

**Excerpt from Vacations Can Be Murder: A True Crime Lover's Travel Guide to New England. This is from the Crime Summaries section of the Connecticut chapter. The actual addresses of these crimes are all included in the Itineraries section of the chapter.**

**Hartford** may be considered one of Connecticut's most dangerous cities, but its suburbs have seen their fair share of crime over the years.

The Hartford Witch Trials occurred between 1647-1663. In all of Connecticut, there were 43 trials and 16 executions, many in Hartford and three in Wethersfield. On May 26, 1647, Alice (Else) Young of Windsor was the first to be executed. Servant girl Mary Johnson was the first to confess to witchcraft in Connecticut but was likely coerced by extensive torture. She was executed somewhere between 1648-1650 (reports vary).

In 1839, The *Amistad* criminal and civil cases were tried at Old Statehouse in Hartford. The case revolved around a mutiny by, and subsequent charging of, 53 Mende African men, women, and children who had been captured and were being transported between Sierra Leone and Havana, Cuba aboard the ship to serve as slaves. The story was the subject of the Steven Spielberg film, *Amistad*. Several other Connecticut locations connected to the trial can be found at <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/travelamistad/visit.htm>.

Joseph "Mad Dog" Taborsky was a murderer sentenced to death after a string of brutal robberies and murders in Hartford and West Hartford in the 1950s. He was sentenced twice to be executed for two different crimes, but the first conviction was overturned due to the mental competency of a witness, his brother Albert, testifying against him. (Albert was later declared insane.) In December 1956, a little over a year after his release from prison, Taborsky launched a 14-month murder spree that killed gas station attendant Edward Kurpewski and customer Daniel

Janowski, package store owner Samuel Cohn, shoe store customers Bernard and Ruth Speyer, and pharmacy owner John M. “Jack” Rosenthal. The second conviction stuck, and he died in the electric chair in 1960, the last execution in Connecticut until that of Michael Bruce Ross in 2005.

In 2004, Matthew Steven Johnson was convicted of the 2000 and 2001 slayings of three female sex workers he murdered—Rosali Jimenez (33), Aida Quinones (33), and Alesia Ford (37)—who were all found dead in the Asylum Hill neighborhood of Hartford. Each of the women had drugs in their system and were found with their bodies stomped upon, strewn with Johnson’s semen, and with their pants pulled down around one leg. Johnson was found guilty and sentenced to three consecutive 60-year sentences at the Cheshire Correctional Institution.

Lazale Ashby became one of the youngest prisoners on Connecticut’s death row for kidnapping, raping, burglarizing, and murdering his neighbor Elizabeth Garcia in 2002, when he was just 18. He was suspected of another Hartford rape, as well.

Ashby has actually been tried and sentenced three times for Garcia’s murder, the final time in 2023, when he confessed to the crime. Now that Connecticut has abolished the death penalty, he’s been sentenced to 46.5 years in prison. In addition, he was convicted and received a 25-year sentence for the 2003 fatal shooting of 22-year-old Nahshon Cohen of Manchester, whose body was found on a street in the city’s North End.

Speaking of Manchester, in August of 2010, the city became the location of a mass shooting at a beer distribution company, Hartford Distributors. Disgruntled former employee Omar Thorton, forced to resign after video evidence revealed he’d been stealing and reselling the company’s beer, fatally shot eight coworkers and injured two others. He then committed suicide on site. Those who knew him cited racism as the reason for his upset, but these allegations were disputed by the firm and not substantiated by the investigation that followed.

William Devin Howell's rape and murder spree, which started on New Year's Day in 2003, took place in Seymour, West Hartford, and Wethersfield, as well as New Britain. Triggered by a fight with his girlfriend, Howell succumbed to years-long rape fantasies. Referring to himself as the "Sick Ripper," he would lure female drug addicts, unlikely to be missed, into his "murder mobile." There, he would rape them, often videotaping bizarre sex acts, before murdering them and disposing of the bodies in a seldom frequented area behind a strip mall in New Britain which he called his "garden." He was arrested in North Carolina and plea-bargained his way into a fifteen-year sentence for the manslaughter of Mary Jane Menard. However, new evidence that surfaced while he was already in jail earned him six consecutive life sentences (360 years in prison) to be spent at the Cheshire Correctional Institution.

In 1986 at the Jamaican Progressive League, a club in Hartford's North End, Bonnie Foreshaw stopped to get a beer and ended up committing a murder that bought her the longest jail sentence ever handed down to a woman in the state. Having endured a lifetime of sexual and spousal abuse, when Hector Freeman offered to buy her a drink and wouldn't let up when she turned him down, the encounter triggered her. She drew her handgun to fire a warning shot, but Freeman protected himself by using a pregnant woman, Joyce Amos, as a human shield. Foreshaw's bullet killed her accidentally.

Foreshaw spent the majority of her jail time at the York Correctional Institution in Niantic where author Wally Lamb taught a writing class for prisoners. Lamb took up her cause, believing she'd been over-sentenced, and thanks to his help, Foreshaw was granted clemency after serving just 27 years of a 49-year sentence. Once released, she changed her name to Bonnie Jean Cook and helped other ex-convicts adjust to life on the outside until her death in 2022.

All of these murders pale in comparison to the crimes of Amy Archer-Gilligan. While she was charged with five deaths (though only tried for one), she may have killed as many as one hundred. Archer-Gilligan ran the Archer Home for Elderly People and Chronic Invalids in the Hartford suburb of Windsor, where countless older residents were bilked out of money and then poisoned by arsenic, including the murderer's own husbands. Other locations tied to Archer-Gilligan include Newington, where she and her first husband James Archer lived with John Seymour until he died, and then they transformed the home into Sister Amy's Nursing Home for the Elderly. In 1917, she was convicted of the murder of Franklin Andrew and sentenced to death by hanging, but she appealed. During a second trial in 1919, she pleaded insanity and was convicted of second-degree murder, earning her a life sentence. In 1924, she was transferred to the Connecticut General Hospital for the Insane in Middletown, where she remained until her death in 1962. The play *Arsenic and Old Lace* is loosely based on her story.

Also in Hartford, the Circus Fire that killed 168 persons and injured 412-700 others through trampling and asphyxiation occurred on July 6, 1944 ("The Day the Clowns Cried") and is considered one of the country's worst fire disasters. The Big Top Tent was coated in paraffin plus gasoline or kerosene for waterproofing; therefore, it was highly flammable. On top of that, some of the exits were blocked by animal chutes. Arson was suspected; others blamed a carelessly tossed lit cigarette. A mentally ill man named Robert Dale Segee, 21, of Circleville, OH, confessed to setting the fire, as well as up to 30 other blazes in Maine, New Hampshire, and Ohio. He later recanted his confession and was never tried in Connecticut. However, Segee was indicted and convicted in Ohio on two charges of arson and served eight out of a four-to-forty-year jail sentence. He died in 1997.

Finally, on May 18, 1988, Billy “Hot Dog” Grant, a bookie who was in charge of Connecticut safe houses for New York’s five families, was reportedly murdered in the parking lot of the Westfarms Mall in Farmington. Grant, who had owned Augie and Ray’s Hot Dog and Hamburger shop in East Hartford, and later the South End Seaport restaurant on Franklin Avenue, was suspected of having given up details of the hiding spot of the brother of a mafia boss. He is supposedly buried underneath a Farmington residence.