

Does 'The Scarlet Letter' have Connecticut roots?

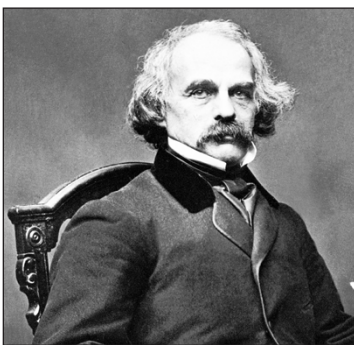
By Patricia Suprenant

For the Journal Inquirer

Since its publication on March 16, 1850, scholars have speculated on Nathaniel Hawthorne's source material for his novel "The Scarlet Letter." Could the inspiration for this classic morality tale have been the forgotten "trial of the century" — that is, the 19th century?

The 1820 case of Connecticut v. Ammi Rogers had everything: sex, intrigue, a coverup, and a flight across state lines into Massachusetts. Even more captivating, it involved a romantic triangle: a Branford-born clergyman, a young Preston physician with political connections, and a beautiful, pregnant teenager from Griswold.

Newspaper coverage of the trial began immediately, on Oct. 5, 1820, and centered on the abortion that may have been performed with an "unusual instrument" by Rogers, a Yale-educated Episcopal minister, on his teenage lover.



Nathaniel Hawthorne

Steeped in hyperbole, words like "cold," "calculating," "poisons," "malice," "concealment of the crime," "depravity of the heart," "so black a deed," "seduction of the innocent," "immoral act," and, worst of all — "child murderer" — blanketed newspapers and captured the interest of an entire nation.

The public was obsessed. Interest ran particularly high in Connecticut, where the events took place, and in Massachusetts, where Rogers fled with the teenager and her younger sister to keep them from testifying.

The 1820 case of Connecticut v. Ammi Rogers had everything: sex, intrigue, a coverup, and a flight across state lines into Massachusetts.

But the drama did not end with the trial. The following year, Connecticut passed the first abortion law in the United States. And by the 20th century, the Rogers case was the foundation for Roe v. Wade. The Rogers case is still felt in today's controversy over reproductive rights.

Rogers' legal troubles began in the early morning of Oct. 27, 1817, when the Geer family urgently summoned Dr. Eleazer B. Downing to their home in Griswold. The message Downing received was clear. Asenath Caroline Smith, the 18-year-old granddaughter of Elisha Geer, feared that "this night she must die."

What Downing could not have foreseen on that full moonlit night as he rushed to the young woman's side was that within three years he and everyone else in that household would become witnesses in the most salacious criminal trial of the 19th century.

Though Rogers' trial set the bars for abortion rights in the United States, its details have been largely forgotten. Confusing and often contradictory assertions before the General Assembly in 1823, including Smith's own declaration of Rogers' innocence, help explain why literary scholars never considered the trial as the source for "The Scarlet Letter."

But circumstantial evidence of a connection between the Rogers case and Hawthorne sits in the Thomas Gray (1803-1849) family papers of the Massachusetts Historical Society. Alongside a letter written by Rogers to his "dear friend," the Rev. Thomas Gray Sr. (1772-1847) is the typed family copy of a letter from George Stillman Hillard (a Gray relative) to his friend Hawthorne. In that letter Hillard offers Hawthorne "pecuniary

aid" for "what you have done for American literature."

The letters suggest that the Gray family knew both Rogers and Hawthorne, and given the extent of the news coverage, Hawthorne and his family and friends must have encountered the infamous trial of Ammi Rogers.

Consider that in both the Rogers trial and "The Scarlet Letter" there is Hester Prynne, the pretty, loyal, seductive young woman, her two lovers — a clergyman and a physician — illicit sex, a pregnancy, and a host of hypocritical male authorities sitting in judgment.

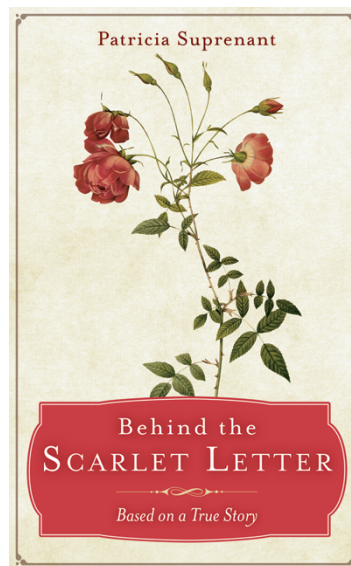
Outside marriage, Prynne, a skilled seamstress, gives birth to a child, Pearl. She refuses to name the father and is tried and convicted. Her punishment is to wear the scarlet letter A — for "adultery."

Hawthorne clearly understood the sensibilities of his times. It was sex outside of marriage that was the greater sin. Doctors and midwives performed abortions with regularity.

During the summer of 1817 the skilled seamstress Asenath Caroline Smith discovered she was pregnant. When both of her lovers — the clergyman Ammi Rogers and the physician George Downer — refused to marry her, she swallowed ergots and cantharides. Her efforts failed.

Now, "quick with child" — she felt the baby moving — she turned to Rogers, who procured "an instrument of a particular form, calculated to penetrate the womb, and destroy the unborn child." His method worked, the baby was aborted, and Asenath lived.

Seventy-five years earlier a Pomfret physician, John Hallowell, had been indicted for a "highhanded misdemeanor" for performing an abortion on unmarried 19-year-



old Sarah Grosvenor, resulting in her death from septicemia.

When the Rogers case came to trial Connecticut had no laws specifically prohibiting abortion, only the sale and dispersant of poison for such purposes. As a result, Rogers was charged with "a high crime and a misdemeanor."

"High crimes and misdemeanors are offenses not precisely defined," the state's attorney, James Lanman, said. "Such nameless deeds of guilt, as the virtuous lawgiver would never have conceived, are embraced in this extensive term. Every crime of this sort, from its nature depends upon its own circumstance. It is more or less a high crime, as it is accompanied with traits of aggravation more or less mischievous to mankind, or horrid and malign in the motives by which it was conceived."

On Oct. 7, 1820, three years after Dr. Downing's nighttime visit to the Geer farm, Rogers was found guilty. Visibly nervous, he stood to receive his sentence. "I am charged with a crime that my heart revolts at," he said.

Before Judge Asa Chapman imposed sentence, he reminded everyone he had the authority to imprison Rogers for "any term of time short of his natural life." Though he and Chapman were high Masons and Yale graduates, Rogers believed that Chapman was his personal, political, and religious enemy and feared that Chapman would send him away for life in

a mine, Connecticut's worst prison — Newgate.

"The crime was heinous and of a most depraved and abominable character," Judge Chapman said. "The prisoner at the bar caused the premature birth of a child, which would otherwise probably have been born alive had it not been for the unlawful violence of Ammi Rogers. But in consideration of your family, the court is inclined to mercy, and will be lenient in its judgment, as is in any way consistent with the welfare of society. The sentence of the court, therefore, is that you be imprisoned in Norwich Jail, without bail or main prize, for the term of two years."

With tears in his eyes, Rogers thanked the court for its leniency.

The following year Connecticut passed the first law against abortion. Willful and malicious use of deadly poisons or other noxious and destructive substances to procure a miscarriage in a woman "quick with child" carried a penalty of life imprisonment. But even after 1821 abortion was allowed when performed by manual means as long as it was done before quickening.

Public interest in the trial continued for well over a decade, and just as in modern times, Rogers wrote his own version of events in a memoir, amending and reissuing it many times and continuing to declare his innocence. He also accepted speaking engagements throughout New York and New England.

Knowledge of the trial seemed pervasive throughout New England and was the reason Judge Chapman gave for writing his own gavel-to-gavel account in a 56-page pamphlet.

Had Chapman's punishment to Rogers been the wearing of a scarlet letter "A," it would have stood for "abortion."

Patricia Suprenant of Mansfield is the author of "Behind the Scarlet Letter," a historical novel based on the trial of Ammi Rogers. The book has not yet been released for public distribution.