

Greene County Gleanings

by Raymond Beecher

Filling the office of High Sheriff for the County of Greene during the years 1806-1810 was Peter Osterhout of Catskill. His responsibilities were numerous, including as it did the responsibility for the goal (jail) and court room. It should be remembered these were the first county buildings no longer in existence. (See Beers' *History of Greene County*, pg. 63.) Between the dates of Oct. 4, 1806 and Oct. 6, 1807, Peter Osterhout, in addition to his salary, applied for reimbursement for special expenses. His bill for 106 pounds, 19 shillings and 11 pence survives.

While the Court of Common Pleas, then Circuit Court, and the criminal one of Oyer and Terminer were in session, it was the High Sheriff's responsibility to secure the firewood, candles and sand for the spit boxes; sweep the floors as well as verify the days of work of the various town constables in attendance on the courts. Whether he did many of the physical duties or farmed them out is uncertain; he might have even used prison labor which he oversaw. Osterhout's usual fee for sweeping the court room and its entryway was six shillings the week (\$1.50). Candle needs were estimated at 3 pounds weight for a normal session. The procuring and splitting of firewood for the more inclement seasons increased in cost as the winter deepened. For the January court term it was 2 shillings, six pence.

Being frustrated at the general untidiness of the room one summer, while no court was in session the Sheriff decided to give this county building a general housecleaning; he hired "several hands to scrub and sand," at a cost of 1 pound 6 shillings.

As to be expected it was the county goal which required most of the High Sheriff's attention. Providing cooked meals to the prisoners, exchanging soiled blankets and shirts for clean ones, and seeing to light and heat were his responsibilities. The first jail was apparently prone to flooding and attention had to be given "to bailing out the lockup and constructing new drains." Sanitation was minimal with wood slobuckets in cells and also a "necessity" out-of-doors. Halfway through his 1806-1807 term we find Sheriff Osterhout

hiring Joshua Wood to dig a pit for the new "necessity," removing the old plank, and planking the new one per Wood's contractual agreement at 2 pounds, 8 shillings. This must have been solely for labor as there are separate entries for the planks and the nails. But the county was billed 14 shillings for workmen's rum!

Certain longer term prisoners must have been kept busy "picking oakum," the traditional English prison work. It is known 17 pounds of oakum were procured and "bringing the tar kettle from the shipyard" on the Catskill Creek set the county back one shilling. It is assumed the processed product was redelivered to boatbuilders.

Prisoners would sometimes take out their frustrations on the eating gear as when prisoner Dayton managed to smash two bowls, one plate and two tumblers which cost the Sheriff 8 shillings to replace. The latter labeled the prisoner "delerious" at the time.

It was the year of the notorious John Scott murder at Nancy McFall's roominghouse on the creek. (See Greene Co. Historical Soc. Journal, Spring 1981.) "And the Catskill Mob Pulled Down Nancy McFall's House." Held as prisoners for the special term of the Court of Oyer and Terminer and General Goal Delivery presided over by their Honors W.W. Van Ness and Leonard Bronk, were John Williams and Nancy McFall. It was one of the few instances of a female prisoner being held in that early era. There is a possibility she was even held in protective custody. In any event her board bill for the brief trial period amounted to 12 shillings. John Williams may have had much rougher grub at 4 shillings.

Transporting prisoners to the goal entitled town constables to extra fees. On July 21, 1807 Constable Eli Botsford of Greenfield (Greenville) delivered "the body of Philip L. Conine on a charge of feloniously (sic) stealing a horse, the property of Robt. Stewart." (the word body meant the "person of"). Also from Greenfield Constable Benjamin Spees, on the basis of two warrants "in behalf of the people," apprehended William Brandow and Jacob Fransburg on suspicion of felony in the case of Isaac

Hull." That set the county back 37 cents, the Greenfield constables using the decimal system. Calling in Constable Jonatham F. Tolly from the town of Coxsackie for the September term of Oyer and Terminer required Sheriff Osterhout to verify in writing that Tolly provided two days for court security service.

Other bills from the High Sheriff covered new handcuffs, a jail lock, and the "making of irons for Tite Anthony--shackles, handcuffs and chains." That blacksmith's work was charged at 2 pounds.

Some prisoners served out their full sentences. To board Thomas Burrel "on commitment by 3 Justices for 3 months, to wit 13 weeks 1 day," the cost of 16 shillings the week. Lyman Litchfield was fed for 7 weeks for 5 pounds, 12 shillings.

One entry of Osterhout's is especially interesting and is open to conjecture. He was responsible for building a wood platform, hauling in the necessary planks and securing 3 pounds of nails. Was this platform for the expected hanging of murderer John Williams? The latter found guilty of the death of John Scott, was sentenced to be hanged but eventually secured a reduced sentence from the Governor.

Sheriff Osterhout apparently decided he needed printed jailhouse rules and regulations. He arranged for Hardwick to print up "a chart of limits for the benefit of prisoners and others" — 16 shillings.

The water supply, if any, was none too adequate and required jail personnel to contract for the Catskill Village watercart, operated by one Penstock, to haul in water. The yearly cost for this amounted to 12 pounds, 16 shillings. Emptying the prisoners' wood tubs (buckets) referred to as the "necessary tubs," was also a contractual expense.

The "strong room" which required cleaning and whitewashing must have been the secure part of the jail. There is no indication it housed valuable county records. Because the High Sheriff was entitled to reimbursement for a number of items and services, and laid out his own money, today's history buffs have some idea of court and goal operations in the first decade of Greene County's existence.