

Bucklesberry, Back in the Day

Alexander Richard Sutton (Part 3)

Imprisoning juvenile delinquents in the same penal facilities as adult criminals is repulsive and inhumane. Yet, prior to the 1800s, children convicted of crimes were afforded virtually no protection from this type of abusive environment.

The first state law that ensured juveniles would be detained separately from adults was passed in Massachusetts in 1878. It took two more decades before the first juvenile court was established in Illinois in 1899. Significant advances in a nationwide juvenile justice system occurred during the twentieth century.

In the late 1800s, juveniles found guilty of major crimes potentially faced the same punishment as adults. A case in point was Junius Sutton born around 1874, not to be confused with Junius Eli Sutton (1847-1931) of Bucklesberry. Young Junius, his parents, and five sisters lived in Craven County. He was only eight years of age in 1882 when he was sentenced to a year in the State Penitentiary by the Inferior Court in Kinston:

1882, July 16: "Sheriff Davis takes to the Penitentiary today: Francis Dawson, five years; Thomas Jones, two years; Junius Sutton, one year—all for larceny." (*The Daily Journal*, New Bern)

Thirteen years earlier, nine-year-old Alexander Richard Sutton (1860-1928) faced a similar fate. On August 24, 1869, he was among eighteen in Lenoir County arrested by detectives at the behest of then Governor William Woods Holden. They were charged with various crimes that had plagued Lenoir, Jones, and Duplin Counties for several years.

Transported by train to New Bern, N.C., Alex was detained in the same jail with others who were arrested, some of whom were adult men. Superior Court Judge Charles Randolph Thomas had been absent from the city of New Bern for several days. Thus, the hearing did not begin until August 31, 1869, a full week after the group had been arrested. The Courtroom was packed on opening day of the hearing:

1869, September 2: "The examination of the prisoners brought to this city from Lenoir County, began before Judge Thomas at the Court House....All the prisoners were in the dock, except such as had turned State's evidence. A large number of spectators were present during the examination, and much interest was manifested in the proceedings." (*Newbern Journal of Commerce* cited in *Goldsboro Daily Messenger*)

Fortunately, justice prevailed for Alex and two of his comrades on September 1, 1869, the second day of the hearing. With no evidence presented by the prosecuting attorney, Judge Thomas ordered their immediate release:

1886, September 3: "Col. [William John] Clarke, counsel for the State...arose and stated....that James Wiggins, Alex. Sutton and James Daly for horse stealing, be...discharged, there being no evidence against them. Upon investigation, it was found that Wiggins, Sutton and Daly were held by improper authority...by a telegram received from the Governor, ordering the Sheriff of Craven to hold all prisoners charged with felony, brought to him by special detective [Lewis H.] Mowers. The Court ordered that James Wiggins, James Daly and Alex. Sutton be discharged from custody. Accordingly, it was done, and they left the Court room." (*Newbern Journal of Commerce* cited in *Goldsboro Daily Messenger*)

More on the life of Alexander Richard Sutton will be shared in an upcoming Bucklesberry article.