

Trial of J. Albertus Hope and Mary E. Hope
for the Murder of Miss Mary Isabella Castles

In the October Session 1875 of the York County Court J. Albertus Hope and his wife Mary E. Hope were charged with poisoning Mary Isabella Castles, a young woman living with them.

The Yorkville Enquirer commented about the trial, "The respectability and social position of all the parties to the affair, and the peculiar circumstances attending the lamentable death of the unfortunate young lady, attracted greater public interest to the trial than has been shown for any capital case that has been on the session docket of York county in many years."

The Enquirer carried a complete account over a three-week period as numerous witnesses were called, most of them either relatives or neighbors of the Hopes.

Albertus Hope, a school teacher, was charged with administering strychnine to Mary Castles, who attended his school, immediately after she gave birth to an illegitimate baby. Several witnesses testified that the baby, who had very curly blond hair and blue eyes, closely resembled Hope.

Mary and her younger sister, Lee Castles, were boarders in the Hope household. Thirteen-year-old Lee was one of the witnesses. After stating that Mary E. (Aunt Lizzie) Hope was her aunt and Albertus (Uncle Burt) Hope was her guardian, Lee detailed the evening that her sister died.

Lee Castles testified that they all slept in the same room. That evening the deceased had eaten heartily and milked a cow. There was a clock in the house and she and sister undressed and went to bed at 8 o'clock. She went to sleep beside her sister and woke up at two in the morning. Her sister was not in the room. Lee went outside and found Mary, fully dressed, on the ground and moaning in pain.

Her aunt went in the house and fixed tea ("squaw-weed" tea) in a tin cup she placed over the coals in the fireplace. Lizzie also gave her sister some pills. After doing so Lizzie went back in the house and lit her pipe.

Some time after 2 a.m. the newborn baby was found and brought in the house. The 17-year-old mother collapsed on the steps saying that she was dying. She was brought in the house and laid by the fire on an oilcloth with a quilt over it. She died in agony about 20 minutes after taking the pills.

Two neighbor women quoted "Lizzie" Hope as having said that she was worried that her husband was too intimate with Mary Castles.

The Methodist minister and the A. R. P. minister each stated that Hope had as fine a character as anyone they had ever known. The A. R. P. minister said he had known Hope for more than 30 years.

R. W. and John Whitesides, two of Mary's uncles, went to Hope and asked numerous questions. They asked to see the contents of Hope's trunk. Hope said the spring-lock of the trunk was broken and showed them the contents: some apples, a flask, a box of pills, a vial of strychnine, a razor and some other small articles.

The prosecutor charged that while Hope had sent for relatives of the deceased he had made no effort to get a doctor though one lived within half a mile. And, furthermore, Hope had attempted to have the deceased buried the next day before the coroner could be brought in.

The York County Coroner sent the contents of the stomach of Mary Castles to a New York chemist who replied by letter that his analysis of the contents and the pills of the same type as though administered showed that the pills were mostly rhubarb. He found no poison.

When the jury was drawn only 7 of the men (no women served on South Carolina juries before 1949) were present or eligible. By custom, a selection was made from bystanders but, in spite of that irregularity, the Enquirer editor stated that he seldom seen a jury composed of a more respectable or intelligent body of men.

The jury's verdict was "Not Guilty."