

Jane Toppan

“Jolly Jane”



Serial killer researched by

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Date	Age	Life Event
1857	0	Jane Toppan was born Honora Kelley to Peter and Bridget Kelley. Little is known about Bridget Kelley other than she died of consumption when Honora was still young. While little background information is known about Peter Kelley, he was said to be a chronic drunk, prone to violent outbursts as well as a subject of quite a few colorful legends. Many say that he eventually went insane while working at a tailor's shop and was institutionalized by trying to sew his eyelids shut. An alleged cousin later reported that Honora had an older sister, Nellie, who went violently insane in her 20's and had to be institutionalized.
1863	6	February: Peter Kelley begged the Boston Female Asylum to take his two youngest daughters – Honora and 8 year-old Delia Josephine. When the board examined the shabby dress and poor hygiene of the young girls, it was decided that these children had been subject to neglect and possible abuse. The vote was unanimous to allow the children to stay at the asylum.
1864	7-8	Honora was indentured to Mrs. Ann C. Toppan by the Boston Female Asylum. Even though she was never formally adopted, she changed her name to Jane Toppan.
1864-1873	7-16	Jane suffered shame and humiliation at the hands of her foster mother. Although Ann's daughter Elizabeth never mistreated Jane, due to the abuse at the hands of her Mrs. Toppan, Jane developed a bitter hate and jealousy for her foster sister. Most of all, Jane envied the fact that Elizabeth would eventually get married one day. According to unsubstantiated love stories, Jane was once courted by a Lowell office worker who even gave her an engagement ring engraved with the image of a bird.

		The relationship soured when he moved to another town and fell in love with his landlord's daughter, a young woman he eventually married. In order to overcome this abuse, Jane developed a vivacious personality and denied her Irish heritage by making derogatory Anti-Irish and Anti-Catholic statements in the Protestant circles in which she moved. While some of her schoolmates liked her a great deal, others despised her as an outrageous liar: she spun tails of her heritage and would often pin her troublesome deeds on other children. Due to her unhappiness with her situation and the unlikelihood that she would never marry, Jane grew unattractively plump.
1874	18	Jane was released of her duties to the Toppan family and received \$50 as stipulated by the indenture agreement.
1874-1885	18-28	Although Jane was released from her indentured obligations, she remained in the Toppan household for a decade and worked for her foster sister, Elizabeth, after Mrs. Toppan died. While there, Elizabeth married Oramel Brigham, a young deacon in the local church.
1885	28-29	Jane moved out of the Brigham household and the circumstances surrounding her departure are unknown. Elizabeth remained kind to Jane and assured her that she could come back and visit whenever she wanted.
		Jane began nursing training at Boston's Cambridge Hospital. She was quite popular with the patients and acquired the nickname Jolly Jane, but her colleagues were not as taken with her. She was not well liked by her fellow trainees and she was perceived as a devious gossip that repeatedly lied about her background. Jane was suspected of stealing, but she was never caught. If she liked a patient, at first she would falsify their charts or give them small doses of medicine to make them so they would have to stay. She began conducting "scientific experiments" on her patients in which she would alternate different doses of morphine or atropine to examine the effects on the patients. She grew to like atropine because of the more animated symptoms that were associated with it.
1887	30-31	It is speculated that Jane killed more than a dozen of patients while working at Cambridge. One patient, Mrs. Amelia Phinney, lived to later tell the tale of Jane's maliciousness. After surgery, Jane administered some bitter tasting medicine to Amelia to help with her pain. As she was slipping into unconsciousness, she realized that Jane had gotten into bed with her and began kissing her all over her face. Luckily for Mrs. Phinney, Jane was startled by someone and hastily left the room. As Amelia gained consciousness the next day, she thought the incident had all been a dream and she checked out of the hospital, keeping her fears silent until she found out that Jane had been arrested in 1901.
1888	31-32	Even though her colleagues did not like her, she won the favor of a couple of doctors, who gave her glowing recommendations to receive wider training at the more respectable Massachusetts General Hospital.
1889	32-33	In head nurse's leave of absence, Jane was named the temporary representative. Colleagues disliked her and suspected that she was using blatant disregard for the dosages of medication she was giving her patients. Quite a few of patients were speculated to have died under her care.
1890	33-34	Summer - Jane broke an important rule and left the ward without permission. She was discharged without ever receiving her nursing license, even though she had passed the final and her diploma was signed. Fall - After a stint as a private nurse, Jane returned to Cambridge Hospital.
1891	34-35	Spring - Jane was dismissed from Cambridge Hospital due to the fear that she was administering opiates recklessly – a rumor that had always followed her. Summer - Jane decided began her career as a full time private nurse. Jane was regarded as the most successful private nurse in Cambridge, even though some of her employers were annoyed with her intricate lies and petty theft. In her free time, Jane loved to guzzle beer, tell lies, and spread rumors.

1895	38-39	May – Jane poisoned her landlord Israel Dunham (WM, 77) because he was feeble and fussy. Jane then moved in with her dead landlord's wife, Lovey.
1897	40-41	Fall – Jane poisoned Lovey Dunham (WF).
1899	42-43	August – Jane's foster sister, Elizabeth Brigham, met her at a vacation home at Cape Cod. Jane slowly poisoned her and claimed this was the first victim that she hated. Jane told Elizabeth's widower, Oramel, that it was her sister's last wish for Jane to have her gold watch and chain. Oramel obliged because this sounded characteristic of his dear wife Elizabeth and later found out, after Jane was arrested that she had pawned the gold watch and chain.
		December 29 th – Jane poisoned Mary McLear (WF, 70) after she was recommended by the woman's doctor to take care of her. It was speculated that Jane took some of Mary's clothing. This murder was odd because Jane did not know Mary personally, and she liked to kill people that she knew.
1900	43	February 11 – Killed old friend, Myra Connors, with strychnine in order to take over her position as dining matron at The Theological School.
		After Myra died, Jane approached the dean of the Theological School and informed him that Myra was planning on going on a sabbatical and she had intended to recommend Jane for the job. Jane lied to the dean and told him that Myra had instructed her on all of the duties of the job.
		The dean offered Jane the job, and right from the start her coworkers questioned her competence. During the summer, while the Theological School was out of session, she worked at the mess hall of the Biological School in Woods Hole.
		November: Jane was dismissed from her job at the Theological School, without claiming any victims, for financial irregularities and complaints that had been lodged against her.
1901	44	Jane began living under new landlords, Melvin and Eliza Beedle, whom she also poisoned, but only enough to give them gastrointestinal illness.
		Jane poisoned the Beedle's housekeeper, Mary Sullivan, enough to frame her as drunk so she would be dismissed and Jane could take over – it worked.
		June - July: The landlord of the cottage where Jane vacationed decided that it was time to collect on the \$500 she owed them, so Mary "Mattie" Alden embarked on a trip to the Beedle's house in Cambridge. Jane gave Mattie some doctored Hunyadi mineral water and later that evening gave her more morphine when she became sick. Over 7 days, under the noses of everyone (even a Dr. who had been successful in catching another woman serial killer who used arsenic), Jane poisoned her victim slowly. She played with Mattie, bringing her in and out of lucidity, only to immediately plunge her deep into a coma.
		July 5 th : Mattie Davis finally died.
		July: Jane moved in with the Davis family to help take care of Alden Davis after the passing of his wife. Less than a week after she had been there, Jane set fire to some papers in a closet in her new home. Much to Jane's dismay, the fire was quickly extinguished.
		A few days later, Jane lit a fire in the pantry and went out for an afternoon stroll. Fortunately for the Davis family, friends saw the smoke and rushed to put the fire out.
		The next week, Jane set another fire in the Davis home, but once again, it was extinguished in time.
		July 26 th : Jane poisoned Genevieve Gordon, the youngest Davis daughter who had remained in the house to make sure that her father would fare well without his wife. Jane tried to pass this off as a suicide due to the fact that Genevieve was so distraught over her mother's death.
		August 8 th : Jane turned her sights on Alden Davis, and killed him in less than two weeks after his youngest daughter's death.
		August 12-13: Jane successfully poisoned the last of the Davis family: the oldest daughter, Minnie Gibbs. While Minnie was dying, Jane brought her ten year old son to bed with her – it is unknown if Jane sexually abused the child.

		<p>August 26th: Jane returned to her hometown of Lowell, in hopes of marrying her dead foster-sister's widower, Oramel Brigham. Jane killed his sister, Edna Bannister (WF, 77), because she felt she was in the way of her marriage to Oramel.</p>
		<p>August 31st: Minnie Gibbs' father-in-law, Captain Gibbs, summoned Leonard Wood – the leading toxicologist in Massachusetts – to exhume the bodies of the Davis family to test his suspicions that they had been poisoned. Jane read this in the newspaper.</p>
1901	44	<p>When the bodies were exhumed, a state police detective, John S. Patterson was assigned to follow Jane and keep an eye on her.</p>
		<p>September 29th: Frustrated that all of her attempts to win Oramel were not working (she even poisoned him and nursed him back to health to prove how indispensable she was), Jane took an overdose of morphine herself. After Jane was back on her feet, Oramel promptly kicked her out. Jane then traveled to New Hampshire to visit an old friend, Sarah Nichols.</p>
		<p>October 29th: Jane was arrested for the murder of Minnie Gibbs.</p>
		<p>During the entire time that Jane was awaiting a formal trial, she remained in the Barnstable Jailhouse. She quickly befriended the jailor's wife who believed that Jane was innocent. As she sat in her jail cell, Jane gained more and more weight.</p>
		<p>October 31st: Arraignment was held for Jane. The trial was continued until November 8th: Jane pled Not Guilty.</p>
		<p>The state proposed that Jane had been using arsenic to poison her victims because it had been found in the bodies. It turned out that the embalming fluid used was mostly arsenic and the prosecution was at a standstill about how Jane had killed her victims.</p>
		<p>It was old Captain Gibbs, Minnie Gibbs' father-in-law, who purposed that Jane had used morphine and atropine as her poisons of choice.</p>
		<p>November 8th: Trial was continued to November 11th. The prosecution was still no closer to connecting Jane to the victims. An inquisition hearing about the deaths of the Davis girls was held after Jane's hearing, and Captain Gibb's suspicions were founded.</p>
		<p>November 11th: Trial once again continued until December 11th.</p>
		<p>November 21st: Bodies of Mattie and Alden Davis were exhumed.</p>
1902	45	<p>December 6th: 23 members of a grand jury assembled to hear Jane's case. Jane was officially charged with 4 counts of murder of the entire Davis family. Once again, she pled Not Guilty.</p>
		<p>March 31st: Papers reported that Jane had undergone a psychiatric evaluation by a panel of experts who had determined that she was insane. Jane had admitted that she had an irresistible sexual impulse to kill and she confessed to 11 murders.</p>
		<p>June 23rd: The trial of Jane Toppan began. It took less than eight hours for the entire trial, and the jury only had to deliberate for 20 minutes. Jane was found Not Guilty by Reason of Insanity. Jane was sentenced to Taunton Insane Hospital for life. Jane appeared to be overcome with joy about the verdict because she assumed that she would be able to convince the hospital of her sanity and be set free in a few month's time.</p>
		<p>It was later discovered that Jane had confessed to her defense lawyer and long time friend, James Stuart Murphy, that she had committed more than 31 murders. In addition to this, as a supplement to the <i>New York Journal</i>, William Randolph Hearst typed up Jane's confession. In this document, Jane admitted that she wanted the panel of psychiatrists to find her insane. Upon convincing them of this lie, she felt very smug in knowing that she had outsmarted a panel of "experts." Jane described the exquisite pleasure it gave her to kill her patients, and she marveled at the lack of feeling and remorse she felt for doing these horrible things. In an attempt to show that she was not without feeling, Jane claimed that the jilt she received from the lover in her youth seemed to be the root of all of her problems. Jane explained, "If I had been a married woman, I probably would not have killed all of those people. I would have had my husband, my children and my home to take up my mind."</p>

		June 24 th : Jane checked into her new home. For three and a half decades, Jane's mental state slowly deteriorated. For a time, she refused to eat any of the food at the hospital because, ironically, she thought that the food had been poisoned. As the years passed, Jane became a quiet old lady who did not cause any trouble.
1938	80-81	August 17 th : Jane died of old age at Taunton Insane Hospital.
General Information		
Sex		Female
Race		White (Irish)
Number of victims		Confessed to 31
Country where killing occurred		United States
States where killing occurred		Boston, MA
Type of killer		Angel of Death/Organized Lust
Height		5'3"
Childhood Information		
Date of birth		There is confusion about Jane's birth year: some sources say it was 1854, whereas Harold Schechter places it around 1857.
Location		Boston
Birth order		Youngest of 3 known siblings.
Number of siblings		3 sisters known
XYY?		No
Raised by		Both parents until her mother died, then by her father who gave her up to the Boston Asylum when she was sick. She then went to Ann C. Toppan as a foster child and indentured servant.
Birth category		Youngest
Parent's marital status		Married until mother's death from consumption.
Family event		Mother's death, father giving her up for adoption.
Age of family event		6
Problems in school?		Troublemaker who pinned bad deeds on other children; spread rumors and gossip; avidly lied about her background.
Teased while in school?		Unknown: possibly about her Irish Catholic heritage.
Physically attractive?		No, unattractively plump.
Physical defect?		No
Speech defect?		No
Head injury?		None known
Physically abused?		Speculated abuse at the hands of her father; corporal punishment from her foster mother, Ann Toppan
Psychologically abused?		Suffered shame and humiliation due to her Irish Catholic background by Ann Toppan.
Sexually abused?		Unknown
Father's occupation		It was said that he worked at tailor shop for a short while.
Age of first sexual experience		Unknown
Age when first had intercourse		Unknown
Mother's occupation		Unknown, deceased
Father abused drugs/alcohol		Chronic drunk
Mother abused drugs/alcohol		Unknown
Cognitive Ability		
Highest grade in school		Completed 4 years of nursing school after high school, but never received her license.
Highest degree		Diploma
Grades in school		Unknown
IQ		Unknown

Work History	
Served in the military?	No
Branch	N/A
Type of discharge	N/A
Saw combat duty	N/A
Killed enemy during service?	N/A
Applied for job as a cop?	No
Worked in law enforcement?	No
Fired from jobs?	Yes, she was released from two of the most prominent hospitals in Massachusetts as well as the Theological School where she worked as the dining matron.
Types of jobs worked	Nurse (private as well as in the hospital); dining matron
Employment status during series	Employed as a nurse both private and in the hospital
Relationships	
Sexual preference	Heterosexual
Marital status	Single
Number of children	0
Lives with his children	N/A
Living with	Many landlords and patient's families.
Triad	
Animal torture	Unknown
Fire setting	Yes
Bed wetting	Unknown
Killer Psychological Information	
Abused drugs?	None known
Abused alcohol?	Some speculated intermittent drug use
Been to a psychologist?	Unknown
Time in forensic hospital?	Approximately 35 years
Diagnosis	Moral insanity/moral imbecility
Killer Criminal History	
Committed previous crimes?	Speculated small theft from employers
Spend time in jail?	7 months while awaiting trial
Spend time in prison?	No
Killed prior to series? Age?	Unknown
Serial Killing	
Number of victims	31, possibly more
Victim type	Patients, family
Killer age at start of series	Around 30
Gender of victims	Male and female
Race of victims	Caucasian
Age of victims	Ranged from age 30 to 70
Method of killing	Overdose of morphine or atropine, once with arsenic
Type of serial killer	Angel of Death/Organized lust
How close did killer live?	Most of the time she lived with the families of the victims
Killing occurred in home of victim?	Yes
Killing occurred in home of killer?	No
Weapon	No weapon
Behavior During Crimes	
Rape?	Unknown
Tortured victims?	Yes

Stalked victims?	No
Overkill?	No
Quick & efficient?	Yes
Used blindfold?	No
Bound the victims?	No
After Death Behavior	
Sex with the body?	Unknown
Mutilated body?	No
Ate part of the body?	No
Drank victim's blood?	No
Posed the body?	No
Took totem – body part	No
Took totem – personal item	No
Robbed victim or location	Speculated that Jane took money or clothing from some victims
Disposal of Body	
Left at scene, no attempt to hide	Yes
Left at scene, hidden	No
Left at scene, buried	No
Moved, no attempt to hide	No
Moved, buried	No
Cut-op and disposed of	No
Moved, too home	No
Sentencing	
Date killer arrested	October 29, 1901
Date convicted	June 23, 1902
Sentence	Life in Taunton Insane Hospital
Killer executed?	No
Did killer plead NGRI?	Yes
Was the NGRI plea successful?	Yes
Name and state of prison	N/A
Killer committed suicide?	Attempted before arrested
Killer killed in prison?	No
Date of death	August 17, 1938

References

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