

Ralph Wireback is Hanged for Murder

By Terry J. Lee
November 2009



RALPH W. WIREBACK.

At 10:15am on June 7, 1899, Ralph W. Wireback was hanged for the April 7, 1898 murder of David B. Landis. He was pronounced dead at 10:30 am.

"He walked steadily from the cell to the scaffold, upon which he stood with eyes closed and oblivious of his surroundings. The execution accomplished systematically – the crowd orderly and the scene impressively solemn. Wireback offered a fervent prayer shortly after midnight – forgave everybody and hoped to meet all in heaven."¹

His last words were, "I go without a tremor."¹

The Shooting

Shortly before 11 am on Thursday, April 7, 1898, at 241 Lime St., Lancaster, PA., David B. Landis, president of the Conestoga National Bank, was shot by Ralph W. Wireback. Landis died instantly. The shooting was prompted by a dispute by Wireback regarding terms of his lease of the house at that address, owned by Landis. Wireback had spent most of the previous day and night barricading the house. The murder weapon was a single barreled, muzzle loader shotgun, and he had stockpiled plenty of ammunition.

According to the terms of the lease, Wireback was to vacate the house by April 1, 1898 if it was sold, which did occur in the Fall of 1897. On December 28, 1897, notice was served on Wireback that he must vacate by April 1, 1898. Subsequent to that notice Wireback indicated he expected financial compensation if he was to move out of the house. Landis ignored this request, as he was not under any such obligation to Wireback.

On April 1, 1898, Landis began legal proceedings to dispossess Wireback, who was represented by counsel in a hearing before an alderman. After hearing testimony, the alderman entered a judgment in favor of Landis. A "writ of dispossession" was given to the constable to execute.



DAVID B. LANDIS

¹ The Lancaster Intelligencer, 7 June 1899, Lancaster, PA

In anticipation of his eviction, Wireback had sent his wife and two sons to the house next door, had removed the knobs from the doors, had securely barricaded every door, and had securely fastened every window. It was reported that he said he would kill any person who attempted to force his way into the house.



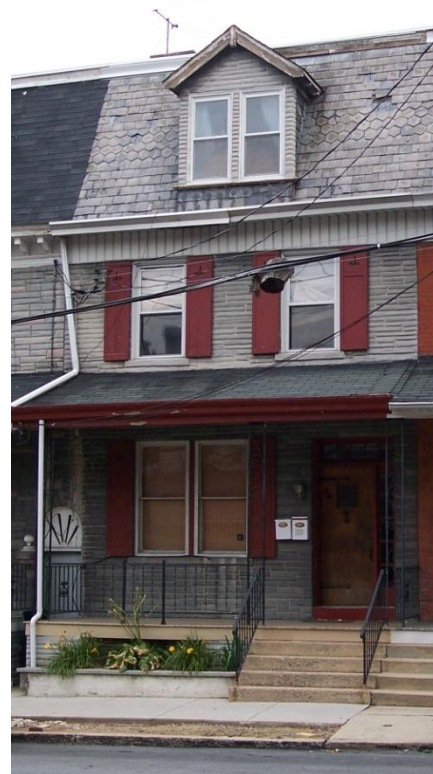
Home of D. B. Landis, 219 N Duke St., in 2009
It is now an Elk's Lodge

Constable Graeff arrived at the Wireback house at 8:15 am to serve the writ. With some difficulty, he located Wireback within the house and read him the writ from outside. As Wireback continued to refuse admittance, the constable and his assistants unsuccessfully attempted to enter the house. Shortly before 10 am, the constable and his assistants were able to enter the house through a rear cellar door and move from room to room by removing each door from the hinges. By this time Landis had arrived at the house. He subsequently obtained a warrant for Wireback's arrest for obstructing legal process. When the constable

party reached the first floor, they heard Wireback's son Royal say, "Why don't you shoot to scare them?" As Royal left the house, he said, "If you try to get into any of those windows you will find something."

The constable party proceeded through the house, ending in a 2nd floor front room. In response to the entry by the constable, Wireback retreated to the attic, from where he indicated he wanted to talk to Landis. Aldus Bleacher, an associate of Wireback, and Wireback's son Royal went part way up the attic stairs and urged Wireback to come down; he refused. When Landis arrived, he entered the house and began ascending the winding stairway leading to the attic. When Wireback saw Landis, he said to him, "What are you going to do for my family?" Landis replied, "You have given me more trouble than I have given you." When Wireback repeated the question, Landis replied, "If you come down and give up the house I won't be hard on you."

After Wireback repeated the question a third time, Landis started to reply saying, "I will ..." when there was a discharge of a gun. Landis fell backward down the stairs, the top of his head having been blown off. In a short time, the police chief and a squad of officers arrived at the house. After some time, C. Eugene



241 Lime St. in 2009

Montgomery, who had been counsel for Wireback, arrived and asked him to give himself up, to which Wireback quickly replied, "What have I done? Who is down there?" When Montgomery explained that the men were afraid to come up because Wireback had a loaded gun and had already killed a man, Wireback replied, "I did not kill anybody."

Wireback's Arrest

At about noon, Wireback agreed to surrender and, because of the barricade, made his way through a back window to the house next door, where Mrs. Wireback was crawling on the floor overcome with grief. Wireback was quickly taken into custody. There were about a thousand people at the house when the officers brought him out and he said, "What are all the people here for. It is too cold for camp meeting."

At 3 pm that same day a coroner's inquest was convened. After hearing testimony from witnesses, the jury rendered the following verdict: "That David B. Landis came to his death on April 7, 1898, in the city of Lancaster, said county, from being shot by Ralph W. Wireback, the shooting being premeditated."²

After his arrest, Wireback said that Aldus Beecher, who had worked for Wireback for about three months selling patent medicine, had helped him barricade the house. On April 1st, Beecher had taken \$16 to pay the rent from Wireback to Landis, who refused it.

On June 7, 1898, the Wireback case was called for trial. Wireback's lawyer, C. Eugene Montgomery, moved for a continuance because Mrs. Wireback was very ill and unable to attend court as a witness. After much discussion among the parties as to the materiality of Mrs. Wireback's testimony, the court postponed the trial to the August term.

The Trial Begins

On Saturday, August 13, 1898, Wireback was brought to court. His attorney argued for an additional postponement due to the continued illness of Mrs. Wireback. This effort failed and the trial began on Monday, August 15, before Judge Livingston with the selection of the jury. Two hundred and four prospective jurors were examined before the twelfth was accepted on at 9:40 am, Wednesday, August 17.

During the presentation by the prosecution, three witnesses testified that Wireback bought a gun at Eichenberger's store on March 29, indicating to all of them that it was to "shoot Spaniards." Numerous other witnesses testified as to the events on the day of the shooting.

² The Lancaster Intelligencer, 8 April 1898, Lancaster, PA

The attorneys for Wireback offered a defense of insanity.³

The defense will show by his wife, if she is physically able to come into court, or by her deposition, the condition of the prisoner. For the past nine months he was a changed man and a wreck mentally and physically. From a kind, loving husband he became overbearing and disagreeable. In that time he had various delusions. He imagined that a milk bath would be beneficial to his nervous system. He also believed that he needed electricity in his system and to get it he was in the habit of putting copper coins in his shoes, carrying them in his hands and tying copper wire around his legs. One night in his sleep he imagined that the blinds had turned in their places on the window. Prior to nine months ago his conduct towards his wife was kind and considerate. Then it changed. He charged her with being unfaithful and quarreled with her because she stayed too long at church.

On Thursday, August 18, Mrs. Wirebach was the first witness called. She was brought to the court house in the city ambulance and brought upstairs on a chair. She testified as follows³:

I am 41 years old on February 20; was married 19 years ago on April 22. My husband treated me kindly until seven months ago, when his conduct towards me changed; it was in August, 1897 that he changed, and after our home was sold. There was a difficulty about the mortgage. Moved into the Lime street house in July 1897; the home was sold six weeks afterwards to Amos Landis. He treated me and the children badly. He accused me of being unfaithful; he did not do so prior to August last; he accused me of going to church to meet men; he said I was always screaming, and he wished I could not talk; at that time I was only talking in an ordinary tone. He said Landis sold the house because I screamed too much; he accused me of being a nuisance and disturbing the neighborhood; three or four weeks before this thing occurred he was more cruel to me and the children than he had been previous; he took copper pennies and held them in his hand to give him electricity while he was sick with rheumatism; he asked me to give him a milk bath at midnight to change the marrow in his bones; he tied copper wire around his legs to get more electricity; he refused to put on his underclothes, but tore them up and wrapped the pieces about himself; after his illness he acted very strangely; he advertised for men who wanted work and offered them goods without money; he would sit about the place in a stupid way, and when I tried to get him to move about he complained of great pain in the back of his head; he always complained about my annoying him; he would not let me sleep as long as he was awake; he was a man inclined to pray and was a God-fearing man; he slept very little at night after his illness in November 30; he grew worse from that time until April 7; the pain in his head came at more frequent intervals; he got up one night at midnight and changed all the blinds in the house saying he was going to have a fine house; he removed all the fastening and turned the blinds around; he always had great ideas of his business and said he ought to be worth a million; that he intended to build a six-story house of glass, with a servant for everything but I was not to enjoy it; prior to November 30, he was a tidy man and kept himself well dressed; after that he became careless and would wear the worst clothes he owned; he owned a toy telegraph instrument and he would frequently tap it and sing to it for half an hour; he always said grace before meals and I would then go to the kitchen for coffee; he would call me back and ask me whether I had no regard for the Lord, as he had not said grace, although he had just finished saying it; on the morning of the sixth of April, because his son had told him he had just said grace, his father denied it; the boy said he was twisted, and Ralph then struck the boy and nearly knocked him from the chair. My husband did not average more than an hour or two of sleep at night between November 30 and April 7. He said he could get friction from me by continually worrying and annoying me. Previous to August last he had no evil disposition; frequently told him he was crazy. He said the church put me up to treat him unkindly, and he was going to see Rev. Eberman about it. From what I saw of him, his actions and conduct, I do consider him

³ The Lancaster Intelligencer, 18 August 1898, Lancaster PA

insane; the last few months he said the world was against him; he began barricading the house on April 1, and from that time until the tragedy he scarcely slept and ate but very little; he was very much excited from the time he began building the barricade; he always said that David B. Landis would do right by him, but he blamed Amos Landis for the trouble, because if he had not bought the house he could have remained in it; her husband imagined he would be ruined if he had to move out of the house on April 1; he always claimed that he had a right to live in the house two years because the lease read that way; never heard Wireback threaten Landis.

On cross examination she said that prior to moving to Mr. Landis' house she lived at 127 East New street for three years; she gave several places she lived since her marriage; her husband is 48 years of age; he was engaged in the manufacture of liniment and bitters in the Landis house and in the sale of the same up to April 1st of this year; advised my husband to lease the Landis house; knew that here was a gun in the house when I left the house on the day preceding the tragedy at the request of my husband; he did not say that if he kept the house over April 1st he would make money out of David B. Landis; he asked me to get twelve of the Christian Endeavor society to get Mr. Landis to let him stay in the house the time the lease called for, and, if he refused, then they should horsewhip him. I made up my mind that my husband was insane last winter; base my belief that he was insane from what I have testified; did not say that I had an assurance from the Lord that he was insane.



Lancaster Courthouse Clock Tower

Later when his son Royal took the stand to testify, Ralph Wireback jumped from his seat crying, "Royal, Royal, you can save me; I am in the hands of the Spaniards." When Royal ran off the stand, Wireback kept on crying, "Royal, Royal, where are you?" and called out in a loud voice, "I call down the vengeance of Almighty God on you!" As the deputy sheriff started to put handcuffs on him, Wireback said, "You have no right to put these things on me. You brought me here in the City of Paris."

Testimony by others followed. Rev Clarence E. Eberman, pastor of the Moravian church, of which Mrs. Wireback was a member; Miss Clara S. Eager, an acquaintance of the family; son Royal; and Dr. M. L. Davis, Wireback's physician, all testified as to Wireback's mental state.

Leon Wireback⁴, of Pleasant Valley, Bucks County testified: I am a brother of the prisoner; my father's brother was mentally deranged; my father's sister was affected the same way, and one of her daughters committed suicide. Sabina Nickel⁵, a sister of Wireback, gave similar testimony as to the family history.

Three physicians, Dr. S. W. Miller, resident physician at the Lancaster county hospital and insane asylum; Dr. J. Z. Gerhard, with the Pennsylvania state insane asylum; and Dr. Charles K. Mills, professor of mental

⁴ This was undoubtedly Zeno W. Weierbach (1845-1927)

⁵ This was undoubtedly Sabina Weierbach Knechel (1847-1899)

diseases in medical jurisprudence in the University of Pennsylvania, testified that Wireback was insane, based on their examinations of him. Among their statements was that Wireback had delusions of grandeur; he had stated that he had just completed a trip around the world and that the Lord had commanded him to build, near Mt. Sinai, a house a thousand stories high for the poor. Dr. Gerhard stated that in conversation, Wireback told him that he had not killed David B. Landis; that if he was killed somebody else did it.

Dr. Theodore Diller, in charge of an insane asylum in Pittsburg, also testified that Wireback was insane when the crime was committed and was insane at present, suffering from "a peculiar psychical convulsion."

In rebuttal, the prosecution presented more than 20 witnesses, many of them customers of Wireback, who testified that they believed Wireback was sane. In addition, Dr J. B. Chapin, in charge of the Pennsylvania Hospital for Insane, testified that, based on the testimony of other, he did not believe Wireback was insane. After nearly four hours of testimony and cross examination, Dr. Chapin concluded, "I have endeavored to form an opinion as to the normal characteristics of the prisoner only from what I heard in this case."

Next, Michael J. Cassidy, warden at the Eastern penitentiary for 38 years, testified that he had known many prisoners to feign insanity.

On Monday, August 22, Mr. H. M. Smith testified that in April 1897, he had rented Wireback a house for three months and that Wireback refused to vacate on July 1, demanding \$200 to give Smith possession. On July 6, Smith paid Wireback \$10 to move out, which he did.

Lee Hunter testified that he lived with Wireback in 1894 and 1895, that during that time Wireback and his wife had frequent family quarrels, and that he was excited and passionate. This testimony contradicted that of the defense, which was in effect that prior to August he was at all times kind and gentle. Charles Eby, a brother-in-law of Wireback, gave similar testimony. He said that Wireback was domineering and tyrannical and that he and his wife had many family quarrels.



FROM THE LAST PHOTOGRAPH OF DAVID
B. LANDIS.

On Tuesday, August 23, as District Attorney Lane began his opening speech, Wireback jumped up and cried, "I want to see him, where is Royal. God Almighty is on my side and you know a terrible vengeance will be called on you." He was removed from the courtroom and when he returned about 10 minutes later muttered, "I have been on a long trip."

Closing speeches by the attorneys were concluded about noon on Wednesday, August 24. The large audience remained to the end, although the atmosphere was stifling. By 9 am that morning every seat in the courtroom was filled and hundreds were standing in the aisles. Wireback appeared pale, looked worn out, his hair was disheveled, and he had a worried look. He took no interest in the proceedings, but looked at the audience in the rear. At 12:45 pm, after Judge Livingston's charge to the jury, they retired to their room. After partaking of their dinner, the case was discussed and a vote taken. At 4:20 pm, they returned a verdict of guilty of murder in the first degree. During the eight day trial, 93 witnesses had been examined. Their testimony covered 250 pages. Reasons were filed for a new trial and counsel argued them at length, taking a full day in presenting them.

Appeals

On November 26, 1898 the court denied the motion for a new trial. District Attorney Lane moved that the sentence of death be pronounced on Wireback. As he was being brought to the front of the court, Wireback turned to the sheriff and said in a loud voice,

"Who are you that are preventing me from going on with my great work? My great plans are to build a house for the poor and care for them. You are going against God Almighty in keeping me from performing my work. The poor need me and must have me." After resting, he continued, "Don't you know who I am? I am Wireback, the greatest; Washington saved the country; Lincoln freed the slaves, and I am the greatest of all, for I will free the poor. That is the greatest mission of all, but I must lie down to do my work. I will build floating islands in the ocean, that would recede in the summer. They would be connected by a bridge. I want to make the earth a paradise, make it also a suburb of heaven. When my great inventions were done they came and took them away from me. God gave me this great work to do. I must go on with this great work. I dare not delay."⁶



RALPH W. WIREBACK, AS HE WAS KNOWN BY FRIENDS
AND BUSINESS ASSOCIATES.

Wireback was removed from the courtroom and allowed to sleep for an hour, after which he returned. He again became excited and called out in a loud voice,

*"God Almighty, Thou hast helped me before; help me through this trouble. Do not forsake me now; God, hast though forsaken me; have I not been on my knees and have you not answered all my prayers before? O, God, take away from these men the power to harm me."*⁵

Judge Livingston pronounced sentence saying,

*"The sentence of the court is that you, Ralph W. Wireback, be taken from hence to the Lancaster county prison, from whence you came, and from thence to the place of execution, within the walls of the yard of said prison, and that you be there hanged by the neck until you are dead, and may God, in His infinite goodness, have mercy on your soul."*⁵

⁶ The Lancaster Intelligencer, 7 June 1899, Lancaster, PA

The case was eventually appealed to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court with fifty assignments of error.⁷ In an opinion of February 27, 1899, filed March 1, 1899, the appeal was denied. Governor Stone set the date for the execution for May 17, 1899.

Following a refusal by the Board of Pardons to recommend a pardon, a petition was presented to the lower court to direct a commission to inquire into Wireback's sanity. The court dismissed the petition. Next counsel went before the Pennsylvania Supreme Court to compel Judge Livingston to direct a commission to inquire into Wireback's sanity.⁸ The governor reprieved Wireback until June 7 to allow for this. This petition was denied on May 22, 1899, with Chief Justice Starrett dissenting.

On Monday, June 5, 1899, Wireback's attorneys, C. Eugene Montgomery and John M. Groff went to Harrisburg to appeal to Governor Stone to appoint a commission to inquire into Wireback's sanity. This was the same petition that had been rejected by the Court. Governor Stone refused to grant any further reprieve or to appoint a commission to inquire into his sanity. Wireback's execution was scheduled for Wednesday, June 7, 1899 at 10 am.

Many went to the prison on Sunday to look at the gallows, and Sheriff Meyers received hundreds of requests for tickets for the execution. Having been told about 4 pm on Monday of the of the Governor's refusal to interfere in his behalf, Wireback appeared composed.

On Tuesday, he said he was ready to die, but claimed that he died an innocent man. According to Rudy Frankenhouser, one of the death watch, Wireback says he is ready to die, but has not admitted to anyone that he fired the shot that killed Landis. He does not talk as though he had any recollection of it. Wireback told the Reverend Dr. J. M. Titzel that he thanked God they had not made him out insane. He continued saying, "I will go to the scaffold like a man, and with abiding faith in the Lord, through Jesus Christ."

Wireback's brother Zeno visited him, however his wife was not able to see him as she was in St. Joseph's hospital, broken down in health and spirits. In a morning statement, Wireback said, "Whatever I have done has been by the command of God; therefore I am not guilty of any wrong doing. I shall go to my death freely, but will declare that I am not guilty."

Further in the Tuesday, June 6, 1899 edition of the Lancaster Intelligencer is a section headed "**The Inhumanity of It,**" which reads in part,

⁷ Lancaster Law Review, Vol. XVI, Lancaster, PA., The Wickersham Printing Company, 1899, (page 132 of original document), <http://books.google.com/books?dq=Ralph+Wireback&jtp=132&id=z1OTAAAAIAAJ>

⁸ Lancaster Law Review, Vol. XVI, Lancaster, PA., The Wickersham Printing Company, 1899, (page 289 of original document)

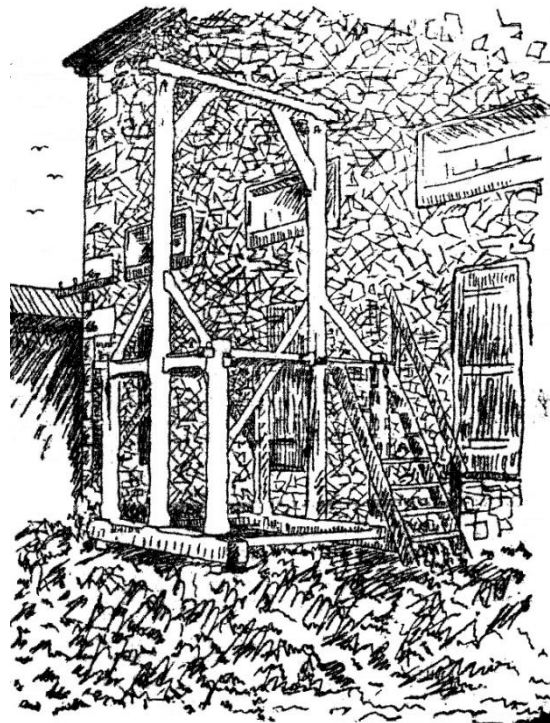
... it may be that Wireback knows himself; and that he is sane as District Attorney Brown says that he is. That is not at all the question disturbing the public mind over his impending execution The law has shown itself unable to provide for a convicted murderer an examination into his sanity One would think that no law would be needed, to secure the certain ascertainment of the sanity of a prisoner about to be executed ... those who refused a petition for the determination of his sanity ... have been brutal.

The Execution

Ralph W. Wireback was hanged at 10:15 am on June 7, 1899 at the county prison in Lancaster, PA. He was pronounced dead at 10:30 am. This, the first execution in Lancaster in forty one years, attracted a great deal of attention throughout the state, owing to the prominence of the murdered man and the sensational features that developed as the case progressed.

At 10 am, Sheriff Myers and Prison Keeper Moore entered Wireback's cell where he was praying with Rev. Eberman. Wireback thanked Prison Keeper Moore for his kind treatment. He assured Sheriff Myers that he had no hard feelings against him. Rev. Eberman said to Wireback, "Be brave; go forth with your eyes closed and praying to the Lord Jesus Christ for strength to sustain you." Wireback answered, "I go without a tremor." It was then 10:12 am.

As he faltered up the steps to the awful instrument of death, it was a sight to move the stoutest heart. He walked unsteadily, but this was because of physical distress, and there was not the slightest evidence of fear. A deadly silence had fallen on the spectators, many of whom were greatly moved by the sadness and solemnity of the spectacle. Chief Fisher quickly cuffed his hands behind him Deputy Smith slipped the noose over his head.⁹



THE SCAFOLD UPON WHICH WIREBACK WAS HANGED.

At 10:15 am, the trap was released. Wireback dropped heavily but never made a movement. At 10:30 am he was pronounced dead. The Lancaster Intelligencer⁹ reported that "The execution could not have occurred more smoothly. There was not the slightest hitch"

After certification of the execution by the Sheriff's jury and the physicians, the body was taken to Widmyer's undertaking establishment by order of Zeno Weierbach, Ralph Wireback's brother, who remained inside the prison during the execution. Zeno was described as "a plain, unassuming man of very quiet demeanor, and he bravely clung to his brother until the last, leaving nothing undone that lay

⁹ The Lancaster Intelligencer, 7 June 1899, Lancaster, PA

in his power to save his life, and when that could not be done he did everything to comfort him in the few hours that remained before the execution.”

During the afternoon, physicians made a post mortem of the body at the request of the brother of the deceased and his counsel. The brain was removed and sent to Dr. Charles K. Mills, an expert in nervous diseases, the principal witness for the defense in the trial of Wireback.

On the next day, Thursday, June 8, 1899, a funeral service was conducted by Rev. C. E. Eberman at the graveside at the Greenwood cemetery. The only persons present beside Zeno Wireback were the undertaker’s men.

Ralph Wireback’s Life Story

On the night before his execution, Ralph W. Wireback dictated a statement of his life story to stenographer William Dorwart. That story was published in The Lancaster Intelligencer on June 9, 1899. The following account is taken from that statement.

Early Years

Ralph W. Wireback was born October 31, 1849 at Pleasant Valley, Bucks County, PA., the son of Adam Weierbach and Eliza Weierbach, who were second cousins, both being great-grandchildren of Hans Nickel Weyerbacher and Catrina Magdalena Hermanni, who immigrated from Baumholder, present day Germany, in 1751.



RALPH W. WIREBACK.

By his own account, his boyhood days were very pleasant. He was christened in the German Reformed church where he was confirmed on his 19th birthday. He worked on his father’s farm until age 19 when he decided to “follow some literary work.” He had attended school regularly and, having passed the examination to become a teacher, began teaching at the same school he had attended the previous year as a pupil. He began attending college and selling books and family Bibles. His mother and two sisters died within a 14 week period in about 1872. During his junior year in college, his health failed and he “took an agency with Prof. Law of Philadelphia,” apparently to sell patent medicine.

“Prior to taking this agency of Prof. Law, I employed a great deal of my time perfecting perpetual motion, which I abandoned at the commencement to travel, having succeeded to a degree that satisfied me that I had invented it, having added by a combination of the pendulum and the action of liquids.”

Although in 1875, Ralph's income above expenses was about \$100 a month, he desired to make more money and entered into a contract to sell Prof. Law's goods at his own expense. In 1877, this business took a downturn due to the railroad strike which prevented him from shipping goods to agents. At that time he decided to manufacture his own "preparatives" and experimented for two years to develop a liniment that was satisfactory. He also developed a "blood circulator" which gave "such wonderful satisfaction to all users." His goal was to create a sustainable business for himself and his posterity.

Life in Lancaster, PA.

Ralph married Alice Tamah Eby of Lititz, PA in Philadelphia on April 22, 1878. The next year, they commenced housekeeping at 150 East Lemon St., Lancaster, PA. It was about this time that the manufacture of the Wireback liniment began.

Ralph and Alice's first son Royal was born July 26, 1882. Their second son, Banks, was born March 9, 1885 and died of diphtheria at the age of 6 after an illness of 120 days. A third son, John Jay was born December 28, 1887.

Alice suffered an illness of 12 weeks after the death of Banks. These losses, coupled with business strains, proved mentally and physically taxing to Ralph. The sudden death of Ralph's father Adam in 1895, and the illness of his son Jay in 1896, only worsened matters to the point where failure of his business seemed possible to Ralph.

After renting a house at 142 East New St. for about 10 years, a house across the street became available where Ralph's family lived for three years before it was sold to a new owner, who assured them they could live there for the next 15 years. Shortly thereafter, the landlord served a two week notice that he wanted to take possession of the house. Ralph desired one month to move out, but was threatened with eviction by the sheriff. A compromise was reached whereby Ralph was refunded 10 dollars and his family moved out as demanded on July 5, 1897.

Determined not to rent another house that they could not keep for a number of years, Ralph was offered a house at 241 North Lime St. by D. B. Landis with the understanding that the house would not be sold.



Wireback's PLEASANT LINIMENT

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Used both Externally and Internally
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Lancaster, Pa.

"So I rented the house with the special written agreement that we were to have the privilege of renting the house for the following year at the same rent. I afterwards signed a written agreement which had the same provisions as I stated above, and I felt positive I had secured possession of the house until April 1, 1899."

It should be noted that the account of the rental agreement as described in the Lancaster Intelligencer, April 7, 1898, the day of the murder, is at odds with the statement of Ralph. According to that account, the Wireback family was to occupy the house until April 1, 1898, but if Landis sold the house, they were to vacate. If Landis did not sell, the Wirebacks were to have possession for another year. In the Fall of 1897, Landis sold the house. On December 28, 1897, notice was served on Wireback that he must vacate the house on April 1, 1898. On April 1, 1898, Landis began legal proceedings to dispossess him. Why D. B. Landis, and not the new owner, began these proceedings is not explained. Perhaps the sale was not to be consummated until the house was vacated on April 1, 1898, or perhaps, because the buyer, Amos Landis, was a relative, D. B. Landis felt an obligation to resolve the dispute.

Conclusion

Was Ralph Wireback insane as alleged by his defense team and various medical experts? Was he "normal" as suggested by the testimony of many acquaintances? Was he feigning insanity as suggested by the warden of the Eastern Penitentiary?

A number of the statements he made provide some insight to these questions.

On the eve of his execution, he declared to Rev. Titzel that he was glad that he had not been found insane. Ironically, had he been found insane, he would likely have been spared the gallows. Was this statement a matter of pride trumping self-interest? Or did he not recognize the significance of the statement? Or did he realize it was too late to matter?

Conversely, at about the same time, he stated to District Attorney Brown that he now felt perfectly sane, but that there was a time about two weeks before the shooting and for some time afterward that he did not feel just right. Certainly, his statement to one of the examining physicians, "that the Lord had commanded him to build, near Mt. Sinai, a house a thousand stories high for the poor" suggests delusion.

The issue of criminal insanity is a complicated one which has evolved over time as has the practice of medicine. Notwithstanding the complex medical and legal issues, I am convinced that in today's legal system, mitigating factors would have precluded capital punishment as an outcome in the case of Ralph W. Wireback.

Epilogue

After the death of her husband, Alice Eby Wireback continued to sell patent medicines in Lancaster; for how long, is unknown.



Mrs. R. W. WIREBACK – PROP.

The Lancaster courthouse, in which the trial of Ralph Wireback was held, was built between 1852 and 1855. In the August 3, 1981 edition of the Lancaster *New Era* newspaper appeared an article about the various 1800s graffiti found inside the walls of the clock tower. One of the drawings found was an awkward rendition of the scene at the county courthouse on June 7, 1899: "The day that Ralph Wireback was hung by Sheriff John H. Myers for the murder of David Landis, banker."



New Era Photo by Ed Sachs

This sketch of a local hanging is in the clock tower of the old county courthouse. The inscription reads: June 7th 1899 is the the day that

Ralph Wireback was hung by Sheriff John H. Myers for the murder of David Landis, banker

In a final irony, shortly after the 1981 article appeared, two 13 year old girls, best friends, met at a school bus stop. The first girl said to the second, "I just found out the worst thing. My great great grandfather was murdered a long time ago. A man shot him." The second girl looked at the first and replied, "Well, I just found out it was my great great grandfather that shot him."

Twenty eight years later, these women are still best friends.¹⁰

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¹⁰ As related by Bobbie Wireback Seeley, great granddaughter of Ralph and Alice Wireback