

# HOG RIVER JOURNAL

## ESCAPE from New-Gate Prison

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### Three pounds Reward

In the night after the 24th of August, New-Gate Prison was broke up, and the following prisoners made their escape: viz. the notorious Richard Steel. He is about 5 feet 9 inches high, pitted with the small pox, has been twice crop'd and branded, had on a green coat. Also, Richard Marshfield, about 5 feet 10 inches high, about 25 years of age, black hair. Also, James McGinley, an Irishman, about 5 feet 8 inches high, black hair, darkish complexion, speaks broad, wore a claret coloured coat, white diaper jacket, a pair of spotted Manchester breeches. Whoever will take up said fellows and return them to the prison from whence they escaped shall have three pounds reward for each, paid by

John Viets , Connecticut Courant , August 28, 1775

New-Gate Prison is thought to be the first prison, in the modern sense of the word, in America . In May 1773 the Connecticut General Assembly appointed a committee to visit the inactive copper mine in Simsbury (now East Granby) to determine if it could be used for the "purpose of confining, securing, and profitably employing . criminals . in lieu of the infamous punishments . now appointed." Until this time, convicted criminals were not incarcerated. Rather, they were sentenced with various forms of corporal punishment. Whipping was the most common sentence, but individuals could be branded and/or have part of their ear cut off. The description of Steel's cropping and branding in the reward announcement quoted above indicates he was a repeat offender.

When the committee visited the mine, they found a network of subterranean tunnels and two vertical shafts cut into solid rock. One shaft was about 3 ½ feet in diameter and 25 feet deep, with a ladder fastened to the side to provide access for the miners. The other shaft, wider in circumference and about 70 feet deep, was used for hauling up ore with a windlass. To transform the mine into a place of incarceration, a wooden lodging, 15 feet by 12 feet, was built and a large iron door installed in the entrance shaft. The convicted criminals were to be kept deep underground and mine copper ore under the supervision of expert miners.



*"South View of Newgate Prison Buildings" John Warner Barber, Connecticut Historical Collections, 1836, published by John W. Warner, New Haven, 1836. Courtesy of the Connecticut Commission on Culture & Tourism*

The newly appointed prison overseers stated "we believe it is impossible for any person put there to escape." The first prisoner, 20-year-old convicted burglar John Hinson, arrived on December 22, 1773. It took him 18 days to escape, climbing out of the deep ore shaft, presumably aided by an accomplice. During its nearly 50 years of operation, New-Gate Prison saw many more bold escapes, some successful and some not.

After Hinson's unexpected departure, prison overseers were authorized to make improvements. Before these could be completed, however, New-Gate received its next prisoners: John Robert, Williams Johnson Crawford, and Zephaniah Ramsdale from Windham . David Humphry and James Williams from New London County joined them soon after. In

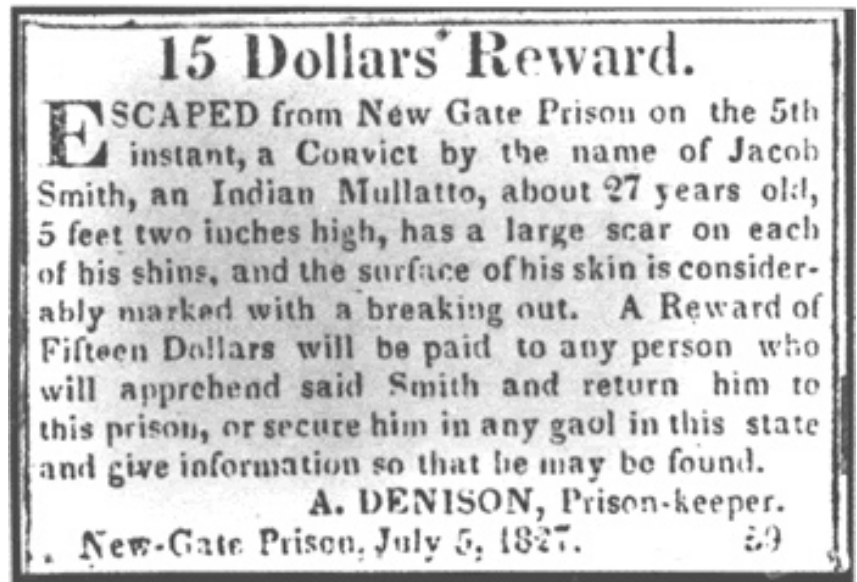
the dead of night, the prisoners attempted to escape through an abandoned shaft that was filled with debris. The rocks caved in on the illicit excavators, and Crawford and Humphrey were never found. Did they escape, or were they buried under the falling rocks? As prison keeper John Viets stated in the Connecticut Courant (May 3, 1774), "whether they are buried there or by some means escaped appears uncertain to those who have viewed the place, but rather conjecture the latter." The remaining three inmates escaped two weeks later.

The overseers reported to the General Assembly that "Your Honours must have heard that the prisoners have all escaped . it would be long . to give a particular and distinct account how this was done; your Honours will excuse us if we only say they effected their escape by the help of evil minded persons abroad, before the necessary and proposed securityes could be completed." Those security improvements included the construction of a 36-foot by 20- foot building, with one room over the entrance shaft and another room to be used as the resident miners' living quarters. The overseers also secured the ore shaft and "every other place where we thought it possible for any to escape."

Prisoners were undeterred. On January 3, 1776, the bodies of three prisoners-Thomas Starr, Joseph Atwood, and John Short-were discovered in the mine. The inquiry that followed determined that the eight inmates confined to the prison at that time had been gradually removing loose rocks blocking an ancillary tunnel used for drainage. Their escape plan was thwarted when they encountered larger, unmovable stones. They built a fire, hoping that the extreme heat would crack the barrier. The resulting smoke filled the small space and nearly suffocated all of them. Prisoners also tried to escape later that year and again in 1778, both times by burning the surface prison building.

The largest mass breakout in New-Gate's history took place in 1781, when the prison population included Tories (British loyalists) in addition to common criminals. On the night of May 18, prisoners rushed the guards as the door to the mine was being opened to admit a family visitor. In the darkness and confusion, one guard, Gad Sheldon, was killed, and other guards and prisoners were wounded. At the subsequent inquiry it was noted that some of the guards were not well qualified for their duty-"a small lad just fit to drive plow with a very gentle team" and "a young man more fit to carry fish to market than to keep guard at New-Gate." Within a week's time, 16 of the 20 escapees had been captured and returned to New-Gate. Tories Ebenezer Hathaway and Thomas Smith, however, reached the safety of British-held New York City , where they published their story. That August, 12 inmates successfully escaped, including five from the earlier attempt.

After yet another fire destroyed the prison building in November 1782, the decision was made to abandon New-Gate.



*Advertisement for an escaped prisoner, The Connecticut Courant, July 9, 1827.  
Courtesy of the Connecticut Commission on Culture & Tourism*

Its prisoners were sent to the Hartford County Gaol. But in 1790 the General Assembly voted to re-open New-Gate and to construct the necessary buildings to make it a permanent prison. The overseers were to hire a keeper and a guard of no more than ten men (later increased to 17). A spiked wooden fence was erected to enclose half an acre of property, including a new, fire-resistant brick guardhouse. Although the prisoners were still to sleep in the mine, mining was abandoned. Inmates were now to make nails in a new workshop. In the following years, buildings were added with enlarged prison walls to house an increasing prison population, to accommodate more workshops, and to provide amenities including a kitchen, an infirmary, and a chapel. In 1811 New-Gate held 46 prisoners; in 1823 there were 99.

One of the repeated criticisms of New-Gate was the freedom the prisoners had to interact with each other at workstations and in common, unsupervised living areas. It was felt that this allowed hardened criminals to teach first-time offenders the tricks of their profession and that with so little supervision, the inmates could “curse, and swear, and fight and do other abominations”-and plot mass escapes.

In April 1802, aware that most of the guards were incapacitated by illness, the prisoners did in fact attempt a group escape. A sole guard-a tall, strong man-single-handedly fought off a surge of inmates, pushing prisoners down the ladder shaft as their mates were coming up to join the scuffle. A more violent melee took place in the nail shop in November 1806. Having secretly made keys by melting down the pewter buttons from their clothes, prisoners planned to unlock their fetters at a signal and attack the guards. Signal was given, fetters were unlocked, guards were attacked and, in the ensuing struggle, ringleader Aaron Goomer was shot and killed. Goomer’s demoralized comrades immediately ceased their attack, not realizing that with their greater numbers they still could have escaped.

A similar rebellion, again in the nail workshop, took place in 1823. An account of the event was written and published by prison keeper Captain Elam Tuller. Tuller described how a prisoner distracted guard Corporal Rowe while another inmate rendered Rowe unconscious with a blow from a fire shovel. Prisoners armed with Rowe’s cutlass and the fire shovel rushed Bacon, the other guard on duty, and, cutting him with the cutlass, tried to seize his gun. Meanwhile, Rowe regained consciousness and fired his pistol, wounding a prisoner. A sentinel in the prison yard alerted the guardroom and then rushed to the nail shop, where he was hit with two thrown axes as he attempted to fire his musket. The blacksmith, hired to supervise the nail-making operations, joined in the fray, hitting the “desperadoes” with a red-hot bar of iron. Sergeant Griswold and other guards arrived, and the prisoners surrendered. During the five-minute fight, two prisoners, William Stuart and Josiah King, were wounded, as along with the two guards.

Stuart, serving a five-year sentence for passing counterfeit money, had been involved in an earlier escape attempt. In his boastful autobiography, *Sketches in the Life of William Stuart: The First and Most Celebrated Counterfeiter of Connecticut*. (First published in 1854; reprinted in 1932 by Times Print Shop, New Milford), Stuart revealed himself to be a cunning and clever criminal who enjoyed making a fool of honest citizens.

Tales of enterprising individual prisoners attempting to escape abound in Richard Phelps’s history of the prison, published in 1844. For instance, Phelps reports that an inmate working in the prison kitchen noticed that the guard was engrossed in reading his Bible. Seizing a piece of firewood, the prisoner knocked the guard out and ran for prison’s open gate. Unfortunately for the would-be escapee, prison keeper Captain Charles Washburn happened to be entering the prison. The prisoner ran back to the kitchen, where he hid himself in a meal chest, but he was quickly found and placed in irons. Phelps also relates the story of a prisoner who removed the body of a deceased inmate from his coffin and climbed in himself. At the appointed time, the coffin was carried to the prison cemetery a distance away. Strange noises coming from inside the coffin caused the guard and coffin bearers to drop their burden and run for safety. Thus, the temporary occupant of the coffin was able to escape.

Escapes of another variety also took place at the site. Whereas the inmates were always plotting how to escape from New-Gate, outsiders were always interested in escaping to New-Gate as a break from their everyday routines. In 1810 the overseers reported 5,400 people had visited in that year. One such tourist, Englishman Edward August Kendall, published a full description of his experience in *Travels Through the Northern Parts of the United States in the Years*

1807 and 1808 (I. Riley, New York, 1809). The practice of admitting visitors was permitted in hopes that “the example of degradation and suffering for crime, which is here exhibited, may prove salutary.” In 1825 a committee appointed to study New-Gate suggested that the admittance fees pocketed by the guards should go instead into state coffers.

For many years concerns over the conditions at New-Gate and the perceived need for stricter discipline had been brought to the notice of the legislature by reformers and activists. At the end of September 1827, New-Gate Prison was closed and all prisoners transferred to a new prison in Wethersfield, where the felons could be confined to individual cells and interaction between prisoners closely regimented. Abel Starkey, a convicted counterfeiter, received permission to spend his last night at New-Gate in the mine. The next morning he was found dead-drowned in the prison well. Starkey had apparently planned to escape under the cover of darkness by climbing up the well rope, having bribed a guard to leave the well cover unlocked. Thus the story of New-Gate Prison ended as it began, with a daring, but tragically final escape.

Public interest continued even after the prison closed. After attempts at re-establishing the mining operations failed, the guardhouse became a private residence, and its occupants provided candles and guide services to visitors. Newspaper accounts in the second half of the 19th century document the public’s ongoing fascination with the site. After a fire in 1904, A. B. Phelps stabilized the ruined prison buildings and made other improvements to create a bona fide tourist attraction. He later transformed the Viets family homestead directly across from the prison entrance into the Newgate Hotel, where tourists could enjoy a meal or spend the night. After Phelps’s death, the prison continued to be operated as a tourist attraction by the Seymour family. The property was re-acquired by the State of Connecticut in 1968, which now operates the site as a seasonal museum.

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**Old New-Gate Prison & Copper Mine**, a museum located at 115 Newgate Road in East Granby and operated by the state of Connecticut, is open mid-May through October, Wednesday-Sunday 10 a.m.- 4:30 p.m. For more information, call (860) 653-3563 (or, during the off season, (860) 566-3005) or visit [www.cultureandtourism.org](http://www.cultureandtourism.org).

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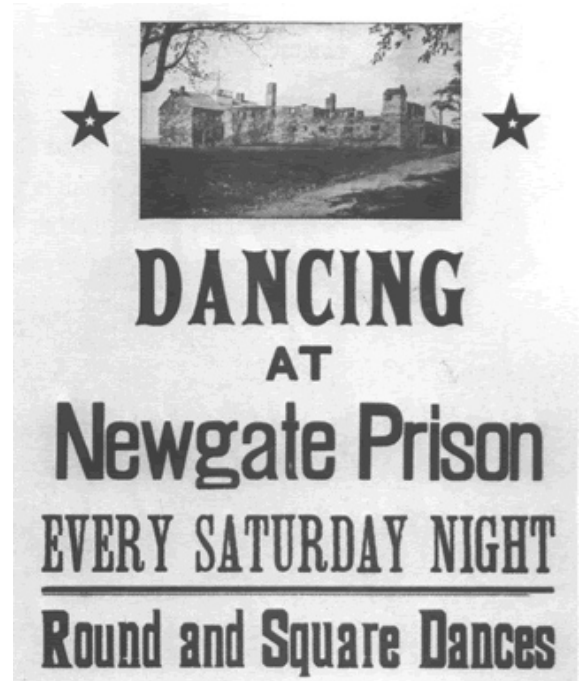
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*Poster, Journal Press, Windsor Locks, undated.*

*Courtesy of the Connecticut Commission on Culture & Tourism*