

The Murders of Ariel Martin – Calais 1858

By
Paul Heller

([Leslie's Weekly](#)) I first heard about this murder case when I saw this newsprint leaf from *Frank Leslie's Weekly* for sale and immediately bought it. After reading about this case, I was intrigued - I am usually attracted to the little known stories of local history but also by the fact that this old story was about mental illness and guns – a story that continues to have relevance today. So, here is a short summary of what happened on July 16, 1858. ([A. Martin portrait](#))

On the day before he killed two men, Ariel Martin went to the McKnight house to borrow his brother's rifle, saying he intended to shoot a hawk that was killing their chickens. The next day, after chores, he walked to the house of his neighbor, Jennerson Wheelock and knocked on the door asking for Jennerson. Told by Mrs Wheelock that he was mowing in a nearby meadow, Martin stealthily approached him and , resting the muzzle of his gun on a tree branch, shot him through the breast. Reloading as he walked, Martin made his way to the Goodall farm, where he found Lucius Ainsworth mowing with three members of the Goodall family. After talking with the men for a few minutes, he rested the rifle on a fence post and shot Ainsworth through the back, and continued on to Kents Corner.

I was immediately struck by the portraits of the principal characters at the trial. ([Leslie's Weekly](#))

I remember thinking how Ariel Martin resembled the Hollywood actor Adam Driver. ([Adam](#)

[Driver](#)) The etchings are attributed as photographs by S.O. Hersey, ([A. Martin Portrait](#)) a

Montpelier photographer. Clearly, they are not photographs. *Frank Leslie's Weekly* was a national

tabloid, published in New York City. ([F. Leslie Cover](#)) Like the *Daily Graphic* and *Harpers*

Weekly, it was a pictorial magazine profusely illustrated. Leslie's Weekly had a large building in

which of the 300 people employed, 70 were artists who turned photographs into woodcuts or

etchings. So, I wondered, who was this Montpelier photographer featured in a nation al

magazine? (Jennifer Boyer has already researched this.)

Reports of this murder in Calais appeared in newspapers from Boston to Sacramento. [\(Show page of articles\)](#)) Some of the papers got the story wrong. In California for example they claimed Martin shot and killed Recta Wheelock after she opened the door. After reading the accounts of the murders, it occurred to me that this is a tragic that continues to have relevance today.

[Martin Portrait](#)) Ariel Martin was born in Calais in 1839. His father, who had died in 1855 earned a modest living as a mechanic, as well deriving sustenance from their small farm. It was said that the elder Martin “loved rum and not infrequently drank to excess.” Ariel’s mother was a Millerite, [\(Millerite Poster\)](#) a member of the odd sect in Calais and elsewhere in New England that routinely prepared for the end of times and was successively disappointed. It was said that she “was not blessed with more than an ordinary share of intelligence.” It is likely that everyone here knows about what happened in Calais in 1843 when a congregation of Millerites assembled at the Old West Church on New Year’s Eve to await the second coming of Christ and the end of the world. Weston Cate noted in *Forever Calais*,

Since the end of the world was coming, the Calais farmers saw no point in harvesting their crops. Some are said to have given away their possessions and abandoned their farms, such was the power of their belief. At five before the hour of midnight the congregation rose and sang “Nearer my God to Thee.” As the clock struck midnight several women screamed.

And nothing happened.

Quickly one by one and in small groups, the shaken Calaisites left the meetinghouse.

Another account says that a group in Calais sat atop a local church in their white gowns, coming down finally to the scoffing laughter of their newly enriched neighbors.

She eventually turned away from the Millerites and embraced spiritualism and, according to *Frank Leslie's Weekly*, “she, as well as her son, claimed to hold frequent conversations with these modern invisibles.” The *Weekly* went on to describe the mental ability of their son:

***(Martie portrait)* Ariel was always regarded by his acquaintances and neighbors as a stupid and inoffensive lad, with barely intellect enough to distinguish between right and wrong, though not sufficient to make any proficiency in learning. He spent a great share of his boyhood in hunting and fishing, and working on the small farm upon which they lived.**

The horror of a seemingly unprovoked murder by a mental incompetent titillated a population accustomed to more prosaic terrors and the cast of characters intrigued the readers of newspapers and tabloid magazines.

The first accounts appeared in late July when the Vermont newspapers reported “the bloodiest scene we have ever heard of in Vermont was enacted in Calais.” ([Calais Map](#)) We learned from the initial newspaper reports. Mrs. Wheelock was not suspicious of the young man carrying a rifle – she knew him - and directed him to a neighboring field where Jennerson was mowing. When Mrs. Wheelock heard the report of a rifle and the startled cry of her husband, she ran to the field and found him dead in the brook that ran nearby. He had been shot through the heart. “The ball had entered the right breast and came out the left side of the back cutting off an artery near the heart,” reported the *Burlington Free Press*.

Martin, as we know, continued to the Moses Goodell farm where Goodell and Lucius Ainsworth were haying. Ariel Martin shot young Ainsworth and, “as he fell, walked off deliberately, loading his rifle as he went.” It seems that his rifle was a muzzle loader, limiting the amount of damage he could have inflicted.

Martin continued on toward Kents Corner, aiming his musket at two others as he made his way. *The Vermonter* noted “news of his arrival had preceded him, but on arrival he made no attempt to conceal the fact that he had killed Wheelock and Ainsworth and coolly informed his listeners that he was on his way to the south part of town to shoot George Soper.” Soper was among the first from Calais to enlist in the Union army and later died during service in the Civil War. Once in Kents Corner, bystanders distracted Martin and took his rifle from him. He was arrested at the general store and his hands bound. The Washington County Jail being closed while a new facility was being constructed, the prisoner was taken to Burlington where he was held pending trial. ([Washington County Jail](#)) The new jail was the Greek- revival style brick building that was, many years later, expanded to three full floors for the Odd Fellows Hall on Elm Street. There seemed to be no plausible motive for the crime and the *Free Press* concluded, “the very circumstances of the case, therefore raise the presumption of imbecility or insanity. He [Martin] wears the appearance of imbecility rather than malice.”

The *Free Press* reporter attended the funeral service for Wheelock and Ainsworth:

The joint funeral of both of the deceased was attended on the last Sabbath by a great concourse of people, and the scene was saddest and most impressive of any that has ever occurred in this region.

While in custody, according to an article in the *Watchman* (21 July 1858) he admitted that he had intended to kill six individuals, in all. *The Vermonter* stated in 1913, “the man was clearly insane and with this defense he was ably represented by attorneys Paul Dillingham ([Dillingham portrait](#)) and Luther Durant.

Lucius was buried in the Ainsworth Cemetery in East Calais. Jennifer found Jennier on Wheelock's grave in Fairview cemetery.

The following March (1859), the trial for murder commenced. Recta Wheelock, Jennison's widow testified early in the proceedings. "I heard the report of a gun and heard my husband's voice – I heard him cry out. As soon as Martin had gone I went to the meadow. I found my husband by the brook. He was dead. I had been married one year, ten months and two days,"

Recta was followed on the witness stand by Moses Goodell:

I live about a mile from Jennison Wheelock. I first saw Ariel Martin standing by the fence. I said, "Good morning." He replied, "Good morning." The muzzle of his gun was coming through the fence. I asked if he was hunting this morning. He said "yes." I asked what he found to hunt. He said deer. Afterwards, Lucius Ainsworth came up and he talked to Martin. I did not hear the conversation. The next I heard was the report of the gun. Lucius Ainsworth fell. Says I, "Ariel. You have shot Lucius." I supposed it was an accident. Martin commenced loading his gun and started off. I have been acquainted with Ariel Martin all his lifetime. I saw nothing unusual in his appearance that morning. I never heard anything about his being deranged.

While Goodell ran to his son's house for help, Ainsworth somehow got up and made it to the house where he lay on the floor. He died about 11:00 that morning.

Winslow Voodry saw Martin at the store at Kent's Corner and, having learned of the mornings events, asked Ariel why he shot the two men. He replied, "They were miserable cusses and not fit to live."

With the conclusion of the testimony of the witnesses for the prosecution, the Defense Counsel, Paul Dillingham addressed the jury. Dillingham said that the defense would not deny the testimony of the preceding witnesses but, instead, would demonstrate that Ariel Martin was not, and never had been, of sound mind. Dillingham said that

He would show that there never had been a month or a week without there having been terrible pains in his head. Many a time he has proclaimed that everybody was his enemy, that they were trying to kill him. Sometimes he has run to the neighbors, and said his father had killed his mother; at others that his father was killed.

Dillingham called Abigail Martin, Ariel's mother, to the stand. She recalled the events that may have precipitated her son's mental illness.

Ariel Martin is a son of mine. I call him twenty years old this spring. He had the whooping cough when he was nine years old. He had the bronchitis and the catarrh at the same time. He was very sick. He had spells of being out of his mind, sometimes they would last all night, sometimes half a day.

Since his father died, he has been worse. At night he wouldn't go to bed in his own room but would fasten the doors and lie down in the kitchen with his gun beside him. He was afraid an enemy was coming to kill him. We often tried to persuade him out of these notions.

About two weeks before this affair happened he kept traveling about – didn't eat any regular meals – I never heard him make any threats against these men.

Several more witnesses attested to Ariel's delusional madness and Recta McKnight recalled that on the day before the murders, he came to her house to get a gun that belonged to his brother Simeon. "I told him I had no right to let him have the gun; he said if Simeon was home he would let him have it. He took the gun down and went to the trunk and got powder. I have heard them tell about him having crazy spells but I never knew anything about them myself."

Ariel's sister Sabrina Carr remarked that some in the family thought it was dangerous for Ariel to have a gun.

A Montpelier physician had examined Ariel at length and concluded, "I consider him somewhat affected with stupidity, but not with that imbecility that would absolve him from moral obligations. I thought he had no indications of insanity." Dr. Richardson later amended his opinion, after admitting he had not heard the testimony of those closest to Ariel. "I should say he

must have been laboring under an illusion. Two other local physicians, however, agreed that nothing in their examination of Ariel Martin supported a diagnosis of insanity.

In his charge to the jury, Judge James Barrett reminded them that they were to hold Martin responsible for the crime unless they believed that the defense had proved that Ariel Martin was not sane when the crime was committed. Judge Barrett explained that it was not claimed that Martin was” wholly and permanently insane but that he was subjected to periods of being under a delusion.” The Judge’s detailed and elaborate charge to the jury appeared to direct a verdict of not guilty by reason of insanity.

That, however, was not to be. That evening, in March 1859, after seven hours’ deliberation, the jury found Ariel Martin guilty and he was sentenced to death by hanging – the first capital punishment in Vermont in 25 years. An editorial in the *Vermont Phoenix* suggested that the citizens of Washington County were divided on the issue of Martin’s competency but the newspaper agreed with the verdict. “Upon a careful examination of the evidence is that he was an ignorant, stupid, and naturally mischievous person, and no sufficient motive appears to which to ascribe the commission of these terrible homicides. There are not reasonable grounds for believing his mental or moral condition to be such as to relieve him from responsibility in the matter.”

As was the custom, (**Windsor Prison**) Martin was held at the state prison for one year, after which he was to be sent to the gallows. Before the sentence could be fulfilled, however, a petition to the legislature, signed by many citizens of Calais and others, asked that his sentence be commuted to life imprisonment. The commutation was granted in November of 1859.

Martin died of consumption in Windsor prison on April 4, 1859.. Paul Dillingham, his attorney, was recognized as one of Vermont's "ablest attorneys and was credited with having drawn 'tears and verdicts from juries' for over fifty years." He garnered a reputation for loyal support of the Union during the Civil War and served two terms as Governor.

He died in Waterbury, Vermont in 1891 at the age of 92.

In 1902 Thomas Waterman Wood's portrait of Gov. Paul Dillingham was presented to the Vermont State House. At that time, Dillingham had been dead for over ten years and Wood used the late Governor's favorite photograph to paint his likeness. **(Dillingham drawing)** The 1859 photograph had taken on a short break from the Ariel Martin murder trial in Montpelier, where Dillingham was the defense attorney. As reported in the *Burlington Free Press*, "Mr. Dillingham was just as he came from the court room with the flush of a hard-fought battle in his face and without any special regard to dress or personal appearance." The photo was first published as a wood block engraving in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Weekly* and had been distributed nationally in the popular periodical. With his defense of Ariel Martin for two senseless murders that occurred on July 16, 1858 in Calais, Paul Dillingham had secured a significant reputation readers of newspapers eagerly devoured sensational accounts of the unfortunate affair. **(Wood painting)** Wood's portrait brings the woodcut to life.