

= Monroe Edwards =

Monroe Edwards (1808 ? January 27 , 1847) was an American slave trader , forger and convicted criminal who was the subject of a well @-@ publicized trial and conviction in 1842 . Originally from Kentucky , Edwards moved to New Orleans then settled in Texas . He smuggled slaves into Brazil in 1832 , and used the proceeds to purchase land in Texas . In 1836 he was again smuggling slaves , this time into Texas . After attempting to swindle his partner out of the profits of the venture , partly with forged documents , Edwards was forced to flee the Republic of Texas to the United States . He then tried to scam money out of various abolitionists in the United States and the United Kingdom , partly with forged letters of introduction . He traveled to the United Kingdom , but his schemes were mainly unsuccessful and he returned to the United States in mid @-@ 1841 .

Edwards ' largest swindle involved forged letters from cotton brokers in New Orleans , which he used to secure bank drafts for large sums that he then cashed . His fabrications caught up with him and he was arrested and tried for the forgeries in June 1842 . Convicted partly because his distinctive good looks made him memorable and easily recognizable , and partly from making the same spelling errors in his fakes , Edwards was sentenced to 10 years in prison and died in 1847 while incarcerated . Several sensational accounts of his offenses and trial were published after his death , and he was mentioned in Herman Melville 's 1853 short story " Bartleby , the Scrivener " .

= = Early life = =

Edwards was born in 1808 in Danville , Kentucky . His father was reported to be Amos Edwards or Moses Edwards , but the name of his mother is unknown . His brother was Amos Edwards , and his uncle was Haden Edwards who lived in Nacogdoches . Nothing is known with certainty of his childhood . As a grown man , he was considered very handsome , and usually dressed fashionably . Some accounts give him the title " Colonel " .

Around 1822 , Edwards was sent to New Orleans to learn business from a merchant named Mr. Morgan . By the late 1820s Morgan had established a trading post on San Jacinto Bay near Galveston in what was then Mexican Texas . Some time after , Edwards met a slave trader and joined his new acquaintance on a smuggling trip to acquire slaves in Africa . This first effort ended when they were shipwrecked , but a second attempt in 1832 successfully smuggled slaves into Brazil . Edwards invested the profits from this venture into land in Texas , where in late 1833 he established a plantation on the San Bernard River in present @-@ day Brazoria County , Texas ; he named his new home " Chenango " . Unconnected with his slave trading , Edwards was arrested in 1832 as part of the Anahuac Disturbances , and was briefly imprisoned during the uprising against the Mexican government which ruled Texas .

= = Slave trading and forgery = =

Edwards ' next efforts in smuggling involved a new partner , Christopher Dart , a lawyer from Natchez , Mississippi . In 1835 Dart invested \$ 40 @,@ 000 to buy the contracts of indentured blacks in Cuba and smuggle them into Texas as slaves . Instead providing money for the partnership , Edwards ' contribution was land certificates . At the time , Texas was a Mexican border province . In 1829 , Mexico had abolished slavery as well as the importation of slaves , but gave Texas an exemption from emancipating slaves who were already in the territory . To circumvent the ban on importing slaves , traders instead reclassified them as indentured servants with 99 @-@ year contracts . The Mexican government cracked down on this practice in 1832 , limiting terms of indenture to a maximum of 10 years . Edwards secured further financing from a New Orleans company named George Knight and Company and then went to Cuba where he purchased slaves .

In February 1836 Edwards landed 170 black people in Texas , taking advantage of the confusion surrounding the end of the Texas Revolution and the establishment of the independent Republic of Texas , which had not yet outlawed the importation of slaves . William Fisher , the customs collector on the Brazos River , wrote to the Texas Constitutional Convention that Edwards did not report the

importation to the authorities , and Fisher went to Edwards ' plantation to confront Edwards . Because of uncertainty about the legality of importing slaves , Fisher did not seize the slaves but referred the issue to the newly formed Texas Government after securing a monetary bond from Edwards . Although the new Texas Republic eventually outlawed the importation of slaves from anywhere but the United States , Edwards ' landing of slaves from Cuba in early 1836 was never prosecuted . After this , Edwards also established a slave market on Galveston Bay , near present @-@ day San Leon . In 1837 , he was sued by Robert Peebles for fraud involving the sale of a slave with tuberculosis to Peebles . Peebles won the case .

Edwards then tried to change the deal with Dart . Instead of dividing the smuggled slaves between the two men , Edwards tried to keep all the slaves and instead repay the money Dart had advanced him , with some interest . Dart sued , and at the trial in March 1839 Edwards offered two forged documents claiming that Dart had sold his interest in the slaves to Edwards . In forging the documents , Edwards originally secured Dart 's signature on a document written in a type of ink that could later be chemically removed . After Dart signed the document , Edwards then removed the original wording of the document and substituted a deed selling Dart 's interest in the land and slaves . The documents were determined to be forgeries and on April 2 , 1840 , Dart was awarded \$ 89 @,@ 000 . Edwards fled the Republic of Texas to the United States .

As part of a plot to discredit both Dart and the government of Texas , Edwards persuaded some abolitionists in Cincinnati to give him money with which he would supposedly liberate the slaves on his plantation in Texas , which he no longer owned . Edwards also tried to get money from the American and Foreign Anti @-@ Slavery Society in New York , but its leader , Lewis Tappan , did not trust him and no money was forthcoming from that source . Edwards then went to England , bearing forged letters of introduction from , among others , Daniel Webster and the American Secretary of State , John Forsyth . One of these letters was to Lord Spencer , who was so impressed he gave Edwards £ 250 as a loan . While in England , Edwards defrauded a company in Liverpool of about \$ 20 @,@ 000 , and then used part of the funds to repay Lord Spencer . The Republic of Texas ambassador in London warned the English government against Edwards . Tappan also sent warnings , so Edwards was unable to acquire more money in England and had returned to the United States by June 1841 .

= = Final scheme = =

Edwards ' next fraudulent scheme involved forging letters to cotton brokers in New Orleans , and using the signatures obtained from their replies to forge letters to brokers in New York City , saying that the fake John Caldwell ? Edwards ' alias ? had a large amount of cotton on deposit with the New Orleans brokers . Edwards used those letters to secure fraudulent loans from brokers on the security of the non @-@ existent cotton . Two New York brokers ? Brown Bros. & Co. and Jacob Little ? gave Edwards bank drafts for \$ 25 @,@ 000 each . Edwards then cashed the drafts pretending to be Caldwell , but without attempting to disguise his appearance . Unluckily for Edwards , in September 1841 Brown Brothers was informed by the New Orleans brokers that there was no cotton on account for Caldwell , and this prompted the bankers to offer a reward for information on the forger . The police began to search for the forger of the letters , but were unsuccessful until Edwards attempted to distract their attention to an acquaintance , Alexander Powell , who happened to look much like him . Edwards sent an anonymous letter to the New York police , stating that the forger they were hunting was sailing to England , as Powell was about to do . Edwards assumed that by the time the police acted , Powell 's ship would already have sailed . The ship was delayed and the police were able to catch Powell , who told them that Edwards was their forger .

After his arrest , Edwards was imprisoned in the Tombs , New York City 's jail . When he was arrested , he had more than \$ 44 @,@ 000 in a trunk in his room . While in jail awaiting trial , Edwards forged a letter alleging he had funds in New Orleans , and then showed the letter to one of his lawyers in order to reassure the lawyer about Edwards ' ability to pay for legal counsel . In an attempt to delay his trial , Edwards also forged a letter from a supposed witness , Charles Johnson ,

stating that he was in Cuba and would not be able to come and testify for Edwards for a while ; this gained Edwards a three @-@ month delay .

= = Trial = =

Edwards ' trial was in June 1842 and was a media sensation . He secured a defense team of six lawyers , including John J. Crittenden , a sitting U. S. Senator , and Thomas F. Marshall , a sitting U. S. Representative . Both Crittenden and Marshall absented themselves from their legislative duties during the trial . One of the junior lawyers was William M. Evarts , who presented the opening remarks for the defense . Another defense lawyer was John Worth Edmonds , who Edwards paid with a forged check . Edwards ' handsome appearance worked against him , when one of the bankers who had cashed the drafts identified him in court and remarked that he remembered Edwards because of his striking good looks . Edwards had also neglected to dispose of a marked bank bag from one of the banks that cashed the fraudulently obtained draft . A final tie @-@ in was the commonality of misspellings between letters from Edwards and the forged letters . The trial ended with Edwards being convicted and given a 10 @-@ year prison sentence . The trial 's proceedings were published by a New York newspaper , The Herald , and ran to 50 @,@ 000 copies . None of Edwards ' lawyers were ever paid for their services . He was sent to Sing Sing prison , where he attempted to use forged letters to escape . Edwards died in prison on January 27 , 1847 , of consumption . He was insane at the time of his death .

= = Legacy = =

Edwards earned a mention in Herman Melville 's story " Bartleby , the Scrivener " , who used the names of contemporary events and people to give a modern feel to his short stories . One of Melville 's characters asks Bartleby , when imprisoned in the Tombs , if he is a " gentleman forger " like Edwards . The career of Melville 's narrator in " Bartleby " parallels that of Edmonds , who defended Edwards then went on to be the prison inspector at Sing Sing during Edwards ' prison term , and was known for his attempts to improve the treatment of the prisoners . Melville 's narrator also tries to secure better treatment for Bartleby . The narrator 's description of Bartleby just prior to death , in the words of Robert Wilson , " eerily echoed " the state of Edwards just prior to his death .

Edwards was known during and after his trial as the " Great Forger " . The main account of his life and trial is Life and Adventures of the Accomplished Forger and Swindler , Colonel Monroe Edwards , which was written by an editor of the National Police Gazette in 1848 . The account , which was probably written by George Wilkes , is the fullest account of Edwards ' life , but mingles fact with fiction to the extent that it has been listed in bibliographies of American fiction . Wilkes ' account is the source for the story of Kitty Clover , supposedly a slave who loved Edwards , rescued him , and followed him throughout his life . There are other accounts , including two anonymous narratives published in 1842 .