

Bloody Dawn

A play by John W. W. Loose

*D*uring Lancaster County's observance of the Republic's bicentennial of the American Revolution, the Quarryville Chamber of Commerce with the enthusiastic approval of the Lancaster County Bicentennial Committee decided to stage a gala event on Saturday, 26 June 1976. Every civic, social, religious, historical and social organization of southern Lancaster County was requested to prepare some presentation lasting about 10 to 15 minutes. Each was to depict some historic event that occurred in or had an immediate effect upon southern Lancaster County. The presentations would be staged in Quarryville Memorial Park on a large old flat bed trailer, today's answer to the Conestoga wagon.

When the Southern Lancaster County Historical Society, Inc, was approached, it decided to portray the Christiana Riot of 1851 as its presentation. Your president and editor, already a veteran carpetbagger by virtue of serving as president of the SLCHS following the death of Albert Hart, its founder, in late 1970, and until 1973, volunteered to "come up with something." The idea took form suddenly while supervising a high school study hall, and the "mini-play" was written in the white-hot fury of inspiration in approximately 20 minutes.

While the play is based on information that is accurate, it ought not be assumed the scenes and dialogue occurred literally. Idiomatic nineteenth century Lancaster County "English" was used. The enforced economy of few lines required that in each line be compressed allusions and nuances that would describe the religious, ethical, social, political and economic milieu of the southern townships without having the characters sounding as if they were a gaggle of history professors lecturing to each other. (That was easier than the reader may think.

for nineteenth century Lancaster Countians often received a superior education in their little rural schools where felicity in expression—in writing and speaking—as well as listening and thinking were encouraged with authority.)

The Christiana Riot has been termed by some historians “the first bloodshed in the Civil War.” However that may be, the brief but deadly struggle surely presented many difficult questions to Lancaster Countians—and all other Americans. “Bloody Dawn” tries to express the ethical issues that the riot raised, in fact, that the fugitive slave laws created. One may argue persuasively on numerous opposing facets of the problem. That many of our problems haven’t simple answers that conform to what we often regard as “morality” is suggested by the little play. Finally, to leave the audience thinking and wondering (the author at times forgets to be a “knee jerk” cynic!), the verdict of the treason trial was left out deliberately. James Reynolds’ little soliloquy at the end was intended to leave more unanswered questions but which the audience easily could “second-guess.”

The original (and only) cast included:

George Boomsma, Peach Bottom	Samuel McClure
Charles H. Eckman, Mechanics Grove	Benjamin Wallace
Rev. Ambrose Hopkins, Quarryville	Jonathan Cooper
Mary Boomsma, Peach Bottom	Sarah Brown
Harry Wilson, Little Britain	James Reynolds, Esq.
Jack Loose, Lancaster	James Penny

Ruth Wilson served as director and Doris Hough was stage manager.

BLOODY DAWN

Scene I

Location: Christiana General Store

Cast: Samuel McClure, playing checkers
Benjamin Wallace, playing checkers
Jonathan Cooper, a kibitzer and obviously a Quaker
Sarah Brown, another kibitzer who has come in to do some shopping.

Properties: Mail keg or crate to support checker board, two small stools or kegs as seats, market basket.

Time: Late afternoon, 11 September 1851

McClure: Your move, Ben.

Wallace (*moving a checker*): What was all that ruckus out at Pownall’s farm this morning?

- McClure:** I heard some Maryland slaveowners came up to get their runaway slaves and the darkies put up a big fight. Shooting and lot's of excitement. I even heard the Maryland farmer got himself killed. Darkies all got away, I reckon.
- Cooper** (*breaking into the conversation*): They were free men fighting to stay free, I'd say.
- McClure** (*mockingly*): Jonathan, thee is soft in thy Quaker head. (*becoming more serious*) Those fellows are the property of that farmer. He bought them. Remember when your horses ran away last month? You asked for help, and I left my wheat harvesting to help you get them back. That was the neighborly way, Jonathan, you know that!
- Wallace:** Yes, and if someone kept your horses, he'd be a horse thief, and you'd get the constable on him right away, Jonathan!
- Cooper:** But those black men are like thee and me, Ben. They aren't animals. They are the Lord's children, too.
- McClure:** I heard the runaways were stealing from the farmer, and they ran away so they wouldn't be whipped.
- Wallace:** The whole slavery issue is bad. Seems like North and South are going to bust apart one o' these days.
- Cooper:** What is the problem? Human slavery is immoral and unChristian. Aren't we Christians? I know my friend Sam is an elder in the Presbyterian church, and you, Ben, I know to be a God-fearing man, too.
- Sarah Brown** (*entering with a market basket and walking briskly up to the three men*): What a terrible thing! Oh, I never thought anything like this would happen in Sadsbury township. What's this world coming to?
- McClure:** What's that, Sarah?
- Brown:** Haven't you heard? That one fellow who came up here for his slaves last night was killed by them. They shot him and hacked him to death with a corncutter. In cold blood right out there on Levi Pownall's farm. And then they shot up his son something terrible.
- Cooper:** Violence is an abomination in the eyes of the Lord, but he who lives by the sword must die by the sword. I am saddened, Sarah, and greatly troubled by these things that turn men against men. I must go now. Perhaps the Lord will help me understand these sad problems. (*Cooper wanders off shaking his head in wonder*)
- Wallace:** John's a good Quaker, Sam, but I can't figure it out. The law's got to be obeyed, and if we don't obey the law we will start

killing each other. Those poor devils living out there in the valley think they are free, now that they have escaped from southern farms. They aren't free as long as the Fugitive Slave Act is the law of the land. The law says we must help return them to their owners.

Brown: Ben, would you help get them back to their owners? Would you, Ben?

Wallace (*somewhat irritated*): Sarah, you have to know when it's smart to obey the law and when it's smart to look the other way. That's the way life is. The law and all that doesn't concern you women anyway. What do women know about these matters! Your Move, Sam.

McClure: Well, none of us up here like slavery. But I agree with Ben. We all can't get excited and run around preaching about the immorality of owning slaves. What they do down South is their business. Why even our church is taking times. It's terrible. (*muttering*) Terrible.

Brown: I didn't want to worry Jonathan, but a few minutes before I came into the store I heard that the police and the sheriff and even the army were coming here to search everyone and arrest any Quaker who knows anything about the riot. Castner Hanway and Elijah Lewis, I hear, are to be arrested.

Wallace: By George, Hanway's no Quaker. How did he get mixed up in that fight?

McClure: Lewis isn't a Quaker, either. I reckon they just go noseey. That's what happens when people get too close to a fight. None of their business, I'd say. Serves 'em right.

Wallace: Sarah, why are the police looking for Hanway and Lewis?

Brown: They are hunting for everyone who was at the fight that wouldn't help the marshal catch the runaway slaves. You said yourself the law says we must help return escaped slaves to their owners.

McClure: Looks like Sarah got you that time, Ben! I'll bet my plug of tobacco Bill Padgett collects a nice bounty on those runaways. Bill's been doing a big business around here lately. Seems he has ways of locating the darkies no matter how hard the Quakers try to hide them.

Wallace: It's a bad business, Sam. I don't care how you look at it. I just wish they would keep the slavery question down South where it wouldn't bother us.

End of Scene I

Scene II

Location: Ante-room outside hearing chamber on second floor of Independence Hall, Philadelphia

Cast: James Reynolds, Esq., editor of Democratic newspaper in Lancaster city
James Penny, a farmer of Liberty Square, Drumore township, southern Lancaster County

Time: Wednesday afternoon, 26 November 1851

Penny: Sir, were you challenged for jury duty on the Hanway treason trial?

Reynolds: Yes, Thaddeus Stevens, that blasted scoundrel, figured my views would not favor the defendants. My newspaper editorials attack him daily, and he always fires back from his own paper. He's a smart man, but completely unprincipled. He has an odd way of looking at life. I don't know anyone who would call him a warm friend. Are you here for jury duty too?

Penny: Mr. Reynolds, my name is James Penny. I have a farm at Liberty Square, not far from Drumore Friends Meeting. I was challenged by the government because my neighbors are Quakers. And quite frankly, Sir, I have only the highest regard for them.

Reynolds: Mr. Penny, I agree with you. Many of our finest citizens are or have come from that tradition. Quakers only find themselves in trouble when they encourage breaking the laws of our nation. My friend, how do you feel about this trial? Do you think Hanway and the others are guilty of treason?

Penny: Treason! All they did was to stay out of the fighting. When the marshal wanted Hanway and the others to help him take the runaways into custody, they refused to come to the assistance of the government officials. From what I have heard, the marshal and his fellows got things so confused no one knew what was happening—no one knew what was right and what was wrong—what was legal and what was illegal. Seems to me the marshal acted rather foolishly. I'd say Marshal Kline ought to be on trial for being a coward and a liar.

Reynolds: My friend, I don't think we can agree on this matter. I want to see the law of the land followed, and if decent, law-abiding citizens won't do it, we will have war. By God, I hope that never happens, but I fear it will. I have two sons, one, John, who is making an army career for himself following his graduation from West Point; and the other, William, who is a naval officer, and will become an admiral some day, I am sure. John, too, is headed for the top.

Penny: *(seemingly anxious to change the subject)* I think I'll have a look inside the court room.

Reynolds: *(musing aloud to himself)* Think of it! Seventy-five years ago at this very spot our nation was born. Now today the fate of our country is being decided here again. Shall we remain a nation of laws that some refuse to obey because they believe certain laws are immoral? Or shall we become a nation of personal viewpoints, of various conflicting moral principles, none with the sanction of law? Human liberty or private property—can't we have both without bloodshed? Or must we have war to ensure the existence of both?

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