penny press, most newspapers were sold through an annual subscription costing around eight to ten dollars a year, a sum nearly equal to ten percent of an average yearly wage.¹⁴ With an expensive yearly cost limiting those who could access newspapers, the presentation of news was

¹⁴ George H. Douglas. *The Golden Age of Newspaper* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999), 3.

defined by those who had the ability to afford it, meaning most of the early newspapers of the Nineteenth Century reported on stock prices, market values and politics. In the week January 17-22, 1831, the New York *Courier and Enquirer*, the most circulated daily newspaper available through subscription before the penny press, devoted just over fifty percent of its content to politics and just over twenty percent of its content to business and labor. Reflective of who was reading the paper, just 6.2% of the paper content was about crime and courts and only 2.2% of the *Courier and Enquirer* content was about accidents.¹⁵

Circulation of newspapers was also significantly lower before the introduction of the penny press to large cities. Newspapers were only available through a weekly or yearly subscription or by actually going to the printing shop and buying an extra copy from the printer, making it harder to get a copy of the newspaper. The *Courier and Enquirer*, although the most popular paper in the country, only had around 4,500 copies in circulation per day.¹⁶ Although newspapers' popularity was increasing throughout the early Nineteenth Century, it would not be until the introduction of the penny press that the newspaper became a popular outlet for news for the everyday person.

The history of the penny press began long before its first successful publication and distribution in New York. The term penny press signified any inexpensive and widely available newspaper; newspapers that could be bought in single copies on the street.¹⁷ Gaining popularity in England in the early Nineteenth Century, the penny press

¹⁵ Gerald J. Baldasty, *Commercialization of the News in the Nineteenth Century* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 153.

¹⁶ Todd Andrlik, *Historical Circulations* (Online Museum of Historic Newspapers, 2012), 202-203.

¹⁷ George H. Douglas, *The Golden Age of Newspaper*, 3.

made its first appearance in the United States in 1830 with the publication of the first true penny paper called *The Cent* in Philadelphia. The paper, started by Christopher Columbus Conwell, was the first step towards broad public access to the news, but it could not sustain interest and shut down in 1832.

In early 1832, another penny paper launched in New York. At the time, New York was the perfect place to launch a new, affordable daily paper. From 1820 to 1830 the population of New York City increased from 123,706 people to 202,589 people.¹⁸ With the population almost doubling in ten years, there was a larger audience for the news. Reading was also becoming more prominent in everyday life with an increasing literacy rate. By 1830, sixty-one percent of the urban population was literate, meaning daily newspapers had a large potential audience.¹⁹ With all of these factors encouraging an inexpensive news source, a new penny paper was founded. Called *The Morning Post* and run by three men, Horatio David Shepard, Horace Greeley and Francis W. Story, the paper should have been successful, but it debuted during a weeklong blizzard in the city possibly causing the financial downfall of the paper which shut down after three weeks.²⁰

Despite these failures in Philadelphia and New York, and a similar failure of a penny paper in Boston, another penny paper soon appeared. Unlike its predecessors, however, *The Sun* was an instant success. Realizing the demand for an inexpensive paper

¹⁸ Campbell Gibson, "Population of the 100 Largest Cities and Other Urban Places in the United States: 1790-1990" Population Division, U.S. Bureau of the Census, Washington D.C., last modified April 13, 2012.

<http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027/twps0027.html>.

¹⁹ Peter Hutchinson, "Magazine Growth in the Nineteenth Century: A Publisher's History of American Magazines" last modified 2008.

http://themagazinist.com/uploads/Part_1_Population_and_Literacy.pdf

²⁰ George H. Douglas, *The Golden Age of Newspaper*. 5.

in a growing urban market, Benjamin H. Day, the owner of a small print shop who had previously worked for the highly respected newspaper *The Journal of Commerce*, started *The Sun*. The penny paper first appeared in New York on September 3, 1833, and was offered for two cents daily on the streets or just three dollars a year for a subscription. Day, using a hand-crank press and working with just one apprentice, produced the paper on a sheet that measured 8 by 11 inches with three columns of type, all that his small shop could make.²¹ The first issue contained some local and national news, and Day and his helper worked all night to get the first issue printed. Although Day offered a subscription, the most common way people had previously received papers, his focus was on selling the paper on the streets for two cents. Day said, “The object of this paper is to lay before the public, at a price within the means of everyone, all the news of the day, and at the same time afford an advantageous medium for advertising.”²² This statement made it clear that he was offering his newspaper to appeal to the average person, adding he wanted the newspaper to be offered at, “a price within the means of every one.” This shift in the focus of the target demographic of newspapers proved successful; his plan worked and within the year, the paper was selling nearly 4,000 copies a day in the growing metropolis of New York City.

After the success of Benjamin Day’s *The Sun*, many other penny presses began to appear in New York City and other large cities. The next significant penny paper was started in the spring of 1834 by two of Day’s former colleagues from *The Journal of Commerce*, Willoughby Lynde and William J. Stanley. The newspaper, called *The Transcript*, eventually started receiving significant attention and large circulation

²¹ George H. Douglas, *The Golden Age of Newspaper*, 6.

²² *Ibid.*

numbers similar to *The Sun*.²³ The next and perhaps the most significant landmark in the history of the penny press came in 1835, when James Gordon Bennett founded the *New York Herald*. Building on the model of Day's *Sun*, Bennett found success in a longer penny paper featuring fuller news coverage, more reporting and columns that resembled more traditional papers. Bennett began his paper in a basement office on Wall Street, working through the night by himself to produce the first edition. On May 6, 1835, when the first edition of the *New York Herald* was released, Bennett wrote a statement of purpose for the paper saying the newspaper was, "Equally intended for the great masses of the community—the merchant, mechanic, working people—the private family as well as the public hotel—the journeyman and his employer—the clerk and his principal, as it is called—all party—all politics."²⁴ Although in the beginning Bennett wrote some issues entirely by himself, covering court reporting and happenings on Wall Street, the *Herald* soon took off in popularity and Bennett eventually hired reporters and apprentices to help in his print shop. Bennett grew the paper and developed a new reporting style, becoming the most popular penny paper in New York with a daily circulation of 51,000 by 1854.²⁵

One of the later penny presses to be released was the *New-York Tribune*, founded and edited by Horace Greeley, who had been part of one of the first failed attempts at a penny paper in New York. The first issue debuted on April 10, 1841, and was a four page paper consisting of five columns. In 1834, Greeley had developed *The New Yorker*, a popular literary magazine that published essays, poems and other popular arts. Despite

²³ Andie Toucher, *Froth and Scum: Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and The Ax Murder in America's First Mass Medium* (University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 8.

²⁴ Don C. Seitz, *The James Gordon Bennetts* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Publishers, 1928), 18.

²⁵ Gerald J. Baldasty, *Commercialization of the News in the Nineteenth Century*, 46.

9,000 subscriptions by 1837, *The New Yorker* was financially unsuccessful, and Greeley soon tried his hand in the daily penny press. The *New-York Tribune* was one of the more politically minded penny papers and was often used to promote Greeley's social agendas. Focusing on ideas such as enlarging police presence, structuring unions and promoting anti-slavery ideals, his social agendas reflected Greeley's time working odd jobs in New York City, making him well acquainted with the problems of metropolitan life.²⁶ Horace Greeley said his paper was meant to be, "Anti-war, Anti-Slavery, Anti-Rum, Anti-Tobacco, Anti-Grogships, Brothels, Gambling Houses."²⁷ Although Greeley's mission was to start an active social, cultural and political paper, as with all penny presses, much of the reporting tended towards sensational news stories that he used to promote his social causes.

Overall, the 1830s represented a major period of growth in the area of newspapers. With the introduction of daily and twice daily papers that were easily affordable to the common person, the popularity of newspapers grew immensely. The top-selling newspaper in 1828, James Watson Webb's *Courier and Enquirer*, circulated fewer than five thousand copies a day. In 1836, however, the penny press had increased in popularity and James Gordon Bennett's *New York Herald* was nearly 15,000 a day and growing.²⁸ Growth in the newspaper industry would not end there. As the papers steered away from politics and focused more on stories of local importance, the newspapers continued to see an increase in popularity. By 1849 there were eighty-eight newspapers

²⁶ George H. Douglas, *The Golden Age of Newspaper*. 37.

²⁷ *The New-York Tribune*, December 3, 1845.

²⁸ David T. Z. Mindich, *Just the Facts: How "Objectivity" Came to Define American Journalism* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 17.

in New York alone.²⁹ New printing technologies contributed to the ease of production and in 1835 *The Sun* became the first New York newspaper and the second U.S. newspaper to purchase the new and expensive steam press technology. The first steam press, invented by German printing press manufacturers Friedrich Koenig and Andreas Baur, brought together existing technologies of printing, type, ink and paper to form a press that could print on both sides of the paper at once, cutting printing time almost in half. Soon all penny papers adopted this technology, allowing for a faster production time and increased production, both of which contributed to a larger newspaper circulation.³⁰ By 1851, the new double cylinder presses were printing 18,000 pages an hour.³¹ Other major technological advancements such as the development of wood pulping to produce paper and improvements in the steam powered printing presses led to the ability to produce and distribute newspaper to mass markets.³² New York Papers like *The Evening Post*, the *New-York Tribune*, *The New York Times*, and the *Herald* were circulated throughout New York and New Jersey, selling for just pennies a copy and enabling the creation of a mass market.³³ Thanks to new technology and a growing audience, between 1835 and 1840, American newspaper circulation increased by eight percent each year.³⁴ By the 1850s, virtually every family in New York city was buying a newspaper, and circulations soared. The *New York Herald* had an average circulation of 58,000; *The Sun*, 50,000; the *New York Times*, 42,00; and the *New-York Tribune*

²⁹ John Tytell, *Reading New York* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003). 122

³⁰ William E. Huntzicker, *The Popular Press, 1833-1865* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999), 166.

³¹ Mitchell Stevens, *History Of Newspapers* (Collier Encyclopedia).

³² George H. Douglas, *The Golden Age of Newspaper*, 16.

³³ *Ibid.*, 122.

³⁴ David L. Jamison. "Newspapers and the Press" An Essay From Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspaper Database. <http://www.gale.com/DigitalCollection>.

29,000.³⁵

Another major development in the history of the penny press was the formatting and size of the paper. Before the first successful penny press was released in New York in 1833, the newspaper was often called a “blanket sheet” due to its immense size, supporting the supposition that it was large enough to cover a man sleeping on a park bench.³⁶ In 1828, newspapers measured 24 inches wide and 35 inches high. Some papers, like the *Journal of Commerce* were even larger, measuring 35 inches wide and 58 inches high and having eleven columns. All newspaper editors in the 1820s associated large size with prestige. The new penny press editors adopted a reduced sized paper for two main reasons. Monetarily, a smaller paper cost less to produce and distribute and editors realized a smaller paper was easier to hold, making it more accessible to readers.³⁷ Bennett said about his smaller *Herald*, “A word on the size of my paper. For years past the public has been cloyed with immense sheets—bunglingly made up—without concert of action or individuality of character . . . My sheet is moderate in size, but neat and manageable, printed on fine paper and with beautiful type . . . I shall avoid, as I would a pestilence, those enormous sheets.”³⁸

As the size of the paper changed to suit the growing audience, the layout of the penny papers similarly changed. Newspaper layout before the penny press was also significantly different. Based in politics and business reports, the weekly papers did not need nor use attention grabbing headlines or bold fonts to attract readers. The typical weekly paper’s first page consisted of advertisements, maritime reports, and stock prices.

³⁵ Gerald J. Baldasty, *Commercialization of the News in the Nineteenth Century*. 49.

³⁶ William E. Huntzicker, *The Popular Press, 1833-1865*, 1.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 11.

³⁸ Don C. Seitz, *The James Gordon Bennetts*. 33.

In a daily edition of the 1826 *New York Spectator*, two of the six frontpage columns featured market prices for ash, cocoa, coffee, cotton, molasses, leather, olive oil and other goods in New York.³⁹ The other columns featured ads, political news and editorials on local politics. With the spread of the penny paper to a mass audience, headlines as well as fewer columns in the newspaper became increasingly important to attract people willing to buy papers from news vendors on the street.

The introduction of news vendors, nicknamed “newsies,” also propelled the accessibility of the penny press. Vendors were able to buy papers from newspaper editors and sell them for a profit—the more they sold, the more they earned. Editors often enticed men with deals and rewards for selling more papers, making the newsies driven to sell papers to people on the street. Now that newspapers could be found on every street corner, people walking to work were able to pick up a paper for a few cents, transforming the world of news and making the newspaper appealing to the everyday man.

The penny presses also increased their demand by offering their paper every day. With papers being distributed daily instead of weekly, New Yorkers began to fear that missing a day of the paper would mean missing out on important news. By offering the paper once or twice a day, the editors of the penny press were able to project the paper’s importance, which in turn made readers want to buy the paper.

Another new development in the newspapers had to do with the changing population in New York City and other large urban areas at that time. Because New York was offering opportunity to many people, “turmoil cast up poor people as well as

³⁹ The *New York Spectator*. June 3, 1826.

riches on Mahattan`s shores.”⁴⁰ With the increasing population, the municipal relief system suffered and disease and crime flourished. The role of women in cities also changed during this time. “As the livelihoods of many men became less dependable , families increasingly needed women`s cash earning to get by.”⁴¹ As a result, some women turned to day laboring jobs, but others, those without husbands or family in the city, turned to prostitution as a means of surviving in the growing urban city of New York. “There was certainly an increase in the absolute number of prostitutes. . . Prostitution was becoming urbane. The trade was quite public in the business district as well as in poor neighborhoods, a notable feature of the ordinary city landscape. Since prostitution was not a statutory offense, there was no legal pressure to conceal it.”⁴² As prostitution was growing in the city, many people believed it was a reflection of the downfall of the virtue of women and respectable city life: “For laboring people as well as bourgeois moralists, prostitution was closely linked to ‘ruin,’ a state of affairs to be avoided at all costs.”⁴³ As prostitution and the urban population grew, crime also increased. The changing city of New York was appearing in the papers and as penny papers became available to the middle class, the downfalls of the city were splashed across the pages of the paper, perhaps a result of some New Yorkers wanting to read about those in worse conditions than themselves.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Christine Stansell, *City of Women* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1982). 5.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 173-4.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁴⁴ Karen Halttunen. *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination* (Harvard University Press, 1998).

Chapter Two: The Reporting of Crime

As the penny papers evolved, so did their content. Many factors, both personal and business related caused a shift in the content of the newspapers. While previously the newspaper had been a weekly paper, gathering market prices and political news from across the nation and world, now papers tended to focus on the local and immediate. Driven by competition for circulation and an audience with a growing interest in entertainment and crime, penny papers developed a new type of reporting, called sensational crime reporting, that used sensational stories to portray violence and scandal in order to attract audiences and sell papers.

Crime reporting first appeared in the 1820s in London when newspapers started featuring columns on petty crimes. In London, daily papers saw success by running daily columns reporting on amusing cases of petty crime—public drunkenness, audacious minor larcenies, lewd behavior and other small crimes. Soon after, American newspapers adopted the idea of crime reports and began copying some of the news from the London police courts into large New York and Boston papers. Despite the integration of London's columns on crime into American papers, it was not until the 1830s that any original crime reporting took place in American papers. In 1830, one of the first original sensational police reports in American newspapers came from James Gordon Bennett, an associate editor at the time, who was sent by his boss to cover the criminal trial of three

young men accused of murdering a sea captain in Salem, Massachusetts. This new press coverage that included reporters asking questions about the trial and taking notes on the judge's rulings caused so much distress to the judge in the case that he tried to forbid the publication of any news on the trial.⁴⁵ However, this was just the beginning of what was to become a new type of news—sensational crime reporting—something James Gordon Bennett would later perfect and sell to the masses.

After the first publications of crime reports in newspapers in the late 1820s and early 1830, newspapers like James Watson Webb's *Courier and Enquirer* began to devote some of the news column space to police court records and deaths. Still, before the creation of the penny press, there was not much demand for the sensational crime reporting because newspapers only came out once a week and, by that time, crimes were old news. Additionally, New Yorkers paying up to ten dollars a year for subscriptions to a weekly newspaper expected business information and political news.⁴⁶ Unlike more expensive weekly papers, penny papers started to offer timely news and updates on crime, making crime reporting more effective and increasing its demand.

In the mid-1830s, penny papers were introduced into New York City. Each penny paper in New York was published and distributed on the street once or twice a day, Monday through Saturday, and lent itself to crime reporting. Most editors of penny papers produced the paper with little to no staff and had to maintain small overhead costs. Crime reporting became an immediate and natural staple of the penny press: it was easy and inexpensive to gather; it was familiar to readers in the urban city; it provided New

⁴⁵ Andie Toucher, *Froth and Scum: Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and The Ax Murder in America's First Mass Medium*. 11.

⁴⁶ George H. Douglas, *The Golden Age of Newspaper*. 3.

Yorkers with useful and important information about the way their police force functioned; and, in the beginning, it met no serious competition from the traditional weekly press.⁴⁷

As sensational crime reporting first began to appear in the newspapers in the form of police court records, many penny press editors were still wary of discussing what, at the time, society viewed as embarrassing or private matters in the public marketplace. This view, brought upon by the tradition of newspaper editors who were expected to maintain a high sense of delicacy and civic responsibility in their reporting,⁴⁸ was reiterated by physician Benjamin Rush in 1786 when he said, “In order to preserve the vigor of the moral faculty, it is of the utmost consequence to keep young people as ignorant as possible of those crimes that are generally thought most disgraceful to human nature. For this reason, I should be glad to see the proceedings of our courts kept from the public eye, when they expose or punish monstrous voices.”⁴⁹ James Gordon Bennett also wrote about the caution newspaper editors took in approaching subjects such as crime and violence: “News was plentiful enough, but it was not the custom to print it. Accounts of social affairs were tabooed. The proceeding of courts could not be exploited. It was libelous to publish reports of bankruptcies.”⁵⁰ Despite the disapproving elite and some caution from newspaper editors, the new brand of news could not be stopped and it seemed that Americans wanted more reporting on crimes. By the time of daily newspapers, crime reporting could be effective because it could be updated with details

⁴⁷ Andie Toucher, *Froth and Scum: Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and The Ax Murder in America's First Mass Medium*, 11.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Don C. Seitz, *The James Gordon Bennetts*, 19.

added to the news story each day. Dailies, with their emphasis on the immediate, became a perfect vehicle for crime reporting.

The shift away from political reporting in New York papers was extremely obvious in the Nineteenth Century. In the week of January 9-14, 1832, *Albany Argus*, a daily New York newspaper, 76.9 percent of its content was politics. In comparison, after the rise of the penny press extremely less space was devoted to covering politics in the newspaper. In 1897, the *New York Journal*, a popular daily paper comparative to the *Albany Argus*, devoted only 18.2 percent of their content to politics. Each penny paper had a different reason for shifting the content of their paper. James Gordon Bennett, for example, had a history working for political newspapers and was eventually shunned by the Jackson Democrats after causing an embarrassment to the party in a news report he wrote on the bank war. He later reflected on his time supporting political parties: “When I first entered Tammany Hall, I entered it as an enthusiast studying human nature, as a young man would enter a new country, full of interest...[Later] I found out the hollow-heartedness and humbuggery of these political association and political men.”⁵¹ Bennett never again wrote for a paper that was bound by political allegiance, and instead published whatever suited him without worrying about upsetting political backers. Other editors also saw the constraints of politically sided papers. If a penny paper was to be the voice or representation of either political party, the newspaper was immediately limiting the audience by half. While political news was on the decline, a new type of reporting was developing and ready to takes its place—crime reporting.

At the same time penny papers started reporting less on political happenings in

⁵¹ Don C. Seitz, *The James Gordon Bennetts*, 21.

the country, violence was increasing amongst the growing urban population. Murders were common, ethnic gangs such as the Bowery Boys fought in the streets, mob riots took place, violence against immigrants and minorities increased, and dueling between men was on the rise in the city. Because of a general lack of a police force, the increasing violence in crime reporting was not merely a figment of editors' mercenary minds.⁵²

The expansion of crime reporting to newspapers was also the direct result of newspaper competition. The great newspaper editors of the 1830s and 1840s were James Watson Webb, Benjamin Day, James Gordon Bennett and Horace Greeley. Whereas in the early nineteenth century, the newspaper had focused on politics and a way to spread the news of elections, politicians and high society, the new penny presses were less concerned with politics and more concerned with taking advantage of their new potentially lucrative business model. The largest papers of the time constantly competed for sales and circulation with each penny paper advertising when it had become the "most popular" or "most circulated" paper.⁵³ Although the newspaper business had expanded and eventually flourished because of political backing that funded political newspapers,⁵⁴ the editors of the penny press papers soon learned that politics was not as attractive to everyday workers when compared to sensational crimes. As one Missouri newspaper editor said in the 1890s about the shift in coverage, "People seem to forget that a newspaper is primarily published as a business enterprise" and that the news was "valued

⁵² David T. Z. Mindich, *Just the Facts*, 33-34.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 18.

⁵⁴ George H. Douglas, *The Golden Age of Newspaper*, 2.

and defined within that context.”⁵⁵ This meant that instead of focusing on a political agenda that could only appeal to a fraction of New York readers, newspaper editors took on the goal of appealing to mass audiences, blurring or rather erasing the line of politics in order to report to everyone.

In order to turn the newspapers of the nineteenth century into a functioning business that could still appeal to mass audiences without the help of political backing, newspapers adopted a management system that focused on advertising, reporters, cost-cutting and distribution. Through adopting a new business model for newspapers, editors were able to break free from political affiliations that had previously provided funding for the newspapers. By the Century’s end, although many editors and publishers retained personal links to political parties, the newspaper had emerged as a business, dedicated to presenting information within the parameters of profitability. Editors introduced certain categories of news primarily because doing so could make money and content that was entertaining appeared because of its marketability.⁵⁶ With the focus of newspaper changing to promoting the business of newspapers and making money, crime reporting became one of the most popular areas of content and editors made every effort to supply the demand.

Crime reporting was easy and inexpensive to gather and it was easy to understand for the people buying the papers. Crime reporting also became entertainment—murders, trials and court records turned into stories that could be covered for weeks or months and as readers became involved and attached to the stories of murders, the newspaper editors sold more copies. Benjamin Day, arguably the first successful editor of a penny paper

⁵⁵ Gerald J. Baldasty, *The Commercialization of News in the Nineteenth Century*. 81.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 140.

said in an opinion item published on September 1, 1835, “News, properly so called, to be interesting to the public, must generally tell of wars and fightings, of deeds of death, and blood, and wounds and heresies, of broken heads, broken hearts and broken bones, of accidents by fire or flood, a field of possessions ravaged, property purloined, wrongs inflicted, rights unavenged, reputations assailed, feelings embittered and oppressions exercised by nations, communities or individuals...and when such accounts are received, we are in the habit of denominating them great or good news, as the matter may be, without a solitary feeling of sorrow for the miseries others have to endure, to furnish food for appetizing the morbid appetites of cormorants for news.”⁵⁷ This attraction of the public to news that involved death, violence or other sensational stories was delivered on by newspaper editors as was obvious by the shift of newspapers that mostly reported on national politics to newspapers that chose to focus on local crime stories in the mid-nineteenth century.

Reporters were driven by newspaper editors to bring in sensational stories that would be attractive to their cormorant readers. Reporters were prompted to report on deaths and sensational crimes in order to make more money for the paper and eventually gain a position as a salaried worker. For reporters, pay was generally low and bonuses and pay raises were only given when stories were able to attract the general population and make the paper more money. Despite low starting salaries, if a reporter was able to find a sensational story, the financial reward would be worth it. In one case, a reporter who had been dispatched to cover a drowning discovered that the victim had actually survived. When he arrived at the scene he was upset because if the woman had drowned

⁵⁷ *The New York Sun*, September 1, 1835.

he would have received six dollars for the story instead of just two. Moreover, he had lost the chance of other profitable assignments.⁵⁸ Accounts of newspaper reporters exaggerating or worsening the details of crimes were common and were sometimes encouraged by newspaper editors for larger story sales. Some editors went so far as to publish sensational stories that were easily disproven, as Benjamin Day did in *The Sun* in a series of six articles titled “Great Astronomical Discoveries Lately Made,” published beginning on August 25, 1835, that claimed there was life on the Moon. The story reported evidence of a civilization on the Moon observed through telescopes. The articles included reports of goats and unicorns in outer space and despite proof that the story was false, *The Sun* never published a statement saying otherwise or retracting the articles.⁵⁹ The stories that became known as the “Great Moon Hoax” increased circulation of *The Sun*, and was just one example of reporters falsifying information in order to attract audiences to a paper.

Editors themselves often told stories of violence or exaggerated personal situations in order to promote their paper and attract readers. James Gordon Bennett was perhaps most known for this, covering the stories of his own victimization at the hands of another newspaper editor, James Watson Webb, who beat him twice with a cane. The day after his second beating, Bennett’s *Herald* featured the exaggerated headline, “OPENING OF THE SUMMER CAMPAIGN—JAMES WATSON WEBB’S SECOND FRACAS—WALL STREET IN COMMOTION,” and continued under the headline, “The violent and disgraceful personal outrages which have so frequently disgraced this city, were yesterday repeated by James Watson Webb, the editor and proprietor of the

⁵⁸ Gerald J. Baldasty, *The Commercialization of News in the Nineteenth Century*, 89.

⁵⁹ Stephen Krensky, *The Great Moon Hoax* (Minneapolis, MN: Carolrhoda Books, 2011).

Courier and Enquirer.” after which Bennett offered to have Webb committed to the Bellevue Insane Asylum.⁶⁰ Clearly, the editors and reporters alike were in the business of selling violence and scandal. With the rise in sensational crime reporting, the focus on details of crimes and violence, made up or not, would sell papers and showed Americans did not so much care about the facts of the story, but rather the sensationalism that made the stories interesting.

Reporters also lifted some of their reportedly factual stories from fiction and oftentimes it was difficult to tell the difference between what was news and what was fiction. These types of stories were often used to fill space in the daily newspapers when there was not enough actual news. The introduction of fiction literature into the newspapers, however, acted as a transition into sensationalizing real news stories. In one detailed article published in a New York daily, the reporter described how a young gentleman, the oldest son of a distinguished baronet in England, returned home from school, fell in love with an orphan, and ran off with his beloved. Perceptive readers might notice the smallest of verbal clues—the word “recent,” for instance—and infer that the story was a news item rather than wholesale fiction. Otherwise, the story’s plot, characterization’s and description might well have appeared within the pages of an early nineteenth-century novel.⁶¹ Many times excerpts from novels were actually published in the newspapers, presented in a way that allowed readers to believe that the fictional was factual. Penny papers frequently published—without commentary—fictional works

⁶⁰ *New York Herald*, May 10, 1836.

⁶¹ Karen Roggenkamp, *Narrating the News* (Kent: The Kent State University Press, 2005), 2.

adjacent to factual ones.⁶² With the line between fact and fiction blurred, it was easier for editors to create and add to the stories in their newspapers, providing their readers with sensational stories of violence that gained attention and improved their circulation.

From the birth of the penny paper in New York, the portrayal of murder in the press became radically different. A typical death in 1820 would have been reported simply, with plain language and little detail and any reporting on a murder or violent crime would be reported with the utmost care and sympathy for the victim, blame for the perpetrator and respect for the victim's family. In the beginning of the Nineteenth Century, before the introduction of the penny paper, death and murder were seldom discussed in any detail in the newspaper.

Since the majority of newspapers before the rise of the penny papers were weeklies, oftentimes murders or deaths would go days without being reported. By the time a death appeared in a weekly paper, any coverage on the death would be published in a small section towards the back of the newspaper in a middle column usually titled "Deaths" or "Coroner's Report" and would appear simply, without details, usually expressing sympathy to the victim. Murders, however, were seldom reported in the paper, and much more space in pre-penny press newspapers was given to natural deaths from illness or old age in the obituary reports and boating or industrial accidents in the "deaths" section.

In the rare occasion of a murder, however, victims received the utmost care in the reports in the newspaper. In 1826, the *New-York Evening Post* wrote a small piece on the murder of a white man: "A black fellow has been committed to jail...for striking a white

⁶² *Ibid.*

man by the name of Pennel on the head...which occasioned his death. The quarrel took place between them on Christmas day at the Mount Alton Iron works, and Pennel lingered till the following Friday. He has left a widow and six children.”⁶³ This column appeared in the middle of the second page of the newspaper, not appearing as a headline or highlighted story. This short paragraph about the murder of the white man Pennel by a black man was typical of reporting of murders in newspapers in the 1820s—the paragraph showed some sympathy for the victim, not alluding to any guilt he may have had in initiating the quarrel. the paragraph blamed the perpetrator and told of the black man’s arrest and, most importantly, the report on Pennel’s death did not describe any violence in detail, perhaps trying to respect his wife six remaining children. Although there was nothing especially extraordinary in the murder of Pennel, even more dramatic murders were not recurring stories and simply appeared alongside natural deaths or accidents in the pre-penny press newspapers.

Overall, deaths and murders were given minimal coverage in pre-penny press newspapers and any reporting on murders was featured towards the end of the newspaper and coverage of a murder usually appeared only once in the paper. This all changed with the rise of the penny papers in New York. What had previously been a standard of reporting that included outright sympathy for the victim, blame for the perpetrator and respect for the victim’s family, completely changed in the mid-nineteenth century. The treatment of murder in the penny papers represents quite a contrast to the portrayal of murder prior to 1830. Hinging on violence, mystery, and sensationalism, murders became the selling point of the papers—full of gory details and scandalous revelations.

⁶³ *New York Evening Post*, January 7, 1826.

As sensational crime reporting was introduced into the penny papers, the typical report of murder changed significantly. Whereas crime reporting had barely existed before penny papers, now the story of a murder would run in the papers for weeks or months, accompanied by background information on the victim, eyewitness reports, theories on perpetrators and sometimes even drawings of the victims.

The typical murder in a penny paper had several important elements that attracted readers. First, the violence of the crime was reported in great detail. This consisted of a representation of the murder scene, the weapons used in the murder, the appearance of the victim, and any other details that might thrill or horrify. Second, the background of the victim was researched and presented to the audience. This in-depth reporting on the victim usually ended up revealing a fault or moment of downfall in the victim's life that many times newspapers would say put the victim into a situation leading to their murder. Finally, all penny papers reported on the perpetrator or alleged perpetrator and their savageness. The newspapers focused on the violence of the perpetrator, their attack and their brutality as a way to condemn their crime and, in later crime reporting, the penny press would also focus on the perpetrator's background and life to try to explain the reasoning and violence behind their crime. All of these elements of the reporting of murder contributed to the sensationalism of the newspapers. Through focusing on these elements, newspapers could easily turn a murder into a headline story, boosting newspaper circulation and garnering nationwide attention. By focusing on these elements when reporting murders, a new style of reporting—sensational crime reporting—took over the penny papers and radicalized the newspaper business.

The newspaper business changed dramatically in the Nineteenth Century. Aided by a growing population, increased literacy rates, new printing technology and an increase in crime rates, newspapers' content began to change. While newspapers had previously been grounded in political news, the penny press soon found success in sensational stories focusing on crime and violence. Overall, the rise of the penny press took time and faced an uphill battle to compete for circulation all of which eventually led to the creation of a new type of news—sensational crime reporting.

Chapter Three: The Pattern Established—The Murder of Helen Jewett

Although the penny press had been available since 1833, it was not until 1836 and the coverage of the murder of a young prostitute named Helen Jewett that the penny papers solidified their popularity and gave rise to a new genre of news—sensational crime reporting. The war between newspaper editors over information on the murder and circulation of papers led to the most comprehensive coverage of a murder ever up to that point in the United States and completely changed newspaper history.

While murders had previously been published towards the back of the penny papers, now Helen Jewett's story became front page news every day. The editors of the largest penny presses openly competed against one another, each claiming more sensational details and more access to the crime scene, trying to make their reporting more exclusive. Helen Jewett's murder came to define crime reporting and specifically typical murder reporting in the nineteenth century. The coverage of her murder defined the three elements that would become standard of murder coverage—violence of the crime, background and alleged faults or downfall of the victim, and savageness of the perpetrator. Although coverage varied slightly depending on the gender and social status of the victim, all newspapers strived to report on these three elements that sensationalized the press coverage of murder.

The story of Helen Jewett was one that, although sad and gruesome, would hardly have been given a second thought or multiple write ups before the daily penny papers. After crime reporting gained popularity with coverage of small local crimes, the murder of Helen Jewett presented itself as the perfect case to cover in the penny papers. Newspaper editors saw the opportunity to cover the murder of Helen Jewett with a new style of reporting that included sensational details, often extracted from the police's own records, hoping coverage of her murder would boost newspaper circulation. Eventually, the murder of the prostitute Helen Jewett became one of the most infamous murders of the Nineteenth Century and made the penny papers notorious for their sensationalism.

Although in the reporting that followed her death, the details and facts of the Helen Jewett murder were heavily debated amongst newspaper editors, they all told the same essential story. Helen Jewett was a prostitute, well known throughout the city for her elegance, intelligence and beauty. Despite varying stories of her background, she was known by many to have been raised in Maine by a Judge Wesern who took her in after she was orphaned.

Eventually moving to New York, working at a brothel owned by madam Rosina Townsend. At the time, brothels were not illegal, and Townsend's boarding house was successful in an upscale part of the city with a reputation for being well-ordered. Attracting many clients, Jewett was popular among wealthy married and unmarried clientele. On the night of April 9, 1836, a young man named Richard P. Robinson who frequented the brothel arrived for a visit with Jewett. Rosina Townsend later reported that around 3 A.M. on Sunday, April 10, she awoke after a man knocked on the front door, wanting to be let in for an appointment with another prostitute, at which time

Townsend noticed the back door open. Figuring another customer had gone out the back way, Townsend ignored it, but on the way back to her room, she noticed a globe lamp sitting on top of a parlor table. Believing it belonged to Jewett, Townsend took it to her room to return it. When Townsend knocked and entered Jewett's room, smoke billowed out and she immediately started screaming for help. While waiting for the local night watchman to come, Townsend and another prostitute braved the smoke to try to save Jewett and her guest. The two women discovered a fire smoldering on the bed, with Jewett's lifeless body in the middle, charred on one side with several gashes across her forehead.⁶⁴

Coverage of the murder began immediately on Monday, April 11, 1836. The first way in which penny papers attracted an audience was to report on the violent and horrific nature of the Jewett murder. The *New York Herald*, the six-page morning and afternoon daily paper run by James Gordon Bennett, began reporting on April 12, 1836, with a first column report on the murder: "The excitement yesterday morning throughout the city was extraordinary. Everybody exclaimed "what a horrible affair!"—"what a terrible catastrophe! The private tragedy of Ellen Jewett almost absorbed all public attention."⁶⁵ Immediately grabbing the attention of readers with the "excitement" of the murder that was felt throughout the city, Bennett continued to report on the crime throughout the week. One of his reports in the paper, titled the "Most Atrocious Murder," said, "Our city was disgraced on Sunday, by one of the most foul and premeditated murders, that ever fell to our lot to record. The following are circumstances

⁶⁴ Patricia Cline Cohen. *The Murder of Helen Jewett* (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1998), 7-9.

⁶⁵ *New York Herald*, April 12, 1836. [The *Herald* insisted on misspelling Jewett's first name]

as ascertained on the spot. Richard P. Robinson, the alleged perpetrator of this most horrid deed, had for some time been in the habit of keeping (as it is termed) a girl named Ellen Jewett, who has for a long period resided at No. 41 Thomas street, in the house kept by Rosina Townsend. In short time Mrs. Townsend was aroused by the smell of smoke—she rushed upstairs and saw the bed on fire and the mangled body of the unfortunate girl upon it.”⁶⁶ Bennett’s emphasis on the “foul” murder and the “most horrid deed” intrigued readers to continue reading, and his colorful descriptions and attention to sordid details became a standard in crime reporting.

Bennett did not stop there, consistently writing about the murder on the front page of both the morning and evening editions of the newspaper, trying to lure readers in with sensational and violent descriptions of the murder. Not only was Bennett given total access to the crime scene after the murder, he shared every detail of his exclusive visit with readers: “We mounted an elegant staircase—dark and gloomy, being in the center of a large double house. On reaching the second story, the Police officer took a key from his pocket—and opened the door. What a sight burst upon me! There stood an elegant double mahogany bed, all covered with burnt pieces of linen, blankets, pillows black as cinders.” Bennett described the bed which was reportedly burned after Jewett was beaten and continued on in his description of the room, building suspense, “I looked around for the object of my curiosity” and after removing the sheet that covered her body, Bennett revealed, “Slowly I began to discover the lineaments of the corpse as one would the beauties of a statue of marble..how like a statue” but noted in his essay the “dreadful

⁶⁶ *New York Herald*. April 13, 1836.

bloody gashes” and her burned skin “bronzed like an antique statue.”⁶⁷ Bennett’s sensational description of the body continued as he noted his last look at Jewett, “I returned to take a last look at the corpse. What a melancholy sight for beauty, wit and talent, for it is said she possessed all, to come to such a fatal end!”⁶⁸

By revealing the violent nature in which Jewett came to her death, Bennett and the other penny papers were delving into a new type of crime reporting that focused on a graphic description of the violence done to the victim, instead of respecting the privacy of the victim and victim’s family through more circumspect reporting. Perhaps, because Jewett had no family to speak of, the newspaper editors did not feel the need or financial motive to respect her family or keep details private because there was no one to speak for her, complain to the newspaper editors, or become outraged at the coverage.

The Sun, the original New York penny paper run by Benjamin Day, also used sensational language to describe the murder of Jewett: “The excitement throughout the city in relation to this melancholy business continues unabated. The cold-blooded, deliberate and savage manner in which the unfortunate girl was massacred...tend to increase rather than diminish the agitation of the public mind.”⁶⁹ The language Day used in his article aroused public sentiments and he continued in his sensational writing to portray violence in his coverage of the crime. Similarly, the *New York Daily Transcript*, another popular penny paper of the time, alluded to the violent nature of the crime, writing, “Some particulars in reference to this horrid affair which will electrify and appal [sic] a great part of this community;--particulars which, as far as we present know, are

⁶⁷ *New York Herald*, April 13, 1836.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett*, 24.

known but to a very few others persons besides ourselves.”⁷⁰ Just as Bennett had reported on his exclusive access to the crime scene right after the murder, the *Transcript* reported that it knew details about the crime that few others knew. All of this eventually contributed to the competition between the newspaper editors for exclusive information in their crime reports.

With a style of reporting that lent itself to sensationalism, each penny paper competed for circulation, claiming exclusivity, arguing over details of the crime, and attacking the competing newspaper editors on their morality. This competition amongst newspapers became part of crime reporting and helped penny papers gain popularity and circulation.

The birthplace, background and even spelling of Helen Jewett were all debated amongst the papers. *The Sun* and the *Transcript* both disagreed on the details of the murder, with *The Sun* claiming she was born in Maine and the *Transcript* reporting that she was born in Massachusetts. They also disagreed on how her innocence was lost—one claimed it was to a bank cashier and another to a merchant’s son. There was even a debate on how to actually spell the young victim’s name. The *Herald* called her Ellen, the *Transcript* called her Helen and *The Sun* used both spellings. With even small facts being argued over, the penny papers continued to claim exclusive content in an effort to compete against each other.

From the beginning, each penny press claimed they had inside knowledge of the crime. Bennett had proudly proclaimed his access to the crime, recounting the story of his first visit to the brothel, “I started on a visit to the scene at 41 Thomas-street. A large

⁷⁰ *The New York Daily Transcript*, April 13, 1836.

crowd of young men stood around the door, No. 41, and several groups along the street in various directions. The excitement among the young men throughout the city was beginning to spread in all directions." Bennett then reported that he entered the residence after the police officer announced, "He is an editor—he is on public duty."⁷¹ Bennett also claimed he had exclusive access to Rosina Townsend, interviewing her at the scene, a statement the other penny papers claimed as false. *The Sun* reported just days later that Townsend said she never talked to Bennett and she "unhesitatingly pronounced the whole to be a base and utter forgery, and declared that she never spoke a syllable to any man, of all that there set forth, and had never in her life exchanged a word, with its depraved inventor!"⁷² This did not, however, stop Bennett from claiming he had exclusive content, when Judge Wesern, who had supposedly raised Helen Jewett, wrote a letter to the *Herald* in which he said, "I have no reason to believe that she has misrepresented the condition in which she resided in my family." The judge went on to claim he did not know who her seducer was. Bennett made it a point to note that the same year Dorcas [Helen Jewett's real name] had been sent away, the Judge Wesern's daughter sued her husband for adultery, perhaps making him the seducer, and headlining this information as inside insight into Helen Jewett's downfall.

The *New York Courier and Enquirer*, a more established daily newspaper offered through subscription, condemned the penny papers' reports on exclusive information as, "reports which are utterly destitute of truth, and which are indented and propogated only for catchpenny phrases."⁷³ Soon after, the penny paper editors began to attack each

⁷¹ *The New York Herald*, April 12, 1836.

⁷² *The Sun*, April 19, 1836.

⁷³ *New York Courier and Enquirer*, April 18, 1836.

other's morality with the *Herald* saying, "The attempt of the *Sun* to protect the characters of the fashionables in Thomas Street is all proper in him. An infidel for many years standing, the printer and editors of Fanny Wright's infamous system of religion and morals—a seal breaker—an indicted thief not yet tried, he cannot help possessing a congeniality of feelings towards the amiable syrens [sic] of St. Thomas hotel. Their morals, are the morals of the editor of the *Sun*—their principals are alike—their purposes are alike."⁷⁴ *The Sun* in turn attacked the *Herald* saying that, "The excitement in the public mind in reference to this monstrous affair, continues to be unabated; and, notwithstanding the puny and purchased efforts of a rickety [sic], tottering print—notorious only for its easy access to petit bribery, and as being the most corrupt, profligate, and contemptible concern that was every yet palmed upon any community—to produce an impression that other persons than Robinson have been the perpetrators of the foul assassination."⁷⁵ While the newspaper editors were attacking each other, the public could not get enough of the coverage and continued to buy papers.

Overall, the competitive nature of the newspaper editors led to an increased circulation. With a new style of reporting that focused on violence of the crime, background and alleged faults of the victim and savageness of the perpetrator, each newspaper was driven to claim they had the most exclusive content and most accurate details of the murder, which eventually led to the newspaper editors attacking each other over content. The competition over the sensational murder eventually became a story in itself. New Yorkers had to get the most updated information from each paper and, because of this, circulation increased. During the coverage of Helen Jewett's murder in

⁷⁴ *The Herald*, April 18, 1836.

⁷⁵ *The Sun*, April 14, 1836.

mid-1836. Bennett proclaimed the circulation of the *Herald* to be 12,000 daily and at the peak of the Robinson trial, Bennett claimed to have a circulation of 20,000 papers a day.⁷⁶ Similarly, *The Sun* was reporting a circulation of 27,000 in August 1836.⁷⁷

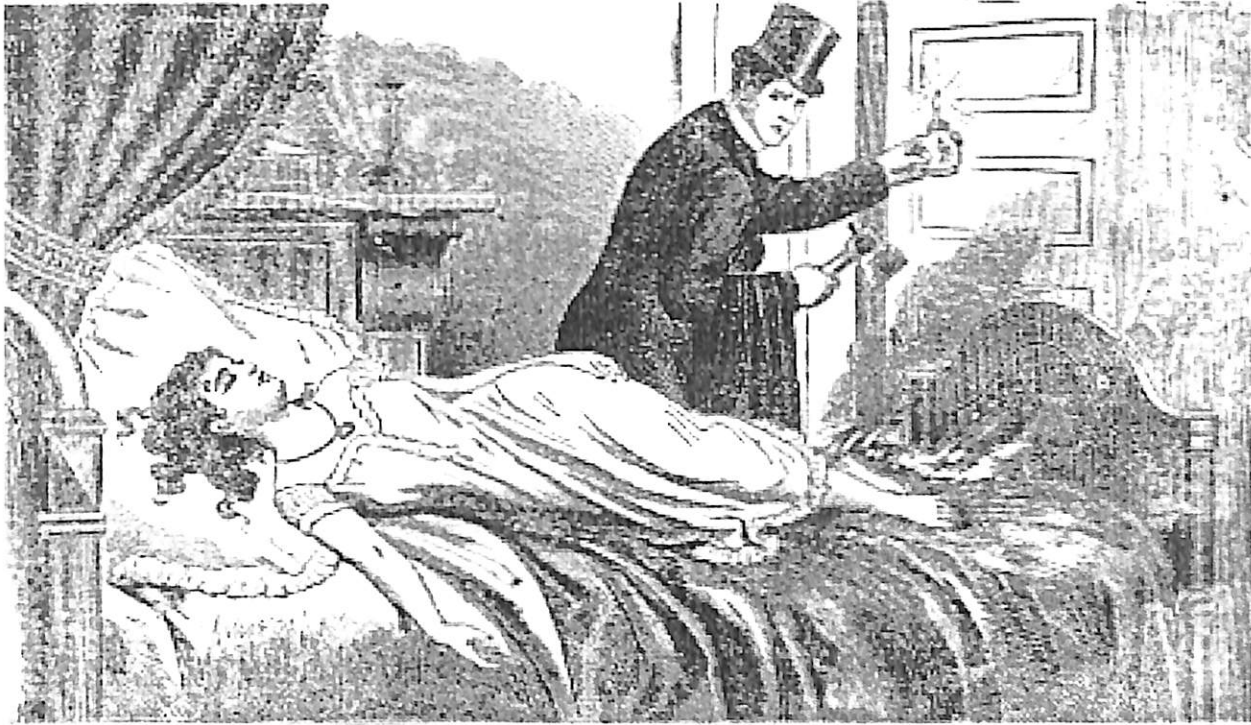
While the penny press editors competed over details and exclusive content, they also adopted new ways to compete in the market place. The penny papers shared the violence of the murder of Helen Jewett with readers through published drawings depicting the victim. One, which appeared in the *Herald*, showed Helen Jewett lying seductively in a charred bed, with a man running away holding a hatchet (See Figure 1). After the *Herald* published a drawing, the other penny presses tried to compete, releasing portrait drawings of Jewett as well as other depictions of the crime scene. All of these reports on Jewett's violent death using description, grisly language and brutal images contributed to the creation of sensational crime reporting in the nineteenth century.

Another important element in the reporting of the murder of Helen Jewett was the penny press's focus on the background and alleged faults of the victim. While in the early nineteenth century newspapers had respected the family of the victims and not delved into the person life of victims, the new penny papers were driven by competition and demand for sensationalism to look into the life of Jewett. What the newspapers reported was the story of an innocent young girl who was seduced by a man, which eventually led her into a life of sin and prostitution. The background of Helen Jewett was reported on extensively, with each penny paper claiming to know the true story of Jewett, and each paper's sensational details on her life driving up circulation of all the papers in

⁷⁶ John D. Stevens, *Sensationalism and the New York Press* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 37.

⁷⁷ Matthew Goodman, *The Sun and The Moon* (Basic Books, 2010).

Figure One: Drawing of Jewett's Murder Scene



The above depiction appeared in the *New York Herald* in the week following Jewett's murder. Portraying Jewett in a seductive pose with Robinson exiting the room with an axe, the drawing was unlike any that had been previously published in the newspaper.

New York.

Just as he had with his reporting on the violence of the crime, James Gordon Bennett used sensationalism in the *Herald* to attract readers. Bennett reported extensively on the background and life of Jewett, writing for weeks on the front page of his penny paper about the young girl's life, acquaintances and relationships. The *Herald* did not reference any sources for its information, but insisted it was of public interest to provide a long history of the young woman's life: "Tomorrow we shall republish on our last page the whole narrative and sketches of the recent tragedy, as published in Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday's Herald. This we do at the request generally of the public, who have an intense anxiety to preserve these memoranda of a transaction unequalled in private history for mystery and horror."⁷⁸ The history Bennett provided was written in an essay form, chronologically recalling Jewett's spectacular life and spectacular downfall using ornate language and embellished stories to sensationalize her life:

Her private history is most remarkable—her character equally so. She is a native of Augusta in the state of Maine, and her real name is Dorcas Dorrance, but in this city she has generally passed under the name Ellen Jewett—in Boston as Helen Mar. She was an orphan—her father and mother, poor people, having died while she was in her infancy. In Augusta, Maine, lived a highly respectable gentleman, Judge Wesern, by name. Some of the female member of his family pitying the bereaved condition of young Dorcas invited her to live at the judge's house. At that time Dorcas was young, beautiful, innocent, modest, and ingenious. Her good qualities and sprightly temper won the good feelings of the Judge's family. She became a chere-amie of his daughters—a companion and playmate. (*The New York Herald*, April 12, 1836)

Bennett used the story of Jewett's early life to show the young girl's innocence and virginal qualities which he continued to emphasize in writing about her school years: "At school her intellectual powers show forth with great and remarkable brilliancy—but

⁷⁸ *The New York Herald*, Friday, April 12, 1836.

not more so than her form, appearance, and looks. She was the pride of her teachers—she was beloved of her school mates—she was obliging, good-tempered, intellectual and refined.” Again, Bennett maintains that Dorcas Dorrance was “good-tempered” and “intellectual” at a young age, but then reveals the girl always had a hint of darkness in her:

Dorcas was sixteen years of age—and one of the most lovely, interesting, black-eyed girls that ever appeared in that place. In intellectual accomplishments, particularly the arts of conversation, interspersed with brilliant wit and repartee, she was unsurpassed. Yet even at this young age, she occasionally gave indications of a wild, imaginative mind—without fixed principles—or knowledge of the true point of honor in morals. Her passions began to control her life. Her education only gave additional power to her fascinations. (*The New York Herald*, April 12, 1836)

Here Bennett begins to portray the young Dorrance as unruly, perhaps misguided and certainly “without fixed principles” which is what Bennett suggests led her to be seduced on a summer vacation from her boarding school. “In the course of visiting, she became acquainted with a young man...After a short acquaintance with him, all was gone that constitutes the honor and ornament of the female character...She left her protector, after having a moment of passion lost all the rules of virtue and morality.” Bennett continued to tell the story of the young Dorrance’s downfall, noting that soon after her encounter with a young man that left her unvirtuous and immoral: “she retreated to Portland, took the name Maria B. Benson, and became a regular Aspasia among young men, lawyers and merchants. Falling into difficulty there, she took the opportunity one morning and came to Boston. Here she assumed the name of Helen Mar, from a popular character in one of the young lady’s novels. She lived in Boston almost a year and a half, and left that city in company with a distinguished man for New York.” Bennett here provides details into Jewett’s downfall deeper into sin. He reports on her status as an “Aspasia.” or

harlot, and describes the false names she took on in each new city. Bennett then reported on her final move to New York City. "In this city she took the name Ellen Jewett, and has lived at several house roundtown. Her way of life in New York has corresponded with the terrible state of society in this city. At such fashionable houses, young men, married and single and all, meet together in the evening, spend their time and their money—exhaust their treasures and their sensibilities—and break down every moral tie that hitherto has kept the elements of social intercourse together." In his article on Jewett, Bennett reflects on the status of society and how, without its immoral boarding houses, perhaps the young woman could have been saved from her untimely death.

However, Bennett did not go so far as to blame the city entirely for her death. He points out Jewett's faults, blaming her for becoming the victim, for luring men into her room and for allowing herself to be put into a position that could bring about her death. Bennett writes that Jewett became known for walking down Broadway in a green dress, appealing to men and ruining her virtue: "Her great passion was to seduce young men, and particularly those who most resisted her charms. She seemed to have declared war against the sex. 'Oh!' she would say, 'how I despise you all—you are a heartless, unprincipled set—you have ruined me—I'll ruin you—I delight in your ruin.'" Through exaggerating Jewett's flaws, Bennett placed blame on the victim of the murder, alluding that her faults brought about her own death. This new style of reporting that investigated the background of the victim revealed a shift in the role of newspapers. The penny papers felt able to make opinions and judgments on the character and morality of the victim based on their backgrounds, especially when the victim had no family to defend them. When the newspaper editors found faults in the lives of victims, such as Helen

guardian to a boarding school outside Boston where the son of a “respectable merchant” met her. “engaged her affections.” seduced her, and took her to Boston to live in sin.⁸⁰ Rescued by her guardian. Jewett was so ashamed of her actions, she left her guardian’s home for New York City: “His unfortunate victim, although kindly treated by her guardian, was too soon aware, that to regain her former standing in society, was impossible; and in order to escape scenes, that only served to remind her...of what she was, and what she had been, she came to New York, alone and unprotected.”⁸¹ The *Transcript*, like *The Sun* and *Herald* had also written, seemed to doom Jewett’s outcome once she had lost her virginity. Each penny paper told the story of a young girl tempted and seduced, losing her virginal morality, which eventually led her to prostitution and murder. Although Attree made it clear in the *Transcript* that not all the blame could be placed on Jewett: “Could her betrayer now see the once fascinating and innocent inmate of the boarding school from which he seduced her, reduced to the condition we have descried, he would, if human, need no further punishment than the remorse which would then gnaw his inmost soul.”⁸² This loss of virtue provided a storyline for the penny papers that featured Jewett as a prostitute, who seduced young men and whose own faults brought about her death.

Although the story of Jewett’s life was reprinted with slightly different details in each of the penny papers of the time, daily six-cent papers such as the *Courier and Enquirer*, the *Evening Post*, and the *Evening Star*, all told the story of the young temptress brutally murdered with an axe by a man she was seducing. Despite the story of

⁸⁰ Patricia Cline Cohen. *The Murder of Helen Jewett*, 29.

⁸¹ William H. Attree. *The New York Daily Transcript*, April 12, 1836.

⁸² *Ibid.*

Jewett's upbringing varying, it always ended with Jewett losing her virtue and becoming a prostitute. This sensational story of a young woman whose downfall was her own immorality became a hit in the daily papers and left readers wanting more.

The penny papers continued their coverage on the murder of Helen Jewett by investigating the perpetrator. Each paper devoted numerous columns to speculating on the identity of Jewett's murderer and his savage nature. In previous papers, little attention was given to the perpetrator of the crime, and information on the criminal was released only after a trial or investigation had taken place. With the immediate attention on the murder of Helen Jewett, however, the papers decided to take on the role of the judge to the accused, proclaiming innocence and declaring guilt in the newspapers before a legitimate trial had taken place. This very public coverage focused primarily on the alleged perpetrator, Richard P. Robinson.

Richard P. Robinson was arrested on April 11 on suspicion of murdering Helen Jewett. Aged nineteen, Robinson was the nephew of a prosperous and well-respected businessman in New York City named Joseph Hoxie. Robinson was arrested based on the testimony of Rosina Townsend who reported seeing Robinson (whom she knew as Frank Rivers) in Jewett's room that night. Townsend also described Robinson as wearing a cloak, similar to the one that was later found next to a bloody axe in the backyard of the brothel. Despite the evidence against him, Robinson maintained his innocence throughout the investigation and trial.

Once again, perhaps the most extensive and outspoken coverage of the alleged perpetrator came from James Gordon Bennett and the *Herald*. Bennett seemed to acknowledge the novelty of the new reporting, becoming defensive, claiming, "The

courts of law have not alone a right to investigate this crime—this red-blooded atrocity. The whole community have an interest—the present generation are both court, jury, witness, culprit, and executioner.”⁸³ As Bennett bestowed upon himself the power to investigate the crime and be the “court, jury...and executioner” he first released a statement on April 11, 1836, charging that Robinson was “a villain of too black a dye for mortal. Of this there could be no doubt.”⁸⁴ However, just two days later, Bennett changed his position and wrote on the front page of the *Herald* in support of Robinson’s innocence. Although evidence seemed to overwhelmingly support Robinson’s guilt, Robinson was also a part of high society, engaged to be married. Bennett’s immediate reversal on the guilt of Robinson could have been provoked or aided by someone from Robinson’s family approaching the editor or perhaps Bennett’s own desire to keep Robinson’s wealthy family happy. On April 13, 1836, Bennett claimed that Robinson was “without a stain, except falling victim to the fascination of Ellen Jewett...at once from the heights of virtue to the depths of vice” nor could “any man in any respect act so terribly towards a lovely young woman”⁸⁵ Although Bennett acknowledged the arrest and overwhelming public opinion of Robinson’s guilt, he asked that readers keep an open mind:

The opinions respecting his guilty vary. The public generally believe from the evidence already developed that Robinson is the murderer. The identification of the hatchet and the cloak, appears to be the principal groundwork of that opinion. All these, however, were mere circumstances that may be within the compass of a conspiracy. This hurrying to a conclusion of guilt before the trial, is no evidence of good reason. We shall follow the even tenor of the law as much as the Police. Police Justices are put into office for the purpose of ferreting out crime, and aiding to bring criminals to justice. We are the *avant-couriers*, and if

⁸³ The *New York Herald*, April 13, 1836.

⁸⁴ The *New York Herald*, April 11, 1836.

⁸⁵ The *New York Herald*, April 13, 1836.

they are excluded from the Police Office, we can exclude the Police from our columns. (*The New York Herald*, April 15, 1836)

Bennett's self-proclamation of his role as an *avant-courier* seemed to be taken too far when, on April 14, Bennett published a letter from the supposed real killer of Helen Jewett. The letter writer claimed he was a secret lover of Jewett's who was jealous of her romantic involvement with Robinson and murdered her in order to frame Robinson for the crime. The other penny papers immediately suspected and accused Bennett of forging the letter and Bennett never reprinted or discussed the letter again.⁸⁶ While Bennett continued to proclaim Robinson's innocence, he published several theories on who the savage criminal could be. In one column, published April 17, he alluded that perhaps Rosina Townsend, the matron of the brothel was not so innocent. Bennett claimed that she could have been capable of murder: "Has an eye—a pair of them—and they are the eyes of the devil. We looked at them—we looked through them—we caught as we believed a glimpse of the very soul within. It is passion and malevolence. That hollow cheek—that deep-set eye—that perturbed spirit we did not like. When I cross-examined her, she could hardly look me in the face. She scowled and averted her flashing eye."⁸⁷ Bennett also announced that the murder weapon, an axe, was most likely used by a female perpetrator in a jealous rage, saying it was a weapon that showed, "the vengeance of female wickedness—the burning of female revenge"⁸⁸ Bennett's choice of words in describing the possible suspects showed a deep resentment and hatred towards the perpetrator. Prior to the publication of penny papers, suspects were never openly accused or discussed in newspapers. However, with the rise of sensational crime

⁸⁶ Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett*, 30.

⁸⁷ *The New York Herald*, April 17, 1836.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

reporting, the savageness of the perpetrator became a sensational element of the story that attracted readers and contributed to increased circulation.

While Bennett debated who the perpetrator might be, still claiming on June 10 that “Robinson is innocent,” the other penny papers were only focused on one possible suspect—Richard P. Robinson. From the beginning, both *The Sun* and the *Transcript* reported on the guilt of Robinson, using chilling anecdotes to make the young man seem like a savage predator. Most unnerving, the newspapers reported, was Robinson’s reaction to Jewett’s corpse. Based on early American legal practice, Robinson was taken to the body in order to gauge his reaction, which could possibly reveal his guilt, “The officers scrutinizing his reaction were amazed to note his composure and impassivity.”⁸⁹ Despite evidence that should have mitigated his guilt, the newspapers instead used this to portray Robinson as a cold-blooded killer.

On April 13, *The Sun* reported that, “Everything which has as yet transpired in relation to this strange and unnatural case goes so strong against the unfortunate young man, that it seems impossible a loop can be found whereon to hang a doubt that the life of Miss Jewett was taken by another hand than his. If he is the guilty one—and who can doubt it? —the artificial appearance of ease and confidence which he has thus far assumed, must ere long give way to that powerful and unerring monitor within, his conscience,” a notion which the *Transcript* reiterated the next day, “He alone is the guilty individual, and...his hands only are stained with the blood of Helen Jewett.” The penny papers used their columns to describe Robinson as a cold-blood killer, *The Sun* writing on April 13 that Robinson. “still appears perfectly calm and unmoved...the cold-blooded, deliberate

⁸⁹ Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett*, 12.

and savage manner in which the unfortunate girl was massacred...tend to increase rather than diminish the agitation of the public mind."⁹⁰ Overall, the majority of penny papers worked to expose the savage killer, publicly vilifying Robinson for the murder before a trial took place.

However, *The Sun* and the *Transcript* were not alone in their belief of Robinson's guilt. The editor of *The New Yorker*, Horace Greeley, had a similar sentiment: "I believed the majority think with me, that he is unquestionably and atrociously guilty, and ought to walk up the ladder. And yet, if money, influence and splendid counsel (Ogden Hoffman and Hugh Maxwell) can save him, he will cheat the gallows, and I believe that will be the result. The great contest will be on disallowing Mrs. Townsend's testimony on account of her character."⁹¹

Just as Greeley had suspected, Robinson was found not guilty in the court of law. Despite Robinson's acquittal, coverage of the murder of Helen Jewett did not end, as many of the penny papers editorialized about the verdict. The *Journal of Commerce* wrote that, "The verdict of the Jury acquitting the prisoner, was of course founded upon the evidence before them; and however dark portions of it may have been...yet there were other portions which were of a different character, and which left upon the minds of the jury at least 'a reasonable doubt'...and 'it is better that ten guilty persons should go unpunished, than that one innocent man should suffer.'"⁹² Despite the more reserved sentiments of the papers that had proclaimed Robinson's guilt, the *Herald*, who supported Robinson's innocence rejoiced in his acquittal: "Robinson went with his father and uncle

⁹⁰ *The Sun*, April 13, 1836.

⁹¹ Letter from Horace Greeley to B.F. Ransom on May 9, 1836, Horace Greeley Papers, New York Public Library.

⁹² *The Journal Of Commerce*, June 9, 1836.

to Mr. Hoxie's, where he might pour into their ears, and theirs alone, the feelings of his heart, and his deep and lasting gratitude to that jury who had not sacrificed an innocent victim on the altar of an abandoned woman."⁹³ No matter what the jury decided, the life of Richard P. Robinson in New York City was forever ruined. The majority of papers had decided on his guilt and recognized as a murderer by many, Robinson fled the city after his trial. By portraying Robinson as a savage killer, a man who ruthlessly murdered a young woman of considerable intellect and beauty, the penny press exerted its power as a popular form of media and showed for the first time how influential newspapers might be in the United States. Despite his acquittal, the coverage on Robinson's character would become a trademark of sensational crime reporting in the newspapers.

The murder of Helen Jewett forever changed newspapers in the nineteenth century. The murder of the young prostitute changed the way murders got reported—instead of sympathy for the victim, blame for the perpetrator and respect for the victim's family, the penny papers now focused on the violence of the crime and the background and alleged faults of both the victim and perpetrator. This new style of sensational crime reporting became the basis of the penny paper, amplifying competition between editors and increasing daily circulation. As James Gordon Bennett said in his editorial in the *Herald*: "We know no private circumstances that has caused such a sensation in our city as the recent transaction. It is the whole topic of conversation wherever one goes. It is horrid. It creates melancholy. It produces horror."⁹⁴ It seemed "melancholy" and "horror" was

⁹³ Andie Toucher, *Froth and Scum: Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and The Ax Murder in America's First Mass Medium*, 37.

⁹⁴ *The New York Herald*, April 17, 1836.

exactly what New Yorkers and the country wanted from their news. The Helen Jewett coverage ran from April until December 1836 and left a powerful legacy in its wake.

Chapter Four: The Pattern Confirmed—The Murder of Mary Rogers

The death of Mary Rogers showcased the sensational crime reporting that had become popular after the murder of Helen Jewett. Similar to the reporting on Jewett, the top penny papers' editors sought to increase circulation of their papers through sensationalizing every aspect of Rogers's life and death. After her decomposing body was pulled from the river in Hoboken, New Jersey, on July 28, 1841, the story of Mary Rogers, known in New York City as "The Beautiful Cigar Girl," was featured daily in the papers for months and revisited many times in following years. Mary Rogers was known throughout the city for her beauty and intellect, but became known through the penny press as a sinful woman who died as the result of a botched abortion. Through reporting on the violence of Rogers's death, her family background, the many relationships and mistakes in her life, as well as the savageness of the many alleged perpetrators, the penny newspapers in New York City were able to attract readers and solidify the new type of news, sensational crime reporting.

Mary Rogers was first reported missing by her fiancée Daniel Payne on July 27, 1841, two days after she did not return home from a trip to visit her aunt. After searching Harlem, the lower end of Manhattan, and Williamsburg in Brooklyn, he headed across the Hudson to Hoboken and Staten Island. Unable to find any news of Rogers, Payne went to the local penny paper press and took out a missing person's notice simply stating,

“Left her home on Morning, July 25, a young lady, had on a white dress, black shawl, blue scarf, leghorn hat...it is supposed some accident has befallen her. Whoever will give information respecting her...shall be rewarded for their trouble.”⁹⁵ The ad, typical for the time period, showed the power of the penny press. Payne took out an ad in the paper, a media outlet that would reach more people than a police report could. The ad worked and Arthur Crommelin, a former boarder and lover of Mary Rogers, soon joined the hunt to look for her. On the same day, Crommelin and his friend Archibald Padley went to Hoboken, New Jersey, to look for Rogers, her body was found and pulled out of the Hudson river around a popular strolling area called Sybil’s Cave. Although her body could not be easily identified, *The Sun* was the first to connect the possibility of the missing girl to Mary Rogers: “The body of a young lady some eighteen or twenty years of age was found in the water at Hoboken. From the description of her dress, fears are entertained that it is the body of Miss Mary C. Rogers”⁹⁶ Eventually Crommelin was able to establish through a mark on her arm that the body was Rogers’s and took identifying bits of her skirt and a piece of her ripped sleeve to her mother, Phebe Rogers, to aid in further identification.⁹⁷ Once the body was confirmed to be that of Rogers, a somewhat well-known young woman in New York City, the press used the violent and horrific details to attract readers to buy papers and read more about the death of the famous cigar girl.

James Gordon Bennett and the *Herald* reported in an article on August 12, 1841 that, “It is now well ascertained that the unfortunate young girl, named Mary Rogers,

⁹⁵ *The Sun*, July 28, 1841.

⁹⁶ *The Sun*, July 29, 1841.

⁹⁷ Amy Gilman Srebnick, *The Mysterious Death of Mary Rogers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 18.

(who three years ago, lived with Anderson, the cigar man) has been cruelly murdered at Hoboken. Nothing of so horrible and brutal a nature has occurred since the murder of Miss Sands."⁹⁸ Although the *Herald* reported that the murder was "horrible" the violent and graphic details that would be reported in the following weeks caused New York City to erupt in scandal. One such eyewitness report published on the front page of the *Herald* described the scene where Rogers's body was found. Because only one coroner was on duty, Rogers's body was visible to the public from the moment it was pulled out of the water on the morning of July 28 until the coroner could conduct an inquest at 9 o'clock that night.⁹⁹ The sensational description of the scene was reported to those who could not travel to New Jersey to see the woman in person: "Here, after jumping down from the bank, groups would stop a while, stoop over the remains of Mary Rogers, and pass along. When we saw her, she was laying on the bank on her back, with a rope around her, and a large stone attached to it, flung in the water. The first look we had of her, was most ghastly." Despite acknowledging Rogers's "ghastly" appearance, the woman continued her account of the young girl adding that, "Her forehead and face appeared to have been battered and butchered to a mummy. Her features were scarcely visible, so much violence had been done to her. On her head she wore a bonnet—light gloves on her hands, with the long watery fingers peering out—her dress was torn in various portions—her shoes were on her feet—and altogether, she presented the most horrible spectacle that eye could see." The woman also acknowledged the disrespecting public, adding the detail

⁹⁸ "The Late Murder of a Young Girl a Hoboken" *The New York Herald*, August 12, 1841. Sands was a young woman murdered and stuffed into a well in 1799. The case against her boyfriend and attacker, Levi Weeks, was the first recorded murder trial in the United States.

⁹⁹ Amy Gilman Srebnick, *The Mysterious Death of Mary Rogers*, 18.

that. "It almost made our heart sick . . . while a rude youth was raising her leg, which hung in the water, and making unfeeling remarks on her dress."¹⁰⁰ The day after the coroner established that Rogers had been "brutally violated," he decided that, "in consequence to the great heat of the weather . . . to temporarily inter the body, which was done at two feet from the surface of the earth."¹⁰¹

Although the violent nature of the crime could be ascertained from some of the descriptions given, none went as far as a report published in the *Journal of Commerce* that described in graphic and sensational detail the violence of the young woman's death after her body was finally exhumed from its shallow grave and taken to the Dead House in City Hall Park in mid-August. "And difficult would it be for the most imaginative mind to conceive a spectacle more horrible or humiliating to humanity. There lay, what was but a few days back, the image of its creator, the loveliest of his works, and the tenement of an immortal soul, now a blackened and decomposed mass of putrefaction, painfully disguising to sight and smell." Rogers's body had been exposed to water, sun and had been buried for a few weeks in a shallow grave, making the gruesomeness of her remains even worse: "Her skin which had been unusually fair was now black...Her eyes so sunk in her swollen face as to have the appearance of being violently forced beyond the sockets, and her mouth, which 'no friendly hand had closed in death' was distended as wide as the ligaments the jaw would admit, and wore the appearance of a person who had died from suffocation or strangulation. The remainder of the person alike one mass of putrefaction and corruption on which the worms were reveling at their will...an inanimate mass of matter, so hideous, horrible and offensive that the bare idea of coming

¹⁰⁰ The *New York Herald*, August, 1841.

¹⁰¹ Amy Gilman Srebnick, *The Mysterious Death of Mary Rogers*, 19.

in contact with it was almost sufficient to make the gorge rise.”¹⁰² Such gruesome detail was even unusual for the penny press at the time, but the penny papers continued to push the limit of sensationalism.

The *New-York Tribune* reported, “The horrible murder of Miss Rogers excites daily a deeper and wider interest in our city . . . daily hurrying to the Sybil’s Cave to look at the scene of the deed and the shore where her body was first discovered. It was an awful atrocity . . . agitated among all classes.” Although city residents protested the violent nature of the crime, the sensational descriptions and call to police action garnered the penny papers more and more readers. The readers of the penny press, although claiming to being disgusted and upset over the poor girl’s death, continued to write letters to the editors, asking for more coverage, prompting some papers to go as far as publishing drawings relating to the crime. The *Atlas*, a Sunday morning penny paper published a portrait depicting Rogers, that first appeared in 1840, after her death under the headline “The Cigar Girl.”¹⁰³ The *Herald* published a drawing with the headline “VIEW OF THE HOUSE WHERE MARY ROGERS WAS LAST SEEN ALIVE”¹⁰⁴ and also a detailed picture of the cave in which Mary Rogers was supposedly violated with the headline “THE ACTUAL SPOT WHERE THE SHOCKING MURDER AND VIOLATION OF MARY ROGES TOOK PLACE”¹⁰⁵ (See Figure 2). These visual depictions of Rogers and the possible last places she was before her untimely death added to the intrigue surrounding her death. Similarly, adding visual aids for readers to imagine what the young woman looked like before she was killed helped sell more papers.

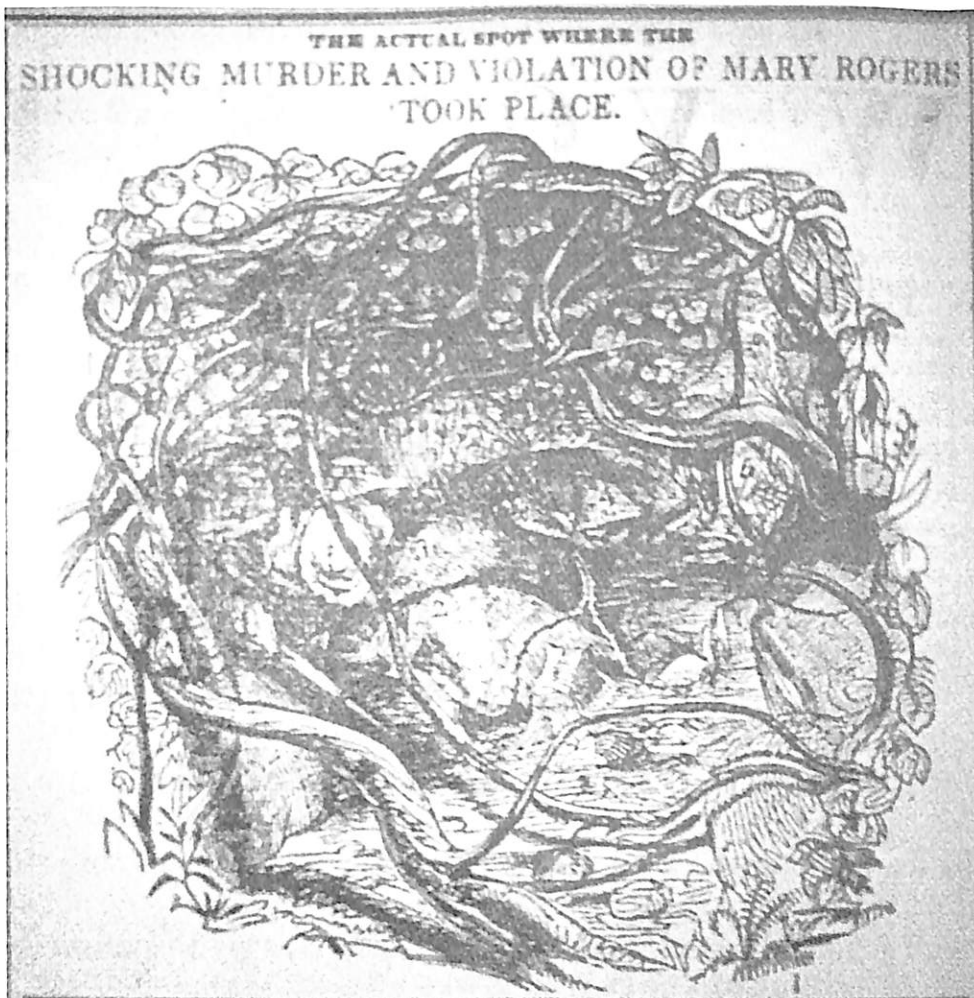
¹⁰² Daniel Stashower, *The Beautiful Cigar Girl* (New York: Dutton, 2006), 105.

¹⁰³ The *Atlas*, September 30, 1840.

¹⁰⁴ The *New York Herald*, September 17, 1841.

¹⁰⁵ See attached Figure 2, *New York Herald*, September 21, 1841 .

Figure Two: Drawing of the Murder Scene



The above drawing appeared in *The New York Herald* on Tuesday, September 21, 1841 with the following text describing the place where Rogers had been murdered.

“We now give, above, a most admirably correct representation of the spot where the murder and violation, beyond all doubt, were committed. The place is not more than 300 or 400 yards from Nick Moore’s house, and the entrance is close to a broad green pathway, that once was a carriage road, but now overgrown; and there is a pear tree in the meadow opposite to the spot, and two beach trees against the wall at the back of it.

In the above picture the reader will see several small letters for references, which it will be best to explain at once. The figures 1, 1, 1, are placed at the exact point of entrance, which is rather less wide than it appears in the picture, because here a full inside view was necessary to be given. The figure 2, is placed on the large flat rock, upon which undoubtedly she sat or was held down at the time she was brutally violated, and subsequently strangled there. The figure 3 is placed upon the rock at the back of the other; this rock is higher than No. 2, and appears to be the rock against which her back was placed at the time of the commission of the horrible outrage. Of course she struggled violently, and as the top of the rock No. 3, would come just across the shoulder bones of a young woman when seated upon rock No. 2, of course this would account from the excoriation upon her back, described by Dr. Cook, in his lucid testimony, when he stated that, beyond all question, she has been violated whilst laid upon, or against some hard substance, certainly not on a bed.”

Rogers since last October or November, and had been so intimate with Mary, that they were engaged to have been married."¹⁰⁷

Later investigations revealed Mary Rogers as a young woman with somewhat of a troubled past. Reporting that her father had died when she was young, and that Rogers went to work for John Anderson. The *New York Times* republished an article from October 5, 1838 when Rogers had previously gone missing, hoping to reveal the tainted innocence of her past: "It seems that Miss Rogers was employed in Anderson's seegar store, in Broadway. There she met and fell in love with a gallant gay Lothario whose name did not transpire. After a month's course of billing and cooing across the counter of Anderson's store, which ended like the smoke of one of that gentleman's seegars (not, however, to speak disparagingly of their deported worth), in thin air. The Lothario was found one morning missing, and that was the reason why Miss Rogers is now missing. When she left, she took with her a shilling, as it is supposed, with the intention of purchasing poison."¹⁰⁸ Although Mary Rogers was found the next day, the penny papers latched onto her earlier disappearance as when the young woman may have lost her innocence, bringing about her brutal murder: "This young girl, Mary Rogers, was missing from Anderson's store, three years ago, for two weeks. It is asserted that she was then seduced by an officer of the U.S. Navy, and kept at Hoboken for two weeks."¹⁰⁹ Just as in the case of Helen Jewett, it seems the young woman's loss of innocence could be blamed for her death.

¹⁰⁷ The *New York Herald*, August 12, 1841.

¹⁰⁸ The *New York Times*, October 5, 1838 and retraction on October 6, 1838.

¹⁰⁹ The *New York Herald*, August 12, 1841.

The *Herald* took the idea of a troubled young woman to a sensational height, claiming she must have committed suicide, burdened by her unhappy life and family problems. “The probabilities of Mary Rogers having committed suicide have been much discussed in well informed quarters, and by official persons, who had opportunities of seeing the remains after the exhumation. The coroner, Dr. Archer, thinks the post mortem examination not sufficiently minute or critical to decide the point, and he is fortified in his opinion by the fact, that every dead body found in the rivers adjacent to this city appears at first sight to have died from violence. Then it is said that her family were very poor, the furniture of the house had just been sold for rent, the boarders had all left, and she had no prospect but that of marrying a man, said to be—we know not on what authority—a very dissipated character.”¹¹⁰ Although the *Herald* later retracted their published suicide theory—reporting that, “His honor has already dissipated the absurd notion, which we alluded to on Saturday, of the girl having committed suicide. The testimony of Dr. Cook on the inquest, which has been reexamined, completely settles that point”¹¹¹—they continued to look into other aspects of the young woman’s life that could have brought about such a horrific crime.

Several newspapers published reports on the many suitors and young men who seemed to adore Rogers. The *New-York Tribune*, run by Horace Greeley, claimed the man who identified Rogers’s body was a former lover, “Alfred Crommeline, who had boarded in the family and was at one time attached to Miss R., swore positively that the body he saw at Hoboken was hers, and produced one of her shoes, a sleeve and skirt of her dress, part of her pantalettes, &c. which he took from the body and brought home to

¹¹⁰ The *New York Herald*, August 17, 1841.

¹¹¹ The *New York Herald*, August 14, 1841.

her mother . . . Crommeline, it appears, had been a favorite suitor of Miss Rogers, but was finally discarded for Daniel Payne."¹¹² While some papers alluded to the young woman as having sexual relationships with her customers at Anderson's cigar store, other penny papers claimed that despite her work history she, "had evidently been a person of chastity and correct habits: that her person was horribly violated."¹¹³ While the penny press debated over the presumed goodness or immorality of Mary Rogers, readers were still enthralled in the case, with, "the crowds daily hurrying to the Sybil's Cave, to look on the scene of the deed, and the shore where her body was first discovered."¹¹⁴ Even more, as the coroner's report was released, the graphic nature of the crime and savageness of the suspected perpetrators kept readers intrigued.

Not only did the coroner's report allege that there were several perpetrators in the murder of Mary Rogers, the report revealed that their actions were brutal. Published in sensational detail the reports were editorialized in each penny paper and reprinted for several days in both the morning and evening editions. The *Herald* first reported on August 14, 1831 that, "From the careful *post mortem* examination which the Doctor made, he is confident that Mary Rogers was brutally violated by six, or possibly, eight ruffians; of that fact, he had ocular proof. . . . He also testifies to another important fact, viz: that there were marks of the pressure of fingers and thumbs about the throat and in the region of the jugular vein, which renders it highly probably that this poor girl died while in the brutal and beastly embraces of one of her murders. There were also marks as of a severe pressure from some hard substance across the loins of shoulders, which

¹¹² The *New-York Tribune*, August 13, 1841.

¹¹³ The *New York Herald*, August 17, 1841.

¹¹⁴ The *New York Herald*, August 4, 1841.

renders it probable that her horrible violation was effected in some stable or out-house, from whence the body was then carried to the North River and thrown in for the purpose of hiding this double crime forever from the eye of the world."¹¹⁵ After the coroner's report established multiple criminals were involved in the rape and murder of Rogers, the penny press began to speculate on who these men might have been: "We are yet inclined to think that she was ruthlessly and barbarously ravished and murdered. That it was done in this city by some of the soaplocks or volunteer fire rowdies, and who either by force or fraud got her into some of the Engine houses adjacent to the North River, kept her there all day, and at night, during the pelting of that pitiless storm, they consigned her body to the North River –either alive or dead. Two watchman have been found, and can be forthcoming at any time, who will swear that they heard an awful groaning that stormy night They say they went to the spot, but beyond a sort of gurgling . . . and might have been the deaths struggle of that neglected girl."¹¹⁶ Not only did the penny press speculate what walk of life the men might have been from, the newspapers seemed determined to recreate the scene for readers, providing more evidence of the brutality of the perpetrators:

A little farther off lay her gloves, turned inside out, as if they had been forcibly drawn from her hands in a hurry. And on of the briar bushes, hung two pieces of her dress which had evidently been torn out, as she was dragged through this horrid place; one piece of the dress was so double as to have a thorn three times through it. The place was stamped out, and the branches were broken, and roots bruised and mashed, all betokening that it had been the scene of a very violent struggle And it appeared from the position of the articles, as if the unfortunate girl had been placed upon the middle broad scene, her head held forcibly back, and then and there horribly violated by several rowdies (*The New York Herald*, September 6, 1841)

¹¹⁵ *The New York Herald*, August 14, 1841.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Through presenting the savageness of the perpetrators by explaining in detail the horrific crime, the editors of the penny papers were able to sensationalize her murder.

While the first theory was that Mary Rogers was raped and murdered by several unsavory men, a new theory soon came out. Several papers reported the arrest of a man named Morse who was investigated for the murder of Mary Rogers after his wife reported he was not home the night of her murder. "The officer has arrested at Holden, near Worcester, Massachusetts, Mr. Morse, the wood engraver, of 120 Nassau street, as the supposed murderer of Mary C. Rogers. . . . The wife of Morse says, that he was not at home on the Sunday night when Mary Rogers was murdered; two respectable witnesses confirm her statement. He came home on Monday night in a state of great excitement, and beat his wife, and cleared out that night. This led to his arrest. Morse says this, 'On Sunday, the 25th of July, I met a young lady about noon, in Bleecker street, near Norton street—She was dressed in black. . . I tried to have connexion with her in the night, but did not succeed. On Monday morning, I came to the city with her and left her in good friendship at the corner of Greenwich and Barclay street . . . I have not seen her since, I don't know her name. I think she lives in Morton street, with her mother . . . *Her name might be Mary Rogers.* If it was I had no hand in murdering her! . . . This is all I know about her."¹¹⁷ While Mary Haviland ended up coming forward as the young woman who had spent the night with Mr. Morse, clearing his name, the daily papers took the opportunity to preach about morality, "Morse is to keep clear of Staten Island and of young ladies in black especially, for the future. Thus ends nine days of wonder . . . Morse has a reputation for industriousness and is a fine artist. . . and we leave him with

¹¹⁷ *The New York Herald*, August 19, 1841.

those kind words which our Savior spoke to fallen man—‘Go, and sin no more.’”¹¹⁸

Although Morse was found to be innocent of the crime, the daily papers had already ruined his reputation in the city by claiming he had a part in the brutal murder.

The next alleged perpetrator crucified in the penny papers was Daniel Payne, Mary Rogers’s fiancé. Although some suspicions had arisen when Payne neglected to attend Mary Rogers’s inquest and funeral,¹¹⁹ the penny press generally ignored Payne until October 7, 1841. Before that time, the papers instead resolved to report on the scoundrels of New York that many assumed must have viciously attacked the innocent Mary Rogers. “From her connection with Anderson’s cigar store and the proximity of that establishment to that resort of gamblers, blacklegs, soaplocks and loafers . . . it is highly probable that the crime was perpetrated by some of that lawless fraternity, who make this city their home.”¹²⁰ When Daniel Payne was found dead, however, the press revisited his possible involvement: “Daniel C. Payne, who was found on Friday afternoon about 5 o’clock on a bench by the side of the walk near the Sybil’s Cave, Hoboken, in a dying state, and shortly after expired. . . . Payne, after her death . . . was suspected of being privy to her abduction, or as knowing where she was and with whom she went away.”¹²¹ Although in some papers, Payne’s involvement in Rogers’s death was only alluded to, others such as the *Herald* made it clear that Daniel Payne had a guilty conscience through publication of his suicide note, “To the world—Here I am on the very

¹¹⁸ Raymond Paul, *Who Murdered Mary Rogers?* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1971), 50.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.* 82.

¹²⁰ *The New York Herald*, August 14, 1841.

¹²¹ *The New-York Tribune*, October 11, 1841.

spot. May God forgive me.”¹²² Although it was eventually established that Payne was probably a grieving man who took up the habit of drinking to forget her death, the penny papers used Payne’s death as a way to keep Mary Rogers’s sensational death in the papers for as long as possible.

While many papers began to speculate that the murderers of Mary Rogers must have left the city to escape punishment, the coverage on the mystery of Mary Rogers’s death began to slowly die down. The sensational story, however, would be brought back to life less than a year later with the death of another woman, Mrs. Fredericka Loss.

Originally interviewed by the magistrate briefly, Mrs. Loss claimed to have served Mary Rogers lemonade on the day of her death at Nick Moore’s House, a popular tavern located near Sybil’s cave. At the time of the original investigation, Loss’s two oldest sons were arrested and held for a judicial hearing on November 19 in New Jersey, but were never charged for lack of any evidence against them.¹²³ Less than a year later, however, Loss was allegedly accidentally shot by one of her sons. The wound left Loss on her deathbed, telling a new story about the death of Mary Rogers. Loss reportedly told an investigator that Rogers was the victim of an illegal abortion gone wrong. Despite the story breaking in the papers over a year after the original crime took place, Loss’s deathbed confession was placed on the front page as interest in Rogers’s death was still high. “On the Sunday of Miss Rogers disappearance she came to her house from this city in company with a young physician who undertook to procure for her a premature delivery. —While in the hands of her physician she died and a consultation

¹²²Raymond Paul, *Who Murdered Mary Rogers?*, 78.

¹²³ Amy Gilman Srebnick, *The Mysterious Death of Mary Rogers*, 31.

was then held as to the disposal of her body. It was finally taken at night by the son of Mrs. Loss and sunk in the river where it would be found.”¹²⁴

Although initially Loss tried to downplay her involvement in the affair, the papers were soon reporting on her so called drinking house as an illegal abortion clinic, harboring the evils of New York City: “Gilbert Merritt, who duly sworn before me, deposeth and saith:--that in the month of July, 1841, . . . he verily believes that the murder of the said Mary C. Rogers was perpetrated in a house at Weehawken . . . then kept by Fredericka Loss . . . and her three sons . . . all three of whom the deponent has reason to believe are worthless and profligate characters; and this deponent further saith, that he has just reason to believe that the said sons and their mother, kept one of the most depraved and debauched houses in New Jersey.”¹²⁵ The claims in the newspaper were horrific, that Mary Rogers, the young and innocent woman, who was previously thought to have been the victim of a brutal attack, had died as the result of an abortion. Despite this, the blame rested on the house of Fredericka Loss, the *Morning Courier and New York Enquirer* saying, “that all of them had a knowledge of and were accessory to, and became participators in the murder of said Mary C. Rogers, and the concealment of her body.”¹²⁶ This new theory on the untimely death of Mary Rogers could never be officially confirmed, but became another sensational aspect of her death.

Overall, the many people accused of murdering Mary Rogers or being involved in her death were publicly embarrassed in the penny press for not only being involved in the death of a young woman, but for being a part of the downfall of New York City. Each

¹²⁴ *The New-York Tribune*, November 18, 1842.

¹²⁵ *Morning Courier and New York Enquirer*, November 12, 1842.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

perpetrator was said to be what represented the wrongs of the city—violent, drunk, immoral—and the newspapers used the immediacy possible in the penny press to tell a sensational story and sell newspapers.

Mary Rogers's story drove the penny papers to once again compete for claims to exclusive information and circulation of papers. Each penny paper editor claimed to have the correct story, even though oftentimes their theory on the death changed as more information was gathered on the crime. Bennett boasted in the paper around the time of Mary's death that, "I am, and have been a peddler [sic] . . . not of tapes and laces, but of thoughts, feelings and lofty principals [sic], and intellectual truths."¹²⁷ Bennett's reporting style, again on the edge of fiction with its sensational allegations and lurid details, increased circulation that forced other penny papers to speculate and investigate into the crime as well. Ironically, the story of Mary Rogers was so popular that it even became the basis for one of the earliest detective fiction works by Edgar Allen Poe called "The Mystery of Marie Roget."

Although the murder of Mary Rogers was never solved, it confirmed the popularity of sensational crime reporting. The people of New York were enthralled with the daily papers, providing in depth coverage and sharing the outrage of the city with all walks of life. The coverage of Mary Rogers in the penny papers solidified the genre of sensational crime reporting with the story's ongoing ability to sell newspapers in the continually growing city. New Yorkers wanted to hear about sensational crimes and with the coverage on the death of Mary Rogers, the penny papers were able to provide.

¹²⁷ Amy Gilman Srebnick, *The Mysterious Death of Mary Rogers*, 67.

Although Mary Rogers's murder was wildly popular in the papers, another murder would soon take over the pages of the penny press as the newest sensational crime.

Chapter Five: The Pattern Challenged—The Murder of Samuel Adams

In 1841, after the murder of Mary Rogers, sensational crime reporting dominated the penny papers. The penny press and their sensational crime reporting had become so popular it seemed not even a high society murderer would be saved from public humiliation and condemnation. As the penny press had slowly eased into sensational crime reporting, the editors had discovered what the audience wanted—dramatic details of violence with graphic depictions, background information on the victims and how the victim had come to their downfall, and details on the savageness of the perpetrator. Although the murder of the prostitute Helen Jewett had been easily attributed to her low moral status and lack of family, the penny papers showed with the murder of Mary Rogers that even with a mother and a respectable job, her murder would be made as sensational as possible. Between 1841 and 1842 the coverage of the murder of Samuel Adams took over the penny papers. Despite the accused murderer's well-to-do family and social status, the editors of the penny press no longer cared to protect the image of the perpetrator, reported every sensational detail, every possible wrongdoing from either party and truly solidified the type of reporting known as sensational crime reporting.

Samuel Adams, a New York printer, was murdered on September 17, 1841 after an argument over money with John C. Colt, the author of financial accounting books. Colt hired Adams to print copies of his book and, after not receiving full payment for the

printing. Adams went to Colt's office to discuss the debt. Colt claimed that after Adams approached him about the supposed debt which Colt refused to pay back, Adams became angry and began to choke Colt with his tie. Colt claimed that he reached for a hammer in self-defense and after hitting Adams several times realized it was not a hammer, but a hatchet. After realizing he had killed Adams, Colt cleaned up the office floor and put Adams in a shipping crate addressed for New Orleans. Eventually, after a missing persons report was filed and Colt's neighbors mentioned hearing a fight and seeing a crate leaving his house, a ship called *The Kalamazoo* was searched and Adams's decomposing body was found stuffed into a crate. After the body was found, Colt was arrested by police and the Mayor of New York and charged with murder. The trial started began in January of 1842 and on January 24 Colt was found guilty by a jury of willfull murder. Colt was sentenced by a judge on September 28, 1842 to death by hanging. On November 14, the morning of his execution, Colt married his young girlfriend in the jail and, just hours before he was to be hanged, committed suicide in his cell.

Samuel Adams was first reported missing on September 22, 1841 when an ad appeared in the *Sun*, now owned by Benjamin Day's brother-in-law: "Any information respecting Mr. Samuel Adams, Printer, who left his place of business on Friday, September 17, about 3 o'clock P.M. will be thankfully received by his relatives and friend . . . who are unable to account for his sudden disappearance. From an investigation of his business, there does not appear to be an assignable cause for his absence; the only conjecture is that he has met with some violence, but when or in what manner is still a

mystery.”¹²⁸ Just a few days later, on September 27, 1841, John C. Colt was arrested for the murder of Samuel Adams and the story of the night of September 17 came out in the penny papers: “It appears on the evening of Adams’s disappearance, the occupants of the upper stories of [his] building . . . were disturbed by a mysterious noise and scuffling in the room of J. C. Colt. A gentleman named Wheeler, teacher of penmanship, occupying a room adjoining Colt’s suspecting foul play, looked through the key hole of Colt’s door and saw Colt washing the floor . . . In the morning Colt went out and called a carman to whom he delivered a box of sufficient size to hold a man, directed to some one at St. Louis via New Orleans . . . The young man reported the circumstances to his employer . . . and she communicated the whole circumstances to Mayor Morris.”¹²⁹ After Colt’s arrest, the penny papers took to their standards of sensational crime reporting—violence of the crime, background and alleged faults of the victim, and savageness of the perpetrator—and reported on the murder and subsequent trial until the following Fall. The coverage on Samuel Adams’s murder was extensive and incorporated the usual claims of exclusivity and competition between the penny editors in order to try to sell more papers. The murder and trial of John C. Colt proved to be popular with editors and readers.

James Gordon Bennett lavished the most attention on the Colt-Adams story, perceiving it from the start as a potential circulation booster on the order of the Helen Jewett and Mary Rogers cases.¹³⁰ Bennett, as always, reported the story in full and gruesome detail, highlighting the violence of the crime. In fact, his excitement over the

¹²⁸ *The Sun*, September 22, 1841

¹²⁹ “Shocking Murder of Mr. Adams, the Printer—the Body Discovered on board a Vessel—Arrest of the Supposed Murderer” *The New York Herald*, September 27, 1841.

¹³⁰ Harold Schechter, *Killer Colt: Murder, Disgrace, and the Making of An American Legend* (Ballantine Books, 2010), 138.

murder and subsequent trial was obvious, writing, "Men who have killed their wives, and committed other such every-day matters, have been condemned, executed, and are forgotten—but it takes a deed that has some of the sublime of horror about it to attract attention, rally eloquence and energy, and set people crazy." And Bennett did nothing to hide the horror of the crime, reporting in a column on the front page titled "Shocking Murder of Mr. Adams, the Printer—the Body discovered on Board a vessel—Arrest of the Supposed Murder." As with Mary Rogers, Bennett lingered over the post-mortem:

Dr. Gilman, who deposed that he had made a post mortem examination of a body in the dead house. It was the body of a man rather under the middle size....It is very considerably decayed in all its parts. Should think it has been six or seven days dead...At the back part of the head there appeared something like a bald spot. The scalp was so much decayed, that it could be pushed off the bone with the finger.. (The *New York Herald*, September 27, 1841)

Bennett continued to report the gruesome details, explaining how Adams's body was found on the ship: "On the first examination, the body was much bent, the head forward to the thigh, the body towards the belly, and the leg up to the thigh. This position was maintained by a rope passing round the neck, and attached to the thigh just above the knee joint. The injuries were only on the head; on the right side a very extensive fracture of the skull, the pieces of bone beaten in and entirely loose among the pulpy mass, which was the brain...[and] the lower jaw was fractured."¹³¹ Describing the body in detail, Bennett attracted readers with the sensational images that he had become known for reporting.

Although in the murder of Rogers and Jewett, the penny papers chose to focus on the background and alleged faults of the victims, the penny papers took it a step further in the murder of Samuel Adams. Since both Adams and Colt were somewhat well known in

¹³¹ The *New York Herald*, Monday, September 27, 1841.

the city, the penny paper editors took it upon themselves to report on the background of both men, revealing each to have faults that could have led to their respective downfalls—Adams’s death and Colt’s horrific act. Samuel Adams appeared in the papers as a victim who was innocent, well-liked by those who knew him, and a loving family man. In a poem published on the murder that was run in many daily papers, Adams was summed up as a man in the wrong place, in the wrong situation, “In New York City, Adams liv’d/A chaste and pious life./And there he might have lived still/Had Debt not caused a strife.”¹³² In researching each man’s background, the papers found that although John Colt was a professional and his victim was an artisan, Adams was a respectable married man who wore a gold watch, was paying off a mortgage on his own shop, and employed several workers, while Colt was a philanderer, who sublet half an office and was behind on rent. Because Adams appeared so innocent and virtuous, instead of focusing on him as the immoral victim like in the cases of Jewett and Rogers, the penny papers chose to report more on John Colt who was revealed as being of bad character and being a bad businessman.

The *Herald* reported on the background of Colt: “Colt, we understand, is the grandson of the late John Caldwell, of Hartford, for years a distinguished merchant of Hartford. He is cousin (not brother) to the cashier of Exchange Bank. He is the son of Christopher Colt, of Hartford, for many years a merchant of that place, and subsequently president of the Silk Manufacturing Co. of Hartford.” Bennett went on to tell of the dark side of the Colt family history: “Colt’s mother died many years ago—and one of his sisters committed suicide in 1827. He has no sister living at this time.” Despite those

¹³² Harold Schechter, *Killer Colt: Murder, Disgrace, and the Making of An American Legend*, 350.

unfortunate circumstance the *Herald* acknowledged that, "He has many connections among the most respectable inhabitants of that city."¹³³ Similarly the *Sun* had both good and bad to say about Colt's life, alluding that he suffered a grim childhood under a harsh father and cruel stepmother who had hounded his fragile sister to an early grave, but also that he had a history of gambling, mistresses, thievery, and that he had forged a letter to leave the Marines.¹³⁴ John Colt's family was especially interesting to readers of the penny papers because he was linked to well known men in New York City: "The relatives of Mr. Colt are very respectable indeed, his brother is the inventor of the patent revolving pistols and rifles and keeps an extensive establishment of this kind at 155 Broadway. He has another brother who is Cashier of the Hartford Bank. It is also said that he is a distant relative of Dudley Selden, Esq., the eminent counsellor."¹³⁵

Despite his family's prestige, John C. Colt was not wealthy and some even went so far to accuse him as being a fraud in the papers. In the *Herald*, a letter written to Bennett was published saying, "Anyone who will take the trouble . . . will at once see that Colt is but a *literary pirate*, and, of course, does not class among original writers."¹³⁶ While in the past the newspapers had chosen to focus on the fall from virtue of the female victims, the penny papers now focused on the male perpetrator. With Colt's reputation being easily picked apart by newspaper editors and readers alike, he was portrayed as a savage perpetrator, out to kill the innocent Adams and feeling little remorse.

¹³³ The *New York Herald*, September 29, 1842.

¹³⁴ Andie Toucher, *Froth and Scum: Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and The Ax Murder in America's First Mass Medium*, 166-67.

¹³⁵ The *New York Herald*, Tuesday, September 28, 1841.

¹³⁶ The *New York Herald*, Thursday, September 30, 1841.

Many papers reported on the lack of regret or sadness Colt seemed to have for his actions. The *Herald* reported that, "On being visited by the keeper of the prison, yesterday morning, he presented the same stoical coldness of countenance which has characterized him throughout since his arrest; he expresses no desire for anything but that he may be shaved." Even though he eventually admitted to murdering Adams, the press reported that he played it off slyly when Adams first went missing: "Characteristic of his coolness and determination is an instance: On Thursday morning last he called at Mr. Adams's printing office, and inquired of Mr. Monohan, the foreman, if Mr. A was in, and on being informed that he was not, he hastily remarked, 'Oh! Ah! I recollect I have seen a notice that he was missing. Mr. Adams has one work for me for three years, and he is a fine man, and always treated me well, and I hope nothing serious has befallen him.'"¹³⁷ Knowing very well that the man he inquired about was dead and stuffed in a crate, the papers portrayed Colt as a savage killer, almost mocking Adams's death. Although every paper reported on Colt as a killer, each paper took a different perspective as to why. Although Colt was known to gamble and engage in other immoral activities, the penny press did not blame his downfall on a loss of virtue or immorality. Despite coming from a respectable family, Colt was a failure in business facing significant debt and because of this, Colt was portrayed by the penny papers as a failure, falling to significantly lower social status compared to his brother and cousins. Some of the penny papers used this as reasoning behind his actions. While most newspapers put the blame on Colt, other newspapers looked to blame society and the general downfall of the city as a reason for Colt murdering Adams.

¹³⁷ The *New York Herald*, Tuesday, September 28, 1841.

In 1841, around the time of Mary Rogers's and Samuel Adams's murder, another daily paper called the *New-York Tribune*, claiming to be of higher moral standards than the other penny papers, came on the market. The editor of the paper, Horace Greeley, apologized to the audience of the paper in a weekly edition stating that, "We shall very seldom publish reports of this kind."¹³⁸ Greeley regretted his reporting on murder because he felt that the penny papers intense attention on violence and crime was harmful to society.¹³⁹ Despite his apologies, the murder of Samuel Adams became Greeley's main focus for months, the story being so sensational—and lucrative—that it had to be reported.

Although the story was sensational, Greeley did his best to avoid the type of coverage for which the conventional penny press had become known. Unlike other editors, there was nothing in his columns about the possibilities of the quarrel between Adams and Colt, lurid descriptions of the body, or imaginative speculation on the motive for the crime.¹⁴⁰ Greeley instead chose to focus on the downfall of Colt, an aspect that was popular in the sensational crime reporting of the time. The *Tribune* focused on the downfall of John C. Colt and how, a young man alone in the city, he had fallen into, "a depth of horrid guilt and blasting infamy."¹⁴¹ On September 28, 1841, Greeley wrote that clearly in the city, "Crime has a vital, growing power, which . . . thrusts downward deep into the heart its mighty roots, and overshadows the whole inner being with its death-distilling shade." After Colt committed suicide on the morning of his scheduled

¹³⁸ The *New-York Tribune*, January 29, 1842

¹³⁹ Andie Toucher, *Froth and Scum: Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and The Ax Murder in America's First Mass Medium*, 142

¹⁴⁰ Forth an Scum, 143

¹⁴¹ The *New-York Tribune*, September 28, 1841.

execution. Greeley said that Colt's life should serve as a, "solemn warning to the Youth of our city and Land." Overall, Greeley covered the murder because it was the news of the year. The discovery of Adams's body, the trial of John C. Colt and his suicide again augmented popularity of the penny press. Although Greeley did not go into the sensational details of the violence of the crime, he instead focused on the faults of the perpetrator, something that defined the sensational crime reporting of the penny papers.

The penny papers took advantage of reporting on John C. Colt and his trial, with the papers covering every day of testimony and every moment leading up to his suicide. First reporting on his savage attack on Adams and then reporting the gruesome way in which he committed suicide, the coverage on John C. Colt, the perpetrator, contributed extensively to the murder's sensational crime reporting.

Luring readers with his "inside knowledge" Bennett once again proved to be sensational in his reporting on the savageness of John C. Colt and the details of his last moments. First Bennett claimed to have exclusive knowledge of Colt's defense saying before the trial began that, "Some think an *alibi* will be proved; but we think that the counsel for Colt will admit the killing, and attempt to show it was manslaughter or homicide."¹⁴² Whether or not he actually did have inside access to information on Colt, Bennett was correct in his guess that Colt would admit to the murder, claiming self-defense. Bennett also provided readers with minute by minute details of the final day of Colt's life. After Colt's sentencing, Bennett began his coverage about the days leading up to his hanging. Issuing a morning edition of the *Herald* that described the preparations for the hanging, at two o'clock an evening edition was issued that described

¹⁴² The *New York Herald*, January 23, 1842.

Colt getting shaved, getting married to Henshaw at noon, and saying his last farewell to the prison guards a little after. Another edition of the paper, an extra, was released at four o'clock that same afternoon, and included a picture of Colt's last goodbyes to his brother and his new wife. Readers flocked to pick up the issue that had a stunning climax, "We had written the above at a ¼ to 3 P.M. this afternoon. At that time Colt was alive. No one entered his cell till precisely 5 minutes to four o'clock . . . [On] the keeper opening the door, Dr. Anthon who was first, drew back, 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,"¹⁴³ the *Herald* reported that Colt, "had evidently worked and turned the knife round and round in his heart after he had stabbed himself, until he made quite a large gash."¹⁴⁴

Other papers also reported on the gruesome death of Colt, saying, "He was then left alone till four o'clock, when the Sheriff entered his cell to take him to excution [sic], when he was found dead in his bed, having plunged a bowie knife into his heart."¹⁴⁵ All of the papers covered Colt's sensational death, noting the excitement it brought to the whole affair and even reflecting on it two weeks after Colt's death. On November 30, 1842, Bennett remembered, "The cell door is slowly unfastened and opened—in stepped the parson, and, merciful Providence, what a sight met his glazed vision—there lay Colt, stretched out on his back on his cot, weltering in his blood—warm, but dead! . . . The excitement resembled madness." The excitement over the death of John C. Colt

¹⁴³ *The New York Herald*, November 18, 1842.

¹⁴⁴ *Killer Colt*, 285.

¹⁴⁵ *Signal Of Liberty*, November 28, 1842.

continued as editors and readers speculated as to who gave Colt the weapon to kill himself.

The penny press was changing. With the introduction of more morally conscious papers such as the *Tribune*, readers were offered more options in what they were getting from their inexpensive daily papers. Greeley's paper saw success with out-of-town readers and readers interested in moralism and reform.¹⁴⁶ Without a doubt, however, middle class readers overwhelmingly preferred papers like the *Herald* and the *Sun* which published information about daily life and sensational stories of crime.

The circulation of penny papers around the trial of John C. Colt was large. People were picking up the morning and evening editions of the daily papers, along with any extras offered. The sensational crime reporting on Samuel Adams' murder stirred the city. People of New York milled around the dead house, blocked the streets around the courthouse, spread wild rumors about the jury's deliberations and more, all thanks to the crime reporting of the penny papers.¹⁴⁷ This was due to the popularity of the sensational story and due to competition. The editors were driven to compete for the newest information, the best engravings of the crime, and exclusive details. The *Herald* and the *Sun* constantly competed, with the *Sun*'s editor, Moses Beach announcing in a Sunday edition of the paper that after the trial of Colt ended he would be publishing a special edition pamphlet saying, "As soon as the Verdict of the Jury is rendered in the case of John C. Colt, we shall publish from this office the Trial Complete in pamphlet form. This pamphlet will comprise 1st—The evidence in detail as it has appeared from day to

¹⁴⁶ Andie Toucher, *Froth and Scum: Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and The Ax Murder in America's First Mass Medium*, 170

¹⁴⁷ Andie Toucher, *Froth and Scum: Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and The Ax Murder in America's First Mass Medium*, 154

day in the *Sun*. 2nd—Faithful sketches and reports of the opening and summing up of Counsel on either side—which, from the well-known professional reputation of Messrs. Whiting and Selden, will doubtless present a greater forensic display than has been exhibited in this city for many years. 3rd—The charge of Judge Kent. 4th—Six engravings, illustrative of scene and character which appear in the history of this dreadful tragedy.”¹⁴⁸ Just as the *Sun* published pamphlets to sell for six cents as an add on to the daily paper, the *Herald* published three drawings in its daily newspaper—a portrait of John C. Colt, a drawing of the building the murder took place in, and a map of the room of the murder (See Figure 3). Devoting the space and money to publish three drawings and taking up almost half a page of type that could have been advertisements, Bennett was making the statement that he too was in competition for the most exclusive and detailed crime reports.

The murder of Samuel Adams and the suicide of John C. Colt had all the elements of a sensational crime but with slight variation. Despite both the perpetrator and victim being male and both men being of a respectable social status, the violent nature of the crime and the penny papers’s devotion to sensational stories made the murder case a perfect fit for the penny papers. With coverage on the murder, trial and suicide spanning from September of 1841 to November 1842, the Adams-Colt affair became known not just in New York City, but across the country. Hinging on the violence of the crime, the background and faults of both the victim and perpetrators and the savageness of Colt, the murder and suicide adhered to what had become the standard of sensational crime reporting set forth by the penny papers but also exhibited changes from the murders of

¹⁴⁸ Harold Schechter. *Killer Colt: Murder, Disgrace, and the Making of An American Legend*. 222.

Figure Three: Drawings of Colt and the Crime Scene



Top Left: A portrait of the accused murder, John C. Colt

Top Right: A depiction of the building where Samuel Adams was murdered

Bottom: A depiction of the room of the murder

These types of drawings and representations that began appearing in the newspaper during the murder of Helen Jewett were now commonplace in crime reporting.

female victims. Perhaps a result of the victim being male and not being able to lose his virginal morality, Samuel Adams was not investigated as thoroughly as the female victims Jewett and Rogers had been. Because there was less focus on the Adams as victim and his downfall, the perpetrator of the crime, John Colt, became the main character in the newspaper's stories. Despite a shift in focus from the victim to the perpetrator, the story still held the same sensational qualities as the murders of Jewett and Rogers. All three of the murders were horrific, leaving readers worried about the conditions of the city and society.

Overall, the sensational crime stories all ended the same—with no justice for the victim. Richard Robinson, accused of murdering Helen Jewett was acquitted; Mary Rogers's many alleged murderers never stood trial and most of the penny papers ended up blaming her death on an abortion and even Samuel Adams, the male and virtuous victim, was never given full justice. Even after Colt's conviction, he escaped execution by committing suicide and Adams's family was cheated out of justice. Despite each case ending without any real justice, the murders all established the new form of news, sensational crime reporting.

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