

# THE RESCUE OF AMEER BEN ALI

By NINA and HOWARD BROWN

**In the last issue, along with the photograph of Ameer Ben Ali, an article was transcribed which featured a prominent stage actor proclaiming he had been told by Ali's court interpreter that Ali had confessed to being in the same room as murder victim Carrie Brown and inferred that he had committed the heinous crime.**

Whether Ali stated that he committed the crime is irrelevant, since he didn't murder Carrie Brown. He didn't have the key which was necessary to lock the door to Room 31. Within days, a handful of people associated with the real killer's employer knew that and it would not be until a decade had passed that this miscarriage of justice would be resolved, resulting in the pardon and exoneration of the Algerian. There were three efforts towards pardoning Ali; one following the sentencing, another in 1897, and finally in 1901.

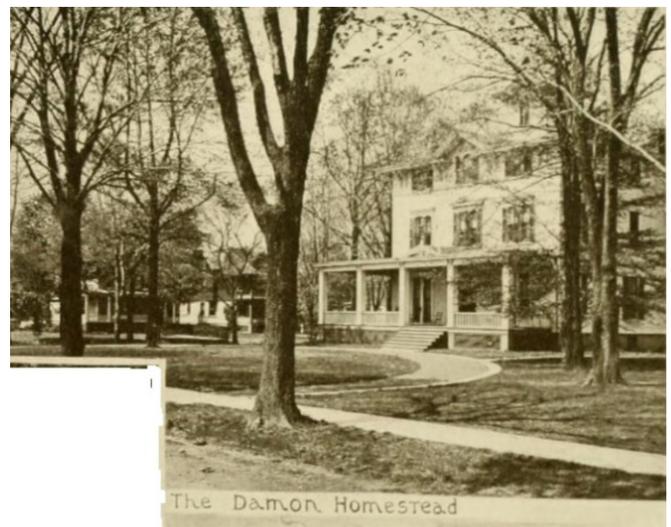
The proof of his innocence all along was the key to Room 31 at the East River Hotel being taken by the killer and left by the same at the residence of his then employer, 51-year-old George Damon of Cranford, New Jersey.

Damon was the proprietor of a printing firm at 44 Beekman Street, Manhattan, which was not far from the Brown murder site. Damon was a pillar of his community in Cranford, situated in Union County 18 miles from Manhattan. In addition to his printing firm, he dabbled in real estate, held patents, and was a member of the Chamber of Commerce. The photo opposite is of the Damon residence as it looked 100 years ago.

There are a few articles already available on JTRForums.com which refer to the activity that ensued after the murder of Carrie Brown, covering the murderer's flight and the build up to Ali's pardon some ten years after the murder. Most are from New York, with a few from other sources in the States.

With that in mind, we thought it might be interesting to share the following article from George Damon's home

town newspaper, the *Cranford Chronicle*. The article previously appeared on June 1st in the *New York Sun*.



## DAMON COMES TO FRENCHY'S AID

*Cranford Chronicle*  
Cranford, New Jersey  
June 4th, 1901

### PUBLICITY'S PET

Truth is stranger than fiction. Nothing that the most ingenious press agent ever devised for the purpose of keeping his employer in the public eye will bear comparison with the actual events which from time to time thrust George Damon into the very focus of popular attention.

Who was the hero of the famous Euchre Row of three or four years ago? George Damon. Whose name is now upon a million lips as the discoverer of the key to Room 31 of the East River Hotel Hotel and the key to the Old Shakespeare murder mystery? And echo answers – George Damon.



The *New York Sun* of June 2 had an extraordinary story about the discovery that George Damon has possession of a key that may be of material assistance in clearing Ameer Ben Ali, better known as Frenchy, of the murder of the woman known as Old Shakespeare. The tragedy took place in April 1891. Frenchy was convicted of the crime and sentenced to life imprisonment.

The key comes to light through George Damon, a dealer in printer's materials at 44 Beekman Street [Manhattan], who lives at Cranford, N.J., with the history of its finding and retention at his home on account of an unwillingness to face the publicity of coming forward with it at that time, a belief that "Frenchy was of a character such that he should be in jail anyway, and a fear of the big, ugly Dane,<sup>1</sup> who Mr. Damon believes committed the murder."<sup>2</sup>

Mr. Damon says that about a month before the murder of 'Old Shakespeare' on April 23, 1891, having some grading to do at his place in Cranford, he went to Castle Garden and hired a big foreigner whom he knew only as Frank and whom he took to be a Dane. After the grading was finished the Dane was retained as an assistant about the stable and grounds, Mr. Damon's regular man being partly incapacitated by reason of an accident. On the morning of April 24, about 6 o'clock, Damon went out to his stable and not seeing the Dane about asked his other man where Frank was. His man told him that the Dane was upstairs asleep, that he had been out all night and had come home very ugly, and that Mr. Damon would be likely to have trouble if he disturbed him. Mr. Damon therefore didn't disturb him, but came to the city as usual about 8am.

Between five and ten days later,<sup>3</sup> Mr. Damon says, Frank left his employ abruptly. He disappeared in the night and Mr. Damon has never heard of him since. When he came to Mr. Damon's he brought with him only a small bundle

of clothes. When he went away he took this with him. When Mrs. Damon sent one of her maid servants to the barn to clean out the room Frank had occupied, the girl found there a bloody shirt and a brass key, the only articles the Dane had left in the room. The key was attached to a brass tag on which was stamped the number 31. This was the number of the room in which 'Shakespeare' was murdered, and the key to which had been taken away by the man who occupied the room with her.

The newspapers had told all about the missing key. The *Sun* had published a picture of another key belonging to the same hotel just like the missing one.



The maid told Mrs. Damon of the finding of the bloody shirt and the key in the barn room, and remarked that the number on the tag attached to the key was the same as the number of the room in which 'Old Shakespeare' had been murdered. When Mr. Damon came home he was informed of what had been found and the next day when he came to the city he took one of his employees and went around to the saloon hotel where the murder was done and sitting down ordered some cigars. From the table they studied the keys to the other rooms of the hotel hanging on the keyboard and saw that they were like the one found at Cranford.

While they were smoking, a man came downstairs from the hotel and, laying a key down on the bar, went out. Damon and his employee walked up to the bar and

1 This newspaper's description of the Dane doesn't jibe with eyewitness Mary Miniters' description. While both Kelly – the night clerk at the Glenmore Hotel – and Miniters described the man as being 5'8" or 5'9", Miniters described him as being 'thin in build' (see *New York Evening World*, April 25 1891).

2 The most likely reason that Damon didn't come forward was the negative publicity any connection to the East River Hotel murder would generate for himself, being a pillar of the Cranford community, his family, and his business. One article we found concerning Damon had him firing his pistol at some burglars, and another had Damon getting involved in rough-house activity on a ferry. Damon also had male manual laborers on his premises too, so the 'fear' factor seems less believable than the more likely reason of negative publicity that his name and that of his family would have being associated with a murderer of a prostitute in the seamiest part of New York.

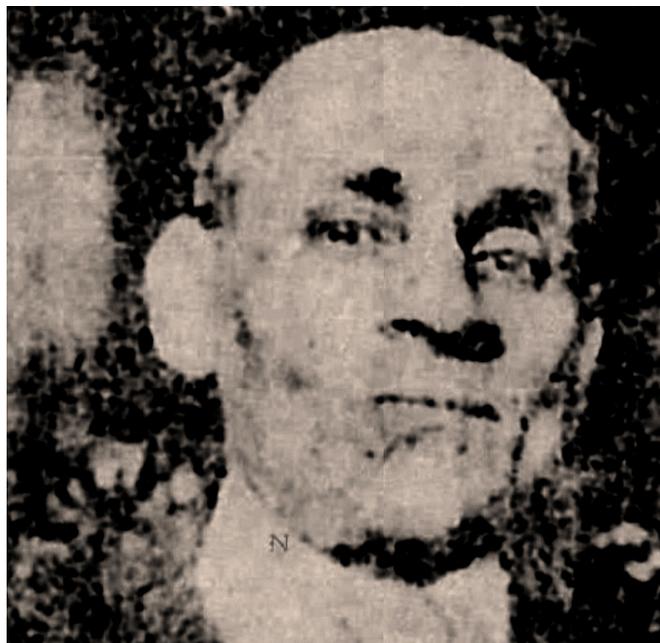
3 It seems unlikely that the Danish farmhand left '5-10' days later, as reported in some newspapers. We think it more likely that his departure was immediate (same day, or probably the following morning). As to his seeking a room at the Glenmore Hotel, it doesn't seem likely that he would ask the clerk at the counter for a room on the cuff. Kelly didn't know him, and wouldn't issue a key to an unknown man or woman. If he didn't have any money as he claimed, the issue of how he made it back to New Jersey (one, possibly two ferry rides and a train ride) is presented. We know that the farmhand had a coin purse from the testimony of Mary Miniters. Evidently, he had enough to cover the room, the pail of beer for Brown, and the subsequent escape home.



*The Glenmore Hotel (at left), corner of Catherine Street and Water Street*

ordered some beer, and while there compared the key just laid down with the one they had brought with them and found that the two were exactly alike. Mr. Damon says that his familiarity with type enables him to say that the number '31' on his key was stamped on the brass tag with the same die which had made the numbers on the tag attached to the other key and the numbers also on the rest of the keys hanging up. The two men left the hotel and for reasons already mentioned Mr. Damon refrained from coming forward and informing the authorities of what he had found out. He did tell his discoveries, however, to a friend, John Lee, the well-known contractor and it was partly on Mr. Lee's advice, he says, that he kept his information to himself after that. An affidavit by Mr. Lee saying that Mr. Damon told him of this ten years ago has been sent to Gov. Odell, and there is among the papers also an affidavit by Mr. Damon's employee corroborating Mr. Damon. Brennan works for Damon as a truck man.

Ever since the trial and conviction of 'Frenchy', there has been a wide-spread conviction in this town (NYC) that the Algerian was 'railroaded' to prison as means to stop the public clamor that someone should be punished for the murder. 'Frenchy' has become insane in his imprisonment and is now in the hospital for the criminally insane at Matteawan, where Gov. Odell saw him not long ago.



Ameer Ben Ali



The following excerpt from an article published during Ali's trial may give the answer to what happened to the 'Danish farmhand' (In one newspaper, the *Daily People*, he is referred to as a Swede). Personally, we consider the story that the old seaman who came forward told

as being credible. It may also explain the reason why a decade later articles were published which stated that the Danish farmhand/seaman had left for the Orient and that it was known that he had subsequently died. It's not known whether the NYPD investigated the sailor's claims at any point or, for that matter, if Ameer Ben Ali's defense team did either.

*New York Evening World*  
June 25, 1891

**HE KNEW THE RIPPER**

A Sailor Who Fled This City in April and Went to China

\*

Mariner Yansen Comes to the Court  
Where Ben Ali is Being Tried

\*

While the lawyers and jurors waited for the opening of court, a gray-haired ancient mariner entered the building inquiring of those he met for lawyer Friend (One of the three attorneys for the defense). He said he believed he had information that would startle the court.

In a quaintly twisted English, the old man said he was Charles Yansen, a Swedish sailor. That he said from this port on the West Indiaman Meridian two days after New York was startled by the discovery that Jack the Ripper, or his close imitator, had been operating in the lowest slums of New York. "I think I can prove the man here is not the Ripper," said Charles Johnson solemnly. (*Note: The beginning of the article states his name as Yansen*)

Then he related that on the Meridian was a young man of medium height, light moustache and tattooed skin, who shipped as a sailor.

(*Note: George Damon picked the 'Danish farmhand' up at Castle Garden in lower Manhattan, the area where recent arrivals and immigrants debarked*).

This young man seemed to know all about the butchery of 'Old Shakespeare', and he said the New York police would never catch him. "I asked him why he thought so and he said he would bet a sovereign that he knew. Then he laughed and said. 'We are outside of the law of the United States now, aren't we?'"

Johnson says that this young man, who answers the description of Carrie Brown's companion of the night of the murder, shipped on a coolie ship at Jamaica, bound for China. He told the story to lawyer Friend and it will be investigated.



NINA and HOWARD BROWN are the proprietors of JTRforums.com.