

***Murder on the Mountain: Crime, Passion, and Punishment in Gilded Age New Jersey*****Peter Wosh and Patricia Schall****New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2022****232 pages****ISBN: 9781978829145****DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v9i2.340>**

At first glance, this book appears to be only a case study about the murder of an eccentric and erratic Civil War veteran, John Meierhofer, that took place on his West Orange Farm in October, 1879. In fact, it is much more than this. In January, 1881 his widow and a hired farm hand Frank Lammens were executed for his murder. Indeed, Margaret Meierhofer became the last female to be so punished by the state of New Jersey. Why, it may be asked, do these three relatively unknown immigrants merit an extended exploration of their lives and death? Wosh and Schall resolve this query by confronting three additional matters: Why did the trial receive such widespread national and local attention? What does that fact reveal about “the structure of [contemporary] information, entertainment and the legal profession?” Most important, how did issues concerning “family, gender, class, justice, community, immigration and democracy play out in this Victorian drama?” Within this context, what seems to be merely an ordinary trial is in reality much more.

Even before John’s murder, tensions between him and his wife were evident. While serving in the Union Army, John’s absence meant that Margaret functioned as “an independent, competent, and reasonable successful businesswoman who transcended idealized gender roles and appeared in control of her own environment.” When he returned from combat in June 1865, John’s behavior became more erratic, strange, and periodically violent. A local newspaper described him as “one of the lowliest men that was to be found” in New Jersey, “a poor, worn out, demented, and ignorant farmer.” One who “often wandered aimlessly about the property, muttering to himself and exhibiting anti-social behavior.”

Into this already tense environment came Frank Lammens, a Dutch immigrant who wandered onto Meierhofer's farm in September 1879. He later described himself as "a professional tramp," a term with somewhat sinister connotations for rural Americans, one supposedly addicted to sudden illnesses and physical disability, although constantly on the move. Apparently, Margaret agreed to provide Lammens with room and board in exchange for him working on the farm, an arrangement grudgingly accepted by John, but not for long. On October 9, after repeated and up to then futile efforts by Margaret to obtain assistance from community residents and local authorities concerning John's abusive conduct towards her, several policemen were persuaded to ride up to the Meierhofer farm house, and discovered John's body later that evening. In due course, after both the widow and the farmhand had been tried together, they were executed for his murder. According to the authors, this crime and resulting trials "involved all the most complex and controversial issues that appeared to be threatening American culture in the Gilded Age: uncontrolled immigration, unstable gender relations, the rise of a new breed of dangerous classes, and the breakdown of community cohesion."

Wosh and Schall use the trials as a sort of lens through which to view New Jersey's Gilded Age, an era of stress, change and uncertainty, both economic and political. The period reflected "nostalgia, myths, and other comfortable fables." Indeed, this desire "to restore a great America that in fact never had existed," represented "the contexts out of which the trials and executions arose. An inherently unequal society in a time when equality was touted as a key concept of Gilded Age America, in fact women could not yet vote nor serve on juries, and both the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments were being undermined in their application to post Reconstruction America. Further, the Meierhofer household—and Margaret in particular—represented anything but an environment wherein the classic breadwinner father and nurturing mother could merge their

talents, and thus stem “the tide of threats posed by modern civilization.” The fates of the three central characters in this study all “exposed the limits of pious political proclamations concerning democracy and equality,” elusive concepts in post-Civil War America.

Finally, the widow and the farm hand “both constituted fundamental threats to home and family as defined by the reactive conservatives of their day.” For Wosh and Schall, the continued existence of these two “proved too complex for contemporary legal and social systems to address in any sustained or systematic manner.” Victorian Americans, however, always proved resourceful in finding way to bury their own inconvenient truths....Execution offered an especially easy, socially acceptable, and seductive short term solution for eradicating disruptive outliers. Further, the authors include a comprehensible summary of the external environment, i.e. West Orange, in which the crime took place. The community reflected “relative insularity, isolation and calm.” Neither the Meierhofer farm nor Margaret in particular fit into it.

**Jonathan Lurie**  
**Rutgers University Newark (emeritus)**