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Welles Descendant Was First Victim of
The Maniacal Ax Murderer of Woodbridge, New Year's Day, 1856

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The *Hartford Daily Courant*, in its issue of 3 January 1856, p. 2, col. 4, provides the information:

**Terrible Affair with a Maniac
Two Men Murdered!
GREAT EXCITEMENT IN WOODBRIDGE.**

The father of Hon. N. D. Sperry, Secretary of State, and a farmer, named Ichabod Umberfield, were cruelly and savagely killed by a lunatic named Charles Sanford, in the town of Woodbridge, on Tuesday... He seems to have accidentally encountered Mr. Sperry, in his sleigh, about a half mile from the main road, on what is called the Shunpike, about 11 o'clock A. M.; to have made an assault on Mr. Sperry; dragged him from his sleigh ... Mr. Sperry was struck first on the right temple with the head of the axe; then another blow just above the right ear, both of which produced fractures of the skull. He was then struck with the edge of the axe on the neck, the blow entering just under the chin, which it wounded and nearly severed his head from his body.

Enoch Sperry, a seventh-generation descendant of Gov. Thomas Welles, had been an elderly man and a quiet farmer in Woodbridge, Connecticut. He was also the father of the very successful N. D. Sperry, Secretary of State in Connecticut. On New Year's Day 1856, while in his sleigh heading home, Enoch was attacked by a young man named Charles Sanford. Sanford attacked with an ax, cutting Enoch's head off. Sanford then went to a nearby house. The woman there locked herself in the bedroom with her children. Ichabod Umberfield came home and tried to talk sense into Sanford. The two sat in armchairs by the fire while the terrified family members remained in the bedroom. Suddenly, Sanford jumped up and beheaded Umberfield. Sanford was deranged by all accounts.

As dramatic as this episode was, it was calm compared to the event which had triggered it. Charles Sanford had been sent over the edge of reason by a murder on Christmas Day 1856. In that murder, one of his uncles by marriage had been strangled while being held down by one of his aunts. Although this maudlin family tragedy took place within the Sanford extended family and had no Welles descendants directly involved, it still makes an interesting story. It is the story of a small religious sect in New Haven known to posterity as the Wakemanites. And it is a story that we can play out as it

appeared in the newspapers of the time. [Just one note here: I have used online scanned images, so these reports come from all over the U.S., but not from the *Hartford Courant*. Connecticut newspapers did carry the news, but they are simply not available yet in online versions.]

The first item to appear came Thursday, 27 December 1855, in the *Hornellsville Tribune*, published in Hornellsville, New York. It was a small paragraph buried in a list of events on page 2:

The body of Justus Matthews [no relationship to me], a workman, was found dead Monday morning last, in the western suburbs of New Haven, Ct. His throat was cut and his wrists were tied. He was in the house of Rhoda Wakeman, and had been connected with a band of Millerites, spiritualists, or something of the kind. Several of his brethren have been arrested on suspicion of having a hand in the murder, and are now in prison.

In the following week's issue, on Thursday, 3 January 1856, the *Hornellsville Tribune* carried the following item on page 2:

Double Murder at Woodbridge, Conn.

New-Haven, Wednesday, Jan. 2, 1856.

Two murders were committed in Woodbridge, six miles from the city, yesterday, by Charles Sanford, an insane man about 26 years old. It is supposed that he was in the woods chopping, and that when he came out he killed Enoch Sperry, who was riding by in his sleigh. Mr. Sperry's head was cut off. He was the father of N. D. Sperry, Secretary of State. Sanford then went to the house of Ichabod UMBERFIELD, a farmer, and killed him with his ax. Sanford is in jail. He appears to be a raving maniac. He is the nephew of Alemeron Sanford, who was one of the Wakemanites arrested on suspicion of connection with the recent murder of Justus Matthews. Sanford has been two or three times at the Insane Retreat. To day he is muttering a senseless jargon, with occasional oaths. — *N. Y. Tribune*.

The Burlington, Iowa, *Weekly Hawk-Eye and Telegraph*, in its issue of Wednesday, 9 January 1856, carried the full story on its front page. It led off with a lurid headline:

A Human Sacrifice — New Haven Witchcraft

Yesterday's telegraph said that Samuel Sly has confessed the murder of Justus Matthews, and that the deceased was killed because he had an evil spirit which

tormented Sly's sister, a prophetess, that pretends to have risen from the dead.

From the New Haven Register we give some particulars as to this strange case. That paper says:

It seems that there exists in the upper part of the city a peculiar religious sect known as 'Wakemanites,' who have made their doctrine known by holding meetings at the house of a Mr. Sam'l Sly, who lives in a lane or alley between Dixwell and Beaver streets.

This Mr. Sly has nowife or family, but has a woman living with him named Rhoda Wakeman, who is the founder of the sect called the 'Wakemanites.' This woman affirms that she was murdered some 30 years ago, and went to heaven, and for some reason, she does not state, came back on earth and founded the sect already alluded to. She preaches and prays, and holds meetings at her house, giving to those who assemble to hear her peculiar stories, her views about the Bible and her experience in the spiritual world. Among her believers and followers, are many families who live in Hamden, and they are in the habit of coming down to her house every Sunday to attend meeting. She held meeting at her house last Sunday evening, and there were present at the meeting A. Sanford and his wife, J. Matthews, Betsy Keeler, a Mrs. Davis, and a colored man named Josiah Jackson. They met about 2 o'clock Sunday afternoon and continued their meeting until a late hour in the night.

On Monday morning, Justus Matthews, was found in a lower room of Rhoda Wakeman's house, dead, with his throat cut from ear to ear. A coroner's inquest was held and a portion of the testimony is as follows:

Almeron Sanford sworn — I went to the house of Mr. Sly with my wife about dark, on Sunday evening, got to the house about two hours after we started; we got there and found Josiah Jackson, Wooding, Miss Hersey, Miss Abby, Julia Davis, and Samuel Sly there; Justus Matthews is my wife's brother; I found them in the chamber singing and praying; about 11 o'clock Matthews came to the house; Widow Wakeman said she was hunted by Matthews — the 'man of power' with an evil spirit; when Matthews came he went into the front room, where there was a fire; Rhoda Wakeman wanted Matthews to come to the meeting, so I went to see him and he seemed willing to come; when he came my wife tied a handkerchief she had over his forehead, and they tied his hands behind him, the same as they would the devil; I told him he had a bad spirit, and he

wanted to give it up; Jackson and Wooding were with him, and talked with him about the evil spirit, widow Wakeman said he was drawing a terrible power over her; Wooding told Matthews he ought to be killed, and Matthews said he was willing to die to quench the evil spirit; Wooding and Jackson said Matthews must be got out of the way; they told him he must die; it was about 1 o'clock when I heard a noise; Wooding, Sly, and Miss Hersey were up stairs praying with us, but dodged down stairs and soon I heard them say down below, 'He's killing the messenger;' I heard a gurgling noise and several blows follow, and started towards the door, but they pulled me back, saying, 'If he's killing himself he'll be raised;' I heard a gurgling noise and cry of Oh! Oh! Oh! I then went up stairs to sing and pray; when I reached the door I found it fastened and something braced against it inside; I could not get into the room below; this occurred about 12 o'clock, and I left the house 20 minutes past 4.

I walked to Hamden, about 6 miles, last night; I have not changed my clothes since the murder; as Wooding and Sly dodged out in such a manner, I think they might have helped kill Matthews; I think Matthews was willing to die; Sly said he thought he ought to die; after I heard the noises and cries, Sly came running up stairs and kneeled down and seemed to be praying; I thought he could not pray much, for I thought he would not feel like it then; they believed that is Widow Wakeman (the prophetess) should die, the *world would be destroyed*. I should think that from appearances he did not kill himself; If they (Wooding and Sly) killed Matthews, it was to keep him from enchanting Widow Wakeman who was disturbed by his evil spirit.

Mrs. Sanford, wife of Almeron Sanford, and sister of the murdered man, testified among other things, as follows:

I tied a handkerchief over my brother's eyes to prevent his enchanting us; the "messenger" said this was the only way to prevent the evil spirit he had in him from enchanting us; I tied his wrists together with a cord; I said to him, "I do this for the glory of God, and in the fear of the Lord"; we talked with him some length of time about his evil spirit; we then went up stairs and went to praying for him, and continued praying until midnight; when he came, the messenger (Mrs. Wakeman) felt his presence and felt bad, and although she was not informed of it, still she knew he was coming; we all believed that if Mrs. Wakeman the messenger was enchanted by this evil spirit, and died, the judgment would come; we all believe that Mrs. Wakeman

is a messenger sent by God on earth, to redeem mankind; we are all her followers, and believe that if Matthew's evil spirit enchanted her she would die; we thought he had better die than to have the messenger; this evil spirit came from Amos Hunt some time last summer; after he got it he went home, and his wife went into convulsions, and seemed to know that her husband had an evil spirit; she prayed for him and tried to get that unseen power away from him; there was something dreadful in his appearance then; I believe that there is an unseen power that will destroy people, and they will not know it; this is revealed by the messenger; my brother's wife tell an awful story about the effect his evil spirit had on her, she is also a believer; the messenger has revelations from God, and is directed to command her followers to execute her wishes, however,

She declares that Matthews, her brother, was the "man of sin" and she urged him to have the evil spirit cast out of him; witness continued to say that she believed if the man of sin could be put out of the way, the world would be redeemed; she said she wished to have the evil spirit cast out of her brother, and thought that by so doing the world would be benefited; in conclusion the witness testified that she did not believe he killed himself.

Abigail Sables testified — I have lived and slept with Mrs. Wakeman (the prophetess) and am her particular friend; I believe no one knows Mrs. Wakeman but God! We thought Mrs. Wakeman was dying several times during the night, and she appeared to be in great distress; I believe the judgement would come if Mrs. Wakeman should die; Matthews was drawing away her spirit with his evil powers; I believe upon my heart and soul that Mrs. Wakeman was sent into the world by God, to redeem and save the world; Matthews fasted for three days in order to starve out the evil spirit; there was a report that we starved him, but this was not true; on the evening already alluded to, Matthews was willing to offer himself up as a sacrifice, and wanted to die, if by so doing the millennium would come.

Israel Wooding sworn — I was at the house when Matthews came there; I saw him about an hour after that, I told him I believed the evil spirit he had would carry the world down to hell and me too; he was lying on the sofa when I was in the room, with his eyes blindfolded; I only talked with him once that evening; I don't remember that I told him he ought to die, but I did tell him that the evil

spirit he had was killing Mrs. Wakeman, and it was better to have him die than to have the whole world die.

Samuel Sly, after giving his testimony as to finding Matthews dead in the room, finally confessed the murder, and said that he first knocked Matthews down with a club, then cut his throat.

It is in the *Weekly Hawk-Eye and Telegraph* that we find the results of the trial, on the second page of the issue of 28 April 1856:

New Haven, April 17.

The jury in the trial of Samuel Slye, the widow Wakeman and Thankful Hersey for the murder of Justus Matthews, this P.M., returned a verdict of not guilty, on the sole ground of insanity. The parties were all tried on the indictment. The result was generally anticipated.

On 7 July 1865, nearly ten years after the murder of Justus Matthews, Samuel Sly starved himself to death. As the *New York Times*, issue of 10 July 1865, p. 4 (quoting the *New Haven Palladium*) stated rather tongue-in-cheek, "His end was peaceful and he maintained his perceptions of all that was going on around him; retaining to the last also his impressions that he was the prophet Elijah".

As far as Charles Sanford goes, his outcome was rather different. In spite of being adjudged by all who saw him in Woodbridge as a deranged man, Charles had the misfortune to kill in Enoch Sperry an elderly man who was both well respected and the father of a politically powerful man. Probably as a result, Charles Sanford was found guilty. He "was convicted and sentenced to be hanged, but a fatal attack of small-pox cheated the gallows" (*New York Times*, issue of 10 May 1879, p. 2, "The Wakeman Fanatics"). That is, if a disease as unpleasant as small-pox can be said to be an improvement over hanging.