

Convict Stephen John Riggs

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In the 18th century, there was a growing opposition to the death penalty for all but the most serious of crimes. Penal Transportation was the relocation of convicted felons to far-off lands in the British Colonies such as America, Australia and Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania). It removed the offender from society and was thought more merciful than capital punishment.

In the period of the Industrial Revolution there was a huge surge in petty crime due to the economic hardships and unemployment caused by machinery replacing the work of men and women.

Stealing sometimes became the only means of survival for some people, and the prisons became overcrowded, especially after transportation to America ended in 1783 with the War of Independence.

Old prison ships known as hulks which were decommissioned war ships, were anchored in the Thames, at Portsmouth and Plymouth and were soon overflowing with convicts. The prisoners were shackled in chains at night, released at dawn and forced into doing hard physical labour.

In 1785, transportation to Australia commenced and convicted criminals were sent to penal colonies for periods of seven or fourteen years, or for life. They were transferred overseas in ships in the most appalling conditions, the journey taking months. Many died on the journey due to the unhygienic conditions, overcrowding, disease and hunger.

Once overseas, the convicts were set to work in gangs building roads, breaking

rocks, or if they were lucky, they were assigned to a free settler to work for him as a servant or farm labourer. Females worked as house servants or in a workhouse prison factory. Punishment was harsh, good behaviour could earn you an early ticket of release. Once free, many of the ex-prisoners settled in Australia and made a new life for themselves.

Guilty prisoners from East Kent who were sentenced to transportation were usually sent to Van Diemen's Land. Between 1830 and 1853 it became the main penal colony of Australia, changing its name to Tasmania in 1856. There is a town 83kms south of Hobart called Dover which was originally established as a convict probation facility from 1844 to 1848. Today it is a beautiful small fishing port, with idyllic cottages and English trees. It has a flourishing apple orchard business and successful fishing industry of salmon, abalone and crayfish. Between 1787 and 1868, more than 160,000 convicts, whose crimes ranged from picking pockets to murder, were transported overseas to serve out their sentences in the British Empire's most remote colony of Australia.



Limekiln Street Dover

Here is the pitiful story of one such unfortunate young man from the town of Dover, Kent, who crossed the oceans to serve out his punishment, undergoing the most extraordinary hardships and conditions.

Stephen John Riggs was baptised on the 10th July 1818 in the Parish Church of St. Mary the Virgin near the Market Square in Dover. His father was Charles Riggs, born and baptised in Lydd, Kent on the 23rd September 1785 his mother Jane. The family, with their three older children, Jane, born 1809, Charles Benjamin, born 1813 and William, born in 1817, were residing at 40 Limekiln Street, where his father Charles carried out his trade as a greengrocer. In early 1836, Stephen, who was employed as a fisherman, was charged with obtaining three score of whiting and half a score of plaice under false pretences and was sentenced to one month's imprisonment. On the 29th April 1836 at the Kent Assizes, eighteen-year-old Stephen was found guilty of stealing a quantity of rope which he had cut from a fishing vessel, leaving the boat adrift in the harbour, and stealing the lifeline which was kept on the North Pier in case of disaster. He had sold these goods to a local marine store in the town. Stephen was sentenced to twelve months imprisonment with hard labour. The 13th October 1837 saw nineteen-year-old Stephen back at the Kent Assizes being charged with fraud and found guilty, receiving another twelve months' prison sentence. On the 4th October 1839, at the Dover Borough Sessions, Stephen, now twenty-years-old, was charged with stealing a gabardine coat, the property of William Worringham. The prosecutor stated that he saw the prisoner asleep under the clock on the pier wearing his gabardine coat, which he had lost earlier that day, after having been laid on the beach to dry. The accused, Stephen

Riggs, protested that he had bought the garment off a young lad called Perkins who had charged him six pence. The jury returned a guilty verdict. The learned Recorder addressed the prisoner, and said that, on passing a lenient sentence on a previous occasion, he had distinctly promised the prisoner that if he were to be before him again, he should have to inflict a severe penalty upon him. He now had no choice but to sentence him to be transported for seven years. On hearing this news Stephen turned to his prosecutor and said, "Worringham, if I come back, I will mark you, for I am not guilty.... this time!"

On Friday, the 11th October 1839, Stephen John Riggs was removed to the *Fortitude* convict ship moored in Chatham Dockyard to begin his seven-year sentence. On the 18th July 1840, prisoner Stephen John Riggs, aged 21, a labourer who could read, was disposed of to Bermuda from the convict ship *Horatio*. Although it was one of the smallest penal colonies it was also the deadliest, with the warm conditions in the confined quarters being lethal for the spread of diseases. The prisoners were mostly contained on prison hulks moored in the Naval Dockyard. During the day they were freed to undertake massive public works, clearing land, or quarrying through the vast scale of hard limestone



HMS Fortitude

rock under the direction of the Admiralty. It was extremely hard labour.

No ex-convicts were granted the right to settle in Bermuda after their sentence had expired. Thus in 1846 we find that Stephen Riggs has been brought back to his hometown of Dover after his seven-year penal sentence has been completed.

On Friday 16th October 1846, at Dover Borough Sessions, twenty-seven-year-old Stephen John Riggs, who was lately returned from a sentence of transportation, was charged with felony. He had been drinking at the Dover Castle Tap, 15 Middle Row, Dover, that Sunday morning and, later in the day, in a state of intoxication, he had plundered some boats in the harbour, breaking into the brig *Chance* and the smack *Stedfast*. He broke into their cabins and stole numerous items of clothing including, a jacket and two shirts. The Recorder observed that he recalled previously sentencing Riggs to seven years penal sentence and, realising he did not want it repeated, felt it was his duty to pass a sentence of transportation for life. Riggs, on being removed from court, thanked the Recorder, saying, "It's the best thing you could have done, as you have made a man of me!"

Stephen John Riggs was received at Millbank Prison, London, on the 16th November 1846, where he remained in separate confinement until the 17th July 1847. Then he was sent to the *Stirling Castle* hulk at Portsmouth where he remained until the 24th January 1849, when he was sent back to Millbank Prison. On the 2nd of June 1849 he was removed yet again to Pentonville Prison and was again in to separate confinement. He was still confined in a solitary cell on the 14th July 1849, when he wrote a plea to the Right Honourable George Grey, Secretary

of State for the Home Department:

"I hope your honor will take my sad case in consideration and release me from my present confinement to the Public Works for I can usher you for haven any hand or act in tring to breach a mutiny in the ship, it was the last of my thorts. I beg that you will do something for me as you are the only gentelman that can render me from the confinement wich I am placed in at present.

*I remain youre humbel and obedient
prisoner*

*Stephen John Riggs Prisoner No. 2342
Pentonville Prison.*

Stephen John Riggs remained in solitary confinement until the 22nd September 1849. Then, on the 12th December 1849, he left England for Norfolk Island and Van Diemen's Land on board the convict ship *Eliza*, a 511-ton merchant ship built in British India in 1806. There were sixty convicts onboard and also men who had been discharged from the British Army, along with their wives and children, who were starting a new life in the Colony. There were also seven members of the Royal Marines with their families and eight members of the 99th Regiment of Foot, who were rejoining their Regiment.

The ship's surgeon, John Andrews, kept a medical journal of the voyage. Here is a short extract... *"Thirty-three prisoners were embarked from Pentonville Prison and 18 from Millbank Prison. These were for the most part men worn long by confinement and severe punishments. All being men of desperate and very bad character they were immediately on their arrival on board confined below in the prison cells - four cells for 15 prisoners each. These cells were very dark, close and hardly ventilated so that the men within a very short time were faint and giddy for the want of air. Most of them were quickly attacked with fits of an hysterical,*

epileptic character and I had to quickly get them on deck as soon as possible." They were in transit for nearly five months, reaching Norfolk Island on the 30th April 1850. There were four deaths recorded.

Meanwhile back in England Stephen John Riggs' mother Jane had died, aged fifty-eight and was buried in St. Mary's Parish churchyard on the 20th September 1849.

In 1851, his widowed father Charles, aged sixty-seven, was still residing at 40 Limekiln Street and running his shop with the help of his married daughter Jane, who was now living with him, with her husband and two children. Charles died aged seventy-one and was buried alongside his wife in St. Mary's Parish churchyard on the 8th November 1855.

On the 30th June 1855, Stephen John Riggs was assigned to work for Captain John Bleach at a pilot station on the Island of Bruny, which is off the south-eastern coast of Tasmania. The station was built by convict labour and was established in 1831 until 1854. It was responsible for guiding ships into the river Derwent and providing safe anchorage at Hobart. The convict labour on the island built St. Peter's Church and the oldest lighthouse in the southern hemisphere, the Cape Bruny Lighthouse, built in 1836.

Tickets-of-leave permitted convicts to live and work for their own wages within a certain Police District. They were usually given to convicts with good behaviour who had served a particular amount of their time.

In March 1862, in *The Tasmania Reports of Crime*, the following statement was issued: *"The undermentioned ticket of leave holder Stephen John Riggs has failed to report himself in the month of December last at the*

Police Office of the district in which he was recently released. His Excellency the Administrator has directed that his ticket of leave shall be revoked. This convict is now illegally at large." Then in the month of June: *"A reward of £2 will be paid for the apprehension of the convict Stephen John Riggs."* On the 12th June 1862, this report appeared in *The Tasmania Reports of Crime*: *"A ticket of leave absconder Stephen John Riggs has been apprehended by the City of Hobart Municipal Police."* Then on 21st March 1864 in *The Tasmania Reports of Crime*, the following: *"Stephen John Riggs received from Port Arthur and discharged to freedom."*

Certificates of freedom were issued at the end of a sentence or granted on the basis of good behaviour.

Our man, Stephen John Riggs, now forty-six-years-old, had spent more than half his life in penal servitude. He did not return to his homeland and his hometown of Dover.

I like to hope he reflected on all his past mistakes and failures and made the best of the rest of his life, living out his years in Tasmania comfortably and contentedly. For a freed convict, life in Australia could be a land of opportunities.

But what is practically certain is that Stephen John Riggs left his mark in the colony. In Tasmania today, wherever you go, you see roads, buildings and bridges from the early colonial years and you can be certain that a convict was engaged in its construction.

After several reforms, new laws and legislation, the Penal Transportation system was finally abolished in 1868. It is interesting to note that one fifth of the Australian population are descendants of transported convicts.