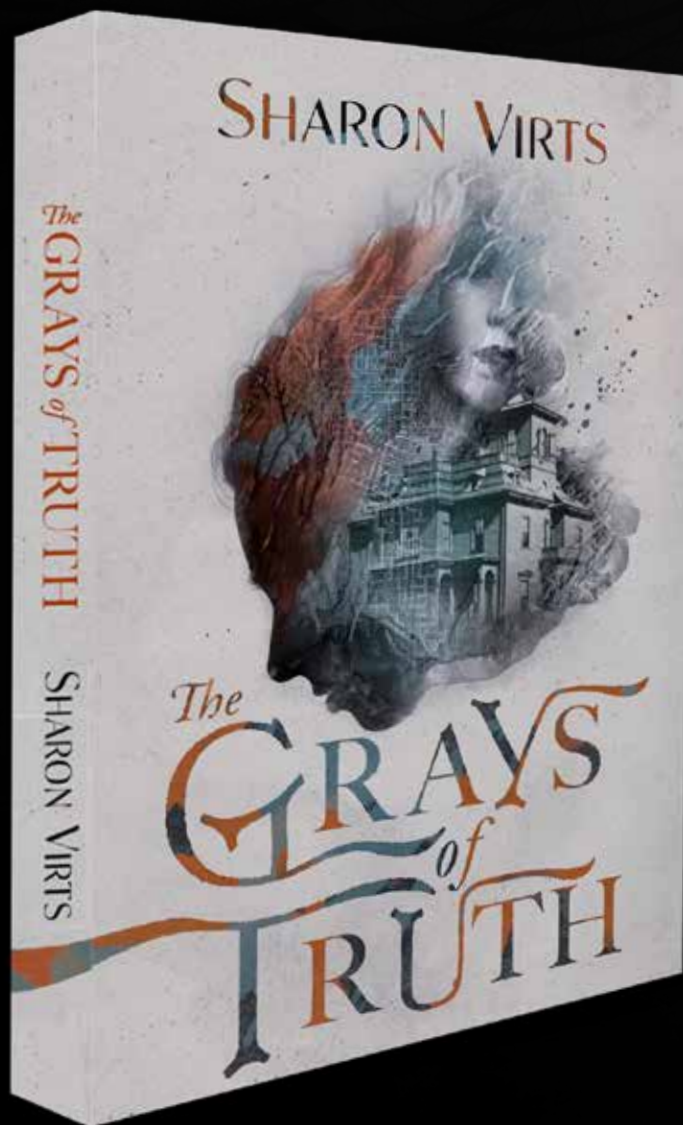


BOOK CLUB

Guide





Dear Reader

I first learned about this true-life story while researching nineteenth-century forensic science for my second novel, *Veil of Doubt*. When I realized that Professor Tonry, the chemist in *Veil of Doubt* who conducted the postmortem analysis on the victim in that book, had testified at a trial involving the prestigious Wharton family the year before, I became fascinated by the Wharton case. As I poured over the testimony in that trial, I knew immediately that this was a story I wanted to tell.

As I studied the events surrounding the Wharton deaths, I homed in on the investigating officer, Captain Jacob Frey as the protagonist of the story. But the more I learned about Jane Gray Wharton, her family's connection to the Lee family of Virginia and her struggle with "debility" (code word for depression and mental illness in the mid-nineteenth century), I knew she was my perfect unreliable witness.

Jane Gray's journey to uncover the truth surrounding the deaths of her loved ones forces her to face her greatest fears. Despite societal pressures and her painful past, Jane's perseverance captivated me and became the heart of *The Grays of Truth*.

Although I have fictionalized many details in the novel, the parallels between the true events and the story I've crafted remain significant. *The Grays of Truth* highlights the challenges faced by women throughout history, irrespective of their place in society. It serves as a reminder that our desires are not always fulfilled, but in the end, we can still find happiness and inner joy.

The Grays of Truth is a story that you will think about long after the final page.

The True Characters from *The Grays of Truth*



Jane Gray (Shippen) Wharton

Jane Gray was born February 22, 1819, at Violet Bank, her mother's ancestral home in Petersburg, Virginia. She was the eldest child of Dr. William Shippen, the son William Shippen Jr, the Surgeon of the Army of the Revolution and Mary Louisa Shore, a descendant of the Lee and Carter families of Virginia.

When Jane was eight, her family moved from Virginia to Philadelphia. She studied at the Moravian Female Seminary (now Moravian University) in Bethlehem PA and was the only one of the Shippen girls to attend college.

In 1842 at the age 23, she married Edward "Ned" Wharton and moved back to Petersburg, giving birth to their only child, Mary Louisa, three years later. In 1857 when Jane was 38, she was admitted to a Quaker hospital in Philadelphia with "debility", a diagnosis often associated with mental illness and depression.

By 1860, she and her husband and daughter had moved to K Street in Washington, D.C. where Ned worked as a clerk in the Coast Survey Department (now part of NOAA). They lived next door to Secretary of War Edwin "Mars" Stanton and his wife Ellen.

After the deaths of her family, Jane returned to Philadelphia, inheriting her father's home and laboratory that she ultimately rented to her nephew, Shippen Wallace, a chemist.

Jane lived the Colonnade Hotel in Chester Hills until her death in 1907. She died just a few days shy of her 85th birthday of "senile degeneration of the brain" and is buried at Laurel Hill cemetery beside her husband and daughter.



Ellen (Nugent) Wharton

Ellen was the daughter of George Nugent, a successful silk and fine goods importer by his second wife. Of his many children, Ellen was his favorite and he indulged her every whim. Her fondness for high fashion accumulated debt of thousands of dollars on her father's account.

Ellen was a refined belle with many admirers, yet her friends were surprised when she announced her engagement to Isaac Williamson, a handsome bachelor in Philadelphia. Invitations were sent to society's elite and on the day of the wedding, guests from across the city arrived at the Nugent family seat, but the bridegroom did not. Ellen's father sent for Mr. Williamson and was shocked to learn that Mr. Williamson had never proposed to Ellen and knew nothing about the affair. Ellen's father made the decision to send Ellen to an asylum for the insane. The day before she was to be institutionalized, Ellen ran off with Captain Henry "Hank" Wharton and the two eloped.

Ellen continued to incur debt on her father's account until Captain Wharton was ordered to Fort Kearney and Ellen relocated with him. During the war, Major Wharton was stationed in Baltimore. Utilizing her family's considerable wealth and status, Ellen adeptly manipulated political and legal spheres to bend outcomes to her favor. Her charm and calculated influence made her a prominent, though enigmatic figure within the city's social and power structures.

After her murder trial, she became an outcast from Baltimore's high society and moved with her daughter Nellie and her husband to Poplar Grove, the Nugent family ancestral home in Baltimore. She died in obscurity in 1890 and is buried in Bryn Mar.



Major Henry "Hank" Wharton

Henry "Hank" Wharton is a charismatic figure known for his good looks and influential Wharton lineage. Born in 1811, Hank was the youngest son of Colonel Franklin Wharton and grandson of the powerful Joseph Wharton of Walnut Grove.

Orphaned as a young boy, Henry and his siblings were sent to live with various relatives, including the home of his uncle Fishburn Wharton, the father of his cousin Edward "Ned" Wharton.

Hank enlisted as a 'seaman' in 1827 and served with General Scott Ketchum at Ft. Smith Arkansas, forging a deep bond that extended beyond the military into family friendships.

He enjoyed a long military career achieving the rank of Major. An injury sidelined him from combat duty during the Civil War and he was transferred to Baltimore as a disbursement officer.

The True Characters from *The Grays of Truth*



General W. Scott Ketchum

William Scott Ketchum was born on July 7, 1813, in Norwalk, Connecticut. He graduated from the United States Military Academy, at West Point, New York, in 1834, and served in the Seminole Wars and on the Western frontier.

At the start of the Civil War, Major Ketchum, with US Fourth Infantry Regiment, commanded Fort Dalles in Oregon, protecting settlers from Indian raids. He was ordered to San Francisco and then sent to take command of the federal troops in Southern California to protect it from secessionist rising and Confederate invasion from Arizona or Texas. Relieved by California Volunteer troops, Ketchum and his regiment assembled in San Pedro for the voyage to eastern United States in the late fall of 1861.

Ketchum was promoted to lieutenant colonel in late 1861. He was made a brigadier general of Volunteers in February 1862. For the rest of the war he had staff duties in Washington, D.C., and was concerned with inspection, recruiting, and auditing, working directly for War Secretary Edwin Stanton.

Following the Civil War, General Ketchum spent four years on special service in the adjutant general's office in Washington, D.C., then retired in December 1870.

Scott Ketchum was twice a widower, marrying sisters, and had two sons, Charles Leavenworth Ketchum by his first wife Nancy, and James Daniel Ketchum by his second wife Rebecca.

Known for his integrity and attention to detail, Scott Ketchum was a respected figure in Washington's military. He was fond of music and the theater and particularly fond of hymns and church choir. Though described as a "quirky" and "tight with his money" he never retreated from a friend in need and was well-known to bring flowers to ailing wives and daughters of his colleagues. He is buried in Rock Creek Cemetery in Washington, D.C.



Captain Jacob Frey

Captain Jacob "Jake" Frey was born in Germany in 1836 and immigrated to Baltimore when he was 10. As a young boy, he witnessed the violence and hardships imposed on immigrants by the city's gangs.

He journeyed as a tinner for a German stove maker and started his own stove manufacturing business shortly after completing his apprenticeship.

Jake was appointed to the Baltimore Police force with the rank of Captain in 1867, was made Deputy Marshal in 1870 and Marshal (Chief of Police) in 1885. He served as Marshal until 1897.

Marshal Frey was known for his integrity and determination and remains one of Baltimore's most notable police chiefs. He died in 1911.



Achsah (Carroll) Shippen

Achsah Carroll was the daughter of Charles Ridgely Carroll and Rebecca Pue. She married William Shippen in 1855 in Baltimore. She had one son, Charles, who would follow in his paternal grandfather's footsteps and become a physician.

Her husband was an esteemed Baltimore attorney and died unexpectedly in 1858.

Achsah raised her son Charles alone, remaining unmarried until her death in 1891.

Drinking & Dining



Recipe | thesaltedweets.com

Thumbprint Cookies

- 1 cup salted butter (*room temperature*)
- $\frac{2}{3}$ cup granulated sugar
- 1 egg yolk
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon almond extract
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt
- 2 teaspoon cornstarch
- $2\frac{1}{4}$ cups all-purpose flour
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup sugar for rolling cookies
- $\frac{1}{3}$ cup jam of your choice
(I love strawberry!)

Preheat your oven to 350 degrees.

In a large mixing bowl, cream together the butter and sugar on medium speed until light and creamy.

Add egg yolk, vanilla and almond extract and mix until combined.

Add in salt, cornstarch and flour, do not over mix.

Line a cookie sheet with parchment paper. Scoop dough into $1\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoon size balls and roll with your hands to make a tight ball; roll the balls in sugar.

Using a teaspoon, press into the cookie balls and create an indentation in each. Fill each cookie indentation with jam.

Allow the dough to chill in the refrigerator for 20 minutes before baking.

Bake for 12-14 minutes.



Recipe | theseasidebaker.com

Strawberry Mint Jam

- 4 cups fresh diced strawberries
- 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups sugar
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- $\frac{1}{2}$ pouch Certo Liquid Fruit Pectin
- 10 mint leaves finely sliced
- 4-5 half pint canning jars with lids

Sterilize jars according to manufacture's directions.

Wash and drain the strawberries. Remove their green caps and dice.

Combine diced strawberries, sugar, and lemon juice in a large, heavy-bottomed saucepan, set over medium heat.

Bring mixture to a boil, then continue to cook for 1 minute.

Remove from heat and stir in pectin and mint.

Carefully ladle jam into jars leaving a $\frac{1}{4}$ inch headspace.

Wipe rims of jars with a damp paper towel and fit with lids.

Process in a boiling water canner.

Drinking & Dining



Recipe | sugarspunrun.com

Homemade Biscuits

- 2 Cups all-purpose flour (250g)
- 1 Tablespoon baking powder
- 1 Tablespoon granulated sugar
- 1 Teaspoon salt
- 6 Tablespoons unsalted butter, very cold (85g). Unsalted European butter is ideal, but not required
- $\frac{3}{4}$ buttermilk

Chill your butter in the freezer for 10-20 minutes.

Preheat oven to 425F and line a cookie sheet with nonstick parchment paper.

Combine flour, baking powder, sugar, and salt in a large bowl and mix well.

Remove the butter from the refrigerator and cut it into the flour mixture using a pastry cutter.

Cut the butter or combine the grated butter until the mixture resembles coarse crumbs.

Add milk, use a wooden spoon or spatula to stir until combined (*don't over-work the dough*).

Transfer your biscuit dough to a well-floured surface and use your hands to gently work the dough together. If the dough is too sticky, add flour until it is manageable. Once the dough is cohesive, fold in half over itself and use your hands to gently flatten layers together.

Rotate the dough 90 degrees and fold in half again, repeating this step 5-6 times but do not overwork the dough.

Use your hands (*do not use a rolling pin*) to flatten the dough to 1" thick and lightly dust a 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ " round biscuit cutter with flour.

Making close cuts, press the biscuit cutter straight down into the dough and drop the biscuit onto the baking sheet.

Once you have gotten as many biscuits as possible out of the dough, gently re-work the dough to get out another biscuit or two until you have at least 6 biscuits.

Bake at 425F for 12 minutes.

Drinking & Dining



Recipe | Sharon Virts

Bourbon Pomegranate Punch

Pomegranate Syrup

- 1 1/2 cups pomegranate seeds
- 1 cup water
- 1 cup sugar

Bourbon Pomegranate Punch

- 1 1/2 cups bourbon
- 1 1/2 cups pure pomegranate juice (*I used Pom Wonderful*)
- 3 tablespoons fresh lime juice (*from 1 large lime*)
- 2 bottles (750 ml each) Prosecco or dry sparkling white wine, chilled
- Pomegranate seeds, lime slices and fresh mint leaves, if desired, for garnish

Pomegranate Syrup: Place pomegranate seeds, water and sugar in a medium saucepan over medium heat and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to low and simmer until pomegranate seeds are falling apart, about 20 minutes.

Strain through a fine mesh strainer into a medium bowl. Cool syrup to room temperature, about an hour.

Discard the seeds. Syrup can be used immediately or refrigerated in an airtight container for up to 1 week.

Makes about 1 1/4 cups.

Bourbon Pomegranate Punch: In a pitcher, mix cooled pomegranate syrup, bourbon, pomegranate juice and lime juice. Stir in a handful of pomegranate seeds, a couple slices of lime and some mint leaves.

To serve, fill ice filled glasses halfway with bourbon pomegranate mixture and top with Prosecco. Garnish with pomegranate seeds, lime slices and mint leaves.



Recipe | Sharon Virts

Old-Fashioned Lemonade

- 1 cup freshly squeezed lemon juice (about 4-6 lemons)
- 1 cup granulated sugar (*adjust to taste*)
- 4 cups cold water
- Ice cubes
- Lemon slices or mint sprigs for garnish (*optional*)

Roll the lemons on a countertop to soften them, then cut in half and juice them.

In a small saucepan, combine 1 cup of granulated sugar with 1 cup of water. Heat over medium heat, stirring constantly until the sugar has completely dissolved. Allow it to cool.

In a pitcher, combine the lemon juice and the simple syrup. Stir well.

Pour 4 cups of cold water into the pitcher and stir to combine.

Place the pitcher in the refrigerator to chill the lemonade for at least 30 minutes to an hour to allow the flavors to meld.

To serve, pour the homemade lemonade over glasses filled with ice. Garnish with a lemon slice or a sprig of mint.

Author's Questions

- Jane Gray Wharton is depicted as an amateur chemist and former nurse with a history of delusion and institutionalization. How does her past shape her actions and decisions throughout the novel? Do you find her to be a reliable narrator, or do her experiences make you question her perspective?
- Why do you think General Ketchum, despite knowing about Jane's suspicions, continued to maintain a relationship with Ellen? Do you agree with the idea that men in the nineteenth century underestimated women's capacity for poisoning and murder, or do you think there could be another explanation?
- The novel presents a blurred line between reality and delusion, especially from Jane's viewpoint. How does Sharon Virts use this ambiguity to build suspense? At what points did you find yourself questioning what was real versus what was imagined?
- Set in the Reconstruction era, the book portrays societal constraints on women, particularly through Jane's experiences. How does Jane's struggle for autonomy and credibility reflect the broader challenges faced by women during this period?
- As the novel unfolds, numerous motives for murder come to light, involving love, betrayal, and financial troubles. Which motive did you find most compelling, and why? Did you sympathize with any of the potential suspects?
- Do you think Ellen Wharton's beauty, charm, political influence, and family name played a role in her treatment by the police? How much do you think these factors influenced the outcome of the trial, and how might things have been different without them?
- Unlike traditional detective stories, Jane herself is a suspect in her own mind, constantly doubting her sanity. How does this affect your engagement with the story and your empathy for Jane?
- The Wharton family, like many others in the book, is filled with secrets and hidden motives. How do these dynamics drive the plot forward? Were there any family members whose intentions you questioned more than others?
- The novel is set in Baltimore during the Reconstruction era, a time of great social upheaval and change. How does the setting influence the events of the story? Could this story have taken place in another time or place, or is it uniquely tied to its setting?
- The novel is described as a story of one woman's quest for answers in her fight for redemption. Do you think Jane achieves redemption by the end of the book? What does redemption mean for her character?
- Even though *The Grays of Truth* is set in a historical context, are there themes or issues within the book that resonate with contemporary readers? How does the novel speak to today's social or psychological issues?



About the Author

Sharon Virts

*Best-selling author of *Veil of Doubt* and *Masque of Honor**

Best-selling historical fiction author Sharon Virts is a successful entrepreneur and visionary who, after more than twenty-five years in business, followed her passion for storytelling. She has received numerous accolades for her commitment to historic preservation, earning national recognition for both her business achievements and philanthropic endeavors.

Beyond her business acumen, Sharon is a gifted visual artist, intertwining her artistic expression with extraordinary storytelling to breathe life into intricate characters and vivid settings that captivate the heart and ignite the imagination. She has authored two bestselling novels, *Masque of Honor* and *Veil of Doubt*.

A dedicated mother to James, Lucas, Zachary, and Nicholas, stepmom to Ben and Avery, and “Nana” to Charlie, Bodhi and Aubrey, Sharon lives at the historic Selma Mansion in Virginia with her husband, Scott Miller, and their three Labrador retrievers, Polly, Cassie, and Leda.