

Highwaymen of the South River

On September 15, 1747, James Ward was surprised when his wife and son raised the alarm. They came into the shop from the St. Andrews Church gate in their home city of London, pointing out a man in the crowd. They told Ward, “he is the Person we suspect that stole our first Glass from us.” Just under a fortnight prior, a gilt framed looking glass was lifted from Ward’s picture shop. It was an expensive piece, valued at twenty-five shillings. “I said to my Apprentice,” Ward later recalled, “go you out four or five Doors up the Hill, and stand at a Distance, and see if he takes any Thing.” Sure enough, the man popped into their shop, under the watchful gaze of Ward, his apprentice, and his wife. “She saw him put the Glass under his Coat,” Ward later testified in court, “She ran out of the Door, and took him by the Flap of his Coat, and cry’d out, Thief, Thief. Accordingly, I ran out and seiz’d him by the Collar, and brought him in.”¹

The thief, a young man named Thomas Bavin, gave a weak defense, initially claiming he “took it down to wipe the Dust off.” When he was brought before an alderman, Bavin confessed. He was tried at the Old Bailey on October 14, and sentenced to whipping.² Corporal punishment and public shame would not be enough to bring Bavin in line.

April 27, 1749, was a grand day in London. The War of Austrian Succession, along with King George’s War, the War of Jenkins’ Ear, and the First Carnatic War had all come to an end. In celebration, a grand illumination of fireworks was displayed at Green Park. There it was accompanied by a performance of George Frederic Handel’s famous “Music for the Royal Fireworks,” penned especially for the occasion at the request of King George II himself. It is said that over twelve thousand people paid admission for the show.³

Joseph Warwicker was tavern keeper at the Sign of the Nag’s Head in Carnaby Park, about a mile from the festivities. It must have been a busy day, because Warwicker’s memory was fuzzy. While he couldn’t swear that it was Bavin, there was a man that looked like him who stepped into the tavern about noon and ordered bumbo, a rum drink. Warwicker served it in a “silver pint-mug” valued at fifty shillings. Such an expensive mug must have been an unusual vessel to serve in. Given the heavy crowds passing through, perhaps Warwicker had to turn out all the vessels he could lay his hands on to serve the thirsty revelers at the Nag’s Head, including personal items he might normally have kept locked away. When Warwicker realized the mug was missing, four hours may have passed.⁴

John Lyon, constable, was given a warrant for the arrest of Thomas Bavin. Bavin’s home was searched, and the authorities began combing the neighborhood, going to door to door in their hunt for him. A foot chase began when Lyon spotted Bavin, who found his way to a pond and flung the stolen tankard into the water. Unfortunately for him, a young boy dove into the water and retrieve the damning evidence. With no one to speak on his behalf, and no real defense aside from outright denial, Bavin was found guilty and sentenced to transportation.⁵

¹ “Thomas Bavin, Theft > grand larceny, 14th October 1747,” Old Bailey Online, <<https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/browse.jsp?id=t17471014-14-defend249&div=t17471014-14#highlight>>.

² Ibid.

³ Jacob Simon, *Handel: A Celebration of his Life and Times, 1685–1759*, National Portrait Gallery, London: 1985, page 212.

⁴ “Thomas Bavin, Theft > grand larceny, 11th April 1749,” Old Bailey Online, <<https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/browse.jsp?id=t17490411-25-punish119&div=t17490411-25#highlight>>. Note: dates were recorded incorrectly, and the trial was actually held that May.

⁵ Ibid.

Bavin was loaded on the *Thames*, Captain James Dobbins, in August 1749, and sent to Maryland.⁶ It is unclear to whom he was sold, or what precisely he was doing for the next year and a half, but his life of crime was not behind him.

Partnering with another convict named John Conner, the pair raised a ladder to climb into the Annapolis merchant Charles Cole's house late on the night of July 2, 1751. Leaving John Conner as his lookout on the street, Bavin tied Cole to his bed at gunpoint, threatening to "blow his Brains out." In an effort to learn where his money was kept, Bavin tried to beat it out of Cole, "giving him several bruises."

Cole was saved, ironically enough, by a man he had enslaved. John, stirring from sleep in an adjoining house, looked out the window and saw the armed John Conner at the base of the ladder. Conner threatened the slave, telling John that if he made any trouble "he would shoot him Dead." Undeterred, John found a musket, leveled it out his window, and fired at Conner. Conner fired back with his own piece, "loaded with Slugs." The brief gunfight alarmed Bavin, who fled out the window, leaving the poor Mr. Cole tied to his bed.⁷

The pair escaped and fled Annapolis, sheltering along the South River Road, hiding in "the almost impenetrable Fields of Pines near the Town." There they doubled down on their life of crime. The writers of the *Maryland Gazette* lamented that "almost every Day, since the Attempt made at Mr. Cole's, has brought a fresh Account of some new Villainy" committed by Conner and Bavin.⁸

The South River Road was a prime location for highway robbery. With as many as eight separate roads converging at London Town and the ferry crossings there, the South River was a bottleneck of colonial travel. With the thick pine forest to hide in, and a remarkably well travelled route, it was both a source of victims and provided enough cover to be relatively safe for highwaymen.

Near the banks of the South River a gentleman was dragged off the road by the mounted and armed pair, and only released when he proved he was carrying no money. Another escaped by spurring his horse and outpacing his pursuers. Enslaved men were robbed of the goods they were carrying to market, likely goods they themselves had grown, raised, or manufactured as an extra source of income. It became so dangerous to travel between the South River ferry and Annapolis that the *Gazette* warned its readers not to travel that way "except in Companies and with Arms."⁹

This must certainly have put pressure on London Town. Once travelers passed through the town and boarded the ferry, they were subject to be robbed at any moment until they safely passed through the Annapolis City Gate. Even the watchman at the Gate wasn't safe. Bavin or Conner was nearly shot by the watchman when they were so bold as to tie their horses in sight of him. If the watchman's pistol had not misfired, perhaps the story would have ended right here.¹⁰

The residents of Annapolis sent "several Companies...at sundry Times, with Fire Arms and Dogs, to search for them," and eventually the posse turned up the heat to the point that Bavin and Conner had to leave for less perilous hunting grounds.¹¹ Taking their horses and guns, they traveled out west to Frederick, where they robbed a few people in the town itself.

Bavin and Conner underestimated the Fredericktonians. The day after their first robbery, "A Number of Men went out" and "found a large Bay horse tied to a Bush, who had just been fed with Oats

⁶ Peter Wilson Coldham, *The King's Passengers to Maryland and Virginia*, page 121.

⁷ *Maryland Gazette* July 3, 1751, page 2.

⁸ *Maryland Gazette* July 17, 1751, page 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

and was in good Order; and just by him there lay three Saddles, and hard by, on a Bush, hung a loaded pistol." Bavin and Conner escaped, but they were short a horse, and had lost a valuable weapon.¹²

With the law closing in, they split up. Conner took the route of the prodigal son. He returned to his master ("a Gentleman at Elk Ridge") on August 8, and made "a free and full Confession." Conner was thrown in the town's gaol, and the town knew that Bavin was right behind him.¹³

The next day, Bavin snuck into Annapolis. At gunpoint, he returned to his master. Where Conner was penitent, Bavin was demanding. He told the unnamed man "he would not have him lost by him, but should be glad to be sold out of the Country" so that he could escape by water. Hiding away in the cellar, he waited for a ship to carry him away.¹⁴

His master would not cooperate with the brigand. Once his wayward servant was secure in the cellar, the master informed the authorities. The next morning, a group of men armed with pistols stormed the basement, "where he was surprised and taken." Dragged to the gaol, Bavin was "strongly Iron'd and chain'd to the floor" to prevent his escape.¹⁵

Thomas Bavin was tried on September 16, 1751, and entered a plea of not guilty. The moment Conner took the stand to testify against Bavin, thus saving his own skin, Bavin objected. In English law, the word of a convict was not admissible evidence. Unfortunately for Bavin, Maryland law permitted the testimony, provided it was also against a convict. At this moment, Bavin must have known he would hang. There was no one to speak for his character, and no mitigating evidence to save him. He changed his plea to guilty, and "ask'd Pardon of the Court for giving them so much Trouble"¹⁶

Between his conviction and his execution, Bavin "applied himself to reading good Books, and was visited in Prison by several Divines to assist him in the work of Preparation" On the way to the gallows, Friday November 4, he continued to read. Standing beneath the rope that would end his life, he prayed for half an hour, and then gave a speech to the assembled crowd "to take Warning by his untimely and shameful End, and to lead quiet and peacable Lives." Following these words, he was hanged outside of Annapolis City Gate, the very same he had tried to boldly enter only a few months before. It is possible that residents of London Town might have watched from some of the higher points in town as the man who had terrorized them and their customers was executed across the river.¹⁷

¹² *Maryland Gazette* July 31, 1751, page 2.

¹³ *Maryland Gazette* August 14, 1751, page 3.

¹⁴ *Maryland Gazette* August 14, 1751, page 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Maryland Gazette* September 18, 1751, page 2.

¹⁷ *Maryland Gazette* November 6, 1751, page 2.