

ISSUE NUMBER 183- JUNE 25, 2022
GEORGE DAMON'S MAY 1901 AFFIDAVIT
WHICH ALONG WITH THE INFLUENCE OF THE FRENCH CONSULATE
LED TO THE APRIL 1902 RELEASE OF AMEER BEN ALI FROM PRISON

I have heard of the murder of one "Shakespeare" attributed to one "Frenchy," Amer Ben Ali, which happened on April 24, 1891. I had a quantity of grading to do in front of my place in the spring of 1891, and I went down to Castle Garden and hired several men to do the work. After getting through this work I kept one of the men to assist my man, who had broken his arm. He took care of the horses. As near as I can recollect, his name was Frank. I do not recollect his other name. I had this man working for me about a month before April 24, 1891. The morning of the murder of "Shakespeare" I went out to my stable and found only my regular man with the broken arm. This was about 6 o'clock in the morning. I asked him where the other man was, and he said that Frank had been out all night and had gone to bed, and that I had better not disturb him, as he was pretty ugly. I did not see him, but at the regular time came to New York. Frank left me between five and ten days later, without any notice. One of my servants, named Mary, went up to the barn to clean up the room said Frank had occupied and found a key in the room. I think in the table drawer. She made the remark that the key had the same number on it as the room mentioned by the papers as the one in which "Shakespeare" was killed. When I returned home that night they called my attention to it. The girl also found a shirt with bloodstains on it in the room. I put the key in my pocket and brought it to New York. It was an ordinary bronze key of the cheap kind and had a tag on it numbered 31.

The next day I told one of my employees, who was familiar with the circumstances, and asked him to walk to the scene of the murder with me, as I did not care to go to that locality alone. We went into a saloon on Catharine Street, the same hotel where the murder had been committed, and asked for a cigar. We sat down at a table and compared the key I had and the tag with the keys on the board. It was exactly the same style of key and same style of small brass tag with the corners clipped. While sitting there a man came down, laid a key on the bar and went out. We got up and called for a glass of beer and laid the key which I had beside the other key and they were exactly alike, the figures were the same size and shape, and the shape of the tag and key were the same. As a practical printer, and being familiar with figures, I am positive that the stamped figures on the key and those on the keyboard were made from the same dies.

The man whom I refer to in the beginning of my statement, known to me as Frank, was, I think, a foreigner. I knew that he had been a sailor because he had done some splicing of ropes for me. He was a man about 5 feet 10 inches tall, rather strong, but not very fleshy, and about thirty-five years old. He had a very sullen disposition. He spoke in broken English, and, in my opinion, was a Dane.

He left me in the night and I have never seen him since. When this man came to work for me he had only a bundle of clothes, he left nothing but the shirt and key in his room. It would be impossible for me to locate the maid servant and the man servant. The only thing I remember is that the man servant's name was Henry. My reason for not coming forward with these facts at that time was the belief that "Frenchy" would be quite as well off where he is as at liberty. Furthermore, I did not care to have my name mentioned in connection with the case. But I now feel that it is my duty to make this affidavit. I believe that the man in my employ was the real murderer of that woman.

There is no reasonable ground to doubt that the key found by me, abandoned by the man Frank, was the key of the room in which old "Shakespeare" was murdered. This act was perfectly clear to me when I learned that the murder had been committed in Room No. 31, and that the key found in Frank's clothing corresponded exactly with every other key used in the hotel. Why did I keep quiet? Well, because the murder was creating worldwide interest, and I dreaded the publicity that my evidence would be certain to give me. I dreaded it as a business man and in a social way for my family. Then, again, I felt certain that although 'Frenchy' was not guilty of the murder he was a dangerous character better under restraint than at liberty. So I kept silent.

Prominent Men In The Release Of Ameer Ben Ali

**George Granville Damon
(Photo discovered by Howard
Brown, March 6, 2022)**



**John R. Lee -NJ Contractor
Whose Actions Induced Damon
To Turn To A Friend For Advice
Concerning The Room Key**

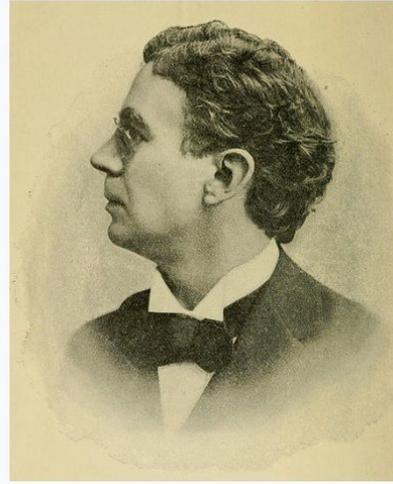


**Key to Room 31, photographed
by Luke Jerod Kummer, in
the NY State Archive, Albany**



Friend of George Damon and Governor of New Jersey, Foster M. Voorhees. It was in no small part due to a letter written by Voorhees vouching for Damon and the story he presented explaining the decade long retention of the key to Room 31 that convinced Governor Benjamin B. Odell of New York to sign an order of commutation which released Ali from prison in 1902. It would take one year from the time of Voorhees' letter to Odell for Ali to be released.

Foster McGowan Voorhees



The People of the State of New York,

To ALL TO WHOM THESE PRESENTS SHALL COME:

Whereas, at a Court held in and for our County of New York in the month of July 1897 George Grant was convicted of Murder, second degree and was thereupon sentenced to be imprisoned in the State Prison for the term of his natural life under which conviction and sentence thereupon the said Convict now lies imprisoned; and it being represented unto us that it is proper to commute or change the said sentence to a less period: **THEREFORE, KNOW YE**, That by these presents we do hereby commute the said punishment to imprisonment in the State Prison for the term of 10 Years, Months, 10 days, actual time from July 10 1897, and will terminate April 10, 1902 1899

This commutation is granted upon the express condition that if the said George Grant shall be hereafter convicted of any felony committed during the period between the date of his discharge by reason hereof and the date of the expiration of the term hereby commuted, he shall be deemed an escaped convict with respect to the said commuted term, and in addition to the penalty which may be imposed for the felony committed during the interval aforesaid, he shall be compelled to serve in the prison or penitentiary in which he may be confined for such felony, or if not confined therefor by any prison or penitentiary, then in the State Prison the portion of the term hereby commuted now remaining unexpired at the date of his conviction

In Testimony Whereof, We have caused these our Letters to be made Patent, and the Great Seal of our said State to be hereunto affixed.

[L. S.]

Witness, Benjamin B. Odell, Governor of our said State, at our City of Albany, the seventeenth day of April in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and ninety-two

Passed the Secretary's Office the 16th day of April 1902 1899
George G. Tennant
 Second Deputy Secretary of State.

Benjamin Barker Odell Jr.

