



ELMER, SALEM COUNTY, N. J., FRIDAY, JUNE 30, 1905

BOSTWICK KANDLE MARRIAGE

The Daring Thieves of Elmer

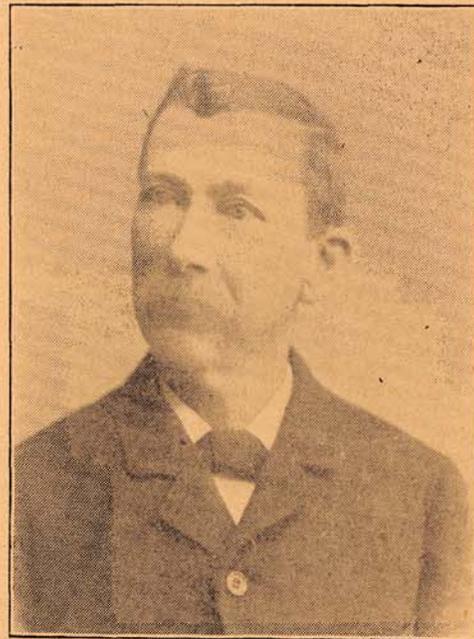
The sound of a bullet whizzing past his ear wasn't necessarily anything new for Sedgwick R. Sithens. Getting shot at had been part of his life back when he was a private with the 12th New Jersey Infantry Regiment during the Civil War.

But this wasn't some southern battlefield—this was his New Jersey hometown.

by Gordon Bond

DARING THIEVES BLOW OPEN SAFE; ROB ELMER POST OFFICE OF \$800

Escape with the Booty after a Noisy Revolver Battle with Marshall Sedgwick Sithens. No clew to the whereabouts of the Robbers



Watchman Sedgwick R. Sithens who exchanged several shots with the Elmer Post-office robbers Monday night

Shortly after twelve o'clock Monday night the safe in the Elmer post office was blown open and about eight hundred dollars in money and stamps taken. The first hint of the robbery was when watchman S. R. Sithen was returning from the wrapper factory in the direction of the post office where he was shot at by some person whom he couldn't see. He heard a bullet whistle by his ear. He returned to the factory and then started back to the post office but before reaching there he heard an explosion and thinking it might be at the bank which adjoins the post office, rushed to that point. As he reached the front door of the bank he was commanded to halt by a man who stepped out from between the post office and bank building, and who said, "Get out of there you S— of a B—!" and about the same time Mr. Sithen sent a bullet at him. As they dodged about several shots were exchanged, some say twenty and others who heard the fusillade say that thirty shots were fired. Mr. Sithen had a six shooter but no extra cartridges with him so that the burglars did the most of the shooting. Marks were left on the buildings where the bullets

times during the past few days and who was in the post office once at least and purchased a postage stamp. He was also at the hotel Monday night and purchased a quart of whiskey.

It was discovered Tuesday morning that a plain envelope containing fifty-nine dollars had been overlooked by the thieves, and other cash left in their haste, amounted in all to nearly a hundred dollars in all.

The advantage of telephone communication and night service were illustrated when F. Wentzell began to warn up the wires immediately after the robbery. The Prosecutor at Salem was called up and surrounding cities and towns notified so that before the rogues had gotten far from town officers were on the lookout and prepared to watch trains and ferries for suspicious characters.

YOUNG MAN ARRESTED

A young man was arrested at Bridgeton, early Tuesday morning on suspicion of being implicated in the robbery but gave a satisfactory account of himself to the Mayor and was released. He had been to Glassboro to see his best girl and walk-



MR. H
THE

of our firm
ru

Th
Ju

All need
eyes or wish
glasses are

Pine
BRID

4th
Cele

AT A

The ladies
will serve
broiled ham

Maple
So

Supper w
and continu

Price f

Ice cream
be on sale.

Music an
noon and ev

Addresses
of Trenton,
Loway M. B

Stock and
of Alloway.

Speaking
p. m. Mr.
in order to
home.

By C

The P

The atten
Sunday-sch
vate parties.

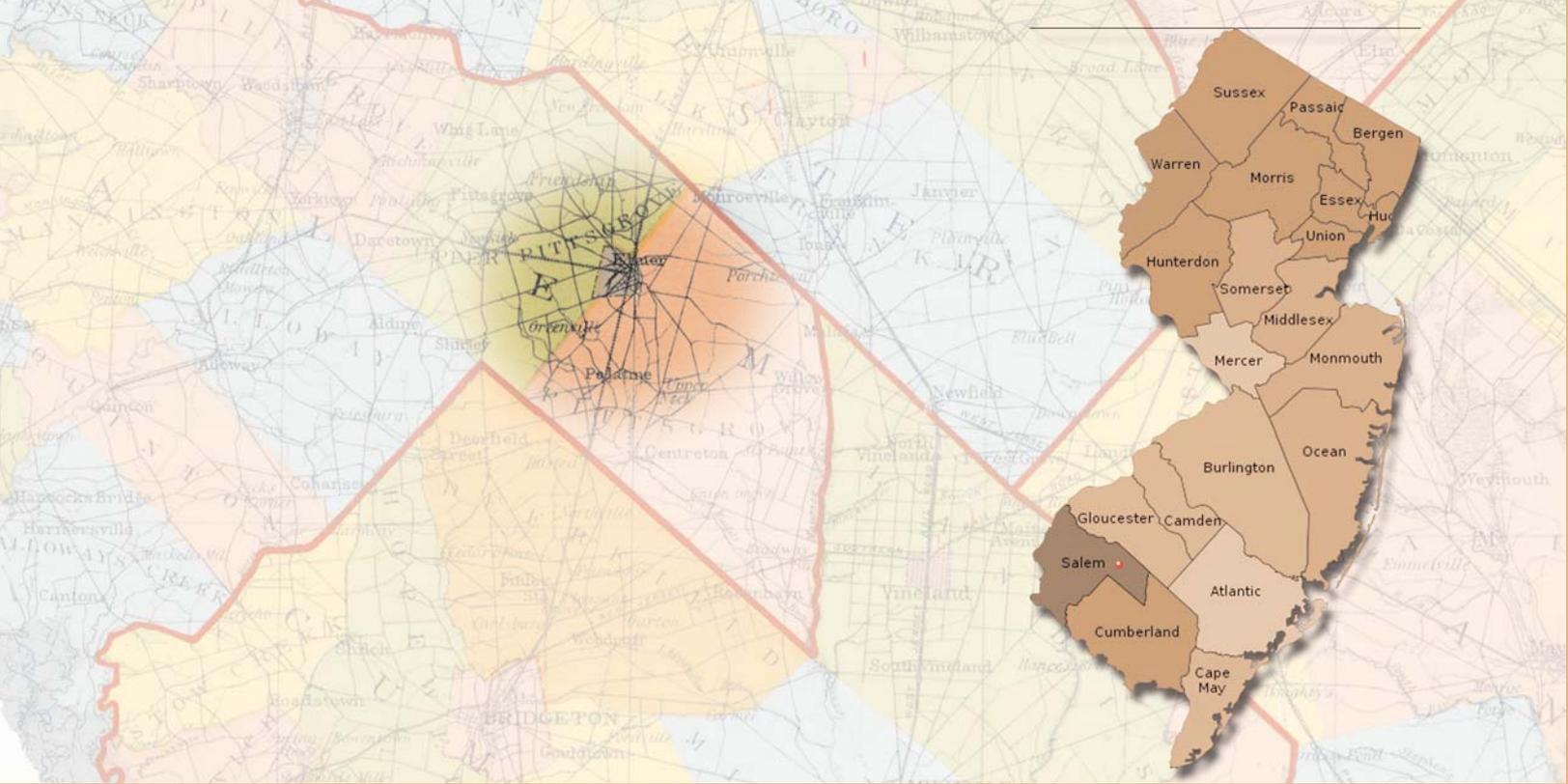
Whitake

Large tw
plenty of ta
boats, merr
shuffle boar
horses, bath
particulars

Lewis Whit

FESTIVA
ME

The Perserva
triotic Supper.



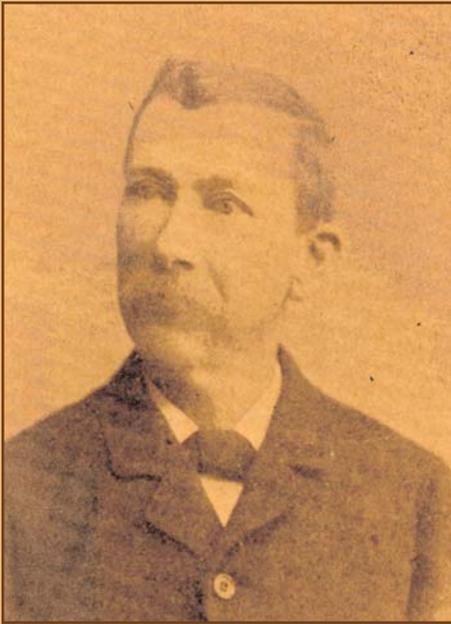
ELMER

The Borough of Elmer, in Salem County, was a relatively new place in 1905, when watchman Sithens was startled by the gunshot. It had been created only a dozen years before, when on January 28, 1893 it was officially incorporated by an Act of the New Jersey Legislature.

Straddling the border of Upper Pittsgrove Township and Pittsgrove Township-and taking a bit out of each-it is comprised of a little less than a square mile. But what put Elmer literally on the map was how it sat at the junction of the West Jersey Railroad and Salem Railroad. “Elmer” was a stop on early railroad maps, though technically just inside Pittsgrove Township. What gave the locale its name, however, was the story behind its Post Office.

Lucius Quintus Cincinnatus Elmer was born on February 3, 1793 in Bridgeton, NJ to parents obviously enamored of Roman history. A veteran of the War of 1812, Elmer would follow the career paths of his father, Ebenezer Elmer, and uncle, Jonathan Elmer, all of whom represented New Jersey in the United State Congress. Lucius had served in the State Legislature and as Cumberland County prosecutor before representing Atlantic, Cape May, Cumberland, Gloucester and Salem Counties in the U.S. Congress from 1843 to 1845. Unable to secure reelection, he would come back to New Jersey, serving as Attorney General and an Associate Justice of the State Supreme Court.

He is noted during his time in Washington as being the only New Jersey Democrat to vote against the annexation of Texas in 1845 as a lame-duck Congressman. But what would secure his name, at least, on the New Jersey landscape was how he used his influence to get a post office for the community by the railroad junction-and the townsfolk signified their gratitude by naming it after him. He died on March 11,



1883, and on the tenth anniversary of his death, the independent borough was established, retaining his name as an official place.

Small and rural, Elmer was nonetheless substantial enough with its train station and post office to include a hotel and its own newspaper, along with saw mills, woodworking shops, a canning factory, glassmaker, creameries, spindle factory, shoemaker, grist mill, and wrapper maker. It was a typical thriving South Jersey small town—certainly not the sort of place where one would expect to get shot at, let alone to hear explosions in the night.

Yet, that's exactly what Sedgwick Sithens encountered a little after midnight on June 30, 1905.

SEDGWICK SITHENS

It had been forty years almost to the day since he last wore Union blue, but when that bullet whizzed past his head, perhaps it brought flashbacks for Sithens. He had enlisted as a 25 year-old on November 8, 1862, traveling the roughly 20 miles north to Camp Stockton, set up near Woodbury, NJ, as the muster point for the 12th New Jersey Volunteer Infantry—the only New Jersey regiment raised in South Jersey.

By the time he arrived, however, they had already marched south, starting out on September 7th to Baltimore, Maryland. There, they were attached to the command protecting Ellicott's Mills, a manufacturing town seized by the Union forces. It isn't clear when Sithens physically joined them, but they remained there from September 8th through December 10th. He was almost certainly among their numbers by the time they marched into Washington D.C. to join the Army of the Potomac in mid-December, arriving at Falmouth, Virginia by the 20th.

The first time Private Sithens would have encountered hostile gunfire would have been during the fateful Chancellorsville Campaign during the first five days of May in 1863. Robert E. Lee's command prowess resulted in his forces defeating the numerically-superior Union troops, with 179 of Sithens's fellow 12th New Jersey comrades killed, wounded or missing when it was over. Sithens would have also witnessed the Battle of Gettysburg in July, where several companies from the 12th managed to capture Confederate officers and some 80 troops. After helping to pivotally repulse Pickett's famous charge, the 12th chased Lee's Army to Manassas Gap.

Sithens was with the 12th throughout the remainder of the war, participating in the Bristoe, Mine Run, and Grant's Overland campaigns. They were also part of the Appomattox Campaign and were present when Lee surrendered on April 12, 1865.

Private Sedgwick R. Sithens was mustered out June 6, 1865. His time in service, according to a later record, was afflicted by "chronic diarrhea." But he had witnessed some of the major events of the war and would survive to tell about it.

Returning to Pittsgrove, he married a woman named Rebecca, eight years his junior, in 1867. The 1870 Federal Census records him working as a "house carpenter" worth \$200 in personal estate. Along with his wife, a Prussian farm worker named Phillip Weisshaupt, age 27, is found living



The First National Bank of Elmer, NJ is the building on the left. The smaller structure made from the same kind of stone to the right of it was the post office where the robbery took place.

with them. By 1900, they owned their own house on Second Street and Sithens was identified as the “Town Marshall.”

The Bridgeton Evening News for July 31, 1900 gives at least one example of his duties. Under the miscellany column for Elmer Borough, he is found having escorted a Curtis Farnsworth back to the State Insane Asylum. Evidently, Mr. Farnsworth had been committed once before, but had been “thought sufficiently cured to mingle with the outside world” again. Signs of whatever haunted the poor man, however, had resurfaced and it was Sithens’ duty to return him to the asylum.

It seems that Sithens was inspired enough by the exploits of the then-newly elected President, Theodore Roosevelt, to write to the White House for an autograph. *The Bridgeton Evening News* reported that he received a reply, addressed to, “Sedgwick R. Sithens of the great war. From Theodore Roosevelt, a comrade of a lesser war.” It was a gracious deference to Sithens’ service, contrasting it with the President’s own during the Spanish-American War.

As the law officer in town, Sithens would patrol at night, making sure the good citizens of Elmer could sleep safe and sound.

So who was shooting at him?

DARING THEIVES

The Jun 30, 1905 edition of *The Elmer Times* newspaper told the story beneath the headline, “Daring Thieves Blow Open Safe; Rob Elmer Post Office of \$800; Escape with the Booty after a Noisy Revolver Battle with Marshall Sedgwick Sithens. No clue to the whereabouts of the Robbers”:

Shortly after twelve o’clock Monday night the safe in the Elmer post office was blown open and about eight hundred dollars in money and

As he reached the front door of the bank he was commanded to halt by a man who stepped out from between the post office and bank building, and who said, “Get out of there you S— of a B—!”

stamps taken. The first hint of the robbery was when watchman S. B. Sithens was returning from the wrapper factory in the direction of the post office where was shot at by some person whom he couldn't see. He heard a bullet whistle by his ear. He returned to the factory and then started back to the post office but before reaching there he heard an explosion and thinking it might be at the bank which adjoins the post office, rushed to that point. As he reached the front door of the bank he was commanded to halt by a man who stepped out from between the post office and bank building, and who said, “Get out of there you S— of a B—!” and about the same time Mr. Sithens sent a bullet at him. As they dodged about, several shots were exchanged, some say twenty and others who heard the fusillade say that thirty shots were fired. Mr. Sithens had a six shooter but no extra cartridges with him so that the burglars did the most of the shooting. Marks were left on the buildings where the bullets struck. Mr. Sithens was not hit and while it was thought one of the robbers was heard to groan, it is not certain that any of them were injured.

Aaron Armon and his wife, and also his mother, who live opposite the post office, saw the shooting from their front window. J. Harry Kandle who was alarmed and rushed to the scene, heard a bullet whistle by him, and as the robbers started to run away with their booty, out Broad Street, they sent back a parting shot, doubtless as a warning to any who might attempt to follow them. They dropped one or two loaded cartridges as they were reloading their revolvers. Four men were seen in all. Martin L. Stahl, a representative of Temple College, who was stopping over night at the Madara House, was awakened by the shooting and plainly saw the four men as they ran away,

The glass door and windows at the post office were shattered and the door of the fire proof safe was wedged tight in the transom over the front door where it was blown when the explosion occurred.

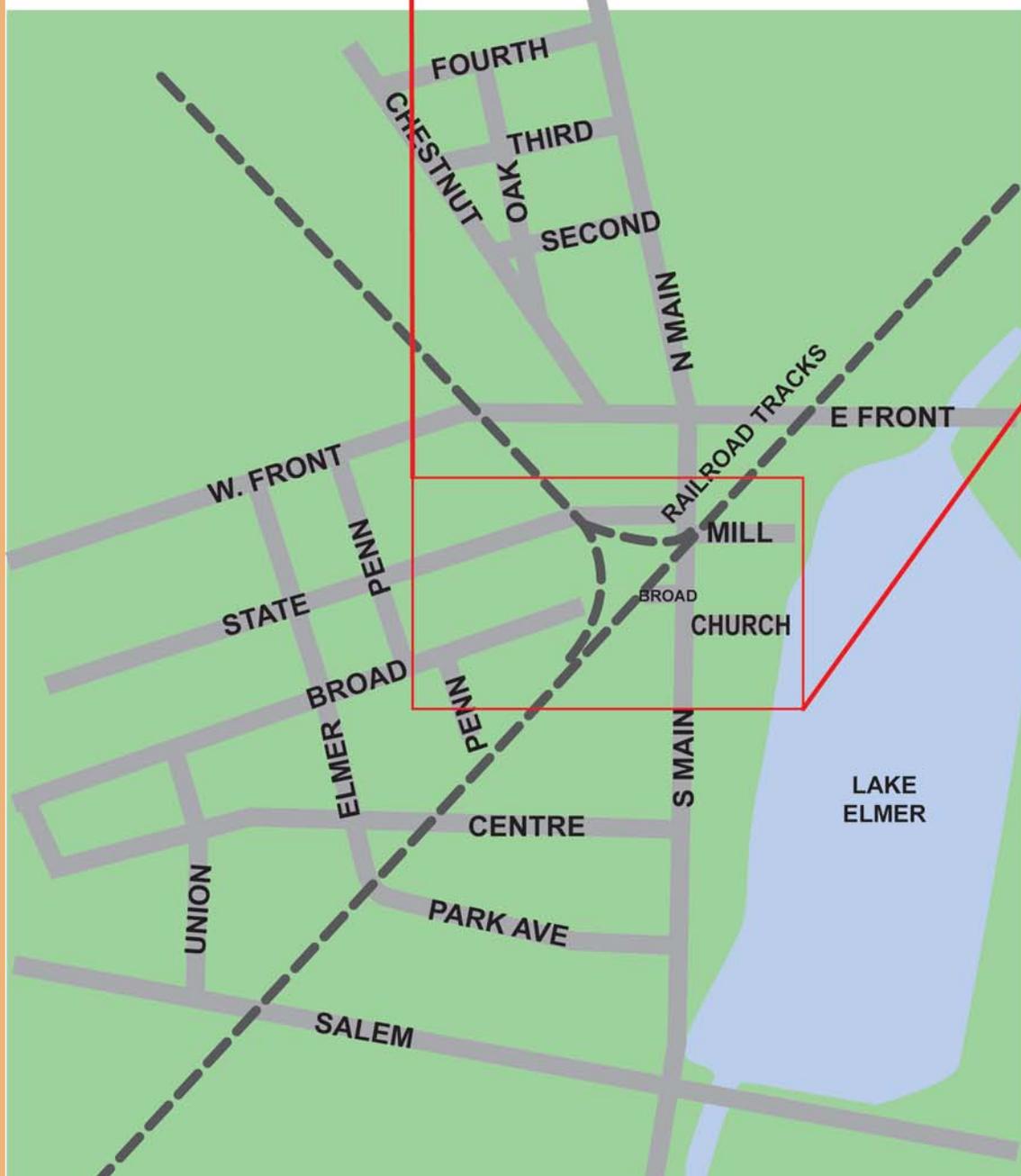
The burglars had made entrance to the office by prying open the back door and breaking the lock with picks stolen from the railroad tool house nearby. They left the picks and a monkey wrench in the post office.

When the thieves departed they walked over the drippings which run out back of the drug store from the acetylene plant, a fact which it was hoped would aid in their discovery, as the stain would not easily be removed from their shoe soles.

There is a wide difference of opinion as to when the explosion occurred as a number of nearby residents insist that the exchange or several shots took place immediately before the explosion. Many people living nearby were on the ground almost as soon as the safe crackers departed. Four men, one a large man with a straw hat on alighted from the evening train at Monroeville and started to walk to Elmer, attracting some attention as suspicious appearing characters. Four strangers were seen in Elmer just at dusk, one of whom it is insisted by three or four persons, had been seen in town several times during the past few days and who was in the post office once at least

Below is a schematic map of Elmer, NJ around 1913. The enlarged section at right shows the path Sithens took and the locations of some of the buildings mentioned in the story.

(Based on 1902 Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps.)



The Prosecutor at Salem was called up and surrounding cities and towns notified so that before the rogues had gotten far from town officers were on the lookout and prepared to watch trains and ferries for suspicious characters.

and purchased a postage stamp. He was also at the hotel Monday night and purchased a quart of whiskey.

It was discovered Tuesday morning that a plain envelope containing fifty-nine dollars had been overlooked by the thieves, and other cash left in their haste, amounted in all to nearly a hundred dollars in all.

The advantage of telephone communication and night service were illustrated when F. Wentzell began to warm up the wires immediately after the robbery. The Prosecutor at Salem was called up and surrounding cities and towns notified so that before the rogues had gotten far from town officers were on the lookout and prepared to watch trains and ferries for suspicious characters.

YOUNG MAN ARRESTED

A young man was arrested at Bridgeton, early Tuesday morning on suspicion of being implicated in the robbery but gave a satisfactory account of himself to the Mayor and was released. He had been to Glassboro to see his best girl and walked home as far as Palatine where he boarded the early south-bound freight. The crew had been notified of the robbery and locked the young man in the car from where he was taken by an officer.

SWAG RECOVERED

Tuesday, a lad by the name of Barney discovered a mail pouch in the woods near Andrew Newkirk's farm, above Elmer, and it was returned to the post office where it was found to contain boxes from the safe, books, money orders, and various other articles including a number of registered letters, containing cash, which the thieves had evidently neglected to rifle of their contents. They had built a fire near where the pouch was found.

In the morning news was received that three suspicious men had been held up at near Aura and Enoch Garrison with others went up there, but failed to find the parties. It has been learned that the four men who left the train at Monroeville, Monday night all had railroad tickets from Philadelphia, although two of them did not board the train until it reached Woodbury. At the latter place one of them purchased a pound of soap, similar to that used on the safe when the nitroglycerine was poured into it.

Lemuel Greenwood found two empty and one loaded cartridges Tuesday morning, in front of his home, on Broad street, similar to those left by the robbers near the post office.

Residents of Monroeville who saw the four men who left the train there Monday night say they have seen at least two of them in that locality before.

They bought some tobacco and a pound of Fel's soap at McFarland's store. This soap is similar to that used on the safe. About eight o'clock Monday night as George Prickett was returning to his home from Elmer, walking up the railroad toward Monroeville, he scented tobacco smoke in the edge of Sturr's woods and distinguished the

murmur of voices. After the robbery he went to the spot and found two empty whiskey bottles, ten loaded cartridges, a pocket knife and some loose change. The cartridges were exactly like those found in other places where they had been dropped by the post office robbers.

ARRESTS

Robbing post offices appears to have been something of a criminal cottage industry. Newspapers from the period report on many a sleepy town being alarmed by the sudden sounds of safe doors being blown off.

Such brute force-and noisy-tactics, however, were not always required. *The Trenton Evening Times* reported that the same day as the Elmer robbery, at around 2 in the morning, Florence, New Jersey's postmaster, James E. Jones along with his "aged housekeeper" were chloroformed by thieves who found the safe left ajar. Without the necessity of an explosion, the robbers were free to steal the \$20 in stamps and \$20 in cash as well as \$40 worth of silver from the postmaster's home. Fortunately for Jones, they managed to miss the \$900 he had stashed in his room. Jones, a widower, had been awakened by a noise and grabbed the revolver he kept under his pillow, but he never made it more than a step out of bed before he was knocked out by a chloroform-soaked rag. That was the last he would remember until morning, when the housekeeper, Mrs. Grace Rhodes, was banging on the door, screaming that they had been robbed.

At first, police believed it was the same burglars that had made a more dramatic appearance at Elmer, but how well-acquainted the Florence thieves seemed to be with the layout made them seem of a more likely local origin.

On July 14, 1905, *The Trenton Evening Times* ran short accounts of two post office robberies in New Jersey—Somerville, where the building was knocked from its foundations by the blowing up of the safe and Bay Head, where they stole all the stamps—and one in Langhorne, Pennsylvania—\$400 in stamps and supplies and 10 cents in cash.

But they also reported on an arrest by Moorestown, New Jersey, police of John Mahoney and Donnell McClane in Merchantville for setting fire to a barn. When the police searched McClane, they discovered in his pockets nearly 300 postcards addressed to J.P Morgan, Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller and other wealthy men asking for financial assistance. The postcards were believed to have been stolen from the Elmer, New Jersey, post office!

Thieves robbed post offices for the same reason today they rob gas stations or convenience stores—they take in and have on-hand large enough sums of cash to make the risk worthwhile. But in the case of post offices, it seems they could also supply the raw materials for an early 20th-century version of "phishing." In its modern internet form, someone sends vast quantities of emails claiming some sort of too-good-to-be-true deal or information update request or other ruse to trick people into revealing passwords, account numbers, credit card numbers or other otherwise secure information they can use to steal money. They send them out by the thousands and, if even half-a-percent of the recipients

When the police searched McClane, they discovered in his pockets nearly 300 postcards addressed to J.P Morgan, Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller and other wealthy men asking for financial assistance.

fall for it, they can end up with large amounts of money.

In McClane's alleged scam, he was sending stolen postcards to rich men asking for financial help. While the article gives no more details, it might be assumed that they were going to be sent using different names and possibly return addresses so as to make it appear they were appeals from true charity cases.

Though the initial reports talk of four men being involved in the Elmer robbery, the authorities seemed to feel they had solved the case with the arrest of Mahoney and McClane. Searches of New Jersey newspapers online to 1910 did not turn up any other arrests.

These days, the train tracks and the station at Elmer are gone. But if you look at the aerial view on Google Maps, you can still trace where they were by the straight lines imprinted on the landscape by tree-lines, street angles, and property boundaries. The shell of the bank building remains, though the roof is gone and there's an addition to the back. The post office that gave the place its name and had been the scene of so much excitement is now gone as well.

We may not know if justice ever caught up with all the bold thieves at Elmer who traded gunfire with a Civil War veteran. But Sedgwick Sithens' experience demonstrates how even a small South Jersey town can hold some dramatic history if you know how and where to look. 

Thanks to Mark Foster of The Elmer Times Company for supplying the text and pictures!