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Florence Elizabeth Chandler Maybrick entered the world as the daughter of a wealthy Mobile banking family during the Civil War in September 1862, and left it a penniless woman living in squalor with dozens of cats in a small Connecticut town at the beginning of World War II in October 1941.

But in between those years, she lived a life that made her famous — or infamous — worldwide. Depending upon who you asked, Maybrick was either a philandering husband-killer following her mother’s devious example, or the victim of an unfair trial founded on circumstantial evidence.

These days she is also known not only as the woman who married “Jack the Ripper,” but possibly as the one who killed him.

The husband Maybrick went to prison for poisoning is among the top suspects believed to have been “Jack the Ripper,” the still-unidentified serial killer who murdered five women 130 years ago in London. This claim divides the universe of enthusiasts and professional investigators working on the case, who either believe it as fact or refute it as fiction. There are even some who include Maybrick’s brother-in-law on the list, and say he framed his brother for crimes he committed, killed him and framed Florence for his death.

Maybrick was the first American woman to face the noose in England, and the first to escape it for a 15-year prison sentence. She eventually returned to America, wrote a book and spoke to packed venues about her experiences, raising awareness about the terrible conditions behind bars and campaigning to improve them.

Maybrick never saw her children again after she went to jail, but became a beloved, mother-like figure to the boys who attended the school near her home in Connecticut, who carried her coffin and laid her to rest nearby when she died.

Educated in Europe, Florence spent little time in Mobile. Yet her life is, according to Tom McGehee, the director of the Bellingrath Home and a columnist for Mobile Bay Magazine, “a great story from Mobile’s past.”

‘THE LIVERPOOL POISONER?’

On May 11, 1889, James Maybrick died in his bed. The 50-year-old had fallen ill days earlier, and succumbed to what doctors diagnosed as gastroenteritis.

Florence woke up confused and alone in her bedroom with no memory of how she got there except that her husband was dead, according to “Mrs. Maybrick’s Own Story,” the autobiography she wrote 16 years later.

Michael Maybrick, her brother-in-law, entered later, told her she was no longer “mistress of this house” and instructed a nurse to keep her in her room until he returned from London. She was not allowed to see her children, James and Gladys, before they left either.

The next day, Florence heard new steps coming up the stairs. The door opened, and the superintendent of police told her he would hold her in custody as a suspect in her husband’s death.

“Was I going mad? Did I hear myself accused of poisoning my husband?” Florence wrote in her book. “Why was I accused — I, who had nursed him assiduously day and night until my strength gave out, who had engaged trained nurses, and advised a consultation of physicians, and had done all that lay in my power to aid in his recovery? To whom could I appeal in my extreme distress?”

Nurses and a policeman monitored her health to see if she could stand trial. The shock of her husband’s death seemingly prostrated her to the point where she prayed to die, despite their rocky marriage. But on her fifth day of house arrest, Florence insisted she see her husband before pallbearers loaded his casket into the hearse.

“Death had wiped out the memory of many things. I was thankful to remember that I had stopped divorce proceedings, and that we had become reconciled for the children’s sake,” she wrote.

Florence was 18 when she met 42-year-old English cotton broker James Maybrick onboard a ship to England. Shortly after their chance encounter, they married, in July

1881, and set up residences in Norfolk, Virginia, and Liverpool. In their eight years together, Florence and James had a son and a daughter.

But the marriage was far from a happy one, according to McGehee. He says James had a mistress, “with whom he had three children before marrying Florence and two more afterwards,” and sent her £100 every year, worth more than £13,500 today or roughly \$15,000.

After her husband’s funeral, Florence spent several weeks in jail before her trial began on July 31, 1889. Rick Hutto, an attorney turned author from Macon, Georgia, wrote about the 10-day-long proceeding in his 2018 book, *A Poisoned Life: Florence Chandler Maybrick, the First American Woman Sentenced to Death in England*, and told *Lagniappe* “just about everything that could have gone wrong to her in that trial did go wrong.”



Born in Mobile just after the start of the Civil War, Florence Maybrick was nearly hanged for poisoning her husband, who was later named as a suspect believed to have been the unknown Victorian serial killer "Jack the Ripper."

Prosecutors brought up Florence’s own affair with a man named Alfred Brierley as an attack on her character. Florence wrote she could feel all levels of Liverpool society opposed to her when the trial began, but noted “there was a complete revulsion of sentiment” by the time it concluded.

Florence also suffered from rumors about her mother’s relationships. Caroline Elizabeth Holbrook came down to Mobile from New York to visit her uncle and met the city’s most eligible bachelor. Her marriage to William G. Chandler, the son of a prominent banking and merchant family, in October 1857 earned the envy of every Southern daughter in town, Hutto said.

When William died after a mysterious illness in July 1862 and Caroline moved away to Macon, Georgia, to marry Franklin Bache Du Barry, a captain in the Confederate Navy, one year later, Mobile gossips went to work.

“For example, they said that the mother [Caroline] went out partying at night leaving her sick husband and two children at home,” Hutto said. “That’s ridiculous because her second child, the girl [Florence], wasn’t even born until six or eight weeks after her father died, and where would she have gone out partying at night in Mobile with a baby at home during the Civil War anyway?”

When Franklin died one year after marrying Caroline, and Caroline moved on to Baron Adolph von Roques, a German cavalry officer, in 1872, some claimed she poisoned both Franklin and her first husband for their money. Florence’s trial resurrected these rumors, and many said she learned the art of murdering wealthy husbands from her mother.

Details of James’s addiction to arsenic for what he and his doctors perceived were benefits to his daily life and sex life also emerged in court. Hutto said James had prescriptions for arsenic powder ready in England and America, so he could never be without his favorite drug no matter where his business took him.

“There was no question that he had been doing all this arsenic himself. That was proven, there was no question about it,” Hutto said. “Plus, no one could put her anywhere near him administering any kind of drugs. Most people thought it was going to be an acquittal, and when they started coming to the trial, people brought their lunches. It was almost like a picnic.”

Members of the public and media eventually empathized with Florence, but Queen Victoria was firmly against her, according to Hutto.

“In [her] mind any woman who committed adultery would certainly kill her husband. And it didn't matter that her husband had repeatedly done the same thing,” he said.

To make matters worse, Hutto said the presiding judge, Justice James Fitzjames Stephen was “literally incompetent,” and was committed to a mental institution shortly after the trial ended.

“He made so many mistakes, but the worst was on the first day at the end of trial he was summarizing everything for the jury. He was very much pro the defendant at this point,” he explained. “And then he came back the next day and did just the opposite, basically saying to the jury, ‘You don't have any choice here. You have to find her guilty. She’s guilty as hell and you have to find her that way.’”

What seemed like an eternity to Florence was only a little more than half an hour before the jury followed Stephen's instructions and found her guilty of the attempted murder of her husband.

"A prolonged 'Ah!' strangely like the sighing of wind through a forest, sounded through the court. I reeled as if struck [by] a blow and sank upon a chair," Florence wrote.

Even though the prosecution could not produce a single witness who saw Florence feed her husband poison, Hutto said the jury convicted her on the assumption she could have done so when no one was looking.

Outcry against the verdict swelled on both sides of the Atlantic. People in England and America wrote letters to the British government asking them to intervene and spare Florence. This massive campaign even included an appeal signed by the vice president, the speaker of the House of Representatives and at least 19 other high-ranking American elected officials.

"That was why they basically ended up saying, 'OK, even though you weren't even found guilty of killing your husband you were found guilty of trying to kill your husband,' which they didn't prove either, that was when they commuted it to life in prison," Hutto said.

Florence avoided the gallows and was sentenced to 20 years in prison, but was released for good behavior five years ahead of schedule in July 1904.

"The last Sunday I spent in prison I felt like one in a dream," Florence wrote. "I could not realize that to-morrow, the glad to-morrow, would bring with it freedom and life."

Upon her release, Florence returned to America and got to work on her second act. She chronicled her trial, her experience in prison and her arguments for reform in an autobiography she published in December, five months later.

Feeling strongly about improving prison conditions to make life better for prisoners, she traveled around the country speaking to packed venues and conducting evaluations of their local jails.

Ron Suresha, a Connecticut author and editor who is writing a book on Florence's last years, told *Lagniappe* even though Florence considered her reform work a hobby, she had a real effect.

"She is said to be single-handedly responsible for ending 'the water table,' which is basically waterboarding, which was a punitive prison practice at the time. She apparently got that abolished in Oklahoma and perhaps other states," he said.

He and Hutto agreed her return to Mobile on the reform tour was a triumph. People filled the Battle House Hotel in December 1908 to hear her speak, and told newspaper reporters they remembered her and her family well 40 years later.

But her triumph was short-lived. When her tour manager ran away with her money a few years later, Florence relocated to the small town of Gaylordsville in New Milford, Connecticut, to live the rest of her life in anonymity. She used her maiden name, Chandler, as cover, and found a job working as a maid.

“However, she had absolutely no household skills whatsoever,” Suresha said. “She was brought up as a lady. She apparently could barely boil water.”

Florence bought a small plot of land and a small house with money given to her by a wealthy friend of a friend, and lived on the good graces of her neighbors. When the South Kent School opened next door in 1923, the teachers and students took care of her as one of their own.

“The school more or less took her under their wing and would bring her food, and firewood. The young boys were a big part of her life,” Suresha explained.

When she died in 1941, she outlived every member of her family, including her two children, who she never saw again after she went to prison. John O’Connell, an English-born journalist who covered her trial before he moved on to newspaper careers across America, was the only journalist allowed to see her before her funeral. The unsigned obituary he wrote about her appeared on the front page of the New York Times, surrounded by reports from Europe about World War II.

“There was someone who was there from the moment she entered public life to the moment that she exited it,” Suresha said.

As he walked down the road past the other members of the press clamoring to get a story, Suresha said, O’Connell told them Florence was, at one time, “the most beautiful woman in Liverpool.”

MRS. JACK THE RIPPER?

It was only after her death that another jaw-dropping detail of Florence’s life emerged — the possibility she had been married to and imprisoned for killing the most notorious serial killer in English history.

A diary found in Liverpool in 1996 purports to contain James Maybrick’s confession to the Ripper murders, the last of which happened before his death in November 1888. Hutto explored the claim in his book and questioned its likelihood. Hutto wondered

whether the ink and paper were old enough to be written around the end of the 19th century, and was skeptical of its provenance.



A large binder in the History Museum of Mobile's archives contained many documents tracing Maybrick's life, the details of her 1889 trial and her possible connection to Jack the Ripper.

"If he wrote this thing saying that he was Jack the Ripper and admitted it, then who had it all those years?" Hutto said. "How did it suddenly turn up almost 100 years later?"

Despite the uncertainty, James Maybrick's name still appears on lists of the Top 10 most likely Ripper suspects. But the Ripper connection theories don't end there.

Suresha took a few classes on English history and literature when he was in college, and developed a lifelong interest in the case of Jack the Ripper, the mysterious serial killer whose identity is still unknown after he murdered and mutilated five women in London's East End in 1888.

"I wouldn't call myself a 'Ripperologist' [a person who researches Jack the Ripper, his victims and possible suspects], but I did take an interest in the case and always thought it was very weird they didn't find out who the dude was," he told *Lagniappe*.

When he read Bruce Robinson's 2015 book, "They All Love Jack: Busting the Ripper," he learned more about Florence's connection to the Victorian murderer.

According to Suresha, Robinson theorized Florence's brother-in-law Michael Maybrick, a famous composer, "so despised [her] that the women that he ripped were more or less proxies for her," and killed his "stupid older brother" for marrying "this insolent little Southern thing," framed him as the Ripper and Florence as his brother's murderer.

Michael accomplished this, he continued, by enlisting another brother, Edwin, to poison James "probably with multiple doses of laudanum [liquid opium]," and insisting James's body be tested for arsenic. Because he knew about his brother's addiction, Michael knew examiners would find traces of it in his system. The explanation that Florence had been soaking flypapers in water to collect the arsenic from them for poison and not for a skincare treatment like she claimed made the "superficial case."

“After I read the book and started doing some other research, I became convinced he had gotten it correctly,” Suresha said. “That would have tied up things very nice and neatly. Scotland Yard [London’s police headquarters] would have basically gotten rid of Jack the Ripper, and then they would have more or less claimed James Maybrick had been the Ripper and Florence learned it.”

But both Hutto and Suresha agree Florence should be remembered for more than just her connection to the infamous murderer.

“[People] would be surprised to know a woman in 1889 who was well born, who did have money, who was well married could be treated this way and spend the rest of her life as an outcast,” Hutto said.

Florence struck Suresha as a fascinating and tragic figure, and his work telling her whole story led to the towns of Kent and New Milford proclaiming Oct. 23 “Florence Chandler Maybrick Day,” as what he called “an exoneration of her.”

Suresha hopes to have his biography of Florence’s later life completed by the end of the year, with 135,000 words already written.

“Bruce Robinson, he [unraveled] the mystery,” he said, “and I’m completing her story.”