

Project Canterbury  
*The Tories of Chippeny Hill, Connecticut*  
by E. LeRoy Pond.  
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CHAPTER VII  
**MOSES DUNBAR**

THERE was one man who drew to Chippeny Hill the critical eyes of the entire State. He was Moses Dunbar, who was captured on or near Chippeny Hill, and who was the only person executed as a traitor as a result of trial by law in Connecticut during the Revolution. It was a tragedy meet for a poet's pen.

The best account is that given by Moses Dunbar himself in his short biography, and by some of the contemporary records of the day. I will give them here as they are given, asking that in reading the unadorned written records you forget not the green hills near the Ledges and the loyal farmhouses that loved him well.

Dunbar's biography is as follows:

"I was born at Wallingford in Connecticut, the 14th of June, A.D. 1746, being the second of sixteen children, all born to my Father by one Mother. My Father, John Dunbar, was born at Wallingford, and married Temperance Hall of the same place, about the year 1743. I was educated in the business of husbandry. About the year 1760, my father removed himself and family to Waterbury where, May ye 30th, I was married to Phebe Jearman of Farmington [i. e. Phebe Jerome of Chippeny Hill] , by whom I had seven children, four of whom are now living. The first year of our marriage my wife and I, upon what we thought sufficient and rational motives, declared ourselves for the Church of England, the Rev. Mr. Scoville being then missionary at Waterbury. May 20th, my honored mother departed this life. She was a woman of much virtue and good reputation, whom I remember with the most honor and gratitude for the good care and affection she continually showed me. My joining myself to the Church occasioned a sorrowful breach between my father and myself, which was the cause of his never assisting me but very little in gaining a livelihood, likewise it caused him to treat me very harshly in many instances, for which I heartily forgive him, as I hope pardon from my God and my Saviour for my own offences. I likewise earnestly pray God to forgive them through Christ." [Dunbar's father later offered to furnish the hemp for a halter to hang him with.]

"From the time that the present unhappy misunderstanding between Great Britain and the Colonies began, I freely confess I never could reconcile my opinion to the necessity or lawfulness of taking up arms against Great Britain.

Having spoken somewhat freely on the subject, I was attacked by a mob of about forty men, very much abused, my life threatened and nearly taken away, by which mob I was obliged to sign a paper containing many falsehoods. May 20, 1776, my wife deceased in full hope of future happiness. .... The winter preceding this trial had been a time of distress with us.\* ... I had now concluded to live peaceable and give no offence, neither by word nor deed. I had thought of entering into a voluntary confinement within the limits of my farm, and of making proposals of that nature, when I was carried before the Committee and by them ordered to suffer imprisonment during their pleasure not exceeding five months. When I had remained there about fourteen days, the authority of New Haven dismissed me. [Waterbury was in New Haven County.] Finding my life uneasy, and, as I had reason to apprehend, in great danger, I thought it my safest method to flee to Long Island, which I accordingly did.

"But having a desire to see my friends and children, and being under engagement of marriage with her [Esther Adams] who is my wife, the banns of marriage having been before published, I returned, and was married. Having a mind to remove my wife and family to Long Island, as a place of safety, I went there the second time, to prepare matters accordingly. When there, I accepted a captain's warrant for the King's service in Colonel Fanning's regiment.

"I returned to Connecticut, when I was taken and betrayed by Joseph Smith, and was brought before the authority of Waterbury. They refused to have anything to do with the matter. I was carried before Justice Strong and Justice Whitman of Farmington, and by them committed to Hartford, where the Superior Court was then sitting. I was tried on Thursday, 23d of January, 1777, for High Treason against the State of Connecticut, by an act passed in October last, for enlisting men for General Mowe, and for having a captain's commission for that purpose. I was adjudged guilty and on the Saturday following was brought to the bar of the court and received sentence of death. The time of my suffering was afterward fixed to be the 19th day of March, 1777.

The indictment of Dunbar in abbreviated form was as follows:

"The jurors for the Governor and Company of the State of Connecticut present that one Moses Dunbar of Farmington, not having the fear of God before his eyes and being seduced by the instigation of the Devil, on or about the 10th day of November last past, and also on or about the 1st day of January, instant, did go from said Farmington to the city of New York to hold traitorous correspondence with the British troops and navy, and did join himself to the British Army and enter their service and pay, and did engage to levy war against this State, and did procure and persuade one John Adams [Dunbar's second wife's name was Adams] of said Farmington and divers others to enlist for the purpose of levying war against this State, etc."

The Connecticut *Courant* of Jan. 27, 1777, published the following:

"At the adjourned Superior Court held in this place last week, Moses Dunbar of Waterbury was convicted of having a captain's commission from General Howe and of enlisting men to serve in the ministerial army. Sentenced to suffer death but the time of his execution is not fixed upon. At the same time Rev. Mr. Nichols of Waterbury was tried for treasonable practice against the United States and was acquitted."

And on Monday, March 17 of the same year:

"Thursday last the Superior Court ended their sessions in this place. During the session the infamous Elisha Wadsworth was convicted of treasonable practices against the State for attempting to rescue Moses Dunbar, under sentence of death; said Wadsworth was ordered to pay a fine of forty pounds, to suffer one year's imprisonment, and pay costs of prosecution. [With the aid of a knife brought by Wadsworth, Dunbar cleared himself of his irons, knocked down the guard, and escaped from the jail, but was recaptured.] Next Wednesday is the day appointed for the execution of Moses Dunbar. A sermon will be preached at the Gaol to the prisoner by Rev. Mr. Jarvis of Middletown. A sermon will also be preached in the North Meeting House to the spectators by Rev. Mr. Strong of this town,"

Dunbar's biography continues:

"Which tremendous and awful day now draws near, when I must appear before the Searcher of hearts to give an account of all the deed's done in the body whether they be good or evil. I shall soon be delivered from all the pains and troubles of this wicked mortal state, and shall be answerable to All-Seeing God, who is infinitely just, and knoweth all things as they are. I am fully persuaded that I depart in a state of peace with God and my own conscience. I have but little doubt of my future happiness, through the merits of Jesus Christ. I have sincerely repented of all my sins, examined my heart, and prayed earnestly to God for mercy, for the gracious pardon of my manifold and heinous sins, I resign myself wholly to the disposal of my Heavenly Father, submitting to His Divine Will. From the bottom of my heart I forgive all enemies and earnestly pray God to forgive them all. Some part of Th----- S-----'s evidence was false, but I heartily forgive him, and likewise earnestly beg forgiveness of all persons whom I have injured or offended. Since my sentence I have been visited by sundry worthy ministers of the gospel, who have discoursed and prayed with me, among whom are the Rev. William Short of Hartford. The Rev. William Viets of Simsbury, my fellow prisoner on account of preaching in favor of the British government, has been indefatigable in affording every possible assistance to prepare me for my terrible exit. He administered the sacrament of the Lord's Supper to me the Sunday before I was put to death. To those gentlemen, as well as all others who have showed me kindness I give my most

sincere thanks. I die in the profession and communion of the Church of England. Of my political sentence I leave the readers of these lines to judge. Perhaps it is neither reasonable nor proper that I should declare them in my present situation. I cannot take the last farewell of my countrymen without desiring them to show kindness to my poor widow and children, not reflecting on them the manner of my death. Now I have given you a narrative of all things material concerning my life with that veracity which you are to expect from one who is going to leave the world and appear before the God of truth. My last advice to you is that you, above all others, confess your sins and prepare yourselves, with God's assistance, for your future and Eternal state. You will all shortly be as near Eternity as I now am, and will view both worlds in the light which I do now view them. You will then view all worldly things to be but shadows and vapors and vanity of vanities, and the things of the Spiritual world to be of importance beyond all description. You will then be sensible that the pleasures of a good conscience, and the happiness of the near prospect of Heaven, will outweigh all the pleasures and honours of this wicked world.

"God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, have mercy on me, and receive my spirit. "Amen and Amen.

"Moses Dunbar.

"Hartford, March 18th, A. D., 1777."

The Rev. Dr. Strong's discourse, with the Dunbar tragedy as its theme, is in part as follows: "The occasion of our being collected here to worship God is one of the most solemn that can be conceived. This day is appointed to close the life of an unhappy person who is condemned for conspiring against his country and all its privileges. HaJiath been judged by men in righteousness, the sentence of death pronounced, the day of execution come; an event indeed awful and affecting to every mind of humanity or religion. Though justice to our country and reverence for its laws forbids anything that would impede a full execution of them, there is room for prayer to Almighty God that this day's business may be blessed for our good, and that the unhappy criminal may receive the forgiveness of his sins from God, though he cannot have forgiveness from the State, consistent with public safety.

"For reasons, we must in charity hope, honest to himself, he refuses to be present at this solemnity; my discourse therefore will not be calculated, as hath been usual on such occasions, for a dying creature who is to appear immediately before the Great Judge: but to assist my hearers in making an improvement of the event for their own benefit. ... I will conclude with some observations suggested by the occasion of the day.

"First. It learns us to love and revere our country, to obey its laws, to devote ourselves to its service, and abhor every practice which hath any tendency to

increase the public calamities. Had the unhappy person who is soon to be executed done this, he might now have been prosperous, beloved, and respected. Now he is covered with infamy, bound in chains, surrounded with the instruments of horror and death. From his fate let us learn the danger of encouraging a traitorous disposition, and secretly attempting practices against our country: the mercy of men cannot pardon them, for darkness will not cover them, hell will not hide them.

"Secondly. The melancholy spectacle which is soon to be exhibited hath drawn together a vast concourse of people who are doubtless influenced by various motives to be spectators of so awful a scene. Some by true seriousness, and many to gratify a vain curiosity. Curiosity is but a poor motive for collecting on such an occasion. Such awful exhibitions are designed that others may see and fear. Death is there! justice and judgment are there, the power of government, displayed in its most awful form, is there.

"One reason why it is necessary the unhappy person should thus die is that others may be fortified against temptation by the spectacle of horror and the bitter consequences of transgression.

"Above all things, learn that we must die. Realize the importance of being prepared to leave the world-- how it feels to be within a few minutes of eternity! of the bar of God! of the solemn sentence which determines a state of happiness or misery forever.

"With regard to the dying criminal, while you acquiesce in the necessity of his fate, give him your prayers. Though public safety forbids him pardon from the state, he may be pardoned by God Almighty. . . . God grant that the awful scene may do us good--confirm us in holiness and virtue, in the love of God and our country--that it may guard us against temptation, and make us careful to live in all good conscience towards God and men--that we may finally lay down these tabernacles of flesh in peace, trusting in the Savior's merits, and be received to the holy presence of God.

"To Him who rules all things according to His own pleasure and wisdom, who saves the world by his blood, and sanctifies the ungodly, be praise, glory, and dominion, forever and ever, Amen."

Dunbar's parting words of affection and guidance for his children are worthy of quotation:

"MY CHILDREN. Remember your Creator in the days of your youth. Learn your Creed, the Lord's prayer, and the ten commandments and catechism, and go to church as often as you can, and prepare yourselves as soon as you are of a proper age to worthily partake of the Lord's Supper. I charge you all, never to leave the Church. Read the Bible. Love the Saviour wherever you may be. I am

now in Hartford jail condemned to death for high treason against the State of Connecticut. I was thirty years last June, the 14th. God bless you. Remember your Father and Mother and be dutiful to your present mother."

The following incident is a curious one and noteworthy from a psychic standpoint.

"I see," said Isaiah Dunbar, in his home on Town Hill in Northbury parish, "I see-," (yet he saw not, for the eyes had been dark many a long day.) "I see a sky and a man there. It is Moses Dunbar hanging!" His brothers laughed and said, "It is not so." But they inquired even as to the hour, and it was so, as he had said.

The excerpts, which follow, give some slight idea of the difference of opinion upon the Dunbar matter.

From the Connecticut *Courant*, Monday, March 24:

"Last Wednesday Moses Dunbar, who for some time had been under the sentence of death in this place for High Treason, was executed agreeable to the sentence. A prodigious concourse of people were spectators on the occasion."

From Jones' History of New York during the Revolutionary War, written between 1783 and 1788. Vol. 1, page 175.

"Early in 1777 a Captain Dunbar was taken up at Hartford in Connecticut, for enlisting men in his Majesty's service; his commission and orders from Gen. Howe were in his pocket. He was confined in prison. There happened to be no existing law in the Colony, which made such an offence punishable with death. A law was therefore made on purpose; upon which ex post facto law he was indicted and tried for treason condemned, and ordered for execution.

"No less than four expresses, at four different times, were sent to General Howe between the condemnation and the execution, to each of which the most faithful promises were made, that an application of such a serious nature should be made to the Governor of Connecticut as should insure his discharge.

"No application was ever made and while the General was lolling in the arms of his mistress and sporting his cash at the faro bank, the poor unhappy Loyalist was executed. This is a fact and the General knows it. His word, his honor, and his humanity were all sported away in this affair. Dunbar had a young wife, big with child.

On the day of execution the High Sheriff (by orders no doubt) compelled her to ride in the cart and attend the execution of her husband. This over she left

Hartford, and went to Middletown, about sixteen miles down the river, where a number of Loyalists lived and where several British subjects were living on parole. Her case being stated, a subscription was undertaken for her comfort and relief. No sooner was this hospitable act known to the Committee at Middletown than they sent for the poor woman and ordered her out of the town; declaring at the same time that if she should thereafter be found in that town she should be sent instantly to jail.

"(Note. The chairman of the Committee at this time was Titus Hosmer, Esq., a lawyer of note, one of the Council of the State, a rigid Presbyterian, a zealous republican, and a flaming rebel. He was afterwards a delegate in Congress, and commissioned by them as Judge of the Admiralty for the four New England Colonies).

"The unhappy wretch was obliged to leave the town in consequence of this inhuman order, and had it not been for the hospitality of a worthy loyal family who kindly took her under their roof, she would in all probability have been delivered in the open fields. A striking instance this of American lenity, which the rebels during the war proclaimed to the world with so much *eclat*."

This advertisement appeared in the *Connecticut Courant* for May 5, 12, 19, 26, and June 2, 1777. The most advertised pamphlet printed during the year.

Just published, and to be sold by the printer hereof, Price One Shilling

The Reasons and Designs of public Punishments;

A SERMON

Delivered before the People who were collected to the

EXECUTION

of

MOSES DUNBAR

Who was condemned for HIGH TREASON against  
the State of Connecticut, and executed  
March 19th, A. D. 1777.

By NATHAN STRONG  
Pastor of the first Church in Hartford.

Bloody and deceitful Men shall not live out half their Days.

The execution caused a great gloom among the Chippeny Hill folk. They had with them the infant Moses, who was baptized at New Cambridge after the father's death. They had also the wife and the orphaned children left in her keeping. Impulsive Chauncey Jerome, he of the athletic frame who tore himself away from the mob and the apple tree on Fall Mountain, and who was a brother of the first wife, married the widow and took her to Nova Scotia until after the war.

Years afterward she pointed out the spot on Gallows Hill near which Trinity College now stands, where her husband was hung. The story of the arch-traitor swept throughout the State and was told and retold for many years by the family fireside. In one family on Town Hill, Plymouth, where the Dunbar brothers lived, children were afraid at night to pass the cupboard in which Dr. Strong's pamphlet was known to rest and this was only sixty years ago!

I have failed to find any of the old inhabitants of Plymouth, either Dunbar's or their friends, who have aught to say of Moses Dunbar, or remember him, other than as one that should not be remembered.