



Perfection to a Fault: A Small Murder in Ossipee, New Hampshire, 1916

Janice S.C. Petrie

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This book is the non-fiction account of the events which encompassed a murder and trial at the turn of the century in Ossipee, New Hampshire. When Florence Small's smoldering body rose to the surface of the basement water, local folks immediately suspected her husband of the crime. Frederick Small was an outsider, a Boston man, who had moved to Ossipee Lake to semi-retire. There was a deep distrust of "city fellas up there behind the Ossipees," in 1916 and perhaps this suspicion was warranted. But how could Frederick have been responsible for a murder and a fire that happened 7 hours after he had left for Boston on a business trip? The sensational trial that followed was unlike any previously experienced in Carroll County. And although everybody from the Boston area to Portland, Maine, had an opinion, nobody anticipated the decision the jury would reach. The unrest on the ill-fated property remained even in 1956, when Anna Foley's unsuspecting son and daughter-in-law felt the effects of the events of 1916 one August night while vacationing on the property.

The Manchester Leader and Evening Union newspaper wrote in anticipation of a verdict, "If the state has proved its case, it has developed a new type of New Hampshire criminal. It has brought forth a cool, daring, mechanical and chemical genius, a man who scorned the ordinary forms of murder but who brought forth to the mountains of this quiet village a science which would baffle a Craig Kennedy or Sherlock Holmes. The jury of his peers will decide whether Frederick L. Small is that man or the normal individual who has been made a victim of circumstances and is being tried for a crime which he never committed and of which he had no knowledge."

Voted "Best in New Hampshire" by New Hampshire Magazine and was a featured segment on WCVB-TV Boston's "Chronicle."

Perfection to a Fault: A Small Murder in Ossipee, New Hampshire, 1916 Details

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From Reader Review Perfection to a Fault: A Small Murder in Ossipee, New Hampshire, 1916 for online ebook

Nicole says

I was excited to receive a free copy of this book, as my parents live in the Ossipee area, and I spent a lot of time there as a child before they moved there. I had no previous knowledge about this murder, and I liked how this book moved fluidly through the history of the area and backwards to the actual murder itself. It was interesting to read about how trials were pursued even with the lack of forensic evidence of the early 1900s. Ms. Petrie obviously did a lot of research, which was great for a history-buff like myself, especially because I had been to the area many times before. Overall, it was an enjoyable read!

Pam says

This book caught my attention because my husband & I had been traveling around New Hampshire. When we came to the town of Ossipee, NH_ we declared this is a most beautiful place, especially the covered bridge in the Fall! Found this book in a little store_ was NOT disappointed. It is based on an actual murder.

This book is the non-fiction account of the events which encompassed a murder and trial at the turn of the century in Ossipee, New Hampshire. When Florence Small's smoldering body rose to the surface of the basement water, local folks immediately suspected her husband of the crime. Frederick Small was an outsider, a Boston man, who had moved to Ossipee Lake to semi-retire. There was a deep distrust of "city fellas up there behind the Ossipees," in 1916 and perhaps this suspicion was warranted. But how could Frederick have been responsible for a murder and a fire that happened 7 hours after he had left for Boston on a business trip? The sensational trial that followed was unlike any previously experienced in Carroll County. And although everybody from the Boston area to Portland, Maine, had an opinion, nobody anticipated the decision the jury would reach. The unrest on the ill-fated property remained even in 1956, when Anna Foley's unsuspecting son and daughter-in-law felt the effects of the events of 1916 one August night while vacationing on the property.

A PAGE TURNER!

Kamalendu Nath says

The Book: Although far from a literary work (poorly written), it's a historic crime story with intriguing situational developments, making it sort of a thriller. Being from an adjacent town it was of additional interest to me. Based largely on available documents and interviews the directions the plot takes, questions unanswered and the outcome cannot be questioned.

I found the title catchy, "Perfection to a Fault". Also, the use of "Small" in subtitle (town & protagonist's name) is clever. Historical narration of the town of Ossipee was educational.

The Story: The first chapter appears to be a prologue and I didn't much care for the superstition part in it. However, it introduces the infamous shorefront summer cottage, acquired by Joe and Anna Foley (children

and grandchildren) from Dorchester, MA in 1956 (author's connection).

So, the plot begins on Sept. 28, 1916, in a 2-story cottage on the Ossipee Lake (\$900) owned by Small family (Fredrick and Florence), married for two years. Fredrick is a stock broker (MA state based), a handy man – helps neighbors (run a telephone wire; fix outdoor motor) and has done a side addition to his cottage (workshop). Fieldstone basement causes water seepage.

The last person to see Florence alive was the grocer during his delivery around 11am. Mr. Connor, principal of High School (profited from ventures with Fredrick) is coerced on to a business trip by Fredrick that afternoon to Boston (scheduled before for a later date). Fredrick leaves at 3 pm, after a heartiest noon meal (routine, but this will be an issue). George Kennet provides taxi service (mare), delivers mail, and a drinking buddy of Fredrick finds him waiting outside (unusual). Fredrick puts the mail inside and says “Good-bye dear” with none in sight.

In Boston they lodge in ‘Young’s Hotel’ where Fredrick buys a postcard and writes a short message to Florence at 8:40pm. The night clerk at the Central House in Center Ossipee conveys message of a fire at the Small cottage, around 10pm. They drive back, Fredrick sobbing; “my poor little pet”, pull up to the ‘Central House’ in center Ossipee around 4:30am. Fredrick eats a hefty breakfast before visiting his blackened fieldstone foundation around 6:30am.

Fredrick speculates glowing ember falling on his wife’s night clothes might have caused the fire. He offers \$6,000 jewelry to finders of a search crowd. One eyewitness to the fire states seeing a woman, the size of Mrs. Small, in the burning house but could not get through the hatchway door (locked?). Neighbors saw no light in the house prior to fire. Not all house contents burned to ashes as the basement water saved all that had fallen through including a smoldering torso of Mrs. Small, with 2 layers of a cloth wrapped around her head, tied with a rope in a square knot. She was also beaten with a butt-end of a fire place poker and a bullet lodged in right jaw.

Coroner’s inquest takes place on Oct. 2, where cause of death is announced as strangulation. Mrs. Small’s cut head, below the cord bound position in the neck, is displayed to jury and the stomach placed in a jar for content analysis. Her body was coated with a resin (unanswered).

Fredrick’s satchel, he carried with him to Boston, contained ‘masonic lamb-skin apron’ (keepsake); two letters from second-wife (sentimental value); cottage warranty deed; couple of diaries, address book & an inventory prepared while in Boston of home & shop assets (\$3,738.60) – what was missing was \$6,000 worth of jewels (announced reward to searchers) & his revolver (bullet lodged in right jaw) – presumably for deposit in a safe in Boston.

Fredrick had taken out three insurances – Cottage (\$3,000); Possessions (\$1,000) and life (\$20,000). On their way back from Boston Fredrick asks Ed if there’d be any problem with the life insurance. In the beginning of the trial when jury is taken out for a site visit Fredrick keeps sobbing uncontrollably.

Fredrick dreamt of being a professional baseball player that was shattered by serious leg injury. He married Laura, sued one Mr. Soden for \$500,000 (\$100,000 in book) charging affair with her, settled out of court (\$10,000 not in book) and divorced her. Fredrick was abusive to Florence (verbally & physically). Her mother, Elizabeth Curry, (her sister Norma) converted the family farm to a convalescent home subsequent to Mr. Curry’s poor health (transferred to Seaman’s home). Fredrick was recruited as a handyman and caretaker of this convalescent home. Fredrick was abusive to Florence after wedding and secured \$10,000 fire insurance on Curry’s farm.

During the industrial revolution in 1800s Center Ossipee (mills & specialized products) went through a population explosion on a train station (Mountain View) and Central House Inn. Cheaper competition due to the railways caused a drop in population in 1900 to 33% to that of 1850. An adversity relationship was born between the natives (farmers & woodsmen) known as 'Hicks' & the summer residents (lake cottages) as 'City fellers'. In 1839, rep. Asa Becham helped build the Carroll County courthouse in town.

The trial and the outcome is an excellent read, although many questions remain unanswered (resin, thermite, actual fire contraption, multiple body assault, why that particular day, etc.).

Perfection to a Fault: The book title itself poses questions (unless it is satirical)

Is it? – Excellent planning on the murder setup (timer & accelerant etc. & alibi)

Or is it not? – Poor planning, missteps and lack of forethought. Such as the rushed trip to Boston; carrying incriminating evidence in the satchel (revolver & jewelry in list missing); insurance policies(previous history); not cementing the cobblestone basement; grief display etc.

Fredrick: Probably an individual with 'Antisocial Personality Disorder' or a psychopath (lacking conscience, resorts to manipulation and reckless behavior to get what he wants).

Kate Baxter says

This was an interesting part of New England history which had escaped my notice during my 29 years living there. Having spent enjoyable days vacationing in Ossipee, New Hampshire, I was stunned by the details of the events of a grizzly murder as I read this tragic, historical account from a small rather bucolic community. As Ossipee marks the 100 year anniversary of this horrific event, we are reminded that mankind can sometimes be anything but kind.

The book is certainly interesting in its telling and author Janice S.C. Petrie attends to every detail of the events and legal proceedings. However, this book might have benefitted from some tighter editing as I found myself re-reading details laid out in earlier chapters.

I am grateful to author, Janice S.C. Petrie and Goodreads First Reads for having provided a free copy of this book. Their generosity, however, did not influence this review - the words of which are mine alone.

Brandi says

Short, quick true crime tale aimed at teens that chronicles the captivating and twisty story of the murder of Florence Smalls and the conviction and execution of her husband for the crime. Interesting case study on the use of capital punishment and the concept of guilty "beyond a reasonable doubt." Well-researched and entertaining with some added spiritual elements thrown in, hand this to fans of true crime or shows like Criminal Minds, NCIS, and Law and Order.
