The Great Escape of “Tunnel Joe” Holmes

WALLACE SHUGG

On Monday, February 19, 1951, newspaper headlines in Baltimore City heralded the astonishing escape from the Maryland Penitentiary of thirty-nine-year-old Joseph E. Holmes, formerly known as “the dinner-time burglar.” The first details to emerge could only have made readers shake their heads in wonder: Holmes had apparently cut his way through nearly two inches of slate flooring in his cell plus ten inches of concrete, dug a seventy-foot tunnel through earth and clay under the massive stone wall of the prison and up onto the grassy plot alongside Eager Street, easily climbed the seven-foot iron fence, and vanished into the night. The feat excited the public’s imagination, leading to numerous false sightings in and around the city, and instantly earned him the new tag of “Tunnel Joe.” As the full story unfolded, readers could only admire the daring, determination, and engineering skills shown by Holmes, the only inmate ever to tunnel his way out of Maryland’s maximum-security prison.¹

Before his escape, Holmes had been in and out of various penal institutions for twenty-three years, beginning with the Baltimore City Jail in 1928, where at the tender age of sixteen he spent ten days for breaking and entering. Thereafter, he pursued his chosen trade diligently, serving four sentences of two to three years at the Maryland House of Correction in Jessup and the Maryland Penitentiary whenever his luck ran out—until hit with a twenty-year stretch in the penitentiary by an obviously fed-up judge, who said Holmes had “as bad a record as any I have seen before this court.” Toward the end of his career, Holmes had thoughtfully focused on burglarizing affluent homes in the Roland Park–Guilford area, entering boldly at dinner time while the residents were supposedly gathered round the table and busy with their food, thereby earning himself the tag of “the dinner-time burglar.”² For the next ten years, Baltimore heard nothing further from Maryland Penitentiary inmate Joseph Ellsworth Holmes (#32565).

Then on Sunday morning, February 18, 1951, at 9:15, cellhouse officer George P. Gearhart became curious and unlocked the barred door of Holmes’s cell and prodded the apparently still-sleeping man, only to discover a pillow wrapped in a blanket. His foot chanced to touch an uneven edge in the floor surface under the cot. Stooping down, he found a square piece of the slate flooring nearly two

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inches thick cut into a trapdoor and hinged to the wall. He lifted it and looked down into a narrow tunnel that went through ten inches of concrete and beyond that into the damp and darkness.

Gearhart called Warden Edwin T. Swenson. Not knowing whether Holmes had escaped or was still somewhere in the tunnel, the warden sent down a volunteer guard, Arthur Newsome, to explore. Holmes had made the tunnel just large enough for himself. The somewhat larger Newsome removed his shoes and stripped himself naked but still could not fit into the concrete opening until it had been chipped and widened. Entering feet first, Newsome began the claustrophobic and dangerous trip through the underground tube.

From the floor of the cell, the tunnel dropped almost vertically for five feet, then slanted downward in a series of steps, forcing Newsome to wriggle like a snake. At length he entered a chamber about six feet in diameter and tall enough for a man to stand up in, but filled with muddy sludge to chest level. The walls had been buttressed with mudpacked trousers and shirts to prevent a cave-in.
and possible live burial, Newsome continued to worm his way, now head first, to a depth of twenty-six feet, where the shoulder-wide path passed under the base of the five-foot thick prison wall. Beyond and adjacent to the wall was a four-foot-wide concrete dry moat, which the tunnel cleared by inches. From there, Newsome found, it angled eighty degrees upward and surfaced in a grass plot, the opening only fourteen inches wide. At least one thing by now was clear—their bird had flown.5

Prison officials reacted with shocked disbelief, tinged with grudging admiration. “It’s the most fantastic escape I’ve ever heard of,” Warden Swenson was quoted as saying, “that guy must have been an engineer.” The warden guessed it had taken Holmes two years to claw out the tons of dirt, bit by bit, and flush it down his cell toilet, probably between 5 and 10 P.M., when the radio programs broadcast over the prison’s public address system would have drowned out the noises in his cell. Most baffling, according to the warden, was “how Holmes

Above: The penitentiary’s west wing and tunnel route. This photograph appeared in the Baltimore News-Post, February 19, 1951. Holmes’s escape sparked enormous interest in Baltimore’s African-American community, and the Baltimore Afro-American ran the same photograph with a different caption on March 3, 1951. (Photograph courtesy Maryland Division of Correction.)

Opposite: “Tunnel Joe’s” escape route from the Maryland State Penitentiary’s west wing onto the grassy plot on Eager Street. At left an official looks into the tunnel entrance in Holmes’s cell. A second prison official examines the exit on the grassy plot. (Baltimore Sun, February 19, 1951. Photograph courtesy Maryland Division of Correction.)
managed to do the work of a sand hog and still maintain immaculate appearance." The warden and his staff were so engrossed by their speculations that they neglected to alert the Baltimore City police until five and a half hours after the escape was discovered.6

More enlightening details surfaced in the later editions of the newspapers on Monday. The square trapdoor cut from the slate flooring had split and been lined on its underside with plywood and metal fastenings. As shown by newspaper photos, the plywood had suffered rot and the hardware was almost rusted away, suggesting its existence before Holmes began his project. Warden Swenson speculated that he had discovered the beginnings of a tunnel when he moved into the cell two years earlier and had exploited the opportunity. The ten-inch concrete barrier was not steel reinforced and not as hard as the newer concrete in use after 1899, when the building was constructed. In his trip through the tunnel, guard Arthur Newsome had discovered six pieces of scrap iron apparently used for digging. Also, a dozen pairs of old pants and pajama bottoms used as sandbags to carry out the dirt.7

By now, prison officials seemed to be assuming a defensive posture in their remarks to the press. The underground chamber could have been a natural fault in the soil or the work of soil erosion from a leaking storm sewer, said the warden. He also expressed his surprise that the concrete floor was only ten inches thick, whereas more modern prisons had floors that went much deeper. Superintendent of Maryland prisons Harold E. Donnell blamed an inadequate guard force, saying that prison management had asked for an appropriation sufficient for 119 guards when submitting its last budget but had been granted enough for only 109.8

And by now, the public was voicing an array of opinions about the great escape: facetious, admiring, harsh, and downright loony.9 "I perceive great possibilities in this man," said former Baltimore City Supreme Court Judge Eugene O'Dunne, who forty years earlier had headed an important investigation into penitentiary affairs.10 "Perhaps it might be well for him to be captured . . . then there might conceivably be a pardon, decorations for ingenuity and two years' back pay, with overtime for the labor Holmes performed on Saturdays and Sundays." One patrolman admired Holmes's patience and thought he deserved to remain free, while another believed he deserved solitary confinement as an example to other prisoners. A Baltimore publicist wanted to make Holmes the "Escapee of the Year," for being "the most dramatic escapee since Jean Valjean." She also believed he should be sent to Washington to head one of the Senate investigating committees: "Mr. Holmes has demonstrated, with tremendous success, his abilities as a prober. He is one man who can justifiably claim to have really reached the bottom of things." Another citizen called Holmes "a gold mine of distorted abilities." A psychiatrist called him a "born engineer . . . just the man to solve the problem of constructing a tunnel under Baltimore harbor."
Lastly, and apparently in all seriousness, a teacher of creative writing saw Holmes “as one of the most original thinkers in Baltimore . . . every teacher likes to have just such a pupil in his class: one with a challenging mind who sees beyond the ordinary barriers of an educational format to the goal that lies beyond.”

A kind of mass hysteria arose, too, beginning with a Curtis Bay tavern owner who claimed to have seen the escapee and a companion enter his establishment on Pennington Avenue on Sunday night. He then called the police on Monday after having seen Holmes’s photo in that day’s Sun. By Monday evening, police had received a half-dozen reports of other sightings of Holmes in northwest Baltimore that also turned out to be false. On Tuesday, police were called in to break up a traffic jam at Eager and Forrest streets caused by curiosity seekers gathered to stare at the tunnel opening. And on Wednesday a running man in downtown Baltimore was stopped by a patrolman who, when told his name was Holmes, called for backup. The man proved to be John Holmes, a B&O railroad porter, running to escape the rain.

The weekly Baltimore Afro-American hailed the escapee as “Baltimore’s Hero
Mrs. Mary Ruiz. "I have very good luck tonight."

Patrolman Frank Plunkett. "The gun clicked twice."

Sergeant James Downes. "Hey, you're Holmes!"

Three people instrumental in Holmes's capture. (Baltimore Sun, March 4, 1951. Courtesy, Maryland Division of Correction.)
No. 1,” describing him as “a fearless person, with unbridled nerve, fantastic engineering skill, strong determination, admirable patience and fortitude.” This same issue carried numerous photographs, beginning with one of Holmes’s parents, Mr. and Mrs. Francis Holmes (who issued an appeal to their son to give himself up), beneath a larger one of Joseph at age seven, a drawing of his escape route entitled “How Enterprising Convict Flew the Prison Coop,” and a full-page spread of his cell and tunnel entrance and exit.¹³

The story of the escape was picked up by the wire services and carried in the New York Times¹⁴ and other papers all the way to California. In the aftermath, Warden Swenson received a letter from Captain H. L. Stallings of the Division of Correction in Los Angeles, asking for photos and diagrams of the “amazing escape.” The captain taught a course in penal administration at California State College and wanted the material to instruct correctional officers in the California prison system on how to prevent such escapes.¹⁵

Police questioned Holmes’s parents and sister, who lived near the penitentiary in the 500 block of West Preston Street. They denied any knowledge of his plan to escape and reportedly had “practically disowned him.” Also questioned without success were a former girlfriend of Holmes and another friend who lived near Philadelphia.¹⁶ But the trail was cold and remained so for two weeks.

Then on Saturday, March 3, at 7:50 P.M., Mrs. Mary Ruiz, a sixty-four-year-old grandmother who worked as a cook for Mrs. John W. Garrett, 4545 North Charles Street, was walking home from work when she was accosted at the base of the Washington Monument by a man in a brown coat and fawn hat who pointed a gun at her, took her pocketbook containing $5, and disappeared. She ran to a nearby store to report the holdup.¹⁷

Minutes later, Officer Frank Plunkett spotted a man at Monument and Cathedral streets fitting the robber’s description just broadcast over his car radio. Plunkett got out of his car and grabbed the suspect by the arm. The man thrust a .32 caliber revolver into his stomach, and Plunkett heard the gun click twice, miraculously misfiring. Drawing his own service revolver, the patrolman chased the suspect through the nearby streets and alleys and fired all five shots. He was joined by Sergeants James Downes and William Kohler, who exchanged shots with the suspect. The chase through Saturday night crowds ended at the Recreational Bowling Alleys at Howard and Monument streets, where the visibly tiring suspect sought refuge. There he was discovered and disarmed by Downes, who looked at him closely and exclaimed, “Hey, you’re Holmes!” The man gasped, “Yes.”¹⁸

At police headquarters, Holmes was photographed—his fawn hat perched at a rakish angle—and questioned for an hour, during which time he “appeared relaxed and unexcited” and “consumed several bottles of soft drink.”¹⁹ His story provided additional details about his escape, some possible or in agreement with the known facts, others not.²⁰
The decision to tunnel his way out, he said, came on July 8, 1949, some months after Swenson became warden and tightened up prison discipline, taking away an inmate’s chance to earn a little money by selling handmade knick-knacks to the others. “I had no future to look forward to,” he said, and feared he would “blow his top.” To raise money for the escape, he turned to illegal activities, taking bets on numbers and horses, and accumulated $152.

He began by cutting through the slate, he told his interrogators, denying a suggestion that he had discovered a trap door made earlier by someone else. Using a couple of drill bits and an inch-thick stick with a nail driven in one end, he bored holes through the slate very close together in an ellipse twenty-eight by seventeen inches—it took about forty days—and hinged the top several days later. He concealed his work on the slate by filling in the cuts with cement dust.

Working between 5:30 and 8 or 9 P.M. while the radio was on, he chiseled through the concrete underneath, using as a hammer a piece of iron wrapped in a cloth to muffle the noise—and requiring about five months. Then, barefoot and wearing only shorts and an undershirt, he dug out the dirt, carried it up in a hand-sewn cloth bag, and flushed it down the toilet. For light he made a lamp by filling a small bottle with kerosene and sticking a wick through the cap. This he would place in a niche dug in the tunnel wall while he worked. Asked how he got air, Holmes replied, “It is not stuffy down there. There is oxygen in the water. . . . If the light burns, you are all right.”

Water seeped into the underground chambers, he said, and he had to cut a drain under the adjoining cell into which he would bail out 125 to 140 gallons a night, depending on how much it rained. Every rain would cause more dirt to fall, which had to be removed. After nineteen months, he at last came to make a one-inch opening in the grass turf through which he saw stars. “That gave me a deal of satisfaction.” He returned to his cell for his clothes. The next morning, dragging his clothes behind him, he wriggled through the tunnel, taking forty-five minutes, and at 1:15 in the morning emerged onto the grassy plot. He slipped off his muddy underwear and put on his clothes, then walked past the warden’s residence, where the dogs were sound asleep, and climbed the fence.

He had been forced to return to Baltimore, he told them, because he could not find a job in Philadelphia for lack of a social security card. As he was being led back to his jail cell, he was heard to say to no one in particular, “I was a fool. You can’t get anywhere these days without a Social Security card.” Because of his spotty employment record and years in prison, Holmes may have been unaware that he could easily have obtained a social security card. The Afro-American offered its own explanations for his return, which deserve consideration. “Consciously or unconsciously,” Holmes meant to be caught. “He did not know what to do with his freedom.” He was homesick, missed the orderly routine of prison life (regular meals, recreation periods) to which he had grown accustomed over
the previous eight years. Also, back in Baltimore where he was known, he could bask in the glory of his feat.\textsuperscript{25}

Long before his arraignment on Monday, a curious crowd had gathered at the Central Police Station. Shortly after 3:30 P.M., Holmes was led in, nattily dressed in a green shirt with the collar open and a green sweater showing underneath at the throat. The charges against him were read off: being an escaped convict, carrying a deadly weapon, robbing Mrs. Ruiz at gunpoint, and assaulting patrolman Plunkett with intent to kill. Holmes pleaded guilty to all but the last. He was handcuffed and taken away, heavily guarded, to the city jail in a special wagon with two patrolmen and a lieutenant, followed by a prow car.\textsuperscript{26}

By the time of his trial on April 3, Holmes had acquired two lawyers, Ernest L. Perkins and Leroy A. Cooper, also black, on whose advice he denied his earlier confession and pleaded guilty only to the charge of escaping from the penitentiary. During the four-hour proceedings, he displayed a casual attitude, even on the witness stand, where he sat in the swivel chair, slumped and relaxed and swaying from side to side. His testimony introduced new details about his escape: it took only eleven months instead of the nineteen previously stated; to raise money for the escape, he had sold two pints of bootleg whiskey a week, made from a small still rigged up in the ventilator of his cell; and he had used a small electric drill (stolen for him by another inmate) to cut through the slate, improvising a heavier fuse in his cell to carry the extra electric power needed for the drill. He again denied exploiting any previous excavations in or under his cell. The jury deliberated for only fifteen minutes, and their verdict was read out to the packed courtroom: Holmes was guilty of all charges.\textsuperscript{27}

Before his sentencing, Holmes allowed himself to be interviewed for an hour and a half at the city jail by Vincent Tubbs, assistant managing editor of the \textit{Baltimore Afro-American}. He obviously opened up to his sympathetic listener, and Tubbs, an especially keen observer, gave an almost cinematic picture of the mercurial escapee that is worth quoting at length.

When slightly excited or when trying to speak a big word where he is not sure of his pronunciation, "Tunnel Joe" stutters... His brow is furrowed but his eyes are bright and inquisitive... One of his eyes, the left, is slightly cocked and there is a scar on the bridge of his nose. After he has used all the words he knows to explain something, he puts his hand to the bridge of his nose, closes his eyes and searches his mind for other ways to say it.

His mind is faster than his tongue—and his tongue is plenty fast. He jumps from one subject to another, not because he is scatter-brained, but because he has so much to say and the words he wants don't come as fast as the thoughts.
His hands are busy... twisting and turning his pencil. . . .

He smiles easily, exposing irregular tobacco-stained teeth, the two front of which are gold. The incisor on the left side of his face is missing. And the right side of his face seems more full than the left. His hair is wavy, and specked in places with gray.

Aside from his escape, “of which he is inordinately proud,” Holmes talked about “his favorite subject—the prison system, the lack of opportunity for released prisoners, and his own future.” At one point he told Tubbs, “I was baptized Catholic, but . . . my Mother is God to me. She’s the closest material thing if you want to think about God that way.” Toward the end of the long article, Tubbs quoted the conflicting opinions of psychiatrists about Holmes’s mental condition: “One says he is ‘good’ and another says he is ‘bad.’ One says he is a pathological liar.” Any problems Holmes might have had Tubbs regarded as “prison-induced, . . . easily remedied through an effective rehabilitation program. He concluded that the escapee was “of a certainty, martyr to the proposition that there is something radically wrong in the Maryland State Penitentiary.”

On April 13, Judge Joseph Sherbow pronounced the new sentence: five years for the escape from the penitentiary, to run concurrently with five years for the armed robbery of Mrs. Ruiz and fifteen years for the assault with intent to murder policeman Plunkett, these latter terms to run consecutively to each other, for a total of twenty years. Along with the ten years yet to serve for burglary, Holmes now faced thirty years more in prison, which if served entirely would mean release in 1981.

Back at the penitentiary, for the next ten years at least, the now famous “Tunnel Joe” was a kind of hero to the other inmates, with whom he did not deign to socialize. Nor did he give up thinking about escape. He was subjected to frequent shakedowns and put into segregation for possession of contraband tools, including on one occasion a hacksaw blade sewn into the sole of his shoe from heel to toe. He seemed to enjoy making fun of the frisking process, coming out of his cell with his arms and hands held up, as if to say “I’m all yours.” But by the late 1960s he had become “Old Man Joe,” at least to the correctional officers. His hair had turned gray, and he suffered from arthritis. As the result of a stroke, his right shoulder drooped, his right hand was held in a claw, and he dragged his right foot when walking. The once natty Holmes no longer took interest in his personal appearance, leaving his shirttail hanging out and his fly open. According to one observer, he never spoke to the guards and performed his cleaning duties in the yard “like clockwork,” needing only to be pointed to the next place to do his sweeping. Perhaps because of his infirmities, he was paroled on October 27, 1970, with a little more than ten years left to serve.

Although no parole records of Holmes survive, a picture of his mental and
physical condition during his last years emerges from the recollections of his former parole officers. The first, Michael C. Davidson, remembers making a special trip in his car to pick up Holmes at the penitentiary and bring him to his office because, he says, “Holmes was like a baby coming into the world—no jetliners or Jones Falls Expressway existed twenty years before.” According to Davidson, the fifty-eight-year-old Holmes “looked 75, walked like an old man, stooped, shuffling, with no energy.” Nevertheless, it appears that Holmes was still up to having a little fun with his young supervisor, saying he had used a garden trowel to dig his tunnel, when no such tool was ever found or mentioned in the escapee’s statements.

Clearly, Holmes had become institutionalized by his long years in the penitentiary. Davidson and subsequent parole officers Alan Feikin and Mark Moessinger visited him every month at his sister’s house in the middle of the 900 block of Edmondson Avenue, across the street diagonally from the Enon Baptist Church. He lived on the second floor in the front room, which was furnished as austerely as a prison cell with only a metal cot, mattress, and green army blankets, and a folding chair—no radio or television. He wore loose, baggy, prison issue denim, with the pants cuffs rolled up, prison style. His parole officers remember him as a chainsmoker, the hardwood floor of his room being strewn with cigarette butts. His sister once called Davidson about a fire in the room, at which time the mattress had to be tossed out the window onto the sidewalk.

But Holmes managed to retain a sense of self-worth based on his memorable feat. Although he seemed mostly “quiet, sulky, and withdrawn,” Davidson remembers him saying that he wanted to get together with “The Birdman of Alcatraz” (inmate Robert Stroud, about whom a film was released in 1962) and became “agitated” when Davidson told him the Birdman was dead. And at one point, Davidson recalls, Holmes went to the offices of the Baltimore Afro-American newspaper hoping to get someone there to write up his escape story. 32

Little is known about Holmes’s last days. He was a member of the Enon Baptist Church on the corner, but given his slovenly dress and anti-social ways, it does not seem likely he attended services regularly, if at all. 33 Be that as it may, he remained a celebrity throughout Baltimore’s black community. 34

Sitting in his room all day and chainsmoking could only have worsened the health of this survivor of an earlier stroke. He died at the University of Maryland Hospital on April 17, 1973, and was buried at Mt. Auburn Cemetery without a headstone to mark his last descent underground. 35
NOTES

1. The only previous underground escape was made in 1889 by John Burke, who did not dig a tunnel but sawed the bars over a sewer opening and crawled through the pipe to the Jones Falls (“20 Escapes Made from Pen Since ’89,” Baltimore Evening Sun, February 19, 1951). A half dozen or so prisoners over the years have tried to tunnel out of the penitentiary but their attempts have all failed or were discovered in time. Only one escapee, who took an aerial route, matched Holmes’s planning and nerve. On December 13, 1946, twenty-nine-year-old Peter Bernackie made a running broad jump—seventeen feet horizontally and fifteen feet downward—from the top of a workshop building to the top of the east wall. He then dropped twenty-two more feet to the sidewalk and a waiting car (“Convict Aided in His Escape, Warden Says,” Baltimore Sun, December 14, 1946). According to retired Captain Robert L. Burrell, Bernackie had trained for weeks for the escape by jumping over a row of fifty-gallon drums, adding one at every stage until he could make the distance (interview with Robert Lee Burrell, August 1, 1988).

6. Ibid.
18. “‘Tunnel Joe’ is Captured Downtown,” Ibid.
19. Ibid.

20. A complete transcript of his interrogation was published a month later at the time of his trial. See “Holmes Answers Queries About Prison Escape,” Evening Sun, April 3, 1951.
21. The details here seem incomplete and puzzling. Perhaps Holmes used an electric drill (mentioned later) to drill the holes and then filed away the partitions between them with the nail driven in the end of the stick. The “forty days” has a biblical ring and is therefore suspicious. No matter—his feat still would have been impressive even if he had discovered the trap door already made.
22. The amount of water seems enormous, perhaps exaggerated. Moreover, no bailing instrument was ever found or mentioned in his statement.