

The Yates Ax Murder divide in two

This is really a Pittstown story, but I can't resist telling it. It does connect with Schaghticoke's Gothic novelist, Ann Eliza Bleecker, and it occurred during the Revolutionary War, so it's in the time frame I've been writing about. But it interests me also because it is both gruesome and poignant. I think we all have a vision of historical times as somehow being different than our own, the people more honest, harder working, more patriotic, just better people somehow. As a teacher, I always heard parents and other teachers say, "Oh, kids today are more disobedient, less disciplined, etc... than in MY day." Well, I have to say that I feel that people are just the same they always have been. Human nature is human nature. And this story is an illustration. It is also an illustration of how difficult it is to piece together a story that occurred over 200 years ago. Many of the facts I will cite below come from the hard work of Warren Broderick of Lansingburgh.

Around the time of the American Revolution, a large family surnamed Yates moved to the Schaghticoke area from Westchester County. They are not to be confused with the family of Peter Yates, the Colonel of our local militia unit during the war. He and his large family moved here about the same time, but they were of Dutch descent, from Albany. The Yates family I am speaking of was of English descent, and from the New York City area. Some of the family, including the father, Richard, were Loyalists during the war. The grown children of the family were Peter (1755-1813); Eve (1744-1825, wife of Richard Green; Rachel (1752-1825), wife of Jacob Overocker; Eleanor, wife of Dr. Samuel Jackson, and James, who is the protagonist of our story. The Jacksons were Loyalists, who left the area in 1782. They all lived in and around what is now the Melrose part of Schaghticoke, some in what is now Pittstown. Peter Yates, Eve Yates Green, and Rachel Yates Overocker are all buried in St. John's Lutheran Cemetery, at the junction of Northline Drive and Valley Falls Road.

James and his wife Elizabeth lived in the "west part of Pittstown." Three of their children, Isaac (1777), Joseph (1779), and Maria (1781) were baptized in the Gilead Lutheran Church in Brunswick. Maria's baptismal sponsors were Henry and Maria Grawberger, who lived in the Melrose area and are buried in St. John's Lutheran Cemetery. Those are the clues to where James and his family lived. There is also a James Yates on the list of those in the 14th Albany County Militia.

I was reading about the other Yates, Colonel Peter, and the border problems with Vermont in the letters of Governor George Clinton, when I came across this passage in a letter from one Simon Pendleton,

Upon the 4th instant (Dec. 4, 1781), in the Night, one James Yates, living upon the Western boundaries of Pittstown, Murdered his Wife and four Children with an Ax; the eldest 6 years of age, and the youngest a sucking child. He likewise killed his two horses, his Cow, and his Dog, which was all the living creatures he had about his house. The murderer was the first that made the discovery; nor did he attempt to make his escape. He was brought into this City (Albany), this afternoon."

Amazingly to me, there is an extensive article about the murders in Wikipedia- the unknown author cites several contemporary newspaper accounts: one in the "Connecticut Courant" in Hartford, Conn. on December 25, two in the "Massachusetts Spy" in Worcester, Mass., on December 27, 1781 and February 14, 1782, and one in the "Salem Gazette" in Salem, Mass. on February 7, 1782. The articles add the information that his neighbors said he was healthy and sane before the incident, and that Mrs. Yates and the baby were found dead at a distance from the house, apparently killed trying to flee. Also, Yates went to his parents' home nearby the next morning in the nude and confused, and that he felt he had been killing Indians and had been "tempted to this horrid deed by the spirit."

In the next column, I will continue the story and connect it with our own local Gothic novelist, Ann Eliza Bleecker, who wrote about the event at the time it occurred. Stay tuned!