



2,563 Exonerations

22,540 Years Lost

Spotlight: Patrick Lyon

Pre-1989 Database

The Bank Heist and the Blacksmith: The Curious Case of Patrick Lyon

Patrick Lyon's case [doesn't qualify](#) for the Registry but remains historically important. Though he was never convicted, Lyon was the first American to receive compensation for being wrongfully incarcerated.

The fascinating case of Patrick Lyon in 1798 led to what was likely the first payment of compensation to a wrongfully incarcerated individual in the United States. While Lyon's story belongs to a bygone era, the suffering he endured rings familiar today.

fever was ravaging Philadelphia, where Patrick Lyon lived and worked as a blacksmith. Having recently lost his wife and infant daughter to yellow fever, Lyon was hurrying to finish his current jobs so that he could flee the city while the epidemic continued.

Lyon had been hired by the Bank of Pennsylvania to make alterations to the iron vault doors in their new location at Carpenters' Hall. The work, which included cutting new keys for the vault locks, was being overseen by carpenter Samuel Robinson.

On August 10, Robinson stopped by Lyon's shop with another carpenter, a stranger who Lyon later learned was named Isaac Davis. They arrived to check on Lyon's progress and also examined the locks in some detail. Lyon told Robinson that the locks were of insufficient quality for use on bank vaults and recommended that Robinson inform the bank president of this concern.

Despite Lyon's concerns about the integrity of the locks, they were installed with the iron doors. After he completed his work, Lyon left for Delaware by boat on August 28. He arrived near Lewistown (now known as Lewes), Delaware, approximately 150 miles from Philadelphia, on September 1 where he remained quarantined in a boarding house to ensure that he did not have yellow fever. It was not until September



John Neagle, Pat Lyon at the Forge (1826-27)

Davis had unwittingly implicated himself by depositing some of the stolen bills back into the Bank of Pennsylvania. Most of the remaining stolen funds were found in Davis's possession, but Davis's uncle, a county judge, pushed to keep Davis out of jail if all the money was returned. Due to his uncle's influence, Davis remained free for days, allowing him to flee Pennsylvania with \$3,000 of the stolen money. He was never prosecuted.

Despite those developments, Lyon remained in jail.

On December 12, 1798, Lyon went before the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania. He would later write that by this point he "clearly perceived it required as much trouble to extricate an innocent man from

Bank of Pennsylvania on September 1.

Several days later, an acquaintance told Lyon that he was a prime suspect in the crime. Despite the risk of yellow fever, Lyon immediately left for Philadelphia to clear his name and report his suspicion that Robinson and Davis may have been involved in the burglary.

Lyon arrived in Philadelphia on September 20, walking part of the way because he could not get transportation due to the epidemic. He quickly sought out John C. Stocker, who was both a director of the Bank of Pennsylvania and a Philadelphia alderman.

On September 21, Lyon met with Stocker and High Constable John Haines. After hearing Lyon's account of where he had been the last three weeks, the men told Lyon that they believed he had made a duplicate key to open the vault doors and had been involved in the burglary. Lyon said he was innocent and that he suspected Robinson and Davis were involved. Nonetheless, Stocker reportedly responded, "Mr. Lyon, I am very sorry: but I must be under the disagreeable necessity of committing you to prison." Without any hearing or legal process, Lyon was taken to Philadelphia's Walnut Street Jail, with his bail set at \$150,000.

Lyon was kept in a cold and damp cell of less than 50 square feet that lacked a bed

was lowered significantly to \$2,000 and two of his old friends bailed him out.

When Lyon's indictment was sent to the grand jury on January 12, 1799, he was not charged.

In May 1799, Davis, still in hiding, sent a letter through his mother in which he confirmed that Lyon was innocent. Lyon wrote to the bank seeking payment to compensate him for its role in his incarceration and suffering, but the bank refused to pay. In an effort to appeal to the public, Lyon published a book detailing his ordeal: *The narrative of Patrick Lyon, who suffered three months severe imprisonment in Philadelphia gaol; on merely a vague suspicion, of being concerned in the robbery of the Bank of Pennsylvania: with his remarks thereon.*

In March 1801, Lyon filed a lawsuit against the bank's representatives, including Stocker and High Constable Haines, that sought damages for his incarceration. He went to trial more than four years later, in the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania. The case turned on whether Lyon was held with malice and without probable cause. After hearing the testimony and then deliberating for four hours, the jury awarded Lyon \$12,000 in damages.

The defendants moved for a new trial, and a new trial date was set for March 1807. Prior to the retrial, the parties

caught the disease and became so sick that his hair fell out. Some days, he was given neither food nor water. He was allowed only the Bible and a book of poetry in his cell.

On November 20, 1798, local newspapers reported that Isaac Davis had been identified as the bank robber.

In the years following his settlement, Lyon went on to become the successful manufacturer of an innovative new style of fire engine. He died in Philadelphia in 1829 at the age of 60.

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Explore Exonerations Before 1989

Did you know that the Registry maintains a separate database of pre-1989 cases? The cases are separated from the Registry's main database because they often lack the types of detailed, publicly available records that we use to code cases. (We chose 1989 as the starting point for the main Registry because the first DNA exonerations in the US took place in that year.)

In many respects, the pre-1989 exonerations are similar to those that happened later. But many of the cases had substantial impacts on criminal justice policy, including the "[Scottsboro Boys](#)" exonerations (starting in 1937), and the exonerations of [Clarence Gideon](#) in 1963, and [George Whitmore, Jr.](#) in 1973.



From left: Deputy Sheriff Charles McComb, defense attorney Samuel Leibowitz, and "Scottsboro Boys" defendants, R. Wright, Montgomery, Powell, Robertson, Williams, Weems, and A. Wright. (1935/AP)

While not all of the cases in the pre-1989 database are recorded in the annals of history, the patterns that arise from the database tell an interesting story about the history of wrongful convictions and the change over time in the process of exonerations.

Here are a few of the exoneree stories:



Lenell Geter, 1982 In early 1982, a group of six black aerospace engineers, who had recently graduated from South Carolina State University, moved to the predominantly white city of Greenville, Texas, to begin engineering jobs at a large military defense contractor called E-Systems, Inc. After a string of armed robberies occurred in the greater Greenville area, a witness reported seeing Lenell Geter's car in the vicinity. Despite the fact that nine of Geter's colleagues at E-Systems were able to testify that he was at work on the day of the robberies in question, Geter's all-white jury found him guilty and sentenced him to life in prison. Following his conviction, Geter's legal representation was taken over by the NAACP. After a great deal of public attention and media focus on Geter's case, he was released and charges were dismissed in 1984. [Read the full story here...](#)



court appointed lawyer, Wilson Lee (L) and Freddie Pitts (R), both black men, pleaded guilty to a 1963 double murder of two white filling station attendants on the Florida Panhandle. Both Pitts and Lee gave detailed statements, which they promptly recanted, claiming that they had been tortured, threatened, and otherwise emotionally abused. After deliberating for twenty minutes, an all-white jury voted to sentence both men to death. After the real perpetrator recorded a detailed confession, the star eyewitness recanted her testimony, and an investigative journalist discovered key documents that were not disclosed to the defense, Lee and Pitts were granted a retrial and then finally pardoned in 1975. Journalist Gene Miller (center in photo) won his second Pulitzer Prize in 1976 for his coverage of the cases. [Continue reading...](#)



Lee Dell Walker, 1954 In 1954, Lee Dell Walker was sentenced to life in prison for the first-degree murder of a grocery store owner in Detroit, Michigan. After educating himself in prison, Walker became one of the most famous jailhouse lawyers in the country, helping nearly 50 inmates go free. In February 1972, the Detroit Free Press published an investigative piece by Howard Kohn covering the details of Walker’s case and his quest for a new trial. As part of the newspaper’s investigation, new evidence was discovered supporting Walker’s claims of innocence. The Free Press spoke with three new witnesses who had never been interviewed by police and could confirm Walker’s alibi that he had been 17 miles from the crime scene at the time of the crime. Shortly thereafter, the prosecutor ended the case and all charges were dropped. [Continue reading...](#)

Database: Exonerations Before 1989

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