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“They Lynched Jim Cullen”: Story and Myth on the Northern Maine Frontier

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LABOUR ACT.

To His Excellency The Honorable ARTHUR H. GORDON, C. M. G., Lieutenant Governor
and Commander in Chief of the Province of New Brunswick, &c. &c. &c.

The Petition of James Cullen
of the Parish of Peel in the County of Cumberland

HUMBLY SHEWETH—

That he is a British subject, over 18 years of age, and is not at present interested
in, nor the owner of any other Land.

That he is desirous of purchasing for actual Settlement one hundred
Acres of Wilderness Crown Land, situated as follows:—

Lot Number Three in McDonald's survey
of the year 1837— in the Parish of Peel
second tier— bounded on the lower or
southerly side by lot number ^{two} occupied
by Michael Cullen and on the upper or
northerly side by lot number Four
occupied by Jacob Ridout

(Not to interfere with the right to cut Timber and other Lumber, under Licenses applied for previous to this application.)

And prays leave to pay for the same agreeably to the Regulations for Land sold under
conditions of actual settlement.

And as in duty bound will ever pray.

his
Signature of Petitioner. James Cullen
mark

If Improved.

James Cullen was born in 1846 in Peel, New Brunswick. In 1864 he applied for a grant of land and began a small farm near his father's homestead. From there, events unfolded, as Cullen crossed the border, married Rosellah Twist, and became one of the most celebrated villains in Aroostook County history. *New Brunswick Archives document courtesy of the author.*

“THEY LYNCHED JIM CULLEN”: STORY AND MYTH ON THE NORTHERN MAINE FRONTIER

DENA LYNN WINSLOW YORK

IN SPRING 1873 James Cullen, the only lynching victim in New England’s history, swung into eternity at the hands of a mob in Mapleton, Maine. Few events in the history of northern Maine can match this story in sheer drama. Generations of Aroostook County and New Brunswick old-timers kept this tale alive by recounting it to fascinated listeners. Cullen’s lynching, and the subsequent oral tradition of life and death on the Maine frontier, provide a window into the cultural identity of the northeast borderland region.

Lynching seems to be as American as baseball and apple pie. Stories, jokes, and songs about lynching abound in our folk culture. In 1882 the *Chicago Tribune* became the first authority to keep records of this activity, followed by the Tuskegee Institute ten years later. The Tuskegee Institute estimated that 4,730 people were lynched in the United States between 1882 and 1951. Of those, the majority, 3,437, were black.¹ In fact, we have come to identify lynching with racially motivated violence towards blacks in the South, or with vigilante justice in the wild and wooly west. We think of New England as largely free from this particular form of violence, although mobs periodically rampaged in northeastern cities, and on several occasions, lynchings nearly occurred.

Northern Maine, like western states where vigilante justice was frequent, was a frontier region, and one theory of non-racial lynchings suggests that this was a recourse where legal systems were weak. But Maine’s judicial system—even in Aroostook County—was firmly in place, and although Maine later abolished the death sentence, capital punishment was a legal option in Maine at the time of James Cullen’s lynching. Here, in this one and only case, the residents did not wait for justice to take its course. What prompted the residents of northern Maine to take the law into their own hands on this one occasion?²

James Cullen was born to a poor Irish Protestant family in 1846 in Peel, New Brunswick, close to the border behind Maine’s Mars Hill. In 1864, when Cullen turned eighteen, he applied for a grant of land next to his father’s lot in Peel and began a small farm. Like other young men,



Granville Hayden (left), a popular young Presque Isle store owner and deputy sheriff, and Minot Bird (right), then a boy of fifteen, set off into the woods to capture Cullen after the latter's depredations in Mapleton. *Photos courtesy of the author.*

Cullen spent his winters working in the woods as part of a lumber crew. In approximately 1870, while Cullen was heading to work in the Maine woods for the winter, he met Rosellah Twist in Mapleton, Maine. Rosellah was married to Cullen's friend John Twist, and they had a baby son named Edwin.³

The following spring when Cullen came out of the woods, Rosellah and Edwin briefly returned to Peel with him, and by 1871 Cullen was working odd jobs in the mills and on farms in the Mapleton area. Rosellah became pregnant with Cullen's baby, and the two of them were married in Presque Isle on August 2, 1871.⁴ The Depression of 1873 was particularly severe in northern Maine, due to the failure of several important lumber firms, and with James unable to find work the Cullens' economic problems intensified. Adding to other difficulties, the couple's infant son, known only as "Dummy Cullen" or "Dummy Twist," was deaf.

Young, handsome William Thomas Hubbard arrived in Mapleton about the same time James Cullen and Rosellah had. Rosellah saw a more promising future with Hubbard and began meeting him secretly. Hubbard bought the farm where Cullen and Rosellah had been squatting and prepared to ask Cullen to leave. Cullen learned of their affair and during the night of April 27, 1873, stabbed Hubbard's horse, which was in the barn at Cullen's house. Further, he broke into David Dudley's

store in Mapleton and took about twenty-five dollars in goods.⁵

On April 28 Thomas Hubbard and David Dudley traveled to Presque Isle and obtained an arrest warrant from Constable Rufus Kalloch. Granville Hayden, a popular young Presque Isle store owner and deputy sheriff, heard about Cullen's behavior and volunteered to go after him. Hayden planned to locate Cullen and inform him of the arrest warrant, but let him escape if he agreed to leave the area and never return—a common practice at the time.⁶ With this in mind, Hayden left town with Thomas Hubbard. When the two men arrived in Mapleton, they met fifteen-year-old Minot Bird, who volunteered to go along on the search for Cullen: Bird knew Cullen and knew the area. Anticipating no problems, Sheriff Hayden agreed to take Bird along, and the three set off for John Swanback's shingle camp in Chapman, where Cullen had gone.

John Swanback was at work in his camp when the group arrived. Cullen was also there. After supper, Hayden took Cullen outside and told him of the arrest warrant. Apparently Cullen agreed to "escape" in the night, leave town, and not return. The men bedded down for the night at Swanback's camp, and during the night, Cullen got up, took his things, and left the camp. Towards morning, however, he returned, entered quietly, and kicked the fire to life. No one stirred. Taking an axe from the wall, he stepped between the sleeping forms of Sheriff Hayden and William Thomas Hubbard and gave each a blow to the head with the blunt end of the axe, killing them. John Swanback and Minot Bird were awakened by the noise and fled the camp.

Cullen carried cedar from Swanback's shingle-making operation into the camp to burn the bodies. Because cedar burns hot and fast, the camp quickly caught fire. While Cullen was hauling things out of the blazing camp, Swanback and Hubbard came out of hiding in the woods; Cullen agreed to let them live if they would help him burn the rest of the camp and swear that they had never seen Hayden or Hubbard. When they saw their chance, Swanback and Hubbard—clad only in their underwear and stockings—ran for their lives, stopping at the first house for help.

The village businesses were closed immediately and men set off in groups to find Cullen. The mob located him in his cellar, and from there he was taken to David Dudley's store, given a box to sit on, and tied to a post because Mapleton had no jail. Throughout the day people crowded into the store to question him about his deed.⁷ By nightfall, when a small group left Mapleton for Presque Isle with Cullen in their custody, it was generally known that he would not arrive alive. A local reporter, present at the store, was so sure the lynching would occur that he wrote



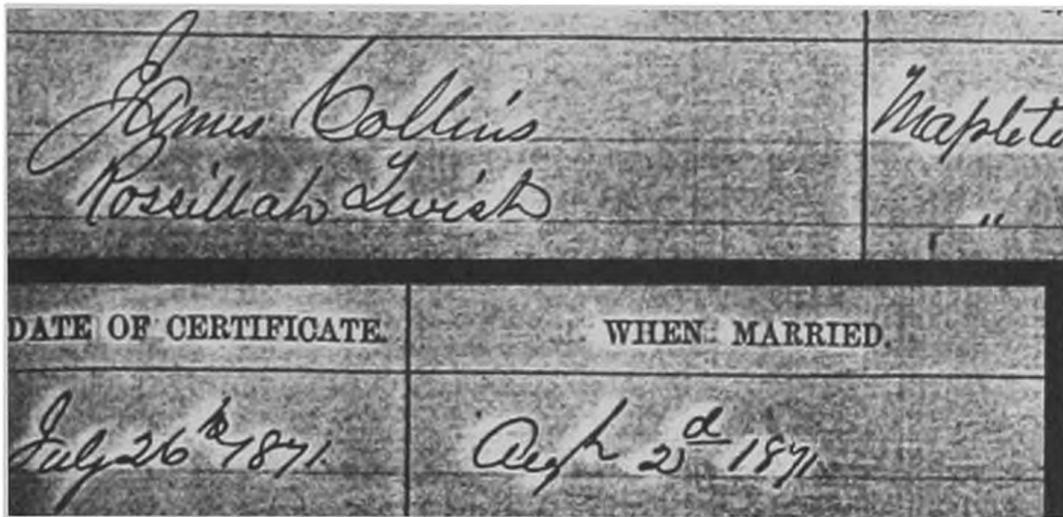
John Swanback and his wife Charlotte Davenport Akeley in New Hampshire. Swanback covered his right arm with his cap because he lost his hand in a shoot-out with his brother-in-law a few years after Cullen's lynching. Swanback's shot killed his adversary, and for this he served a prison term. *Photo courtesy of the author.*

the story and sent it to the outside newspapers—before it occurred!

Just outside Mapleton village, a group of men, mostly Masons, of which Granville Hayden had been a popular member, lynched James Cullen. They placed the body in a wooden box designed to hold coffins for burial. The box had been sent to Mapleton to carry the remains of Cullen's victims; instead, it became his coffin. Further down the road, the group, carrying Cullen's body in a wagon, met a second and much larger mob intent upon torturing Cullen and then lynching him. When they were told he was already dead, they scattered.⁸

Cullen's body was displayed in a Presque Isle store where citizens filed by to look at him. Someone thought an inquest should be held, so a coroner was called. The coroner's jury decided that Cullen met his death by being hung by parties unknown, a typical verdict following lynchings everywhere.⁹ Cullen was buried at the town dump in a shallow, unmarked grave. The site today is near the runways of the Presque Isle Airport.

It was while Cullen's body was on display in the store that we see the process of myth-making take shape. Typical of other lynchings, the Cullen incident involved a certain amount of demonizing. Folklore tells us that while Cullen's body was on display, ladies filing past stabbed it with hat pins, and men spit on him. Over time, stories of Cullen's



Cullen's troubles began when his love, Rosellah Twist, turned her affections to William Thomas Hubbard. Despite an extant marriage record, folklore is adamant that Cullen was not married to Twist. *Maysville Marriage Records, courtesy of the author.*

strength and demoniac temperament grew. We have stories of Cullen lifting a forty-foot log that five other men couldn't lift, and carrying ten bunches of cedar shingles in the mill just to show off or win bets. One of the more notable stories involves his incarceration at the Houlton County Jail prior to the lynching; Cullen supposedly escaped by shaking the bars on the window so hard that the wall fell down. In fact, while one of Cullen's brothers was incarcerated at the Houlton Jail, Cullen himself was never there. Stories of Cullen's huge feet and his fiery red hair and beard grew right along with stories of his remarkable strength.¹⁰

Oral tradition gives us a picture of his character as well. There are stories of theft of food and clothing, and despite an extant marriage record, folklore is adamant that James was not married to Rosellah. To this day, she is designated in oral tradition as Mrs. Twist.¹¹ We also get a picture of Rosellah's character from oral tradition: as wide as she was tall, but a real beauty. We also learn from oral tradition of the love affair between Rosellah Twist and Thomas Hubbard. Apparently, she liked to dance for Thomas, and according to one report, "When she danced, the concealed was revealed!" Tradition also tells us that when the search party came to the Cullen home to find James after the murders, Rosellah announced loudly, "He's not here!" while pointing to the cellar—thus giving him away.¹²

Stories of Cullen's past developed following the lynching—again typical of other lynchings. There were reports that he had murdered a



The saga of Jim Cullen took a bizarre turn when phrenologist Luther Bateman entered the scene. Bateman hoped to use the dead man's skull to prove that a criminal's cranium is anatomically different from that of a "normal" individual. *Photo courtesy of the author.*

lawyer in New Brunswick by locking him in his office and burning the building down. In fact, Cullen had no criminal record prior to this incident. Oral tradition tells us a doctor present at the lynching was called to examine the body. He reportedly said, "He's dead boys, but I guess you better let him hang a little longer!"¹³ And of course, the significance of burying him at the town dump in an unmarked grave indicates how much the citizens disliked the man.

While there are similar examples of myth-making in the oral tradition, nothing illustrates how quickly Cullen was mythologized as the strange story of his disinterment by a traveling phrenologist. Phrenology, a popular "science" of the time, interpreted the shape of a subject's head as an indication of character and behavior. In fall 1873, after Cullen was lynched, Luther Bateman, a phrenologist from the Lewiston area, arrived in Presque Isle on a lecture tour.¹⁴ Bateman, who edited and wrote for the *Lewiston Journal*, was an advocate of the science of predicting character traits from physical features like cranial and facial morphology and head and brain size. Influenced by the work of such men as Casare Lombroso, an Italian Phrenologist who was attempting to discover anatomical similarities between criminals and insane men, Bateman developed a theory that criminals' heads were shaped differently than the heads of non-criminals. If he could prove his theory, society could lock



Granville Hayden's gravestone at the Fairmont Cemetery in Presque Isle. William Thomas Hubbard was buried in the same grave, but there is no mention of him on the stone. *Photo courtesy of the author.*

up criminals before they committed any crimes.

As strange as they sound, these and similar beliefs captured the nation's fancy during the later 1800s. Phrenology permeated all levels of society; women had their hair dressed to best display their head shape, and employers required phrenological readings for prospective employees. Virtually all prominent Americans had their heads examined by phrenologists. Such writers as Edgar Allen Poe, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman were heavily influenced by Phrenology.

When Bateman heard about the lynching, he knew he had to obtain Cullen's skull for his collection. He hired a young lawyer named George Smith—later a prominent judge—to accompany him to the town dump and remove Cullen's head. During the night the two men set off for the dump, where they located Cullen's shallow grave and dug him up. Oral tradition gives us the grisly details. After taking turns digging—the grave filled with water as fast as they dug—the men reached the wooden box containing Cullen's body. Bateman removed the lid and the men were struck with the odor. Smith faltered at that point, but Bateman produced a bottle of gin, which restored their courage. After Bateman removed the head they replaced the lid and returned the coffin to the grave. Bateman spread leaves over the area so no one would know that

the grave had been disturbed. They filled a pail with water and boiled the flesh from the bones over the flames of the burning trash at the dump. After boiling the skull three or four times, they buried the red hair and flesh. Bateman carefully tucked the prized skull under his coat and returned to the village.¹⁵

Bateman continued to lecture and write on phrenology into the early 1900s. He returned to Presque Isle from time to time and brought the skull with him—along with others he had collected. Folklore tells us that after one of these lectures, Cullen's widow, Rosellah, and her older son, Edwin Twist, asked to see the skull, and Bateman showed it to them. According to one newspaper account, she reportedly said that she was pleased that her husband had become such an important man and was proud of his stage career.

Eventually Bateman abandoned phrenology. He ran unsuccessfully for governor of Maine three times and continued to work for the newspaper. His skull collection survived his disenchantment with phrenology. Cullen's skull being his favorite, he kept it in a glass case on his desk at the newspaper office, proudly telling the story to anyone who asked. Bateman died on September 20, 1924.¹⁶ The disposition of the skull, last seen in Lewiston, is a mystery today.

Phrenology helped shape the construction of the Cullen myth. A Presque Isle newspaper editor writing the day after the lynching described him: "We never saw Cullen to know him, but we hear that he had a low forehead, large nose, and very course features." These descriptions would have been recognized by Cullen's contemporaries as traits of a criminal temperament. Even recent informants refer to Cullen's unusually large head and flat forehead. One recalled that his parents had attended a lecture by Bateman, and his mother swore that the skull was unusual, with the forehead sloping "right straight back with no forehead at all."¹⁷

Cullen was not alone in providing such grisly souvenirs. After the lynching of Big Nose George Parrot on March 22, 1881, in Montana, Dr. John Osborne removed Parrot's chest skin and had a medicine bag made from it. He had skin from Parrot's thighs made into a pair of shoes for his nurse. Osborne also removed Parrot's brain to investigate the relation between intelligence and brain size. Osborne left no indication of how intelligent Parrot was, but the top of Parrot's skull was preserved and used as a flower pot by the nurse who received the shoes. One phrenologist, believing that all criminals were of low intelligence, dismissed the large brains found in some criminals by reasoning that "death by hang-

ing tended to engorge the brain and lead to spuriously high weights.”¹⁸

It is unlikely that James Cullen’s lynchers were thinking about criminal archetypes when they took the law into their hands that fateful spring day in 1873, but the shape of Cullen’s skull became important later as people grappled with their actions and decided that justice had been served. After all, his skull showed him to be a criminal. Phrenology thus became part of the mythic monster we know as Jim Cullen today. Beliefs like these influenced the way we perceive the life and death of James Cullen, and in turn they add to the cultural identity of northern Maine.

Despite the clearly mythological elements in the story of James Cullen’s lynching, the episode offers an important message about the way we learn history: our perceptions of past events are filtered through an array of social and cultural values. History, like folklore, is subject to these various biases, social judgments, and psychological attitudes. Examining the way people remember the details of James Cullen’s life and his highly unusual death shows us how these subtle influences—and the appeal of a good story—can shape and color virtually any attempt to capture the past for our contemporary readers.

NOTES

1. Robert A. Gibson, “The Negro Holocaust: Lynching and Race Riots in the United States, 1880-1950” (New Haven: Yale Teachers’ Institute, 1997), ynghti-help@yale.edu, p. 4.

2. Roger D. McGrath, *Gunfighters, Highwaymen, & Vigilantes: Violence on the Frontier* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. v; William T. Haines, *Report of the Attorney General of the State of Maine, 1897-98* (Augusta: Kennebec Journal Print, 1898), p. 13.

3. James Cullen, Land Grant Applications, June 20, 1864 and August 6, 1864, New Brunswick Archives, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton; Maine Census Records, 1870, and Mapleton, Maine, town records.

4. New Brunswick Census Records, 1871; W.S. Gilman, “The Lynching of Cullen,” *Aroostook Times* (Houlton), May 8, 1873.

5. Gilman, “Lynching of Cullen.”

6. “Reminiscences of Mr. Kalloch,” *Presque Isle Star Herald*, November 6, 1930.

7. George S. Rowell, “A Maine Lynching: The Violent Death of James Cullen at Mapleton, 1873,” *Maine Historical Society Quarterly* 19 (Spring 1980): 218.

8. Rowell, “Maine Lynching,” p. 221.

9. W.T. Sleeper, "A Chapter of Horrors!" *North Star*, May 7, 1873.
10. Unidentified clipping, ca. 1905, Philip Phair's journals, Turner Memorial Library, Presque Isle, Maine; Rowell, "Maine Lynching," p. 221; Oscar Nelder, "Big Jim Cullen Made His First Mistake When He Took Boots," *Bangor Daily News*, June 17, 1965; Holman F. Day, "The Grim Tale of the Only Lynching in New England," unidentified clipping, Maine Historical Society, ca. 1909, p. 219.
11. There may be some justification for this. Rosellah was married to John Twist at the time she married Cullen, so she was a bigamist at that point. See Phineas E. Ellis, "The Lynching of Jim Cullen," *Call Me Phin* (Caribou, Maine: Custom Printers, 1977), p. 106; Beatrice Hoffses, interviewed by Dena Winslow York, January 19, 1998, tape and transcription in the author's collection.
12. Ellis, "Lynching of Jim Cullen," p. 106; Phineas Ellis, taped rendition of the story of the lynching, owned by Oscar Nelder and probably performed before a group of high-school students in Presque Isle in the 1970s. .
13. W. T. Sleeper, "A Terrible Tragedy! Two Men Murdered! The Murderer Secured," *North Star*, extra edition, May 1, 1873; Rowell, "Maine Lynching," p. 220.
14. "Something Definite About Cullen's Head," *North Star*, November 13, 1930.
15. Ellis, "Lynching of Jim Cullen," p. 114.
16. Unidentified newspaper clipping, "On Further Comments on an Old Maine Story," probably from the *Lewiston Evening Journal*, ca. May 26, 1930, Maine State Law Library, Augusta; C.C. Harvey, *Fort Fairfield Review*, February 22, 1929; "L.C. Bateman's Life was Filled with Adventure," *Lewiston Evening Journal*, September 22, 1924.
17. Sleeper, "Chapter of Horrors!!"; Ivan Sawyer, interview by Dena Winslow York, March 6, 1982, p. 12. Tape and transcript in the author's private collection.
18. Fred M. Mazzulla, "Undue Process of Law—Here and There," *Denver Westerners Monthly Roundup* 20 (October 1964): 9; Steven Jay Gould, *The Mismeasurement of Man* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), p. 94.