



I Am Murdered: George Wythe, Thomas Jefferson, and the Killing That Shocked a New Nation

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"A good story, well told, of a sliver of life in Richmond, a small, elite-driven capital city in the young nation's most influential state."

—Publishers Weekly

George Wythe clung to the mahogany banister as he inched down the staircase of his comfortable Richmond, Virginia, home. Doubled over in agony, he stumbled to the kitchen in search of help. There he found his maid, Lydia Broadnax, and his young protégé, Michael Brown, who were also writhing in distress. Hours later, when help arrived, Wythe was quick to tell anyone who would listen, "I am murdered." Over the next two weeks, as Wythe suffered a long and painful death, insults would be added to his mortal injury.

I Am Murdered tells the bizarre true story of Wythe's death and the subsequent trial of his grandnephew and namesake, George Wythe Sweeney, for the crime—unquestionably the most sensational and talked-about court case of the era. Hinging on hit-and-miss forensics, the unreliability of medical autopsies, the prevalence of poisoning, race relations, slavery, and the law, Sweeney's trial serves as a window into early nineteenth-century America. Its particular focus is on Richmond, part elegant state capital and part chaotic boomtown riddled with vice, opportunism, and crime.

As Wythe lay dying, his doctors insisted that he had not been poisoned, and Sweeney had the nerve to beg him for bail money. In *I Am Murdered*, this signer of the Declaration of Independence, mentor to Thomas Jefferson, and "Father of American Jurisprudence" finally gets the justice he deserved.

I Am Murdered: George Wythe, Thomas Jefferson, and the Killing That Shocked a New Nation Details

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Hannah says

My word, this book was all over the place, with constant repetition of the same facts, disorganized writing and tons of extraneous filler information that took over from the central story. I'm giving it 2 stars because there were parts that were interesting and relevant, and because I finished the darn thing.

I love me some historical true crime, but I couldn't recommend this to anyone. And what a shame too, because I know there's a good story in the mysterious death of George Wythe-- it's just not to be found in the pages of this particular book.

This would have received a much higher rating (3-4 stars) had the writer organized the story in a coherent way.

Marianne Meyers says

I couldn't even finish this book. It has all the things I'm interested in - colonial and early Virginia history, poisoning, a crazy trial - this book had amazing promise, but what a failure!!! The author is a great researcher and had a lot of fascinating things to add, but where is the editing?? It went everywhere and I could barely make it to halfway before skimming through the last part to see the end which already had been given away earlier anyway. The ending was slapped on. This could have been a great non-fiction bestseller, but it was put together like crap. What a shame!!!!

Phil Ford says

Interesting story, or more a clarification of the 1806 "murder" of the 1st Professor of law in the US, George Wythe. Wythe was an elderly man, 80, when he was purportedly poisoned by his nephew. The case was a shocker for the time; a signer of the Declaration of Independence, educator of men like Thomas Jefferson, poisoned by his blood relative for money. To only tell the story of this case, which is interesting, would fill only about 100 pages, so there is a lot of padding in the book, to bring it just under 250 pages. The padding is not bad; Richmond, VA at the time of the late 1700/ early 1800s, history of various people poisoned, law in the the U.S. regarding African Americans in "White" trials, history of various doctors who did Wythe's autopsy (botched), and a slight biography of Wythe himself. Sometimes it is relevant, interesting and then sometimes it feels like just a listing of things that happened, paragraph by paragraph. Take the history of various people poisoned in history section; it goes paragraph after paragraph, from Pharaohs to Kings, being poisoned for power. It borders on silly when Chadwick, I guess in an effort to add ONE MORE paragraph, adds the plays of Shakespeare as an example of poisoning. Okay...why and how is this relevant to an 1806 murder? So yes, you do realize it is padding to make a book at time, but overall I would say worth a check out at the library if the subject interests you.

Vince Ciaramella says

Who knows George Wythe raise your hand?

* silence

No takers? Very well. George Wythe was a lawyer and an expert in law. Anytime someone posed a legal question to George Washington his answer was "Go ask George Wythe." He trained Jefferson, Henry Clay, John Marshall as well as a host of other men of law that went into various local, state and federal positions. He was one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence (one of the 5 from the state of Virginia). He was a respected teacher who's moot courts were copied and are still used today in law schools. Oh yeah, one more thing....HE WAS MURDERED! (duh, duh, duh)

This book looks at an event in Richmond, VA that stunned a nation. The Great-Grand Nephew of George Wythe poisoned him with arsenic (in doing so he killed Michael Brown and nearly the maid). Wanna know more? Then read the book. But let me tell you why I gave it 2 stars.

As the book went on I liked it less and less. Too much frivolous detail as space filler. I think that this book could have been edited down 30 pages (its a short book to begin with). Or it would have made an interesting series of articles. I grew tired of the build up to the trial with page upon page of the history of poisoning or the extended mini-bios of the two defense lawyers or the three doctors. In the end, after all that build up the book was over.

I'll keep it in my collection just because he was a signer but I really doubt I will re-read it.

Text Addict says

Loaded with information about the society (and some politics) of early national Virginia and to some extent the USA and Atlantic worlds. I think the pacing is somewhat off, but overall it worked for me.

Of course, as a professional historian I read a lot of dry-as-dust monographs, so your mileage may vary!

fyc says

I thought the first part dragged on and on. It was redundant at times. I understand the author's reasoning for including the material; a background was needed but it was a bit too much. I found the reading fascinating but sometimes the author got off the subject and gave us very little information about the trial itself and loads about the history of autopsies and poisonings (which was interesting but not always relevant.).

Kathleen says

This was sadly not as good as I was hoping. While the story is fascinating-- Founding Father! Murdered by his own nephew! Discussion of the current state of forensics! HISTORICAL TRUE CRIME!-- the execution is not. The book, while comprehensive and intelligent, unfortunately feels rather scattered, with frequent and extensive digressions. Due to this... narrative confusion I found it very difficult to get through, though the prose was accessible and even entertaining at times.

I do want to say that the story itself is a really good one, and once it finally gets into the actual nuances of the trial and why the young man eventually got away scot free, it becomes a much better read. Unfortunately, it drags a bit too much for me to recommend it.

Also, some of you who follow me on Livejournal and/or Dreamwidth may be thinking that the author's name sounds familiar. You aren't wrong. Trigger warnings for rape and some really WTF rape apology logic at that link.

Laura says

Unless you live in Virginia or are exceptionally familiar with early American law or politics, George Wythe probably isn't a name that rings many bells. Yet he was a gifted lawyer, teacher, and jurist who changed the way lawyers were taught; tutored some of the best legal and political minds in U.S. government; and deeply influenced our Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and Bill of Rights. He also died under suspicious circumstances.

Chadwick puts a lot of energy into providing the historical, legal, and social context for the investigation into George Wythe's death. While the background is interesting, it often distracts and meanders more than strictly necessary to make his points. In other words, while some of the asides are interesting in and of themselves, they can cause readers to lose the thread of the main story.

A great many ironies collide to make what should be an "open and shut" case into a travesty of justice, but the evaluation of this case reminds us that legal and just aren't necessarily the same thing, that people will do things for their careers that are contrary to friendship, and that experts egos can get in the way of professionalism. Useful points, but they could be better presented.

Becky says

A true historical murder mystery! This narrative of how the venerated George Wythe was poisoned by his no-good nephew is a cliff-hanger, even though we start the book knowing that he did it! Bruce Chadwick has included lots of background on all the principals, the laws of Virginia in the early 1800s, and medicine. George Wythe was a signer of the Declaration of Independence, a delegate to the Constitutional Convention, and a teacher of Thomas Jefferson, John Marshall, and many others. He was also beloved by nearly everyone

who knew him. Even cranky John Adams liked him. His life is interesting because of his accomplishments and personality, but the story of how he died enters into the realm of a Perry Mason courtroom drama. There were times when the suspense was building and I was frustrated by too much background information. I felt that I did not need to know about every case of arsenic poisoning over thousands of years when I really wanted to know what would happen next in the murder trial. However, overall I recommend this book to anyone interested in early American history.

Steve says

A great story poorly told. It was repetitive and the relationships between Wythe and the other founding fathers were, for the most part, unimportant to the story.

Nicole says

The topic of this book is very interesting, especially for those interested in Virginia history. The author provides a lot of information about Wythe and his relationship with other well-known Virginians, particularly Thomas Jefferson. Unfortunately, it was not very well-written. Much of it seemed repetitive, out of place, or irrelevant. The author provided some detailed profiles of prominent Virginians and discussed a really fascinating crime, and this book would have been great if it had been edited a little better.

Jan C says

How could I resist a title like "I Am Murdered"? And then his doctors don't believe him. But he showed them. He died. And then they had the first "trial of the century."

A very thorough job by the author. Too thorough on some subjects. He just went on and on. Did he have a page/word limit that he had to hit? Otherwise, his editor wasn't doing his/her job.

A fascinating story about the murder of George Wythe by his nephew who had succumbed to the gambling bug. Wythe was friend and mentor to many of the founding fathers. He was one of them. He told Thomas Jefferson what to put in the Declaration of Independence. Taught at William and Mary. When the capital moved to Richmond he moved with it. George Wythe Sweeney was a troublesome nephew and Wythe thought he could mentor him, as he had Jefferson, James Monroe and Henry Clay. But Sweeney liked the fancy life in Richmond and had to find ways to support his bad habits. Unfortunately, he decided to do it the easy way by ripping off the old man, who was 80 years old by this time. Wythe didn't really appreciate this too much. And decided to cut him out of the will. Wythe is suddenly violently ill, along with his cook and a young man who was also living with the judge. He tells his doctors that he has been poisoned and that they will need to do an autopsy on him. And he gets his lawyer in to change his will, cutting the miscreant out.

The information about the judge was fine. And I found the information about life in Richmond in 1806 pretty interesting. In the 1780s apparently the slaves of Virginia who had been hired to work in the city had a certain amount of freedom. I had no idea. Well, that was too good to last. The slaves thought it would lead to

freedom eventually. That's what the Virginians became afraid of, and revolts had been planned. And a certain amount of the information about arsenic poisoning was good but he just went on too long. Even I had to start skimming, and I almost never skim. And also too much information about autopsies and what the doctors did and what they should have done.

I actually had more interest in the trial, of which we got short shrift. Of course, many of the things the prosecution wanted to bring up couldn't be because witnesses were slaves or freed blacks and the law forbade blacks testifying against whites. And guess who wrote that law, or at least didn't try to liberalize the law when Virginia became a state. Wythe, Monroe and Jefferson modernized the laws and the legislature voted on them. So if they had tried to liberalize the law it might not have passed.

I really thought this was a ★★★★★ book but I became so irritated with the author and TMI that I demoted him a ★.

Rachel says

This is exactly the kind of thing I enjoy reading. I love learning about real-life events, people, and what life was like in other times/places. This book explores the murder of George Wythe, one of the founding fathers, and the unbelievable outcome of the trial of his murderer, his grand nephew. It also gave fascinating history lessons on autopsies, arsenic poisoning, medical knowledge at the time, the founding fathers, the legal system of the time, and life in a young America in the early 1800s. It also covered the history of Virginia, but not just about the laws that were passed and major events, but about how everyday Virginians lived then. This was particularly interesting to me.

One negative about this book is that these history lessons sometimes seemed out of place and extraneous. For example, reading about arsenic poisoning in ancient Rome and Egypt provided an intriguing background, but it didn't have much bearing on or relation to the murder in the book. Despite this, I enjoyed learning about these topics I didn't know much about. Also, some concepts and ideas were used several times in different places, occasionally using the same sentences or wording.

Another thing that stood out to me was how human nature never changes. I sometimes catch myself thinking that life in previous times was simpler, safer, and more civilized. This book proves that isn't the case. Many of the stories in this book could easily be taken right out of today's headlines.

Evanston Public Library says

The murder of George Wythe, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence shocked the new nation. Even more disturbing were the laws of the new nation, formulated mainly by Wythe that set his murderer free. This is a well written study of the colonial history of Richmond and Williamsburg, as well as the establishment of law in the young country. (Tess A., Reader's Services)

Patti says

If you are into history this is a great book. There are a lot of places in this book where the writer tells you

about how life was back then, and some of the history of when certain things started...like arsenic poisoning. This book also tells a lot about how and where early American doctors became doctors. It really is pretty interesting, and goes way beyond just the murder of George Wythe.
