Base Ballists Arrested: The London, Ontario Theft Case Against Billy Geer and Harry Luff

By Justin Mckinney

CREDITABLE TO THE PROFESSION.—Certain members of the New Haven professional base ball club have been arrested on a charge of larceny, alleged to have been committed in London, Ont., during their late visit. They put up at the Tecumseh House, and on leaving there it was observed that two of them, named Luff and Geer, carried away more baggage than they brought. On their arrival home the proprietors of the Tecumseh wrote to the Base Ball Association of New Haven, stating that a valuable coat had been stolen from a room adjoining that occupied by two members of the club. The result was the arrest of Geer and Luff, the search of their room, and the finding of a number of fine coats, one of which answered the description given of the lost one. Inside of the collor was inscribed, "D. Mackenzie, Sarnia, Cnt.," who is a brother of the Premier.

AMERICAN PRESS DISPATCHES.

BASE BALLISTS UNDER ARREST.

Luff, third baseman, and Billy Geer, left field of the New Haven base ball club, were arrested in New Haven this morning on the complaint of stealing watches and clothing of parties from Syracuse, N. Y., while on a tour with their club. Bail has been refused. The directors of the base ball association are now in secret session, and there is considerable excitement among base ballists.

etc.

Great excitement was caused among the New Haven base-ball players, yesterday, by the arrest of Henry T. Luff and William Geer, third baseman and left fielder of the New Haven nine, on a charge of stealing several coats, etc., during their recent trip to Canada. There is some doubt of their guilt, however, and the matter will be fully investigated.

Suspect # 1 - Billy Geer



Born ca. 1855 in New York City

Starred at Manhattan College from 1871-1874

Made pro debut in 1874

Utility man for New Haven

Considered one of most promising young infielders in baseball

Suspect # 2 - Harry Luff



Born September 14, 1852 in Philadelphia

Attended Polytechnic College and graduated as engineer - graduated first in his class

Promising amateur player in Philadelphia

New Haven had strong Philly contingent

Versatile player who could play every position

Scene of the Crime

The Tecumseh House Hotel in London, Ontario

Opened December 27, 1858 and cost a reported $100,000

Visitors over the years included Walt Whitman, John L. Sullivan, and the Prince of Wales and possibly a fugitive Louis Riel

160 rooms - regularly hosted sports teams

Owned by Edwin M. Moore and James T. Conklin



The Tecumseh House, west side Richmond St., between York



New Haven Elm Citys

The Elm Citys had joined the National Association for 1875 season

Recruited many young players to strengthen their nine

Billy Geer and Harry Luff were among the young recruits

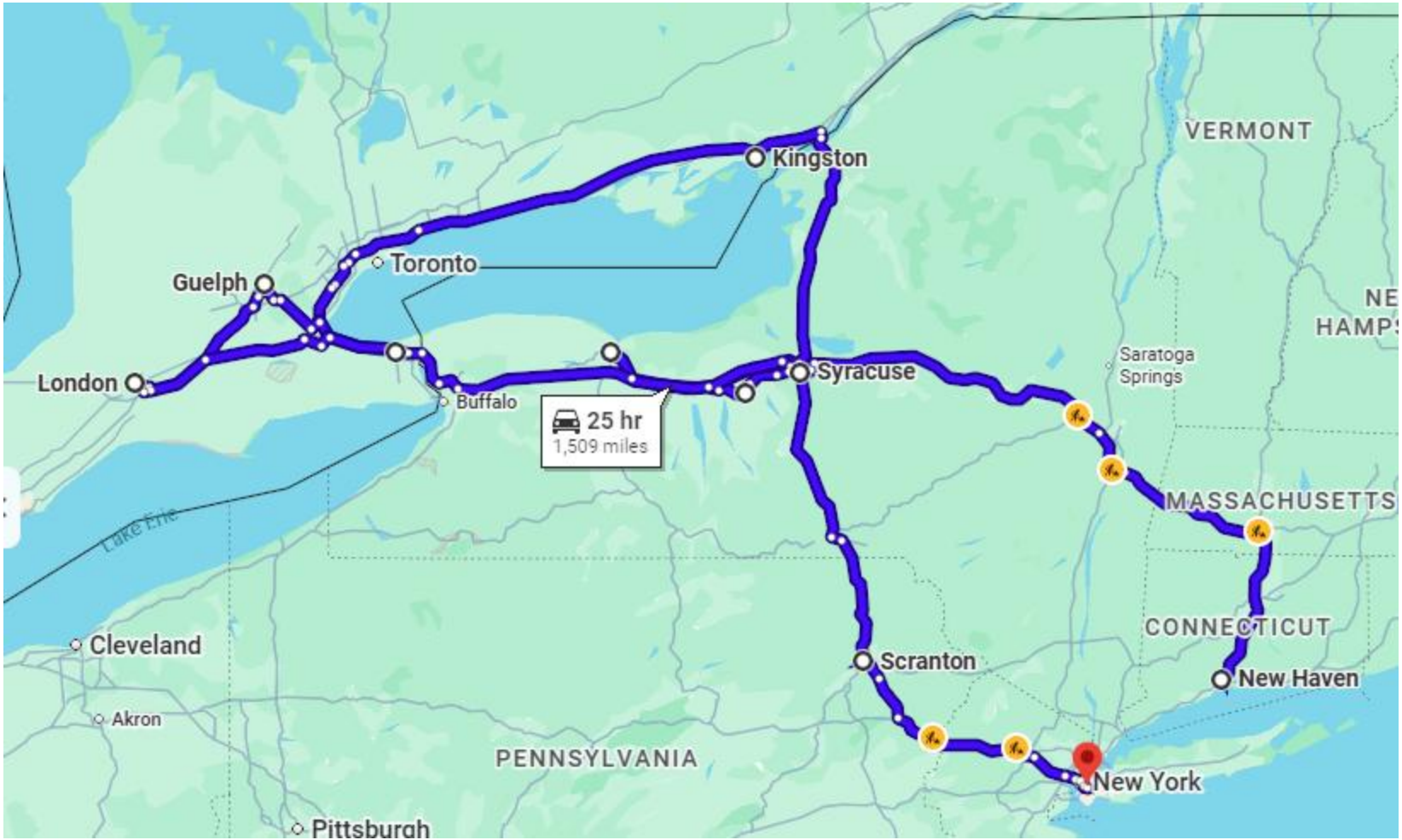
Club was dismal and drew poorly

In late August went on exhibition tour of New York, Canada and Pennsylvania

Common practice to make extra revenue

The Tour

August 26 New Haven vs. Syracuse @ Syracuse, NY **28-4 W**
August 27 New Haven vs. Franklins @ Auburn, NY **13-3 W**
August 28 New Haven vs. Rochester @ Rochester, NY **10-1 W**
August 31 New Haven vs. St. Lawrence @ Kingston, ON **15-3 W**
September 1 New Haven vs. St. Lawrence @ Kingston, ON **13-6 W**
September 3 New Haven vs. Guelph @ St. Catharines, ON **10-2 W**
September 4 New Haven vs. Guelph @ Guelph, ON **5-7 L**
September 6 New Haven vs. London @ London, ON **19-4 W**
September 9 New Haven vs. Scranton @ Scranton, PA **15-7 W**
September 11 New Haven vs. Brooklyn @ Brooklyn, NY **13-6 W**


VERMONT
Kingston
Toronto
Guelph
London
Buffalo
25 hr
1,509 miles
Syracuse
Saratoga
Springs
MASSACHUSETTS
CONNECTICUT
New Haven
Scranton
New York
Cleveland
Akron
PENNSYLVANIA
Pittsburgh
Lake Erie

The Timeline

New Haven papers published detailed account of events:

September 5 - New Haven arrived in London and stayed at Tecumseh House

September 6 - New Haven defeats Tecumsehs 19-4 and stays at hotel

September 7 - New Haven leaves to travel to Scranton, PA for next contest on September 9

	O	R	BH	PO	A	E
Brown, c f	4	0	1	0	0	1
[illegible]ilds, 1 b	3	1	2	15	0	1
[illegible]an, l f	3	1	1	0	0	1
[illegible]evlin 2 b	3	1	2	4	2	2
Hunter, c	3	1	0	2	1	2
McLean, p	2	0	2	0	4	5
Moore, r f	3	0	1	1	0	4
Jury, 3 b	3	0	0	1	5	3
Hyman, s s	3	0	2	1	4	3
	27	4	11	27	16	22

NEW HAVENS.

	O	R	BH	PO	A	E
Somerville, 2 b	3	3	3	2	3	0
McKelvey, r f	2	4	3	0	0	1
Geer, 3 b	2	3	3	2	2	1
Luff, l f	3	2	2	2	2	1
McGinley, c	3	2	3	11	0	2
Latham, 1 b	4	0	1	8	0	0
Wright, s s	4	1	0	1	1	0
Tipper, c f	5	1	2	0	0	0
Nichols, p	1	3	2	1	0	0
	27	19	19	27	8	5

New Haven	2	1	2	6	4	0	2	2	0	—19
Tecumseh	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	— 4

Umpire—Mr. E. Moore.

A game of base ball will be played on the

The Timeline

September 9 - Team in Scranton - several teammates report that Geer and Luff travelling with extra luggage

September 12 - club arrives home

September 13 - letter from London received by New Haven directors and given to police

September 14 - Geer and Luff arrested by Officer Reilly and Brewer of New Haven police force on suspicion of theft

The Spoils

Geer and Luff stayed at the Chaplain House in New Haven

Police searched their room and found the missing coat, along with several other coats, a gold watch, and a meerschaum pipe

Officer Sweet had previously suspected that Geer and Luff had stolen a revolver from his room - gun not found

Geer claimed to have purchased the coat for $35 in Canada, but had told another teammate that he had purchased it for $12.

Motives?

Player salaries in the National Association were modest - Dick Higham was highest paid player in 1875 at $2,200 per year

Youngsters like Geer and Luff would likely be making less than half that

New Haven was a poor club with poor attendance

After defeat at Guelph on Sept 4, reports club was going to disband, and players released

Threat of losing job + low pay

The Proceedings

Conflicting reports of what happened next

Geer and Luff were held while awaiting trial

Conflicting sources say pair were bailed out, while others said bail refused

Geer hired former semi-pro teammate and future NYC judge William H. Kelly as his attorney

Trial scheduled for the following week

Trial?

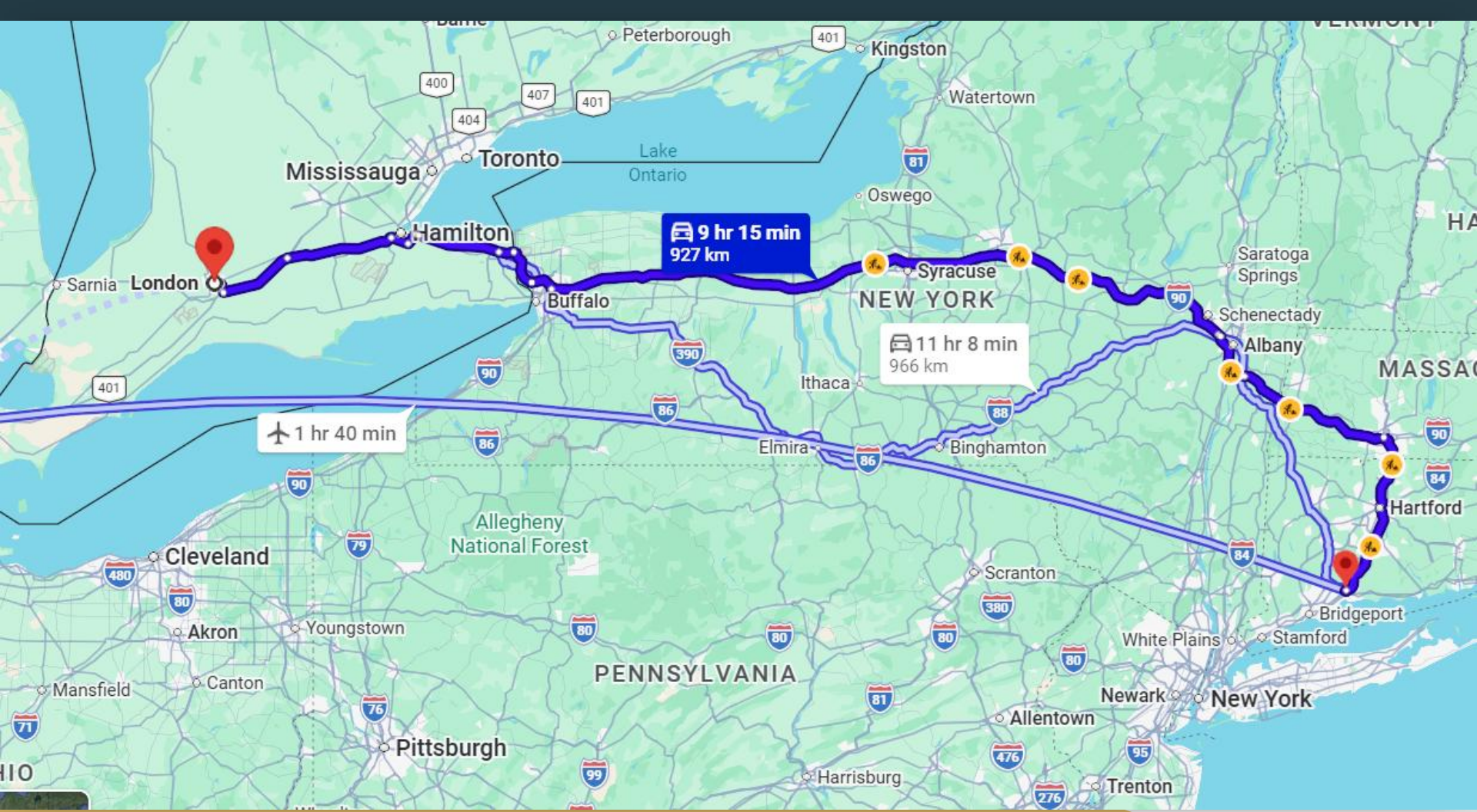
The trial was scheduled for week of September 21

Coverage of the arrest and case had appeared nationwide, with *New York Clipper* publishing lengthy editorial

London papers were strangely quiet about the incident

Geer and Luff were in possession of the coat that was reported stolen, but case required witness testimony

Witnesses would need to travel from London to New Haven to testify at their own expense


Peterborough
Kingston
Watertown
Toronto
Mississauga
Lake Ontario
Oswego
Hamilton
9 hr 15 min
927 km
Sarnia
London
Buffalo
Syracuse
NEW YORK
Saratoga Springs
Schenectady
Albany
11 hr 8 min
966 km
Ithaca
1 hr 40 min
Elmira
Binghamton
Hartford
Allegheny National Forest
Cleveland
Scranton
Akron
Youngstown
Bridgeport
White Plains
Stamford
Mansfield
Canton
PENNSYLVANIA
Newark
New York
Allentown
Pittsburgh
Harrisburg
Trenton

Results

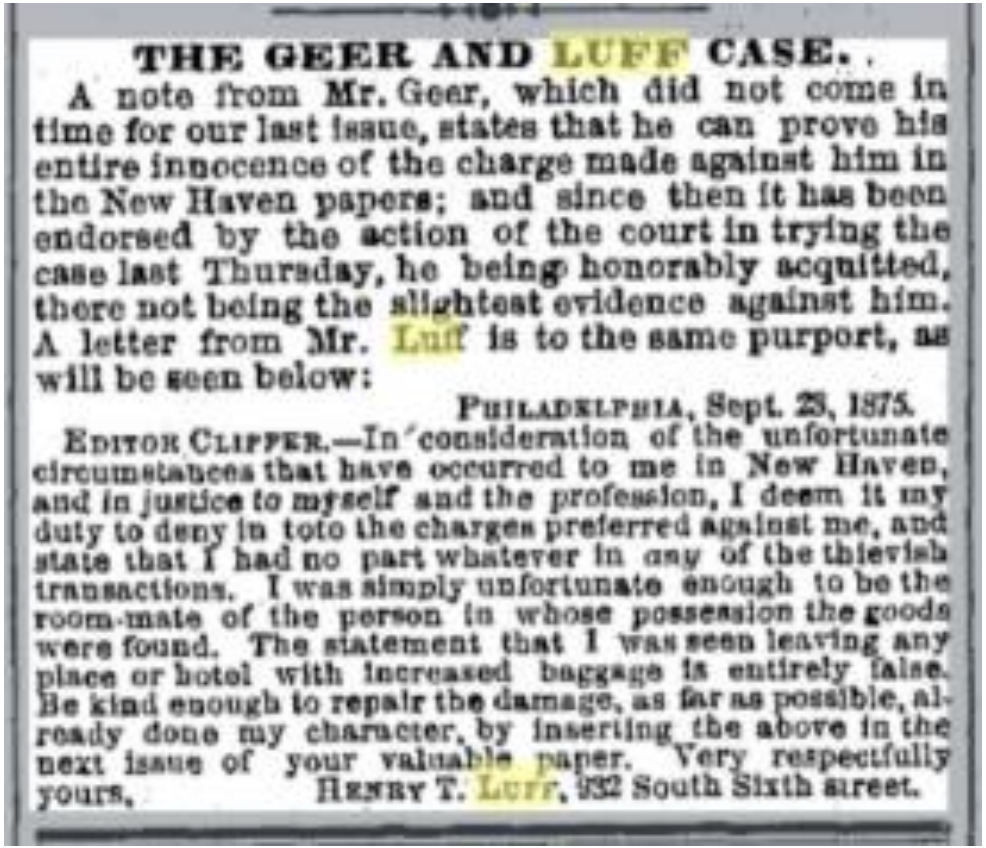
Not surprisingly, no witnesses were willing to make the 900+ km voyage

Geer was released on September 23 and Luff shortly after

Charges dropped due to lack of witnesses

Luff and Geer were dropped by New Haven as result of the arrest

They were not formally punished by National Association



THE GEER AND LUFF CASE.

A note from Mr. Geer, which did not come in time for our last issue, states that he can prove his entire innocence of the charge made against him in the New Haven papers; and since then it has been endorsed by the action of the court in trying the case last Thursday, he being honorably acquitted, there not being the slightest evidence against him. A letter from Mr. Luff is to the same purport, as will be seen below:

PHILADELPHIA, Sept. 23, 1875.

EDITOR CLIPPER.—In consideration of the unfortunate circumstances that have occurred to me in New Haven, and in justice to myself and the profession, I deem it my duty to deny in toto the charges preferred against me, and state that I had no part whatever in any of the thievish transactions. I was simply unfortunate enough to be the room-mate of the person in whose possession the goods were found. The statement that I was seen leaving any place or hotel with increased baggage is entirely false. Be kind enough to repair the damage, as far as possible, already done my character, by inserting the above in the next issue of your valuable paper. Very respectfully yours, HENRY T. LUFF, 932 South Sixth street.

Both men honorably acquitted

Luff claimed his only crime was sharing a room with Billy Geer

Both men found jobs with independent clubs in 1876

Rap Sheet - Billy Geer

Billy Geer's career continued through 1885

In 1887, began a second career as the most prolific check forger in America

8 different prison stints, each with different name

35+ aliases, forgeries in at least 35 states, travelled to dozens of countries

Died in 1928 under name of Bruce Barrington, true identity not discovered until 2020


WILLIAM GEER
ALIAS DWIGHT



Pinkerton's National Detective Agency.

FOUNDED BY ALLAN PINKERTON, 1850.

ROBT. A. PINKERTON, New York, }
WM. A. PINKERTON, Chicago, } Principals. GEO. D. BANGS, Gen'l Sup't. New York.

D. ROBERTSON, Ass't Gen'l Sup't Middle Division, CHICAGO.

JAS. MCPARLAND, Ass't Gen'l Sup't Western Division, DENVER.

ATTORNEYS, SEWARD, GUTHRIE & STEELE, New York.

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BULLETIN NO. 10.

NEW YORK, November 23, 1897.

FORGERY! CAUTION!

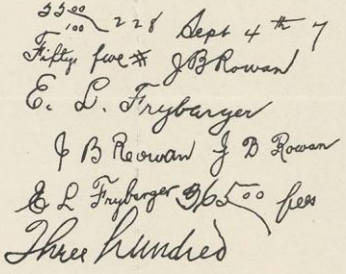
TO BANKS, BANKERS, AND CHIEFS OF POLICE:

For THE AMERICAN BANKERS' ASSOCIATION; we call your attention to a forger named W. H. GEER, alias R. H. W. DWIGHT, etc., who is swindling banks, hotels, merchants and individuals with bogus checks usually purporting to be certified.

In these swindles GEER has used the aliases of J. B. ROWAN, R. A. MYERS, J. R. MOTT and EDWARD LYON, but will doubtless use other names. He has operated in several cities in different sections, makes quick and distant moves after each swindle and is liable to turn up in any city or town this circular reaches. He STOPS AT FIRST-CLASS HOTELS AND FREQUENTS BUCKET SHOPS.

Below is a photograph of GEER and samples of his hand-writing. This portrait, although taken in 1885 is a good one of him, excepting that he is now older.





He is described, as follows:

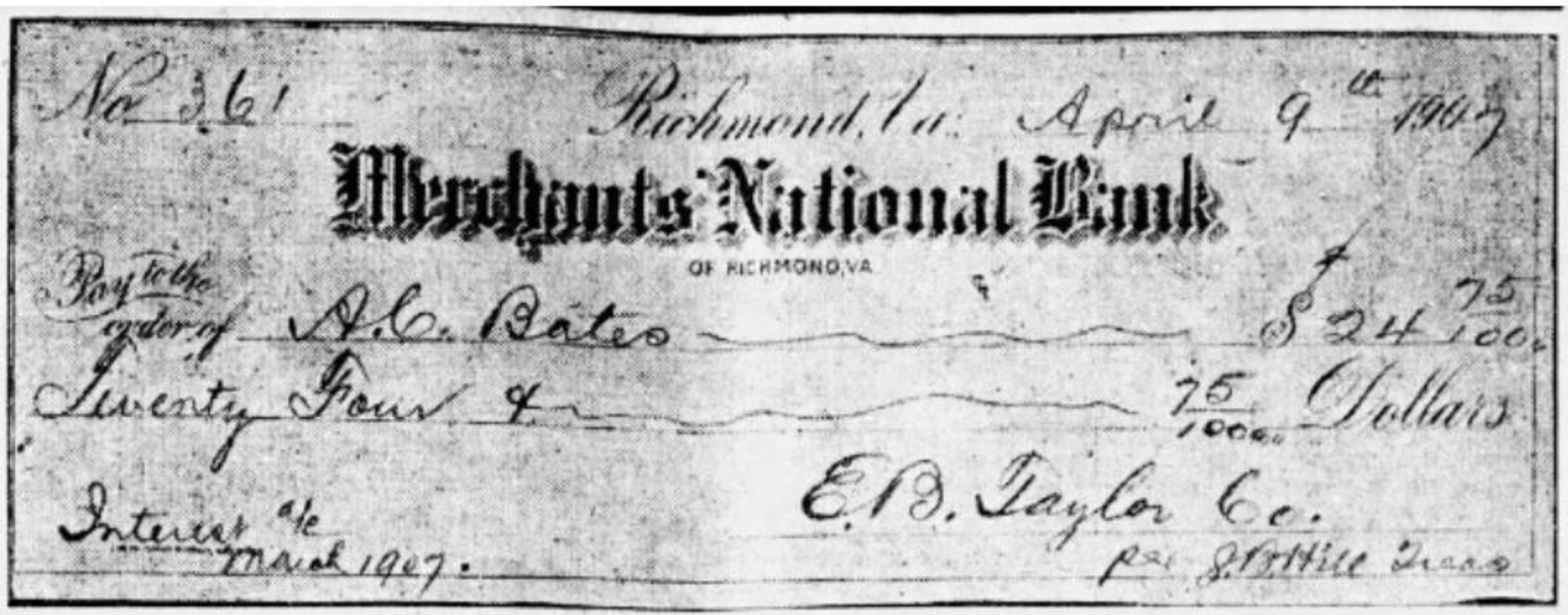
Name: W. H. Geer.	Aliases: R. H. W. Dwight, Geo. M. Miles, J. B. Rowan, R. A. Myers, J. R. Mott, Ed. Lyon.		
Occupation	Salesman	Criminal Occupation	Forger and Swindler
Residence	Syracuse, N. Y.	Nativity	American
Age	37 years	Height	5 feet 6 or 7 inches
Weight	150 pounds	Build	Medium
Complexion	Very dark	Color of hair	Dark brown, mixed with gray
Style of beard	Mustache	Color of same	Dark brown with gray
Eyes	Dark blue	Nose	Regular

Remarks:—Good conversationalist; dresses neatly; scar over lip; mole on right and left shoulder; used to be a professional baseball player.

Merchants have suffered mostly from GEER's swindles, but he has occasionally successfully defrauded a bank. He pretends to be a travelling salesman, claiming to represent among others the National Cash Register Co., Dayton, Ohio; Grote Manufacturing Co., Evansville, Ind.; Bartholomew & Co., Faint Manufacturers, Michigan City, Ind., and R. D. Lewis & Co., Akron, Ohio. His usual course is to win the confidence of a hotel keeper or merchant, then open in their presence a letter purporting to be from the firm he claims to represent, taking from it a check which the letter states is sent him for expenses. GEER then requests his victim to cash the check, and when refused asks to be identified at the bank and in this way usually obtains the currency. Sometimes he purchases a small bill of goods, offering one of these checks in payment and receives the difference in cash. Should GEER appear in your city promptly cause his arrest and notify

or PINKERTON'S NATIONAL DETECTIVE AGENCY, at its nearest office,

WM. A. PINKERTON, 201 5th Avenue, Chicago, Ills.
ROBT. A. PINKERTON, 57 Broadway, New York City, N. Y.



No 361 Richmond, Va. April 9th 1907

Merchants National Bank

OF RICHMOND, VA

Pay to the order of A. C. Bates $24 75/100

Twenty Four 75/100 Dollars

Interest a/c March 1907.

E. B. Taylor Co.

per S. Pettus Treas

CHECK FORGED ON E. B. TAYLOR COMPANY, OF RICHMOND.

Rap Sheet - Harry Luff

Harry Luff's career also continued until 1885 - notoriously violent drunk - released multiple times due to drinking

1874 - shot a man during an argument at a Philadelphia tavern

1877 - arrested for assaulting a man in Fall River, MA

1881 - charged with accessory to murder after two women died due to "nostrums" he gave them to induce an abortion

1883 - drunkenly assaulted a Louisville policeman

1884 - pulled a knife on a Cincinnati street car driver

1889 - arrested for neglecting wife and four kids

Rap Sheet - Harry Luff

1891 - sentenced to one year in prison for spousal abuse - judge called him “the worst person in the world without exception”

“You have beaten your wife, neglected your family, blackened the eyes of your sister, blackguarded your father who has kept you for years, and done everything else you could to be in keeping with your habitual drunkenness. You have tried to get rid of your wife who is a good woman, and I think it is about time the community was rid of a beast like you.”

Died in 1916 in Philadelphia

Were They Guilty?

Geer and Luff were in possession of the coat that was reported stolen

Geer offered conflicting stories about how he acquired the coat

They were at scene of the crime

Luff pointed finger at Geer

Both Geer and Luff were among the most notoriously unsavory characters of 19th century baseball

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