

The Unsolved Murders of the Pastor and his Choir Singer

Trial of the Century

Reverend Edward Hall and Eleanor Mills, the victims of the murders.

by Jay Jorgensen

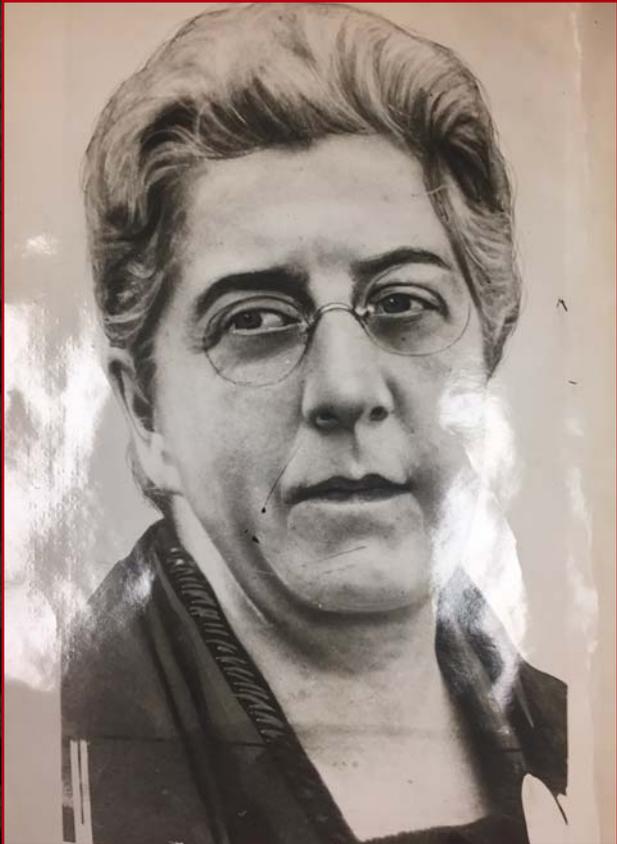
Jay Jorgensen is a judge in New Jersey. He and his wife wrote the script for "The Trial of the Century: the Hall Mills Murder Trial." The play will be produced at the Avenel Arts Center July 22-25, 2020.

EPISCOPAL RECTOR SHOT TO DEATH, WITH WOMAN, IN LONELY PLACE NEAR CITY screamed the headline of the local New Brunswick newspaper just hours after two bodies were found on September 16, 1922 in a lovers' lane near the border between Middlesex and Somerset counties. The bodies of Reverend Edward Hall and Eleanor Mills lay near a crabapple tree, torn up love letters strewn on the ground between them.



ensuing maelstrom of media frenzy that descended on central Jersey in the ensuing weeks. Schneider would falsely accuse an acquaintance of his as the murderer. Pearl's father Nick, a local saloon and poolroom owner, was carrying on an incestuous relationship with his daughter. Eventually she would be placed in a home for incorrigibles.

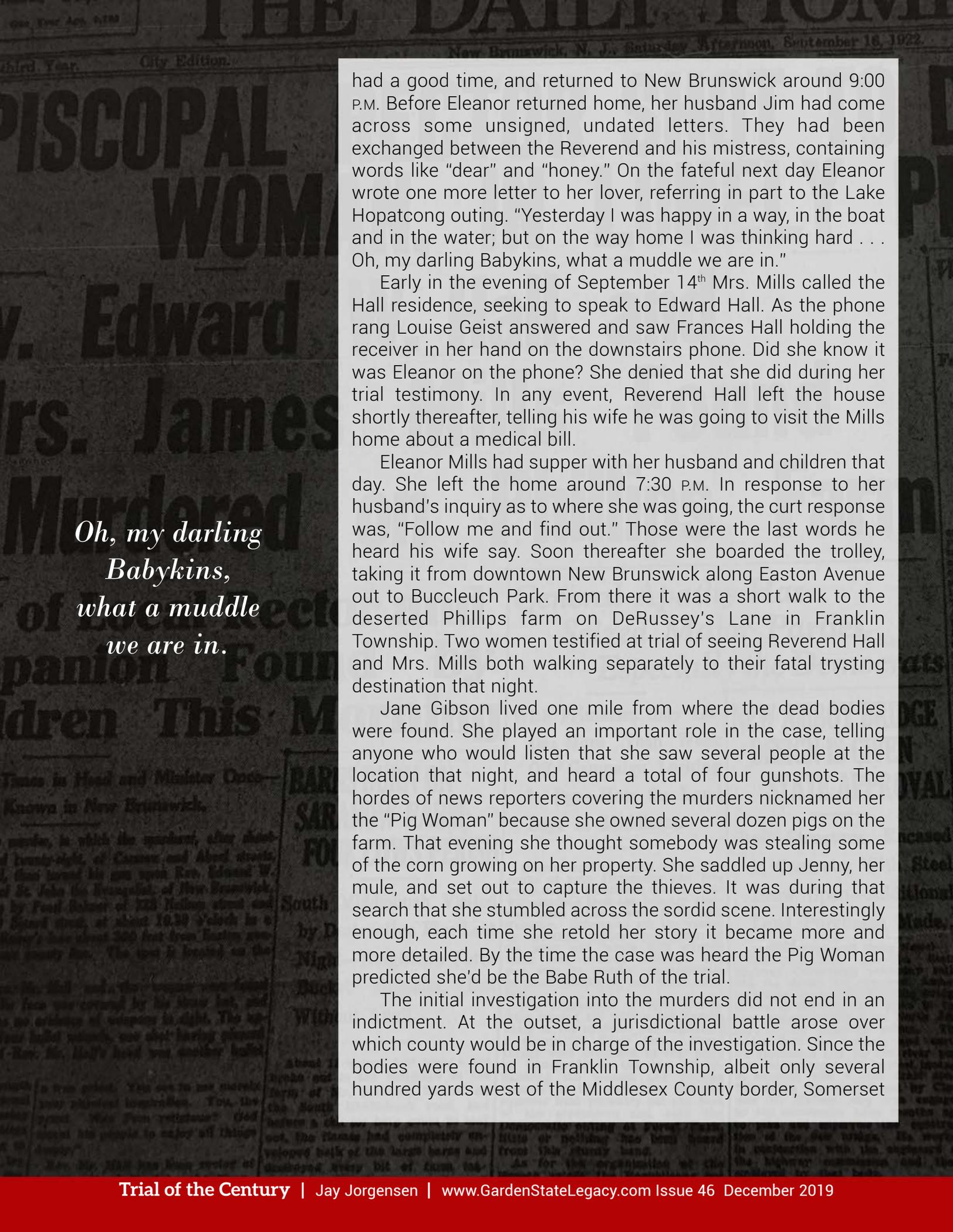
Who was responsible for the brutal murders? Suspicion soon focused on the rector's widow. The Reverend and Mrs. Hall lived in the Stevens family mansion at 23 Nichol Avenue in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Her brother William "Willie" Stevens lived with them. The sister and brother's actions on the night of the murders were peculiar to say the least. She later informed the police that her husband had not come home from a meeting with Mrs. Mills earlier that evening. Concerned, she woke up Willie at 2:00 A.M. on September 15th, and the two of them walked the couple of blocks to the church to see if Reverend Hall was there. He wasn't. Then they walked to the Mills apartment at 49 Carman Street, close by the church. Seeing all the lights off, the two siblings did not knock at the door, and instead returned home. Several hours later a visibly agitated Willie told Louise Geist, one of the Halls' maids, that "something terrible has happened last night." Later that day he purportedly told Captain Michael Regan, a fireman for local Engine Company No. 3 that "something big is going to pop . . . You'll hear about it later."²



Frances Hall, the Reverend's wife, and prime suspect

Frances Hall's actions the day after the murders were equally suspicious. In the morning she telephoned the local police to ask, "have there been any casualties?" Hearing none had occurred, she hung up without giving her name. As the day progressed she did not call any of the hospitals, even though at trial she stated that she feared her husband may have been in an automobile accident. She also went back to the church in the morning. She saw Jim Mills there. He was Eleanor's husband, and served as the sexton at St. John's church. The two spoke briefly about the fact that their spouses had not come home the previous night. Frances declared, "They have met foul play, they are together, they are dead." Indeed they were.

On Wednesday September 13, 1922 Reverend Hall took his annual day-trip to Lake Hopatcong, New Jersey as a thank you to certain members of his congregation for their good work with the church. Accompanying him were his mother, his wife, and two parishioners—Minnie Clark and Eleanor Mills. They all



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*Oh, my darling
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had a good time, and returned to New Brunswick around 9:00 P.M. Before Eleanor returned home, her husband Jim had come across some unsigned, undated letters. They had been exchanged between the Reverend and his mistress, containing words like "dear" and "honey." On the fateful next day Eleanor wrote one more letter to her lover, referring in part to the Lake Hopatcong outing. "Yesterday I was happy in a way, in the boat and in the water; but on the way home I was thinking hard . . . Oh, my darling Babykins, what a muddle we are in."

Early in the evening of September 14th Mrs. Mills called the Hall residence, seeking to speak to Edward Hall. As the phone rang Louise Geist answered and saw Frances Hall holding the receiver in her hand on the downstairs phone. Did she know it was Eleanor on the phone? She denied that she did during her trial testimony. In any event, Reverend Hall left the house shortly thereafter, telling his wife he was going to visit the Mills home about a medical bill.

Eleanor Mills had supper with her husband and children that day. She left the home around 7:30 P.M. In response to her husband's inquiry as to where she was going, the curt response was, "Follow me and find out." Those were the last words he heard his wife say. Soon thereafter she boarded the trolley, taking it from downtown New Brunswick along Easton Avenue out to Buccleuch Park. From there it was a short walk to the deserted Phillips farm on DeRussey's Lane in Franklin Township. Two women testified at trial of seeing Reverend Hall and Mrs. Mills both walking separately to their fatal trysting destination that night.

Jane Gibson lived one mile from where the dead bodies were found. She played an important role in the case, telling anyone who would listen that she saw several people at the location that night, and heard a total of four gunshots. The hordes of news reporters covering the murders nicknamed her the "Pig Woman" because she owned several dozen pigs on the farm. That evening she thought somebody was stealing some of the corn growing on her property. She saddled up Jenny, her mule, and set out to capture the thieves. It was during that search that she stumbled across the sordid scene. Interestingly enough, each time she retold her story it became more and more detailed. By the time the case was heard the Pig Woman predicted she'd be the Babe Ruth of the trial.

The initial investigation into the murders did not end in an indictment. At the outset, a jurisdictional battle arose over which county would be in charge of the investigation. Since the bodies were found in Franklin Township, albeit only several hundred yards west of the Middlesex County border, Somerset

Court of Oyer and Terminer for the County of Somerset, draw nigh and ye shall be heard. God bless this honorable court and the State of New Jersey," intoned John Bunn, court attendant, on November 3, 1926 at the start of the Trial of the Century. Over 200 news reporters from around the country were packed into the court room in Somerville, New Jersey to cover the case.

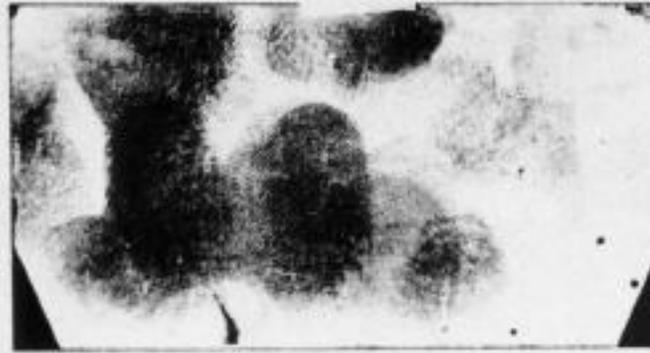
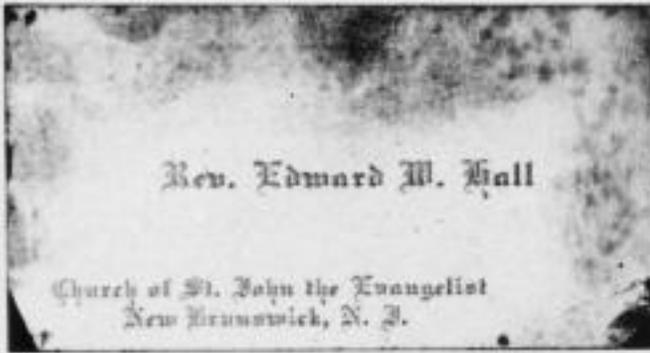
Their task would be assisted by a large telegraph loop board installed in the courthouse basement specifically for this trial. The big board machine had recently been used at the Gene Tunney—Jack Dempsey heavyweight boxing match in Philadelphia on September 23, 1926. There would be no shortage of coverage for the American public to follow the trial.

Prosecutor Simpson and his staff decided to sever Carpender's case from the Stevens siblings, and proceeded first with the murder of Eleanor Mills. Testimony would show that Eleanor had been shot three times in the head, her throat was severed from ear to ear, and her tongue and larynx were cut out. Clearly someone had it in for the petite choir singer. It is surmised that due to the vicious nature of her demise it would be easier to persuade the jury to convict the defendants than it would be to convict them for the killing of Reverend Hall.

The trial lasted for five weeks. Prosecutor Simpson called 87 witnesses to the stand as he methodically built the State's case against the defendants. The jurors got to hear about the love letters passed between the murdered couple. There was testimony about the autopsies that were performed, and about the cause of death. A world renowned fingerprint expert opined that

Willie's fingerprint was on the back of Reverend Hall's calling card, which was found on the ground near the clergyman's left foot at the scene. Jim Mills testified about his wife's actions on the evening of September 14th, as well as his several interactions with Frances Hall the following day. Eleanor's daughter Charlotte testified about the frequent visits the Reverend Hall used to make to their house.

Of course, the theory of the case revolved around Mrs. Hall's desire to put an end to the affair between her husband and Eleanor. Some witnesses testified that the affair was well known in the New Brunswick community, inferring that Frances Hall had to have known about it. When she took the stand she



The calling card of Reverend Edward Wheeler Hall, found at the crime scene with Willie's fingerprints on the back.



*...awoman jumped
to her feet screaming,
“Liar, liar, liar.”
That woman was...
the mother of the
witness.*

flat out denied having any knowledge of her husband's infidelity. Some witnesses testified about Willie's strange behavior the day after the murders, and the following day when the bodies were found. Other witnesses testified about the activities and actions of the defendants the night of the murders and the ensuing couple of days.

Although several witnesses testified about being in the area of the murders on September 14, 1922, Simpson was only able to come up with one person who alleged to have seen the defendants at the scene and heard the fatal shots—Jane Gibson. The prosecutor intended to call her early in the trial, and she was anxious to testify. However she became ill and was rushed to a hospital in Somerville, New Jersey. When Simpson sent for her to appear in court, her doctor refused to allow her to leave the hospital, stating she might go into a coma if forced to come to court. The tenacious prosecutor petitioned the Court to reconvene at the hospital so he could elicit her testimony. The judges visited her in the hospital that day, but declined Simpson's request that she testify from there. Simpson was beside himself, perhaps feeling he was being unfairly treated as a Hudson County outsider in Somerset County. Perhaps to obtain a more level playing field, he had the Pig Woman transferred to a hospital in Jersey City until she could testify.

Testify she did. When she was stabilized Mrs. Gibson was transported to the courthouse in an ambulance. Once there she was wheeled into the courtroom on a hospital gurney. Indicative of the carnival atmosphere surrounding her remarkable appearance in court, a woman jumped to her feet screaming, “Liar, liar, liar.” That woman was Mrs. Salome Cerenner, the mother of the witness. Quickly sworn in, Jane Gibson testified in open court while lying flat on her back on the gurney. By the time defense attorney Case finished his cross-examination, there could be little doubt that the jurors found her testimony to be anything but incredible. Indeed, prosecutor Simpson did not even try to rehabilitate her, informing the judge that there would be no re-direct examination.

The legal defense team jumped into action at the conclusion of the State's case. Each of the defendants took the stand and provided detailed testimony as to their whereabouts and doings on the night of the murders. News reporters had painted Willie Stevens as being slow and dimwitted. His initial statement from the witness stand seemed to bear that out. When asked how old he was he responded “forty-four.” There was some muffled laughter in the courtroom when his attorney corrected him—“Isn't it fifty-four?” and Willie sheepishly grinned in

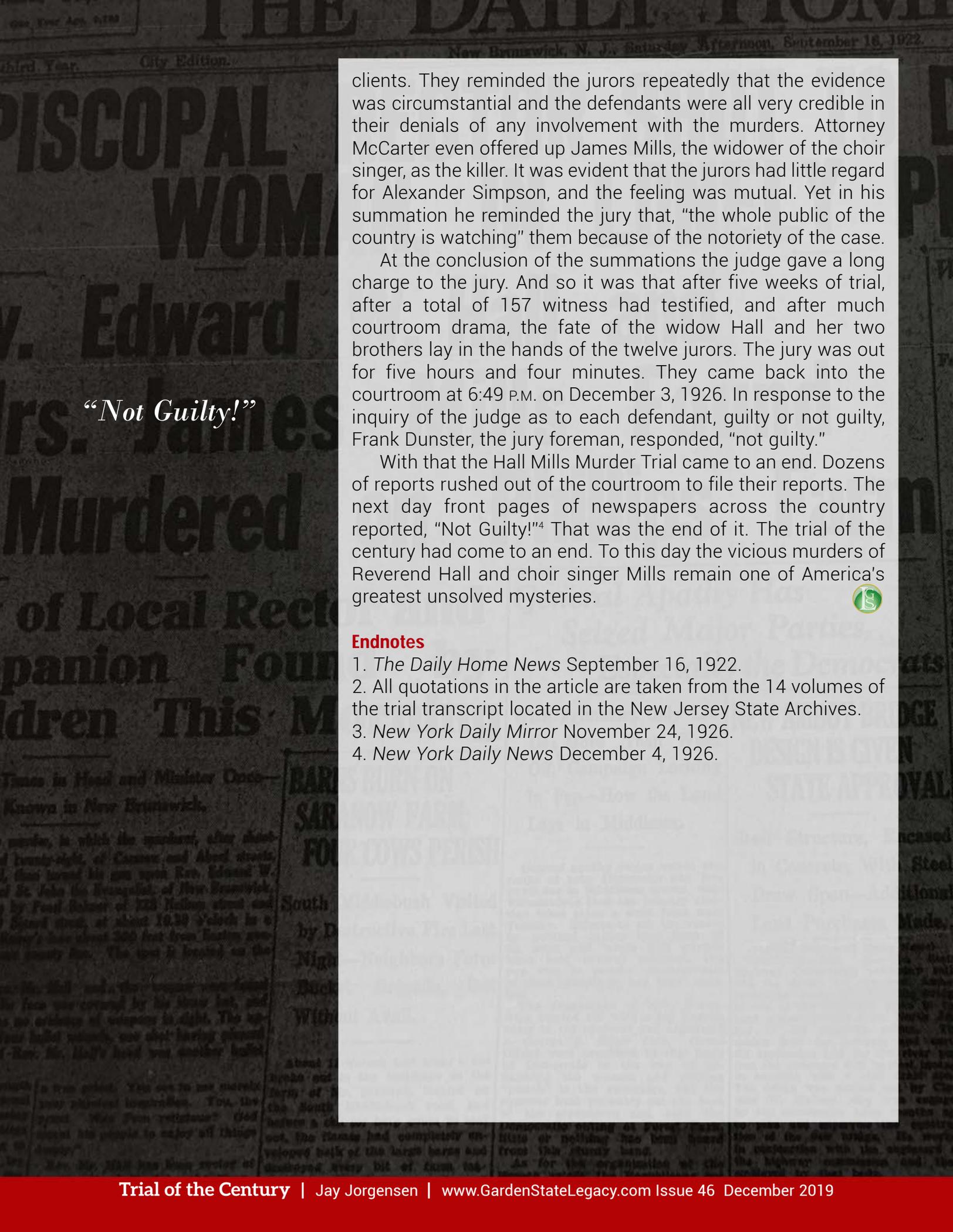


Jane Gibson, the State's star witness, who testified from a hospital bed because of her medical condition.

acknowledgment. That would be his only slip-up on the stand. Apparently he had been well prepped by the defense team, and did surprisingly well throughout his testimony. The front page of one of the New York newspapers declared "Willie is a Good Witness!" to its reading public the day after he testified.³

Frances Hall, dubbed the Iron Widow by some of the reporters, took center stage toward the end of the defendants' case. Dressed in a black mourning dress and a black hat covering much of her gray hair, she took the stand and testified for several hours. Her attorney walked her through her marriage with the Reverend Hall and the warm relationship she had with Eleanor Mills. She came across as the aggrieved widow, not as the cold, calculating wife bent on revenge against the woman having a notorious affair with her husband. Try as he may, prosecutor Simpson was unable to have Mrs. Hall acknowledge that she had even an inkling that Edward was unfaithful.

Both sides gave elaborate summations to the jury. The defense attorneys hammered away at the innocence of their



“Not Guilty!”

clients. They reminded the jurors repeatedly that the evidence was circumstantial and the defendants were all very credible in their denials of any involvement with the murders. Attorney McCarter even offered up James Mills, the widower of the choir singer, as the killer. It was evident that the jurors had little regard for Alexander Simpson, and the feeling was mutual. Yet in his summation he reminded the jury that, “the whole public of the country is watching” them because of the notoriety of the case.

At the conclusion of the summations the judge gave a long charge to the jury. And so it was that after five weeks of trial, after a total of 157 witness had testified, and after much courtroom drama, the fate of the widow Hall and her two brothers lay in the hands of the twelve jurors. The jury was out for five hours and four minutes. They came back into the courtroom at 6:49 P.M. on December 3, 1926. In response to the inquiry of the judge as to each defendant, guilty or not guilty, Frank Dunster, the jury foreman, responded, “not guilty.”

With that the Hall Mills Murder Trial came to an end. Dozens of reports rushed out of the courtroom to file their reports. The next day front pages of newspapers across the country reported, “Not Guilty!”⁴ That was the end of it. The trial of the century had come to an end. To this day the vicious murders of Reverend Hall and choir singer Mills remain one of America's greatest unsolved mysteries.



Endnotes

1. *The Daily Home News* September 16, 1922.
2. All quotations in the article are taken from the 14 volumes of the trial transcript located in the New Jersey State Archives.
3. *New York Daily Mirror* November 24, 1926.
4. *New York Daily News* December 4, 1926.