

NEW ALBANY'S FIRST MURDER CASE

It was an early spring day in 1820 – the kind of a day that invites a man to put aside his workaday cares and go fishing. But the two fishermen who dangled trot lines from their skiff in the river below New Albany were to make a gruesome discovery that day – one of the trot lines snagged a heavy object and the fishermen discovered a floating body. Then they saw the gaping slit in the throat – this was a case of murder.

The two fishermen had discovered the body of Frederick Nolte, a German immigrant who operated a bake shop in his little log cabin on the southeast corner of Pearl and Main. As the news spread through New Albany, some odd events of the past few days became clear. Nolte had suddenly vanished about a week earlier – vanished overnight. A friend of the missing man, one John Dahmen, a Danish immigrant, explained the disappearance by saying he had purchased Nolte's business and that Nolte had left to seek his fortune elsewhere.

Strangers drifted in and out of New Albany constantly in the early days and apparently everybody had believed Dahmen's explanation. Now the whole picture was changed and the town was alive with gossip. Everybody knew that Dahmen had been at Nolte's cabin very late on the last day Nolte was seen alive and that the two men had been passing the bottle back and forth. James Besse, the county's first sheriff, went into action immediately and set out for Dahmen's farm several miles down the river and came back with the first prisoner in the new county of Floyd to be charged with a capital crime.

Dahmen was placed in the primitive log jail that stood about where the present jail is. This early jail had been erected the year before at a cost of \$50, but a \$50 jail was not secure enough to keep Dahmen a prisoner, for in a short time he had made his escape by boring through the log floor and tunneling his way out.

The whole town was in an uproar – everybody had looked forward to attending the trial. Sheriff Besse was highly embarrassed that his first important prisoner had so easily escaped justice, and no doubt Seth Woodruff, who had built the jail, was kept busy explaining away the escape.

Then a series of lucky circumstances occurred which enabled the sheriff to save the dignity of his office. Dahmen made a fatal error by writing his wife a letter expressing a desire to see her, but it was written in Danish which his wife could not read. Then she made a move which sealed her husband's doom. She took the letter to a neighbor who could translate it for her and after he had read it, he lost no time in telling the sheriff that the escaped prisoner was in eastern Canada.

It's a long way from New Albany to Canada, even today with fast transportation. In 1820 it was a five-week journey, but that didn't discourage Sheriff Besse. He set out for Canada, taking along John Eastburn, an early merchant who didn't seem to mind taking time out from business for an expense-paid trip, as a special deputy.

The sheriff didn't let the international boundary and the niceties of diplomacy interfere with his mission. He wanted to get his prisoner back with no red tape. He knew that Dahmen was living near the American border, so he devised a trap. After he and Eastburn had crossed the river into Canada, they went directly to Dahmen's dwelling – Eastburn dressed in women's clothing to impersonate Dahmen's wife. The trick worked and when Dahmen came to the

door he was seized and carried by force to the river, clapped in irons, tossed into the boat and hustled to the American shore. The two officers of the law with their prisoner returned to New Albany by way of Pittsburg and down the river by flatboat.

A grand jury soon was impaneled and on December 11, 1820, returned an indictment charging Dahmen with the murder of Frederick Nolte. The trial was held at the May 1821 term of court in the basement of the First Presbyterian Church on State Street, the same building in which Indiana's first Sunday School class had been organized two years earlier. Judge Davis Floyd, the county's first judge and possibly the man for whom Floyd County is named, presided at the trial, and when the jury returned a verdict of guilty, Judge Floyd sentenced Dahmen to be hanged on July 6.

The case had attracted such widespread interest that Dahmen decided to cash in on his notoriety. He agreed to sell his body to Dr. Asahel Clapp, the town's first physician, so that Clapp could dissect it for medical study. Later he tried to annul this agreement so that he could auction his body off to the highest bidder, but Clapp apparently was able to head this off.

When the day for execution came, Dahmen spurned the ministers who attempted to comfort him declaring he had no need of them because the devil was his father.

The story of Dahmen was the first big news story in New Albany and provided the town's first newspaper, *The Chronicle*, with lurid copy that was eagerly read all over Southern Indiana. After the hanging, two different books about Dahmen's life and crime were published and snapped up by curious buyers who wanted to read about Dahmen's adventures as a soldier in the armies of Napoleon and the bloody details of the murder of Nolte.

The hanging took place on State Street near the jail and for years afterward the story was a favorite topic of the oldtimers as they gossiped about New Albany's early days.

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