



Questioned Documents Section - 2015

J24 The American Dreyfus Affair: Parallels Between the Alfred Dreyfus and the Leo Frank Matters in America

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After attending this presentation, attendees will learn about the historical aspects of a notorious murder case that took place in Atlanta, GA, in 1913 and the involvement of questioned documents.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by discussing how forensic science and the judicial system has evolved over the past 100 years.

In 1913, Mary Phagan, a teenage worker at the National Pencil Factory in Atlanta, GA, was found murdered in the basement of the factory. A handwritten note, in two pieces, was left at the murder scene and was the initial focal point of the investigation. This discussion will highlight the ensuing investigation by the Atlanta Police Department, the Pinkerton Detective Agency, and the defense team for Leo Frank, the factory superintendent who was ultimately charged with Phagan's murder.

Leo Frank, of Jewish descent, was born in Texas but, as a young man, moved to New York City with his family. He ultimately graduated from Cornell University with a degree in Mechanical Engineering. His uncle and two investors owned the National Pencil Factory in Atlanta, GA, and needed someone to take over its daily operation. They convinced Frank to travel to Germany to learn the pencil manufacturing process before taking charge of the factory. He spent approximately a year in Germany learning the business and, after returning to the United States, took over supervision of the Atlanta factory. Frank became a prominent member of the Atlanta Jewish community, at that time the largest in the American southeast.

Leo Frank ultimately became the focus in the murder investigation of Mary Phagan. He was tried and convicted of Phagan's murder and sentenced to death. The governor of Georgia commuted his sentence to life in prison hoping that Frank would be exonerated. Not satisfied with this, a vigilante mob dragged Leo Frank from the prison and took him to a remote area where he was hung. Some news articles of the time termed this tragedy as the American Dreyfus Affair. The parallels are similar as to the anti-Semitic aspects against both the principals, Alfred Dreyfus and Leo Frank, and their hatred by the public.

Questioned Documents, Murder, Anti-Semitism