The Story the Torn Gown Told: Forensic Evidence and Lanah Sawyer’s Prosecution of Henry Bedlow for Rape, New York, 1793

The morning after

After ten years of work, I recently finished a book on Early America’s most sensational rape trial and its long aftermath. In the opening scene of *The Sewing Girl’s Tale*: *A Story of Crime and Consequences in Revolutionary America* (2022), I evoke the image of seventeen-year-old Lanah Sawyer sitting in the back room of a New York brothel one morning in the summer of 1793, with a needle and thread, repairing her damaged gown. Lanah had been assaulted the previous night, and then trapped in that small, dark, space. But she didn’t want to leave until she could appear “in the streets decently.”

A month later, during the young woman’s prosecution of Henry Bedlow for rape, the attorney general produced the gown in court. It was the only piece of forensic evidence introduced by either side. Despite Lanah’s skill, signs of damage were still visible; legally, they were what made it significant. For the prosecution, the gown’s rips and tears were evidence: proof that Bedlow’s

assault had been violent and that Lanah's resistance had been vigorous.

Lanah Sawyer's story highlights the importance of the modern distinction between our fear of "stranger danger" and the realities of acquaintance rape—a distinction that this rape trial helped create. By 1793, rape was commonly defined as the "carnal knowledge of a woman *forcibly* and against her will"—though the word "forcibly" wasn't in the original statute. It had been added by legal commentaries published in the eighteenth century as part of a broader effort to narrow the effective definition of rape to cases involving violent surprise attacks by lower-status strangers.

Most notably, the English jurist Matthew Hale had emphasized the supposedly enormous power of a woman bringing a rape charge and the possibility that her claim was "false and malicious." The accuser's credibility, he proposed, should be evaluated in light of specific circumstances: Did she have a good reputation? Did she cry out for help when attacked? Did her body bear the signs of physical violence? Did she report the crime while it was still recent? During Lanah Sawyer's prosecution of Henry Bedlow in 1793, his defense lawyers relentlessly tried to push the law even further—raising virtually impossible standards for victims of acquaintance rapes. "The life of a citizen," they reminded the all-male jury, "lies in the hands of woman." The result made prosecuting sexual assaults among acquaintances all but impossible.

Over the years, I've pieced together the fragmentary references to Lanah's Sawyer's clothing in William Wyche's *Report of the Trial of Henry Bedlow* (1793) and puzzled over what they add up to. What would her gown have looked like? How would it have been constructed? Where would she have carried the sewing equipment needed to repair it? And what did the evidence of the damaged gown tell us?

To answer these questions, I've researched the fashions of the period. I've consulted with leading experts. And I've have had the good fortune to examine in person a number of dresses and accessories that date back to Lanah Sawyer's day.

Linda Baumgarten

My assumptions about Lanah Sawyer's clothing were transformed about five years ago, when I met with Linda Baumgarten at Colonial Williamsburg. She is a leading expert on early American textiles and the author of several important books, including *What Clothes Reveal: The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America* (2002).

Figure 1: About six weeks before Lanah Sawyer joined a gentleman calling himself “lawyer Smith” for an evening walk on the Battery, John Drayton sketched this scene. Despite the various ways in which women’s gown were constructed and styled, fashion favored similar elements: big hats, shawls, fitted bodices, and voluminous skirts gathered in the rear. John Drayton, “A View of the The Battery,” engraving, 11.6 x 15.6 cm (detail), in his *Letters from the Eastern States* (Charleston, S.C., [1794]), courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library, Brown University.

She ushered me into her office, and I ticked off the clues I had assembled. Lanah was a seventeen-year-old from a modest New York family who worked as a seamstress. She had dressed to go for stroll with a “fine beau” on a mild late summer evening in 1793. Later that night, according to Lanah’s trial testimony, Bedlow dragged her into a brothel, “threw off her hat, tore the pins out of her gown, and placing her before him, drew it off her shoulders.” Then, she went on, “he tore the strings of her petticoats, and kicked them off with his feet.”

Other details about her dress appear in an editorial note: “In the course of the testimony, the gown of the Witness was produced, (a calico, made with drawn frill round the neck;) two or three strings were torn off—-a few places were torn in the gown, but mended, which the Prosecutrix did the next day, to walk in the streets decently.” Later in the trial, Mother Carey, in whose brothel the assault took place, testified that she “could not recollect the dress of the Prosecutrix, but the gown had a frill round the neck.”

Figure 2: Lanah Sawyer likely wore a fitted gown like this one. John Scoles,

“Government House,” engraving, 8.9 x 14.8 cm (detail), *New-York Magazine* 6 (Jan. 1795), opp. p. 1, Phelps Collection of American Historical Prints, New York Public Library.

From another reference in the trial *Report*, we know that Lanah was wearing gloves that evening. And she was likely wearing a shawl, too. From a subsequent newspaper account, we know she had one.

Having laid out what I knew, I paused.

Baumgarten sighed.

1793, she explained, is difficult.

Five years earlier—or five years later—Lanah’s gown would be much easier to imagine. But 1793 fell in the midst of a major transition in women’s fashion. In the years after the American Revolution, women typically wore highly structured gowns with fitted bodices, funnel shaped torsos, low waistlines, and voluminous skirts. By the turn of the century, women—especially young women—were turning toward the high-waisted, loosely draped, neoclassical gowns familiar from *Bridgerton* or Jane Austen productions. Even the term “calico” came with caveats. In his *Compendious Dictionary* (1806), Noah Webster defined calico as a “printed” cotton cloth—but plain white was increasingly fashionable.

Figure 3: Linen shift (chemise) with a drawstring at the neckline, ca. 1775-1800, French, gift of Mrs. Dudley Wadsworth, C.I.41.161.7, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Still, Baumgarten went on, there are some things we can safely assume about how a seventeen-year-old sewing girl would have dressed for an evening stroll with a gentleman. And the mention of pins and multiple strings helped narrow down the possibilities.

Foundations

In the early 1790s, any gown would have been worn over several basic undergarments.

First, was a shift: a long, loose, plain, white linen or cotton garment rather

like a modern night shirt. The chemise dress (or, in English, shift dress) made fashionable—and notorious—by the French queen Marie Antoinette, took its basic form and color from these humble undergarments. In a portrait from the mid-1790s, the young New Yorker Frances Harison (who was married to one of Henry Bedlow's lawyers) wears a billowing white chemise dress ornamented with a drawn frill at the neckline and given shape by a ribbon tied under the bust. For rich women like Harison, a white shift dress represented a daring break with the conventions of the past—and the life of leisure that allowed them to wear such delicate, easily marred garments.

Figure 4: Frances Duncan Ludlow Harison (1776-1797), portrait miniature by Benjamin Trott, ca. 1795-97, watercolor on ivory, 5 x 6 cm, Richard Harison Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

For ordinary women, a traditional shift had far more practical purposes—among them to absorb sweat and other body fluid that might otherwise stain her gown. Thus, when Lanah was sleeping the night after the assault—and her cousin pulled up her skirts to examine her "linens"—it would have been her shift that was stained with blood.

Over the shift, a woman wore garments designed to support the gown, shape her body, and give the finished outfit the desired silhouette. That was one of the primary purposes of the petticoats women tied around their waists with "strings"—typically sturdy cloth tabs or tape. Multiple petticoats were often worn to support a gown's voluminous skirts. To this end, a woman might also strap on a pair of pillow-like bum rolls to pouf her skirts out even further in the rear and create a distinct cleft.

Figure 5: A shift and stays are worn under this petticoat, silk, 1750-1800, American, Gift of Helen L. Latting, 36.64.2, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Around her torso, a woman wore stays—a sturdy corset reinforced with baleen or wood that, when laced tight, created a smooth cone shape from her waist to her breasts.

Over this foundation came the gown—which was typically tailored (with high armholes and a tight waist) in such a way that it had to be partially dismantled to get it on and off.

The bodice usually opened down the front. And because of the support provided by the stays, it could be both closely fitted around the torso and also held in place with nothing more than straight pins. Sometimes other fasteners—and sometimes drawstrings—were used to fit the bodice around the neckline. In any case, necklines were generally cut low; the exposed décolletage was covered with a kerchief or fichu, often a fine white cloth tucked into the bodice.

The gown’s skirts were generally sewn to the bodice around the waist at the back and sides and secured in front with strings. In 1793, this was typically done in one of two basic ways.

Figure 6: Silk petticoat tied at the rear with cotton tape, silk and cotton, 1795, French, Brooklyn Museum Costume Collection (gift of Mrs. Alvah E. Reed) 2009.300.894, Metropolitan Museum of Art

An "open" gown—or a "round" gown?

Baumgarten reached for a pencil and in a series of swift, smooth strokes sketched out one option: an open gown or *robe a la anglaise.* A few years before 1793, she said, this would have been the obvious choice.

Open gowns echoed the traditional look for women's gowns: the skirts wrapped around the back and sides but were open at the front to reveal a coordinating petticoat. The gown could thus be slipped off the shoulders like a bathrobe once the pins securing the bodice were pulled out and the strings securing the skirts were untied.

Figure 7: A partially assembled "open" gown. The bodice fastens with straight pins and drawstrings shape the neckline. The plain petticoat is exposed to show the gown's construction. Robe à l'Anglaise, 1785–95, cotton and baleen, American, Brooklyn Museum Costume Collection (A. August Healy Fund) 2009.300.647, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Reaching for another Post-it, Baumgarten explained that the main alternative in 1793 would have been a "round gown."

This style of dress was called "round" because the skirt wrapped all the way around the body and was stitched closed with vertical seams, entirely covering the petticoats underneath. The skirt was generally constructed with a drop panel in front, secured at the waist with strings. This was necessary to get the whole thing on or off because the gown's waist was typically fitted so closely around a woman's waist that it couldn't just be pulled down over her hips. To get a round gown off, you released the bodice and slipped it over your

shoulders, untied the drop panel, and stepped out of the skirts.

Figure 8: However gowns were constructed, fashion in the early 1790s favored the same pigeon-breasted silhouette. Fashion plate, Sept. 1791, French, Costume Institute Fashion Plates, Women 1790-1800, Plate 008, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

This, Baumgarten said, was the more likely option in 1793—especially for a young seamstress who, presumably, had a sense of changing fashions. Cotton calico was both less expensive than silk and more durable. When it got dirty, cotton could be laundered——especially if it were printed. A working woman needed a gown that could withstand the routines of her daily life and not show every stain and speck of dirt.

Laura Johnson

A few years later, when the time came to find a surviving gown from Lanah Sawyer's day to use as an illustration in *The Sewing Girl's Tale*, I knew what I wanted: a round gown made of printed cotton. To examine a particularly compelling example, I made an appointment at the Winterthur Museum in Delaware.

On a crisp September day, textile curator Laura Johnson ushered me through a warren of offices, work rooms, and galleries into a textile storage area lined with cabinets, shelves, and drawers. On a big table, in a big box, was the gown.

Figure 9: Unassembled round gown, with a drop-front secured by a drawstring, printed cotton, 1785-1795, English, 108 x 42 cm, museum purchase, 1994-0108, Winterthur Museum.

It was, Johnson observed, a late eighteenth-century round gown fastened, like Lanah's gown, with a combination of straight pins and drawstring. The fitted bodice pinned together down the front. The voluminous skirts featured a drop panel at the waist secured by a drawstring and partly covered up by the points of the bodice.

The gown had likely been made around 1785, Johnson noted, but there were signs that it had been refashioned twice. First, probably around 1795, the bodice had been partially dismantled and the skirts reattached to give the gown a newly fashionable high-waisted silhouette. Then, around 1900, it had been hastily, indeed somewhat crudely, returned to its original appearance—probably for a woman looking for a "colonial" costume. That's probably when the gown acquired the sweat stains apparent under the armholes, Johnson observed. Whoever had been playing dress-up hadn't worn the kind of undergarments that had protected the gown in its early days.

Figure 10: Detail of the gown's rear, showing the attachment of the skirts to the bodice. The original stitching along the vertical seams is notably fine and even; when the skirts were later reattached to the bodice along the horizontal seam the stitches used were much more large, uneven, and looping. 1994-0108,

Winterthur Museum; photo (cropped with permission) courtesy of Winterthur Museum.

The drawstring holding up the skirt's drop front was a modern replacement, she noted; the original would have been a length of sturdy tape.

These strings, Johnson pointed out, represented the puzzle of Lanah's gown. A round gown could be constructed with a single drawstring at the waist; but, according to the trial report "two or three strings" had been ripped out. Perhaps there were additional strings at the neckline. Or, perhaps Lanah was actually wearing a *robe a la anglaise*—which might well have had two separate strings at the waist.

Repair

Mention of the gown's torn-out strings brought the conversation to the various accessories Lanah Sawyer probably took with her for that walk on the Battery. The gloves. The hat. The shawl she likely wore. And, most significantly, her sewing case.

Figure 11: An innocent young sewing girl targeted by an older procuress in William Hogarth's iconic "Harlot's Progress" (London, 1732), plate 1, NYPL. The young woman carries a reticule; a pair of scissors and a pin cushion dangle from her wrist. She's wearing open gloves to keep her fingers free to work. William Hogarth, "Harlot's Progress," detail of plate 1 (London, before Apr. 1732), etching and engraving, first state of four, 31.3 x 38.4 cm, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 32.35(2), Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The fact that Lanah repaired her damaged gown the next morning indicates that she was carrying some kind of sewing kit with basic tools, including a needle and thread. Perhaps she carried it in a reticule hanging from her wrist or in a pocket under her skirts.

Pulling open a drawer, Johnson showed me half a dozen sewing cases from the

period—long narrow rolls fastened with strings, many of them made by carefully piecing together scraps of cotton. They are both signs of thrift and of the pride women took in their needlework.

Figures 12a and 12b: A late eighteenth-century sewing roll crafted from scraps of printed cotton. Traces of the red felt used to hold pins and needles are visible on the exterior. English (front and back), 1960-0196, Winterthur Museum; photos courtesy of Winterthur Museum.

The story the gown told

Finally, I asked Johnson about the two most surprising things Linda Baumgarten had told me. Neither had much to do with what Lanah's outfit looked like. But both cast disturbing new light on the nature of Henry Bedlow's assault.

First, Baumgarten had told me that Bedlow didn't need to remove Lanah's gown in order to rape her. In that period, Baumgarten explained, almost nobody wore drawers. Beneath her gown, Lanah would have been wearing petticoats and stays over a long, plain night shirt-like shift.

Figure 13: Detail of a sack and petticoat made (ca. 1775-1780) of block-printed cotton (ca. 1760s), 150 x 87.5 cm, French or Swiss, T.9-2020, gift of Jonathan Anderson, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Bedlow could have simply pulled up the skirts of her gown and her petticoats. The fact that he didn't—and this aspect of Lanah's testimony was not disputed—indicates that his sexual aim involved removing her clothing, seeing her naked, making her feel exposed. Perhaps he felt this would add to his sense of possession, increase her sense of vulnerability, or simply make it harder for her to escape. In any case, it was not about her outfit; it was about his emotional needs and desires.

Second, Baumgarten went on, the fact that the gown was damaged—the fabric torn in places and more than one "string" ripped loose—indicates that Bedlow's assault had been forceful and that Lanah resisted physically.

For a young woman like Lanah Sawyer, clothing was expensive and labor-intensive. She probably didn't own more than a few dresses—which she may very well have bought used or received as hand-me-downs and remade to fit her form and suit the current fashions. Lanah had likely worn her best gown that evening: a garment not only too costly for her to damage casually but also, quite possibly, an object of pride—a demonstration of her skill with a needle and her eye for fashion.

The prosecutor had been right, Baumgarten concluded. The damaged gown *was* strong evidence of a sexual assault.

It remains a haunting image. It has returned to me many times over the years as I've worked on Lanah Sawyer's story: her calico gown with the frill about its neckline, hanging limp and disembodied as it was held up in court, its usually private interior exposed for the inspection of the jurors, so that they could look, under carefully stitched repairs, for evidence of violence and damage.

I asked Laura Johnson if she agreed with Baumgarten's analysis. Actually, I asked that question every time I spoke with an expert on eighteenth-century clothing and needlework. And they all responded the same way.

Yes, Johnson said, all of that is true.

In fact, that's exactly why the gown was relevant to the trial: it showed that Lanah had endured, and resisted, a violent assault that met even the unreasonable legal standards for rape proposed by the defendant's attorneys.

But that didn't mean that the all-male jury—who took only fifteen minutes to return a verdict of not guilty—actually had ears to hear the story the ripped, torn, and imperfectly repaired dress had to tell.

Further reading

For more on Lanah Sawyer, see John Wood Sweet, *The Sewing Girl's Tale: A Story of Crime and Consequences in Revolutionary America* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2022). Quotations in this essay are from William Wyche's *Report of the Trial of Henry Bedlow* (New York: n.p., 1793), the first published report of an American rape trial; the two surviving copies are at the American Antiquarian Society and the New-York Historical Society; a modern edition is available at www.johnwoodsweet.com. On sexual assault in Early America, a good place to start is Sharon Block, "Bringing Rapes to Court," *Commonplace: The Journal of Early American Life* (April 2003), http://commonplace.online/article/bringing-rapes-to-court/. See also, Marybeth Hamilton Arnold, "'The Life of a Citizen in the Hands of a Woman': Sexual Assault in New York City, 1790-1820," in *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History,* ed. Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989, 35-56); Sharon Block, *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Estelle Freedman, *Redefining Rape: Sexual Violence in the Era of Suffrage and Segregation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013).

The most authoritative work on eighteenth-century American clothing is Linda Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal: The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America* (New Haven: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation in association with Yale University Press, 2002). A terrific resource on changing fashions and the practical construction of garments is Lauren Stowell and Abby Cox, *The American Dutchess Guide to 18th Century Dressmaking: How to Hand Sew Georgian Gowns and Wear Them with Style* (Salem, Mass.: Page Street Publishing Co., 2017). On sewing as work, see Marla Miller, *The Needle's Eye: Women and Work in the Age of Revolution* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006) and Susan Burrows Swan, *Plain & Fancy: American Women and Their Needlework, 1700-1850* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1977). Eye-opening analyses of eighteenth-century clothing include Kimberly Alexander, *Treasures Afoot: Shoe Stories from the Georgian Era* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018); Mary C. Beaudry, *Findings: The Material Culture of Needlework and Sewing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); Barbara Burman and Ariane Fennetaux, *The Pocket: A Hidden History of Women's Lives, 1660-1900* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019); and Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell, *Fashion Victims: Dress at the Court of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

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John Wood Sweet is a professor of Early American history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the former director of UNC's

interdisciplinary Program in Sexuality Studies. His books include *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003) and *The Sewing Girl's Tale: A Story of Crime and Consequences in Revolutionary America* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2022).