



Geelong After Dark

The Death Mask – Frequently Asked Questions

Where are they from?

Old Melbourne Gaol, part of the National Trust (Victoria) collection.

Who are they?

James Murphy, executed in 1863; and Thomas Menard, executed in 1865; both were hung by the neck at Geelong Gaol.

What did they do?

James Murphy:

Shortly after 7.00 am on Tuesday, 4th August, 1863 Constable Daniel O'Boyle was supervising whilst James Murphy, a prisoner on remand for horse stealing, cleaned the Warrnambool Court House. O'Boyle knelt down to light the fire when Murphy struck him on the head with a 3 point (1.5kg) masons hammer, inflicting massive head injuries. O'Boyle was beyond medical help and died at 4.50am the following morning (5 August).

After he struck the fatal blow Murphy calmly walked from the Court House and made good his escape. The Constable's body was located some minutes later, and the hunt began. Despite the large number of people used in the search Murphy evaded capture for two days, being finally arrested at a farm 25 miles from Warrnambool at 2pm on Thursday, 6th August, 1863. Murphy was soon convicted of the Constable's murder, and he was hanged on the 6th November, 1863 at Geelong Gaol.

Thomas Menard:

Thomas Menard was sentenced to death by Justice Williams at the Geelong Circuit Court on the 10th of October 1865 for murdering James Sweeney. Menard, alias "Yankee Tom" and Sweeney were both working as quarrymen for Mr Evans of Warrnambool. On the 10th June 1865, the two men had an argument in which Sweeney made a comment about the American war to which Menard took offence. Later that evening after Sweeney had gone to his bunk, Menard came into the hut and fired three shots at Sweeney where he lay in bed. Sweeney and another man, John Howe, took off after Menard but returned to their huts. One of the shots had hit Sweeney in the abdomen, which had lacerated his liver causing his death two days later.

Menard was apprehended in Beechworth and was brought to trial. Menard was executed at 10am on the 29th October 1865. He would be the final execution at the Geelong Gaol. Menard was said to be dejected but repentant. Menard had asked Governor Brodie to say a prayer for him. He stepped onto the scaffold and the burial service was read and the bolt was drawn. Newspapers report that his body convulsed for ten minutes, which was put down to the fact that Menard was only 25 years old and in very good physical condition. Menard was to have read out a statement but at the last minute, he was unable to do so. He went to his death holding the statement in his hand, along with a single rose which he had asked to be placed in his coffin. Menard's statement was to the effect that he did not regret killing Sweeney; that Sweeney had got what he deserved.

How many were killed at Geelong Gaol?

In total six convicted criminals were executed at Geelong Gaol, of which Thomas Menard was the last in 1865. They were (in order):

- George Roberts (16 December 1854); murder
- John Gunn (9 November 1854); murder
- James Ross (22 April 1856); murder
- Owen McQueeney (20 October 1858); murder
- James Murphy (6 November 1863), murder
- Thomas Menard (28 October 1865), murder

Why were death masks created?

Death masks were common in Australia from the early 1800s. They were mostly of criminals, including convict absconders and bushrangers, and were used both for exhibition purposes and for phrenological analysis. The Old Melbourne Gaol's collection of death masks numbers 36 and includes Frederick Bayley Deeming ('Jack the Ripper'), Frances Knorre ('the baby farmer') and James Williams who was hanged in 1904.

Death masks were cast of executed prisoners for scientific study - the study of Physiognomy and Phrenology. Physiognomy studied the physical facial features, whilst Phrenology looked at the size of the skull and measurements of sections on the cranium corresponding to character traits. They are now known as 'pseudo-sciences' and are discredited.

How were death masks created?

The 'modern' method for making a death/life mask requires the application of oil or grease to the subject's face then a coat of plaster of paris that is allowed to harden before being removed. This creates a mould that can be used to cast the mask. Because they are created from a mould taken shortly after a person dies, death masks offer a unique view of the dead person. Formal portraits, whether painted or photographed, present a two-dimensional image, often reflecting the way a person wishes to be remembered. A death mask, however, creates a three-dimensional,warts and all, representation.

After hanging, the body was removed; an autopsy performed and an inquest held. During these procedures, the head was cast to be analysed by professors of anatomy, using phrenology and physiognomy. Sometimes the head was shaven. Firstly, oil was rubbed into the skin and head; not too much so that the plaster didn't slide; and three or more sections were coated in plaster at a time to create the mould. The inside of the mould was oiled and plaster poured into the cavity. When it was dry the mould was taken apart.

Many copies were often made and were distributed amongst the scientific fraternity or placed on public display in wax or Phrenology museums.