

Title:

New-Gate in New England: Hard Time Connecticut Style

Word Count:

509

Summary:

Connecticut was once home to America's biggest dungeon: the mine/prison known as New-Gate.

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Article Body:

The very 1st state prison in the United States was founded before there were states at all, let alone united ones. Connecticut's New-Gate Prison, originally a copper mine, was began it's role as a detention center in the fall of 1773 as the colony's public "gaol" and workhouse. It was called New-Gate after the fearsome prison of the same name in England. During the early years of the American Revolutionary War it held captured loyalists and torries. It was also a Prisoner of War facility in the American Civil War.

The people of Connecticut were no less concerned with budget over-run in the late 18th century than we are today, so the supposed "self-sufficiency" of New-Gate was very appealing. Copper could still be mined from the dank tunnels that made up the prison, allowing prisoners to pay for their own upkeep. In addition, the structure of the prison, i.e. two shafts, a couple of iron trap-doors and a veritable dungeon of mine tunnels, meant that a minimal staff would be needed. This included the warden or "Keeper" three guards or "overseers" and a few skilled miners, paid from the prisoners salaries, to instruct the prisoner on the finer points of copper mining.

Surely such a prison was a model of efficiency and security; it's a shame then that the very 1st prisoner escaped in less than a month.

On December 22nd of 1773, John Hinson was the 1st man incarcerated in Connecticut's new New-Gate Prison. Little is known about Hinson, other than that he was 20 year-old and stood 5'6" tall. Even his crime has been forgotten, though it must have been serious; the New-Gate was reserved for burglars, horse-thieves, counterfeiters, highwaymen and other such hard-cases.

What is known is that on January 9th John Hinson escaped, possibly using his

compact size and the vigor of youth to climb up a 70-foot well shaft, but more probably aided by an accomplice on the outside with a length of rope and a bit of cash to bribe an overseer. One rather romantic (and unsubstantiated) tale involves his beautiful ladylove coming to his rescue. The only certainty is that if he was ever imprisoned in Connecticut again, then those records have been lost.

Three months later three more convicts escaped, leading local authorities to grudgingly admit that some sort of wall may be necessary. With the addition of a stone enclosure and a few more guards the prison became far more secure, though it never quite lived up to its initial boast of being escape-proof.

For the next 54-year of its operation some 800 hard-timers lived and worked in Connecticut's largest state-operated dungeon. It wasn't until 1827 that the New-Gate was abandoned as a permanent detention facility, though it did see limited military use in the Civil War. A new, nominally less medieval prison was built in Wethersfield and the prisoners were transferred there. Presumably the prisoners regarded this as an improvement in their situation. No matter how dismal the new prison was, at least it wasn't subterranean.