

Bristol Bill and his Gang of Counterfeiters - by Deborah Jurist - July 2023  
Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Groton Historical Society Membership

Groton has two “national level” stories in its past. The most famous is the pardon by Abraham Lincoln, of William Scott, known as the Sleeping Sentinel, during the Civil War. We will delve into that event at our August 26th Open House.

The other is the counterfeiting scandal, brought to Groton by the famous “Bristol Bill” before the Civil War in 1848.

A focus of our programs this year.... is looking at historical events that happened **in** Groton or to people **from** Groton, and how they become stories, and even **myths**.

We are curious about how these stories become the fabric of who we are and... what we believe to be “true.”

The more we study history and discover all the ways that the stories of our past are manipulated, it helps us to sharpen our ability to recognize what we now refer to as “misinformation.”

We DO have the ability to recognize, even subtle manipulations in the reporting of current events, and we have more tools than ever at our fingertips to verify what our **guts** tell us might be “fishy” . By studying the way these distortions happened in the past we come to understand

1. It is NOT “worse” than ever before, and
2. We learn how to recognize “baloney” when we see it.
3. And we see how historians have uncovered facts to verify or negate historic stories.

One important tool to make use of in this process is studying the **sources** of information.

An individual telling the “story” may have a reason to distort the facts, or they may not remember them accurately. In fact most people do not remember things accurately.

So it is worthwhile to look at original sources, and become familiar with who the “storyteller” is and read several accounts of the same event.... especially if your gut tells you something might be “off” for some reason. It takes time..... But with practice you get faster at it and it is extremely important at this point in time.

Tonight we will dive into the Counterfeiting Gang and what happened in Groton. We will use five sources. Each piece of information I cite has the source identified in the notes from this talk. But I want to point out, none of these sources were eyewitnesses. They were all written after the fact. There is considerable data which can be verified, such as prison sentences, and a lot that can't. So take it with a grain of salt.

Sources:

1. An article by Paul Heller, who served as Director of Libraries at Norwich University, lives in Barre VT, writes historical articles for the Times-Argus and has recently published a book called The Civil War and Central Vermont.
2. “A Johnny White Recollection” is an article printed in the Historical Society newsletter. Johnny White (1898-1965) was a lifelong resident of Groton. He was considered the historical expert of his day. However, he wasn't even born when the events took place! He is the author of The Johnny White

Memoirs, published by the Historical Society. This account of the Counterfeiting Gang was edited twice, once by Andrea Blair in 1992 and then by John Willard Benzie in 2022.

3. An article by David Richardson of Orange VT (1832-1898). This was also published in the Historical Society newsletter Fall 2017. He married Janette Darling of Groton in 1858, and then moved to Iowa. He was owner and editor of the Davenport Daily Democrat, and was a Regent of Iowa State University, The Richardsons "bought" Medad Mtn and built a summer home there. His article was also published in the Caledonian. (date unknown)

4. Wikipedia - Bristol Bill was from England and had a vast history of crimes before he came to Groton. Wikipedia has background info about him and cites 38 informational sources.

5. Mr. Glover's Groton - written by Waldo Glover which was first published in 1978, and is, in short, the most complete history of the town of Groton.

6. John Willard Benzie - Mr. Benzie born in 1927, is a native son of Groton and brother of Janet Puffer. He left as a young man but kept his ties to the town securely intact. He has edited the Historical Society newsletter since the 1980s and continues to maintain the Groton family genealogy database from his home in Montana. His knowledge of Groton history is vast beyond imagination.

## **The Players:**

**Bristol Bill**, also known as William Warburton was born in England around 1802. He lived in London, Liverpool and Bristol. He also robbed a bank in Bristol, RI. In a pamphlet written about him in 1850, by George Thompson, it is said that he was born into a wealthy family and went to Eton. He committed numerous crimes in England, for which he was sentenced to prison in Australia. He escaped by swimming to a boat offshore and sailed off to New York. In New York, he met Christian Meadows, an accomplished engraver and Margaret O'Conner. More about his time in NY is coming up later.(4)

**Christian Meadows** was also born in England in 1814. He learned the craft of engraving as a young man and moved to Boston to make his fortune, where he married Elizabeth Mearns. For some reason he turned to crime, becoming a thief of petty goods. Eventually, he was caught, tried and sentenced to 6 years in prison. By 1846 he was employed as an engraver by a Mr. William Wilson, engraving and printing currency for several banks. (1)

**Margaret O'Conner** was reputed to be an operetta singer in NY, as well as someone who traded in counterfeit money, buying something with a counterfeit bill and taking the change in legal currency. She was also supposed to be Bristol Bill's wife when she came to Groton. (2) She was known as "Gookin Peg" in NY. (1) (whatever that means)

**George Green** Was a New York gangster known as **English Jim**, he teamed up with Bristol Bill possibly as an enforcer. (2)

**Ephriam Low** Was a Groton merchant who was bankrupt at the time of these shenanigans, and is given credit for convincing Bill to come to Groton, with Christian Meadows to print counterfeit money. (1)

In 1826 he opened a store in the building which eventually became the Coffrin Block, but was first known as Low's Store. Mr. Low "took a break" from the merchant's life from 1828 until 1833 when he returned and ran the store until his death... in prison in 1850.

Waldo Glover states that Low was responsible for convincing Meadows to steal the printing dies. Page 265 (5)

Also according to Mr. Glover, in 1837, Low contributed \$1,080 towards the construction of the Methodist Episcopal Meeting House. (5) pages 122, and 176.

**Peter Paul** was a Groton resident. He was a watchmaker and ran a jewelry and watch store in the west end of what is now the Peter Paul House, where we are right now and home of the GHS. He was also a very fine carpenter and made some of the best furniture in Groton at the time. (5) page 108.

Christian Meadows and his wife Elizabeth moved into this house when they came to Groton. (2)

According to Mr. Glover, Peter Paul was commissioned to **design** the Methodist Episcopal Meeting House in 1837. (5) page 176

**McLane Marshall** - Another Groton resident, was an Innkeeper in a building that was literally connected to the top floor of the old Groton General Store (Artesano's) until 1854. That building was moved and became part of what is now the Groton Free Public Library, formerly the Goodine House, where Allen Goodine grew up. (5) page 118-119. He then built the famous "Lake House" on Ricker Pond and the steam boat called the "Lady of the Lake" It is unclear what his role in this scandal was. (2)

One question I had was, How **was** currency printed in 1848? Didn't the federal government protect it?

The following information came from a paper called "American Paper Currency". It is at the Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library

## **PRIVATE ISSUES**

"Although the individual states could not issue currency, they did have the right to charter private banks that could issue notes. From these private banks came a great flux of paper money that both oiled and clogged the wheels of commerce in pre-Civil War America. In addition to private banks, municipalities, transport companies, insurance companies, stores, et cetera, all issued scrip. The notes of these organizations were payable on demand and were only as strong as the bank or company itself. Thus, if too many notes were presented at once, a bank would simply close its doors and default." Eventually this was part of what led to the Great Depression and laws to protect our Currency.

## **The Back Story**

Bristol Bill became a well known criminal in the US, especially in New York, where he was involved with several bank and jewelry store robberies. He was also a witness in an attempted murder in which the murder weapon was to be a bomb!. Somehow, he was still free to move about and he ended up in Groton, with his buddy Christian Meadows, probably on the suggestion of Ephriam Low. (4)

Bill moved to a farm, referred to as the "Clough Place" by Johnny White (2) owned by Orlo Goodwin in the 1960's and surmised by Willard Benzie (6) to be part of what is now Seyon Ranch. Another of our sources, Paul Heller, says that they moved in with Ephriam Low, which could have been in the "Clough Place" (1)

Christian Meadows came to Groton, with his wife, Elizabeth, and they took up lodging with Peter Paul, who had built an apartment upstairs. (2) Although Johnny White says they moved in with Bristol Bill. The plan was to alter bank notes using Meadows as the engraver and Bristol Bill, English Jim and Gookin Peg, were to take charge of distribution. (1)

## **The Plan**

According to David Richardson (3) The dies were shipped to Ephriam Low in ax boxes. Bristol Bill and company withdrew \$1,000 in one dollar bills from a bank in Danville. They planned to change the bills into higher denominations, relying on Christian Meadows and the equipment they had smuggled in.

## **The Tunnel**

It is said that the gang dug a tunnel under what is now Rt. 302. But.....According to Willard Benzie: "Ephraim Low had a store that was torn down to build the Coffrin Block, which in turn burned down in 1925. The Coffrin Block was located where Sarki's, or Brown's Market in the "old days" and Tim Spooner's Groton Garage is now.

The tunnel was actually a drainage culvert designed to carry storm water from the north side of the street, where the Carroll Ricker Funeral Home was, now a private home set back from the road, west of the Post Office, under the road.... to the river behind Low's store. The counterfeit equipment was found hidden in the culvert/tunnel, including a 1,500 lb. transfer plate and the press. It was found by A. J. Carpenter, who was the town's road commissioner at the time" (6)

## **The Arrest**

How Christian Meadows and Bristol Bill were discovered is a bit murky.

William Wilson, who owned the engraving business where Meadows had worked, followed the trail of his stolen property and that trail ended up in Wells River. (1) Johnny White says Meadows was recognized by Oscar Hale, a teller at the Wells River Bank..... and then he was seen in the company of Bristol Bill.(2)

However, it is also believed that **Bill** was recognized and that led the owner of the engraving company from Boston to believe that Meadows would be nearby.

However it came about, Sheriff Colonel Jacob Kent, the Caledonian County Sheriff was notified. He gathered up a group of officers and they raided the farmhouse where they apprehended Bristol Bill on March 5th, 1850..

According to Johnny White, Bill's wrists were abnormal **and** he had very slender hands, so he slipped out of the handcuffs that Sheriff Kent had put on him at the farmhouse. But, he did not escape. His ankles were "fettered" and he was taken... by oxcart, to jail in Danville. (2)

Following the arrest a complete set of burglar's tools, the 1500 lb. transfer plate, blank copper plates, and a printing press were found in the culvert/tunnel. 135 dies were also discovered, under a **beehive** owned by Ephriam Low behind Brown's store, probably on information given by the Groton men.

Ephriam Low, Peter Paul and McLane Marshall, were all arrested. Margaret O'Conner and Elizabeth Meadows were not. Peter Paul and McLane Marshall, cooperated with the state and were released. Ephriam Low died in prison in Danville while awaiting trial which was slated to occur in June of 1850.

### **The Trial**

According to the Johnny White article (edited by Andrea Blair and Willard Benzie) Judge Poland was the presiding judge. Mr. Bliss M. Davis was the county attorney. The defendants were represented by lawyers from Boston. Bristol Bill and Christian Meadows were both found guilty and sentenced to 10 years in state prison in Waterbury. However, quoting Judge Poland, "While writing out the sentences at my desk, I heard a noise and looking up, Bristol Bill was recovering from having struck Mr. Bliss Davis with a blow. I supposed with his hand or fist, but Mr. Davis straightened up, put his hand on his neck and cried, 'Pull it out! Pull it out!'

Mr. Daniel Coffrin, Groton Sheriff, sitting nearby, sprang up and pulled a case knife out of Mr. Davis' neck. Immediately, they carried him from the courtroom to his **hotel**, and after the prisoners were secured, I adjourned court, and followed them, expecting to find him either dead or dying. But, as I entered the room, he looked up and exclaimed, 'I am not dead yet, Judge. You and I will punish a great many more rascals'

A letter from the Warden at Windsor State Prison to Andrea Blair stated that Bristol Bill was discharged by Gov. Erastus Fairbanks, after serving 6 years of his sentence. Once released, he was brought back to Caledonia Court, tried for his attack on Mr. Bliss. He died in 1882 while serving his second sentence." (2)

### **The Fate of Christian Meadows**

According to Paul Heller (1) Christian Meadows began his sentence in Windsor State Prison, however he began to be seen as an unwitting victim. He and his wife's demeanor was described in the Caledonian Record: "Meadows appears careworn and anxious, while his wife, true to that affection which burns brighter as the clouds of adversity thicken, accompanies her husband, and sits by his side, holding in her arms a prattling infant....The appearance of Mrs. Meadows is amiable, modest, and unassuming, indicating little acquaintance or affinity with such causes." Meadows was seen as a victim" (1)

While an inmate at the Windsor Prison his reputation as an expert engraver began to spread far and wide. A group of Dartmouth Alumni sought out Meadows to create an engraving of the college campus. Meadows was granted permission to visit Dartmouth while in prison in 1851. He created a copper plate

of the campus. Next, Meadows was approached by the NH Agricultural Society and asked to create an engraving for their diploma.

At that point, Meadows requested that the Officers of the Society help him win "liberation from his imprisonment"

It seems at this point he got a lucky break. He had been supplied with an image of a famous elm tree that towered over the boyhood home of Daniel Webster to use in his design for the diploma! Mr. Webster was so impressed with the engraving that he wrote a 3 page letter to Governor Williams of Vermont pleading on Meadows behalf.

He waxed poetic about Meadows' victimhood and the suffering of his wife, Elizabeth, and his great skill as an artist. However, Gov. Williams did **not** pardon Meadows.

But... in 1853, Gov. Erastus Fairbanks not only pardoned him, he arranged for Elizabeth and his son to be present at the surprise event, on July 4th! AND he himself contributed \$100 toward the purchase of a house for the family.

Meadows proceeded to create a large body of work that includes engravings of the Barre Academy, Thetford Academy, and a portrait of the Rev. David Merrill of Peacham among many others.

#### **A short description of the Groton men's genealogy.**

They are all buried in Groton Cemeteries.

Peter Paul was the 12th of 13 children.

He was born on the 18th of March in 1811 in Groton, he died May 1st 1861, He is buried in Groton Village Cemetery. He married Sally Maria Meader, who died in 1892. She is also buried in Groton Village Cemetery. They had 2 children:

Ephraim Low was the 7th of 8 children. He was born on April 19th, 1800, in Groton,

He married (1) Emily Hall, about 1823 in Groton, they had 4 children.

He died 1850 in the Danville Jail in 1850 and is buried in the Village Cemetery.

McLane Marshall was the first of 3 children. He was born in 1816.

He died in 1889 in San Francisco, CA, He married Abigail Vance in 1838 in Groton, she died in 1885 also in San Francisco, CA, they are both buried in the Village Cemetery in Groton.

They had 3 children.