

DELAWARE NOTES

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THE NEW CASTLE COUNTY WORKHOUSE
GREENBANK, DELAWARE

By

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building.²⁸ To this end, steel trusses were used in the roof of the center corridor, and fire walls were run up through the roof to divide the several sections of the building. A new shop was constructed on the ground floor so as to make it as remote and distinct from the cell houses as possible. In the constructing of the cell houses, the floors were made of steel and concrete, and steel vestibules and stairways were provided for the use of future cells. By the new plan the second story of the east cell house was to be used as an eating room for the prisoners. This dining room was to be employed also as a chapel and night schoolroom. Provision was likewise made for a shop on the first floor, which was to house some light industry.

9. The Lynching of George White

On the morning of June 15, 1903, a crime of the most heinous and revolting nature was committed near Price's Corner on the outskirts of the City of Wilmington.²⁹ The victim of this crime, Helen S. Bishop, the eighteen-year-old daughter of the Reverend Mr. E. A. Bishop, superintendent of the Ferris Industrial School, was brutally assaulted and outraged about ten o'clock in the morning while within sight of her home. It was nearly 5 o'clock in the afternoon, however, before the young woman, with her clothing in shreds and covered with blood, and suffering from three deep gashes in her throat, was found crawling along the road, in an attempt to reach her home. When discovered she was on the road leading from Price's Corner to the Ferris Industrial School, and was about four hundred yards from that institution.

The *Morning News* of June 16, 1903, in describing the crime, declared:³⁰

"Miss Bishop, who is in her eighteenth year, left home early yesterday morning to come to this city [Wilmington] to make inquiries concerning her

²⁸ *Fifth Annual Report, 1903*, p. 4.

²⁹ Most of the facts for this account of the murder and the subsequent lynching have been drawn from the *Morning News* and the *Every Evening* of June, 1903.

³⁰ *Morning News*, Wilmington, June 16, 1903, p. 1.

high school examinations. She had been ill the greater part of last week and was unable to attend the sessions of her school . . .

"The road along which the assault upon Miss Bishop was made is lonely. Woodland skirts one side for a considerable distance and a tall hedge hides the other side of the highway from the fields adjoining. It is believed by many that the assailant of the young woman saw her alight from the trolley car at Price's Corner and followed her . . .

"That Miss Bishop put up a desperate struggle is indicated from her condition when found. Her dress was torn to shreds and her hands and arms a mass of scratches and clasped in one hand was a pocket knife which she had used in school for the purpose of sharpening pencils. The knife was closed and it is supposed that she had not time to open it . . .

"That the assailant wished to murder her seems certain from wounds in her throat, one of which had almost severed the jugular vein . . .

"It was about 4:30 when a Mr. Keene, a farmer whose place is near the scene of the assault, and who was working in a field nearby, chanced to look down the road and saw a woman stagger to her feet and fall forward. This was repeated several times. He thought her intoxicated and called attention of his son to the sight. The latter was about to investigate when George Leech and his daughter of Elsmere passed along the road and stopped by the young woman. She was several yards from where the assault evidently had been committed and was partly conscious when found, but soon lost consciousness.

"Mr. Leech gave the alarm and soon was joined by the Keenes. Reverend Bishop, the father of the girl, hastened to the scene. The girl was carried to her home and a doctor was summoned. Her condition is critical, although not hopeless . . ."

The police were immediately notified of the crime and began an investigation. One witness was found who stated that he had seen George White, a negro, following a young white woman down the road from Price's Corner. It was soon discovered that White had a bad reputation, having been released a short time before from the workhouse where he had served a term for assault on Daniel Quil, a well-known citizen of Hockessin. Previous to that he had served terms of imprisonment for attempted rape and house-breaking.

White lived in a small house on the Woodward farm not far from the New Castle County Workhouse. Three officers went to his house on the night of June 16th, and arrested him. In the

meantime, Miss Bishop, who had never regained consciousness, died, and a great surge of indignation swept over the people of the county.

As soon as daylight permitted on the morning following the attack, police made an examination of the place where Miss Bishop had been found.

The *Morning News* on June 17, 1903, described this investigation in these words:³¹

"The scene was one of the kind which stirs men's blood and makes them thirst for a vengeance speedier than law.

"The leaves of the bushes were splattered with blood which had turned black in the sunlight. On the ground was a pool where the young woman had lain until she had partly regained consciousness, while leading to the clump of bushes where the body had been found was the crushed grass which shows where the body had been dragged for the human fiend to accomplish his foul purpose. Beneath the hedge the bushes and hedge were crushed down which showed where the body had been pushed out of sight when the murderer and rapist had cut the throat of his victim and left her for dead. About the place were splotches of blood which showed where the victim, half conscious, had arisen, made an effort to move forward on hands and knees toward her home and then had fallen back again helpless."

Evidence was soon collected that definitely pointed to George White as the perpetrator of the crime. A bloody knife was found at the scene of the crime and through Mrs. Woodward, the wife of the man for whom White worked, identified as White's knife. Moreover, persons said that they had seen the negro walking behind the Bishop girl on the morning of the crime. Another negro, named Segars, saw him run to catch up with a woman he had been following down the road. Segars said that he had believed the woman to be a colored girl with whom White had been going. Several white women, also, claimed that they had seen White following Miss Bishop.

Feeling against the suspect ran high and there was talk of a "lynching party." Many influential citizens began to urge an immediate trial of White as a means of allaying the rising anger

³¹ *Morning News*, Wilmington, June 17, 1903, p. 1.

of the citizens of Wilmington. However, as there was to be no session of the court until September, an immediate trial required the calling of a special session of the court.

The *Morning News* on June 18th, editorially suggesting the advisability of such a session, stated:³²

"Public indignation was never more aroused in this city than at present and we believe the demand of the public for a swift trial is just."

The judges of the court, however, refused to call an extra session, claiming that it was inexpedient to do so. For this action they were widely criticized and condemned, the *Morning News* pointing out that, although it might be "inexpedient," it was an age of precedents, and that a special session was "justified."³³

The funeral of Miss Bishop was held on Thursday, June 18th, and on the following Sunday, ministers in the City of Wilmington devoted parts of their sermons to the horrible crime. Some of these, especially that of the Reverend Mr. Robert A. Elwood, pastor of Olivet Presbyterian Church, were highly inflammatory. The Reverend Mr. Elwood, in an open air service, delivered a sensational sermon on "Should the Murderer of Miss Bishop Be Lynched?"³⁴ During the sermon he scored the judges of the superior court for refusing to call an extra session of the court to try White. In making a fervent appeal to these judges to reverse their decision, he displayed a number of leaves plucked from the scene of the crime. These were spattered with the blood of Miss Bishop.

The Reverend Mr. Elwood, in answering the above quoted question of his subject, thought the murderer should be lynched only on the condition that, after the trial, George White should escape through some technicality or influence. While the Reverend Mr. Elwood was delivering his sermon he was frequently interrupted by applause.

During Sunday, indignation continued to increase and threats were made that an army of citizens would march to the work-

³² *Morning News*, Wilmington, June 18, 1903, p. 4, col. 1.

³³ *Ibid.*, June 19, 1903, p. 4, col. 1.

³⁴ *Morning News*, Wilmington, June 22, 1903, p. 1.

house and give White the punishment he deserved. These threats became so widespread and violent that for several hours on Sunday, officers of the workhouse stood guard in expectation of an attack from a mob that gathered outside that institution. It was believed that the lack of a leader and the arrival of two wagon-loads of police from Wilmington alone prevented the attack. The mob made angry threats and, after discharging guns into the air, dispersed.

Rumors of the assembling of new mobs for the lynching of White continued to circulate. Feeling rose to a frenzied pitch throughout Wilmington, and the *Morning News*, on June 22nd, hoping to calm the people, printed a letter from the Reverend Mr. Bishop, the father of the murdered girl, asking the public to refrain from any violence.³⁵

During the day of June 22nd, vague rumors passed through the city that a mob would storm the workhouse that night, but little credence was given to them. Nevertheless, as if to substantiate these rumors, groups began to converge on Price's Corner around eight o'clock in the evening. By ten o'clock the march on the workhouse began. When the mob arrived at the institution, it was met by Chief of Police Black, Captain Evans and a squad of officers who emerged and formed a solid line across the path leading to the main entrance. Leaders of the mob demanded the surrender of White, but this Warden Meserve refused to do. As the crowd, that by this time had increased to several thousand, appeared about to move forward again, Chief Black warned them to stand back, threatening to shoot the first man who advanced toward the prison. The crowd was undaunted, however, and surged forward driving back the police. It soon became clear that resistance to the infuriated mob would be useless.³⁶ Several hundred shots were fired, but only one person, a youthful bystander, was killed.

After hours of work, the doors were battered down, and the crowd pushed its way into the workhouse, where they soon found White and wrung from him a confession in which he admitted the rape and murder of Miss Bishop. This confession, as

³⁵ *Morning News*, Wilmington, June 22, 1903, p. 1.

³⁶ *Fifth Annual Report*, 1903, p. 6.

it appeared in the *Morning News* on the following day, was as follows:³⁷

"I was sent by Mr. Woodward down to the cornfield to thin some corn and I saw Mr. Woodward's daughter and intended to rape her, but a couple of men came along in a wagon and I didn't. Then I saw the Bishop girl and I followed her. I seized her and asked if she had any money she would give me to let her go. She gave me a half dollar and two five-cent pieces. Then I seized her and she cried, 'Please don't hurt me.' I choked her and accomplished my purpose. Then I asked her if she was going to tell on me, and she said she was. Then I gave her a hack in the throat with my knife and asked her again if she was going to tell on me. She said she was, and then I cut her throat twice again and left her. Then I went back to Mr. Woodward and told him there was no good water down there to drink and he sent me somewhere else. I went back once but soon left. Then I went back to the house and put on a light hat instead of the cap I wore. You would not do this to me if I was a white man and did this."

When George White had made his confession, a rope was put around his neck and he was dragged from the workhouse. Cries of "shoot him," "burn him," went up from the crowd when they saw their intended victim. White struggled violently, but was carried to the scene of his crime and there tied to a stake and burned to death.

The *Morning News* on the following day editorially condemned the lynching, terming it a disgrace to the state.³⁸ Ministers of the city, of all denominations, held a meeting, and adopted resolutions denouncing the lynching.³⁹

Despite these public expressions condemning the burning of White, no convictions were obtained, and the coroner's jury on June 24, 1903, rendered the verdict that White had died, "at the hands of persons unknown."⁴⁰

The board of trustees of the workhouse, in reporting the damage caused by the mob, stated:⁴¹

³⁷ *Morning News*, Wilmington, Delaware, June 23, 1903, p. 1.

³⁸ *Morning News*, Wilmington, Delaware, June 23, 1903, p. 4, col. 1.

³⁹ *Morning News*, Wilmington, Delaware, June 24, 1903, p. 1, col. 2.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, June 25, 1903, p. 1, cols. 6, 7.

⁴¹ *Fifth Annual Report*, 1903, p. 6.

"There was very little destruction of property except that necessary to get at the criminal, and no other prisoner was molested. The cost of making repairs of damage done by the mob was \$383.36, which was promptly paid by the Levy Court."

Thus was brought officially to a close one of the most tragic and shameful episodes in Delaware's history.

10. *The Increasing and Shifting Population Becomes a Problem*

During 1904, as shown by table 5, there were received into the workhouse 1,460 prisoners and 1,429 were discharged.⁴² This shifting population was caused by the commitment of a great number of short-term prisoners. As table 6 shows, more men were committed to the workhouse for the minor offense of being drunk and disorderly than for any other offense.⁴³ This shifting in the prison's population not only added greatly to the work of supervision, since each newcomer had to be cleaned, vaccinated, given new clothing and properly accounted for in the workhouse records, but also made it difficult to keep all the inmates productively employed.

TABLE 5
MOVEMENT OF POPULATION
For the Period December 1, 1903 to November 30, 1904

	RECEIVED	DISCHARGED
December, 1903.....	114	100
January, 1904.....	81	86
February.....	101	105
March.....	103	96
April.....	129	105
May.....	132	122
June.....	131	116
July.....	118	113
August.....	153	152
September.....	134	142
October.....	116	139
November.....	148	151
Total.....	1,460	1,429

⁴² *Sixth Annual Report, 1904*, p. 36.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

TABLE 6
OFFENCES COMMITTED BY PRISONERS RECEIVED FROM DECEMBER 1, 1903
TO NOVEMBER 30, 1904

Vagrancy.....	169
Drunk and disorder.....	748
Concealed weapons.....	22
Forgery.....	8
Non-support, etc.....	21
Rape.....	1
Manslaughter.....	1
Murder.....	12
Trespass.....	170
Assault and battery.....	102
Bigamy.....	1
Assault with intent.....	40
Breaking and entering.....	12
Violating City Ordinance.....	20
Highway robbery.....	10
Toying with females.....	7
Witness.....	8
Houses of ill fame.....	10
Larceny.....	98
Total.....	1,460

Moreover, in view of the steady increase in the size of this prison population (which had grown from the one hundred seventy-four in prison on November 30, 1902, to two hundred twenty-five by November 30, 1904) it was necessary to plan for an expansion of the workhouse accommodations and for the provision of an isolation ward for tubercular inmates. The latter seemed especially urgent since five prisoners died in their cells of pulmonary tuberculosis during 1904.⁴⁴

In order to meet these problems, the trustees considered various plans and, after consulting with the levy court, presented a bill to the legislature authorizing the levy court to issue bonds on the credit of the county to an amount not exceeding one hundred thousand dollars.⁴⁵ This money was to be used by the board of trustees in enlarging and extending the buildings and providing steel cells and appurtenances. The bill was passed, but, at first, only sixty-five thousand dollars of the bonds were sold. With this money the south wing, or women's wing, was

⁴⁴ *Sixth Annual Report, 1904*, "Physician's Report," pp. 42-45.

⁴⁵ *Seventh Annual Report, 1905*, pp. 4-6.