

"An Unsuccessful Attempt"

Carroll County Times article for 14 September 1997

By Jay A. Graybeal

When Carroll County was founded in 1837, one of the first tasks was the construction of a court house and a jail in Westminster. The latter structure was also the residence of the sheriff and his family. This elected official had the task of confining and caring for the prisoners as they awaited trial or served out their sentences. Not surprisingly, some prisoners became unhappy with their lodgings and hatched plots to escape. Such was the case in the spring of 1887, as reported in the 24 March issue of the Carroll County Democrat newspaper:

"AN UNSUCCESSFUL ATTEMPT.

Sheriff Lynch Discovers a Plan of the Prisoners in Time to Prevent their Escape from Jail.

On Monday afternoon a plan of several prisoners to escape, was discovered by Sheriff Lynch in time to prevent a general jail delivery. Merriment and joy, singing and dancing during the evening, for the past ten days, has been the rule of the prisoners, and during the day a studied watch by them of the actions of the sheriff and his deputies, was their characteristic, which was noticed by the watchful eye of the sheriff. He also noticed that the cell doors were almost always blanketed, another fact that led him to the belief that all was not as appearances indicated, and that some plan was being hatched which boded no good. Satisfied that something was wrong he made an examination of all the cells, but failed to discover anything out of the way. This however did not satisfy him and he concluded to make a second search, which was more successful than the first and which disclosed to him the plan, which if it had been successful would have resulted in the greatest jail delivery Carroll county has ever known. But "the best laid plans of mice and man, gang aft a'glee" and the originators of the scheme are now doing penance in a strong cell. The sheriff as a reward for his careful scrutiny found in cell No. 12, third tier, occupied by John Berens and Charles Rodgers, the iron bars of the window were gone and replaced with broomsticks, blackened with charcoal. When discovered Berens professed to know nothing of it, and Rodgers got very pale. A caseknife was found made into a saw, supposed to have been secreted there by some of the prisoners' friends; also a twenty pound weight, which it is thought would have been used to assist them in getting over the wall. No ropes of any kind were found. One of the prisoners said they intended making them to-night. The sheriff locks the prisoners in their cells at nine o'clock, and there would have been ample time to get ready and escape. Some of the railing around the tiers was used to pry the bars out with. On several occasions friends of the prisoners wanted to go into the jail, but were not admitted. After the find by the sheriff one prisoner, more sanguine than this fellows, declared that they would escape on Monday night, although their plan had been frustrated. But up to going to press they were all in, with no prospects of a release save by due course of law. If they escape Sheriff Lynch they will have to do so by chloroforming him, as he is not to be easily evaded as they have doubtless learned to their sorrow.

There are thirty prisoners in jail, and the gang connected in the attempted delivery are Daniel Farlin, Moody Livine, McFarlan, alias Bolivar, for breaking in cars on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad; George Taylor, theft of cloverseed; Charles Rodgers, peace warrant; Wesley Dutton, assaulting officer Lindsay, and John Berens, assaulting a young lady at Union Bridge. The affair was beyond doubt well-planned and Sheriff Lynch is deserving of great credit for his vigilance and success in preventing the escape."

Not all such attempts were foiled by the sheriff and prisoners occasionally escaped. Many were recaptured within a short time while others were seized by a law enforcement officers in Baltimore City or neighboring counties often after the commission of another offense.

Photo caption: The former Carroll County Jail in Westminster once held as many as thirty inmates in the late nineteenth century. Historical Society of Carroll County collection.