

Woman murdered for freedom

Murderer pays the price near victim's grave

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Elizabeth McKinstry's worn, broken, and tilted gravestone in the Plain Cemetery isn't easy to find.

It lies surrounded by the other McKinstry family stones which are now merely mounds of flaking and crumbling granite.

"Here lies the Body of Mrs. Elizabeth McKinstry," the stone reads. "Basely murdered by a Negro boy, June 4th, 1763, aged 28."

Elizabeth was Taunton's first murder victim.

It was a wet, dark evening, and the old woman's hut on the outskirts of town was dank, musty, and dimly lit.

"So, you want to know the future, Bristol?" she whispered to the young black boy.

He hesitated and the dying embers of her fireplace were reflected in the gleam of his eyes.

"Yes," he said quietly. "I want to know if I'll ever be a free man."

The old woman paused, took his hand, and performed whatever magic she needed to know.

Then she sighed and paused a moment.

"You will get your freedom," she said, shaking her head. "And someone in your master's house will die for it. Now go."

The boy ran from the hut with his heart pounding and his stomach in his throat. He didn't know what to think. He didn't know what to do. He didn't know what to believe.

In those days, the 28-year-old Elizabeth McKinstry, who some considered beautiful, would have been called a spinster. When she came to visit her brother, Dr. William McKinstry, and his family at their High Street home in June, 1763, she was just unlucky.

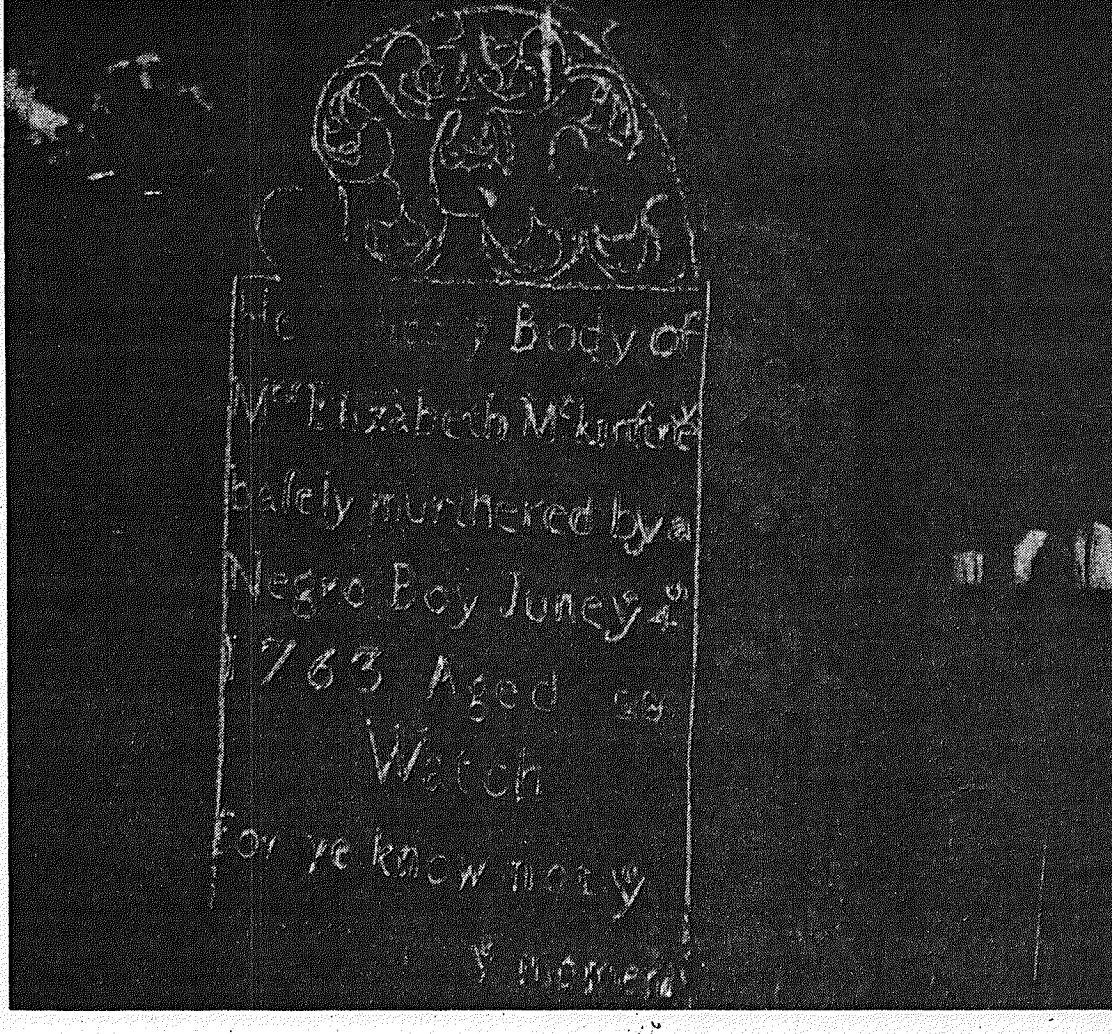
Dr. McKinstry, Bristol's master, was an interesting character in his own right.

McKinstry was an eccentric Tory who lived in Taunton when it wasn't wise to love the king, but his loyalty to Great Britain did not prevent him from being friendly with such early American patriots as Robert Treat Paine, the one-time Taunton resident and signer of the Declaration of Independence, and the second president of the United States, John Adams.

McKinstry built his High Street house, today known as the St. Thomas Rectory, in 1759 on land bought from Stephen Crossman.

Since he was a respected Taunton physician who attempted to keep quiet about his sympathies, the tide of public opinion didn't turn against McKinstry until a brawl broke out over politics, and a prominent Taunton Tory was in need of a physician.

"Send for Dr. McKinstry!" the



TAUNTON'S FIRST MURDER: Elizabeth McKinstry, Taunton's first murder victim, is buried beneath this 223-year-old gravestone in the Plain Cemetery. Other members of the McKinstry family surround her. (Cubie Photo)

forced the doctor to head to Boston. His family, however, attempted to stay in Taunton a while longer.

McKinstry's wife and Bristol's mistress was the former Priscilla Leonard, daughter of Rev. Nathaniel Leonard of Plymouth, sister of George Leonard, a loyalist who led the British attack on Fall River, and cousin of noted Taunton Tory Daniel Leonard.

Mrs. McKinstry's political beliefs were reportedly more obnoxious than her husband's.

After McKinstry left his Taunton home, his family was subjected to constant surveillance. Mrs. McKinstry, described as "a finely educated and high-spirited woman of elegant monners," was felt to be snobbish and haughty towards her neighbors. She finally fled to Boston after she was forced to march around the Liberty Pole on Taunton Green in an attempt to break her spirit.

The McKinstry property was confiscated in 1779 and held in trust for the Commonwealth. It was eventually sold to John

and was raised in the High Street house.

It may have been difficult trying to please the haughty doctor's wife and her children, and Bristol may not have been as content with his life as the family and town citizens wanted to believe. Sources claim he had decent relations with the family, and he was fond of the doctor's sister. But he loved the idea of freedom more.

No matter how decent the McKinstrys were as masters, one hard fact remained. Bristol had no free will, he was not in the house, hold out of choice. He was a slave.

And so after his visit to the local fortune-teller, he pondered what she told him, thought about his situation, and decided what he would do.

On the afternoon of June 4, 1763 Elizabeth and Bristol were alone in the house. He worked about his chores, and she stood ironing by the kitchen fireplace with various flatirons warming on the hearth.

Bristol crept over near her and picked up a flatiron.

He moved steadily closer and hit her over the head.

When she fell to the floor, Bristol realized his job wasn't complete — she was still alive.

He dragged her across the floor to the cellar door and threw her down the stairs.

When he reached the bottom of the cellar steps, he grabbed a nearby axe and cut up her body, throwing the pieces into the nearby fireplace.

After the murder was complete, Bristol knew he would no longer be the McKinstry family slave, and he soon realized he would be anything but free.

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The slave wasn't condemned unfairly, but was given a trial and one of the most prominent area lawyers defended his case.

Not even Robert Treat Paine, Taunton's signer of the Declaration of Independence, the prosecutor of the British soldiers who killed three colonists in the "Boston Massacre," and a friend