

The Wicked Life of James Poisson

An Eighteenth-Century Scoundrel in Simsbury

James Poisson was not a nice man. Nor was he an honest man. He was a doctor, a merchant, a shopkeeper, an investor in mills and factories, a land speculator, a financial wheeler-dealer, frequently involved in lawsuits, a defaulter of loans, a liar, a con-man, a wife beater and a counterfeiter. He was also a French Huguenot.

The Poisson name is French – meaning fish. However, in various Connecticut records, it is spelled, Payson, Pyson, Poyson, Pison and frequently, Poison. New England Yankees had problems with French names.

A brief look at French history might explain why James and his much older brother Edward, came to the colonies. The Edict of Nantes was issued by Henry IV of France in 1598. It granted religious freedom to Protestants.

Edward and James Poisson were probably born in France during this time of peace and tolerance. Little is known about their life there. They grew up and were educated without experiencing persecution for their religion. The Poisson family must have been wealthy, because James received an education in medicine and the brothers had money when they emigrated. In the colonies, Edward married a woman born in 1656, so he was probably born around that time. Since James was a doctor, he was not a particularly young man. The brothers bought property, invested in businesses and became merchants. James may have been born between 1660 and 1680, so a rather arbitrary 1670 date of birth is reasonable.

In France, in 1685, Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes and initiated intense persecution of Protestants. There was a Huguenot revolt in 1702.

About the Author

Carol Laun has been the Archivist, Curator and Genealogist of the Salmon Brook Historical Society in Granby, CT since 1986. She was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and received a degree in elementary education from the University of Wisconsin. She and her husband, Dave, live in Granby and raised three daughters there.

Also, she has served on the Granby Conservation Commission, Granby Bicentennial Committee and the Granby Cemetery Association. She chaired the Granby Civil War Monument Restoration and the building of the Society's Preservation Barn.

She has been writing monthly history articles for the town newspaper *The Granby Drummer*, since it was established in 1970. Other articles have been published in the *Hartford Courant*, *Connecticut Nutmegger*, and many area newspapers and local history magazines. In addition, she was the author or compiler of eight Granby history books and received awards for two of the books from the Connecticut Society of Genealogists.

Carol refers to herself as a “born again New Englander” and she considers researching history and genealogy like detective work. Her latest project was to re-create the lost 1890 Granby Census.

James and Edward probably emigrated about 1706. Edward may have been about fifty and James about thirty-six years old. Perhaps they left France because the situation there was becoming too dangerous. It is unknown where they landed, but they first went to Wethersfield.

The name of James Poisson appears multiple times in the Public Records of Connecticut. He bought seventy-one bushels of Wethersfield large red onions from Benjamin Adams in 1707 and refused to pay for them. Adams sued Poisson in 1710 for his 8 pounds, 17 shillings and 6 pence, which Poisson appealed. The court decided in favor of Adams, but Poisson continued to appeal his case for the next two court sessions, dragging the case on for another year, until the judges finally decided not to accept any more appeals. Poisson had established a pattern he would follow throughout his life.

In 1708, the two brothers bought a half-acre triangular plot of land in Wethersfield, with a mansion house on it, on the northwest side of the street. Within a year, they were asked to leave town, having been “warned out” of Wethersfield. They appealed to the General Court and argued that “the law was never intended to exclude French refugees from the liberty of residing in this Colony, provided they are conformable to law.” After giving security not to become dependent on the town for support, Edward and James would be “allowed to live quietly in the said town of Wethersfield, or any other town of this Colony.”

James was back in court in 1710, suing Elizabeth, widow of Captain Stephen Hollister, for a debt of 4 pounds, 18 shillings and 10 pence. He won that lawsuit.

Edward Poisson married Mrs. Elizabeth (Harris) Wheeler Nesbitt on Nov. 20, 1712 in Stratford. The following year, the brothers sold their Wethersfield mansion and moved to Derby. The much-married Elizabeth became a widow again when Edward died on June 22, 1716, in Stratford. Within a year, Elizabeth was married to Richard Blackleach. All of her four husbands were merchants, with whom she had no children.

James seemed to move frequently, buying and selling property. In various documents dating from 1715, he is said to be of Derby, of Hartford and of Simsbury. Another lawsuit in 1717, by Jonathan Belcher of Boston, brought judgment against Richard and Elizabeth Blackleach and James Poisson “for the return of buildings, land and meadow obtained by them through fraudulent means.” There were no details as to how James, his former sister-in-law and her new husband, swindled this man.

While operating as a shopkeeper in Wethersfield, Derby and New Haven in the 1720s, James Poisson became involved in a counterfeiting scheme. Connecticut and the other New England colonies were increasingly troubled by altered and counterfeit copies of their Bills of Credit. One group of counterfeiters operated in Connecticut, but had connections in New Jersey, Philadelphia and Boston. Poisson was arrested in 1724 and committed to the Hartford County Jail awaiting trial, “being suspiciously guilty.”

The resourceful James Poisson did not stay in jail. He convinced a man named Jonathan Easton to bail him out by a pledge of two hundred pounds surety. He also managed to buy and sell some land in Enfield before his trial.

James then was tried and found guilty of making “a false and counterfeit bill in imitation of the five pound bills of publick credit of Rhode Island.” He was sentenced to stand an hour and a half in the pillory, have the lower part of his right ear cut off, go to prison for six months and pay for the costs of his prosecution.

This rather severe punishment did not occur because “James Poisson absconded.” The gullible Mr. Easton was now liable for two hundred pounds. Unfortunately, he died and his poor widow was sued for the money. The Court recognized the unfairness of this situation, “whereby the said James Poisson is like wholly to escape punishment for his flagitious crime, and the innocent widow and fatherless children made the only sufferers.”

Orders went out to all the county sheriffs to arrest Poisson. They seemed to forget about the pillory, cutting off his ear and even the prison sentence. If Poisson would pay the two hundred pounds and the sheriff's fees, he would be discharged. He didn't meet the end of 1725 deadline, but by April 1726, the high sheriff received the money and Poisson was free to continue his less than exemplary life.

James did not change his ways. His pattern of lawsuits continued, including a four thousand pound bond forfeited by Poisson in 1728 and judged in favor of a man from New York City. True to form, Poisson appealed several times and lost. He frequently borrowed money from the colony and someone had to agree to post a surety bond to insure repayment of the loan. From the number of forfeited bonds in his records, he rarely paid back the loans. Yet somehow, he always managed to talk someone into standing surety for him.

By 1739, James Poisson was living in Simsbury and, astonishingly, got married. If he was born about 1670, he was at least 69 years old.

The wedding of James Poisson, about 69 years old, took place in Stratford, Connecticut on August 14th 1739, when "Rev^d. Mr. Samuel Johnson joined James Poisson of Simsbury in marriage to Sarah Pengilley of Suffield." Sarah was only 22 years old. She was the daughter of John and Mary Pengilley, born Feb. 22, 1717 in Suffield. Her new husband was older than her father.

There is no indication in the records as to how they met, why they got married in Stratford or what possessed Sarah to marry this elderly man. Perhaps it was all about money. Poisson may have been thought to be very wealthy because of all of his financial deals.

Poisson continued to buy and sell property in Connecticut. He bought a house with four acres near the Hop Brook Gristmill in Simsbury. He also bought the gristmill. He bought a half share in a sawmill in Salmon Brook (the early name for Granby). He owned an Iron Works on the Scantic River in Somers. Huge profits were made when Poisson sold these properties. He sold a $\frac{3}{4}$ interest in a sawmill and gristmill in the Scotland area of Simsbury, for eight hundred seven pounds.

His name also appeared on a list of the original proprietors of the township of Winchester in Hartford Co. Connecticut, in 1744. He was granted land in that town.

Poisson was involved in more lawsuits in 1745 and 1747. In many of these cases, he would tell the defendant that he was dropping the suit, so they would not bother to appear in court. But he would not drop the suit and would then win the judgment by default.

In the 1747 suit against Samuel Beamond (probably Beman) of Simsbury, Poisson lied to Beamond, saying he would not proceed with the case. Since Beamond was not present, Poisson obtained a judgment of five hundred pounds plus costs. Fortunately for Beamond, the judgment was set aside.

During these years, little is known about Poisson's wife Sarah, until her father gave her some land in February 1748. John Pengilley bought three acres of land from John Slater, west of the river, and gave it to his daughter. This indicated that there was something very wrong with the marriage. Parents only gave property to a married daughter to make sure she had some security and a place to live.

In early April 1748, James Poisson deserted his wife. They had been married for nine years. Sarah was now 31 years old and James was probably close to 80.

The Simsbury Vital Records provide the next chapter in this saga, "John Poisson the Son of James Poisson and Sarah his wife was born the 4th of January 1749." John was born nine months after James deserted Sarah.

Later that year, Sarah's sister, Mary Pengilley, was staying with her. She was caring for her, because Sarah was lame and "not able to help herself." Poisson showed up to tell Sarah he was "selling her clothes and linens and what she had for her necessary support" to Mr. Jacob Pettibone who had provided security for

money Poisson borrowed from the Colony.

Sarah objected to this and according to Mary, "Poisson immediately fell into a violent passion with her and in this great rage did bend his fists at her and come up to her as if he would strike her and cursed and damned her at a dreadful rate and said he would strip her of everything. He would not leave her so much as a rag to wind about her finger."

When Poisson left, Mary asked Sarah if he had ever acted like that before and Sarah said many times. Mary said she would be afraid for her life and wondered how Sarah could have lived with him. Sarah replied that she "was afraid of him and had shut herself up for fear of her life."

In 1750, in the last land record found for him, Poisson sold land in Turkey Hills (now East Granby). Then, as he had threatened, he sold the contents of his Simsbury home, where Sarah and the baby were living. He sold "bedding, pewter, brass, ironware and all other particulars that are now in said house" to settle the forfeited bond to Jacob Pettibone. In 1751, Sarah filed for divorce.

Sarah testified in her petition that James had deserted her in early April 1748 and since that time "totally neglected all and every said duty of his marriage covenant." He told her he had no intention of caring for her or being a husband to her again. Therefore Sarah asked for a divorce "to be freed from all the obligations she is under in virtue of her marriage."

Many witnesses gave depositions in this divorce case. Joseph Smith, a Simsbury blacksmith, said that for the past three years he worked for Poisson at the mills and sometimes lived in the Poisson home. "To the best of my observation and from what I have often heard Mr. James Poisson say, he has lived in total neglect of duty toward his wife Sarah for more than three years. I know that there always has been two beds in the house and when I lived there, James Poisson used to lodge in one of them and his wife in another. He never provided food or clothing for his wife. Once I saw him take his staff and hold it over her head when she was lame and said to her 'you are a cursed damned eternal whore, begone out of the house.' He was daily quarreling with her and using such language to her and speaking all manner of evil of her."

Poisson was living in Enfield at this time, and a deputy sheriff read the divorce petition to him. Poisson responded "I acknowledge that I am not able to perform my marriage covenant with the petitioner and therefore it is very reasonable that her petition should be granted."

However, the court continued to take depositions, including one from Moses Estey, an Enfield friend of Dr. Poisson. He said he had been to the Poisson home many times and the Doctor and his wife always lodged in separate rooms. "I have heard the Doctor call her a bitch and cursed creature and many other bad names and that she should never have one penny of his estate."

A few days later, James Poisson sent another message to the Court in Hartford. "I hereby inform your honors that I have not lay with my wife Sarah for the space of three years past and do not intend to use her as my wife for the future."

The testimony about the divorce, between James Poisson and Sarah (Pengilley) Poisson, continued despite the lack of objections from James.

Rachel Moor said she lived near Mrs. Poisson for seven years, and for six months of that time, she lived in the same house. "In all that time, when the Doctor was at home, although his bed was in the outward room, he would always go to bed in another room and the Doctor went to several neighbors to board and stay away nights to stay away from her."

Sarah Poisson had filed for divorce in September 1751 and the final petition was heard by the Superior Court in March 1754. The testimony of Sarah, her relatives, friends and neighbors and even from James, provided the necessary proof of at least three years of not living as husband and wife. "Total neglect of all

dutys of a husband,” according to Sarah. The divorce was granted October 22, 1754.

It is probable that James Poisson, aged about 84, died sometime between the divorce in 1754 and 1769, when neighbor John Slater wrote his will (more about this later). There are no more land records in the Simsbury area for Poisson, although he could have continued to buy and sell land in Enfield. No death record or probate for Poisson has been found at this time and he may have had a large estate. The amounts of money he received for the property he sold would make him a very wealthy man. And yet, he was always borrowing money from the Colony, defaulting on surety bonds and trying to avoid paying his debts.

In 1754, Sarah Poisson was 37 years and her only child, John, was nearly six. She had no means of support other than family. A year later, her father John Pengilley of Suffield and her neighbor John Slater of Simsbury, for 100 pounds, sold her their rights to all the property that formerly belonged to James Poisson, four acres with a dwelling house and barn, as well as rights in the lower mill. The property was located on the southwest corner of Hopmeadow Street and West Street in Simsbury. A few months later, Sarah bought the same property rights from Samuel Dwight of Somers, for 400 pounds. Sarah and her son now had a secure home.

It is highly unlikely that Sarah had the 500 pounds to buy this property. Her father was probably helping her. The involvement of her neighbor, widower John Slater, is explained in Simsbury Vital Records recording the marriage of Sarah Poisson to John on January 25, 1759.

John Slater had four children from his first marriage, John Jr., his only son, and daughters Abigail, Mary and Elizabeth. John and Sarah only had one child, a daughter Sarah, born in 1764. She died at the age of 15, in 1779. This whole saga has led to:

A Genealogical Theory

James and Sarah Poisson were married for nine years before he deserted her. In all those years, she never had a child. He left her in April 1748 and in January 1749, John Poisson was born.

According to the law, if a couple is legally married at the time a child is born, the husband is listed as the father, whether or not he actually is the father. I do not think James Poisson is the father of John Poisson. If no children were born early in the marriage when he was in his late 60s, it is unlikely that he would father a child when he was in his late 70s. Especially since he was so neglectful and abusive to Sarah and they did not share a bed.

I strongly suspect that widower John Slater was the father of John Poisson. Sarah named her son John, which could honor her father or her friend and neighbor, John Slater. Slater was involved in selling land to Sarah's father in 1748, which was given to Sarah, probably to give her some security in an obviously bad marriage. James Poisson had sold his Simsbury home to a man from Somers in 1741. A year after the divorce, Slater and Sarah's father bought partial rights to the property to make sure she had a home. Later, the Somers investor sold her the remaining rights.

This still doesn't prove that John Slater was the father of John Poisson. However, there is a very intriguing sentence in John Slater's will, written June 5, 1769 and proved January 12, 1778. John left his dwelling house and adjoining land "in Hopbrook where my new house is now building" to his wife Sarah. He left something to his four children by his first wife and to daughter Sarah, by his second wife. Then he gave a legacy, "to my wife's son John Poison which she had born unto her while she was the wife of James Poisson, deceased." After Sarah died, her son John would inherit the property Sarah was given.

If you study it, that quote is very strange. Slater identifies John as born while she was the wife of James Poisson, now deceased. He never says John was the son of Sarah and her former husband. While there is no way (outside of DNA testing) to prove this theory, it is logical.

John Poisson is believed to have built this gambrel-roofed house about 1795 on land once owned by the Rev. Timothy Woodbridge. The house has one and a half stories and a central chimney serving four fireplaces. The stone basement and first floor had kitchens.

The house is shown here in its original location on the north bank of Hop Brook facing West Street. It was moved to the Simsbury Historical Society grounds in 1965 and is called the Hendrick Cottage for its last owner, Fanny Josephine Pomeroy Hendrick.



Photo courtesy of the Simsbury Historical Society

There were also several land transactions between John Slater and John Poisson. After Poisson married Lucy Tuller around 1767, he bought 80 acres from his stepfather. A few years later, Slater sold John Poisson his home lot and orchard, available because Slater had built a new house. His own son, John Slater Jr. eventually moved to New York.

John Poisson and Lucy Tuller had eight daughters who married into local families such as Gillet, Edgerton, Cook, Clark, Holcomb and Kilbourne. If my theory is correct, their ancestry is Slater, not Poisson – which might be preferable, considering the character of James Poisson.

By Carol Laun

This article by Carol Laun was published in three parts in The Granby Drummer between February and April 2015. It is reprinted here with her permission.

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Genealogy Road Show — Hail and Farewell!

Diane LeMay, our popular genealogist who began the Genealogy Road Show, is retiring to move to Florida. Marilyn Giese, who joined our staff some months ago, will now host the program.

Marilyn Giese is a member of the Association of Professional Genealogists and her impressive résumé can be found on that organization's website. In brief, her specialties include researching records concerning emigration, immigration and migration; Mayflower, colonial and Federal records; land platting and land records; and Scottish clans. She has experience researching the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. As for geographic areas, she has particular expertise in the states of California, Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Vermont and Wisconsin; also Boston, Minneapolis/St. Paul, Ontario and the British Isles.

All are welcome at the Genealogy Road Show! Begin researching your family tree or bring in questions and problems you have with ongoing searches.

Regular sessions will be from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. on the second and fourth Saturdays of August, September, October and November and on December 10. Mrs. Giese is also available on Thursdays from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m. Free to members, \$5 for non-members.

Drop-In Book Club

New people are always welcome at the Drop-In Book Club which meets on Tuesdays at 11:15 a.m. It is free. The books for discussion for the rest of 2016 are:

- ◆ September 13: *What Alice Forgot* by Liane Moriarty
- ◆ October 11: *Lila* by Marilynne Robinson
- ◆ November 8: *Joy: Poet, Seeker and the Woman Who Captivated C. S. Lewis* by Abigail Santamaria

The New Patio

If you are looking for an outdoor place to read, come to the fine new patio on the north side of the front door. The patio was designed by trustee Rick Schoenhardt, who is an architect. It is furnished with a table and chairs. Plantings will be added soon.

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Simsbury Free Library Fall 2016 Programs

George McLean & the George Family: A Bond with the Land

Thursday, September 29, at 6:30 p.m.

David Holdt lived in a house in the McLean Game Refuge from 1974 to 1979. While residing there, Holdt learned the lore of the land and its wildlife and about Amos Everett George of the Pequot tribe to whom Simsbury's George Payne McLean, former Connecticut governor and U. S. senator, entrusted the care of his expanding property. Sen. McLean used the land as a private hunting and fishing preserve and often hosted dignitaries such as Presidents Coolidge, Taft and Hoover. Mr. Holdt became friendly with Amos George's two sons, Amos A. and particularly Henry, who succeeded their father as caretaker. At the request of the McLean Fund, author and history educator Holdt wrote an article in which he shared his special knowledge of the game refuge.

All are welcome to hear David Holdt read from his article. Free to members, \$5 for non-members.

From Brownstone to Cast Stone: The Ketchin-Herpel Story

Saturday, October 1, at 9:00, followed by a walking tour at 10:30 a.m.

A. J. Ketchin & Son built almost all the brownstone buildings in Simsbury: the Ensign-Bickford fuse factory, the Methodist Church, the high school (now Simsbury Town Hall), the Wilcox house (Vincent Funeral Home), the R. H. Ensign stables (now The Courtyard), the J. R. Ensign house (later Webster Bank), the Tariffville Volunteer Firehouse (formerly the Ketchin tobacco warehouse) and more. Fredrick Henry Herpel donated his great grandfather William Mansfield Ketchin's memoirs to the Simsbury Free Library and they were the basis of a five-part article written by Mary Jane Springman and published in this Quarterly in 2011-12. After enlisting John Nagy as speaker, the three of them presented a program about Andrew and William Ketchin's brownstone buildings last fall at the Simsbury Public Library.

This fall the trio will recap some Ketchin history and move on to the cast stone businesses that William Ketchin and his descendants established in Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach, Florida. For a preview of one business, go to the website for Herpel, Inc. Cast Stone & Columns (www.herpelcaststone.com).

After the illustrated talk, please come on a narrated **walking tour** along Hopmeadow Street to view some Ketchin brownstone buildings. Jim Ray, historian for Simsbury United Methodist Church, will be point out special details on its exterior. Rick Herpel will explain particularly fine stonework on the Joseph R. Ensign house. Those who would like to follow the tour with **lunch** at Metro Bis are welcome to join Rick, John and Mary Jane.

The program and tour are free to members, \$5 for non-members; lunch is on your own tab. To make a reservation, please call the library at 860.408.1336. **Space is limited. Reservations are required for each event.**

Hartford in World War I

Thursday, October 20, at 6:30 p.m.

David Drury, journalist and author of the recently published book *Hartford in World War I*, will speak about the war and how it impacted both the Hartford men and women who served in the war and the people at home. Simsbury's Ensign-Bickford Company played a significant role and the town was reputedly the first in the region to have a full company of recruits organized and in uniform after the U.S. entered the war, the author wrote.

Please come to hear David Drury speak about the First World War. Free to members, \$5 for non-members.

A Special Thank You

The Trustees of the Simsbury Free Library are very grateful to the many people who donated to the library in memory of the late Margaret M. Donohue and Dr. John L. Cannon. Peg Donohue guided the library through its transition from the town's public library to the research library that it is today. Besides being a beloved family doctor, John Cannon was an active supporter of the library and its mission.

☆☆☆ Farmington Canal Maps ☆☆☆

Farmington Canal maps are available for sale at the Simsbury Free Library. The series of nine maps, created by canal expert Carl E. Walter, includes one for each of the towns through which the canal once ran: New Haven, Hamden, Cheshire, Southington, Plainville, Farmington, Avon, Simsbury and Granby. Construction of the canal began in 1825 and it was abandoned in 1847. Each map shows where the canal and various engineering features were located, some of which can still be seen today.

The reverse side of each map explains the need for the canal, its financing and construction, the challenge of running it and the reasons for its demise. It gives details of topics unique to the town it covers: tolls, road and farm bridges, locks, waste weirs, canal boats, aqueducts, canal basins, culverts, dams and feeders. It also features ten town-specific photos, many taken in the 1930s.

The price of each folded map is \$5.00 and the set of nine is \$40.00. Flat maps are available for \$10.00 each. The maps can be purchased at the library or online. Visit simsburyfreelibrary.org for information on shipping and handling charges.

☆ Simsbury Free Library Programs on SCTV ☆

Before buying the Farmington Canal maps, you might want to view the illustrated talk that Carl Walter gave at the library on June 9. It is easy to access online at the Simsbury Community Television (SCTV) website: simsburytv.org. Bob Belletzkic's June 25 talk on the railroads that served the town is there and many other library programs, as well as interviews with long time residents Thelma Hall and James Patrick Connelly.

☆ Upcoming Programs ☆

For information about the exciting programs scheduled at the library on **September 29, October 1** and **October 20**, please see the insert in this issue.

FIRST CLASS

SIMSBURY FREE LIBRARY
Simsbury Genealogical and Historical Research Library
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And by appointment Closed major holidays.
Mary Jane Springman, Editor, SFL Quarterly

