

What happened to people who broke the law?

People accused of crimes were put in jail in the county where they lived. They stayed there, bound in leg irons or shackles, until county justices of the peace looked into their case. These local justices made the decisions in all minor crimes as well as in matters involving slaves.

If you were white or a free black person accused of a *major* crime — such as murder or horse-stealing — you would have been taken to the *Public Gaol* (the old-fashioned word for jail) in Williamsburg.

Everyone in Williamsburg knew the gloomy Public Gaol on Nicholson Street. The gaol-keeper and his family lived there, too. If you were friends with one of his children, you might have visited and peeked into one of the tiny airless cells where prisoners were kept. You might have caught a



*Tom, Tom, the piper's son,
Stole a pig and away he run.
The pig was eat, and Tom was beat,
And Tom went crying down the street.*



glimpse of a forger or a murderer chained up awaiting trial. The accused might have a long wait. The General Court met only twice a year.

A person found guilty of a minor crime could get a public flogging at a special whipping post. Sometimes he or she was sentenced to be locked in the stock. The stock had a wooden frame with holes for holding the feet. Stocks were usually set up outside in a public square because part of the punishment was the shame of being seen and insulted by folks who knew you.

People who committed serious crimes, like murder, were sentenced to death. Justice was swift in colonial Williamsburg. Executions took place soon after the verdict.

