

The Friends' Quarterly



A Newsletter from the Enfield Shaker Museum

A Murder in Enfield

By Arthur Gagnon, Jr., Enfield Shaker Museum Interpreter

Caleb Dyer and Thomas Wier were very different men who became involved in one of the most intriguing dramas in Shaker history. Thomas Wier was a family man, a shoemaker by trade, who worked for the Shakers part-time. Caleb Marshall Dyer was a devoted Shaker leader and one of the most respected men in Enfield. The conflict that developed between these two men left Caleb Dyer dead and Thomas Wier sentenced to hang. Their tragic story began with Thomas Wier's response to the Civil War. Former Shaker Henry Cumings gave this first-hand account:

In June 1861, Thomas Wier, being at work with me at the North Family, suddenly broke out with, "Well I am going to enlist and go south and get Jeff Davis' head." This was said in an earnest, impulsive way very common with him. He said he was going to put his two youngest girls, aged about 8 and 10 years old, at the Church Family Shakers ...!

After some initial resistance, the Shakers relented and agreed to take the children.

Most of the Shakers were opposed to taking these children, knowing the man and the family so well, but Caleb favored it on the ground that Wier was going in the Army, and he thought they ought to help him in that way."

So on August 29, 1861, Thomas Wier placed his two youngest daughters, Sara and Ellen, with the Church Family Shakers.³ The following is an excerpt from the Covenant he signed together with Trustees Caleb M. Dyer and Mary Fall:

Sara Wier born Dec. 6th 1850, Ellen Wier born Dec. 28th 1852 have been placed by me in the Society of Believers... with the intent that they should remain with the Society... so long as they shall with their own consent remain with the same Society... where I have placed them afore said until they shall arrive at lawful age...⁴

During this period in Wier's life, he reported a wife "sick unto death," he placed his two youngest daughters with the Shakers, and his two oldest daughters had died! Apart from "getting Jeff Davis' head," one can only speculate on his reasons for joining the Union Army. Military records show that he enlisted in the Fifth NH Volunteers, Co. C, on August 23, 1861, and was mustered in on October 12, 1861, as a corporal. Wier's military service was brief, just eight months. His regiment was in the Battle of Rappahannock, which occurred on March 28, 1862. Conditions during this campaign were severe, and Wier's health failed. He was discharged "for disability" on May 1, 1862. After his separation from the Army, he returned to Enfield.⁵

By and by, Wier's health failed and he returned home; his wife had become better and they wished their children returned. C. M. Dyer replied, saying if the girls desired to go they could do so...⁶

The next move was Thomas Wier's. His wife had regained



Thomas Wier. Image from the collection of the Enfield Shaker Museum.

her health. Caleb indicated he would release the girls, and the Wiers were in a position to take them. But, when Wier visited his children to take them home "they told their father that they had a good home and were happy and contented." This must have been discouraging news for a father trying to reunite his family, especially so, since two of his daughters had died within the year.

After failing in this attempt to take his children home with him, Wier persuaded Squire W. C. Smith to visit and talk with his daughters.

Then Wier got Squire W. C. Smith to go over and see the girls, which he did having them alone. But all he could say to them, they would not consent to go with their father.⁷

Note that Smith was a civil engineer, town official and respected resident of Enfield.⁸ It is unlikely he would have interceded for the Wiers if he thought them unfit parents.

Conversations between Wier and Dyer up to this point had been civil, but they had reached an impasse. Dyer's position was, "if the girls desired to go then they could do so, but as their guardian he should protect them in their choice," and they had chosen to remain with the Shakers.

Urged on, no doubt by his wife and friends, he visited them again and...tried to persuade them to go with him; not succeeding, the next time he went to see them, he made a demand that the children be given up to him, nolen volens.⁹ This, of course, was not complied with and he left, swearing that, "as true as there was a god in heaven, he would have the girls dead or alive."¹⁰

Matters escalated, and "the next attempt was made by his wife and daughter Martha (to) seize them and drive off with them." This also failed. Following this attempt at kidnapping, Wier was "refused the privilege of seeing them, and forbidden to come into the door yard of the Society." It was then that "Elder Dyer received an anonymous letter, threatening his life unless he gave up the children."¹¹ The whole thing came to a head on July 18, 1863.

Wier came over to the Society... met Elder Caleb who was going from the North to the Church Family. He asked him if he could see the girls? Elder Caleb's answer was, "It's a Saturday night and not a proper time for such visits." Then, "You will take this," said Wier, drawing his revolver and firing immediately. "I am shot, but not killed," was Elder Caleb's remark, as he passed on and into the office.

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Arthur Gagnon, Jr. has been giving tours at the Museum for 15 years. His article "Shakerism and the Godhead" appeared in the Spring 2005 issue of The Friends' Quarterly. He has been researching Thomas Wier for some time, but a recent donation of a photograph of Wier (shown above) to the Museum inspired him to write this article.

