

Today in Columbus History:

On November 11, 1890, a few words appeared in Columbus Enquirer-Sun under the heading "Today's Racing Program" stating, "Dawson Enters Fairholmes." Dawson may not have known it, but three men wanted to kill him and that notation in the paper told them exactly when and where to find him. That seemingly innocuous phrase spelled one man's doom and led to what was probably the most widely witnessed murder in Columbus history.

The race in question was part of the Grand Chattahoochee Valley Exhibition, taking place in the South Commons. This event was probably the largest in Columbus history up to that time. That morning's paper noted that fifteen thousand people had attended the fair the day before.

Fairhome was actually Fairhaven, a well-known horse owned by Thomas Colbert (T.C.) Dawson of Glenville, Alabama. He had the misfortune of being the former husband of Antoinette Rutherford "Ruth" Howard of the prominent Howard family of Columbus. Robert Howard and Richard Howard were two of Ruth's brothers, who along with James Bickerstaff, a brother-in-law, wanted Dawson to pay for dishonoring their family. This was an honor killing and they didn't care who witnessed it.

The complicated family story started when Ruth found herself pregnant in 1889. At first, she named a married man as the father. After repeated badgering by her brothers, she changed her story and claimed Dawson, a single man, as the father. Dawson agreed to marry her but found out the child was not his after it was born. The child died shortly after birth, and Dawson's sister Sue was implicated in its death. Sue was the widow of Tyler Howard, another brother of Ruth, Robert and Richard. Dawson left the marriage and Ruth was committed to an asylum by her family. It was now time to tie up a loose end in the affair.

At the end of the race, Dawson pulled up in front of the judge's stand, dismounted, ducked under the rail. In front of hundreds, if not thousands of spectators, Robert Howard came from behind and drove an eight-inch bowie knife into Dawson's shoulder breaking his collar bone and severing an artery. At that point, Dawson was a dead man, he just didn't know it, yet. Then the shooting started.

Dawson spun around as he tried to get his bearings while he rapidly bled out. His assassins took this opportunity to make sure that once he fell, he wasn't getting up. Dawson was able to pull a pistol from his pocket and fire off a couple of rounds, without hitting anyone, before falling dead. In the meantime, Bickerstaff and the two Howard brothers got off several shots of their own. Three of them hit the already dying Dawson.

The three men were arrested but not before Robert confessed to the crowd that a private family matter justified their action. They changed their story to self-defense at their trial. In the end, their attorney claimed they were being persecuted for their service to the Confederacy. Both Robert Howard and Bickerstaff served and Bickerstaff lost an arm in the war. However, Richard Howard and Dawson were too young to serve. During the trial, attorney Thomas W. Grimes asked, "...can't a man fight in the Confederate Army and then kill the betrayer of his sister and be justified?" Somehow, the ploy worked. After what was called the longest and most important trial ever recorded in Muscogee County, the three men were found not guilty in the death of Dawson.

This was not the last time a member of the Howard family ran afoul of the law for their violent tendencies. Robert Howard's younger sister Helen Augusta Howard was convicted of attempted murder for shooting a boy in her magnolia tree thirty years later. She recently had a historic marker erected honoring her efforts for women's suffrage here in Columbus.

Clipping from Georgia Historic Newspapers (GALILEO).

Daniel A. Bellware

Our weekly snippets of Columbus history are usually based on a few days-worth of searching through the most popular sources for Muscogee County history. Meant to inspire readers to explore more about Columbus history, they are not exhaustive dissertations on the topic and may contain mistakes. If you have corrections or additional information, feel free to share them with the group.

TODAY'S RACING PROGRAM.

The program for the races today is as follows:

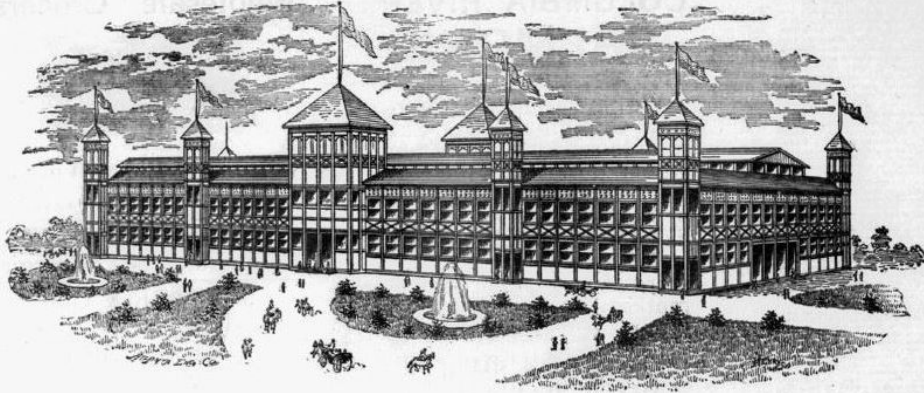
First race, trotting, 3 minute class; purse \$200. Little Sister, Belle, Justenia and Miss Banker have been entered for this race.

Second race, trotting; gentlemen's roadsters race to carts; owners to drive; entrance free. The entry must be owned 30 days prior to race to be eligible. No race horse allowed. One hundred dollars to first, \$50 to second.

Winslow enters Jenny June; Dudley enters Lucy; Hamer enters Cliff; Collins enters Frankie; Fletcher enters Bob Woodford; Dawson enters Fairholmes; Alexander enters Kite.

Columbus Enquirer-Sun, November 11, 1890, <https://gahistoricnewspapers.galileo.usg.edu/>

GRAND CHATTAHOOCHEE VALLEY
EXPOSITION.



Commencing November 5th. and Ending November 15th,
COLUMBUS, GA.
A Program of Unrivalled Attractions!

Columbus Enquirer August 31, 1890, <https://gahistoricnewspapers.galileo.usg.edu/>



High Wheel Sulky – what Dawson was probably driving in the race.
(<https://standardbredcanada.ca/news/8-15-15/sc-rewind-peis-old-home-week.html>)



Grand-pa and His Bright, Beautiful Sunbeams.

Confessed murderer Robert M. Howard from his book *Reminiscences* (1912). The book contains many recollections from his life but conspicuously absent is any memory the murder or trial. It also contains several photos of Howard, always in the company of small children. From

<https://www.google.com/books/edition/Reminiscences/Ya0TAAAYAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0>



The grave of Thomas Colbert Dawson in the Glenville Cemetery in Russell County, Alabama, from

<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/15017997/thomas-colbert-dawson>



The grave of Antoinette Rutherford "Ruth" Howard and her sister Helen Augusta Howard in Linwood Cemetery from <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/8249650/antoinette-rutherford-howard>