

Destiny Carved in Stone



I was born in the village of Plattekill, New York, on May 29, 1852. Plattekill is situated in Ulster County about ten miles north of Kingston. The neighborhood sits between the Plattekill and Esopus Creeks, in the south part of the town of Saugerties. The Reformed Church, parsonage, schoolhouse, and cemetery are in the nearby vicinity.

The foothills of the mountains where I was born were rich in bluestone. This stone was considered a luxury, if not a necessity, fifty years ago for the construction of buildings. Sidewalks, curbing, and window casements all afforded a constant demand for bluestone, to say nothing of the foundations which were constructed from the rubbish left in the quarries. The piers of the Brooklyn Bridge were taken from the quarries of those mountains. Who cannot recall the beautiful pieces of great bluestone which surround the Vanderbilt mansion at the corner of 5th Avenue and 59th Street in New York City? They are a work of art and excite the admiration of thousands of passers-by. The casual observer, however, would not and could not realize the amount of hard work required in tenderly removing these stones from their natural bed in the soil and transporting them to where they will be used.

Working in the quarries was no easy task. It required muscle and brawn to extract the stone in addition to a keen eye and a sure stroke to use the chisel and sledge. The hours were long and the pay small. Yet, one could see the results of their work. Therefore, the rivalries of the stone cutters became quite intense and partook in what today would be recognized as sport. Quarry gangs would wander from one quarry to another. The life of these people became rugged and rough. When the snows of winter made it impossible to quarry stone because of the intense cold, the gangs would “quarry” ice.

My father, Jacob Conyes, owned thirty acres of quarry land. The stone taken from this property was regarded as the finest quality in New York State. The leading industries were farming and fruit growing, but stone cutting was rapidly forging to the front. A large quantity of the stone used in the construction of the State Capitol



FIGURE 4. Bluestone quarried from land owned by Alfred Conyes's father and stone quarried by prisoners from Sing Sing Prison were used to build the State Capitol in Albany. Photo courtesy of the New York State Library.

at Albany was quarried on my father's land. He would allow men to settle on his farm with the stipulation they pay him a certain amount for every foot of stone quarried on the property. This arrangement provided him a comfortable income. Hence, my father became a man of influence in the community.

A few years after my birth, the name Plattekill was changed to Mount Marion, New York, after the daughter of a prominent farmer. The village has retained this name ever since. I went to school in the village and had my share of chores and odd jobs on my father's farm. Soon, I became strong and old enough to take up stone work. This work appealed to me for I had been brought up in just such an atmosphere. Consequently, most of my early life was spent in quarrying and cutting stone, breaking off the rough edges and preparing them for building purposes. I little dreamed this experience would prove so valuable to me during my career among criminals, who were often the most desperate and violent characters in our penal institutions. Memories of my quarry days would come back to me in the building of the stone walls of Sing Sing Prison intended to isolate men from the rest of the world and forbid all contact with their fellow beings.

As a young man, I wandered from place to place with the quarry gangs learning the trade. Even in stone cutting, an apprenticeship must be served. My apprenticeship was difficult, but I soon became quite proficient at the work. I enjoyed the surrounds of a stone cutter's life and might still have been swinging a sledge had I not become acquainted with a fortune teller who was indirectly responsible for the turn in my life which led me to prison work.

Back in 1877, most of the traveling was done by stage coach. I rode the stage coach to the quarries everyday. Since the ride was slow and tedious, it was only natural that the passengers would pass the time talking and joking. Consequently, I met a woman fortune teller, who later proved to be somewhat of an excellent harbinger, so far as my future was concerned.

The Brown Hotel in Kingston was at that time one of the most popular in the Hudson Valley. Since it was also the terminal of the stage coach lines, many people including stone cutters made the hotel their headquarters when in town. When we arrived, the

woman insisted I accompany her into the lobby to have my palm read. I was in a hurry, but there was no polite way out. She prophesied many good things for me—those people generally do. One thing she said remained indelibly impressed upon my mind: “You are a loyal worker, young man. You should be doing something else. Be a boss, for I see signs of great power over men, if you will only bring it out in yourself.”

Her words of flattery pleased me greatly. I agreed with her and said I would very much like to be a boss over men. Who wouldn’t at that age? The idea kept turning over in my mind and the more I thought about it, the better I liked it. The thought soon became an obsession. After those words of “wisdom,” I knew I would not rest until I had found a suitable position. Still, where I might find the place and how to go about it was no small dilemma. A friend unknowingly suggested a solution.

While riding to work one morning, I was delighted to see one of my boyhood chums get on the stage coach. He saw me at once and during the ride we talked of many past experiences. I told him of my audience at the hotel and asked if he could offer any suggestions. Jokingly, he replied that the best place for a boss was in a prison as far as he was concerned. We both laughed. Still, perhaps prison was a good place to be a boss. I became intensely enthusiastic over what had started as a joke. My friend tried to dissuade me, but I was determined to find a position in one of the prisons. Fully convinced my intentions were serious, he promised to introduce me to a keeper at the Sing Sing State Penitentiary.

Sure enough, a few days later I received a caller. He introduced himself as John Hornbeck and told me many things about prison life. I listened attentively asking many questions. He was very kind and our meeting was a pleasant one. I was advised not to enter into this field unless I was certain that I really wanted such a position.

For several days, I carefully went over every detail weighing the good points with the bad. Quarrying was all right, but the prospect of handling convicts fascinated me. The job was surely worth a trial anyway. My main problem would be in obtaining an appointment.

In 1829, to reward his supporters for their political services, President Andrew Jackson introduced a system of handing out appointments to office. Senator Marcy, in a bitter speech against this practice, stated that “to the victor belong the spoils of the enemy.” This phrase rapidly became the accepted practice of political action in the country. So well adapted did this practice prove itself to the American party system, it became prevalent in the entire public life of the country. It is interesting to note that in the forty years from the beginning of Washington’s administration to that of Jackson, not a single subordinate was removed from office without due cause. During Jackson’s first term, such removals numbered well into the thousands.

This new system caused many vigorous and bitter debates in the United States Senate. However, nothing could turn the tide. For more than forty years, no president ever raised his voice against it. Finally, in 1867, the sentiment in favor of reform found expression in a report to the House made by Mr. Thomas A. Jenckes of Rhode Island. This report suggested the establishment of a merit system based upon competitive examinations. Mr. Jenckes made another report in the following year, but Congress failed to take any action until 1871. Then, the first Civil Service Commission was appointed by President Grant. Meanwhile, the politicians were making their own plans and succeeded in having Congress withhold the necessary yearly appropriation for this committee. President Grant yielded and suspended operation of the Civil Service Rules in 1875.

In May 1877, the year I decided to seek my appointment, the Civil Service Reform Association was organized in New York. The Association instituted an active propaganda to generate public sentiment in favor of reform. Speeches and huge mass meetings aided the movement, and the organization became very influential. However, not until July 1883 when Senator Pendleton of Ohio introduced a bill, which passed in both houses of Congress by overwhelming majorities, did the Civil Service Law go into effect. The law “prohibited the vicious practice of levying assessments for partisan purposes upon members of the civil service of the government, authorized the appointment of a commission to frame rules and regulations for

the civil service and empowered the president, from time to time, to determine by executive order, what classes of the public services should come under the operations of such rules.”¹

In 1877, obtaining a civil service position was considered quite an accomplishment because the government was in a constant turmoil over how positions were assigned or denied. There was not a single employee in this branch of work who felt assured of his job. Thousands of men were turned out of their positions whenever a new administration went into office; their efficiency was immaterial. Jubilant at being elected, almost every official appointed a friend to a position of high salary with the express agreement that the man was to do no work, whatsoever. Such cases were common and “breaking in” was the most difficult thing in the world. I had very few friends in politics, but those I did have were men of influence.

The Surrogate of Ulster County, Alton D. Parker, granted me an interview and after listening to my plans, agreed to do what he could. Next, I wrote to John D. Schoonmaker, who was New York Attorney General at the time. After some delay, I received a most gratifying reply. Mr. Schoonmaker had managed to interest several state senators in my application. For some reason unbeknownst to me, they wrote and told me that they would do everything in their power to help me. I think Mr. Schoonmaker must have done some “tall” talking. There was nothing more for me to do. I had left no stone unturned to secure my appointment. If I failed now, there was no help for it, and I would have to go back to the quarries. Senators, as a rule, paid little attention to requests such as mine. I could only hope for the best.

It was not long in coming. A few weeks after the first letter from Mr. Schoonmaker, I received another enclosing letters from his friends in the State Senate. Their letters were splendid recommendations to Warden Isaiah Fuller of Clinton Prison and expressed their best wishes for my future success in penal work.

I was pleased, of course, but decided to wait until I had definitely been accepted by the Warden before congratulating myself. Letters of recommendation can sometimes mean very little. Past disappointments had made me somewhat cautious. I would feel better when I drew my first pay check.

I prepared to leave home at once. Plattekill was so small that all of the residents knew each other by sight. Saying farewell was but a matter of an hour or so. Throwing my few belongings into a suitcase, I left for Kingston, where I boarded a train for Albany, and thence to Dannemora, home of Clinton Prison.

Dannemora is a village in Clinton County, northeastern New York, situated about twelve miles west of Plattsburg. The population in 1877 was a shade over two thousand people. There was not much to the place with the exception of the prison.

The construction of Clinton Prison was begun in 1844. At the time of my entrance, the prison consisted of a number of buildings enclosed within a stockade which surrounded thirty-seven acres of land. This particular site had been chosen so the convicts might be employed in the mining and manufacturing of iron. There was an abundance of iron ore on the tract belonging to the prison. The surrounding region was densely wooded and the timber furnished the charcoal used in the furnaces. One thing could be said of the prison commission—they knew a good site when they saw one.

As I walked up the main and only street in the village, I paused occasionally to look over the surroundings. There was very little to see—just a few stores and hitching posts. I was looking for someone who might direct me to the prison. Seeing no one in the street, I entered a store and asked the proprietor. He stared at me without speaking. It was not a very cheery reception. I repeated my question and he nodded his head, pointing with his pipe.

I started up the street once again and after walking about a mile, saw the gates of the prison in the distance. I stopped again, wondering if I had made a mistake, after all. Strange to say, my biggest inspiration at that moment was the prediction of the fortune teller back in Kingston. I had doubted her before, but now her words helped me considerably.

The huge gates swung open to admit me. As they closed, leaving me within the prison walls, I experienced a tightening in my throat, a feeling somewhat akin to being homesick, but it lasted only a moment. I recovered my composure and asked for the Warden. An attendant led me to the Warden's office, where I was cordially

and officially welcomed to Clinton. The Warden glanced over my recommendations and smiled.

“Well, Mr. Conyes, your credentials are in good order. It gives me great pleasure to welcome you here. Believe me, sir, there are few men who ever apply for a job such as you desire.”

His last comment did not sound very encouraging, but then I remembered that the type of work I had selected would probably be more or less repulsive to many.

“There has been quite a shortage of keepers and guards,” continued the Warden, “and I find it difficult to keep my roster up to quota. It is customary to try out newcomers as guards until they prove their ability. However, I think I’ll take the chance and make you a keeper. What do you say?”

My reply was quite obvious. Of course, I’d take the keeper’s post. The job was not only a better one, but meant ten dollars more a month than I had expected. This last bit of good news was the best of all. I entered the life of a keeper at Clinton full of faith and confidence in my ability to do the new work.