LW3 Murder of the Schoolmarm: The First School Shooting

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Learning Overview: The goal of this presentation is for attendees to become familiar with techniques of shooting incident reconstruction and evidence collection used in a historic 1850 shooting incident.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by showing how firearms evidence was utilized in an early (1850) shooting reconstruction and how the same techniques can be currently utilized to perform a shooting reconstruction.

This incident was an early documented shooting reconstruction and from historical research it appears to be the first school shooting in the United States.

In 1850, the local schoolmarm was fatally shot as she attempted to unlock the one-room schoolhouse early one morning. The weapon was a shotgun. The fatal wounds were in the left side of her head where pellets had penetrated. There were also pellet strikes on the schoolhouse door, which was behind her. There were no witnesses, but one key piece of evidence was a shotgun wadding found between a nearby tree and the schoolhouse. The wadding was a small section of paper that, after an investigation by the local sheriff, incriminated a young man who was charged with murder. A basic shooting reconstruction was performed by placing a broom straw into one of the perforating holes in the schoolhouse door. This straw pointed back toward a location near a tree where footprints were found in the dirt, which also implicated the suspect. Although the suspect denied involvement in the shooting, key evidence was recovered from his clothing that proved to be of high probative value. The suspect was charged with the murder and a trial was held.

The historical official records of the trial were obtained and the details of this incident made possible a review of the investigation and the trial testimony, which was hand-recorded in the courtroom. The trial resulted in the defendant being found guilty and sentenced to death by hanging.

A key element in the trial was examined in this study's experiment utilizing a similar black powder shotgun and newspaper. High-speed videography was used to show several aspects of the projectiles and wadding dynamics. The purpose of the experiment was to determine the possibility that paper used as wadding would not be burnt or destroyed during the black powder ignition. This presentation will show how the trajectory reconstruction was performed and how the paper wadding was used to convict the suspect. A video demonstration and re-enactment will be utilized to demonstrate the operation of the double-barrel black powder shotgun used in the incident and how the paper wadding was identified to the suspect.

Shooting Reconstruction, Shotgun, School Shooting