

William Johnson – Scindian Convict #70

William Johnson was a married man, aged in his late twenties and working as a carpenter when he was convicted of arson and sentenced to 20 years' transportation. According to the news report of his trial Johnson carried out the crime purposefully, his intention to be transported to Australia. Was he the only convict sent out to Australia who sought this as his goal?

In March 1847 his crime was reported in the Stafford Advertiser article on the Staffordshire Lent Assizes under the subheading "Arson at Tunstall – a candidate for transportation":

"William Johnson, aged 27, was indicted for setting fire to a stack of straw, at Tunstall, the property of Henry Meir, Esq.

Mr Huddlestone conducted the prosecution; the prisoner was undefended.

Mr. Meir stated that he was a manufacturer, living at Tunstall. About half-past eleven on the night of 8th of February, he was alarmed by a cry of fire. He went out, and discovered that a rick of straw in his stack-yard was on fire, which was ultimately almost totally destroyed. The stack contained about 15 tons.

John Bourne, a collier, living at Chell, stated that at eleven o'clock on the night of the 8th of February., he was at the Highgate Inn, Tunstall, where the prisoner was drinking. Witness was going home in about half an hour afterwards, and on passing the prosecutor's premises, he saw one of the stacks on fire. He gave an alarm, and immediately saw the prisoner a few yards distant from the stack, and coming in a direction from it. As he continued calling out "fire", the prisoner came up to him and said, "What art making that noise for?" Witness said, "The stack is on fire"; to which the prisoner replied, "Well, you have no occasion to make that noise if it is."

Charles Nixon, one of the parish constables of Tunstall, was at the Crown and Anchor public-house, in that town, on the night in question. The prisoner came to him about half-past eleven, and told him that he wanted to speak with him. He accordingly went with him into the back-yard, when he told him to take him into custody, as he had set fire to Mr. Meir's stacks. Witness told him that he did not believe him; to which he replied, "I have, don't you see the blaze." Witness looked in the direction of Mr. Meir's, and saw there was a fire. On asking the prisoner why he had done so, he said, "I want to be transported for life." In reply to questions the prisoner said he had set fire to the rick with a lucifer match; he usually cried three or four in his pocket to light his pipe. The other matches he had thrown in the road.

By his lordship. – I looked in the road for the matches, but I could not find any; the snow was falling fast.

Prisoner to Nixon. – Was you sober? Witness – yes.

Prisoner. – Was I sober? Witness. – You was not drunk; and not perfectly sober.

Prisoner. – You consider you was not drunk; now I consider you was very drunk.

By his Lordship. –The prisoner is a cabinet-maker by trade, and is considered a good workman. He has been on the drinking system for some weeks.

“John Shrigley Poole stated that he was an inspector of hawkers’ licences. On the night in question the prisoner was left by Nixon, the constable, in his custody. The prisoner said he had set fire to Mr. Meir’s stacks, and gave as his motive that he wanted to get out to Australia or Van Dieman’s Land. Witness told him that he was a good workman, and might get his passage paid for him; to which he replied, that the government should pay it. The next morning the prisoner said he was only sorry that he had not set fire to Tunstall church, and also the house as well as the stack. The church is close by.

“By the prisoner. – Was you sober? Witness.- I was.

Prisoner.- Did you not help to drink the bottle of rum Nixon brought to the house when he came from the fire? Witness.- No, I did not.

This being the case for the prosecution, the prisoner in defence said, “I know nothing of it; they have done it all for spite.”

The jury, without any hesitation, returned a verdict of guilty.

The learned Judge, in passing sentence, told the prisoner that he had been guilty of a most outrageous and diabolical offence. It was well for him that the punishment of death in such cases was abolished, otherwise he would most probably have been left for execution. He would find that government would not so far accommodate him by transporting him either to Australia or Van Diemen’s Land. He would be kept in this country, but he wished him to understand, and through him others also, that the punishment to which he would be subjected would be of the most laborious and severe description. There was no one circumstance in his favour. The sentence, therefore, was, that he be transported for the term of twenty years.”

Johnson was moved from Stafford Gaol to Millbank Prison in London on 26 April 1847, the usual practice for convicts sentenced to transportation. After a period of assessment, on 18 September 1847 Johnson was moved to the north of the country to the Wakefield House of Corrections in West Yorkshire. His final move was to Portland Prison on 22 November 1848 in readiness for transportation. The Judge may have intended for Johnson to be kept in the dire conditions of a prison hulk or an English gaol however, Johnson, through steadfast behaviour, was selected to be sent out to Western Australia aboard the first convict transport, the *Scindian* arriving 1 June 1850.

Because William Johnson was chatty with the prison Chaplain, we know his father was Thomas who lived at Tunstall near Burslem in Staffordshire. The Portland prison register records him in November 1848 as “24½, single, was married, lost his wife, literate, joiner & carpenter.” A William Johnson was baptised in Burslem on 14 December 1817 to Thomas & Ellen Johnson and married November 12, 1838, to Eliza Ann Eardley, both of Tunstall at time of marriage; both signed the marriage entry. Tunstall is 1km from Burslem. The 1841 England census records Johnson and his wife Eliza at Tunstall, Wolstanton, with him working as a joiner. How Eliza left him after 1841 is unclear.

Johnson's physical description as recorded in the Convict Registers was: height 5' 8", with dark brown hair, dark hazel eyes, a sharp-looking face, dark complexion, and being of stout appearance. On 5 July 1851, the Superintendent's Orders record Johnson along with nine convicts from the ship *Pyrenees* being appointed to work on building the Mount Eliza Convict Station. A notation in the Receivals and Discharges register states that for Johnson this is only temporary. Shortly after this, on 20 July, Johnson was issued with his ticket-of-leave.

5 July 1851

"Wilson McGormick(?) will this day proceed to the Mill at Perth with those prisoners from the ship Pyrenees, and 1 prisoner Scindian, to purpose it for a Station, to be called the Mount Eliza Station, taking with him the following provisions & c.

The Steward will issue to the officers the following tools &c.

1 axe, 1 oil stone, 1 pair pincers, 1 cold chisel, 3 funier?, 3 locket chisels, 1 pr compasses, 1 hunter's? illegible, 2 illegible, 1 small square, 1 mallet, 3 Grimblets?, 1 illegible, 1 large hunt? Illegible, 10 small knives, ...pails, 10 tin pints, 2 large forks, 2 beds, 2 pr blankets.

It took a long time for Johnson to be issued with his conditional pardon. Convict Establishment records indicate that he was sent to the Resident Magistrate in Bunbury on 11 January 1866. Three months later, on 17 April 1866, he was issued with his conditional pardon having served nineteen years of his original twenty-year sentence. Was committing the crime to be sent out to Australia a good idea in retrospect?

Eleven years later, at the age of 57 years, Johnson can be found on the register of local prisoners at Busselton where he is sentenced to 21 days and 1 month in prison for being drunk and absconding from service. His trade is listed as a carpenter. He was discharged from gaol on 13 January 1877. Johnson stayed working in that region, most likely in the timber industry near Augusta which had begun gaining momentum around the late 1870s. Johnson is recorded as having died on 29 August 1880 at Augusta and was buried in St Mary's Church graveyard in Busselton. The burial register records *"entry 158, 1880, March 29th William Johnson, Residence Hospital, age 61? 64, calling carpenter, Cause of death debility."*

© Bevan Carter and Joanne Hyland, September 2020

Sources:

Births, Deaths, Marriages Western Australia; Reg no 10474, aged 64 years;

Erickson, R., and O'Mara, G., *Convicts in Western Australia, 1850-1887. Dictionary of Western Australians Vol. IX*, p 295;

Millbank Prison Register, PCom_2_27, no. 11935, courtesy of Bevan Carter;

Pinfold, Elizabeth, *The History of Augusta from 1830 to 1900*, Claremont Teachers' College, 1959, p 17;

State Library of Western Australia, British Library Newspapers Online:

Stafford Advertiser, 20 March 1847;

State Records Office of Western Australia, Convict Registers: Cons 1156 F3-F4, R&D 1A, p7, R17, R21A, R21B, SO1, 5 July 1851;

Portland Prison register, PCom_2_383, courtesy of Bevan Carter;

Wakefield Prison register, HO 24_13, courtesy of Bevan Carter.