

The Murder of George W. See by James Harvey Standish

George W. See was “murdered in an affray” after being mortally wounded in the presence of his wife on 28 Feb 1874 by their landlord James Harvey Standish. The story was reported widely in eastern New York, even making the front page of the *New York Times* of 2 Mar. The accounts in Albany and Saratoga Springs papers are rich in incidental detail and local color. They will be quoted at length in the following pages. This author’s editorial comments and corrections will be in square brackets and italicized, since the newspapers used brackets for their own parenthetical remarks.^a

From the *Saratogian*, Albany, New York, 5 Mar 1874:

HORRIBLE MURDER IN WILTON

Harvey Standish Pounds George W. See to Death with a Flat-Iron — Shocking Spectacle. —The Inquest and Verdict — Standish Apprehended and Committed.

The whole town of Wilton, in this county, was thrown into a fever of excitement Sunday, by reason of a most horrible tragedy which occurred last Saturday evening, the killing of George W. See by Harvey Standish. It was, as many of the oldest inhabitants attest, the first homicide ever committed within the boundaries of the town. The scene of the affair was the dwelling house on what is known as the “Perry Arnold farm,” which is located about three-quarters of a mile west of the old Stiles tavern and about six miles north of this village^b [*Saratoga Springs*]. The farm contains fifty acres of land and was purchased not many months since by Harvey Standish, an unmarried farmer of apparently thirty-two or thirty-three years of age. He has relatives residing in the vicinity, and is said to be possessed of some means. He is a man of considerable intelligence; but, unfortunately, has a most ungovernable temper. ...

The above report contains the only attribution of much intelligence to the accused, though others agree on his temper. The *Saratoga Sentinel*, reporting the same day, adds that Standish had purchased the farm from Perry Arnold. “Harvey Standish is a son of Benjamin Standish, of Greenfield, well known in this village, where the family, father, mother and boys have for years been peddlers of farm truck, wood, meals, berries, etc.”^c

... George W. See, the victim, is a farm laborer, who had attained the age of forty-nine years, and whose whiskers were sprinkled with the gray of time. See was twice married, and two children was the fruit of his first marriage. These children are well advanced in years, and were not living at home. His second wife he married some six years since, though by her he has had no issue. She was his junior by many years, and is a woman of rather attractive appearance. Last Spring, Standish and See entered into an agreement substantially to the effect that the latter was to assist him in the farm work; also that the latter and his wife were to occupy the house and Standish to board with them. As near as we could learn the furniture of the house belonged to both parties. -- Whether or not from a misunderstanding or from an incompatibility of temperament matters on the Perry-Arnold farm did not glide as smoothly as might have been desired. The informal contract between the farmer-landlord and tenant-assistant, at no extended period after it had been perfected, was in a measure informally cancelled; though, we believe, a temporary agreement was afterwards entered into. Notwithstanding this, household jars in regard to the most trivial matters would arise between Standish and the Sees’. Having thus introduced the principal actors and their relation, we give a brief description of the house and more especially that portion of it which was the scene of the tragedy. It is a one-and-a-half story building, with a large wing. The whole has apparently stood for years, yet is in a good state of preservation. The front contains two large rooms and chambers overhead. In the wing is a kitchen, about 12 x 14 ft. in dimensions, and leading from it are pantries, passage-ways and two small bed rooms. One of these bedrooms was occupied by Mr. and Mrs. See. At one side of the kitchen and within four feet of the Sees’ bed-room stands a cook stove. At the opposite side of the room from the stove is a door that

a Note also the casual use of “Saratoga” referring to the village of Saratoga Springs, not to the rural town of Saratoga on the opposite side of Saratoga Lake.

b The property is probably on the north side of what is now Strakos Rd. near the intersection with Greenfield Rd., and not far from the Greenfield town line, judging from the location of the “P. Arnold” property in the 1866 Beers map of Saratoga County. “M. See”(Martin, #137) was right around the corner, on a road no longer on the map.

c His descent from the Mayflower Capt. Standish is given by the LDS church’s genealogy site: James Harvey⁷, Benjamin⁶, Isreal⁵, Israel⁴, Samuel³, Josias², Miles¹

opens into what would properly be denominated the parlor. So much for the scene of the homicide.

Last Saturday a Democratic caucus was held at Doe's Corners, a few miles distant. Mr. See attended it, as also did Perry Arnold. The caucus took place late in the afternoon. Early in the evening, Mrs. See made a short visit to one of the neighbors. On returning, as she alleges, she found Standish and three boys engaged in playing cards in the house. She expressed her dissatisfaction at the proceedings, which resulted in anything but a pleasant argument between them. Concluding that they had tarried a sufficient length of time, the boys left. When they had departed, Standish in a violent manner and with a mixture of oaths, denounced Mrs. See for daring to assail him in the presence of his company for what he held to be his rights and privileges. She retorted, and a quarrel ensued. There was no one present but these two. Finally, Standish's temper obtaining the supremacy, he seized her by the hair of the head and sought to inflict on her bodily harm. She tore herself from his grasp, jumped into her bedroom, closed and locked the door in his face. He had torn quite a handful of hair from her head; and the hairpins, which held her hair up, were twisted in every conceivable shape. Self-imprisoned in her room, she subsequently disrobed and retired to bed. Standish remained in the kitchen, and seated himself on the wood-box near the stove.

At the adjournment of the caucus at Doe's Corners, and at about nine o'clock, Mr. See and Mr. Arnold started together on foot for home. Previous to their leaving the Corners they each indulged in a small glass of bourbon whiskey. They had the company of a Mr. Washburn a part of the journey. When within a short distance of their homes, diverging roads separated Mr. See and Mr. Arnold. Mr. See had with him a can of kerosene oil and, after arriving at the house, passed into the north hall and set it down. Stepping into the kitchen, where sat Standish, he approached his wife's bedroom door and, finding it locked, rapped. Standish spoke up. "The ----- has locked herself in." Hearing the rapping on the door and her husband's voice, Mrs. See arose and unlocked it. As she looked out of her room Standish was seated on the woodbox and See was standing close to the door and within a few feet of the former. See inquired what was the trouble. A war of words again ensued.

The inquest transcription taken a few days later (see pp. 127-130) provides details left out at this point in the narrative. A quick summary of the "war of words" and the murderous act itself given by The Albany Morning Express of 3 Mar seems worth inserting at this point:

Standish declared that See had threatened to beat out his brains, which See flatly contradicted, and added that if he (Standish) dared to lay his hands on Mrs. See, he would thrash him, at the same time shaking his clenched fist in the face of Standish. Thereupon Standish seized a flat iron, weighing three pounds, and hurled it at Mrs. See. *[sic!]* Fortunately the missile did not strike her. Standish immediately seized another flat iron, weighing six pounds, and dealt See a fearful blow, crushing in his skull, and felling him to the floor.

Lovinia's testimony at the trial later that year stated that Standish first struck George See, then threw the small flat iron at her, a more credible sequence.

The account from the Saratogian continues:

After the bloody act he started for Mrs. S., who again sought refuge in the bedroom and locked the door. Standish attempted to force the door open, and failing to accomplish his purpose he returned to his prostrate, dying victim, and completed his fiendish work by dealing him five more blows with the iron, fracturing the skull in three places, almost severing the right ear from the head, and crushing in the face under the right eye. Meantime Mrs. See succeeded in escaping from the building by jumping out of a window. She ran immediately to the house of a neighbor, a Mr. *[Samuel]* Taylor, and gave the alarm.

After horribly pounding See, Standish, as it appears, went to the house of Benjamin Durfee, a neighbor, and asked them to send for a doctor as fast as they could. On being asked for what cause, he said, "Mrs. See got mad and struck me across the back of the neck with a shovel, and guess she has broken

the spine of my neck.” He added, “I took a flatiron and knocked See down, and I don’t know but I’ve killed him; left him lying on the kitchen floor.” Standish entered Mr. Durfee’s house, where he remained until he was arrested on Sunday morning. Arthur Arnold was dispatched for Dr. G. W. King. The whole neighborhood was informed of the commission of the crime and speedily large numbers began to assemble at the house. Mr. Durfee was the first one to enter. The sight that met his gaze was simply horrible. Upon the floor lay See. Though unconscious, he was rolling and wallowing in his own blood. His eye balls protruded, his head had the appearance of raw beef, and his clothes were soaked in gore. Over one third of the floor of the kitchen was covered with blood, and the furniture and walls were bespattered with the same. Mr. Durfee grasped him by one of his arms and called his name, but elicited no response. Though he had lost an immense amount of blood, he was still bleeding profusely. Mrs. See returned to the house and the scene that followed was intense. She gave a shriek and went into a convulsion; recovering for a moment but to relapse into another. Dr. King arrived at eleven o’clock and saw that See was beyond medical aid, being in a dying condition. He made an application of snow to See’s wounds, to arrest the hemorrhage. On examination, six frightful wounds were found on See’s head. Three of these were fractures of the skull, two under the right eye, and about one-third of the right ear was severed. A mattress was placed on the floor and the dying man placed on it. In his convulsive struggle, he would continually roll off, and finally at fourteen minutes past twelve o’clock, midnight, breathed his last. The physician turned his attention to Mrs. See and, after considerable difficulty, succeeded in a measure in restoring her to consciousness and quiet.

Between three and four o’clock Sunday morning Coroner Huling and the Saratogian reporter were notified of the fact and immediately proceeded to the scene, where the facts were found as stated. The Coroner empaneled the following jury and an inquest was held: Northrup D. Stiles; foreman; Nicholas Tallman [*father of the boys who came to play cards, and brother of Perry Arnold’s wife Lydia Tallman*], John McDowell, Perry Arnold [*previous owner of the farm which was the scene of the crime*], Philemon Terrell, Benjamin Durfee, George Hawkins [*George See’s son Martin would later marry his daughter Georgianna*], William H. Viele [*husband of Perry Arnold’s sister Diantha*], William McWakeley, George W. King [*the attending physician, who had also witnessed George’s mother’s will in 1870*] and Dudley Wait [*Northrup Stiles married his sister Acelisia*]. The following testimony was then taken:

The Inquest into the Murder

The Saratogian continues:

Livonia See being sworn stated that she was the wife of George W. See; he came home from Doe’s Corners last night; I was in bed; he walked in north hall, and set down oil can; came to my door and knocked; Standish said, the d----- --- has locked herself in; Standish was in the kitchen, sitting on the woodbox; as I unlocked and opened my bedroom door saw Standish in kitchen; my husband knocked at my door and I got up and opened it; looking into kitchen I saw Standish sitting on woodbox beside stove in kitchen, which adjoins my room; See asked what the trouble was; Standish said I was mad because they were playing cards; he said he would play cards where he choose; told him, not in any house where I paid rent and as long as I had control I would do as I saw fit; told him I’d rather they wouldn’t come Saturday nights after I had worked hard and got house clean for Sunday; they might come other nights during the week; he said it was no worse for me to clean floor for him and his company than for me to soil his carpet; See told him as long as I had asked him not to play cards Saturdays why he did not quit it; Standish said, you take it up for the d----- ---, I’ll knock your d---n head off; Geo. told him, I don’t take it up for her, but as she has cleaned her house up for Sunday I don’t blame her; Standish said, “you do take it up for her”; See said “you are a liar and a d-----d liar” ...

“You take it up for her” sounds like an insult approximate to “You do her bidding.” The censored word in George’s retort “You are a liar and a d-----d

liar” was probably for emphasis (as in “You’re a scoundrel and a *double* scoundrel.”)

... See stood in center of room, facing Standish; See raised his hand, but had nothing in his hands; did not touch Standish; shook his doubled fist at Standish but did not strike; Standish grabbed flatiron off from stove and hit my husband with it; I saw See fall; Standish started for me; I shut my bedroom door and locked door; Standish come to door and said, fight me too, will you; I had got up out of bed to let George W. See, my husband into my bedroom; I fled through the window and down to Mr. Taylors; told Mrs. Taylor that Standish had killed See; Taylor and boy was in bed, but Mrs. Taylor and daughter were up; before my husband came home there were two flatirons on the stove; before See came home Standish pulled my hair and scratched my neck; when he and George got into the argument afterwards Standish threw small flatiron at me [*it fell beside the bedroom door, according to The Sentinel*], and with the large one struck See on the head; before Standish caught flatirons he said George had threatened his life, threatened to smash his skull; Geo. said that he did not say so, but had said that if Standish did not keep his hands off me, or insulted me he would thrash him.

Benjamin Durfee sworn: I reside here in Wilton; next house to Standish’s; had gone to bed and just got to sleep when Standish came and knocked at the door ... said he, I want you to go after a doctor as fast as you can; I said, what’s the trouble; he said, Mrs. See got mad and struck him over back of neck with a shovel; Standish said he guessed she had broke the spine of his neck; Standish said he had took flatiron and knocked George See down, and he didn’t know but he had killed him; asked him where See was and if he was not dead; he said he had left him laying on the floor; he sat down on lounge by stove and I started for here (Standish’s house); left Standish at my house; he is at my house now, (7:45 A.M.); he has not been here since; opened door and found See wallowing in blood on the floor; he was insensible; he was rolling on floor; breathing fast; blood running pretty fast; from wounds on head; tried to see if he knew me; he paid no attention; no one in house; his wife’s bedroom door was locked; other bedroom door open; no one in house; lamp burning on table; I started out to rally neighbors; met Mr. Arnold coming this way; think it was about 9:30 or 10 P.M.; told Arnold what was going on here; he came along, and I went after neighbors; Arthur Arnold went after doctor.

Perry Arnold sworn: Was at Doe’s Corners Saturday evening with George See; there was a political caucus there; left there with and came home afoot with Mr. See; it was between 9 and 10 o’clock; not far from 9; left him on corner close by and near Mr. Taylor’s; I then went to Wm. Viele’s house and went to bed; had been in been about 10 or 20 minutes when Mr. Taylor came and rapped at the door; know I had been in bed but a short time; he was let in by Viele; he said Standish had killed See and he wanted us to go right over to Standish’s; dressed and came over as fast as I could come; met Durfee at foot of hill near Standish’s house; came to Standish’s house; found door shut; opened it and came in; See lay floor, rolling and tumbling, and blood running out of his head; took his hand; tried to left him up; spoke to him, but he made no answer; one bedroom door open; other adjoining was locked; I called Mrs. See; no one answered; came out, left house alone, and went to house of Ezra Standish, brother of Harvey Standish; called Ezra Standish, and told him his brother had struck See with a flatiron; Durfee and Mrs. See was here when I came back; saw See take one glass of liquor last evening; never saw him drink before and have known him for forty years and since he was a boy; last evening he drank bourbon and a small glass at that; he and I drank together just before we started to come away; he walked and talked along the way perfectly sober; Mr. Washburn came with us part of the way; See was not at all excited or under the influence of liquor.

Dr. Geo. W. King sworn: Am a practicing physician and surgeon; was called about 11 P.M. by Arthur Arnold, requesting me to come and visit Mr. See as Standish had struck him with a flatiron and he was bleeding; came soon as possible and found See lying on floor senseless; judged from appearance of pulse and breathing that he was in a dying condition; put some [*ice*] on head for purpose of stopping hemorrhage that way; found fractures on head; I then tended Mrs. See, who was in nervous convulsions; staid here till after See died;

he died at 12:14 this morning; this morning have washed and made an examination of deceased's wounds; found six wounds made apparently by corner of flatiron; three fractures of the skull or head; either of these fractures would have produced death; was here about an hour when he died; the wounds on the face would not have necessarily caused death; one-third of the right ear is cut off; all the wounds are on the right side of face and head, near the right eye and ear.

Mr. Durfee recalled: (Shown flatiron) that is the flatiron; found it setting on stove; six-pound flatiron; covered with blood when I found it.

The jury after brief deliberation rendered the following verdict: That said George W. See came to his death from the effects of blows received on the head from a flatiron in the hands of Harvey Standish, and we, the jury, believe that the said Harvey Standish had no sufficient cause for inflicting said blows.

Deputy Sheriffs D.S. Gilbert and John T. Bryant, of Saratoga, at the close of the inquest arrested Standish at Mr. Durfee's house, brought him here and incarcerated him in the lockup at police headquarters. He was committed to Ballston jail Monday. He was very reticent and seemed terribly oppressed, frequently sobbing like a child. About the only words that escaped him was the following in answer to a question, what possessed him to commit such a crime: "Was forced into it; couldn't help it; but I am very, very sorry for it." There may be some extenuating circumstances connected with his case, as our reporter was informed on what seemed to be reliable authority that insanity is hereditary in Standish's family; that two or more members of his family are now insane, and that one of them is now an inmate of the Utica Asylum. It is possible that insanity may be the defense.^a Standish has retained for counsel, Geo. W. B. French, who advised him to communicate with no one in regard to the matter.

There ends the *Saratogian's* account of the inquest. Other news reports fleshed out a few other details. The *Troy Daily Press* of 2 Mar covered the story in a way that would be incautious and hostile to the defendant by today's standards. The report was headlined "Braining a Man with a Flat-Iron", and characterized the evidence of the inquest as having "produced the most explicit guilt of the accused."

Shortly after nine o'clock yesterday morning Mr. Huling and the officers returned to this village [*Saratoga Springs*] having in custody the prisoner, who was lock up in the Town Hall lock-up and will be taken to the Ballston jail at noon to-day. On the way to this village Standish feigned to be in great pain from a blow he claimed he had received from the hands of See, near his left side, and went so far as to unloosen his clothes and display the wound which was, to all appearances, a mere scratch...

The murderer [*sic*] is a man of medium size, light hair, sandy whiskers and moustache, light blue eyes, light complexion, and about thirty-eight years or forty years of age.^b He is said to be by his neighbors of a quarrelsome nature, and that he and the deceased had frequent disputes on minor affairs. He is far from being an intelligent man which one can readily discern by hearing him converse. His whole aim throughout life has been to gain wealth, of which, it is said, he has a fair share.

We were granted an interview with the prisoner in his cell towards evening, yesterday, but he absolutely refused to answer any questions, having been cautioned against doing so by his counsel. He appeared to be rather despondent, and avoided looking up to see who his visitor was. In a conversation, yesterday, with the janitor of the town hall, he allowed in extenuation of the deed that See rushed upon him and struck him with his fist, when he (Standish) grasped the flat-iron and struck See, knocking him down, and of how many times he struck him thereafter he has no recollection. He claims he acted in self-defence. He also stated to Mr. Ahern [*the warden*] that the occasion of the quarrel was his having taken improper liberties with Mrs. See during her husband's absence. The deceased is spoken of by his neighbors as a very quiet and peaceable man, and was much respected by all who knew him. His brother, Andrew J. See, keeps a hotel at Doe's Corners. He leaves a wife, two sons (both young men), father and brother to mourn his untimely death.

^a The *Weekly Saratogian* followed up on 5 Mar with the following: "A lady correspondent has received the impression that in stating, as we did on Monday, that Standish, who killed See, would put in a plea of insanity, we sought to make public sentiment in his favor. A greater mistake would hardly have been possible. We simply stated *facts*, as a matter of news, without the slightest desire to prejudice the case one way or the other. How we can be suspected of such a motive when we simply said that the plea of Standish would probably be insanity, is more than we can understand. It is generally known already in legal circles that there is a taint of insanity in the Standish blood..."

^b A few days later, the *Press* published an account of a brief and mostly uninformative interview with Standish in jail which however fleshed out the physical description a bit more: "He has sandy hair and whiskers, with a projecting forehead and rather dull eye, and looks like a man of not much brains. When talking with him he seemed to be quite nervous, yet spoke very low and mile. He weighs about 170 pounds."