

# Hattie Aderhold: An unfortunate woman and her trial for murder

## Williamsport Women

by MARY SIEMINSKI



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The story of Hattie Aderhold, unlike other stories in this series, is not an uplifting one. It is not about a woman who was a leader or who was accomplished or successful.

Hattie's story is that of a pregnant, unmarried young woman in 19th-century Lycoming County — a time when there were few resources available for a woman in her "condition."

I first learned about Hattie from an undated newspaper clipping tucked into the Home for the Friendless record book for 1879-1904. The story was headlined "The Home's Defense."

It made reference to "the trial of Hattie Aderhold" and the fact that a newborn baby, brought to the Home, was turned away. According to the Home's mission, the board president said in its defense, the Home for the Friendless was not "a lying-in, foundling, or Magdalen hospital."

The Home for the Friendless was the origi-

nal name of the present Williamsport Home. The charitable organization had been established in 1872 by the Women's Christian Association. Its mission was to see to "the temporal, moral and spiritual welfare of homeless and friendless women and children, especially aged women."

Although the Home, located at the corner of Rural Avenue and Campbell Street had cared for hundreds of women and children since its founding (and continues to provide care for elderly men and women today at its Ravine Road location), it did not take in newborns.

With the help of two other newspaper clippings discovered in the scrapbook kept by the Home, Hattie's story gradually emerged. It went something like this.

In early April of 1890, the lifeless body of a two- or three-week-old baby girl was found on the banks of the Susquehanna River near Academy Street. The sheriff set out to discover whose baby this was. He narrowed the search

down to a Mrs. Beck, who had given birth at the Williamsport Hospital in March.

At first Mrs. Beck said that the dead baby was not hers; she had found a home for her baby, but the baby had died of a convulsive fever shortly thereafter.

### Hattie confesses

Eventually "Mrs. Beck" confessed to having thrown the baby into the river. The sheriff described her at the trial as "of less than normal intelligence." Her name was really Harriet, or Hattie, Aderhold and she was unmarried. The father of the child, Hattie testified at her trial, lived in Ohio, where she had been staying with her grandmother, and he had "forced himself on her."

Hattie's parents lived in Warrensville. Her father, Isaac Aderhold, was a prosperous miller. She had two brothers and two sisters. When Hattie left Ohio and came home to them, her father would not have her in the house. He said that he would leave home rather than live there with her in that condition.

So she seems to have gone back and forth between Ohio and a cousin in Williamsport. As "her time" came near, her mother, Christiana, took her to the Williamsport Hospital under an assumed name. After the baby was born,

knowing that she could not return to her parents' house and that she could not care for the child herself, Hattie desperately tried to find a home for her, but without success — asking person after person to take the child, telling them that she would pay for her care. But no one, including the Home for the Friendless, would take the baby.

In a fit of despair — as she finally confessed to the sheriff — when she was walking alone with the baby at night, not knowing what else she could possibly do, she had tossed the baby into the river. She said that she had then tried to retrieve the baby girl, but it was too late: she was gone. The coroner noted at Hattie's trial that the baby had just been fed.

### The trial

So 24-year-old Hattie Aderhold was arrested for murder and sent to jail, where she cried inconsolably and pulled out her hair until she was almost bald. Her trial was in December of that same year, 1890. There were three days of testimony, according to the Daily Gazette and Bulletin.

The courtroom was packed. Her story and that of her mother and father were confirmed. Hattie was described by witness after witness — her aunts, her friends, her teachers — as being "dimwitted," "not of nor-

mal intelligence" and "sometimes acting strange." The jury came back with an acquittal; they said that she was not capable of distinguishing right from wrong.

Her father, who would not have her in his house, had hired his daughter a good lawyer.

After she was acquitted, he asked the judge to commit her to an insane asylum, but Judge J. J. Metzger, who had presided at the trial, said no. Hattie, he said, was distraught and dimwitted but not insane, and she was sent home with her parents.

### Home for fallen women

There must have been a need in Williamsport, because several years later a group of women associated with local churches established what was called the "Home for Fallen Women."

In an article published in the Sept. 28, 1893, Gazette and Bulletin, they stated that their mission was to "provide a home for friendless girls and women who had fallen, or who are in circumstances that may lead to their fall, from want of employment, from destitution, or from evil associates."

Two months later, they reported that the Board of Trustees had purchased a house on Jefferson Street

near Hepburn Street and that Mrs. Burchard had been appointed superintendent. Jefferson Street was near the Susquehanna River, close to where Via Bella is located today.

The Home for Fallen Women, according to my research, evolved into the Florence Crittenton Home, part of a nationwide network of homes for pregnant girls and women. When a representative from the national organization visited the home, she reported that the Home had "started out with literally nothing but faith."

She held a series of meetings, raised \$150, and put it on its feet. The Florence Crittenton Home, which had various locations in Williamsport, served local girls and women for the better part of a century.

Hattie's own story does not have a happy ending, however. Court records indicate that in 1904, after both her parents had died, her brother Edward did have her declared insane and she was committed.

She spent the next 30 years of her life in Danville State Hospital. Hattie Aderhold is buried with her parents in a small family cemetery in Warrensville, near where the family lived. We don't know where her baby daughter is buried.