

Who Killed Maggie Bangs?

Between two and four o'clock yesterday morning a woman named Maggie McCutcheon, whose sporting title is "Maggie Bangs," was killed by pistol shot under circumstances that leave it somewhat of a mystery . . .

--San Diego Union, June 19, 1881.

The death of a prostitute in San Diego's notorious Stingaree District rarely excited public comment. But the violent passing of Maggie Bangs, found dead in a house of ill-fame below H Street (Market) was curious. Was it suicide, as it first appeared? Or was she murdered?

Maggie was found dead in her bed in the early morning hours of Saturday, June 18, 1881. Raising the alarm was her "fancy man" Charley Gordon. Once the proprietor of the Pioneer Exchange Saloon on Fifth Street, Gordon now lived with Maggie. He would tell a coroner's jury the next day that he had left Maggie's side at about 3:00 a.m. to walk in the yard behind their house. He heard the sound of a gunshot, but "as shooting was of frequent occurrence in that vicinity, he paid no attention to it."

When Charley returned to the bedroom he found Maggie asleep, or so he thought until he saw a bloody wound in her head and a pistol clutched in her right hand. He then woke up "one of the girls of the house," a woman named Flora Asher, who immediately followed Charley to the room. "She raised the head of the unfortunate woman, when a copious flow of blood from the wound made her sick and she left the room."



"British Bulldog" revolver. Ca 1880. *Wikipedia Commons*
been bought by Charley Gordon only a few days earlier.

The coroner's jury investigation revealed a messy relationship between Maggie and Charley. The two had frequent "spats" over other men--often fueled by Charley's heavy drinking. One prostitute revealed that Charley had run up a large bar tab on Maggie's account at Till Burnes' Saloon on Fifth Street, and added that Maggie was anxious to be rid of Charley, whom she had come to regard as "an expensive ornament." When Till Burnes was interviewed, the saloon owner told the jurors that the gun found in Maggie's hand—a cheap .44 caliber "British Bulldog" revolver--had

The possibility of suicide seemed impossible when the jury studied the body of the deceased. Coroner Thomas Stockton presented grisly evidence for the jury to examine: the head of Maggie McCutcheon. While Maggie had been found with a gun in her right hand, her skull revealed that she had been shot behind the left ear, with the bullet ranging upward and exiting near her right temple.

The scarcity of powder burns on Maggie's skull confirmed that the fatal shot had not been at close range. And there was no powder residue on Maggie's fingers. The expected recoil of the pistol was also considered; the jurors thought it was highly unlikely that the deceased could have retained her hold on the gun after firing.

Reporting on the inquest examination, the *Union* summed it up: "it was impossible that the woman could have done the shooting." After nearly a week of considering the evidence, the coroner's jury rendered their verdict, deciding that the gun that killed Miss McCutcheon, aka "Maggie Bangs," was a pistol held by Charles H. Gordon.

The trial of "People v. Gordon" began in Superior Court six weeks later. After covering the findings of the coroner's inquest in detail, the *Union* was dismissive of the court case, declaring they would not "lumber columns with a tiresome report of the details of the trial." "Besides," the newspaper printed, "the relations of the deceased and accused to society are such as to elicit but little interest save to secure justice."

Representing Gordon was a defense team of San Diego's best known attorneys: Colonel W. Jeff Gatewood (a founder of the *San Diego Union*), and the law firm of Leach & Parker. Despite the coroner's verdict of homicide, the defense attorneys casually ignored the apparent evidence and argued the case on the assumption of suicide.

But defense of any nature hardly mattered. In the face of overwhelming evidence of murder, the jury of twelve men deliberated for a little over an hour before pronouncing a verdict of not guilty.

"Was it murder or suicide?" the *Union* asked the next day. "The verdict of not guilty of course makes it the latter."

But for the "innocent" Charley Gordon, comeuppance would arrive fifteen months later. Resting in his room one day in November 1882 after a bout of "congestion of the lungs," the 39-year old Gordon got up from his bed to check his door and dropped dead of a heart attack.

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