

From the Lawrence County Historical Society

# New book aims to tell Reed's 'true story'

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LAWRENCEVILLE — What is fact and what is fiction in regard to the illustrious Elizabeth "Betsey" Reed?

Publicly hanged near the Embarras River in Lawrenceville on May 23, 1845, Reed is the subject of a new publication issued by the Lawrence County Historical Society entitled "A Documentary Record of the First Woman Hanged in Illinois." The book will be available at the weekend's performances of "The

Hanging: The Saga of Betsey Reed," a collaboration between the Lawrence County Arts Council and the historical society. The production is intended to be Lawrence County's contribution to the Illinois Bicentennial celebration.

According to a press release from the historical society, much "misinformation" surrounding Reed and her death is commonly accepted as truth.

For example, some reports say Reed was 20 years old at the time of

her death, which is clearly incorrect. The historical society says that, according to the 1840 census, Reed was between 40 and 50 years of age at the time of her death.

Reports that Reed's husband, Leonard, whose death she was convicted of causing by arsenic poisoning on Aug. 15, 1844, was healthy are also untrue. Bills from doctors, found in court files, indicate that Leonard Reed had been ill for at least three years prior to his death.

A jury of 12 men convicted Betsey Reed of the murder after a three-day trial on April 28, 1845. She was put to death less than a month later.

However, it seems that plenty of evidence exists to suggest that the all-male jury may have gotten it wrong. Reed's defenders point out that she wasn't even allowed to testify on her own behalf during the proceedings.

Included in the historical society's book will be copies of the actual documents

found in the court files and explanations of the legal terms used and the laws in effect in the 1840s in Illinois.

Newly discovered evidence from Leonard Reed's estate file, as well as interesting facts from the Lawrence County Commissioners' records are also included.

Books purchased at the play are priced at \$20. After the play closes, the book will be available from the historical society for a cost of \$25.