

2015 Ghost Walk

Esther Wilkin – played by Kayla Nash

My name is Esther Wilken and I was said to “operate in the shadows of the police.” No, I wasn’t a criminal. I was Elmira’s first police matron.

The work of a police matron might be unfamiliar to you, so let me explain what I did. I was tasked with caring for women, girls, and young boys who were arrested. See, by the 1880s when I was appointed, people began to worry that there were more and more women and girls being seduced by a life of crime and that their compromised morals were hurting society. Large-scale efforts to save these poor souls were started throughout the country. One of these reforms was the creation of the position of Police Matron.

By having a woman police officer, female prisoners could be separated from the corrupting environment of the county jail. I maintained a female station house on Baldwin Street and then at City Hall when that new building was finished in 1895. The constant nature of crime meant that I lived at the station and was on call night and day. But the job paid pretty well at \$50 a month and my rooms were nice and rent-free. My living quarters opened up to a hallway where the female prisoners were held until they were sentenced or discharged.

Understandably, the duties of the police matron were not the pleasantest imaginable. When police officers brought women to me, they were often filthy and stinking from the conditions on the streets. Regardless, I had to search their persons, looking for any valuables or money they might have stolen. Then, I bathed them and found them new clothes. Many of the women came to me in nothing more than shredded rags. And while women have the reputation as the “fairer” sex, I can assure you I’ve seen behavior one would not consider “fair.” In fact, some local police believed that the women are more unruly than male prisoners and have tongues twice as sharp.

The city desperately needed my services. For example, from 1891 to 1892, I took care of a total of 135 people. Those people were in my care for 294 days out of that year! People came to me charged with all types of crimes: assault, disorderly behavior, insanity, intoxication, suspicion of murder, vagrancy, and more. Of those people, some were committed to prisons or poor houses and others were fined or given train tickets out of town. I also worked to reunite lost children with their parents.

As you can imagine, with all of this activity, occasionally things went wrong. Once, the police brought in a woman who was unruly from imbibing beer and laudanum. I visited her cell and gave her a mingled message of sympathy and threats, and that seemed to quiet her. I took my leave, but did not realize that I had forgotten to lock her cell door. Well, it didn’t take her long to realize my mistake and she walked out. Later that day, the arresting officer was passing by the woman’s house where he had made the arrest earlier and was surprised to see her entering the home. He investigated and she said she had tired of police hospitality, and finding the cell lock agreeable, she decided to go home. The officer gave her a stern lecture on the evils of intoxicants and let her go.

I believe that my work was noble and necessary, but its rigors took a toll on me. In 1894 I took a brief leave of absence for my rheumatism, but I soon returned to work. I succumbed to pneumonia in 1899. Still, I hope that I was able to pave the way for more women in criminal justice, and that the poor souls who passed through my jail cells benefited from my compassion.



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Jacob Greener – played by Steven Winston

I wonder how many among you here tonight have a piano in your home. Probably few of you do. Well, I remember a time when one of those beautiful instruments graced the parlors of every well-to-do home. My name is Jacob Greener and I am Elmira's oldest piano man.

I was born in Worms, Germany on February 2, 1825 and my interest in pianos started early. I apprenticed with a piano manufacturer in Germany, but immigrated to the United States in 1846 when father purchased me an exemption from German military service. When I got to New York City I found work in a piano factory. I stayed in the City for 6 years and started a family.

In the early 1850s, I was on a business trip and was fortunate enough to visit Elmira. I was quite taken with this growing town and I decided to move here and start my own piano shop in 1853. Now this was easier said than done. It took me two years to move all of my equipment from New York City to Albany to reach the Erie Canal and then the Chemung Canal. I initially worked with two partners, but I became the sole owner of the company in 1866. I ran my business and factory at 221 East Church Street and employed up to 60 men at the height of business. We manufactured pianos and sold those made by other companies.

I was also a tinkerer and patented two piano improvements. My 1869 soft pedal was regarded by experts as a significant piano improvement. A couple of decades later, in 1893, I patented a piano action. However, not all of my inventions had to do with music: in 1895 I patented a life-saving device. My invention was designed to be carried aboard a ship to be used in case of shipwreck or disaster where it becomes advisable or necessary for the passengers or crew, or both, to leave the ship. It was basically a large sling or sack that made it easier to launch the lifeboats, for instance, during heavy seas, where under ordinary circumstances and by the usual appliances the launching of the lifeboat is a dangerous and almost impossible.

But I digress. Let's go back to the pianos, shall we? I believed that music was a vital part of our lives and communities. I gave pianos and organs to local charitable organizations, including the tuberculosis sanitarium. It was my duty to this community.

However, the golden age of the piano did not last. By the early 1900s, people's musical needs changed. New technology, like phonographs, player pianos, and radios made pianos obsolete. Learning to play the piano, a necessary skill for those of a certain class in earlier decades, was no longer a priority for most people. I recognized this shift and tried to keep my business in line with new consumer demands. I stopped manufacturing my own pianos and instead focused on retail. I sold the new technologies as well. My son Augustus, a talented musician, made and sold violins in the store.

I worked until my death in 1916 at almost 92 years old. Augustus continued the business until it closed in 1930. In the entire life of the business, my company manufactured 670 pianos, some of which I'm sure still exist today. Each piano was hand-made.

The store's closing was a blow to the whole community. The news said, "Overtones of ghostly music by great masters now seem to haunt the buildings which Jacob Greener...made the pride of musical Elmira." In 1937, the old factory was demolished. Ultimately, the machine age spelled the doom of the old workshop.

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Truckson LaFrance – played by Alan Caum

How do you feel when you hear fire engine sirens? Do you feel anxious? Excited? Scared? Annoyed? I feel nostalgic. I am Truckson LaFrance and I devoted most of my life to improving firefighting equipment.

I came to Elmira in the 1850s and got a job as a pressman for the Daily Advertiser by an odd twist of fate. The newspaper had just bought the first power press in the city. It could print 800 papers an hour. Of course, the wonderful new machine was the talk of the town. I was lucky enough to get a chance to see the modern marvel with a group of other curious folks. Unfortunately the press wasn't working. I have always been a tinkerer. I'm not happy unless my hands are busy working on something mechanical. So, when I heard the press wasn't running, my fingers practically itched to get ahold of it. I told the newspaper men that I could fix their press. "What do you know about a press?" they asked. "Nothing," I replied with a shrug. But I was sure I could fix it. And you know what? I did fix it and they offered me a job.

My fascination with fire engines began when I was made engineer of the local fire company's horse-drawn fire engine. As I worked with various fire engines, I made improvements that I was able to patent. In 1870, I began manufacturing steam fire engines in partnership with John Vischer of the Elmira Union Iron Works. In 1873 a group of prominent Elmira businessmen including George M. Diven, Charles Langdon and John Rathbun bought the company, renamed it the LaFrance Manufacturing Company, and built a factory south of the river. John Vischer became the company's director and I was the mechanical engineer. That same year we sold our first steam fire engine to the city of Elmira. It was a big beautiful engine with two lines of hose for dousing fires. The one flaw was that the cams on the pumps would wear down and not deliver constant pressure. To fix it, firefighters would pour molasses over the cams to make a better seal. For years a jug of molasses was regular equipment on the old "LaFrance" engine.

From early on, many predicted that the company could grow into one of the largest industries in Elmira and it did. By the 1950s nearly 1,000 employees worked at the Elmira plant and American LaFrance firefighting apparatus were sold all over the world. Yet, things were a bit shaky early on. In 1878, to promote worldwide sales, we built a steam fire engine and shipped it the Paris Exposition. Unfortunately, the engine did not meet the French standards for boiler plate thickness so it couldn't be demonstrated. The expense of that venture nearly closed the plant.

Local businessman Thomas Hotchkiss, however, agreed to help finance the company if we agreed to name an engine after his wife. The "Jeanie Jewell" turned the business around. My brother Asa took "Jeanie Jewell" to a three day steam engine competition in Chicago where it was declared the "best in the industry." The success of the "Jeanie Jewell" sealed the company's fate. By 1880, the LaFrance Steam Engine Company was the leading manufacturer of rotary, nest-tube boilers. The nest-tube boiler is a great improvement on older steam engines. You see, the packing can be adjusted from the outside without even stopping the pump when it is in motion. The design also makes it so steam doesn't escape no matter how the packing expands or contracts within the engine.

But listen to me going on. I sometimes forget that some people are not as interested in the intricacies of steam engines as a man who worked with their design and development his entire life. I'm sure you fine folks have other stops this evening. So I will send you on your way and only ask that when you hear fire sirens that you think of my work.

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Clarissa Thurston – played by Casey Meyer Winston

Hello, my name is Clarissa Thurston, but you, like all my friends, may call me Clara. I was born in Andover, Massachusetts in 1801 to good New England stock. My five siblings and I were raised to be hard-working and God-fearing. I studied at home with my family before attending a ladies' seminary in Byfield, Massachusetts under the direction of the Rev. Joseph Emerson. The experience changed my life.

The Byfield Ladies' Seminary and all that I studied there helped to broaden my world and my mind. Moreover, it inspired me to be an educator of young women. Most families who could afford to do so would educate their sons in the hopes that they might become doctors, leaders and successful businessmen, but few care to educate their daughters. In my mind, this was the upmost folly. After all, it is the mother who imparts to the next generation the values of learning, hard work, thoughtfulness and Christian virtue. How is she to do such a thing if she herself is ignorant?

After leaving Byfield, I taught at a series of rural school houses throughout New England. My first posting in Oldtown, Maine, was in the midst of a howling wilderness filled with Indians. In 1821, I traveled south and established my own school in rural Putnam County, Georgia. Sadly, the weather there did not agree with me and I returned north in 1826 after leaving my school in the capable hands of the assistant principal. Over the next decade I taught or served as principal in a series of private schools throughout New York and New England.

In 1844, I came to Elmira to reside with my youngest brother, Ariel, to help care for his children following the death of his wife. Ariel was an up-and-coming lawyer in what was then a charming and prosperous town. The one thing it lacked was a private school for the education of young ladies so, in 1847, I founded one. For the next 17 years I operated my Ladies' Seminary at the corner of Main and Third Streets. Each year we took 50 students, both boarding and not, from around the area and across the nation. Believing as I did that every woman should have a rich store of generous sentiment, sound and correct ideas of history of human life and a personal responsibility to god, I tailored our courses accordingly. My girls studied mathematics, natural sciences, history, rhetoric, great literature, music, French, Latin and, of course the Bible.

The most unusual student I ever taught was a black man named John Jones. He came to Elmira as an escaped slave and, for a time, he boarded and worked as caretaker at my school so he might pursue an education. Ariel and I had long been abolitionists, but my close relationship with Jones brought home the cruelty and wasted potential that is slavery. When the Lake Street Presbyterian Church split with First Presbyterian over their refusal to support abolition, Ariel and I were among f the founding members.

I closed my school in 1864, but I continued to educate, this time with my writing. I wrote a number of articles in the Christian Family Magazine and Parlor Magazine, as well as three books. My last, Light from History or the story of Fulfilled Prophecy, confirmed the predictions of biblical prophecy as manifest within our nation's history, and was published after my 80th birthday. I also continued to educate myself by traveling across Europe and America's western states. As my health began to fail in my later years, my profound deafness became a problem. In fact, it got me killed. I died when I failed to hear the warning noise of a train backing up as I crossed the tracks on my way to Sunday church.