

1873

John Walker - Convicted for Stealing Onions

A Typical Crime

This case concerns a market gardener of Beeston, Robert Cooper, an agricultural labourer John Walker and the theft of some onions.

John Walker was charged with **Larceny** for the theft of the onions valued at between 4 and 5 shillings. He appeared for trial on 8th April 1874 and was sentenced to seven years' penal servitude and seven years' police supervision.

In this section you will find background information and activities relating to this case and to the system of prosecution and sentencing in the 19th century.



Above: John Walker

[The case](#)

(Flash for PC version)

[The case](#)

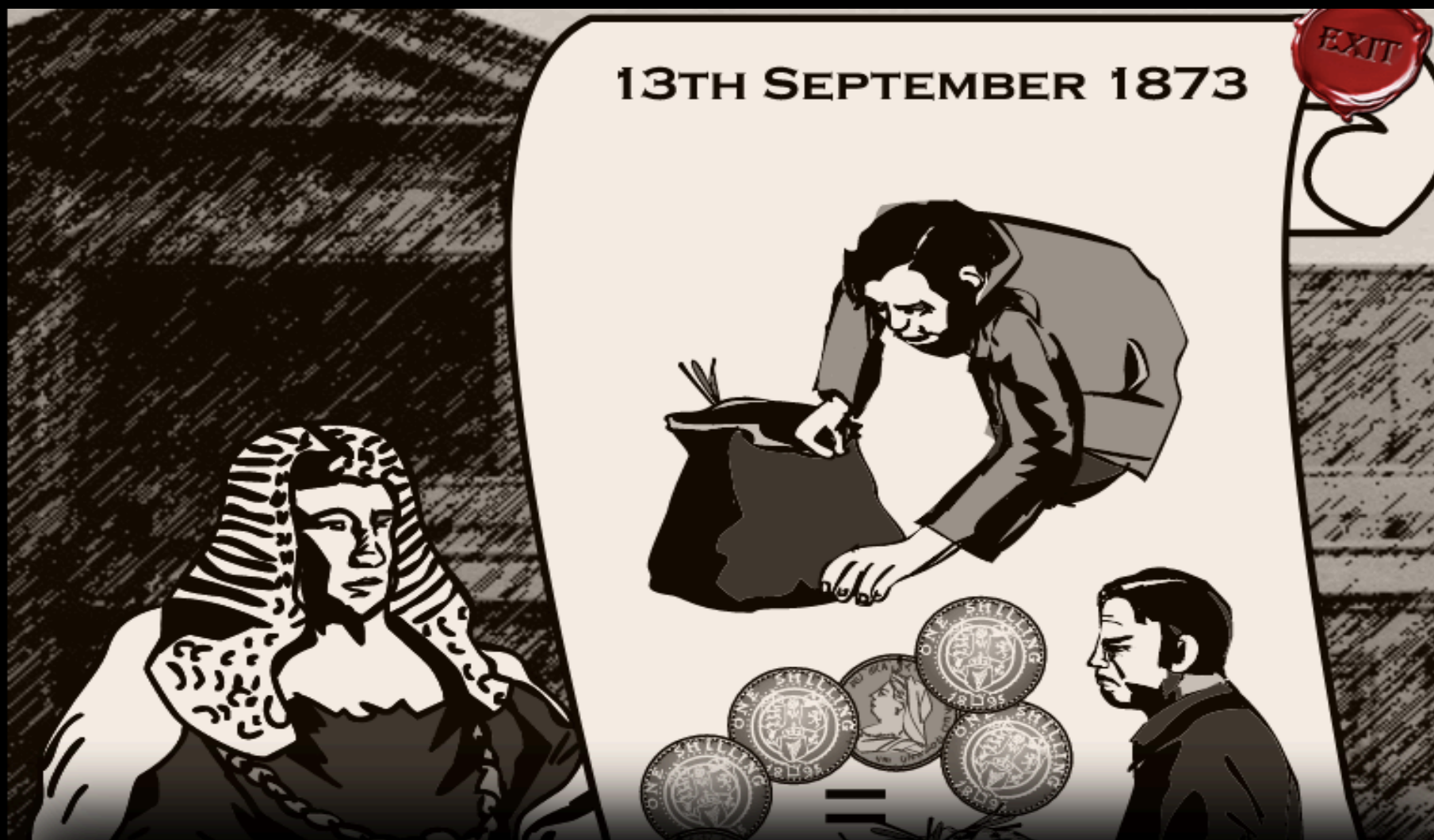
(HTML5 for iPad & Mobile version)



On April 7th 1874, at the Bedfordshire Quarter Sessions, a new case was just about to be tried. The charge was grand larceny. Of the many people in the court room, the proceedings had special significance for two men. One was Robert Cooper, a 27 year old farmer with a small holding just outside Sandy. The other, John Walker, a 34 year old agricultural labourer.



How different things were from September, Robert Cooper thought, when he had employed John Walker as a labourer on his farm. Unfortunately, he had not been happy with his work and had dismissed him; and now he was bringing a prosecution against the labourer.



The charge was read to the court: The prisoner stands charged of the following offence: for that he, the said John Walker, on the 13th day of September 1873 at Beeston in the said county, did feloniously steal a quantity of onions of the value of six shillings, the property of Robert Cooper contrary to the form of the statute in such case made and provided.



"Please state your full name and occupation for the record." "I am Robert Cooper, a Market-Gardener at Beeston." "Explain to the Court the events of the 13th September." "I was sitting near the hedge bordering one of my fields. There were heaps of onions lying in the field where they had been pulled. I saw the prisoner, John Walker, who I had discharged."



Robert Cooper hesitated, so indignant did he still feel. "Go on, Mr Cooper" "He picked up the solitary onions and when he came to the heaps, he picked him up a peck, and then kicked the heap with his foot to disguise this. He put them in a sack. In this way he stole about two bushels."



Robert Cooper described how he challenged John Walker: "I shook him by his collar. What do you think you're doing, I said? You shouldn't even be in this field! How dare you steal from me?" Robert Cooper recalled John Walker's reply.... "Please Sir; forgive me I did not mean..." "You don't deserve my forgiveness."



"And what action did you take?" "I told him I should prosecute him. I gave the information to the police and obtained a warrant for his apprehension. "How much were the goods that the prisoner stole from you worth?" "The two bushels of onions were worth about four or five shillings." "Thank you, I have no more questions" "You may sit down Mr Cooper."



"I call police constable Newton to give his account of what happened after Mr Cooper contacted him." "Please state your full name and occupation for the record" "My name is Joseph Newton. I am a police constable stationed at Northhill." "How did you respond to Mr Cooper's complaint?"



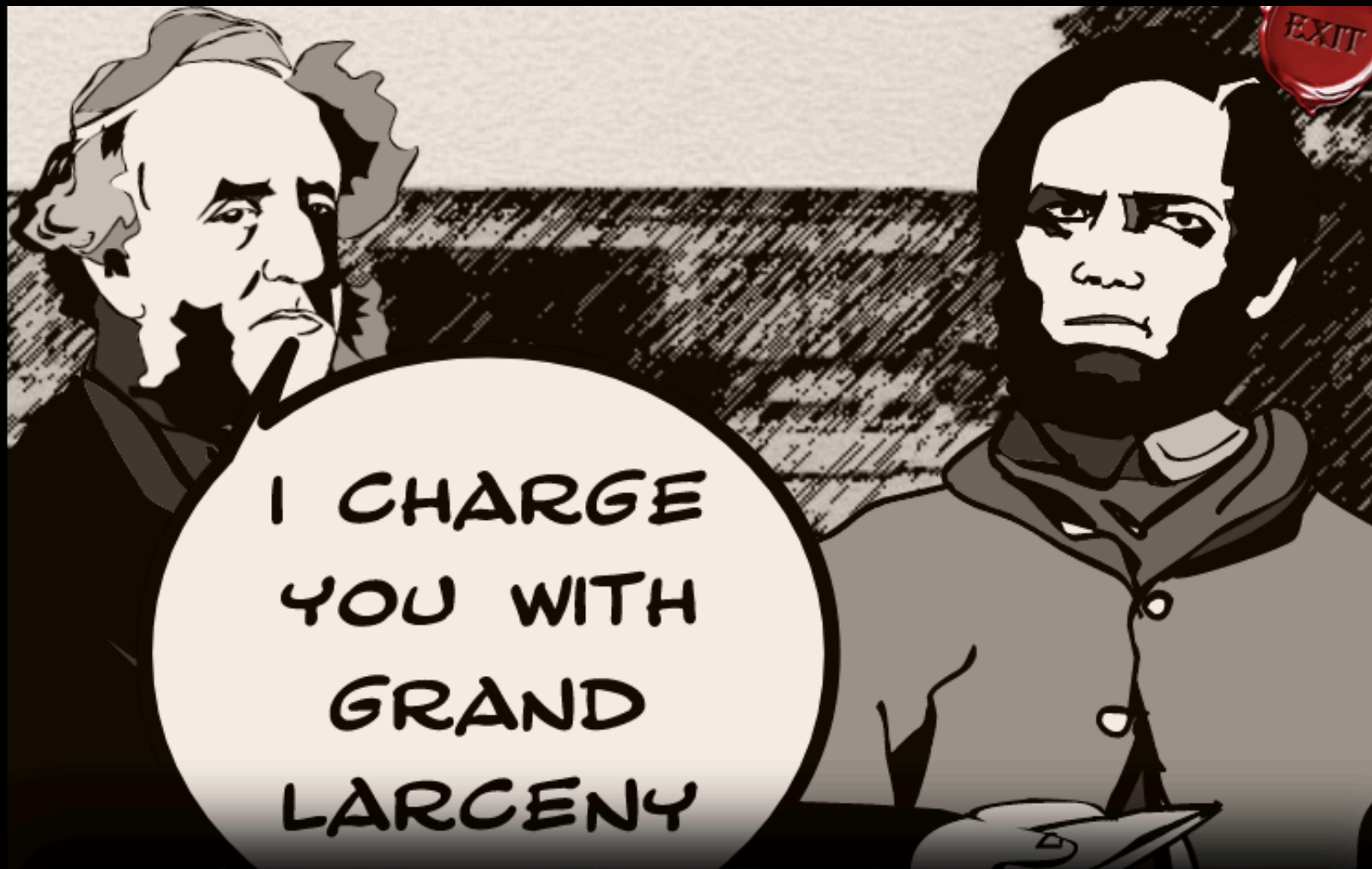
"I went to John Walker's house at Beeston about 8pm. Constable Newton recalled the events....." "Good evening Mrs Walker, I'm sorry to disturb you. I received a complaint against your husband. May I have a word with him please?" "He's not in. I haven't seen him since he left this morning." "May I take a quick look around then please Ma'am..."



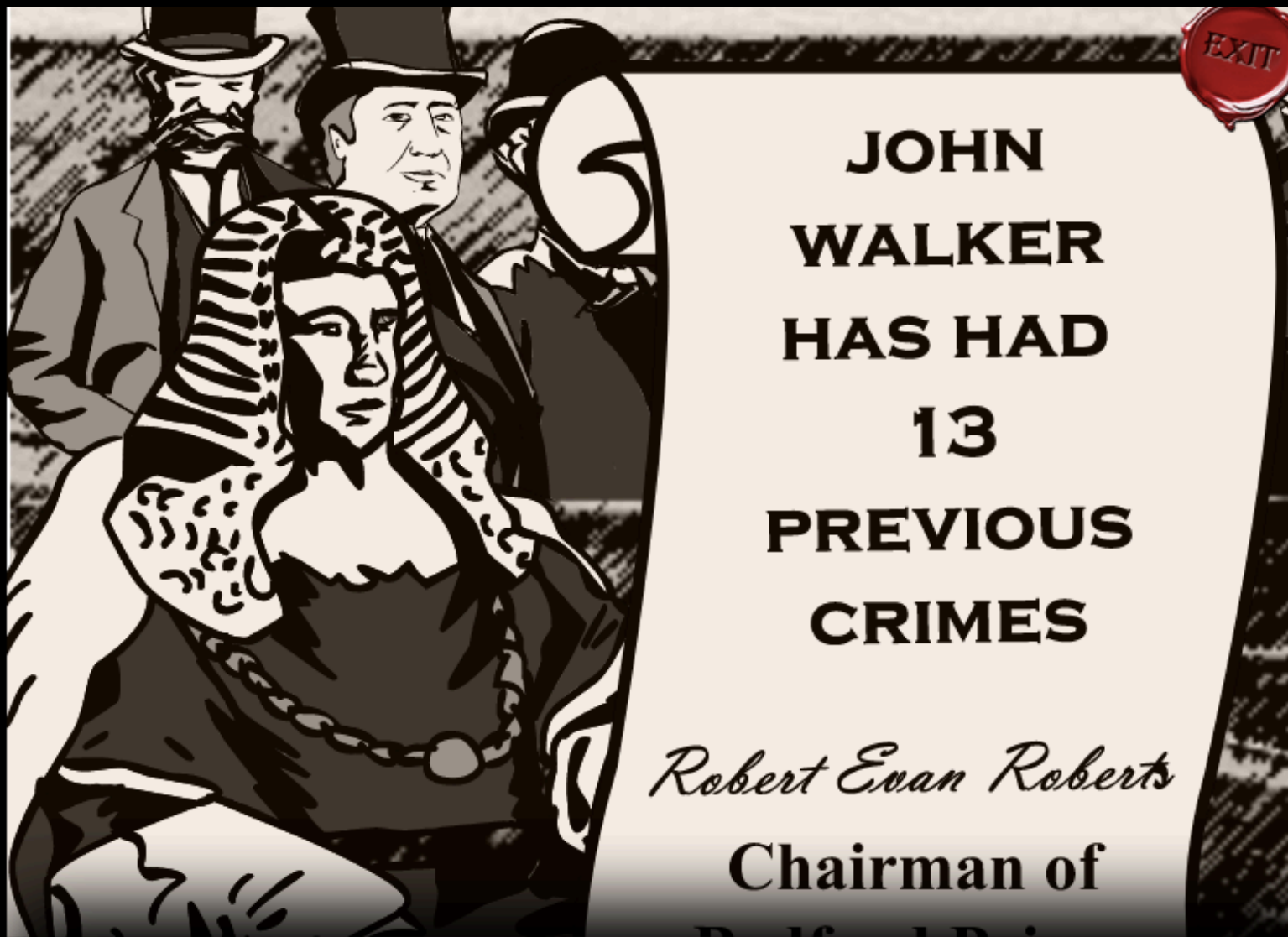
...How did you acquire these onions Mrs Walker?" "I don't know anything about them constable. John brought them home this morning but I don't know where he got them from."



The judge enquired... "How many onions did you recover from the house?" "About one bushel, probably worth two shillings." "Thank you for your time. I have no more questions" "You may step down constable."



John Walker sighed; he knew things were not going well. He'd pleaded guilty, but they were they still hearing evidence. He remembered being brought before the local magistrate, who charged him with grand larceny. He'd hoped to get away with a hearing at the local petty court but, instead, the magistrate had issued an indictment for the case to be tried at the Quarter Sessions. He'd already spent six months in prison awaiting trial.

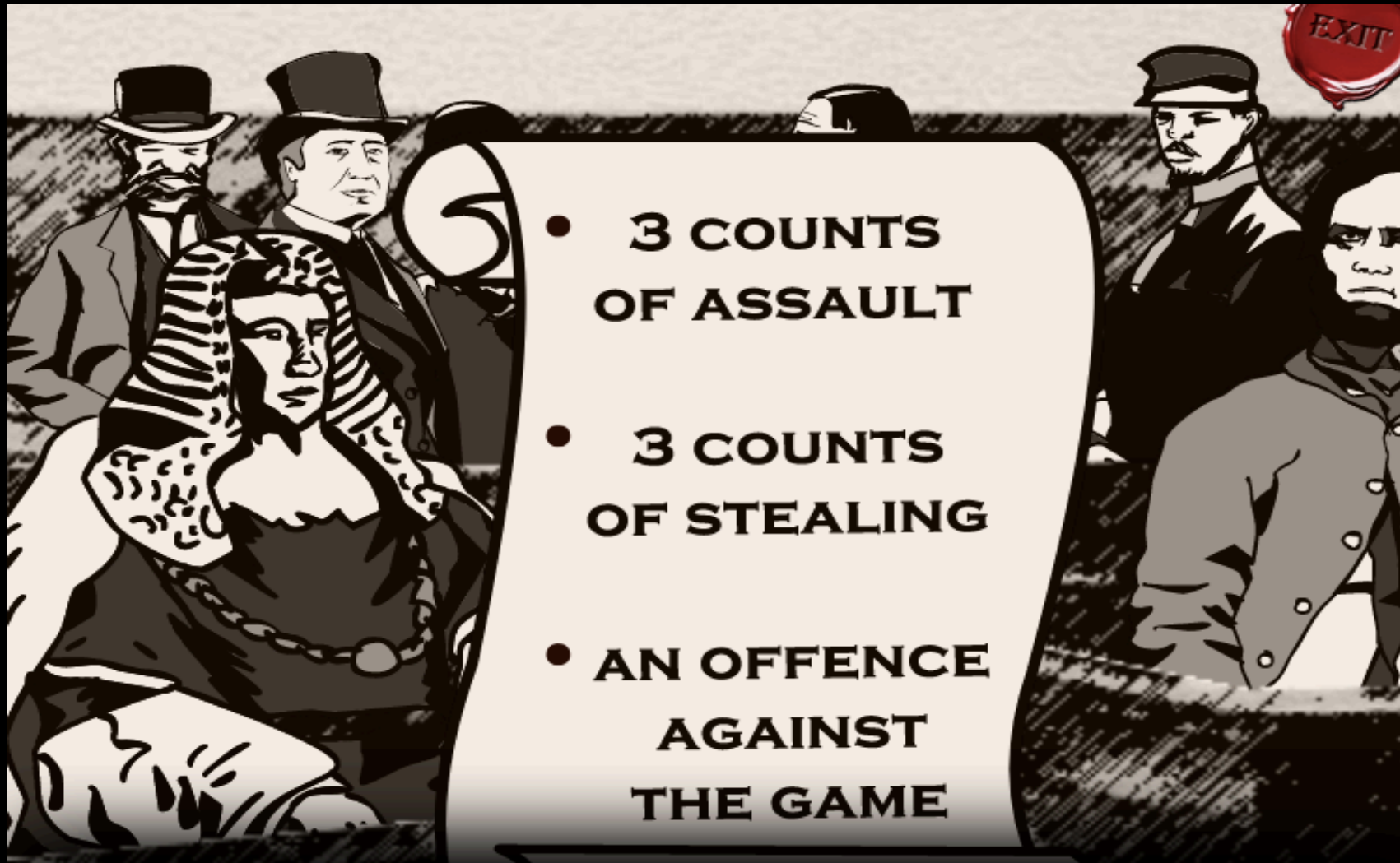


**JOHN
WALKER
HAS HAD
13
PREVIOUS
CRIMES**

Robert Evan Roberts

Chairman of

"The prosecution calls Mr John Walker." "I have here an account from one Robert Evan-Roberts, the Chairman of Bedford Prison. He states that under the alias of Mulls you have been previously convicted of no less than thirteen crimes"



The Judge continued... "Indeed, Mr Walker these crimes include three counts of assault, three counts of stealing, an offence against the game law, larceny and receiving stolen property. You have already pleaded guilty to the case brought against you today, but in light of the evidence given, do you have anything to say?" "I have nothing to say"



John Walker was taken to the prison to await disposal. There he was photographed and a full physical description was recorded. On the 19th May 1874 he was removed to Pentonville to begin his sentence.