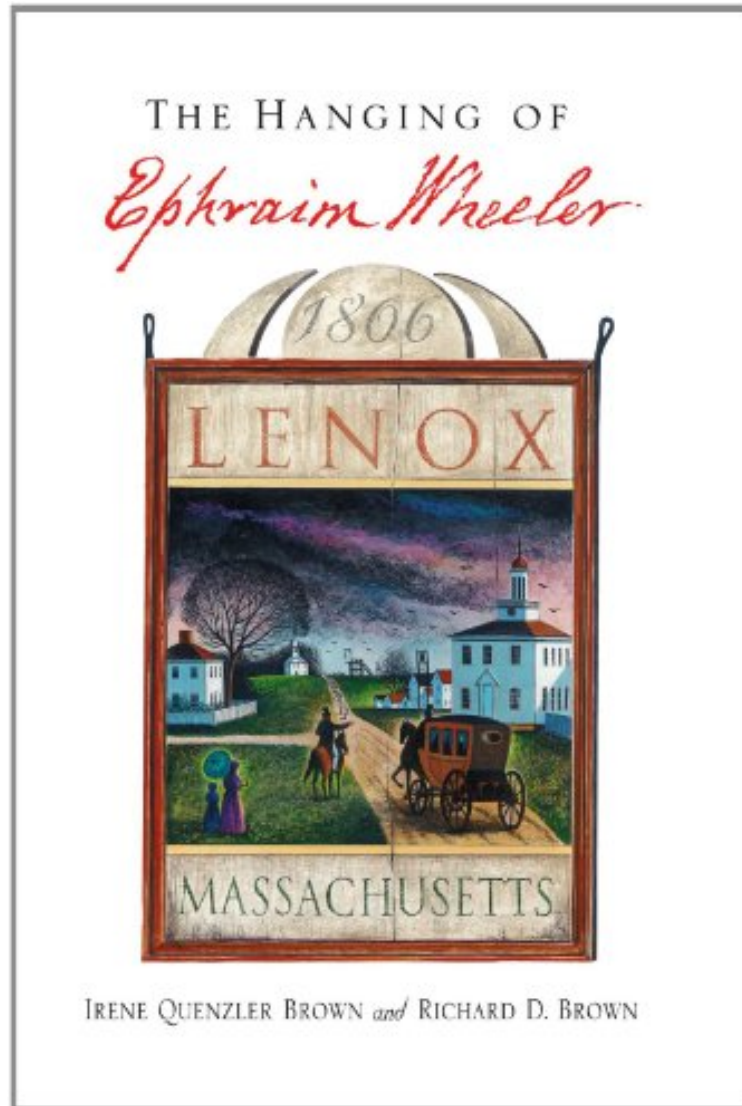


The Hanging of Ephraim Wheeler: A Story of Rape, Incest, and Justice in Early America

Irene Quenzler Brown, Richard D. Brown
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Irene Quenzler Brown, Richard D. Brown : The Hanging of Ephraim Wheeler: A Story of Rape, Incest, and Justice in Early America before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Hanging of Ephraim Wheeler: A Story of Rape, Incest, and Justice in Early America:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. I don't know if this book is great, but it is certainly importantBy meredith hoppinI don't know if this book is great, but it is certainly important. I live in Williamstown, MA, and I feel

that I understand the rumblings of the world around me on every level -- and I am only half-way through. But don't think you need to live where I do. Live anywhere, and you can imagine this world. This is an important book. 2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Well Researched Book By RJDASSlow reading; a little too much of the authors' perspective, but all in all very well researched and interesting story. 14 of 20 people found the following review helpful. history with a twist By Rachel MedberyA great read. The authors' dynamically combine history and conventional issues while telling the story of a misfortunate man and his family in the 1800's. This book does a fabulous job of examining the politics of law and their relation to capital punishment.

In 1806 an anxious crowd of thousands descended upon Lenox, Massachusetts, for the public hanging of Ephraim Wheeler, condemned for the rape of his thirteen-year-old daughter, Betsy. Not all witnesses believed justice had triumphed. The death penalty had become controversial; no one had been executed for rape in Massachusetts in more than a quarter century. Wheeler maintained his innocence. Over one hundred local citizens petitioned for his pardon--including, most remarkably, Betsy and her mother. Impoverished, illiterate, a failed farmer who married into a mixed-race family and clashed routinely with his wife, Wheeler existed on the margins of society. Using the trial report to reconstruct the tragic crime and drawing on Wheeler's jailhouse autobiography to unravel his troubled family history, Irene Quenzler Brown and Richard D. Brown illuminate a rarely seen slice of early America. They imaginatively and sensitively explore issues of family violence, poverty, gender, race and class, religion, and capital punishment, revealing similarities between death penalty politics in America today and two hundred years ago. Beautifully crafted, engagingly written, this unforgettable story probes deeply held beliefs about morality and about the nature of justice.

From Publishers WeeklyHistory's grand narratives--the American Revolution, the Civil War, the Gold Rush--are always crowd pleasers, but microhistory, on the scale of everyday persons and singular events, draws readers seeking a more intimate encounter. The case unfolded here, of a man executed for raping his daughter, offers such an experience, bringing readers face to face with a family torn by domestic violence and civic authorities struggling with questions of justice. Throughout the book, Brown and Brown, both professors at the University of Connecticut, balance a historical perspective on rural Massachusetts in the early 1800s with a sympathetic portrait of each character. After a journalistic reporting of the Wheeler trial, the authors take a psychological approach to the story from the viewpoints of Betsy, the 13-year-old victim; Hannah, the abused wife; and Ephraim, the father, who insisted that he had been framed. The authors also follow the judges, the state councilors and the governor through the decision to uphold capital punishment and, particularly, to deny petitions for Ephraim's life. If the authors go a bit far in transposing modern psychology to these early Americans, they clearly distinguish documented facts from conjectures about the individuals' thoughts and emotions. Wheeler was hanged two centuries ago, yet the authors effectively demonstrate that there were never uncomplicated solutions to the perennial problems of family violence and criminal justice. 14 photos, 1 map. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc. From BooklistIn a forceful reminder of just how long Americans have debated the morality of capital punishment, two gifted historians revisit a post-Revolutionary Massachusetts community struggling to adjudicate the ugly case of a dissolute sailor and farmhand--one Ephraim Wheeler--accused of raping his daughter. Careful scrutiny of the evidence leaves little doubt about Wheeler's guilt. Still, a community anxious to distance itself from the bloody rigor of contemporary British jurisprudence was troubled by doubts about the justice of ending an almost 30-year hiatus of executions for rape. In limning the personality of the man whose fate lay in the balance, the authors uncover few virtues. Yet they do illuminate sufficient humanity to account for the petitions from 103 local residents for clemency. But the governor refused to intervene. And so the taut narrative of Wheeler's last moments--the sudden release of the supporting plank, the jerk of the rope, the frantic death struggle of the suspended man--leaves modern readers wrestling with the same questions that troubled nineteenth-century witnesses of the harrowing event. Bryce ChristensenCopyright American Library Association. All rights reserved The Hanging of Ephraim Wheeler is a haunting book that will engage the reader at every level--analytical, historical, and above all emotional. With exceptional insight and rare grace, the Browns describe an early republic at least as compelling and perhaps more real than the glamour of the Founding Fathers. (Jon Butler, author of *Becoming America*)In small places, a sordid crime, and a shattered family, Irene and Richard Brown find the pieces to craft a haunting and powerful tale that illuminates the dark corners of the early republic. Thoroughly researched and crisply narrated, *The Hanging of Ephraim Wheeler* insightfully explores the interplay of elite journalists, lawyers, judges, and politicians with a hardscrabble family violently wrenched into a tragic melodrama of American crime and punishment. (Alan Taylor, University of California, Davis)*The Hanging of Ephraim Wheeler* is an absolute gem, through which elemental shafts of human experience are powerfully refracted. Like most microhistories, it spotlights a remarkable story. But, more than most, it touches themes and trends of the widest significance: race, class, and gender; justice and vengeance; love and hate; good and evil. And, perhaps more than any, it discloses the mysterious blend of sharing and difference that underlies all our relations to the past. (John Demos, Yale University)Irene and Richard Brown tell their chilling story with clarity, drama, and compassion. Melding family history with social and political history, they show how small decisions by ordinary people can reshape public debate, and they show the instability as well as the

power of that old triad race, class, and gender. (Laurel Ulrich, author of *A Midwife's Tale*) Through the case of Ephraim Wheeler, Irene and Richard Brown give us new entry into the worlds of early nineteenth-century New England: of the laborer Ephraim and his wife, Hannah, a woman of color; of the judges who condemned him for raping his daughter; of the governor of Massachusetts, who refused to pardon him. The Browns' deep digging and careful reconstruction show us family struggles among the poor, sexual disorder, the power of patriarchy, quarrels about the death penalty, and much more. A stunning achievement in family history and the history of law--and a marvelous read. (Natalie Zemon Davis, author of *The Return of Martin Guerre*) History's grand narratives--the American Revolution, the Civil War, the Gold Rush--are always crowd pleasers, but microhistory, on the scale of everyday persons and singular events, draws readers seeking a more intimate encounter. The case unfolded here, of a man executed for raping his daughter, offers such an experience, bringing readers face to face with a family torn by domestic violence and civic authorities struggling with questions of justice. Throughout the book, Brown and Brown...balance a historical perspective on rural Massachusetts in the early 1800s with a sympathetic portrait of each character...Wheeler was hanged two centuries ago, yet the authors effectively demonstrate that there were never uncomplicated solutions to the perennial problems of family violence and criminal justice. (Publishers Weekly 2003-03-10) In a forceful reminder of just how long Americans have debated the morality of capital punishment, two gifted historians revisit a post-Revolutionary Massachusetts community struggling to adjudicate the ugly case of a dissolute sailor and farmhand--one Ephraim Wheeler--accused of raping his daughter. Careful scrutiny of the evidence leaves little doubt about Wheeler's guilt. Still, a community anxious to distance itself from the bloody rigor of contemporary British jurisprudence was troubled about the justice of ending an almost 30-year hiatus of executions for rape...[Brown and Brown] illuminate sufficient humanity to account for the petitions from 103 local residents for clemency. But the governor refused to intervene. And so the taut narrative of Wheeler's last moments--the sudden release of the supporting plank, the jerk of the rope, the frantic death struggle of the suspended man--leaves modern readers wrestling with the same questions that troubled nineteenth-century witnesses of the harrowing event. (Bryce Christensen Booklist 2003-04-15) There were hundreds of people filling the church, the Browns write, as Wheeler, his wrists and ankles in chains, "clanked his way forward to the seat before the pulpit on the rough pine coffin he was scheduled to occupy." It is such details--all evoking the hill-country life of early 19th-century Berkshire County--that give *The Hanging of Ephraim Wheeler* color and vibrancy...From contemporary reports, the Browns...have assembled a richly nuanced account...and place the trial in its social and political context. (Michael Kenney *Boston Globe* 2003-04-15) *The Hanging of Ephraim Wheeler* is at once a stark human drama superbly well told and a work of exceptional scholarship. The setting is that of Ethan Frome, and in all the book casts something of the same haunting spell, except that here the story is true in every detail. My admiration for the skillful and consistently fair-minded way Irene and Richard Brown have rendered the story could not be greater. (David McCullough, author of *John Adams*) As the Browns sensitively piece together this meticulously researched history, we see how the marginal life stories of the Wheelers clashed with the mainstream ambitions of government officials, lawyers and clergymen. The dynamic interplay of personalities, politics and principles determined not only what happened but also the severity of the punishment. This is a very insightful book. (Lester P. Lee, Jr. *Times Literary Supplement* 2003-08-22) *The Hanging of Ephraim Wheeler* provides a vibrant recreation of the life and death of one convicted felon in an early nineteenth-century New England town. Irene and Richard Brown's thoroughly readable and engaging microhistory is its own case study for the success of the genre *The Hanging of Ephraim Wheeler* provides significant insights into how capital punishment cases were adjudicated and how communities and families weighed in on the ultimate sentencing of convicted felons. Scholars and student of legal history will benefit greatly from the book's realistic re-enactment of the roles played by lawyers, judges, and other legal and community officials in such capital cases This book is a readable and informative model of how a single incident can be used to illuminate a much broader slice of American life and history. (Sharon Block *Journal of Social History*) The Browns provide a rich analysis of the various elements of Wheeler's story, and in the telling they provide a micro-history in which issues of gender, race and class, family violence and poverty, theories of punishment, and death penalty politics intersect...The authors even-handedly present the competing perspectives on what "really" happened in 1805 and 1806, from the viewpoints of Wheeler's wife and daughter, the prosecutor and the court, the community and the press, and Ephraim Wheeler himself. From all of the perspectives, it is clear there can be no single "true" version of these events. This uncertainty provides the book with the air of a mystery in the vein of *The Return of Martin Guerre*, the acknowledged inspiration behind the Brown's work...*The Hanging of Ephraim Wheeler* is a wonderful read, generally persuasive in its interpretations, and likely to become a benchmark book against which other micro-histories of the early republic will be judged. It is also an eloquent reminder of what remains to be done to purge the American judicial system of the vagaries, arbitrariness, and rank injustices associated with the death penalty. Only abolition will do. (James E. Crimmins *Eighteenth-Century Book s Online*)