

The Ballad of John Funston: A Sad Tale With A Local Connection

By William M. Baillie

Printed below is a fascinating bit of folk Americana, intriguing for the tale it tells, for the tradition surrounding its creator, and for the way it was preserved. The poem, or actually song, was "collected" by a popular-ballad historian who heard it sung by an aged resident of Canton, Ohio (near the scene of the events in the ballad). The singer, C. A. Sneary, used to hear his parents sing this song and remembered it decades later. The song had been passed orally, never written down, apparently, until more than a hundred years after the events it reports.

Columbia County's John Funston was a Revolutionary War veteran of Scotch-Irish descent who settled in Madison Township just after the War. He cleared farmland and opened a frontier store which prospered and became the nucleus of the village of Jerseytown. His descendants included son Thomas Aten Funston, who while serving in the Legislature 1844-1845 was instrumental in moving the county seat from Danville to Bloomsburg, and Thomas' son John Albert Funston who moved to Bloomsburg and became one of that Town's leading citizens.

The "Ballad," however, is not about Madison Township's John Funston, but rather about his nephew. When John settled in Columbia County, his brother Nathaniel settled near Williamsport (now Lycoming County), and it is *his* son John Funston who is the subject of this mournful song. This John, born about 1804, left home as a young man for greener pastures in northeastern Ohio. There he clerked in a store but evidently was dissatisfied with his wages. He knew that a local boy named Cartmell had a weekly mail route which took him through a lonely woods. Believing one day that the mail included a shipment of money, John lay in wait with a pistol, shot the boy, grabbed the mailbags and ran off. Though another man was jailed for the crime, John's flashing of newly-acquired money betrayed him and he was soon apprehended, tried, and convicted. The Gettysburg, PA newspaper *Adams Centinel* reported on 25 January 1826:

John Funston who shot the mail carrier last Sept. in Ohio, was hung at New Philadelphia, on the 30th, [that is, December 1825]. He made a full confession of his guilt. He was born in Northumberland [later Lycoming] county, in this state, and only 22 years of age.

John Funston

John Funston a youth of but
twenty years old

With light hair and blue eyes he
ventured so bold;

He was young, fair, and
handsome with light hair and blue
eyes

He wrought his own ruin by
seeking a prize

He murdered William Cartmell a
youth of renown,

On the road leading from Freeport
to Cochocton town;

He murdered him and robbed him
of money and of goods,

And made his way home through
a thicket of woods.

Soon after, young Johnston to
prison was bound;

He denied all the charges that
against him were found;

He said he was nigh when young
Cartmell was shot,

And hearing the gun, he came up
to the spot.

Soon after, John Funston was
sporting with joy

On the money he took from the
poor murdered boy;

Squire Major then took him and
brought him straightway

To New Philadelphia, his actions
to try.

Squire Major then took him and
bound him so fast;

Said he, "There ye must lie till
your sentence is passed."

The jury found him guilty, and

unto him they said,

"You must hang by the neck until
you are dead."

On the twentieth of December, in
the morning quite soon,

He called to the sheriff to confess
what he'd done;

He confessed to his God for the
crime he had done,

He said he was a murderer, his
race it was run.

They took him to the gallows on a
cold, stormy day;

The crowd that was round him
was awful to see;

And When he got there he wept
very sore

To think that he'd ne'er see the
world any more.

His two little brothers brought a
carriage that day

To bear the dead body of Funston
away;

And when they got there, they
wept bitterly

To think on the gallows their poor
brother must die.

The doctors stood round him his
pulse for to feel,

Thinking at night his dead body to

steal;

'Tis forbidden by law and
considered not right

To steal the dead body of Funston
at night.

The last stanza, with its reference to body-snatching for medical-school cadavers, is illumined by Ann Diseroad's recent *Newsletter* article about the hooded graves near Catawissa (December 2003, p. 9).

There is one other remarkable feature worth noting about this ballad: the singer, C. A. Sneary, believed that the stanzas had been composed by the slain mail-carrier's sweetheart! If so, she had an unusual empathy for the slayer of her beloved, for the ballad evokes sympathy not just for the murder victim but also for the murderer's repentance and for his "two little brothers" overcome with grief, and the final stanza evokes the nineteenth-century horror at the idea of one's corpse being dug up and sliced up for an "anatomy."