

PRISON MUSEUM POST

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

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WE NEED VOLUNTEERS

We need volunteers to give tours, answer visitor questions, set visitors up with the audio tour, assist visitors using the escape game and help out in the gift shop. Giving tours and answering questions is a lot easier than you think. None of this stuff is hard at all. Volunteering at the museum is 100% pressure-free - we don't ask or expect our volunteers to commit to a schedule. Volunteers can come any time the jail is open. It's a lot of fun and you will meet nice and interesting people who come from all over. If you are interested or know anyone who is, contact us at info@pma1811.net.

ESCAPES



Many have asked if anyone ever escaped from the Jail. The answer is yes, many! We have started a list of escapees on the website under the "History/Escapes" tab. We have 60 so far.

The first escape we know of occurred on January 31, 1819. The February 3, 1819 issue of the *Mount Holly Mirror* reported that

"On Sunday night last, two prisoners escaped from the Jail of this County, by cutting a bar out of a grated window, and letting themselves into the yard; from which by means of a rope made of their bed-clothes they got into the street. A few days previous to their departure, one of the prisoners, a young man of about 19 years of age, pretended to be quite unwell and requested Mr. Wilson, the jailer, to permit two other prisoners to remain with him during his illness, which he granted. A third person in the plot, in endeavoring to get from the window, fell and broke his leg; and after giving his friends time to depart, raised the alarm."

The Notice for a reward for their recapture was printed in the paper:

\$40 REWARD

Broke jail, in this Town, and made their escape on the night of the 31st ult – two prisoners – the one named

SAMUEL LEAMING

Alias, HAMLET, alias Wm. Thompson, about 19 years of age, dark complexion, long dark curly hair and blue eyes, had on a blue roundabout jacket, grey pantaloons, common fur hat- but little worn- about 5 feet 5 inches high. The other named

OBADIAH REED

Alias GEORGE SOMMERS, about 26 years of age, light complexion, dark hair, large blue eyes, had on a velvet roundabout, blue pantaloons, a fur hat nearly worn out, and an old pair of shoes.

The above reward and all charges shall be paid for securing said Prisoners in any Jail, so that the Subscriber may get them, or Twenty Dollars for either.

JAMES WILSON



The "fur hat" will make most of you think of Daniel Boone or Ben Franklin. But their hats were probably top hats like the one on the left, which were made out of beaver fur.

It appears that everybody was trying to break jail that week. *The Mirror* reported that the day after Samuel and Obadiah escaped,

"...Mr. Wilson discovered that a black fellow, confined in a separate apartment, had succeeded in sawing one of the bars in his window nearly off – and intended to march that morning."

Here are some excerpts from news articles about other escapes:

A prisoner escaped from the Mount Holly Jail, on Thursday, and got off. His name is **Charles Lety**. He is about 35 years old, is 6 feet high, slim, dark hair and complexion. \$50 is offered for him. His crime is Larceny. (*Monmouth Inquirer*, Apr. 17, 1851)

Peter Riggin, who lately broke jail at West Chester, where he was confined for passing bogus coin, has again made his escape from the Mount Holly jail, where he had been placed to await his trial on a similar charge. His wife (Phoebe Riggin) still remains in custody. (*Phila. Public Ledger*, Nov. 20, 1856)

Saml S. Ringgold, colored, charged with being concerned in certain burglaries committed in Burlington Co. and who was committed to the Mount Holly jail on the 30th of December, effected his escape from the said institution on Wednesday. (*Phila. Public Ledger*, Jan. 20, 1860)

Three prisoners broke out of the jail at Mount Holly, and made their escape, a few nights since. (*Phila. Inquirer*, June 23, 1866)

A man named **Brown**, who had escaped from prison, was arrested a few days since at Delanco, and was committed to the Mount Holly jail. He had also been engaged in robbing a number of places in Burlington County. (*Phila. Inquirer*, Mar. 5, 1869)

A servant carelessly left the door of the Mount Holly jail open for a few minutes, and an old offender, named **William Henry Braddock**, took the opportunity to leave. He stole a horse and sulky and escaped to Pennsylvania. (*Intelligencer Journal*, Nov 30, 1870)

Yesterday morning about seven o'clock, five prisoners escaped from the jail at Mount Holly. They had been permitted to go into the apartment where the tramps are kept when applying for lodgings. This room was surrounded by a high wall, and contained a bench some fifteen feet long. While the sheriff was at breakfast the prisoners raised this bench against the wall, by which means they ascended to a place of egress, jumped down on the opposite side and fled. Their names are: **Charles Alexander, George Early, John Hartman, George Johnson and George Davis**. They were all awaiting trial on the charges of grand larceny except Hartman, who was committed for an assault and battery with intent to kill the postmaster at Bordentown. Charles Alexander is about five feet high; dark complexion; hair, dark brown; smooth face, with some marks of small pox. George Early is five feet; dark complexion; small black eyes; is some 18 years of age, and weighs about 120 pounds. John Hartman is five feet nine inches; slim built; sandy complexion; hair, a darkish brown; about 22 years of age, and had on a blue shirt. George Johnson, colored, a

light mulatto; age, about 28; stoutly built, and about five feet six inches in height. George Davis, colored; very black; age, 24 years; five feet nine inches in height; stoutly built, and weighs some 170 pounds. All these prisoners left destitute of coats. (*Phila. Inquirer*, May 13, 1872)

George Alexander, George Early, John Hartman, George Johnson and George Davis, who made their escape from the Mount Holly jail, have all been recaptured and returned to their old quarters. They were found about seven miles from Mount Holly in the woods. Alexander was pretty badly hurt when jumping from the wall. All had injured themselves. (*Phila. Inquirer*, May 14, 1872)

The Incredible Lorenzo Atkinson

Our most infamous escapee has to be Lorenzo Atkinson. The proverbial mold was broken with this guy, who was said to have robbed every store between Freehold and Mount Holly between 1875 and 1890. He not only escaped from the Burlington County Jail - *at least twice* - but also from the Monmouth and Ocean County Jails.

This is a good place to mention that almost all the information we have about Lorenzo is from newspapers, which were as unlikely to get the whole story straight then as they are now. With that in mind, we continue:

We first hear of Lorenzo on August 30, 1875, when he and three other men broke out of our Jail. One of the other men was George Atkinson (his brother). Within a week, Lorenzo was captured by Constable S.W. Davis in New Hanover and George was recaptured in Camden. Our commitment books indicate they were sentenced to a year in state prison for larceny.

Lorenzo next appears on October 1, 1877, when he, George and an inmate named George Jeffries escaped from the Burlington County Jail by sawing the bars of the cell window and making a rope out of their blankets, by which they let themselves down the wall. They had all been convicted of burglaries and sentenced to state prison. (The newspapers said they were sentenced to five years at hard labor, but our records say three years.) On November 6, while apparently still on the lam, Lorenzo and a teenager named William Burke broke into Charles Shepherd's store in Smithville (the Smithville in Atlantic County) and robbed it of goods worth about \$100. He and Burke were captured in Perrineville, which is now Millstone, in Monmouth County, and lodged in the Monmouth County Jail in Freehold. It would appear that the Monmouth County Court had jurisdiction over the Smithville

robbery but never actually heard the matter; Lorenzo was taken directly to the state prison to serve the sentence he had received from the Burlington County Court.

Whether Lorenzo served three or five years, he didn't waste much time getting back to his old ways upon his release, because we find him on December 22, 1882 robbing Shepherd's store again, with the aid of a fellow named John Burke (perhaps a relative of William Burke, or the same Burke if the papers got the name wrong). Burke confessed and testified for the prosecution. Burke said that they stored their booty in a barn belonging to a man named William Smith. Smith himself captured Burke in the act of retrieving the items. Lorenzo was convicted, though we are not sure of the sentence.

At some point in the 1880s, Lorenzo was convicted in Ocean County for a "particularly bold" robbery and was awaiting sentence in the Toms River Jail when he was visited by Burke's wife. The two exchanged clothing, and Lorenzo escaped dressed as a woman, walking out of the jail "right under the guard's noses". This is hard to believe but it was reported in both the *Brooklyn Citizen* and the *Asbury Park Press*.

He was arrested in July of 1888 for a string of home burglaries in Burlington County. At the time, his brother, George, was living on Burlington Island and, despite his own criminal history, was described by *The Courier Post* as "respectable" and "well-to-do". Lorenzo was living in a cabin on the Rancocas Creek in Centerton. Silverware and clothes were found in George's barn and in the cabin. Lorenzo confessed to stealing the items and did not implicate his brother or anyone else.

In February of 1890, he robbed a hotel called Resort House in Point Pleasant (Monmouth County). *The Philadelphia Inquirer* reported that George committed the robbery and was arrested at Lorenzo's house, but it is pretty clear that it was Lorenzo who was arrested at George's house in Burlington. He was taken to the jail in Toms River to await trial and apparently escaped, because in April of 1890 he was arrested in Moorestown for robbing several hundred dollars' worth of shoes and clothing from a store in Shamong belonging to a fellow named John Scott. By then he was going by the name of David Fleming and had a new partner, Henry Lemon. He was arrested by Constable Rizendolfer of Shamong. During the arrest, Lorenzo attempted to escape, whereupon Rizendolfer shot him in the hip.

By August of 1890, he was back in the Toms River Jail awaiting indictment on the Resort House robbery. On August 27, 1890, he escaped.

It would be another decade before Lorenzo popped up again. By 1901 Ellis Parker had become a well-known detective in Burlington, Ocean and Monmouth Counties. Parker received a tip that Lorenzo had been living for the past 12 years under the name James Cummings in Tinton Falls, working in a sawmill owned by a Daniel Cook. Parker, disguised as a tramp, worked side by side with Lorenzo in the sawmill until he determined that Cummings was the man he was looking for. Parker arrested him in early December, 1901 and took him back to Mount Holly. On the way, Lorenzo admitted his true identity.

The story ended happily for Lorenzo, however, according to *The Journal of Asbury Park*, which reported on December 27, 1901 that:

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**Prison Museum Post Editor, Researcher, Writer,
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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.

"Wednesday was a happy Christmas for Lorenzo Atkinson, who was arrested a few weeks ago at Tinton Falls. Atkinson is a reformed criminal who escaped from the Mt. Holly Jail nine years ago and was also wanted by two other counties. Tuesday the judges of the three counties decided to suspend sentence in the case and Atkinson, or Cummings as he was known in Tinton Falls, ate his Christmas dinner with his wife and children at his old home."

This is the last we hear of Lorenzo Atkinson.

More about escapes in the next issue.

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