

PRISON MUSEUM POST

*The Official Newsletter of the Historic Burlington County Prison Museum Association
Incorporated in 1966*

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PLEASE RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP

We have always appreciated our members, but never more than last year. With admissions and gift shop sales at a record low due to the pandemic, dues and donations alone paid the costs of preserving the history of our fascinating National Historic Landmark through research, the website and publications. We actually accomplished a great deal last year, including the graffiti video, which is on our website. We upgraded the website in several other ways as well, including the addition of extensive information about our Landmark status. Keep an eye out for even more website updates, including the addition of all our past newsletters (with a search feature). We are also working on another film. Please help us continue this work by renewing your membership.

NEW DISCOVERIES

The PMA has discovered and preserved more about the Jail's history over the last two years than it has over all the preceding 53 years of its existence combined. At this point, we are uncovering information faster than we and our interns can digest and store it. Many of you have asked - How in the world do you find this stuff? We'll discuss that in this issue.

The man who slept with his wife's corpse...

Sometimes in researching one topic, we will be led to countless others. Our research on Barclay Peak, featured in the last issue, is an example. Peak, the young man who killed his girlfriend in February of 1887, was dismayed that while awaiting trial, he would have to share an 8 by 8-foot cell (the "dungeon" on the top floor) with a particularly creepy guy. The inmate was William Agnew, a Palmyra day laborer who had killed his wife, Lizzie, a month before. Lizzie, a house servant, had last worked at a New Year's Eve party attended by well-to-do Philadelphians at a hotel owned by the Wallace family in Palmyra. The Agnews spent the two dollars she made that night on whiskey. They imbibed continuously for the next two days. On Monday night, January 3, 1887, they got into a drunken row in which Agnew beat her into eternity with a rocking chair. He carried her body upstairs, washed it and put it in their bed, where it remained for the next nine days. He testified

to sleeping next to the corpse. Several people came by to inquire about her, including the landlady, Mrs. Gleason, who shared a "half-pint" with Mr. Agnew as Mrs. Agnew lay lifeless above. She testified that he told her that his wife was "out working". On Wednesday, January 12, Palmyra constable Albert Horner visited the Agnew home to inquire why Lizzie, who usually did housework for him on Wednesdays, had not appeared that day or the previous Wednesday. Agnew made a run for it but was apprehended by the constable a few blocks away. Horner returned to the Agnew home and discovered the body.

Burlington County residents were understandably horrified by the incident, which was widely reported in the local papers. The *Camden County Courier* noted that Agnew "is said to be a nephew of Dr. Agnew, the celebrated Philadelphia physician who figured in the Garfield sick room. He is a short, stout man, about 40 years of age. He has a light moustache and a small goatee. His face shows evidence of much dissipation. He is intelligent and a fluent speaker." According to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the doctors who conducted the autopsy testified that the body was not much decomposed because the bedroom, apparently not heated, was freezing. The nose was broken and there wasn't an inch of the body that hadn't been bruised or cut. A neighbor testified that Lizzie had suspected her husband of killing his first wife. Agnew was convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced on May 9. The public, anxious to see him hang, was disappointed with the verdict and sentence (20 years at State Prison at hard labor). The *York Daily of York, Pennsylvania* reported that Judge Parker "remarked that the crime...was one of the most revolting and inhuman in the annals of crime. The condemned man displayed no emotion whatsoever, but remarked that the sentence was undeserved." He would never have killed her, he said, had he not been "in liquor".



The attack on the Washington Monument...

One of our board members has a Google alert which notifies him whenever something appears in the media dealing with the Jail or Robert Mills, the Jail's architect. In 2019 it alerted him to a Washington Post article about the Washington Monument, which was one of Mills' last designs before his death in 1855. The Monument had just re-opened following years of renovations after being damaged in the 2011 earthquake. Construction on the building began in 1848. Foreign and political leaders from all over the world sent slabs of marble to be placed in the monument. In March of 1854, a group of nine men belonging to the

anti-Catholic "Know Nothing" Party snuck up to what was still a construction zone, poisoned a guard dog, tied up a night watchman, stole a slab of marble that had been sent by Pope Pius IX and dumped it in the Potomac. Construction would be halted for another 23 years due to lack of funds, a struggle for control of the Washington Monument Society and the American Civil War. The monument would not be completed until 1885. It was the tallest building in the world at the time and is still the tallest in Washington, D.C.

An embezzler escapes...

One of our interns likes to keep an eye on Ebay to see if anything related to the Jail comes up. He recently found a "WANTED" flyer, which we purchased and added to our unabashedly quirky collection. A quick perusal through some old newspapers revealed that the person appearing on the flyer was one Howard Robinson.

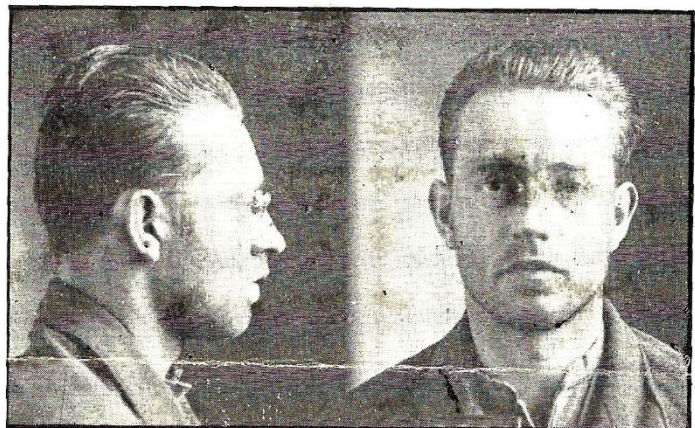
The *Mt. Holly News* on May 25, 1915 reported:

"Robinson, a very respectable and intelligent looking young man, called for sentence on a charge of embezzlement, pleaded non vult. His record was quite bad. He had committed similar crimes before, and had served terms in the state institutions.

Judge Lippincott could not see anything in the young man's favor, and sent him to state prison for not less than one nor more than three years." He escaped from a State Prison Road Camp in Springdale (now Cherry Hill) with two other men on October 29, 1915.

ESCAPED! \$25 REWARD!

New Jersey State Prison.



HOWARD ROBINSON, No. 3725.

Received May 21, 1915 from Burlington County. Crime, Embezzlement, Sentence, 1 to 3 years. Escaped from Road Camp No. 1, Springdale, N. J., Oct. 29th, 1915.

Description.

Color, White. Age, 27. Height, 5ft. 10in. Weight, 157½. Build, Slim. Eyes, Hazel Gray. Hair, Brown. Complexion, Dark. Residence, Flemington, N. J.

Marks and Scars.

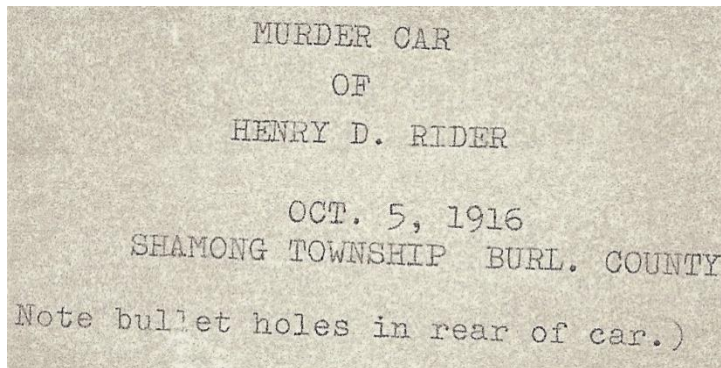
Right Side: Scar palm of hand. Left Side: Large scar top back of thumb. Large scar left face at jaw. Large angular scar left side top head.

Wire any information at my expense,

Trenton, N. J.

THOMAS B. MADDEN, Keeper.

Murder in the Cranberry Bogs...



Sometimes we find long-forgotten material in our files like this photo and note card.

It was pay day on October 5, 1916, when cranberry bog owner Andrew Rider set out with \$4000 to pay his men at four different bogs. His 25-year-old widowed daughter, Elsie Smathers, was driving his car, pictured above. Andrew was seated in the back seat with his foreman, James Rigby. Seated next to Elsie in the front seat was Andrew's brother, Henry Rider, who was visiting from Michigan. Driving on a lonely dirt road in Shamong near Atsion, they were held up by nine masked men, some dressed in women's clothes. The bandits opened fire. Andrew returned fire with a revolver that he carried with him until he was shot in the arm. He then handed the revolver to Rigby, who climbed out on the running board and continued to return fire. Both Andrew and Rigby were shot several times. Elsie was also shot in the leg and torso. A steel rod in her corset deflected the bullet from her torso into the brain of her uncle Henry.

Elsie was quite a gal. When she saw her uncle slump down, and despite being shot herself, she had the presence of mind and courage to hit the gas and speed through the band of robbers. She made it to her father's headquarters, where Henry died within an hour. She, her father and Rigby survived. A few months before, her husband had died of poisoning contracted while directing the spraying of the cranberry bogs. Two weeks later, her father broke his arm and could not drive. At that point the young woman had to learn how to operate an automobile, called a "machine" at the time. She testified that she liked to drive, and also liked to hunt, having killed her first deer the year before; she had only wished she had her rifle with her that day. After a few years, she remarried a man named Hinsch and moved to Great Neck, Long Island.

Her father, Andrew Rider, was also noteworthy. He is the namesake of Rider University. Born in Michigan, he graduated from Howell Seminary and Hillsdale College there before moving to New Jersey to take up a career in higher education. In 1866 he took charge of a business school in Trenton which eventually became Rider University. In 1880 he became its owner and president and held those positions until his retirement in 1900. In 1873 he also started acquiring and operating cranberry bogs near Hammonton. He came to be known as the Cranberry King of New Jersey by virtue of his 500 acres of bogs and also because of his efforts to promote the cranberry in England. He was president of the American Cranberry Growers' Association.

It was no easy task to track down the robbers, all of whom turned out to be Italian immigrants employed by Rider as cranberry pickers. Only one, Giovanni Iraca, was sentenced to death and executed. The day after he was sentenced in April of 1917, he escaped from our Jail by walking out the front door. He had used a pewter spoon to bore through his cell wall by simply loosening the mortar and lifting the stones out. He made it to Burlington before Warden W. Harry King (the one who was murdered by an inmate 3 years later) noticed he was missing. Detective Ellis Parker, in a car driven by Constable Joe Haines of Burlington, tracked Iraca down on York Road in Burlington.

One of the other robbers was arrested in Italy and convicted. Others served prison sentences. The last of them, named Pinto, escaped arrest initially but was finally caught in 1933 in Stockton, California, and deported.

**Historic Burlington County
Prison Museum Association ("PMA")**

P.O. Box 483
Mt. Holly, NJ 08060
PMA Office Fax: 609-261-5252
PMA Phone: 609-288-6372
Museum/Gift Shop Phone: 609-265-5476
Email: info@pma1811.net
Website: www.prisonmuseum.net

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**Prison Museum Post Editor, Researcher, Writer, Typesetter and
Distributor:**

Janet L. Sozio, Esq.

Please help us preserve and promote the museum by joining the PMA. Annual dues are \$15(individual)/\$25 (family). Membership benefits include a quarterly newsletter, event updates and free admission to the museum.

Go on the website for an application.

Speaking of Warden King....

Sometimes we research stories we already think we know and find out we have been wrong all along. For years we told visitors that the above mentioned Warden King and "trusty" Charles Bartlett were bludgeoned to death in November of 1920 with a coal stoker in the basement hall near the furnace by inmate Harry Asay, and that Asay was found not guilty by reason of insanity. Upon further investigation over the last few years, we found that although Asay did in fact kill King in the hallway, Bartlett wasn't with him. He was in the kitchen. (Apparently, in addition to acting as the Warden's body guard/assistant, or "trusty", Bartlett also worked as a cook). After killing King, Asay ran to the kitchen, where he struck Bartlett. He then fled to the Exercise Yard, where Detective Ellis Parker and some Camden County detectives, who happened to be at the Jail on another case, found him hiding in a shed, still holding the stoker. Mortally wounded, Bartlett died later that day. Asay pleaded guilty to second degree murder of King and was sentenced to between 20 and 30 years in state prison. He was paroled after 13 years, in 1934. He was allowed to plead "non vult" to the murder of Charlie Bartlett, and sentence was suspended. Bartlett's mother, Viola Vernon, served Freeholder Director Edward Haines with a suit for \$50,000 for the wrongful death of her son. The case was dismissed in February of 1922.

Both Asay and Bartlett were jailed on disorderly charges filed on the complaint of their families, although Bartlett's situation raises some questions that might be the gist of a future *Post* article. Both from Burlington, the men knew each other. Asay, who operated a scrap iron business with his brothers, had a rather substantial criminal history. He had a reputation as a drunk. He was also a character - he dozed off during the prosecution testimony of one of the other inmates (John Jones) during the murder trial.

WE'RE IN BACKROADS USA!

Check out a great piece about us in the May 2021 issue of *BackroadsUSA*, a really well-produced motorcycle magazine full of fun articles about many interesting destinations. You don't have to be a bike enthusiast to find it interesting. Many motorcycle groups visit us, and we hope that many more come as a result of the article. They are energetic, ask a lot of good questions and always buy a souvenir or two in the gift shop. Their website is www.backroadsusa.com and the article about us can be found at <https://issuu.com/backroadsmagazine/docs/may2021web>. Our intern Paulie Wenger gave them a tour and is featured in the article.

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ParkerMcCay
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Armed Forces Heritage Museum

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New Jersey Paranormal
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Chase Circello
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PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES:

Dr. Eugene V. Timpano
Dr. Eugene D. Timpano
Cinnaminson
Podiatric Medicine & Surgery
856-786-2247

Our accountant:
Gary F. Mazzucco, CPA
Brian Frampton, CPA
Mazzucco & Co., CPA
Moorestown
856-234-7788

Jennifer Anderson, CPA
Moorestown
856-234-7788

Regan Young
RYEBREAD Architects-
Regan Young England Butera
Referendums, Engineering,
Architecture, Design
Mt. Holly
609-265-2652

Peter Genzano
Genzano Contractor
Riverside
Additions, Alterations, Siding,
Masonry, Decks
856-461-7249

Sandra Genzano
Four Corners Travel
www.fourcornerstravelnj.com
Riverside
856-75-2440

Adam Greenberg, Esquire
Honig & Greenberg
Cherry Hill
Creditor-rights matters
(foreclosures, bankruptcy,
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856-770-0990

Warren S. Jones, Esquire
Mt. Holly
Bankruptcy, real estate,
real estate tax appeals,
personal injury, wills
609-261-8400

Hon. Michael J. Hogan, J.S.C. (ret.)
Mediation, arbitration, neutral services
609-351-3144
michaelhogan.jsc.ret@gmail.com

Joan Warren, Esq.
Lavery & Sirkis
Hackettstown
Bankruptcy matters
908-850-6161

Oliver & Legg
William H. Oliver, Esq.
Cameron Legg, Esq.
Neptune
Bankruptcy matters, real estate
732-988-1500

Gary Woodend, Esq.
Medford
Real estate, construction,
municipal court, wills
609-654-5489

Robert Weishoff, Esq.
Weishoff and Richards
Landlord tenant matters
609-267-5297

Travis Richards, Esq.
Weishoff and Richards
Bankruptcy and
landlord tenant matters
Mt. Holly
609-267-5297

Berge Tumaian, Esq.
Moorestown
Family law
856-722-1818

Stewart LaVine
INTERFACE
Mt. Holly
Data-voice-video
609-702-9394

Jan Myers
Ed's Tailor Shop
609-723-1341

Nona Ostrove, Esq.
Voorhees
Bankruptcy and Community
Association Law
856-566-4200

Dorothy L. Wright, Esq.
Greenbrook
Family law, bankruptcy
732-752-8834

Stephanie Shreter, Esq.
Mt. Holly
Bankruptcy
609-265-9600

Guardianship Assistance Program
Non-profit Guardianship Legal Service
609-444-6653

Cynthia Salvatore Earl, Esq.
Guardianship, family law
Moorestown
856-642-7470

Susan R. Dargay, Esq.
Family law
Mt. Holly
609-265-3985

Edward Kaelin
Lee Funeral Home
Mt. Holly
609-267-0906

Michael Rothmel, Esq.
Family law, municipal court,
Criminal law, real estate
Mt. Holly
609-261-9100

Our lawyers:

ParkerMcCay
Mt. Laurel
www.parkermccay.com
*Creditor rights, litigation, corporate,
public school & education, insurance
defense, etc.*

John M. Devlin, Esq.
Stephen J. Mushinski, Esq.
Ronald C. Morgan, Esq.
Gene R. Mariano, Esq.
Harris Neil Feldman, Esq.
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Kiera McFadden-Roan, Esq.

Clark Bish
*Bloodshed Farms Haunted
Attraction and Hayride*
www.bloodshedfarmsfearfest.com

Linda Hynes, Esquire
*Domers, Bonamassa & Hynes
Marlton*
Family law
856-596-2888