

ABOVE: ANTOINE LE BLANC'S EERIE DEATH MASK, PREPARED AT THE COURTHOUSE AFTER HIS HANGING

OPPOSITE PAGE: LE BLANC'S LIKENESS ON A PAMPHLET ABOUT THE MURDERS, PUBLISHED IN 1833

FOR MORE THAN 160 YEARS, THE MEMORY OF A HEINOUS CRIME LAY DORMANT, BURIED UNDER THE LEAFY GREEN IN MORRISTOWN. THEN A HORRIFIC DISCOVERY IN AN OLD BASEMENT RESURRECTED THE GHOST OF ONE OF THE STATE'S MOST NOTORIOUS MURDERERS.

BLOOD TIES

BY ROBERT KLARA

Strahlen Sie?" he asked. Antoine Le Blanc, a hired hand on the Sayre family farm, had just returned from Luse's tavern in Morristown at eleven o'clock on the balmy evening of May 11, 1835. Samuel Sayre, his wife Sarah, and their servant Phoebe should still have been awake, but the house stood silent. Up in Phoebe's room on the second floor, Le Blanc groped through the darkness. "Are you asleep?" he asked in German.

Phoebe gave no response. It was then that Le Blanc saw blood oozing from her broken skull and ran. Such was his version of things, at least. It was testimony that would fall apart almost as quickly as the idyllic nineteenth-century New Jersey town that found itself embroiled in the most bizarre and shocking crime in its history. Le Blanc was as much a liar as he was a murderer, and the blood of one of Morristown's most respected families lay on the hands he folded in the courthouse as his sentence was read. One hundred and sixty-three years later, Morristonians still talk about the crime, and perhaps with good reason. It seems that the discoveries made after the murders are as reluctant to rest as the legend they ignited.

On the night of Halloween 1995, workmen from Dawson's Auctioneers & Appraisers in Morris Plains had nearly finished cleaning out Carl Scherzer's basement. Liquidating his father's



estate was a task that Douglas Scherzer had been putting off, but one that many of the historically minded would have envied; by the time of Carl's death in 1979, his house had become more museum than residence. He had earned a living as a surveyor, but his trained eyes had also helped amass a staggering collection of nineteenth-century books, maps, and artifacts. Through the years, he'd accepted dusty goods from everyone—including a ghost. As a worker lifted one crate, Douglas remembers, "a head actually rolled out on the floor. He was a little shaken up." There was more to be shaken up about: Tucked among the shelves in the library upstairs was a frail wooden frame housing an equally frail coin purse made of human skin.

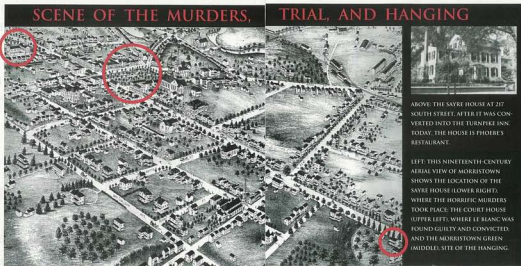
Probably to the relief of the worker, the head turned out to be made of plaster. But the glazed face lying nose down on the floor was a death mask that, like the hide upstairs, hailed from the corpse of Antoine Le Blanc, who had been hanged on the Morristown Green two weeks after his conviction. "If they could have hanged him three times," ventures Carole Deutsch, the public relations manager for Dawson's, "they would have done so. They were so outraged." Outrage often leaves shocking relics, but Le Blanc's is a case for psychology courses. Purses, lamp shades, and book covers made from his tanned hide are said to survive in local homes to this day. "They

warned his disgrace to last forever," says Deutsch. They succeeded.

Anne Le Blanc didn't exactly fit the profile of a triple murderer. He was a Catholic born to privileged parents in Chateau-Salins, France, in 1802. Le Blanc's "delight and sole aim was mischief" according to his post-trial confession. Friendless and out of his family's favor, Le Blanc fled to Germany in 1826, where he accepted farm work with a widow named Smitch and her three daughters. Marie, the youngest, "received my addresses kindly." Le Blanc recollected, "and after much solicitation she consented to be mine." The widow Smitch was considerably less moved, and withheld her matrimonial nod pending a testimonial to Le Blanc's good character. It was a letter he could never obtain.

Le Blanc pinned his hopes on the New World, planning to send for Marie once he'd made his fortune. On April 26, 1833, he landed at a New York City boarding house. Three days later, Samuel Sayre, owner of a modest but lucrative farm in Morristown, came calling in search of hired help. It was probably Le Blanc's desperate shortage of money that quickly brokered what would soon amount to a most unattractive deal. He was enmeshed in a cramped basement room of the Sayre house, and fortunes seemed as far away as his betrothed. The arrangement paid him in board, not wages. The fact that as a foreigner of protestant birth he found himself taking orders only from Sayre bore from Phoebe (who was probably a slave) did little to preserve his dignity. The family's wealth was everywhere in evidence, and amid the drudgery of feeding birds and cutting wood, Le Blanc turned his thoughts to some drastic scene-evening.

Around 10:30 on the night of May 11, Le Blanc burst with feigned panic into the kitchen where Samuel Sayre stood shaving, and proclaimed trouble in the stable. Sayre stepped outside with a candle. Le Blanc waved with a shovel in his hands. The blow to Sayre's face was so hard that bits of brain matter later be found on his coat. Le Blanc dragged the body to an adjacent manure heap and buried it. Using the same ruse to lure Sarah Sayre, Le Blanc faltered with his aim, and the shovel glanced off her head. As she screamed and clutched his vest, he struck her again, dispatching her with kicks to the head and sealing her up in the pile beside her husband. Phoebe was



SCENE OF THE MURDERS, TRIAL, AND HANGING



ABOVE: THE SAYRE HOUSE AT 217 SOUTH STREET, AFTER IT WAS CONVERTED INTO THE TURNPIKE INN. TODAY, THE HOUSE IS PHOEBE'S RESTAURANT.

LEFT: THIS NINETEENTH-CENTURY AERIAL VIEW OF MORRISTOWN SHOWS THE LOCATION OF THE SAYRE HOUSE (LOWER RIGHT), WHERE THE HORRIFIC MURDERS TOOK PLACE, THE COURT HOUSE (UPPER LEFT), WHERE LE BLANC WAS FOUND GUILTY AND CONVICTED, AND THE MORRISTOWN GREEN (MIDDLE), SITE OF THE HANGING.

alone in her room upstairs; her sleep would prove eternal. Le Blanc shattered her skull with a club.

Le Blanc was an efficient killer, but the planner he had carefully plotted fell prey to panic. He threw fertilizer around the stable in a fruitless attempt to cover the spattered blood. Now alone in a dead man's house, he frantically looted rooms and stashed books in pillowcases. Simple cloth pantaloons paired with gold watches bore testimony to his hurry. As Le Blanc rode toward Newark, Sayre's mare bucked under his unfamiliar weight, leaving a trail of evidence. He would never make it to New York, where he had planned to board a ship for Germany.

The following morning, Lewis Halsey passed near the Sayre house and stumbled on a bundle of clothes (some monogrammed with the family name) in the road. News of the discovery moved like a brush fire. Smelling robbery, a band of townfolk besieged the property. One search party discovered Phoebe, and another, tugging at a piece of cloth just out from the manure pile, uncovered Sarah's leg. Nathan Lee, who'd watched Le Blanc drinking in his tavern the night before, set out with sheriff George Ludlow in search of his wayward cus-

tomer. They found him in the Mosquito Tavern in the Hackensack Meadows. Le Blanc broke for the back door but was grabbed. Samuel Sayre's frock coat lay folded in a sack on the floor.

The trial, which began on August 13, saw the beams under Courtroom Number One groan with the weight of shocked citizens. Among them was Samuel P. Hull, editor of the *Jerseyman*, who prepared the transcript. A present-day read of the document reveals an awkward joining of democratic ideals and common wrath. Given that Le Blanc risked being lynched, the trial's involving the testimony of 48 witnesses is only slightly less surprising than Le Blanc's being appointed three attorneys. But this was all window dressing. Though the accused man had not yet confessed, the court overruled the defense's objection that fairness would be compromised by the public's anger, and peppered the proceedings with high moral names. "The separation of church and state," observes local historian Timothy Cutler, "was more theoretical than practical, and Catholics were pretty scarce here in Presbyterian country."

While the evidence remained circumstantial and addressed theft more than murder, Judge Gabriel Ford counseled the

jury thus: "That Being who is infinitely just and righteous, once descended Himself to enact laws for the government...These murders were not perpetrated in this hideous form for nothing; the guilty wretch must have had some definite object. Who was this plaintiff? It was the prisoner." The jury took twenty minutes to find Le Blanc guilty. Judge Ford summarily suppressed the hanging.

The sentence shocked no one. What did was its aftermath. Many would later question if *civilization* was an accurate term for Morristown on September 6. That afternoon, Le Blanc took his final steps toward a noose on the Green. The phalanx of rangers that escorted him there was not for ceremony: The roads of a town with only 2,700 residents were rendered impassable by a jeering mob of 10,000. Some had driven all night to reach Morristown, where, studding trees and rooftops, they are bag lunches. Le Blanc's body swished for two minutes on "modern" gallows built for the occasion, only to be spilt back across the street to the courtroom, where doctors Joseph Henry and Isaac Canfield were waiting.

Nineteenth-century science suffered no shortage of dimly lit theories. "Animal electricity," the belief that motor coordi-

nation was governed by electrical currents, was what the doctors attempted to illustrate as they hooked the corpse up to galvanic batteries. They managed to get its eyes to roll backward and its limbs to tense, but did little else to advance their scholarship. The surgeon then panned off Le Blanc's skin and sent swaths to the Atino Tannery on Washington Street, where "charming little keepers," as the *Jerseyman* called them, were made. Sheriff Ludlow personally signed each one to prove its authenticity. Strips of skin were hawked like pennants. People had gotten their hands on Le Blanc, literally.

Samuel Hull's transcript proved to be a best-seller. It told a story that many eventually wanted to forget—but reminders continued to lurk everywhere. During the construction of the 1893 addition to the county clerk's office, spades struck a small wooden box containing Le Blanc's bones, dispelling the tale that Canfield had reassembled the skeleton for his office. The skin souvenirs found their way into as many homes as stories. To this day, the gallows repose in the attic of the courthouse. "I don't imagine they'll be seeing the light of day anytime soon," muses Michael Arnold, the trial-court administrator. "It would be rather tacky to have

them assembled on the front lawn with the litigants coming in."

The Sayre house—now Phoebe's restaurant—survives at 217 South Street, along with Phoebe herself, it is said. "Some people going up the stairs feel someone blowing on their neck," relates manager Tony Butraglia. He sits at the bar and speaks casually of self-opening doors and exploding punch bowls. "The haunting is great for business," he says smiling. The murders are also good business for Morristown's First Night celebration on New Year's Eve, when a play about the trial again packs Courtroom Number One.

But the subject of Antoine Le Blanc remains a complicated one that evokes horror or anger, acceptance or embarrassment. "Revising the Antoine Le Blanc story is a disservice to the other events and people who made Morristown what it is today," historian Timothy Cutler says. Others disagree. "As a historical fact about life in the nineteenth century," maintains former Historic Speedwell director Sarah Henrich, who adds that similar treatment of condemned prisoners was actually commonplace. "It was a very sad occurrence," she admits, "but it also serves to help people look at their reactions to major events. It shows that the community pulled together." Most seem to accept the legend as a fascinating (though dark) part of history. And history, after all, seldom has a pretty face.

Neither does the head, now in a glass cabinet standing amid the Carl Scherzer collection at Duxbury's. A November 18 auction—which featured the Le Blanc pieces only as an exhibit—brought record attendance, but the kinder samplings from Scherzer's estate won the most attention. "I thought there would have been more people crowded around there," reflects Carole Deutsch while looking at the cabinet. She unlocks the door and places the head squarely into my hands. It weighs about three pounds and coaxes a slight shiver. Despite rumors that the Le Blanc items might be fake, hair sockets dotting the tiny pumpe's shrivelled surface discourage questioning.

In the end, many matters linger. The pieces mark one constanant's breath with evil; preserving them remains a frontier step toward explaining it. Le Blanc's plaster face is sealed, with firmly shut eyes. "Solafer Sin" one is tempted to say. ■

Robert Klara's last words for New Jersey Monthly on Fiat La's Riviera alphabet.