

The Eastlake Murder

This event occurred in 1921 and may be the most scandalous event in the history of Colonial Beach. The information below has been compiled from a number of articles. It is impossible to extract exactly what happened due to the many versions printed in press articles around the U.S.

In 1910 while living with her family in the wealthy Gowen Ave. area of Philadelphia, **Margaret Lamphier Thorne**, age 19, met **Roger Delano Eastlake**, age 21. They began a friendship that quickly turned into a closer relationship.



Margaret Thorne Eastlake

Roger was born in Japan and had been living in Japan. Many years prior Roger's American grandfather (William Clark Eastlake) had moved to Japan where he had become famous as the dentist who introduced Western dentistry to Japan. Roger's father, the son of William Clark Eastlake, had been living in Japan and had died in 1909. Roger, who had been living with his father, moved from Japan to the Philadelphia area to live with his mother. She had previously returned to the U.S. from Japan.

Despite disapproval from both Thorne and Eastlake families, Margaret and Roger insisted on continuing to see each other. They eventually eloped to New Jersey in 1912. After the marriage they were estranged from both the Thorne family and the Eastlakes. Eventually after the birth of a son and a daughter, Margaret, Roger and their children managed to return to live in the Thorne household.

Around 1915 Roger and Margaret moved to Ocean City, NJ. There is no mention of Roger's profession before this time, but by 1915 Roger was in the U.S. Navy and was stationed at the Cape May Naval Air Station. Roger and Margaret were familiar with the area as both families had often vacationed there.

Around 1916 Roger met a woman named **Sarah Euphemia Knox**. Sarah lived most of the time in Baltimore, had been trained at Johns Hopkins to be a nurse, and was reported to be a great nurse who was "well-liked" on the job. She was 13 years older than Roger. She had a brother (a doctor named **Mason Knox**) and a sister. The young Eastlake family and the three Knox family members all saw each other regularly in Ocean City NJ and they all became friends.

In 1918 when WWI began, Roger Eastlake, still in the Navy, was sent overseas. While he was gone Sarah Knox inherited some money. She saw Margaret and her children regularly and she was generous with Margaret; later she also gave money to Roger. Sarah was still living in Baltimore where she worked as a nurse, and was exchanging letters with both Margaret and Roger. By 1918 (probably before that) Margaret Eastlake knew her husband was having an affair with Sarah Knox. Margaret sent a letter to President Woodrow Wilson asking to have the Navy relocate Roger to a place away from NJ and she got a response from Wilson's secretary saying that he would try to do so.

In 1919 Roger was relocated to Dahlgren VA. The affair with Sarah seems to have been off and on in 1919 but Roger sent a letter to Sarah regarding his move to Dahlgren. He told her that he was finding a place for Sarah to live near Colonial Beach. Sarah was apparently working at that time as a nurse in a sanitarium near Philadelphia.

By 1921 Roger (now age 32) was Chief Petty Officer in the U.S. Navy stationed at Dahlgren Proving Grounds where he worked as a naval aviation chief machinist's mate. Margaret was a 30-year-old mother and housewife living in Colonial Beach. They lived in a small cottage on Lincoln Ave. in the block nearest the Potomac River. They were members of a local Episcopal Church where Roger taught Sunday school. (It's not clear if the church was in Colonial Beach.) Margaret was friendly with several neighbors and had coffee often with one of them. The Eastlake's son was age 7, the daughter age 5. Sarah Knox was often seen around the town of Colonial Beach, was recognized by many, and by September she had taken a room in the DeAtley Hotel. The "friendship" between Sarah and Roger was not a secret in Colonial Beach.

In 1921, though the Eastlake couple and their children recently had taken what seemed like a happy family vacation in Ocean City NJ, Margaret told her neighbor that she was afraid of Sarah Knox. Margaret said that she (Margaret) might be murdered soon, and reported that she had contacted an attorney in regard to getting a divorce. She had made some plans to live with a sister-in-law. Margaret had also spoken with a doctor at Dahlgren base about her problems with Roger but the doctor told her not to worry or be jealous because Roger had agreed to give up Sarah.

Nevertheless, Roger owned a motorcycle and was often riding it "away"; Margaret believed that he was probably spending time visiting someone. Roger and Sarah were still exchanging letters and Roger had suggested in a letter that they "frame a plot". Sarah had taken an axe to be sharpened in Ocean City NJ and had told the sharpener that it belonged to the Eastlakes. Meanwhile Margaret had written a letter to her father saying that she was so happy that her husband was being transferred to San Francisco.

On Sept. 30, 1921, early in the morning, Sarah Knox woke up a neighbor of the Eastlakes to report that Margaret Eastlake had been shot and Sarah asked the neighbor to call the police. When Sergeant W.T Hall arrived at the home he found Margaret Eastlake covered with blood which was splattered around the room. He discovered that she had been killed with an axe and a hammer, and that her throat had been cut with something sharp. Some reports say that there was a revolver in the room and two shots had been fired. Some neighbors reported hearing shots.

There was a bloodstained raincoat found at the bottom of a toy box (reports vary) and a bloodstained canvas cap found in a bush outside the house; there was a suitcase found in the house containing morphine, strychnine and a hypodermic needle (some articles do not report this).

Roger Eastlake claimed that he arose around 5 am that day. He reported that he saw his wife Margaret just before he left his home to catch a boat to Dahlgren around 5:30 am and she was alive and well. He declared that he was innocent and did not know what could have happened.

Sarah Knox claimed that she had slept in a shack behind Eastlake's house that night so she could visit the family in the morning. There were blood spots on her dress which she said she got as she tried to lift the body that she found in the Eastlake home. A neighbor said that Miss Knox had asked him to get a doctor though she apparently knew that Margaret Eastlake was dead. Miss Knox said she saw a man in a cap and a long overcoat running from the side door of the home.

A local policeman had seen Roger Eastlake early in the morning waiting at the ferry platform in Colonial Beach. Instead of the overalls that Roger usually wore to work, he was wearing a white naval uniform. Some bloodstained clothing was found floating in the river near Lincoln Ave.

The Eastlake children were in the home when the incident happened. They reported that they heard the commotion and they were told by their father that their mother had been hurt. The children told the police that their father had locked them in a bedroom and told them to stay. The son reported that he knew it was his father that he saw wearing a long raincoat and a cap inside their home. His father warned him (in front of the police) not to talk even while he (Roger) was placed in handcuffs.

Roger Eastlake and Sarah Knox were both charged with murder. Roger could not explain why he was wearing the white uniform, but he insisted that the cleanliness of his white uniform proved that he was innocent. In jail Roger and Sarah screamed at each other and argued from their cells. Roger refused to eat, and he tried to convince any listeners that he loved his wife and he was innocent. An angry mob gathered first in Colonial Beach, then in Montross after both Roger Eastlake and Sara Knox were transferred there. Eventually Eastlake and Knox were moved to Fredericksburg via ferry to avoid the possibility of a lynching. Roger immediately pleaded "not guilty". (The newspapers covered this widely and a New York Times report called the mob gathered in Montross "Virginia mountaineers".)

Roger's trial was separate. It was held first and quickly in Dec. of 1921 at Westmoreland County. The prosecuting attorney's speech may have influenced the outcome of the trial which was widely reported up and down the east coast and in Philadelphia where Margaret's parents were well-known. The prosecutor tried to present Roger as the guilty party and Susan Knox as Roger's victim even while acknowledging her probable guilt. While the jury of twelve males deliberated, Roger smoked, lounged in a chair, and asked to be allowed to walk around outside. After only 36 minutes, the jury declared Roger "not guilty" due to "insufficient evidence". The newspapers far and wide sensationalized the event. They seemed to have found it unlikely that Roger could have committed the crime. They reported that Roger was a young handsome man; that Susan Knox was an older, plump, middle-aged woman and an unlikely lover while Margaret Eastlake was an attractive young woman who probably made Sarah Knox jealous. (Note: Women were not included in juries in Virginia until 1950. The jury was all male. Some concluded that the trial was held too quickly and all evidence was not presented.)

The Sarah Knox trial was held months later in April of 1922. More evidence had been collected and there was more to the story. Roger Eastlake testified that he had ended the affair with Sarah Knox in August and refused to see her after that (although there was proof that he had seen her and had rented a house for her locally). It was also reported that Margaret Eastlake had been having an affair with Mason Knox, Sarah's brother. Sarah's attorney suggested that Roger was extremely jealous because he found out about his wife's affair with Dr. Knox and that was his motive for murder. It was also suggested that Roger needed both his wife and Sarah out of the way as soon as possible because he wanted to marry a third woman with whom he had been having an affair.

The third woman did exist and Roger actually married this third woman during the trial of Sarah Knox. (The new wife did not attend the trial.) Much of the evidence during this second trial indicated that Roger Eastlake was at least a conspirator in the murder and now the newspapers changed the reported opinions and agreed that Roger was probably guilty. However, despite the new evidence, by law at that time in history Roger could not be retried for the murder. Sarah Knox was found guilty and sentenced to twenty years in prison. She served twelve years in the state prison in Richmond VA. Roger was free to go and remained in the Navy.

Roger had married a woman named Susan Bell Crittenden in Alexandria during the Sarah Knox trial. They had met at the sanitarium where Sarah Knox was working as a nurse; Susan was working there too.

Roger and Susan probably moved to Florida after the trial (this is unclear). All reports to the contrary, records indicate that Roger remained married to Susan Crittenden until her death in 1940. They had no children.

During the marriage to Susan, Roger apparently continued to engage in the kind of activities to which he had become accustomed. Sometime during the marriage to Susan, Roger went to the funeral of a widow by the name of Erva Annetta Sparks. Erva was born in 1900, so she was about the same age as Roger. He apparently consoled her. She became pregnant by Roger, had their child, and moved in with Susan and Roger. At this time they all lived in California. The first child was born in 1931. It was reported that she had childhood polio and that Roger spent a good deal of time caring for her. Erva and Roger had two more children. Roger probably spent time overseas during WWII. Well after Susan's death, Roger married Erva in 1947.



Sarah Knox with her prison number.

Roger may have intentionally changed his middle initial to avoid being identified by the public, and may have used another first name, but his U.S. Navy records were not changed.

Roger continued his career in the U.S. Navy. His obituary reported that "his exposure to the Japanese language made him a valuable naval asset during WWII". He died May 15, 1950 at the age of 60. Reports suggest that Roger may have been an alcoholic at least at the end of his life. He and his third wife Erva are buried



Roger Eastlake during his trial.

in Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery, San Diego. Erva lived until age 73 and died in 1974.

What became of the first two young Eastlake children that Elizabeth worried about is not reported. At least initially they were sent to Margaret's parents in Philadelphia. What became of Sarah Knox after twelve years of incarceration or of Dr. Mason Knox seems unreported.

The initial information above came from an article by Jackie Shinn & Joyce Coates in "Another Time and Now". That article and questions from town residents prompted a search of many old newspaper accounts including some in the "Washington Times", "Washington Post", "Richmond Times Dispatch", "New York Times" and others. There were also articles from the Central Rappahannock Heritage Center, in the "Gowen Avenue Courtship Ends in Tragedy on the Potomac" on the internet, and from various obituaries of the family members.