

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT MEDFIELD'S FIRST MURDER IN 1802

Compiled by Rob Gregg, Medfield

Part 1 of 5: The Horrible Story Unfolds

Background

Thirty-one year old William Pitt Allen removed from Dover to Medfield in 1798 and took residence with his wife Keziah Mason at her father's Asa home near the Dover line on what is today Pine Street. Joining them were sons Reuben (age 11), Willard (age 6), Ira (age 1) and daughter Patty (age 2). Another son Willard had died at age 1 in 1792, while another son Amos would be born to them in 1799.

When father-in-law Asa advanced in age, rather than deed his property to his eccentric son Ebenezer Mason, (another son Beriah was declared insane in 1804), he passed the property to William Pitt Allen, his son-in-law.

The Attack

On Tuesday morning, May 18, 1802, while fertilizing with manure in his field preparatory to planting, William was attacked by the offended 45 year-old Ebenezer with a shovel and died soon afterwards. Thirteen year-old Reuben, William's son, witnessed the event while working with his father. After Ebenezer fled the scene, William's body was discovered by family members.

The Trial

Ebenezer was soon apprehended and taken for trial in Dedham Superior Court where he was later convicted of murder on August 6 and subsequently hanged on October 7, 1802.

Aftermath

Mason's body was returned that same day for burial in Medfield near William Guild's place at a fork of two roads as was the custom with suicides and those hanged. On that account the place was called "the graves;" in 2017 that location is presumed to be on the upper section of Green Street. Twenty-four days later on October 31, Mason's body was dug up by grave robbers Jonathan Sprague of Dedham and Zadok Howe of Franklin.

Both men were subsequently captured and sentenced to appear in the Dedham court; however, on the night before the trial, the principal witness, Royal Sales, mysteriously vanished. This fortuitous happening allowed both Sprague and Howe to be released.

A Final Disposition

Back in Medfield, the Selectmen reclaimed Ebenezer Mason's decomposed body and chose to dismember it to prevent further vandalism. Legend has it that his torso was buried at the corner of South Street and Noon Hill Road, his head was interred in a field on South Street next to the Stop River, and lastly, his arms and legs were buried in undisclosed locations around Medfield.

On a more uplifting note, William Pitt Allen was buried with dignity in Vine Lake Cemetery.



MR.

WILLIAM P. ALLEN

Died May 18th, 1802.

Aged 35 years.

No pain, nor grief nor anxious fear

Invade thy bounds.

EMILY, daught^r of

Mr. Ira & Mrs. Permelia

Allen. Died Dec 21st, 1820.

Aged 22 months.

Angels watch the soft repose.

[Note 1: Emily was William's granddaughter]

[Note 2: Both these inscriptions were adapted from Verse 2 of the hymn 'Unveil Thy Bosom, Faithful Tomb,' text by Isaac Watts and music by Handel from 'Dirge.']



Part 2 of 4: The Grave Robbers Themselves

Their Daring Adventure

Jonathan Sprague of Dedham and Zadok Howe of Franklin were somehow apprehended after their nefarious escapade of exhuming Ebenezer's corpse. Both men were sentenced to appear in the Dedham court; however, on the night before the trial, the principal witness, Royal Sales, mysteriously vanished. This fortuitous happening allowed both Sprague and Howe to be released.

Who Were These Grave Robbers?

Over the last 215 years, scant attention has been paid to them, but recent research by has uncovered some surprising facts which lend plausibility to their nighttime adventure.

Jonathan Sprague was 23 years old when cemetery fame entered his world, having been born in Dedham to Dr. John and Rebecca (Chambers) Sprague. In 1800 he married Mary Ann Winterton; their issue: Edward (who was ten months old when his father sprang into action), Amanda b. 1803, and Samuel b.1811. At a later date, Jonathan became a physician like his father as did his younger brother Lawrence. He died at age 46 in 1825 at Meadville, Crawford, PA and is buried in an unknown location.

Zadok Howe was 25 years old when he teamed with Jonathan Sprague. He was born in Vernon, CT to Zadok and Rachel (King) Howe and graduated from Dartmouth College Medical Department in 1809 and began his practice in Concord, NH. In 1814, he removed to Franklin, MA and partnered with Dr. Nathaniel Miller in a cancer hospital in nearby Norfolk, which failed. He spent a few months in Boston and then moved to Billerica, MA in the fall of 1816, and spent the rest of his life there.

He was president of the Massachusetts Medical Society at one point, and when he died at age 74 in Billerica in 1851, he endowed the Howe High School. He never married. Zadok is buried in that town's Old South Burying Ground; his inscription reads "The Faithful Citizen and Distinguished Physician. The Town of Billerica, in token of their regard for his long and Skillful Services, and their Gratitude for his Munificent Legacy for the Endowment of a High School, Erected this Monument A.D. 1852."

A Night of Mischief

Sunday, October 31, 1802 looms ominously as the date of the grave robbery. Today that date is synonymous with Halloween, but what was the correlation then to what we know today?

Celebration of Halloween was extremely limited in colonial New England because of the rigid Protestant belief systems. Halloween was much more common in Maryland and the southern colonies. As the beliefs and customs of different European ethnic groups as well as the American Indians meshed, a distinctly American version of Halloween began to emerge. The first celebrations included "play parties," public events held to celebrate the harvest, where neighbors would share stories of the dead, tell fortunes, dance and sing.

Colonial Halloween festivities also featured the telling of ghost stories and mischief-making of all kinds. By the middle of the nineteenth century, annual autumn festivities were common, but Halloween was not yet celebrated everywhere in the country.

Ascribing today's Halloween overtones to a same night event in 1802 event offers a debatable dilemma.

Their Motive

The work of body snatchers was in its heyday from the 1780s to the 1830s. The fact that both Medfield grave robbers became physicians introduces an alarming but unproved motive for their visit to 'the graves.' It is unknown in 1802 as to whether Jonathan or Zadok were enrolled

in a medical college but we might imagine that their pre-med leanings created an insatiable urge to supply a corpse to an unnamed hospital for anatomical purposes and/or their own financial gain. As we know today, their unsuccessful efforts landed them in a peck of trouble before an unlikely miracle resulted in their release.

Who was Royal Sales?

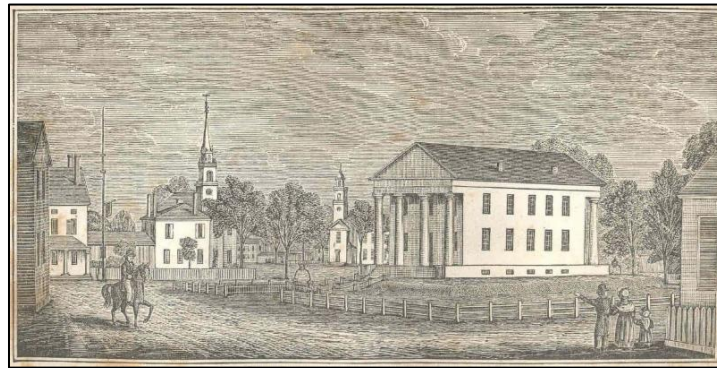
Billed as the principal prosecution witness to the grave robbery, little is known about him, his role, and his timely disappearance. Perhaps he was one of the first to enter a Witness Protection Program.



Part 3 of 5: A Surprising Juror in the Trial of Ebenezer Mason

The Murder Trial Opens

Within hours of killing William Pitt Allen, Ebenezer Mason was arrested in Medfield and held at the Dedham jail. His trial began on Thursday, August 6, 1802 at the Supreme Judicial Court in Dedham.



Dedham Courthouse 1839

Ebenezer was indicted "for the willful and malicious Murder of *William Pitt Allen*, by striking him divers (sp) blows on the head and body with an iron shovel; giving him thereby several mortal bruises in his head, and breast, whereof he died."

The judges were Robert Treat Paine (1731-1814), Simeon Strong (1735-1805), and George Thacher (1724-1854). The names of the prosecutor (the Attorney General) and the defense attorney are unknown. The jury was composed of twelve men, one of whom was Zadok Howe.

What Do We Make of Zadok Howe, the Juror?

At the outset, there is confusion over which Zadok Howe was a juror. Lt. Zadok Howe of Foxborough and Revolutionary War fame was the father of Dr. Zadok Howe of Franklin, the grave robber. What evidence do we have to identify which one served on the jury?

Scant, if any. Perhaps the best guess centers on appreciating the gravity of a murder trial and subsequent juror selection. From what evidence is available, the ages of the jurors at this trial tended to be of older men. Lt. Zadok Howe was 60 years old, another juror, Samuel Nightingale, was 62. Zadok the younger was 27 years old, and his age may have precluded him

from consideration as a juror. In the end, perhaps the best guess (Lt. Zadok Howe) is all we have to go on.

Testimony is Taken

The first witness called was Dr. Leprilete of Dedham. "I was called to attend W.P. Allen, who, it was said, had met with an accident. When I arrived, I was informed, he had been dead about twenty minutes."

The Attorney General then called Reuben Allen, the 14 year-old son of the deceased. "On the morning of the 18th of May last, I went with the team to work in the field with my uncle Mason, just in the edge of Dover.

My Father did not come till we went home after a second load of manure...when we were in the field, and had about half unloaded, my father told my uncle that he did not put the muck where it should be...when my uncle had laid one or two more shovel fulls, he came to my father, who was also taking muck out of the tail of the waggon (sp), and struck him with his shovel [The shovel was then produced] - my Father then sallied, and caught hold of the round that holds in the hind-board. My uncle immediately pulled him down with his hand...I saw him strike six. I then jumped out of the waggon (sp) and ran into the wood."

Note: The shovel which was introduced as evidence in 1802 is no longer part of the court's property in 2017.

Mason's Nearest Neighbors Testify

Jesse Newell: "I think he possessed an odd disposition."

Paul Fisher: "I have thought him rather a strange, odd kind of genius, in some respects...I judged him from his countenance. He seldom, if ever, proposed any conversation; and I believe he was never known to laugh."

Jason Harding: when he asked Mason why he killed Allen, he said "*Because he was an ugly man, I could not live with him, and he ought to have been killed before.*"

In addition, David Plimpton, Nathan Harding, the Reverend Thomas Prentiss, John Williams, Josiah Draper, and Hezekiah Battelle were called to testify both by the Attorney General and the defense attorney.

The Prosecution and Defense Rests

The Jury retired about 8 o'clock in the evening on the first and only day of the trial. One hour later, they returned a verdict of guilty. Two days later Judge Paine pronounced the sentence of death on the prisoner.

Ebenezer Mason was to remain in the Dedham jail for the next eight weeks until his execution on October 7, 1802.

[The quotations are taken from an "Impartial Account of the Trial of Ebenezer Mason on an Indictment for the Murder of William Pitt Allen" compiled by Herbert Mann, editor of the local newspaper.]



Part 4 of 5: The Last Words of Ebenezer Mason

The Hanging Hastens

Herbert Mann, editor of the local Dedham newspaper, chose to conduct a series of interviews with Ebenezer Mason just days and then hours before his execution by hanging.

It must be said that Mann was not without prejudice as he prepared for these interviews. "EBENEZER MASON, the subject of these remarks, and before whom I now pen them, stands one of the most horrid spectacles on the catalogue of human wretchedness and woe.

But while his hands are not yet wreaking with the blood of *innocence*...let us drop a tear of sympathy over the untimely ruins of the *man*, as also those of horror and commiseration (sp) at the ignominious fate which so shortly awaits this inhuman, this fiend-like *foe* to man, and the wanton challenger of his GOD!

It is from the purest motives of benevolence that I address you on your pitiable condition...you will please, in all that sincerity and candor which characterize an honest, and I hope, penitent heart, make such answers, and such remarks as you may desire, to those questions I shall propose to your consideration.

This, indeed, may render your last moments your choicest moments, and your last words your most comfortable words to your relatives and friends, even after your tongue shall have forgotten to speak and your heart to vibrate with life."

The Interview Begins on October 3

Question: "Will you tell what...inducements you had to murder...your brother in law."

Answer: "Because he was an ugly, bad man. I could not live with him. He had no business there to get my father's farm and my interest into his own hands. I had tried long enough to get him away, and did not wish to hurt him."

Question: "Is that all that prompted you to take his life, and thereby forfeit your own?"

Answer: "I have heard people say, he was too bad to live among people; and that I had a right to take my own way with him."

Mason Offers His Defense of Killing Allen

Question: "You have reference to those instances where people were at war, and commissioned by the laws of their country, not only to oppose, but to take the lives of their enemies?"

Answer: "Well - I have been at war with him for more than *three years*, and he knew it! I have

done no more than I was obliged to do."

Mann Continues His Interview on October 5

Question: "...permit me to enquire (sp) the mode in which you received your education...or whether you have been left to follow the impetuosity of blind reason, to commit criminal acts in society...?"

Answer: "I was born of honest, good parents; who, I believe, always wished me to be so...My parents also taught me to read and believe the Bible...But there is one thing in the Bible which I think is called a part of the Levitical law, which says - '*He who worketh in the field on the sabbath day shall be put to death*' ...I have known *Allen* to go into the field on the sabbath day, with his team, load hay, and get it into the barn! This is also the truth!"

Observation: "Numbers of those laws are chiefly abolished since the commencement of the Christian system in the New Testament."

Remark: "Neither my parents or priests ever told me of that...And if so, as near as I can learn from the Bible, which, I have heard persons say, contains the word of God, what I have done is not wrong - I ought not to die for it."

Observation: "You are presumptive, in the highest degree. I know not what particular texts have infatuated your mind."

Mason Admits His Guilt

Reply: "I am sorry that I killed Bill Allen - people make so much noise about it."

Question: "Do you not wish to ask the forgiveness of your Sister...?"

Answer: "I have already told her, I am sorry that he is dead."

Question: "Are you willing to die for it?"

Answer: "I am as afraid to die as any man whatever! - I cannot bear the thoughts of it! And if I should be killed, who will hang the man that hangs me?"

Question: "A young gentleman from *Boston* asked him...Do you know *Jesus Christ*, who came to save you?"

Answer: "I have heard people say there has been such a man; but have never seen him. I believe he has been dead for a long time. The bible says, he was a good man; but he was killed, and no one was hurt for it. I have heard some ministers say, that they who killed him were bad men, and should not have done it: But then, I have heard them give thanks because he died - I am afraid, if none of my friends come to help me out of my difficulty, I shall not go home again."

The Evening Before His Hanging

Question: Is there anything more, *Mr. Mason*, that worries your mind, which you wish to

communicate - or anything, unasked for, that you want?

Answer: "I have lived here very well as for victual and drink since I have been here. Mr. Doggett (the deputy jailer) has treated me very kindly. I want nothing but a thick pair of shoes for winter - but - if I should not go home when I have staid (sp) here as long as they say I must, I shall not want them."

The Interview Concludes on The Day of His Execution

"A serious alteration in his looks and conversation was visible. Last night he refused even his usual allowance for supper - requesting only a small piece of bread and a mug of water.

I asked him how his situation appeared. He replied, that he felt as bad as anybody could feel...But he devoutly and repeatedly exclaimed - *I do repent!*

As I was about to take my leave of him, he seemed more anxious than ever he had been to continue the conversation. When I turned to go, he most earnestly begged, that I with Mr. Doggett, would be his friends - would persuade all good people to come to the gallows and try to save him.

His voice frequently faltered; but not a tear was seen in his eye. I observed that we would continue his sincere wellwishes (sp); but that, we could not save his life.

- I only added - as you profess to *repent*, put your trust in that GOD who alone is able to SAVE you, and who is able even to brighten the gloomy vale of death: And may the momentary pang you will sustain be but a necessary struggle to introduce you to those realms, where joy and felicity forever reign!"

[The quotations are taken from "*The Last Words of Ebenezer Mason Who Was Executed at Dedham, October 7, 1802 For The Murder of William Pitt Allen, His Brother in Law, on the 18th of May 1802*" compiled by Herbert Mann, editor of the local newspaper.]



Part 5 of 5: The Final Day of Ebenezer Mason's Life

At about 2 o'clock on Thursday afternoon, October 7, 1802, forty-five year old Mason left his solitary cell at the old Norfolk County Jail on Village Avenue and was received at the gate by a "formidable guard" of Dedham's volunteer militia, commanded by Captain Isaac Doggett and the High Sheriff Benjamin Clarke Cutler who rode in front.

The prisoner walked with a steady, firm step but his facial expression was "the gloom of despair without a tear." He was accompanied by the Reverends Grafton, Chickering, Palmer, and other neighboring clergyman "who discoursed with him in a manner adapted to his situation."

When Mason arrived at the gallows, his death warrant was read again after which a prayer was said by the Reverend Grafton. During these moments, Mason frequently wrung his hands and "with an anxious and pitiable look tossed back his head, as if he would repel from the frightful

scene before him."

After the prayer, Mason was offered wine but refused to take it as he did his dinner. He asked the gathered throng to be silent, "his eyes often shut, as if in profound thought or prayer, but said nothing more..."

He then ascended the ladder to the gallows where "he again most earnestly begged for his life...He desired they would let him stand a long time, that he might think what to say."

At about ten minutes to three, the Sheriff looked at his watch and told Mason that he might live so many minutes and asked him what he would say. When Mason could think of nothing to say, he was given a handkerchief and was told he "must make the signal for his exit by dropping it, or he could cause it to be done as such a minute, without it."

The Executioner drew a cap over his eyes, "Mason then holding by the rope that goes over the pulley, desired that he would not, as he should certainly fall. These were about the last words he was heard to utter.

The last moment arrived, the signal was given, and the wretched Mason launched into the world of the spirits!"

Unfortunately the new rope purchased for the occasion gave way as Mason dropped. "...it was a pleasing reflection, that no accident or indecorum occurred among the multitude during the solemn scene, or in their retirement."

[The quotations are taken from an "The Last Words of Ebenezer Mason Who Was Executed at Dedham, October 7, 1802 For The Murder of William Pitt Allen, His Brother in Law, on the 18th of May 1802" compiled by Herbert Mann, editor of the local newspaper.]

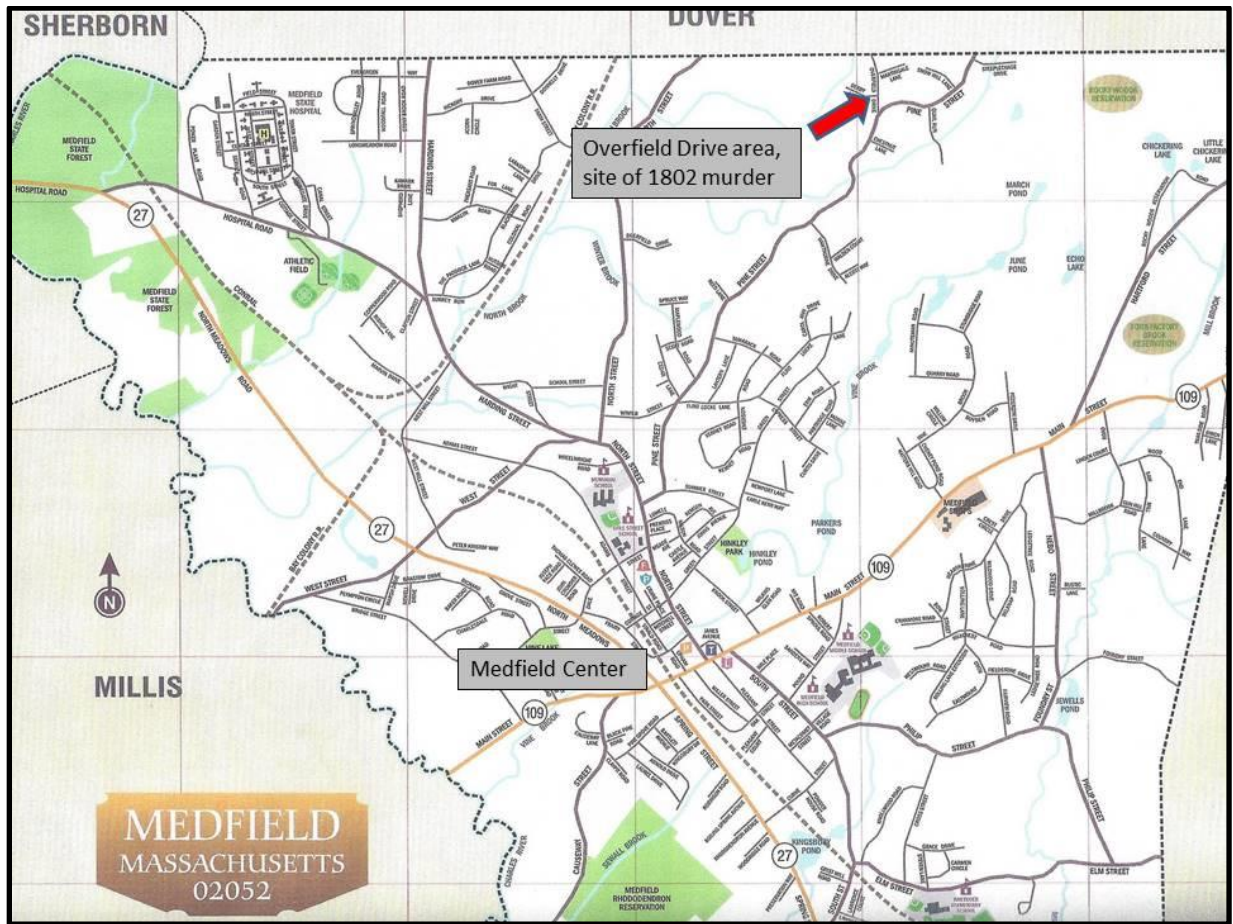


Check out what follows in Cast of Characters in this remarkable story: catch a photo of one of the grave robbers, find most everyone's burial spots, discover today's location of the murder site, and much, much more. You'll be astonished at what you discover about one person's relationship to Ebenezer Mason.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

IN

MEDFIELD'S FIRST MURDER IN 1802



William Pitt Allen

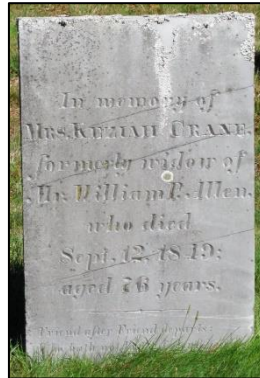


Killed by Ebenezer Mason, his brother-in-law, in 1802 at age 35. Buried in Vine Lake Cemetery, Grave 227.

Ebenezer Mason

Convicted and hung at age 45 for the 1802 murder of William Pitt Allen. Buried in a variety of unmarked locations in Medfield.

Kezia (Mason) (Allen)
(Cleaveland) Crane



Married first William Pitt Allen 1789; second David Cleaveland 1808; third Elijah Crane 1826. Died in Canton. Buried in Vine Lake Cemetery, Grave 226 (next to her first husband).

Reuben Allen

William and Keziah's son who witnessed the murder. Died in Boston at age 33 in 1821. Buried in an unknown location.

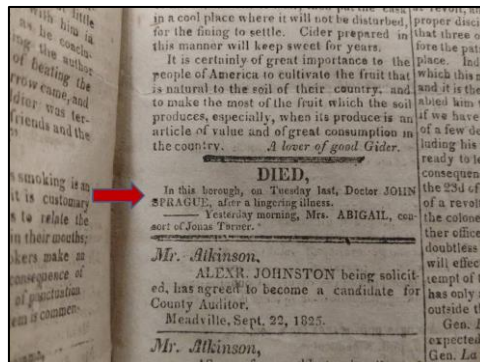
Asa Mason

Father of Ebenezer and Keziah. Died in 1803 from a fall in his barn at age 76. Buried in an unknown location.

Beriah (Fisher) Mason

Mother of Ebenezer and Keziah. Died in 1804 at age 70. Buried in an unknown location.

Jonathan Sprague



One of the two grave robbers

Jonathan Sprague (cont'd)



"In Memory of Dr. John Sprague. Formerly of Boston: State of Massachusetts Who Departed This Life the 20 of September 1825 Aged 42 years"

Buried in Greendale Cemetery, Meadville, Crawford, PA

One of the two grave robbers.

Zadok Howe



Inscription:

"ZADOK HOWE
Born in Bolton, Ct.
February 15, 1777
Died in Billerica March 8,
1851. The Faithful Citizen
and Distinguished
Physician.

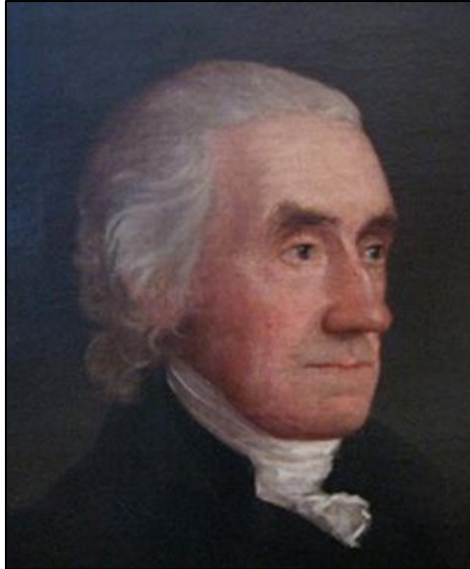
The Town of Billerica, in
token of their regard for
his long and Skillful
Services, and their
Gratitude for his
Munificent (sp) Legacy for
the Endowment of a High
School, Erected this
Monument A.D. 1852."

Old South Burying
Ground, Billerica,
Middlesex, MA

Royal Sales

The only prosecution witness who mysteriously disappeared the night before the trial of Sprague and Howe. Nothing more is known about him.

Robert Treat Paine



The chief judge in the Mason trial, being 71 years old at the time. He was a Massachusetts lawyer and politician, best known as a signer of the Declaration of Independence as a representative of Massachusetts. He served as the state's first attorney general, and served as an associate justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, the state's highest court.



He died in Boston at age 83 and is buried at the Granary Burial Ground, Boston, Suffolk MA

Simeon Strong



One of the judges at the Mason trial when he was 68 years old. He died just two years later and is buried in the West Cemetery, Amherst, Hampshire, MA.

George Thacher

One of the judges at the Mason trial when he 78 years old. He died in 1854 and is buried in an unknown location.

Captain Samuel Doggett

The commander of the Dedham militia who escorted Mason to the gallows. Nothing more is known of him.

Benjamin Clarke Cutler

The High Sherriff who escorted Mason to the gallows. He was 46 years old at the time. He died in 1810 and is buried in an unknown location.

John Baxter



One of the five Medfield selectman who voted to dismember Mason and bury him in unknown locations around town. He was 56 years old at that time. He died in 1832 and age 85 and is buried in Vine Lake Cemetery, Lot 260.

Charles Hammant



One of the five Medfield selectman who voted to dismember Mason and bury him in unknown locations around town. He was 41 years old at that time. He died in 1832 at age 71 and is buried in Vine Lake Cemetery, Grave 7.

Moses Hartshorn



One of the five Medfield selectman who voted to dismember Mason and bury him in unknown locations around town. He was 43 years old at that time. He died in 1826 and is buried in Vine Lake Cemetery, Lot 272 Grave 1.

Johnson Mason



One of the five Medfield selectman who voted to dismember Mason and bury him in unknown locations around town. He was 37 years old at that time. He died in 1856 at age 99 and is buried in Vine Lake Cemetery, Lot 205. **Remarkably, Johnson Mason was a 2nd cousin to Ebenezer Mason.**

William Clark



One of the five Medfield selectman who voted to dismember Mason and bury him in unknown locations around town. He was 44 years old at that time. He died in 1826 at age 66 and is buried in Vine Lake Cemetery, Grave 85.

Herbert Mann

Editor of the local Dedham paper who compiled and published two detailed accounts of the Mason's murder trial and his last days. Nothing more is known of him.

Rob Gregg



Compiler of the five-part chronicle 'What We Know about Medfield's First Murder in 1802.' He was XX years old at the time of crafting this article.

