



Hello... My name is John Hill

I arrived at the Tennessee State Penitentiary on the 28th of December in 1831.

That wretched place had been open just about 1 year when I had the misfortune to walk through the gate..... a gate in the 4' thick... 20' tall stone block wall.

I was prisoner # 36 and moved into one of the 200 cells.....

Those cells were 3 ½' x 7 ½' x 7' tall ... with very little light, and even less fresh air..... 3 ½ x 7 ½ x 7

can you think of something else about that size?

[tracing out a grave on the ground] now that's just downright
Ironic... or maybe,... maybe it's not so very ironic at all....

Don't know if it shows, but I was born in Ohio, and I trained as a Cabinet Maker. As with most tradesmen, I moved along and followed the work, which is how I came to be here in Tennessee. I'm very good with my hands, and I have made many beautiful things over my lifetime... I'm not even a bad guy so, how would you suppose I came to be in the Penitentiary? well, I made the very poor choice of trying to break a friend, James Powel, out of the Fayette County Jail... .. Now James, he WAS a rather bad guy, a convicted murderer, but a friend is a friend none the less. Suffice to say, the operation went poorly, and a short time later, I was tried, found guilty, and sent to those darkest of facilities out on Church St. In those days, the Penitentiary was a couple of miles outside of downtown.

In the Pen there was much less interest in reform and physical wellbeing of those incarcerated, compared to the financial wellbeing of the prison itself. Prison was a for-profit business then. Our water was foul, sanitation was worse, and our accommodations were more awful still. We were made to work hard in prison shops with no financial benefit to ourselves... but it was arguably better than the alternative of being in those cells all day & night... There was no talking.... Not to each other, and especially not to the guards... There were no visitors... There were no NEWS PAPERS... you were not even the able to send a letter OUT... There was almost NO contact with the outside world at all... none... when you were in, YOU WERE IN ! And there were rules, lots of rules, and harsh punishment for breaking those rules... generally involving 5 to sometimes 30 lashes across the back with a 3" leather strap, or, time in a small metal box that was sat out baking in the hot sun, or, 30 days in the hole... an even darker more dungeon-like cell than the regular cells,... OR, the worst, the very worst punishment, time time added to your sentence, more time locked up, in there, away from the rest of the world as it went on by.

And if you should happen to pass away on the inside... you had your name listed in the Nashville paper, and if your family happened to see it, then they knew, and if they did not see it, then they did not know. That was the case with my 19 contemporaries here... They all died, one horrible, stifling June, in 1833.

Jackson Thomas, he was the first lost of this group, passing on the 9th. He was described in the official intake rolls as “a little yellowish” Any thoughts about that? ... it means he was Mulatto... one white parent, one black parent. He was convicted of stealing, sentenced to 3 years, and served 552 days as prisoner # 32.

Most of them [looking down] passed between the 14th & 17th, and John Delk was the last of the group to go on the 20th. He had a Wife & 9 children in Campbell Co, but decided he would steal a hog and was sentenced to a year... that year,... as you can see,... turned into a LIFE sentence. Sadly, if he would have just served his year and been discharged, he might have gone on to improve his lot, but he couldn't keep out of trouble, even on the inside, and died during the 413th lonely night he spent in that tiny cell. He was prisoner # 50.

John Dougan here, he was prisoner # 2 !... prior to that he was from North Carolina and made his living as a Cooper... do you know what that is? He made barrels, which were basically the cardboard boxes of our day... He was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to 10 years of which he served 870 days.

A lot of these men were farm laborers in for petty theft, but now... George Rogers here, he was a Shoemaker convicted of horse stealing, a very serious crime back then... Beasley Barbee, a Tailor, he was convicted of malicious shooting... William McCracken, he was a Teacher & Peddler, convicted of forgery... Mr. Yates & Mr. Lucas, they were both Wagonmakers, convicted of assault with intent to kill & grand larceny,... Perhaps the most surprising, the oldest of the group at 58, is the Reverend Hugh Moore... a Baptist Preacher for 30 years... He made the mistake of embezzling a fund of pension money that had been set aside for old soldiers.

In 1833, ½ of the individuals buried in this cemetery, were victims of the Cholera... 174 of them. Fully ¼ of all inmates in the penitentiary died that summer, most from cholera, some from other maladies... but I survived, I made it, I did my time and walked out that giant gate. And what did it cost me? 5 years.

5 years of my life, 1 thousand 8 hundred 36 days, and 1836 long long horrible... desperate nights. Time that I couldn't ever get back, time that I could have done something with,... time that I could have done *anything* else with. When you're in prison, all there is, is time. [sob] Sorry, it's difficult to remember sometimes, how fortunate I was to walk out at all.

These were all people... people... flawed in one way or another, to be sure... but then, aren't we all somewhat flawed...? Death is the great equalizer in life. It comes for all of us, and there's no escape of it. Although a sinful life can frequently provide the circumstance which brings about a premature end, it is also true than no amount of good works can hold the that end at bay...

By one method or another, we ALL end up in the ground or cast to the wind, and after we have gone, the best we can hope for is that one day, well... that one day, we be justly remembered...

Thank you *so much* for visiting, it means a great deal,... to all of us.