

FACTS OF THE CASE

On February 28, 1905, Mrs. Jane Lathrop Stanford, wife of Senator Leland Stanford and co-founder of Leland Stanford Junior University, died in Room 120 of the Moana Hotel in Honolulu, Hawaii.

Mrs. Stanford's death was attended by Bertha Berner, her secretary and companion of twenty-three years, by Dr. Francis Howard Humphries, Dr. Harry Vicars Murray, and Mrs. Stanford's personal maid, Mae Hunt.

A cable was immediately sent to Mr. Charles G. Lathrop, Mrs. Stanford's brother, informing him, "Mrs. Stanford died unexpectedly."

Dr. Humphris informed Deputy Sheriff William T. Rawlins of Mrs. Stanford's death. At that time, he told the sheriff he suspected the cause of death to be strychnine poisoning.

On the night of her death, Mrs. Stanford made Dr. Humphris aware of the January 14, 1905, strychnine poisoning attempt on her life.

That attempt took place at Stanford's Nob Hill mansion in San Francisco on the corner of California and Powell Streets. On January 15, Mrs. Stanford and Miss Berner fled to the Hotel Vendome in San Jose. While Mrs. Stanford was in San Jose, the Morse Detective Agency conducted an investigation of the mansion. The results of that investigation were destroyed in the 1906 San Francisco earthquake fire.



Leland Stanford residence, 905 California at Powell, circa 1880. (wnp37.02207; Carleton Watkins, photographer – Marilyn Blaisdell Collection / Courtesy of a Private Collector)

Photo source: San Francisco Open History.

Early newspaper accounts of the crime quoted chemist Louis Falkenau stating he found strychnine in the bottle of Poland water delivered to him on the evening of January 14, 1905.

The strychnine found by chemist Falkenau was an agricultural grade—common rat poisoning—and the quantity that he states was “sufficient to kill twenty men.” There is a controversy as to whether the poison was present in the water when Mrs. Stanford drank it, or whether Mrs. Richmond, a maid, placed it in the bottle on her way to the pharmacist to have it analyzed. Two rumors circulated about Miss Richmond. One was that she had a history of endangering her mistresses, then saving them from the risk of disaster. The

second rumor was that she wanted to incriminate Miss Berner for attempted murder. Among the domestic staff, Miss Berner was not well thought of. She treated the staff as subordinates, which caused much ill will in the household.



Photo Credit: Westin St. Francis Hotel, San Francisco

Upon coming back to San Francisco from San Jose, Mrs. Stanford did not return to her home. Her brother suggested she stay at the St. Francis Hotel for her own safety. She remained at the hotel until February 14, 1905, when she sailed on the *S.S. Korea* for Honolulu. Her plans were to continue on to Japan for an extended trip.

The trip was at the urging of her brother, her attorney, and Dr. David Starr Jordan, president of Stanford University. Upon her sailing, Dr. Jordan issued a

statement that Mrs. Stanford would take up leisurely travel “for the purpose of recuperation from tonsillitis.”

Mrs. Stanford, Miss Berner, and Miss Mae Hunt departed San Francisco on February 14, 1905, and arrived in Honolulu the morning of February 21, 1905.

During the stressful years after Senator Stanford died (1893), Mrs. Stanford’s mental and physical health were a speculation of many. Board of Trustees members and railroad associates of the senator advised Mrs. Stanford to close the university. The United States was experiencing a depression, and the Stanford estate was tied up in probate for years.

There are conspiracy theories that imply former Central Pacific Railroad associates of Senator Stanford caused his estate to be inaccessible to his widow, and that they also arranged for the federal government to call in fifteen million dollars of construction loans, leaving Mr. Stanford in dire straits.



Photo Credit Palo Alto Museum: Senator Leland Stanford, Jane Lathrop Stanford, Leland Stanford, Jr.

Mrs. Stanford financed the university out of her own funds during the “six pretty long years.” She used the payment on Senator Stanford’s ten-thousand-dollar life insurance policy and the ten-thousand-dollar monthly allowance the probate court allotted her to keep the school afloat. And while there is no record of Mrs. Stanford taking a cable car through San Francisco during that time, there are several accounts of her walking Nob Hill, rather than hiring a cab to make her social calls.

In the spring of 1894, Mrs. Stanford visited President Cleveland, asking for his assistance in reviewing the government’s case against the Stanford estate. Two years later, on March 2, 1896, the estate of Senator Leland Stanford was released. Mrs. Stanford subsequently sold her stock in the Central Pacific Railroad Company and turned over eleven million dollars to the university trustees.

It was nine years later that the alleged attempts were made on her life.

On the morning of her death, February 28, 1905, Mrs. Stanford and Miss Berner hired a carriage to take a day trip to the Pali Lookout. Upon return, Mrs. Stanford rested. She ate a light dinner that evening, complained of stomach pains, and returned to her room early. At around 10:00 p.m., she called out to Miss Berner and Miss Hunt. Miss Berner, seeing Mrs. Stanford’s condition, ordered the maid to get medical attention.

Upon his arrival in her room, Mrs. Stanford informed Dr. Francis Howard Humphries that she had been poisoned, and Miss Berner supplied the details of the January Nob Hill attempt. Dr. Humphris called Dr. Francis Foot Day, requesting that he bring a stomach pump to the Moana and “not to spare the horses” in coming. Dr. Day arrived minutes before Mrs. Stanford died.

Although Dr. Humphris was the attending physician at her death, he requested that Dr. Clifford Brown Wood perform the autopsy so that there would be no question as to the objectivity of the results.

The autopsy was conducted at Queen's Hospital on March 1. Dr. Wood served as the prosecutor. Other physicians present were: Dr. Francis Howard Humphris, Dr. Harry Vicars Murray, Dr. Francis Root Day, Dr. John S. B. Pratt, Dr. Frank E. Sawyer, and Dr. William E. Taylor. Also present were: Robert Duncan, chemist and toxicologist, Mr. Williams, the mortician, and the morgue assistant.

The autopsy uncovered no natural cause for death, and the possibility of tetanus was ruled out.

A coroner's inquest was held in the dining room of the Moana Hotel.

The toxicology report presented at the inquest confirmed the presence of strychnine in the bottle of bicarbonate of soda that was next to Mrs. Stanford's bed and in the intestinal tract of the deceased. Controversy over the amount and source of strychnine in Mrs. Stanford's body was played out in the press. The debate as to whether or not the amount present was sufficient to be fatal plays out to this day.

Pharmacist W.E. Jackson of the Stanford Pharmacy in Palo Alto, California, stated that he sold Mrs. Stanford and Miss Berner bicarbonate of soda on February 6, 1905, and it did not contain strychnine.



Photo Credit: Queen's Hospital, Honolulu, Hawaii. Queen's Hospital.

On March 9, the coroner's inquest jurors delivered their verdict after deliberating less than ten minutes: "Jane Lathrop Stanford came to her death in Honolulu, Island of Oahu, Territory of Hawaii, on the twenty-eight day of February, A.D. 1905 from strychnine poisoning, and strychnine having been introduced into a bottle of bicarbonate of soda with felonious intent by a person, or persons to this jury unknown and of the contents of which bottle Jane Lathrop Stanford had partaken."

Dr. Jordan sailed from California to Honolulu to escort the body of Mrs. Stanford back to California. He was accompanied by Timothy Hopkins, a lifelong friend of Mrs. Stanford.

David Starr Jordan was appointed the first president of Stanford University in March 1891. His tenure lasted until 1913, when he became chancellor. Mrs. Stanford considered Jordan a confidante during the years when the senator's estate was in probate.

Once the funds were released, President Jordan was eager to develop the academic program of the university, while Mrs. Stanford was determined to execute the building plan. This led Jordan to refer to this period as the "Stone Age."

Jordan rejected the theory of the murder of Mrs. Stanford and held that position until his death, although his story varied. He denounced the Honolulu physicians and, at one point, accused Dr. Humphris of putting strychnine in Mrs. Stanford's bicarbonate himself.

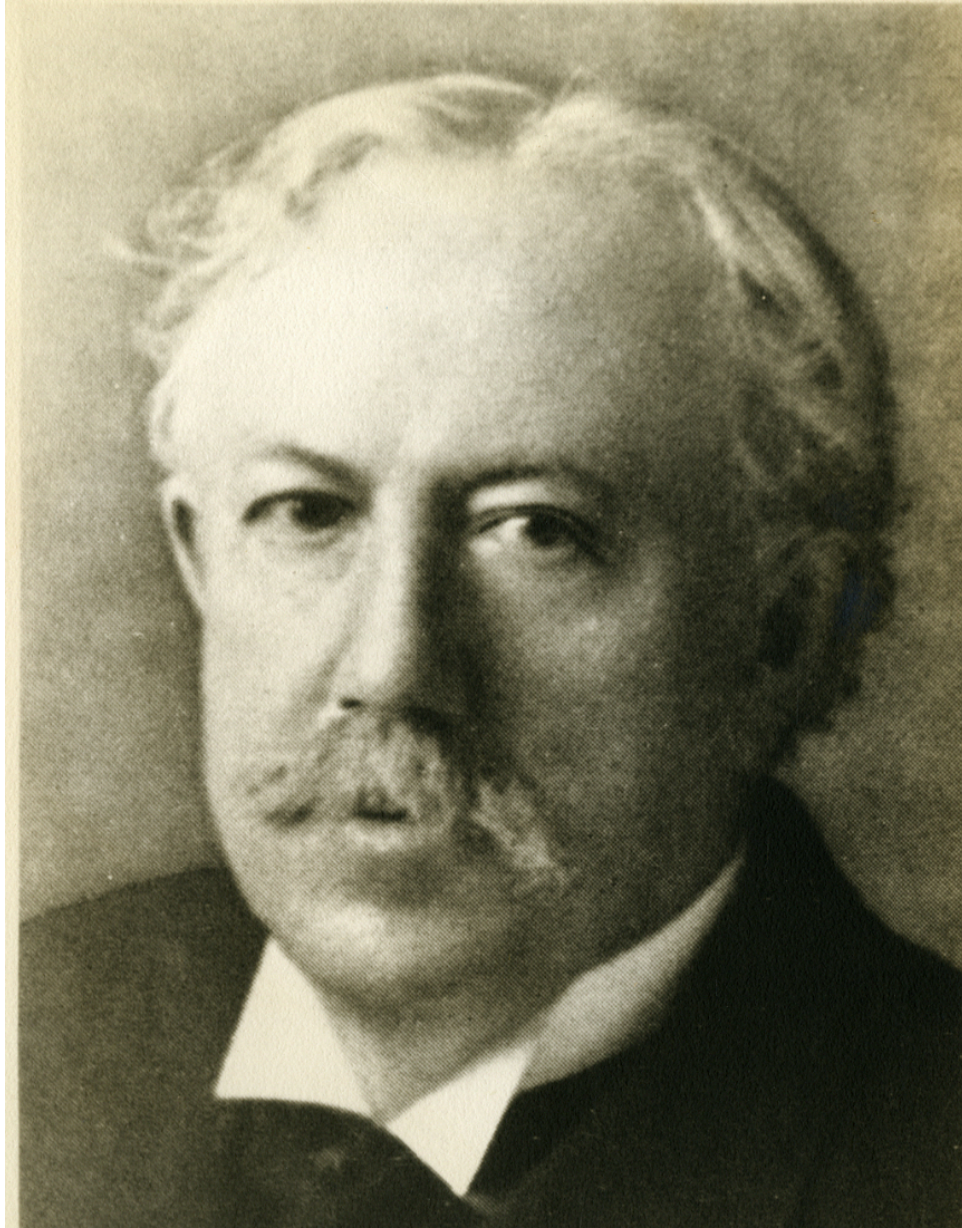


Photo Credit: Smithsonian. Dr. David Starr Jordan

On March 15, 1905, President Jordan's statement appeared in the *Evening Bulletin*: "In our judgment, after careful consideration of the facts brought to our knowledge, we are now fully convinced that the death of Mrs. Stanford was not due to strychnine poisoning nor to intentional wrongdoing on the part of anyone. We find in the statements of those who were with Mrs. Stanford in her last moments no evidence that any characteristic symptoms of

strychnine poisoning were present. We think that death was due to a combination of conditions and circumstances. Among these we may note, in connection with her advanced age, the unaccustomed exertion, the surfeit of unsuitable food, and the unusual exposure during the picnic to which she went on the day of her death.” Jordan and Hopkins consulted with Dr. E.C. Waterhouse for his opinion regarding Mrs. Stanford’s death. According to the Honolulu newspapers, Dr. Waterhouse reviewed the testimony of the attending physicians and the autopsy report, and from these documents, he opined that death was due to natural causes.

FACTS WORTH NOTING

During the month of February

"THE EXAMINER"

Published **35,066** Want Ads

\$7,000 More Than Any Other San Francisco Paper

A GAIN OF \$1004 Over its Own Total of February, 1916.

AN AMERICAN PAPER

The San Francisco Examiner

FOR THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

THE WEATHER

Forecast made at San Francisco for 24 hours ending Wednesday, March 2, 1916:

San Francisco and vicinity—Fair; Thursday; light north wind, clearing; 50 to 60.

A. G. MEADE,
Editor Forecaster.

VOL. LXXXII. THURSDAY SAN FRANCISCO, MARCH 2, 1916 THURSDAY NO. 61.

MRS. JANE L. STANFORD DIES IN HONOLULU FROM EFFECTS OF STRYCHNINE POISONING

MAKES OFFER TO PLEAD GUILTY

Sensational Overtures Made by Attorney D. W. Burchard on Behalf of George Letcher, Accused of Arson in Ohio

FINALLY DECIDES TO GO TO TRIAL

(Special to Examiner from Toledo, Ohio, March 1.)—George Letcher, accused of conspiracy in arson, sound, through his attorney, the State authorities at Bryan with a view to ascertaining what inducements they would offer if he would plead guilty to the indictments for arson and conspiracy to defraud an insurance company. This unexpected advance on the part of the prosecutor was made last night after the news of Ullis Pratt's conviction. The proposition was withdrawn. Letcher, the prisoner, yesterday afternoon, however, that all offers were off and that he would go to trial on the indictments.

Attorney D. W. Burchard, Letcher's California attorney, was the instrument chosen to carry this tentative proposition to the State's attorney. Speaking to Judge Bowenrock late yesterday afternoon, he said: "Mr. Letcher will charge his plea of not guilty to one of guilty, what is the minimum sentence you and your associates would recommend to the Court?" Judge Bowenrock, taken completely by surprise, was unable to say. This, in com-

DEATH ROBS STATE OF A GREAT BENEFACITOR

By Thomas J. Kirk, State Superintendent of Public Instruction.

SACRAMENTO, March 1.—In the death of Mrs. Jane Stanford the cause of free public education, from the kindergarten to the college, has lost one of two of its most generous and devoted friends.

While the great institution at Palo Alto may exclusively claim her as its own Alma Mater, our State University and every department of our public schools, either from her help direct or through Stanford University, are recipients of her benefactions.

Today in the city of Sacramento, where she and Senator Stanford lived so long, where were laid the foundations of their great wealth and where they were at the height of political influence and power, old neighbors are recalling her many womanly virtues, her lack of ostentation or love of display, but of her great love of children. Truly the memory of Mrs. Stanford will ever live in the hearts of all the people of California.

Venerable Philanthropist Expires Suddenly in Great Agony.

DEATH IS SHROUDED IN DEEP MYSTERY

MRS. STANFORD'S LAST WORDS

"BERTHA, I fear I have been poisoned. Tell the doctor what happened to us before."

HONOLULU, March 2.—The chemists' analytical report positively shows the presence of strychnine in the bicarbonate of soda bottle from which Mrs. Stanford took her last medicine.

(Special by Pacific Cable to "The Examiner.")

HONOLULU, March 1.—Mrs. Jane Lathrop Stanford, most generous of women, lies dead—done to death by poison.

The doctors and police authorities are hard at work on the case—the doctors so determine just how the poison was taken, while the police are making every effort to ascertain whether it is a case of murder, suicide or accident.

Mrs. Stanford has feared a poison. She said when she came from San Francisco here that she fled that city because of an attempt made upon her life by giving her strychnine in her mineral water. She seemed to think the attempt would be repeated.

But she did not go into particulars as to why any one should wish to put her to death. The people here who know her best have no theory to point a guilty finger toward any person. It is told that she is not phenomenally rich, having given most of the vast estate left her by Lathrop

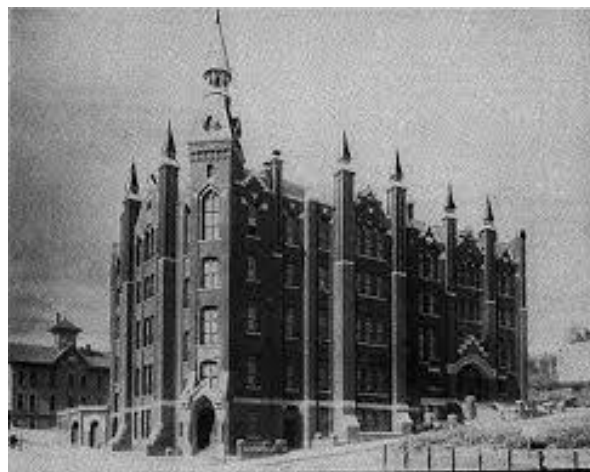


Waterhouse declined to make any public statement. And it was soon disclosed that he had never seen the deceased’s body, a fact Waterhouse admitted. He stated that the lack of opportunity for direct observation seriously affected the value of his opinion. The text of his report was never released. Jordan and Hopkins left Honolulu without any physician publicly backing their theory of

death by natural causes. Just as the SS *Alameda* was to leave Honolulu, Dr. Jordan gave a dockside interview, accusing the other Honolulu physicians of accepting Humphris's statement without examining the evidence, and "Dr. Humphris and his associates don't know what they are talking about."

Two days later, the *Pacific Commercial Advertiser* released the rebuttal of the Honolulu physicians. They stated, "She [Mrs. Stanford] did not die of angina pectoris because neither the symptoms of the attack nor the condition of the heart confirms that diagnosis. It is imbecilic to think that a woman of Mrs. Stanford's age and mental capacity might have died of a hysterical seizure in half an hour...Her 'advanced age, the unaccustomed exertion, surfeit of unsuitable food, and the unusual exposure' separately or combined could not cause death, as Mrs. Stanford died. No Board of Health in existence could allow a certificate based on such a cause of death to go unchallenged."

The heart and the brain of Mrs. Stanford were preserved and underwent an autopsy by Dr. Ophuls of Cooper Medical School in California. This report was never released, nor is it in the collection of the Stanford University Archives. Dr. Jordan states that Dr. Ophuls found the cause of death to be "rupture of the coronary artery."



Cooper Medical College. Original building with addition including Lane Hall, ca. 1892.

(Cooper Medical College became the Stanford Medical School in 1912. Photo credit: Stanford University Archives.)

The bad blood between Jordan and the Honolulu physicians continued for years. Not only were the professional reputations of the Honolulu doctors impugned, but Jordan also accused them of collusion with the police to fabricate a crime, and later added extortion to his accusations. Controversies regarding payment of fees owed to the physicians were followed in newspapers in both Honolulu and San Francisco. Dr. Wood and Dr. Day charged \$150 each for their autopsy services---a fee Jordan found exorbitant.

The cause of Mrs. Stanford's death is still argued today. Support can be made for every theory—natural causes, suicide, an accidental overdose of strychnine, or strychnine poisoning.

There were indeed rumors that Mrs. Stanford suffered from dementia. There was gossip that her death was a suicide. And there was the scuttlebutt about Nob Hill servants that Bertha Berner murdered her mistress.

There was conjecture that Dr. Jordan wanted control over the university and that he had heard unconfirmed reports that Mrs. Stanford was planning to replace him. There was a theory that he arranged her murder. There was hearsay about a Chinese houseboy who threatened Mrs. Stanford's life, and there was a report of an English maid who had a history of saving her master's life after she poisoned them. Periodically, one or all of these theories emerge as popular.



Photo credit: Stanford University Archives of Bertha at the Palo Alto Mansion.

There are two unrefuted facts in the case. First, that strychnine was found in Mrs. Stanford's bottle of bicarbonate of soda, and second, that strychnine is a foreign substance in bicarbonate of soda.

The events of *Who Murdered Jane Stanford* are fictitious. Much of the chronicle of her last days in Hawaii is true. Some press coverage of her death was taken from the original text; inquest testimony has been both embellished and skewed to support the storyline.

It is true that the Republic of Hawaii was annexed by the United States in 1898, and in 1905 there were attempts to return Queen Liliuokalani to the throne. And, in fact, there was a short-lived scheme to annex Hawaii to San Francisco County. But none of that is related to Mrs. Stanford's death. The only uncovered association between President Jordan of Stanford University and the scheme to annex Hawaii to California was a casual remark he made supporting the idea after his delivery of the 1902 commencement speech at Kamehameha School.

The overthrow is a fact of history. On November 23, 1993, President Bill Clinton signed Public Law 103-150, the “Apology Resolution,” in which the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America apologizes to Native Hawaiians on behalf of the people of the United States for the overthrow of the kingdom on January 17, 1893.”

The Waikiki Aquarium was established in 1904. It was operated by the directors of the Honolulu Rapid Transit Authority. Jordan did visit the aquarium, then known as the Honolulu Aquarium, several times, and he praised its fine collection. But no contractual or implied relationship between the university and the aquarium was uncovered in the research. Both the Castle and the Cooke families contributed to the aquarium. In 1919, it came under the auspices of the University of Hawaii. The site of the present aquarium is on property adjacent to the original site.

While the Moana Hotel was the site of Mrs. Stanford’s death, the fictitious Palms Hotel is not intended to reflect any events that occurred at the Moana Hotel during her stay in the islands, nor are the characters representative of any Moana Hotel Staff. The Moana has no affiliation with this work of fiction.



Photo Credit: University of Hawaii Archives. Waikiki Aquarium, then known as Honolulu Aquarium.

Who Murdered Jane Stanford? manipulates and twists historical facts to support the plot and create a sense of intrigue. The definitive nonfiction work on Mrs. Stanford's death is *The Mysterious Death of Jane Stanford* by Robert Cutler, M.D. (Stanford University Press, 2003).

There are many theories about the cause of Mrs. Stanford's death, but since all records of both autopsies and final reports of the Morse Detective Agency, the San Francisco Police Department, the Hawaii Sheriff's Office, and Stanford University are lost. There is only a copy of Honolulu's Coroner's Inquest in the Stanford University Archives.

My research for this book was possible because of the free and public access to library and archive collections. My heartfelt thanks go to Robert Cutler, retired Stanford University Medical School, and fellow researcher of the Stanford case. Working with Robert was always challenging. He is the real force behind this work.