

Book Report by Ivy Trumpour

The Sewing Girl's Tale. A Story of Crime and Consequences in Revolutionary America,
by John Wood Sweet. Henry Holt and Company, New York. 2022. ISBN: 9781250761965

If you would like to know what daily life was like in Manhattan during the 1790s, this is a book for you. It is an account of the date rape of a 17 year old working girl by an upper class "gentleman" and the court cases which followed. It is hard to imagine that such an event could fill 286 pages (and 60 pages of notes), but there are many details about other characters and similar trials. The author seems to have done an astounding amount of research.

Lanah Sawyer was the unfortunate victim who had to repeatedly describe details of the assault to judges, lawyers and jury, all of whom were elite white men. At the same time, she was almost on the sidelines because the general attitude was that her stepfather was the one who had been wronged. In fact, even after sitting through the trial, her assailant thought her name was Helenah.

The rape trial took place within weeks of the event, and at the time the penalty was death. The verdict caused a riot, and later there was a seduction trial, for which the penalty was a fine. The higher the status of the woman seduced, the greater the fine because a high class woman was of greater value than a lowly servant girl or black woman. The charge was made by the husband or father of the victim, and he received the money if the jury decided in his favour.

In addition to discussions of the court cases, there are descriptions of the businesses, farms and lodgings that existed at the time. New York was still recovering and rebuilding after the recent revolution. Lanah's stepfather was a pilot boat driver and this occupation is explained in detail.

There is even a mention of a Loyalist family that had returned to America after spending a few years in England. The daughter, Susanna Rowson (née Haswell) was a celebrated author.

Due to the paucity of records and the insignificance of women, information about Lanah's later life is scant. There is more to be found about the rapist, Harry Bedlow, and his difficulties with money, women and family.

Lanah was a seamstress, and as a stitcher myself, I was intrigued by the photograph of a darning sampler made by Anna Hofmann. This marvellous work can be seen online at diligentneedle.winterthur.org/diligence/darning-sampler and was included in the book as an example of the type of sewing that Lanah may have done.