



## THE CAPITAL: JACK & ROSE'S HOUSE, FEDERALSBURG, MARYLAND.

Gwen: We had a short trip across the state to our next investigation, in Reliance, Maryland. At the end of a remote road on the Delaware-Maryland border stands a lone house. It's the kind of place where you could get away with murder. Legend has it that in the 1820s, one woman did. She ran a gang of murderous kidnapers. She was known around here as "the wickedest woman in the world." And it's said that this house was her headquarters. The state of Maryland even put up a sign marking the spot. But is the story really true?

I'm Gwen Wright, and Elyse Luray and I are here in Reliance to investigate this tale of murder and kidnapping. The house's dark past troubles its current owners, Jack and Rose Messick. So, Jack and Rose, what have you heard about the history of your house?

Rose Messick: This was supposedly the house that Patty Cannon and her gang operated out of. And what they did was go to the free states, kidnap free blacks, bring them back to Maryland and sell them back into slavery.

Elyse: In the 21 years the Messicks have lived here, they've never come across any proof that the sinister events took place in their house.

Jack Messick: I guess it's part of the common knowledge that those things happened here, but I don't know if they did or not truly. We'd like to find out really what is true. Well, you can tell me if the sign out in front of the house is correct or not. It says it's the Patty Cannon House, but I'd like to know, is it really the Patty Cannon House or the -- just, where do I live? What is this place?

Gwen: Before we can answer the Messicks' question about their house, we need to find out more about Patty Cannon.

Elyse: She and her gang kidnapped free blacks and sold them into slavery, or so the story goes. But was that kind of thing really going on around here back in the 1820s?

Gwen: In 1808, Congress made it illegal to import slaves from Africa. This led to a huge labor shortage in the South, and soon one slave could fetch upward of \$1,000.

Elyse: This area had more free blacks than anywhere else in the country, and soon they risked being kidnapped, smuggled across the Mason-Dixon line and sold into slavery in the South. For anyone wanting a piece of this illegal, but lucrative trade, Reliance was the perfect place to set up shop.

Gwen: It sits on the state line between Maryland and Delaware, and according to legend, it was here that Patty Cannon based her infamous gang. But was she for real, or has her legend been embellished over the years?

Elyse: Much of that legend comes from a novel called "The Entailed Hat" that was a big seller in this area in the 19th century. I'm meeting historian Russ McCabe to find out more about the story and the characters involved.

Russ McCabe: Well, certainly, Patty Cannon is the central character of this story. Also known as Martha, she was the wife of Jesse Cannon, a local farmer, who was also a part of the gang. The co-leader of the gang was actually her son-in-law, Joe Johnson, who ran a tavern very near her home.

Elyse: If George Alfred Townsend's book was a work of fiction, why was it so influential?

Russ: The elements of history that were incorporated into it made it such that for many of us it became very believable, and there are quite a number of people today that will swear that Townsend was absolutely correct with all of the stories that he told.

Elyse: So is it -- is Patty Cannon folklore or does this book make it real?

Russ: Well, both. Certainly it -- the book perpetuates the story of Patty Cannon. It did a great deal to perpetuate the

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story of Patty Cannon, but to a certain extent, there's a strong element of fiction, romance that's been attached to it, and it's extremely difficult to separate, in this case, fact from fiction.

Elyse: Well, that's what I need to do. I've come to Delaware Public Archives in Dover to meet Professor Carol Wilson. She's been studying the experiences of African-Americans during this time. If there's any evidence that there was a Patty Cannon gang, then she'll know where to find it. Do you believe that Patty Cannon and Joe Johnson existed?

Professor Carol Wilson: Absolutely. Yeah, they definitely existed.

Elyse: Can you show me any proof?

Carol: Sure. There are quite a few records talking about the activities of the Cannon-Johnson gang. One of the documents that's survived that we have involves the testimony of a number of the victims of this gang.

Elyse: These were the lucky few who managed to escape their captors and return to freedom in the North. They gave testimony to Mayor Joseph Watson of Philadelphia when they returned from the South. "The African Observer," which was an abolitionist newspaper, printed their testimony.

Elyse: These eyewitness accounts could be the evidence I'm looking for. We have here the narrative of Peter Hook. He talks about being on this boat with quite a few other young men, and eventually they were taken to Joe Johnson's house, quote, "a tavern on the road six miles from Lewiston".

Elyse: So this clearly implicates Joe Johnson, Patty Cannon's son-in-law, in the kidnapping.

Carol: You know, it's amazing because it talks about here how Joe Johnson put everybody in leg irons. "Now, boys, be still. Make no noise or I'll cut your throats." Unbelievable. Peter Hook later says, "we were severely whipped by Johnson for saying that we were free." And he even says in his deposition here, that "he once heard Johnson's wife" --that's Patty Cannon's daughter -- "declare that it did her good to see him beat the boys." So the whole family was involved.

Elyse: So everyone's implicated except Patty Cannon. Where's the mention of her and her house? We have here the narrative of Lydia Smith. Lydia Smith was a free African-American woman who was kidnapped also, in 1825. She talks about traveling on the road near Georgetown, Delaware, being taken forcibly, eventually to Patty Cannon's house, "thence to Joe Johnson's," she says, "on the line between Delaware and Maryland." And she was kept there chained for five months before she becomes part of this other large group that's taken into the Deep South.

Elyse: This is it: firsthand evidence that Patty Cannon existed and was involved in these terrible crimes. Now, were Patty Cannon and Joe Johnson the only people that were kidnapping in the Maryland- Delaware area?

Carol: Definitely not. The Maryland-Delaware area, as well as southern Pennsylvania, was a real center of kidnapping activity.

Elyse: But how is this possible in the free states of the North?

Carol: There were a lot of whites at this time who thought that all Blacks should be slaves. And so, although kidnapping was a crime in most states in the country, it wasn't really heavily prosecuted. And because black people could not testify against whites in courts of law, it was very difficult, if someone was kidnapped, to regain their freedom.

Elyse: But I discovered, the law finally did catch up with the Patty Cannon gang. This is a deposition from 1829. "Much excitement now prevails in this county in consequence of the discovery of the bodies of several persons upon the premises of the celebrated Patty Cannon." So she had bodies buried on her property. This is more grotesque than I could have imagined. But it gets worse. There's a witness statement here from someone called Cyrus James, who witnessed the killing of a child. "It is said that he stated before the justice who committed Mrs. Cannon "that he saw the mortal wound inflicted upon the child that was found and that Mrs. Cannon on another occasion "carried out

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a black child not yet dead in her apron but that it never returned." This is unbelievable. "There is no doubt that these persons have been murdered and that the suspicion of present rests upon this degraded and wicked woman."

While a lot of local legends turn out to be myths, Patty Cannon was all too real. But that's just the first part of this investigation. What about the Messicks' house? Was it really her hideout?

Gwen: To answer that question, I need to look for clues that date the structure to the time Patty Cannon and her gang were active in this area, the 1820s or earlier. At first glance, the facade appears to be early 19th century, but the details don't look quite right. In part, it was very fashionable to evoke colonial-era houses, and this one is trying to do that. Lots of the elements are made using factory-produced decoration and building elements which weren't available in the 1820s. The windows are much too large for a house of that period of time. But most importantly, it's the porch. A porch didn't become at all popular in American houses until the 1840s. While porches can be added on to old houses, this one looks to be part of the original structure. The interior of the house is very spacious, and that's another clue. This area is a clincher for me. It's called a stair hall, a room that was characteristic only of American houses after the 1880s. Earlier in that century, stairs were cramped and tucked away, especially in a moderate house like this. But now we have proportions, scale and spaciousness that convinced me this house could not have been built in the 1820s. But what about this historical marker? Is there any connection between this place and Patty Cannon? Maybe I need to take a different approach. I've come to the Maryland State Archives to check out local land deeds. If Patty Cannon ever lived on the Messicks' land, there'll be a record of it here. There's nothing so far, but what's this? It's a land deed for 1821 involving Patty Cannon's son-in-law and fellow gang member, Joe Johnson.

"For the sum of \$150 to hand paid by Joseph Johnson." Now where is the land? "The parcel of ground lying in Dorchester County, adjoining Wilson's crossroads, being part of a parcel of land called Wilson's Plain dealing on by whatever the same may be called." This is exciting. I've now established definitively that Joe Johnson bought a parcel of land in 1821 at Wilson's crossroads, and that is precisely where the Messicks' house is. But how was this land ever linked to Patty Cannon? This land deed from 1826 is even more surprising. "be it remembered that the following deed was recorded: this indenture made on this first day of March in the year of our Lord, 1826, "between Joseph Johnson and Martha Cannon, widow of Jesse Cannon of Sussex county." Now Patty was also known as Martha, so here's the link. She bought the land from her son-in-law. It's significant that there's no mention of a house on the land, which ties in with my belief that the Messicks' house must have been built after Patty's time. But I'd still like to know what exactly did happen to the real Patty Cannon house.

Fantastic. "Evening Journal,' Monday, November 11th, 1968." The headline says, "Cannon house myth fades. Research shows Patty's home gone. The real home of Patty Cannon, notorious slave kidnapper of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, was torn down in 1948." Here's a picture of the house that looks much like the house today. And below it, a picture of the original house that is a totally different structure. So this was not Patty Cannon's house, definitively.

Patty Cannon did own the plot of land on which the Messicks' house stands today. But her house, the scene of many of her crimes, was a far more primitive structure that stood nearby until the mid-20th century. There's only one question that I haven't answered, and that's why the historical marker was put up in the first place. I can only imagine that the State Roads Commission applied some creative thinking to a local legend, and maybe saw an opportunity to attract tourists to the area.

Elyse: But what happened to Patty herself? Did she get her just desserts? In 1829, she was arrested on suspicion of murder. But Patty cheated the hangman and died of natural causes while behind bars awaiting trial. It's time to tell the Messicks what we've discovered about their home.

Jack and Rose, we've had a fascinating time tracing the long history of this house and this land and we can tell you definitively that the historical marker in your front yard is inaccurate. Patty Cannon and her son-in-law, Joe Johnson, had owned this parcel of land. Patty had a house close by, probably several hundred yards away, that had been built in the 1700s and lasted until the 20th century.

Jack: It's kind of mixed emotions. It's a great relief that the house is not stigmatized by what you found. That's always a relief, but it's kind of bothersome to hear that the State bothered to put up a sign that's in error.

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Rose: The farther we are from Patty Cannon and anything she does, then the happier I am. Patty Cannon was truly a terrible person, but she was part of a system of taking away freedoms from African-Americans. And so much of the white population, especially in this area, condoning that, at best, turning the other eye and not being worried by it. And that's the history we have to remember. It's not just how terrible Patty was.

Jack: I guess I'm unhappy to hear that, but I accept the reality of it and it is regrettable, but it's part of our history whether we like it or not.

Gwen: Now that they know the truth about their house, the Messicks say they just might call the state of Maryland to get the sign changed.

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