



Volume 34

## Spring Newsletter

May 2011

### SELDOM-HEARD CIVIL WAR TALES

by Martha Mayo

Come one, come all to a discussion of unusual and seldom heard stories of the Civil War. Our panel will consist of Jack Herlihy, Museum Specialist at the Lowell National Historical Park; Martha Mayo, librarian and archivist for LHS; and Attorney Richard P. Howe Jr., Middlesex North Register of Deeds and former Society president.

A few of the stories to be told include:

**George J. Fox** (1841-1863) – At first Fox was held back from enlisting by his mother, who feared for the safety of her only son. But his belief "that my fathers would be ashamed of me if they were living for not going before" compelled Fox to join his cousin David Goodhue as volunteer in Company C, Massachusetts Sixth Regiment, enlisting for nine months service. Well aware of the dangers he faced, Fox vowed to "do my duty & come back with a clear conscience or not at all."

**Patrick Sarsfield Gilmore** (1829-1892) – Musician Patrick Gilmore moved to Massachusetts in 1848 and formed Gilmore's Band. In 1858, he married Nellie J. O'Neil in Lowell. Gilmore's Band enlisted in the Twenty-Fourth Massachusetts Infantry and under Benjamin F. Butler's command played for the troops in New Orleans. During the war, Gilmore wrote "When Johnny Comes Marching Home". He is considered by many to be the Father of the American band.

**Abba Ann Goddard** (1819-1873) – Abba Goddard moved with her family to Lowell in 1834. She wrote for the "Lowell Offering" in the 1840s under the pen names A.G.A and A.A.G. In October 1861, Goddard left Portland, Maine with five other women to accompany the Tenth Maine Infantry as a nurse. "Miss Goddard will receive the blessings of our sick boys to the end of life" stated John M. Gould, a veteran of the Tenth Maine.

**Richard Alonzo Elliott** (1836-1911) – Richard Alonzo Elliott enlisted in the Union Army on April 15, 1861 and served the entire Civil War until September 15, 1865. First he was with Massachusetts Sixth Regiment and

then, in September 1861, Elliot was commissioned an officer in the 30th Massachusetts at Camp Chase, Lowell under the command of General Benjamin F. Butler. Elliott's regiment was among those sent to Ship Island in the Gulf of Mexico to begin operations against New Orleans. His diary covers the year of 1862 while in New Orleans, Baton Rouge, and Vicksburg with detailed descriptions of his assignments and camp life. A gifted artist, the diary features many unique hand-drawn illustrations of his time on Ship Island and Baton Rouge.

**See Calendar of Events on page 6 for location details.**

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### Part Time Job Opportunity

Site Coordinator for the Lowell Historical Society.  
(\$10/hour, six hour/week with flexible work hours.)

**Summary of Responsibilities:** Responsible for the general everyday operation of the office. Open and close site during public hours. Collaborate with archivist on collection management.

**Major Duties:** Maintain Computer Mailing Lists; Maintain Membership Database; Accession Incoming Donations (database entry, arrange storage, provide reports); Publication Sales; and General Office Duties.

**Position Requirements:** Skill in the use of a computer using the Windows environment. Ability to exercise judgment and to work without close supervision. Ability to serve the public and others in a courteous and professional manner.

Question can be addressed to: [choyt48@comcast.net](mailto:choyt48@comcast.net) or by calling Cliff Hoyt at 978-458-6575.

Forward resume and description of your interest in working for the LHS to: Cliff Hoyt, President, Lowell Historical Society, PO Box 1826, Lowell, MA 01852

# "The Notorious Nellie Ellis":

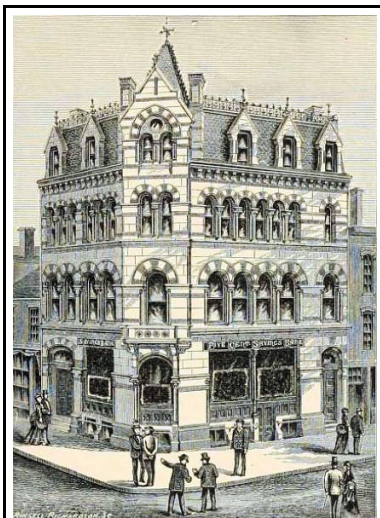
*Domesticity, Wifely Behavior, and Female Deviance  
in Late-Nineteenth Century Lowell*

By Gray Fitzsimons

## Part I: Arrested in Lowell

In the late spring of 1885, not long after midnight on a Saturday, when a typically bustling and raucous crowd in Lowell's downtown was beginning to dwindle, three Lowell police officers approached the rear of a building on John Street, silently climbed two flights of stairs, and entered a narrow, darkened corridor. Night patrolmen Herbert Streeter and Patrick Fitzpatrick, accompanied by police captain Charles Howard, had an arrest warrant for one Nellie Ellis, a 35-year-old married woman, living apart from her estranged husband. The charge was prostitution or "common night walking" as this crime was prosaically called. All three men knew the suspect and were even quite familiar with small apartment dwellings that adjoined the Lowell Five Cent Savings bank building. In fact, Streeter himself resided in one of the flats below Ellis' floor. Upon finding her door, Captain Howard knocked, identified himself, and stated he had a warrant for Ellis's arrest. Immediately a woman's voice softly but firmly replied that she would not open the door nor did she believe he had any such warrant. Streeter, the younger and more muscularly built of the men, then smashed open the door, splintering the wooden frame and breaking two locks and an iron bolt.

Inside they found Nellie Ellis, alone and sitting in a chair in her dimly lit front parlor, wearing only a "loose wrapper." Although startled, she recognized all three men, having had various encounters with the two patrolmen on the street over the past several months and having been subject to in interview with Captain Howard in her apartment but a few weeks earlier. Captain Howard spoke first, reiterating that she was under arrest for being "a common night walker." Ellis calmly but defiantly claimed she was "no such person and questioned the authenticity of the warrant." Howard responded that she was indeed under arrest and that she could either come to the station dressed as she was, or she could put on some



The ornate Lowell Five Cent Savings Bank was formerly located on the corner of Merrimack and John streets. Attached to the rear of the bank was a two-story apartment building where Nellie Ellis lived on the second floor. Engraving from James Bayles, *Lowell Past, Present, Prospective*, 1891.

clothing. Howard later testified that Ellis initially refused his offer to change her clothing, but as the officers began escorting her out the door she asked permission to dress in more suitable attire. Ellis then dressed while Howard and Streeter waited outside her bedroom door. According to later court testimony of another Lowell police officer who knew Ellis, before descending the stairway of her apartment building, Ellis asked Howard for "permission to speak to her lover" who lived in an adjoining room, whereupon she reportedly tapped on his door and called from outside, "Goodbye, lover." Howard and Streeter then accompanied Ellis the half-dozen blocks to the police station, where she was booked and confined in a cell, pending a preliminary Police Court hearing before Judge Samuel P. Hadley.

The ensuing trial of Nellie Ellis in Lowell's Police Court, followed by her conviction, an appeal in a Superior Court in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in which Judge Hadley's ruling was affirmed, and then Ellis' shocking suicide roiled city residents throughout much of the summer of 1885. This fascination intensified as more, though often-conflicting, details of Ellis's life emerged. More was learned about her activities in Lowell and those of the Lowell police officers who investigated and arrested her. Ellis' case and the responses of those in Lowell, mostly of the city's middle class, reveal a great deal not only about the period's urban, middle-class social mores and the punishment of those considered social deviants, but also about powerful notions of ideal womanhood, wifely behavior, and respectability of adult females working and living on their own. This analysis is somewhat problematic, given the difficulty of piecing together information about Ellis' life and the particular details of the crime for which she was arrested, tried, and convicted. For example, there are no known surviving diaries or papers of Ellis or her estranged husband, and only two letters known to be from Ellis were published in local newspapers after her suicide. Further, during her trial in Lowell and her appeal in Cambridge, Ellis was never called to testify. Thus, we do not know directly from Ellis her views on the facts in her case or, more broadly, her perspective on the life she was leading in Lowell. Part of the challenge then, of analyzing these larger issues is based upon the relatively short life and tragic ending of Nellie Ellis. This is tied to uncovering and assessing the limited available sources on Ellis' personal experiences as a young woman. Included are her short-lived and unhappy marriage in Upstate New York, as well as her subsequent removal to Lowell, her actions in the Spindle City, and details of the criminal case that resulted in her trial, and conviction, her deepening despondence, and ultimately the taking of her own life.

## Part II: A Rural Girlhood

Drawing from some of the sketchy biographical material on Nellie Ellis published in Lowell newspapers after her suicide and using a number of other primary sources, it is possible to confirm or correct some of the historical record on her background, and even expand upon some details of Ellis' life. Her family first appears in the federal



manuscript census of 1850. Her father, Michael Gillen, who was born in Ireland in 1813, immigrated to the United States in the mid-1830s. He settled in Vermont, where he and his first wife, Lucy, also born in Ireland around 1814, had a son, Thomas, born in 1838. By 1850, Michael and Lucy Gillen were living in Hopkinton, New York, a farming community outside of Potsdam, near the St. Regis River. Michael, the household head, listed as a “farm hand,” had amassed a personal estate valued at \$288, a considerable sum at that time for a farm laborer. Several other Irish families lived nearby. The majority of these male Irish émigrés, like Michael Gillen, were farm hands or common laborers. By 1850, the Gillen family had grown to nine children and included five sons and four daughters. Two sons and two daughters were twins. Of the two female twins, one was Lucy Gillen, later called Nellie, born in Hopkinton on June 9, 1848.

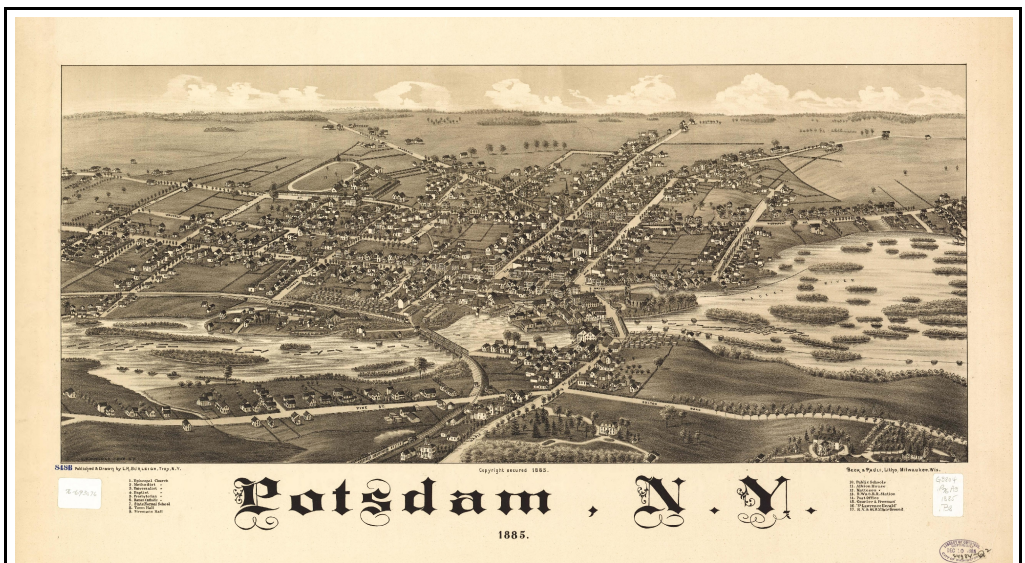
During the 1850s, Michael Gillen’s fortunes substantially improved for he was able to purchase his own farm in North Lawrence, New York, a few miles from Hopkinton. Although a railroad had been constructed through this area in 1850 and the population had grown, notably in the villages of Lawrence, North Lawrence, and Hopkinton, this region of New York remained quite rural. It is likely that young Nellie and her siblings received their formal education in a district school. The extent to which Catholicism played a role in the lives of the Gillen parents and children is not known. There was no nearby parochial school and the nearest Roman Catholic Church, St. Mary’s, was in Potsdam, New York, nearly 20 miles from the Gillen farm. This parish included perhaps as many as 500 members in the late 1850s. Nellie’s mother, Lucy, whose death in the 1860s precipitated some dramatic changes within the Gillen household, was buried in St. Mary’s Cemetery.

According to a number of newspaper accounts, Lucy Gillen died when Nellie was a little girl. Nellie’s father apparently felt overburdened with running a farm while raising several small children and decided to entrust her care and education in the hands of another farm family. This was the Ellis household, headed by twin brothers Carlos and Carlton, whose farm was located on the outskirts of Potsdam village perhaps a dozen or so miles from the Gillen farmstead. Villagers knew the Ellis family quite well. The patriarch, Freeman Ellis, had cleared the land and settled here around 1815. Ellis also helped establish Potsdam’s first Universalist Church and remained active in church affairs throughout his life. His twin sons were born in 1835, when his wife, Sarah, was about 40 years old. The Ellis family may have included as

many as eight or nine children, with Carlton and Carlos being the youngest males. Upon their father’s death in 1853, they inherited the family farm. As shown in the 1860 federal census of Potsdam, the Ellis brothers were among the wealthiest farmers in the area with real estate and personal holdings amounting to \$8,000. Their widowed mother, two unmarried sisters, a female domestic servant, and a male farmhand, lived in their household. Villagers considered the brothers to be inseparable and called them the “Twin Ellises.”

It is not clear how Michael Gillen, who was very likely a Roman Catholic, became associated with the Ellis brothers, who, like their father, were members of Potsdam’s Universalist Church. It appears, however, that Gillen’s eldest daughter, Betsey, met and married Carlos Ellis in the 1860s, when she was in her twenties. After the death of Lucy Ellis, Nellie’s father likely decided that his daughter should join her sister in a relatively prosperous and stable household. From later reports, it appears that Nellie was extremely unhappy and felt confined in a family she believed terribly insular and the brothers, some 15 years her senior, quite provincial. Despite her restiveness, when Nellie was 18 she agreed to marry the bachelor twin Carlton, who by all accounts, doted on his young bride. Into the early 1870s the two brothers and their wives continued living under same roof and working on the family farm. However, Nellie’s unhappiness and her passionate, occasionally fiery personality strained the Ellis household.

*(The next newsletter will feature the conclusion of “The Notorious Nellie Ellis,” covering her brief life in Lowell and the public outcry following her trial and suicide in the summer of 1885.)*



The Village of Potsdam, New York, had a population of about 1,300 in 1885. The Ellis family farm, where Nellie lived following the death of her mother in the 1860s, was three miles from the village on Norwood Road, called Market Street (on the left side of this bird's-eye view) within the village limits. *Bird's-eye view of Potsdam, NY, 1885. From the Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress.*

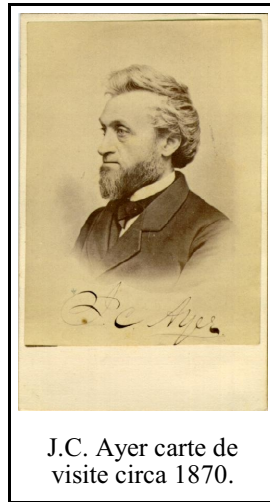
# J.C. AYER & CO. AND THE CIVIL WAR INTRODUCTION

By Cliff Hoyt

James Cook Ayer started his medicine manufacturing empire in Lowell in 1841. James brought his younger brother Frederick Ayer into the company in 1855. Together the two brothers built a company that would remain in business in Lowell until 1943. During the Civil War, this company was known as J.C. Ayer & Co. The products manufactured by J.C. Ayer & Co. during the Civil War were:

- ★ Cherry Pectoral – introduced in 1843 for throat and lung diseases.
- ★ Cathartic Pills – introduced in 1853 as a laxative with many curative powers as perceived by current medical knowledge. The pills were sold in oval wooden boxes as well as bottles for humid climates.
- ★ Sarsaparilla – introduced in 1858 for skin and wasting diseases.
- ★ Ague Cure – introduced in 1858 for fever and ague (later known as malaria)

These medicines were very similar to the medicines compounded in the period drug stores as directed by doctors' prescriptions. Medicinal ingredients were generally isolated primarily from plants and to a lesser extent minerals and animals. These ingredients had been published about every ten years since 1820 in the *U.S. Pharmacopeia*. It is a standard reference guide containing accepted ingredients that have therapeutic values in medicine. The pharmacopeia also provides standards for



J.C. Ayer carte de visite circa 1870.

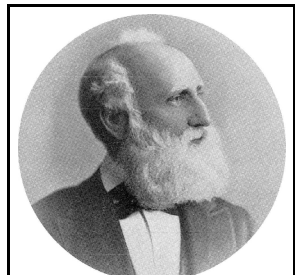


Bottles similar to those used by J.C. Ayer & Co. during the Civil War. From left to right: Cherry Pectoral, Sarsaparilla, Cathartic Pills (small bottle), and Ague Cure.

the strength and purity of these ingredients. Ayer claims to have made medicines in conformance with the *U.S. Pharmacopeia* and from the very beginning in 1843 Ayer provided his formulas to medical authorities. Although many medical authorities wrote negative articles against the medicines prepared by J.C. Ayer & Co., I could find no

article that ever found fault with the actual ingredients. Additionally, the ingredients in Ayer's products were found in period medical books to be used for diseases claimed by Ayer in his advertising. In short, Ayer's ingredients were valid given the medical knowledge at that time in history. The medical authorities of the day found fault with Ayer's medicines not because of the ingredients but because:

1. He advertised in newspapers. Today we would think nothing of a doctor or medicine company advertising but in the 1860's ethical doctors did not advertise. Only fakes and frauds sold medicine using advertising.
2. He sold medicines off the shelf. To a doctor it was unthinkable that the patient could accurately diagnose an illness and obtain medicine without a prescription. But in the 1860's many people could not afford a doctor. Also good doctors became much harder to find the farther the patient was from a city. It was better to have some medicine in the house and Ayer's medicines met that requirement.
3. His medicines appeared to be cure-alls. Ayer's advertisements for each of his products claimed cures for many types of diseases. Doctors of the period would have written different prescriptions for these same diseases. Doctors felt that some ingredients would be better in this case and other ingredients better in another case. Additionally, some ingredients may have adverse effects in certain cases. If Ayer had a fault it was in this area. Still in this era a medicine that often worked was better than nothing.



Frederick Ayer circa 1900



The pill box on the left dates around 1853-1862. The pill box on the right dates between 1862 - 1868. Note the end of the box on the right includes a tax stamp that was required on medicines starting in 1862 to help pay for the Civil War.

At the time of the Civil War, J.C. Ayer & Company's headquarters was on Market St. The War most certainly



eliminated the company's southern customer base. However, there was at least one story of Ayer's medicines found on a captured ship caught trying to run the Union blockade of a southern port. Ayer still had his major customer base in the North and his international sales. By the Civil War, J.C. Ayer & Co. claimed to have an international business with retail outlets in over 20 countries. The company claimed dealers in London, Alexandria (Egypt), Amsterdam, Athens, Berlin, Bombay, Constantinople, Melbourne, Sidney, Singapore, and Shanghai. Closer to home he started bottling his medicines in Canada in 1862. The company sold medicine in California by at least 1850. Since the only way to California was to ship his medicines south, he had outlets in Mexico, Chili, New Grenada (Columbia), Peru, Brazil, and West Indies. J.C. Ayer & Co. proudly displayed Lowell, Mass. on all their products as well as most of their advertising. In this way, Ayer spread the fame of Lowell around the world.

Because of this wide distribution, Ayer's advertising appeared in many languages. The major advertising for the company included newspapers and *Ayer's American Almanac*. The advertising distributed during the War appeared neutral. There were no stories of Ayer's medicines curing soldiers from either side. The almanac's calendar pages did list many of the Civil War's battles from previous years but showed little favoritism. Ayer was careful not to alienate the supporters of the North or the South.

In future articles in this series we will find that the Ayer brothers ran a cotton plantation in the South during the War. We will also see how some of Ayer's advertising impacted a national coin shortage in 1862. We will describe Frederick Ayer's meeting with President Lincoln and how Egypt helped publish *Ayer's American Almanac*. Lastly, we will discuss the origin and the unveiling of J.C. Ayer's tribute to Victory.

## FROM THE BOOKSHELF

by Pauline M. Golec

This year begins the 150th Anniversary Commemoration of the Civil War. Michael Pierson's book, *Mutiny at Fort Jackson*, contributes to our knowledge and appreciation of the complexity of this national tragedy.

Pierson begins his volume by describing a little-known event. On April 25, 1862, Union sympathizers gathered at a levee to welcome a US fleet to New Orleans. Eyewitness accounts tell of horsemen charging and firing into this crowd of men, women, and children. The number of injured and killed has remained unknown as the Confederate government quickly covered up the evidence and the press minimized the seriousness of the incident.

This vivid introduction leads us into the heart of Pierson's research. Two days later, on April 27, about 65 miles downriver from the bloodied levee,

Confederate troops at Fort Jackson mutinied against their officers in the largest mutiny of the Civil War. The author sheds bright light on this episode. We learn of the mutiny's important significance as it led to the fall of an ethnically diverse New Orleans, the Confederate's largest and richest city. The myth of a solidly Confederate Crescent City is debunked as this compelling drama of immigrants and thwarted expectations helps explain reasons for the mutiny.

General Ben Butler's role in administering martial law in New Orleans is examined also. It appears that Lowell's own Ben, a cagey and astute politician, is not considered "Beast Butler," by everyone in the city. The book contains a warm photo of Ben Butler complete with a friendly dog.

*Mutiny at Fort Jackson* is thought-provoking, well-researched, and interesting.

*Former LHS officer and long-term society member Michael D. Pierson is an associate professor of history at UMass Lowell. The above reviewed work earned the prestigious 2010 Albert Castel Award for best recent book on the western theater of the Civil War.*

## LHS Corporate Memberships

The Lowell Historical Society proudly acknowledge our 2011 Corporate members who demonstrated their organization's commitment to the preservation of Lowell's past and the dissemination of information to keep Lowell's heritage alive in the future. The following organizations have made this commitment:

Anstiss & Co., PC  
 Ayotte Plumbing, Heating & A. C.  
 CARSTAR Atlantic Collision Ctr.  
 Dr. Evan Coravos, DMD  
 D'Youville Senior Care  
 Enterprise Bank  
 Jeanne D'Arc Credit Union  
 Lowell Co-operative Bank  
 Lowell Five Cent Savings Bank  
 Lowell General Hospital  
 Mazur Park Apartments  
 Washington Savings Bank  
 Watermark Environmental, Inc.  
 Wyman's Exchange

### Lowell Trivia

By Martha Mayo

1. Who was known as the "Beast of New Orleans"?
2. Who was President Lincoln's Assistant Secretary of the Navy?
3. Monument Square is dedicated to what three Civil War soldiers?

Answers are on the Page 6.



The preservation of Lowell history depends heavily on your membership. If you have not yet sent in your membership renewal for 2011, please do so as soon as possible.

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### *Lowell Historical Society*

The Lowell Historical Society's Mission is to collect, preserve and publish materials related to Lowell and to promote the study of the history of the City. We are located at the Boott Cotton Mills Museum, 115 John Street, Fourth Floor, Downtown Lowell Massachusetts 01852.

The office is open 9:00 am to 12:00 Noon on Monday and Wednesday. The site telephone number is 978- 970-5180 or on the Web at:

<http://ecommunity.uml.edu/lhs>.

### *Center for Lowell History*

The Center for Lowell History, 40 French Street, currently is open on Tuesday through Friday from 9 am to 5 pm. For Saturday hours call 978-934-4997. The contact point for information is Martha Mayo, 978-934-4998. The Center's web address is: <http://library.uml.edu/clh/>



## Calendar of Events

**Meeting:** Annual General Meeting of the Lowell Historical Society. All members of the Society are encouraged to come.

**Program:** A panel consisting of Martha Mayo, Jack Herlihy, and Dick Howe Jr. sharing the unusual and not often heard stories of the Civil War.

**Date:** Sunday May 15, 2011

Meeting at 1:00 pm

Program at 1:30 pm

**Location:** Middlesex Community College's Federal Building at 50 Kearney Square. Parking is available directly across the street in the college's City Building lot (former Wang training center.)

### Answers to Trivia Questions

1) Benjamin F. Butler, 2) Gustavus V. Fox, 3) Ladd, Whitney and Taylor