

James Morgan – Look out for the villain

The *Vermont Telegraph* newspaper of December 3, 1838, had an article under the heading: “Look out for a Villain!!!” “The readers of the Telegraph will recollect the notice taken of one Morgan, a dancing-master, some months since his carrying a girl from Cornwell to Orwell, where he took private lodging with her, &c. With such facts as are now in my possession, I feel in duty bound to give this vile vagabond another passing notice. And I would suggest to as many publishers of newspapers as love or regard the cause of virtue, whether they would not do well to assist in putting the public generally on guard against a consummate villain – a nefarious marauder – who are not a few – degrading human nature, and subverting the institutions of Heaven, which lie at the foundation of good society on earth.”

It appears that many newspapers in the East ran articles about James Morgan; he was reported to be at a place called Highgate, Vermont, teaching dancing. This was quickly dismissed as incorrect, and the school asked the *Vermont Telegraph* to make a retraction. The Highgate School also thanked the Telegraph for alerting the public against the impostor as their very prosperous school was being taught by a highly respected gentleman. The newspaper editor and author of the first paragraph of this story answered by stating: “While I am happy in being able to make this correction, I cannot refrain from informing my correspondent that I have no sympathy or countenance for Dancing-Schools, however ‘respectably conducted.’ I think that chopping wood and hoeing corn, for males – and spinning, weaving, and making bread, for females, altogether better employment, in regard both to the physical and moral being.”

James Morgan in 1835 was a dancing master, teaching at a school in the town of Stanford, Dutchess County, in the state of New York, when he met Miss Jane Anson. After a short romance, they married in October of the same year. In the spring of 1836, James left home, after telling Jane that he was going to the house of William Waltermeyer who lived in the town of Milam, only 10 or 12 miles away, to play a violin at a ball. He promised that he would return in four days. As it turned out, he never went to Milam and had no intention of returning to his wife. Nothing was heard of James Morgan until a relative of Jane Morgan informed her that James had been reported in newspapers with details of exploits, involving other women. He was fast becoming a very infamous person.

In the winter of 1839, two men stopped in Dumfries, Virginia, on their way to Richmond. They gave their names at the hotel as Col. Morgan and Col. Bayly. They only stayed a few days but made themselves known in a short time. In March 1840, James Morgan or Col. Morgan, as he preferred to be called, returned to Dumfries. When asked about Col. Bayly, James replied that Bayly had died in Richmond.

James Morgan was described as a very good looking man with black hair and mustache, piercing eyes, and always well dressed. On returning from Richmond, he stayed in the “Public House,” kept by a widow woman named Merchant. He remained there for two or three weeks and became well known to the town because of his looks and his fiddle playing. James Morgan was a man who was hard not to notice. Along with his looks, he had a tremendous dog that always followed him. The dog wore a brass collar, engraved with B. Morgan.

While attending one of the local churches, he became acquainted with a Methodist minister by the name of Jesse Weems. Weems' daughters immediately took to him; within weeks, he was boarding at a farm called "Sommerfield," owned by Jesse Weems. Morgan died a few months later on this farm from a cause not given in the records. The date of his death was given as August 20, 1840. He was buried about eight miles from Dumfries in historic Bel Air.

A letter, from Dutchess County, New York, in 1841, was sent to the postmaster at Dumfries, inquiring into the death of James Morgan and what became of the money gained by the sale of his property. The case would later be settled in chancery.

Because of a lack of information, many things are left unanswered. How many victims did James leave between New York and Virginia? Who was Col. Bayly and did he die? Did the fact that the town of Dumfries lies on the road from the capital of the United States to the capital of Virginia have any bearing on his moving to Sommerfield? Was he afraid he would be recognized if he stayed on a well traveled road? None of these questions are likely to be answered, but the people of Dumfries agreed that until his death they thought he was a reputable man.

The following song, along with other papers, was found at Bel Air plantation house while its owner George Carr Round was making renovations.

PLANTATION SONG

When Morgan first came to this country
He came in a four-wheeled carriage.
He put up at Parson Weems's house
And proposed to his daughter in marriage.

The Colonel had a nice gold watch,
It hung at his right side.
He gave it to Miss Fanny
And his bulldog besides.

Chorus

Morgan, move along, you're moving mighty slow.
Morgan drank buttermilk and Tansill drank the whey.
So ride up, Colonel Morgan,
While Tansill gains the day.

The song appears to be about two suitors Robert Tansill and James Morgan, vying for the affection of 15 year old Fanny Weems. To her credit, she chose Robert Tansill

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