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## Discovering Local History

### John F. Gallagher's "A Monument to Her Grief: The Sturtevant Murders of Halifax, Massachusetts"

*By Eva Chapman*

In 1874, a brutal triple murder occurred within the borders of our beloved small town of Halifax, Massachusetts. One hundred and fifty years later, the residents of the town gathered at the Holmes Public Library to learn about the tragic event from true crime research author, John F. Gallagher.

Years ago, while browsing through a book in the Images of America series, John F. Gallagher came across an old photograph of a house on Broadway Street in Hanover, Massachusetts. The caption underneath the image is what truly drew his attention; it said that three men had been killed in that house in 1845. After working for the Boston Police Department for 32 years—four of which he served as the Chief of Detectives—he felt a natural urge to investigate this local murder case and uncover the secrets surrounding it.

While researching the 1845 murder in Hanover, he discovered two other murders that occurred in the town within the same time frame. As he continued his research, he started to obtain so much information that he felt keeping it to himself would be a disservice. He decided that the only logical way to share his newly acquired knowledge would be to write a book. This resulted in his first publication, titled "Murder on Broadway: A History of Homicide in Hanover." After releasing this book in 2015, he began investigating a murder that took place in Norwell, Massachusetts in 1903. He compiled the information he gathered into his second book, "Arsenic in Assinippi: The Trial of Jennie May Eaton for the Murder of Her Husband, Rear Admiral Joseph Eaton."

As Gallagher examined records at the Hanson historical society to collect information about the Norwell murder, he stumbled upon news of the infamous Sturtevant murders in Halifax. This discovery inspired him to start working on a book centered around the story. This resulted in his third publication, "A Monument to Her Grief: The Sturtevant Murders of Halifax, Massachusetts".

The book is the product of over two and a half years of thorough research. Gallagher utilized the Holmes Public Library and the Halifax Historical Commission to analyze records and old microfilm newspapers. He was pleased to discover that these documents provided specific details that greatly assisted him in producing his book. Halifax resident Linda Redding is appreciative of the fact that Gallagher gives credit to the two local institutions for their significant contribution to his project.

When local newspapers covered the case, the house in which the murders occurred was referred to as a monument, serving as a reminder to passersby of the events that transpired within it. This piece of local lore inspired Gallagher to title his book "A Monument to Her Grief." The house still stands today on Thompson Street, and has been home to five different families since the Sturtevants. Former owner John Heller, professor of art at Bridgewater State University and member of the Halifax Historical Commission, renovated the house from the inside out to accurately represent its original eighteenth century appearance. The current homeowners, Sarah and John Page, purchased the house in 2022.

Sarah is a culinary consultant and chef, and John is a landscape and architectural painter. They deeply appreciate the historical significance of the building they call home. “We are proud to carry on protecting both the house and its legacy,” Sarah proclaims. “We don’t feel as if we ‘own’ the house as much as we are the current caretakers.”

John F. Gallagher's purpose for his book is not only to share a story that might have been otherwise forgotten, but also to learn how to positively reflect on a challenging period in Halifax's history. He states, “it’s part of the history of the town, and although we all like to read about the progress and the good-doings in all of our towns, we still have to look back on some of the things that affected the people who were first settling the place, and how difficult it was for them at times to deal with tragedies in their community ... It shows a lot of strength in the community, and they set an example for those who live there later. They set the groundwork.”



The Sturtevant's headstones in Thompson Cemetery, Halifax, MA  
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