

Myth & Mystery: Al Capone's Secret Tunnels

Who is Al Capone? We all know his name. A famous gangster, you might say. Maybe you'd call him Scarface. Maybe you've seen one of the many movies dramatizing or parodying his life. You're probably aware that he was a bootlegger, trafficking alcohol during prohibition. You know some of his famous stories: a kingpin gangster surviving a lifetime of crime finally arraigned on tax fraud and killed by syphilis. If you've read your books, you might even know about the Saint Valentine's Day Massacre. But Al Capone and his Chicago mob had more secrets than we'll ever know. Hidden beneath theaters, inside the walls of hotels, and under every conceivable corner in Chicago, Capone and his cronies left their mark. Designed to be invisible and undetectable, many of these tunnels, basements, and secret doors sit undisturbed to this very day. What secrets has Scarface left for us? Let's find out together. **I'm your host and you're watching 'It's History'.**

The Five Points was a slum in Manhattan known for its density, disease, unemployment, prostitution, and violent crime. For decades, the Five Points were a place where immigrant groups would settle and begin to get their feet under them. While not exactly immigrants, newly freed slaves also settled here after New York gradually abolished slavery in the 1820s. Five Points was a neighborhood for Black and Irish people for years. As the Black community formed stronger roots in New York City, they began to move north to Harlem and the Bronx and away from the villainy of Five Points. As they left, the Italians began to move in. Italy was in turmoil, having just concluded the Third Italian War of Independence and as a new unified, right-wing party began to emerge, many Italians wanted out. So, as the saying goes, America accepted these tired, poor, huddled masses yearning to breathe free.

Five Points was a melting pot, and it was where Al Capone first got involved with organized crime. It wasn't his first brush with crime though, as he was kicked out of school at just 14 for hitting a female teacher in the face. Capone was a bit of a miscreant, a roughouser, and a street thug. He would work odd jobs, play baseball, get into fights. It wasn't until he met Johnny Torrio that he got involved in the world of the mob.

Torrio was the genuine deal: he ran a brothel and was the leader of the James Street Boys. He allied the group with the notorious Five Points Gang and rose to become an extortion boss in Brooklyn. In 1909 he was called to Chicago to operate and expand a chain of brothels run by Big Jim. During his time in New York, he met Capone. Whatever he saw in Capone was enough, as Torrio hired him to work as a bartender at the Harvard Inn on Coney Island. While he was working the door at the Harvard Inn, Capone for one reason or another let loose an insult at a woman. Back then the response when you were insulted was pretty harsh, and Capone was slashed with a knife three times on the left side of his face by that woman's brother. The damage done never fully healed, leaving him scarred. Hence his world-famous nickname: Scarface.

Years after Torrio moved to Chicago, he asked Capone to come with him. Torrio trusted Capone, and when you're running a chain of brothels in the notoriously violent Chicago, you want a guy you can trust. Capone's first job in Chicago wasn't too dissimilar to his gig in New York, he was the muscle. During his time as a bouncer at a brothel, he ended up contracting syphilis. While there were effective treatments at the time, they weren't widely known and Capone refused.

At the same time, liquor had just been outlaws and Torrio had money on his mind. After Big Jim refused to get into the bootlegging business, Torrio called and told him that a shipment was about to arrive at his restaurant. Big Jim drove there to await it, but instead, he was shot in

an ambush by an unknown assassin. Many believe that Frankie Yale, owner of the Harvard Inn, had traveled from New York to Chicago and personally killed Big Jim for his friends. Jim's ex-wife, financially devastated by the divorce, may have been the one to call in the hit. Some believe that Al Capone, Torrio's most trusted muscle in Chicago, might have been the actual assassin, with Yale being the fall guy. Now that Jim was eliminated, Torrio took control of the Chicago Outfit and was now one of the most powerful criminals in the country.

In 1926, six years after taking control of the mob, Torrio was ambushed by some unknown assailant and suffered multiple bullet wounds. After a painful recovery, he resigned from his position as boss and handed over control of the Chicago Outfit to Al Capone, age 26. The organization ran illegal breweries all over the city and had a transportation network that reached all the way to Canada. The outfit also had established considerable political and police protection while running their rackets. Because of this, Capone leaned into his role, and began to use more violence to help increase the gang's profits. If you ran a restaurant or speakeasy and refused to purchase liquor from Scarface and his Chicago Outfit, you'd most likely get blown up. Throughout the twenties, over 100 people were killed in bombings related to the mob. Capone was also responsible for opening more brothels in the city. With protection from the police, the world of crime was his oyster.

Even with the police on his side, Capone was afraid of being caught out. Bootlegging was illegal and dangerous and given his authoritative manner of control, Capone had made more than his share of enemies. He saw how Big Jim and Torrio went down and wanted to avoid it at all costs. His entire multi-million dollar empire was underground, sometimes literally. Like every great mythic hero, there's a lot of dubious truths surrounding Capone's Chicago. Almost every building in Chicago over a hundred seems to be able to claim that Capone had a drink there, or

killed a man in cold blood in their bathroom, or whatever tale seems closer to legend than fact. This makes it understandably difficult to track down all the places that *were* Al Capone's.

The Green Mill Lounge, built in 1914, claims to be an epicenter of Capone's activities. The owner goes out of his way to claim a single booth as the booth where Al Capone used to sit. Allegedly, it was his favorite booth because he could see the front door and the side door without his back being to either one. There is also a trap door hidden behind the bar. It led to the massive underground system designed for bootleggers. There were miles of underground tunnels, running to the nearby ballrooms and theaters. If the police raided Green Mill and Capone wanted to make a quick getaway, he could slip into the tunnels and be blocks away before the police even had a chance.

The Exchequer Pub has a similar story, but they're able to claim original architecture courtesy of Capone. The Moorish revival interior hidden behind a drop ceiling is the style and structure that Capone is said to have drunk beneath. The Blackstone Hotel, a famous luxury hotel often haunted by sitting presidents and international celebrities also has a claim to Capone's lineage, although not a tunnel. The interior barber shop was windowless, so Capone preferred it to a windowed one where any passerby could turn and decide to assassinate him. The modest, short Capone family home once housed him, his mother Theresa, and his wife Mae. It's nothing special, except for a tunnel between the house and the garage that Capone would use to slip away during his house arrest. That tunnel, like the tunnels at Green Mill and Exchequer, have been cemented up in the years since his fall.

While most of his life has entered popular myth, his downfall is often glossed over. Mobsters and bosses like Capone were very careful with their tracks. Hiding in tunnels isn't great for the ego or a very stylish method, but remaining unconvictable in court is far more

important. Despite the breadth of his crimes and his network's being widely known, there's little that could actually be pinned on Al Capone himself. Conversations with his goons weren't recorded, there was no audit log or text message string to rely on. He was arrested once in Philadelphia for carrying a concealed weapon, but served a measly year and continued with his work. Eventually, Assistant Attorney General Mabel Walker Willebrandt, or the First Lady of Law, connected the dots that the mobsters hadn't: their tax returns. They never filed for anything at all with the state, despite making incredible sums of money and leading lush lavish lives, and thus they could be convicted of tax evasion without requiring the difficult-to-get hard evidence and testimony about their other, more violent crimes.

So the man who had terrorized a city, who had transformed the face of organized crime and turned himself into a celebrity, a legend, wasn't convicted for his violence, or his extortion, or even for the booze he was bootlegging. He was arrested and convicted on 22 counts of tax evasion. The cops then used this as an excuse to investigate, and some of the bootlegging was found out. So despite being responsible for toppling buildings and the deaths of hundreds, according to the U.S. government, Capone's only crime was not paying taxes and loving booze.

Capone was imprisoned in Atlanta, Georgia with a sentence of 11 years at the age of 33. So, hypothetically, Capone would've been out of prison at 44 and could resume business or retire a free man. Unfortunately, he had spent time in the brothels when he was a bouncer, and his syphilis was catching up to him. In Atlanta, he was officially diagnosed with syphilis and gonorrhoea. He was also suffering from withdrawal, and his cocaine usage had perforated his nasal septum. Capone was in a pretty sour state, and the goons that were protecting him on the inside were arousing suspicions and heightening tensions. To ease tensions and remove him from his network, Capone was sent to Alcatraz maximum security prison in San Francisco.

Due to his continual decline, Capone was released from prison in 1939, just six years after his initial imprisonment. The Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore refused to admit him due to his reputation, but Union Memorial Hospital was gracious enough to accept him. Despite his ailing mind, Capone was grateful for the compassionate care that he received and donated Japanese weeping cherry trees to the hospital, one of which still stands to this day. He lived out his final years in deep decline, one physician stating that he had the mental capacities of a twelve-year-old. He eventually died in 1946 of a heart attack, at his mansion in Florida.

While the man died with little dignity left, his legend persisted. In 1986, forty years after Capone's death, recently fired ABC News host Geraldo Rivera hosted a television special called "The Mystery of Al Capone's Vaults". The special broadcast was billed as the live unearthing of mobster Al Capone's secret vaults which were recently located under the old Lexington Hotel in Chicago. Millions of people watched the 2-hour show, and they had IRS agents and medical examiners on hand in case they uncovered cash or corpses, but all that was in the safe was dirt. Thirty million viewers made it the highest rated television special in history. Rivera and the legend of Al Capone had inadvertently launched a new form of news, where instead of reporting on news, entire programs were about possible and hypothetical news. With the advent of the 24-hour news cycle in the 90s, this focus on the hypothetical became the primary way Americans received their news. Al Capone's myth was so famous, his mystery and intrigue so powerful, that it changed the way we get our news forever.

And as the Geraldo Riveras of the world get rich and make their careers off the back of his legend, the history is actively being destroyed. Capone was so famous, for many he was synonymous with the city of Chicago. But the city didn't want his fame, and has tried very hard to scrub this bloody history from its legacy. Mayor Richard M. Daley even tried to block

gangster memorabilia and tours from having downtown storefronts. While these efforts of exerting propagandistic control over it's legacy has failed, Chicago has erased this history in a different way: economically.

Capone's clients, cronies, and rivals were almost entirely working-class guys from the city's vibrant immigrant communities. Most of their speakeasies and pubs in old Italian, German, Polish, and Irish neighborhoods have completely disappeared. Gentrification, demolition, and assimilation have steadily transformed these areas and their people over the past century into a city that would be unrecognizable to Capone. In many ways, history is an attempt to tell a story. That story is based in fact and about how we got to today. The story of Al Capone grips people: the lawlessness, the style, the violence, his rags-to-riches arc, his culture, and his legacy. Al Capone's is perhaps the most American story, and with so many of his tunnels already filled in, we may never get the full story. **For more of "It's History", don't forget to subscribe and check out our daily stories – this is ... signing off.**