

The Murder of John Walters and The Execution of Charles Johnson

There have only been as many as four public executions or hangings for Seneca County murders. Indian John was hanged near Aurora on August 17, 1804, for the murder of Ezekiel Crane on December 12, 1803 (What is today Seneca County was still part of Cayuga County at this date.).¹ A man named John Andrews was hanged in Ovid on Friday, September 6, 1811, for the murder of an assistant with whom he worked in a distillery in Ovid.² George Chapman was hanged in Waterloo on May 28, 1829, for the murder of Daniel Wright, with whom he had been drinking and quarreling on July 20, 1828. Reports are that between 15,000 and 20,000 people crowded on or near to the island on West Water Street where the execution took place.³ On January 9, 1887, John Walters who worked at the Seneca County jail in Waterloo suffered fatal blows to the head inflicted when some prisoners were trying to escape. Charles Johnson was hanged on November 15, 1888, for this death. This article focuses on the murder of John Walters and the execution of Charles Johnson.



We don't know a lot about either John Walters or Charles Johnson. John Walters was described at the Johnson murder trial as being about age 60. Sheriff Lerch's testimony described him as "rather weak and slow and clumsy. He was somewhat bent over, about 6 feet high" His general business had been as a coachman. Lerch said that Walters had been working at the jail for about eleven months, with the responsibilities of taking care of the barn, stoves and office and "if I needed extra help, to furnish it."⁴ (The picture of John Walters at left is taken from the November 21, 1888, issue of the *Syracuse Weekly Express*.)

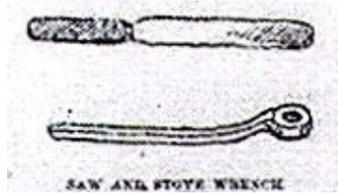
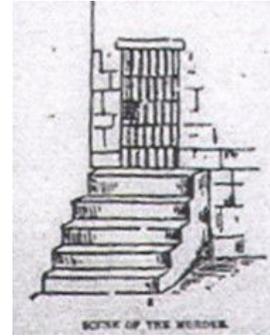
Charles Johnson was 27 at the time of the trial. He was described as "heavily built with a rather high head." He had been held previously for minor offenses. He had been living in Waterloo for some time, and had a married sister living there. A newspaper artist for the *Syracuse Herald* did a sketch of him at the trial. The *Syracuse Weekly Express* on April 6, 1887, printed this Johnson sketch shown at right.⁵



The events leading up to the murder of John Walters begin on the night of Sunday, December 29, 1886, when property consisting of two horses, equipment, etc. was stolen from several places in the towns of Seneca Falls and Fayette. Edward Caldwell and Charles Johnson were arrested, charged with burglary and grand larceny, and placed in the Waterloo jail. The sheriff had them shackled with an iron on each leg with 8 links of chain. At meal times they were let out but at other times they were locked up in their cells. The entrance into the jail was through a wooden door in the sheriff's office, at the time a space of some three feet, and an iron-grated door. There were 4 or 5 stone steps down to the floor of the jail.⁶ Johnson and Caldwell spent much of the daytime on January 9, 1887, removing bricks from a wall so as to escape. They had begun to realize that this was not going to happen soon enough, so they decided they would escape by simply "rushing" the turnkey when that person came in to lock them up in their cells for the night.

At 7:30 p.m. on January 9, 1887, John Walters who was the acting turnkey of the jail, and John Cronin, a constable of the town of Waterloo who had come in to help during the absence of the regular turnkey, and Warren E. Lerch, the Seneca County Sheriff, decided it was time to lock

up the 14 or 15 prisoners for the night. Cronin unlocked the door and Walters proceeded down the stone steps. (The picture at right is a sketch that appeared April 6, 1887, issue of the *Syracuse Weekly Express*.) At the foot, he was met by Caldwell and Johnson who were attempting to escape.



Johnson struck Walters on the back of the head with an iron bar, and then he and Caldwell ran up the steps to attack Cronin. (The picture at left shows a sketch of the saw that was used to remove the shackles from Johnson and Caldwell prior to their attempted escape, and the stove wrench that Johnson used to strike Walters on the back of the head. These sketches appeared in the April 6, 1887, issue of the *Syracuse Weekly Express*.) Cronin was struck repeatedly and fell backward against the wall, bloody and hurt, when Sheriff Lerch rushed in. Lerch was a short man, not overly strong-looking, but he made a reputation for himself that night. He fought the two prisoners back with his club in a fierce struggle. Finally Cronin, coming to, called, "Shoot them, Sheriff," whereupon Sheriff Lerch drew his revolver and drove the prisoners back into the jail. (The sketch of Sheriff Lerch appeared in the April 6, 1887, issue of the *Syracuse Weekly Express*.)



John Walters died the next day as a result of the attack by Johnson and Caldwell. Dr. George A. Bellows was coroner. Soon after Walters' death on Monday afternoon, a coroner's jury was assembled, consisting of Moses Barlow, Philip Johnson, Jacob Sands, James S. Boughton, Charles Illick and J.B. Maloney. The jury rendered a verdict that John Walters came to his death by murder by Charles Johnson and Edward Caldwell with blows inflicted by a bar or iron in the hands of Charles Johnson and a stick of wood in the hands of Edward Caldwell, and that it was murder in the first degree.

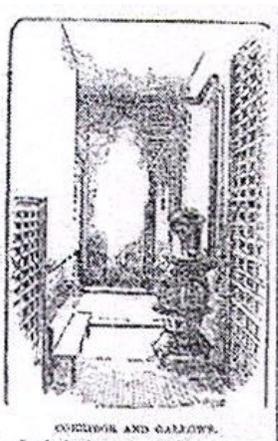
The trial of Charles Johnson began April 4, 1887, before Judge Macomber. The prosecuting attorneys were District Attorney Francis Allen of Ovid, and Colonel F. L. Manning of Waterloo as his assistant. The defending attorneys were Corydon Rood with the Hon. William H. Burton assisting. The men were tried separately. The jury in the Johnson trial consisted of Henry Jinks (a Waterloo farmer), Spencer Hoffman (a Junius farmer), Nelson Seekel (a Tyre farmer), Spencer White (a Tyre farmer), Charles Whitlock (a Seneca Falls farmer), Columbus Christopher (a traveling man), George Troutman (a Fayette farmer), Henry S. Bonnell (a Waterloo farmer), Patrick J. Maloney (a Waterloo farmer), Edward Bear (a Junius farmer), and George W. Barlow (a Tyre farmer). The trial was a very popular event. One newspaper described the throngs that wanted to attend at least some part of the trial this way: "A terrible crowd demanded admission at 2 p.m., hundreds more than could be accommodated and hundreds more were turned away."⁷ The jury brought in a verdict of "guilty in the first degree."

The trial of Caldwell was begun April 11, 1887, with the same attorneys as for the Johnson trial. The verdict in this case was "murder in the second degree."

It developed during the trial that one Marcus Fisk, a prisoner in the jail at the time, had sawed off the shackles of Johnson and Caldwell with a saw made from a table knife, and had attempted to dig a hole through the brick walls of the jail so as to escape. Not being able to make

a hole large enough, they had determined to go through the door when the turnkey came in to close up for the night.

Johnson was sentenced to hang on May 25th, but his case was appealed. He was re-sentenced to hang on November 15, 1888. Caldwell was given life imprisonment and Fisk was convicted of manslaughter and sent to the Elmira Reformatory.



Johnson was hanged on a scaffold erected in the jail. These gallows were brought in from Utica where they had been used for two previous executions. The gallows were in the jail corridor with the south windows darkened with canvas. Forty guards were placed outside of the jail, twenty being from Cross Post and twenty from Tyler J. Snyder Post, G.A.R. (Grand Army of the Republic. A very few members of the press were admitted. All this reflected Sheriff Lerch's determination to take every precaution "to attain the privacy which the law enjoins."⁸ Sheriff Lerch read the death warrant to him at 8:40 a.m. At 10:15 a.m. the sheriff led the way to the scaffold, followed by

Johnson and the Rev. Swift and the Rev. W.S. Carter. The execution took place at 10:22 a.m. (The sketch of the corridor and gallows appeared in the November 21, 1888, issue of the *Syracuse Weekly Express*.)

¹ *History of Seneca County New York with Illustrations*, Philadelphia: Everts, Ensign & Everts, 1876, p. 17

² Wayne E. Morrison, Sr. *Town & Village of Ovid, Seneca Co., N.Y.: An Early History*, Ovid, NY: W.E. Morrison, 1980, p 16.

³ John E. Becker, *A History of the Village of Waterloo, New York and Thesaurus of Related Facts*, Waterloo: Waterloo Library and Historical Society, 1949, pp 117-18.

⁴ "Summing Up," *The Auburn Bulletin*, April 5, 1887.

⁵ "Trial for Murder," *Syracuse Weekly Express*, April 6, 1887.

⁶ John E. Becker, *A History of the Village of Waterloo, New York and Thesaurus of Related Facts*, Waterloo: Waterloo Library and Historical Society, 1949, pp 276-77. Note that this is the source for most of the information in this article—except for the information that is specifically cited by the following endnotes.

⁷ "Summing Up," *The Auburn Bulletin*, April 5, 1887.

⁸ "Execution of Johnson," *Seneca County Courier*, November 15, 1888.