

James Sweeney – Scindian Convict # 15

James Sweeney was around 56 years of age when he was convicted in March 1847 of passing counterfeit coin in Bangor, Wales. He was described as being a well-known “smasher”, a slang term for one who passes or utters counterfeit coin or notes. He had been before the court on at least two prior occasions for the same offence. At the time of his being sentenced to 15 years’ transportation he was recorded as being married with two children.

Sweeney had previously found himself before the court at both the Spring and Summer Lancashire Assizes in 1842. On the first occasion in April he was fortunate enough to be acquitted after having been arrested for passing counterfeit coin when buying ale in the house of one Martha Cartwright in Manchester. Just a few days later, however, he was arrested again. This time he was not so lucky. The *Liverpool Mercury* of Friday 8 April, 1842 reported:

“Coining and uttering base money – On Wednesday, the following parties were brought before magistrates for knowingly uttering counterfeit coin, and for having in their possession implements for coining:- James Sweeney, Margaret Sweeney, Catherine Bennett, and John Bennett. On the previous evening the three first-named prisoners called at Scarisbrick’s public-house, in Hutton Garden, for a glass of ale, which was paid for with a bad shilling. This circumstance exciting suspicion, they were followed in the street when Catherine Sweeney entered the shop of Mr. Alcock, confectioner, in Tithebarn-street, and bought two pies for a shilling. The prisoners were again followed to some spirit vaults in Highfield-street, and given in charge to the police. On examining their lodgings, a top-room in Eaton-street, Vauxhall, there were found on the premises a file, bright with metal dust, ten or a dozen pieces of plaster of Paris, some bees’ wax pearl ash, a mould same as the shilling, a crucible, and the broken parts of another, two small stones bright as if with polishing metal, a bad shilling in the middle of the room, and a bag containing twenty-eight bad shillings among the straw of the bed. The boy John Bennett, about eight or nine years of age, son of the prisoner Catherine Bennett, was in the room when entered by the officer, and, from the dust on his clothes, appeared to have been employed in polishing the money. The poverty-stricken appearance of the prisoners did not betoken them to have been successful in their nefarious speculation. The prisoners were committed for trial, Mr. Rushton expressing a hope that the mint would not proceed against the boy.”

Lancashire Summer Assizes, August 1842

“James Sweeney, Catherine Bennett, and Margaret Sweeney were then tried for a misdemeanour in uttering base coin at Liverpool in April last, the particulars of which were the same as in the previous case. The jury returned a verdict of guilty against James Sweeney and Catherine Bennett, but acquitted Margaret Sweeney, and his Lordship sentenced the two first to twelve months’ imprisonment and hard labour.”

In August 1842 Sweeney was tried along with two other people, one of whom, named Margaret Sweeney, was acquitted. Perhaps Margaret was Sweeney’s wife or daughter? This remains unconfirmed however it is clear that James Sweeney had a long history of passing bad coin which ultimately lead to his downfall.

The Chester Chronicle and Cheshire and North Wales General Advertiser dated Friday 26 March, 1847, reported on the trial:

“James Sweeney, 56, charged on the oath of Mary Williams and others with having on the 8th day of January, 1847, at Bangor, falsely and deceitfully uttered 1 base shilling and two base sixpences, with intent to defraud Mr David William, shopkeeper at Bangor aforesaid, pleaded not guilty. – Edw. Jas. Powell, Esq. assistant Solicitor to the Mint, produced the record of a previous conviction at Liverpool Summer Assizes, 1842, and pronounced the coin now produced to be counterfeit. Policeman Penn, of the Liverpool force, was present at the prisoner’s former trial. Miss Mary Williams, sister to the prosecutor, and Henry Price, shopman to ditto, proved the attempt to pass the base money in part payment of a cloth cap; and Joseph Myers, of the Bangor police, proved the apprehension of the accused. Verdict of the Jury – Guilty. Sentence of the Court – To be transported for fifteen years. The prisoner is a well-known smasher.”

James Sweeney was the oldest of the 75 convicts transported to the Swan River Colony aboard the *Scindian* arriving 1 June 1850. His appearance was described in the Convict Establishment register as being stout, 5 foot 8 ¼ inches tall, with grey hair, blue eyes, a round visage and sallow complexion. One prison register report stated that he should not be transported, clearly this advice was not followed. He received his ticket-of-leave just six months after arrival on 10 December 1850. At this time Sweeney was reportedly employed in Toodyay, however his employer and rate of wages was unknown at the time of the half-yearly return from Comptroller Henderson, dated 1 January 1851. According to the report “They Kept This State Afloat”, by Rod Dickson of the Western Australian Museum’s Maritime Archaeology Department, Sweeney went from Fremantle to Perth where he was self-employed, hiring himself out to the Perth shipyards.

Unfortunately for Sweeney, his time in the Swan River Colony was brief. He was in and out of the prison hospital with an ulcerated eyelid and eye socket and it was this condition which eventually caused his death. This note, recording some of James Sweeney’s medical history, provides some explanation of the ongoing eye problem which eventually led to his death:

“Prisoner James Sweeney, Aged 54 [sic], Tailor

He has been in prison nearly 6 years, and when in Wakefield Jail in solitary confinement, a small pimple appeared on the left lower eyelid which remained stationary for some time, and afterwards gradually increased in size, he was then sent to Portland and 3 weeks after his arrival there was admitted into the infirmary - a portion of the inner surface of the lower eyelid was removed; he then improved and went to work in the Carpenter's Shop and continued there until removed to the "Scindian" for this Colony, the eye was all the time obliged to be kept covered - during the passage from living on Salt provisions the eyelid became worse - he could see very well with it and continued to close for 18 months after his arrival - the globe of the eye had now become diseased as well as the surrounding parts. and after a drunken bout (as he was a Ticket of Leave Man) he came to the Hospital and Maggots were removed from the eyelids, and at the same time the humours of the eye were discharged - ever since this period the interior of the orbit has presented a large ulcerated surface, which shows not the least disposition to heal - altho' various remedies have been tried.”

Convict Establishment records indicate that on 23 October 1853 James Sweeney died of a perforated ulcer, from chronic ulceration of the orbital cavity. He was 61 years old when he died.

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Sources:

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