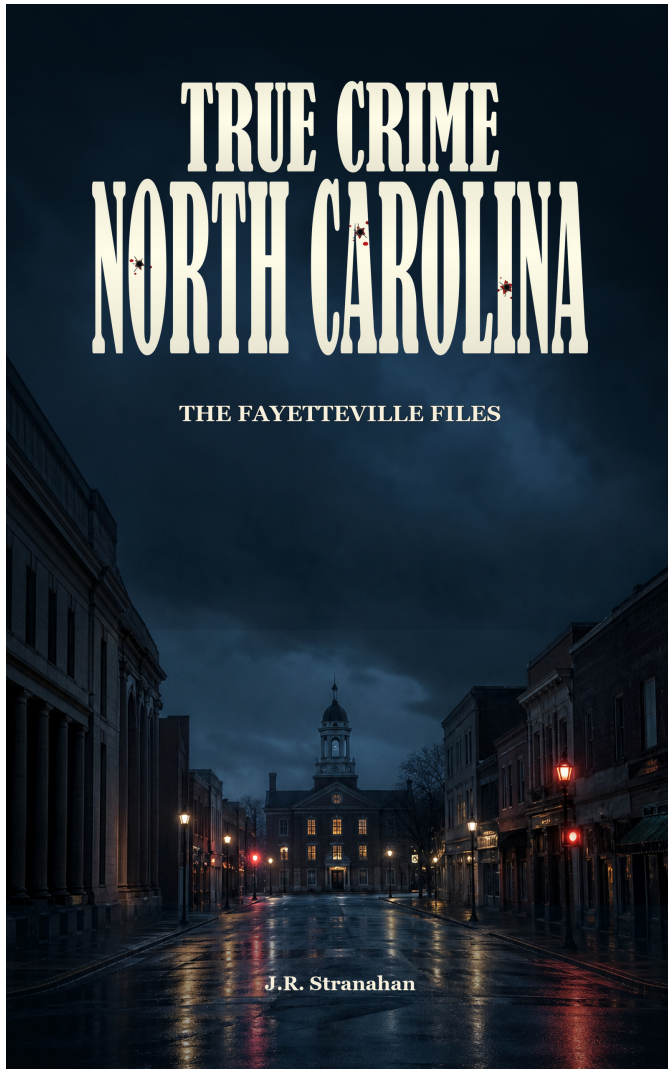


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J.R. Stranahan

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# Chapter 1: Alexander Simpson and the Arsenic Trial

Alexander C. Simpson died in Fayetteville in 1849 after an illness that witnesses would later describe in a crowded Cumberland County courtroom. The prosecution said arsenic killed him. It accused his wife, Ann K. Simpson, of giving it to him. In November 1850, a jury heard the evidence and returned a verdict of not guilty.

Those three statements define the legal case. They also mark the places where later retellings tend to go wrong. Alexander's death becomes a stage for a supposedly wicked wife. Suspicion becomes certainty. The acquittal is treated as a dramatic mistake rather than the judgment the law produced. A more careful account begins with the man who died and respects the verdict that followed.

Alexander and Ann had experienced serious marital conflict. The contemporary North Carolina Standard reported evidence of a letter in which Alexander said he once believed Ann loved him but now thought she loved someone else. He proposed that they continue living together for the sake of their friends while sleeping separately. Other testimony addressed Ann's relationship with another man and her visits to a fortune teller.

The fortune telling evidence occupied a powerful place in the public story. Witnesses said predictions concerned Alexander's life and Ann's future. In a nineteenth century murder trial, such testimony could suggest secrecy, forbidden knowledge, and a wish fulfilled. It did not establish who placed arsenic in anyone's food.

The state had more concrete evidence. Witnesses said Ann bought arsenic before Alexander died and asked about its effects on animals and people. Medical and chemical witnesses examined material associated with his stomach. According to the newspaper summary, they concluded that white arsenic was present and that the symptoms

and physical findings were consistent with death from the poison.

Proof of poison answered only part of the case. The state still had to prove that Ann administered it with the mental state required for murder. No witness described seeing her add arsenic to food or drink. The prosecution relied on circumstances: marital discord, alleged romantic attachment, the purchase, questions about the poison, conduct at the table, and statements surrounding the death.

The defense attacked both parts of the chain. Its lawyers questioned the medical conclusion and argued that the physicians might be mistaken. They offered other possible explanations for Alexander's death, including illness or self administration. They also argued that suspicion about Ann's behavior did not prove the act of poisoning beyond a reasonable doubt.

The trial report, published in 1851, ran to roughly two hundred pages. Its length shows the seriousness with which lawyers developed medical testimony, household evidence, and the arguments on each side. It also preserved how much the prosecution asked jurors to infer from conduct inside a marriage.

Publication did something a newspaper summary could not. It allowed the case to survive as a sequence of testimony and argument rather than only as a verdict announced to the public. That survival is valuable, but it does not make the printed volume neutral. Trial publications were assembled for readers. Editorial choices, transcription limits, and the advocacy preserved in lawyers' speeches remain part of the document.

The contemporary newspaper had its own frame. Its language invited readers to see the circumstances as ominous even while reporting the acquittal. A historian using it must separate the facts attributed to witnesses from the paper's assessment of those facts. Description such as dark or suspicious reveals the writer's reaction. It is not an additional piece of evidence.

The medical proof also passed through layers. Physicians observed Alexander before or after death. Chemical examiners interpreted material submitted to them. Lawyers selected questions. A reporter compressed the answers. Modern readers encounter the result through that chain, not through a preserved laboratory file that can be retested under current standards.

None of this means the poison evidence was worthless. It means the degree of certainty must match the record. The jurors heard more than later readers can recover, and even they declined to convict. A modern author working with less evidence has no sound basis to overrule them through confidence of tone.

Ann was represented by prominent lawyers. The state also had experienced counsel. The contest was not a brief frontier proceeding. Witnesses were examined, scientific claims were argued, and the jury received a developed circumstantial case.

The North Carolina Standard thought the evidence created dark suspicion. Its report described the state as linking separate circumstances into a chain. Yet the same account acknowledged the absence of positive testimony identifying Ann as the person who administered the poison. That gap was not a technical nuisance. It was the central question.

Alexander's position in the story is difficult. The trial record necessarily treated his body as evidence. Physicians discussed organs, symptoms, substances, and timing. Lawyers reconstructed his marriage through other people's testimony. He could not explain what he had eaten, whether he had access to poison, or how he understood the conflict in his household.

A victim centered account cannot invent those answers. It can recognize that Alexander's death deserved a truthful explanation while refusing to manufacture one after the jury found the prosecution insufficient. The desire to solve a historical death does not authorize the removal of reasonable doubt from a verdict rendered long ago.

Ann's gender shaped the accusation. The prosecution's narrative combined poison with adultery, fortune telling, and domestic betrayal. Poison was often imagined as a hidden weapon available to a person who prepared food and moved within a household. A woman accused of it could be portrayed as dangerous precisely because her ordinary domestic role gave her access.

That cultural script did not make the evidence irrelevant. A poison purchase could matter. A strained marriage could supply context. Questions about arsenic could be incriminating depending on their timing and purpose. The problem comes when social suspicion is treated as proof of the act.

The jury acquitted Ann. A not guilty verdict did not identify another person and did not establish a natural cause of death. It meant the state had not proved her guilt to the degree the criminal law required. That is the final legal status.

Later stories have attached additional claims to her life, including comparisons with other women accused of poisoning husbands elsewhere. Those claims are unstable and do not belong in the legal account of Alexander's death. Similar names, sensational newspaper writing, and a compelling plot do not create identity.

The surviving contemporary record leaves an uncomfortable result. Medical witnesses believed arsenic was present. Alexander died. No one was convicted of causing his death. The jury refused to convert a chain of circumstances into a murder judgment against Ann.

That discomfort is not a flaw to be repaired. It is what the case decided. The law requires the state to prove who committed a crime, not merely that a death looks suspicious. Alexander's unresolved death and Ann's acquittal must remain together.

## Sources

*[North Carolina Standard, November 20, 1850]*(<https://newspapers.digitalnc.org/lccn/sn84024517/1850-11-20/ed-1/seq-3/ocr/>) Berkeley Law Library, Trial of Mrs. Ann K. Simpson \* University of Tennessee Press, The Murder Trial of Ann Simpson

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