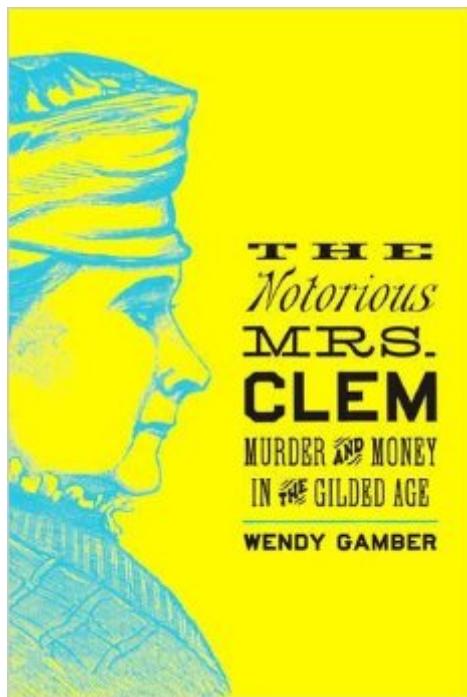


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# The Notorious Mrs. Clem: Murder And Money In The Gilded Age



## Synopsis

In September 1868, the remains of Jacob and Nancy Jane Young were found lying near the banks of Indiana's White River. It was a gruesome scene. Part of Jacob's face had been blown off, apparently by the shotgun that lay a few feet away. Spiders and black beetles crawled over his wound. Smoke rose from his wife's smoldering body, which was so badly burned that her intestines were exposed, the flesh on her thighs gone, and the bones partially reduced to powder. Suspicion for both deaths turned to Nancy Clem, a housewife who was also one of Mr. Young's former business partners. In *The Notorious Mrs. Clem*, Wendy Gamber chronicles the life and times of this charming and persuasive Gilded Age confidence woman, who became famous not only as an accused murderer but also as an itinerant peddler of patent medicine and the supposed originator of the Ponzi scheme. Clem's story is a shocking tale of friendship and betrayal, crime and punishment, courtroom drama and partisan politicking, get-rich-quick schemes and shady business deals. It also raises fascinating questions about women's place in an evolving urban economy. As they argued over Clem's guilt or innocence, lawyers, jurors, and ordinary citizens pondered competing ideas about gender, money, and marriage. Was Clem on trial because she allegedly murdered her business partner? Or was she on trial because she engaged in business? Along the way, Gamber introduces a host of equally compelling characters, from prosecuting attorney and future U.S. president Benjamin Harrison to folksy defense lawyer John Hanna, daring detective Peter Wilkins, pioneering "lady news writer" Laura Ream, and female-remedy manufacturer Michael Slavin. Based on extensive sources, including newspapers, trial documents, and local histories, this gripping account of a seemingly typical woman who achieved extraordinary notoriety will appeal to true crime lovers and historians alike.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Forty-seven pages of notes attest to the extensive research Wendy Gamber did in order to write “The Notorious Mrs. Clem: Murder and Money in the Gilded Age.” A dispassionate narrative that reads as if it was a newspaper story or the script from an investigative journalism program may fascinate readers interested in legal procedures and trial proceedings from the nineteenth century. Further, the book highlights the manner in which perception of the appropriate roles and behavior of women played a significant part in Nancy Clem’s prosecution and conviction. Nancy Clem was an unusual woman. Intelligent and propelled by an innate drive, she was involved in various financial transactions and business ventures. This was highly unusual and, in the eyes of nineteenth century society, not something a respectable woman would do. When passersby discover the bodies of one of her business partners, Jacob Young and his wife Nancy Jane, suspicion falls on Nancy Clem. “The Notorious Mrs. Clem: Murder and Money in the Gilded Age” details the trials against her and discusses the prevailing societal attitudes and the atmosphere in which those trials occurred. That they may have influenced the outcome of the proceedings is undisputed; that Nancy Clem was guilty may be disputed. Photographs and maps, including their captioned information, add to the overall work. There is no sensationalism nor are there vividly described, detailed murder scenes that will horrify the average reader. A brief, factually based description of the condition of the Young’s bodies, in particular that of Nancy Jane Young, may disturb some individuals. “The Notorious Mrs. Clem: Murder and Money in the Gilded Age” becomes a tedious read.

This is a very detailed, academic work about crime & punishment in mid 19th-century America, and how it intersected with the position of women within society. Nancy Clem was definitely involved in some shady business dealings which bear comparison to Ponzi schemes. That is the only thing we can say for certain about her. She may have been involved in murder, and over a 6-year period she faced 5 trials for murder. She never was acquitted, but the state finally decided it had spent enough money trying to convict her. Over that time, as Gamber writes, "In their efforts to pin her down, to prove her innocence or guilt, attorneys, reporters, and ordinary citizens lurch from one available cultural script to another." (p. 191) Nancy Clem was viewed with disdain & suspicion in large part because she was a woman who actively engaged in business, and her business activities played a

large role in the prosecution's narrative in the first trial as they painted her as a villain. In other words, if you were a woman engaged in business, you were capable of nearly any heinous act imaginable. But by contrast, many of the members of the jury were culturally hard-wired to believe that women simply were not capable of planning or committing murder, and this made it increasingly difficult for the prosecution to secure a conviction. As Clem's incarceration wore on, more cultural hard-wiring helped to shift public opinion, which increasingly came to view Clem as a victim of a miscarriage of justice. Gamber is a history professor at IU Bloomington, and her book reads like that of an academic. It is not lurid or sensationalist. It is scholarly and detailed.

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