

## "A Westminster Jail Break"

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By Jay A. Graybeal

The history of the Carroll County jail is sprinkled with attempts by prisoners to escape. Occasionally, the prisoners gained their freedom, as happened in late August 1898. The story of the jail break was front page news in the September 3rd issue of the Westminster Democratic Advocate newspaper:

### "ESCAPED—CAPTURED

Four White Men Break Out of Jail and a Colored Man Walks Away.

About 7:30 on Friday night of last week four white men escaped from the Carroll County jail, viz:—Harry Stoffle, Clarence Arbaugh, James Cook and Morris Nott. Sheriff Haines and his deputy, Wm. Wilson, were both absent, but Mrs. Haines gave the alarm and City Constable, John Mitten, immediately responded. Sheriff Haines was telephoned to and he telegraphed all points on the railroad and to the several sheriffs to keep a lookout for the men. George Hill, the colored man, went away in the afternoon, he having had permission to do some work around the yard.

The manner of their escape was planned and carried out with much ingenuity. They were not locked in their cells during the day and had access to each other's compartments. One of these is in the upper tiers on the right-hand side of the building. Above this cell is a small low space or garret. The main joists above the cell are about three feet apart, but the space between some of them is entirely filled with broader joists of less height. In other spaces there are only one or two of these broader joists and the widest space between them is six inches.

The prisoners operated in the cell referred to and tried the ceiling in several places until they struck this space. They tore off the ceiling, but found the space, which was several feet long, too narrow to get their bodies through. With a knife they enlarged it to seven inches wide, a length of nine and a quarter inches. Then small as the space was they forced their way up through it to the little garret above from which there was no outlet, but which was separated from the attic of the sheriff's residence portion of the jail by a thin partition of laths and plastering. This they broke through and then made their way to a corner window in the front of the building, passed through to the roof, and along that to the branches of a locust tree standing within two feet of the corner of the jail. They then descended the tree without difficulty and fled into the darkness. Two of them were gone before their attempt to escape was discovered.

Mrs. Haines was engaged in some domestic duty when she heard the noise of their movements and tried to stop them. She took hold of one of them, but he struck her a severe blow on the arm and forced her to let him go.

By daylight Sheriff Haines had Nott in Jail, he having been captured on a freight train of the Western Maryland Railroad, at Bruceville, while on his way to Emmitsburg, it is supposed, from which place he formerly came. Stoffle was caught at Mt. Airy, by Mr. Charles Wampler, as he was boarding a train on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad.

Sheriff Haines and Sheriff M. Finley Seibert, of Washington county, arrived at Martinsburg, West Virginia, Saturday morning in pursuit of Clarence Arbaugh and James Cook. Shortly after the sheriffs arrived there M. S. Tabler, deputy sheriff at Berkeley county, and J. Russler, constable of that city, succeeded in getting

both of the men at the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. They resisted arrest, and it was necessary for the deputy to knock one of them down before they were landed in jail. Sheriff Haines brought the prisoners to this city on Saturday evening.

Sheriff Haines deserves the thanks of the community for the promptness and energy displayed in capturing the prisoners, and the public can rest assured that they will remain until tried and convicted.

#### CONFESSIONS OF THEIR PLOTS TO ESCAPE.

Since the capture Stoffle has confessed to the Sheriff that they had made three plans of escape. One was to seize him when he went into the jail to lock up for the night, another to escape over the jail wall by steps and a rope made from bed clothing, and by the way which they adopted. If the County Commissioners do not have the ceiling of the jail covered with extra hard steel, the sheriff will be compelled to hobble each prisoner, and not allow them to recreate in the corridors, except under a strong guard.

#### WHAT THE MEN WERE CHARGED WITH.

The men who escaped were confined under the following charges: Clarence Arbaugh and James Cook, charged with assaulting and robbing Capt. Miller, of Hampstead; Morris Knott, charged with stealing a horse from Mr. Witherow, a tenant on the farm of Hon. Harry M. Clabaugh; Harry Stoffle, charged with burglarious entry of the residence of Ezra Brown, near Meadow Branch."

While Sheriff Haines may have been too lenient with his prisoners, he certainly mounted a diligent search for the escapees. That all were captured in a short time is remarkable.

Photo caption: Four prisoners escaped from the Carroll County Jail in August 1898. Historical Society of Carroll County collection.