

# Murder in Matunuck

Crime of passion, legend says, was committed by one Reuben Hull against Freeloze Dolliver in house now owned by Providence attorney

STORY BY ROBERT L. WHEELER — PICTURES BY ARCHIE ARSENAULT

**W.** LOUIS FROST, Providence attorney, purchased an old house in the Matunuck area of South Kingstown in 1947. A bleak gabled structure, one of the first houses built between South Ferry and Westerly, it stands a little back from Schoolhouse Road, a short distance from Matunuck Beach.

All that Attorney Frost thought he was doing was buying a run-down house to renovate and use for a summer home. It turned out, however, that he was also buying himself a very old and murky colonial murder, that of a young woman named Freeloze Dolliver, who was pistolled to death on the night of April 25, 1719, by Reuben Hull, a desperate youth having not the fear of God before his eyes and acting, to quote from his indictment, at Ye Instigation of Ye Devill.

Reuben Hull was the grandson of Joseph Hull, who came to America in 1635 in an early wave of the Great Crossing and settled in York, Maine, where he died in 1665. His oldest son, who was also named Joseph, moved to Rhode Island and built the Schoolhouse Road dwelling in 1714. This house he deeded to his youngest son, Reuben, with the stipulation that if he died without lawful issue, it and the 150 acres that went with the house should go to John Hoxie and John Segar, Reuben's brothers-in-law, their heirs and assigns.

Reuben did so die. Examining papers relating to the history of his summer home, Mr. Frost came across an act of the General Court of Assembly held within and for His Majesty (George I's) Colony of Rhoad Island &c in the last Wednesday of October in the seventh year of His Majesty's Reign anno Domi 1720.

This act gave Hoxie and Segar possession of the land "in Westerly" and Attorney Frost noted with interest that it was described as a tract of 150 acres "which

Lately belonged to Reubin Hull whoe lately was executed for Murther."

Up to this point Mr. Frost had known nothing about Reuben Hull, much less about the Murther for which he was executed. Reading on, he found that the grant of the late Reuben's 150 acres was made with a proviso that his brothers-in-law should pay "all Lawful charges that hath or may accrue on the seizure prosecution Condemnation and execution of ye aforesd Reubin Hull" and any debts he may have left behind him when his feet danced an airy rigadon above Tonomy Hill in Newport, 23rd June, 1720.

Attorney Frost's curiosity was piqued. Just whom did Reuben Hull "murther" and why? He set about finding out.

As so many of us do, he went first to Thomas Hazard's *Jonnycake Papers*, that fascinating coffer stocked with South County lore. Hazard mentions the old Hull house, which Frost now owns, as the scene of one of the few early South Kingstown murders he recollects hearing about. As sometimes happens, Tom was a little off in his facts. He refers to the deed which brought Reuben to the gallows as "the murder by a disappointed lover, who, in a fit of desperation, shot his sweetheart, a Miss Hull, through a window of her father's house, just after she was married to a rival, nearly two centuries ago." The victim of the shooting wasn't a Miss Hull and even if she had been, originally, she would have been a Mrs. Somebody just after she had been married.

Reuben simply couldn't have shot a married woman while she was still a spinster. Colonial murderers just weren't that fast on the draw.

Pursuing his inquiries, Mr. Frost found himself up against the usual obstacle confronting anybody who tries to investigate a colonial slaying: the absence of anything in the nature of detailed newspaper coverage. Incidents like Murthers are reported laconically, if at all. We know that they happened and to whom, and who swung for them. But that is about all. And in 1719, there were no Rhode Island newspapers anyway, not even a single modest four-pager filled with stale news from Europe and advertisements for runaway slaves.

The traditional account of the murder, on the contrary, is detailed, dramatic and creative. Here it is: Reuben Hull's sweetheart married somebody else. There was a party that night. The rejected suitor came to a window and looked in upon the scene of gaiety. He was heeled with a horse-pistol. There stood the newly married pair. Bang!

Just how it befell that Reuben's faithless sweetheart happened to be holding her wedding reception in the parlor of Reuben's house is something that has never been explained. But that is the story that the old South County people have always told and believed, and they swear that the murder was committed at the old Hull house on Schoolhouse Road. It is a story that matches the setting of lonely fields and brushland.

The house stands well back from the road. Upright stone posts flank the entrance to the lane leading to its great stone threshold. It has passed through many hands, since Reuben Hull's day. Generations of children have peered through the chinks of its boarded-up windows, heard uncanny noises inside.

The Frosts have given it a gay and sunny name,



OLD HULL HOUSE, where, legend says, lovelorn, desperate Reuben Hull did with a handgun loden with powder and shott, pistol his faithless sweetheart so that she fell down crying "O I am dead," and so she was, shortly after. Frost bought house, renamed it 'Sunnybank.'

*Sunnybank*. But the folk of the countryside once had their own name for the old Hull house. They called it *Cheerless*. Why? Because of what happened on the night of April 25, 1719?

MR. Frost kept on with his efforts to find out more about the murder for which Reuben Hull was hanged by the neck until he was dead. He finally found three paragraphs about it in issues of *The Boston News Letter* printed in 1719-1720 by B. Green in Newbury Street, Boston, for John Campbell in Corn Hill. The first:

Smith Ship Mover from London. Entered Ourward, Albany for Madera, Pope and Margate for South Carolina. Rhode Island, May 1. Arrived here Hubert Stanbrough and Wm. James from Antigua, John Almy from St. Christophers, Lathrop from Boston for Connecticut. Some V. B. Is bound Out for Barbadoes and Leeward-Islands. On Friday last the 24th of Aprile one Reuben Hull of Westerly shot one Freeloze Dolliver a young Woman of fild place, and now it is Irons in our Goal for the fild Fact.

"Rhode Island, May 1. Arrived here Hubert Stanbrough and Wm. James from Antigua, John Almy from St. Christophers. Lathrop from Boston for Connecticut. Some vessels bound out for Barbadoes and Leeward-Islands. On Friday last the 24th of April one Reuben

Hull of Westerly shot one Freeloze Dolliver of said place, and now is in Irons in our Goal for the said Fact."

The next thing Mr. Frost did after obtaining photostats of the *Boston News Letter* references to Reuben's wicked deed was to consult John Greene, former clerk of the Superior Court in Newport and now clerk of the Supreme Court in Providence. He found, in furtherance of Frost's relentless pursuit of Reuben, some loose papers relating to the Hull case in a shoe-box containing the bundled court records of 1719.

In faded pen strokes scrawled on brittle paper 235 years ago, they tell a story which is somewhat at variance with the legend.

There is, first, the deposition of two eye-witnesses of the crime, Lawrence Voillet and Mary his wife, taken by the Jury of Inquest which sat upon the body of Freeloze Dolliver on April 26, 1719.

This deposition "testifieth and saith that on ye 25th day of this present instant April 1719 testifieth and saith that they being in Ruben Hull's house in Westerly they saw ye sd Ruben Hull take up and present a gun at sd Freeloze Dolliver and shott it off and she fell downe & said she was dead and she saide her guts was Comd (out)."

Justices John Babcock and John Hiscox presided at the inquest, which was held "at ye house of Ruben Hull

in Westerly." (Query: was the Matunuck area then considered part of Westerly?) The jurymen of inquest were Joseph Maxson, Sam'l Babcock, Jonathan Maxson, Hubert (?) Burdick, John Kenyon, John Wilbur, Natt Wolff, George Lewis, John Kenyon, Samuel Lewis, Eben Crandall, and Samuel Willcocks. "Being met in view of one Freeloze Dolliver dec'd," they reported, "we do find that she was murdered by a hand gun."

The Westerly justices acted with dispatch. They first bound the Voillets (or Viollots) in the sum of 50 pounds to appear at the September General Court of Tryalls to give evidence in the case of Reuben Hull, suspected of the murder of Freeloze Dolliver, a single woman of Westerly.

MARY signed her name neatly, Lawrence made his mark. This done, they sent Town Sergeant George Stillman out in His Majesty's Name to look for Reuben Hull of Kingstown "and him find, you are to seiz his body and bind him in safe custod (y) to keep and forthwith bring him before lawfull authority of this town to be examined relative the premises and to be further dealt with as to justice doth appertain hereof fail not at your peril."

This the Town Sergeant did. And the Westerly justice court being apparently saving of paper, he is di-

rected, on the other side of the warrant, to take into custody the body of Reuben Hull "and him safely convey to the Keeper of His Majesties Jail in Newport," the same being Major William Coddington, who is required "him safely to keep in your said Goal until he shall therefrom be delivered by Due Order of Law."

Which was done. Reuben may have been a little refractory, for Stillman was empowered "to take what aid you think necessary" to deliver Reuben to Major Coddington at the old Spring Street jail in Newport.

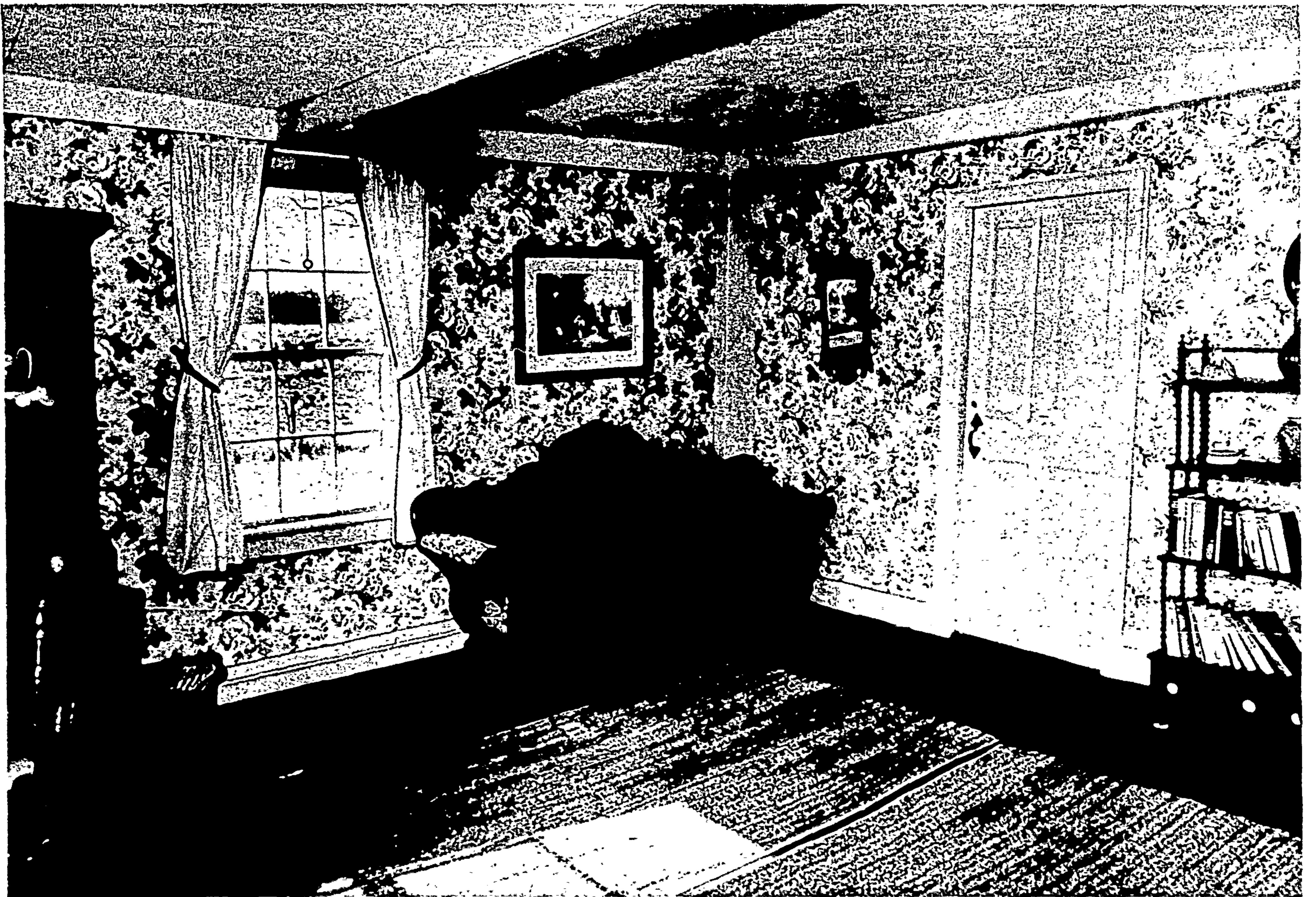
And there poor Reuben lay in irons all summer until the September "Tryall Court" met and an indictment, or "Bill a Vera," was returned charging that he did, "not having the Fear of God before his eyes and being led by ye Instigation of Ye Devill, with one gun or pistol loden with powder and shott, feloniously, willfully and of Malice forethought, present sd gun against Freeloze Dolliver, spinster, and shott it off after which ye sd Freeloze Dolliver fell down and soon after died."

All of which rigmarole tells us nothing of why Reuben Hull murdered Miss Dolliver.

Mr. John Campbell, editor and publisher of *The Boston News Letter*, got most of his news from the masters of incoming ships. In other words, he covered the Boston waterfront. Early in the fall of 1719, he had news from Rhode Island which he dated Sept. 11. God-



PROBER OF VILLAINY. W. Louis Frost investigates Murder Most Foul of Freeloze Dolliver by Hull.



PARLOR of Hull house, legendary scene of 1719 Crime of Passion. Through a window—why not this one? —story says Rejected Reuben fired with deadly aim. The Frosts now use it as their summer living room.

Matunuck Murder continued

## He was reprieved but he was hanged

frey Malbone was arrived at Newport from London after nine weeks at sea, "but brings no late news," and Captains Webb and Green were in from New-York. The latter was bound for Boston and may have informed Mr. Campbell that:

from London about Nine Weeks past, but brings no late News, Web & Green from New-York, the first bound there again, and the last for Boston, Panchard from Boston for Connecticut, and John Dennies from Connecticut, Several Vessels bound to Barbadoes and the Leeward Islands. Cleared out. John Chase for Madaga.

One Ruben Hull of Westerly, was tryed here on Monday last for Killing & Murdering one Freelove Dolliver, a Young Woman on the 25th of April last, and found Guilty, accordingly Sentence was past that he should be Hanged the 10th day of November next.

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Reuben Hull was not hanged on Nov. 10. His relatives were at work for him. In October they "plainly laid" before the General Assembly of Rhode Island, sitting in Providence, the fact that Reuben "had been troubled with lunacy several times before the committing of the aforesaid murder and has ever since appeared in a stupefied and insensible condition."

Impressed, the Assembly reprieved Reuben until the second week of May, 1720. And in the first week of May it reprieved him again, this time until June 23.

But that was the last stay Reuben got. The June 4 session of the Assembly was held in Newport, which may have felt more

strongly about the "murthering" of Westerly people. It was voted and ordered that "the sd Reuben Hull be no longer reprieved," and he wasn't.

And on a day in early summer, with June busting out all over on the Boston waterfront and Editor Campbell down to meet the ships in his gold-laced hat, with his inkhorn tucked under his arm, a skipper hailing from Rhode Island brought him a news item with which he pithily tailed the usual grist of shipping intelligence from Newport, under date of June 24, 1720:

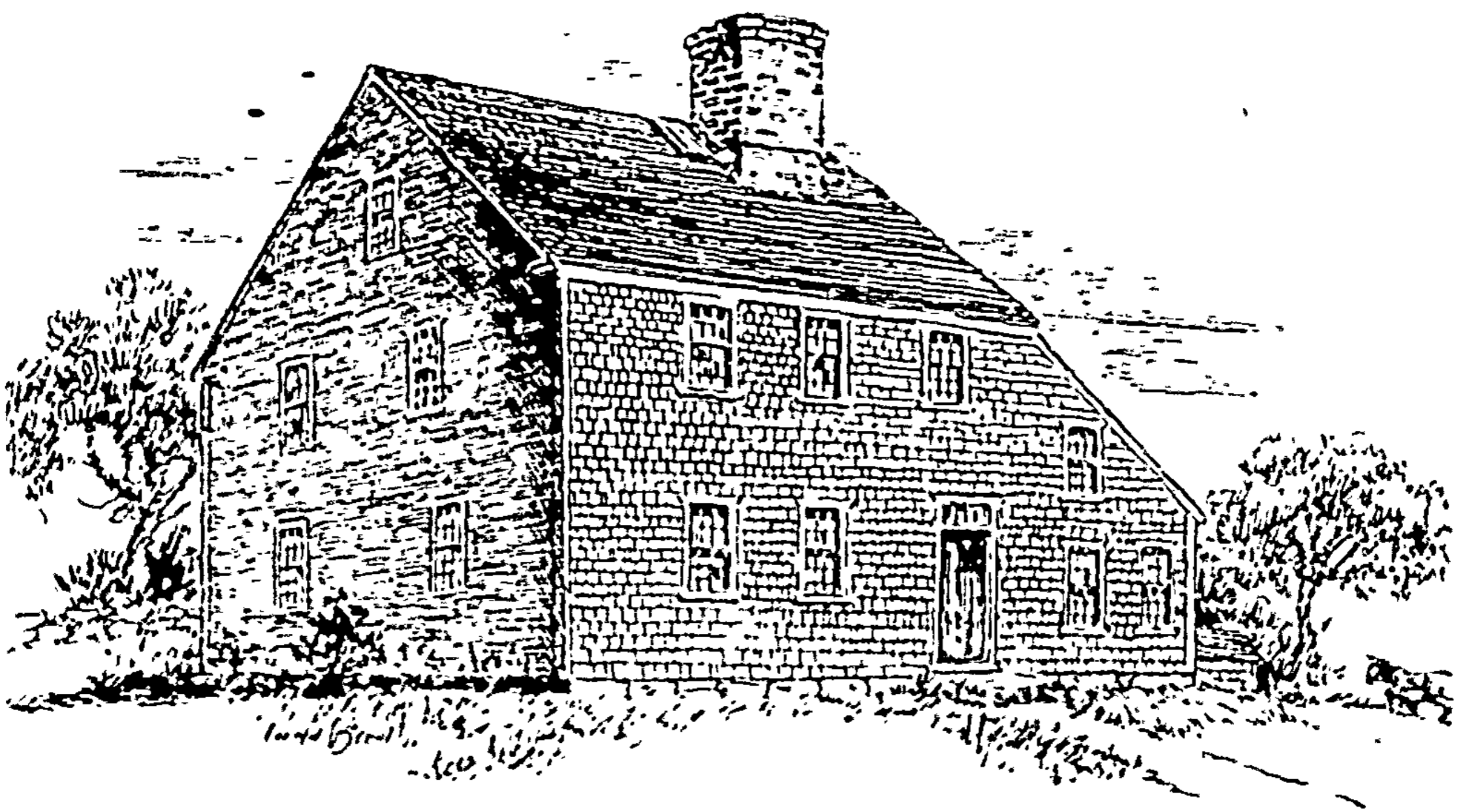
& Generous Spirit; and very cheerful and pleasant in his Conversation.

Rhode Island, June 24th. Arrived here Wm. Coggeshall & J. S. Wicaten from Barbadoes, J. G. Gorham & Job. Davis from Boston for Connecticut. Several Vessels bound to Barbadoes & the Leeward-Islands. One Reuben Hull of Westerly in this Colony, was executed here yesterday for Murdering one Freelove Dolliver, a young Woman of said Colony, in April last was a Twelve Month; who was very obdurate, & made no Confession, who was buried near the Habitation of one Samuel Dyer, near New Port, which favour was granted at the request of his Friends and Relations, by the Government of this Colony. From the Votes, of the House of Commons at London, and the Daily Post, we have the following Intelligence, viz. That on the 24th of February last. A Petition of several Mer-

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"One Reuben Hull of Westerly was executed here yesterday for Murdering one Freelove Dolliver, a young woman of said Colony, in April last was a Twelve Month; who was very obdurate, & made no Confession, who was buried near the Habitation of one Samuel Dyer, near New Port, which favour was granted at the request of his Friends and Relations, by the Government."

So ends the tragic story of Reuben Hull. There are no documentary records of his trial to be found, either in the shoe box files of Newport's Superior Court or in the State House Archives in Providence. The only facts Miss Quinn (of Archives) was able to add concern the sale of Reuben's personal effects, ordered in October, 1719, after it became apparent that the reprieved



BACK IN 1719 when sighing swains were fast on the draw, the Hull house looked like this. Sketch by Harold Breul.



'CHEERLESS,' folk once called it: Rear view of Hull house with original upstairs window. Wing is 1890-ish addition.

murderer was going to be a steady boarder at Major Coddington's. They brought 26 pounds, 7 shillings, and since Reuben's keep for the year and two months he spent in jail only came to twelve pounds seven, that gave the Major a tidy profit of 14 pounds. Out of it he may or may not have paid the hangman a fee not exceeding five pounds. What became of the other nine pounds? Don't be silly. The Major put it in the church collection plate, of course!

But what about the story of the wedding party and the Face at the Window and the pistol shot crashing through the skirl of the fiddles?

Ah, there are always two kinds of truth—factual truth and artistic truth. The first may do well enough for pedestrian minds; it is all they can comprehend and all that they deserve. But artistic truth is something else again; it possesses a rightness all its own, and the generations which have told and retold the story of Reuben Hull and faithless Freelove Dolliver have seen to it that she was shot when and where she should have been, at a wedding party and through the heart, and without any unladylike exclamations, either!

Attorney W. Louis Frost knows both versions of the story of Reuben Hull. Cognizant of their contradictions, he still likes the traditional version best. Seated by the parlor window of the old Hull house on warm summer nights, he has seen, in imagination, a dim figure dodge across the lane leading up from Schoolhouse Road, caught the glint of moonlight on a steel pistol-butt. He has even written a poem, *The Rejected Suitor*, ten stanzas long.

Its concluding one:

*In Newport buried at request of sire,  
Near the habitation of Samuel Dyer,  
A victim of the heart, as many another,  
There lies Reuben the unwanted lover.*

And that's where fact and legend are in complete agreement, for once. No question about it, Reuben Hull was hanged for the murder of Freelove Dolliver, the girl with the generous name.