



Murdered by His Wife

Deborah Navas

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In March 1778, Joshua Spooner, a wealthy gentleman farmer in Brookfield, Massachusetts, was beaten to death and his body stuffed down a well. Four people were hanged for the crime: two British soldiers, a young Continental soldier, and Spooner's wife, Bathsheba, who was charged with instigating the murder. She was thirty-two years old and five months pregnant when executed. Newspapers described the case as "the most extraordinary crime ever perpetrated in New England." *Murdered by His Wife* provides a vivid reconstruction of this dramatic but little-known episode. Beautiful, intelligent, high-spirited, and witty, Bathsheba was the mother of three young children and in her own words felt "an utter aversion" for her husband, who was known to be an abusive drunk. A year before the murder, she took in and nursed a sixteen-year-old Continental soldier who was returning from a year's enlistment under George Washington. The two became lovers and conceived a child. Divorces were all but impossible for women at that time and adulteresses were stripped to the waist and publicly whipped. Bathsheba's pregnancy occasioned a series of desperate plots to murder her husband, finally brought to fruition with the aid of two British deserters from General Burgoyne's defeated army. The plots, the crime, the trial, and the aftermath are presented against a backdrop of revolutionary turmoil in Massachusetts. As the daughter of the state's most prominent and despised Loyalist, Bathsheba bore the brunt of the political, cultural, and gender prejudices of her day. When she sought a stay of execution to deliver her baby, the Massachusetts Council rejected her petition and she was promptly hanged before a crowd of 5,000 spectators.

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