

UNRAVELING THE MYSTERY OF THE TWO JEREMIAH SHEAS

by Marie Coady

What are the odds of two people, with the same name, drowning in the same place, only a few years apart? Was it coincidence, or an unsolved mystery? As it turns out the strange story of the two Jeremiah Sheas would still be a mystery if it weren't for another coincidence.

When John Parrish of Woburn read a story, posted on-line at the Ye Olde Woburn Web site, that I'd written some years ago about drownings in Horn Pond, he scanned the list of names and something clicked. Something about my mention of the drowning of Jeremiah Shea in 1924 stood out in John's mind.

Turns out he remembered seeing an obituary for a Jeremiah Shea on the same page of the Woburn Daily Times as his great-great-grandmother's obituary. But if that were true, something didn't add up. You see, John's great-great-grandmother, Bridget Young, died in 1916, not 1924 as I had written in my story. Something was not right.

John then e-mailed me and told me of his discovery, and when I checked my file, I realized that although I did find an index card with the mention of a Jeremiah Shea who drowned in 1924, I didn't make a copy of the article and wasn't sure if I'd made an error in copying the date. So I asked John if he would share the text of the 1916 Woburn Daily Times article with me.

Well, he did better than that. He went to the library and found two separate articles about two completely different Jeremiah Sheas both of whom drowned in Horn Pond, copied them into an e-mail and sent them along to me. But in the process of transcribing the Jeremiah Shea drowning of 1924, he uncovered another coincidence. Jeremiah Shea's body was discovered by none other than his great-uncle, James Young, Bridget Young's grandson. But before I reveal more of this mystery, let me keep you in suspense a bit longer and tell you the details of the Jeremiah Shea drownings.

Jeremiah Shea number one, was missing for 3 weeks before his body was discovered by police on November 22, 1916, after a "young lady" reported finding a man's hat floating on the Pond and turned it over to the police. That

prompted police to drag Horn Pond with grappling hooks. They had hardly begun when Jeremiah rose to the surface, and in another coincidence, Patrolman George Shea (no relation) retrieved his body.

The sad duty of identifying Jeremiah's remains was left to his brothers, William and Timothy of Water Street, all of whom worked at the Thayer-Foss Tannery. They had reported him missing more than three weeks before, but were hopeful that he had left town to take a better job as a skilled leather men were in demand. His funeral Mass was held at St. Charles Church, but no mention was made of where he was interred.

Jeremiah Shea number two was found much the same way, floating, fully clothed only 15 feet from shore. Jeremiah number two lived on 27 Buckman Street, and he too had been missing for several days when John Parrish's great-uncle, James Young of Oak Street, found him shortly after noon on September 2, 1924. As the then 18-year-old Young described to police, he saw what he assumed was an article of clothing floating in the Pond and extended a piece of wire to retrieve it. But when he tugged on the clothing the body turned over "revealing the fact it was a man's body".

Upon examination, Jeremiah number two's face appeared to have some suspicious cuts on it, and it was thought that, because he was found along the well traveled Arlington Road side of the Pond, he may have been thrown into the water in an effort to conceal a hit and run accident. But when Dr. Stewart examined his body, he announced that his death was most certainly due to drowning. Jeremiah number two's funeral Mass was also held at St. Charles, and his body was laid to rest at Calvary Cemetery.

Now comes another coincidence. Two people, Leo Coughlin and Trish Doxzen, posted queries on the Ye Olde Woburn Web site at almost the same moment recently, asking about a Jeremiah Shea believed to have drowned in Horn Pond in 1924. And both claimed him as an ancestor.

Leo Coughlin now lives in Maryland, but he has an abiding interest in Horn Pond. He swam there often while visiting his grandmother, Anastacia Sullivan Shea, wife of Jeremiah Shea two. In fact, Grandmother Shea, in spite of living to the ripe old age of 91, didn't seem to want to share the details of her

husband's drowning which left Leo more curious than ever.

Trish Doxzen, it turns out, is the great-granddaughter of Jeremiah Shea two, and the daughter of Leo Coughlin. Trish wanted to help her father solve the mystery of his grandfather's drowning, because as she stated in her e-mail to me, "There has always been a lot of mystery surrounding the details of his death; it seems my father was never able to talk about it with his mother or grandmother without them quickly dismissing it with 'he fell in the pond and drowned'. " One wonders if each knew they were asking the same question at the same moment.

In any case, John Parrish and I shared what we knew with both Leo and Trish in the hopes it served to dispel some of the mystery surrounding the death of a man neither of them ever met. But one more coincidence occurred when John shared an e-mail with me that he had sent to Leo and Trish.

In describing the connection between his great-uncle, James Young, and the Jeremiah Shea drowning in 1924, John mentioned that his grandmother, James's sister, Alice Young Cody (no relation, just coincidence), never talked about the fact her brother James had discovered a body in Horn Pond.

But that could have been because James died from complications after an appendectomy in 1926. In fact, John only found out about his great-uncle James' discovery after he researched the story of the Jeremiah Shea drowning of 1924 as a favor to me.

Could it all be merely coincidence, or could it be that we are all truly connected by six degrees of separation?