



Target: Princeton

What happened when a suspected New York City crime ring set its sights on Princeton

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Sheila Nall knew police officers were searching her secluded Princeton neighborhood for a fugitive one day last March. But she didn't know that the wanted man had apparently spent the night hiding out in her garage.

Six police departments and K-9 units were chasing the suspect, Claude Gaskin, who was on the run for at least seven hours when he came across Nall's house on Random Road, a heavily wooded road northeast of the University campus. Gaskin was wanted in connection with an attempted bank fraud at the Chase Bank branch in Princeton earlier that day, March 17.

The next day, Nall and her husband left for work on what was supposed to be a normal day — until she received a call from a neighbor who saw a car pick up a man from her house and speed off. When Nall met with police at her house to discuss the incident, she was shocked by their question: “Do you ever use the shower in the garage [upstairs] room?” she recalled.

The problem was, Nall hadn't been in the upstairs room of her detached garage for months.

The man who apparently freshened himself up in Nall's shower was

allegedly, along with his co-conspirators, part of an organized New York City criminal gang operating a multi-state check and identity fraud scheme. In March, they decided to target Princeton.

The alleged co-conspirators — Omar Boyce of Brooklyn and Laquan Williams of New Brunswick — were arrested March 17 after a high-speed chase, a car crash and a foot chase across backyards in Princeton. Gaskin got away, but he was arrested in New York City in July by the U.S. Marshals Service.

On Tuesday, Gaskin is expected to plead not guilty at his arraignment at Mercer County Criminal Court to a host of charges, including forgery, credit card fraud and flight to avoid prosecution. Boyce and Williams have already pleaded not guilty.

If convicted, the three could each face up to 20 years in prison, said James Scott, assistant Mercer County prosecutor and chief of the county's economic crimes unit.

From license suspensions to bank fraud

Williams, 26, has a lengthy criminal record, which escalated from traffic violations to the alleged orchestration of an elaborate identity theft scheme in New York, according to records searches conducted in his home state of New York.

By age 24, Williams' New York drivers license had been suspended 54 times, and it was finally revoked, according to records filed in the Kings County, N.Y., Supreme Criminal Court. Williams also pleaded guilty to aggravated unlicensed operation of a motor vehicle and criminal possession of a .40-caliber Glock handgun, in separate incidents, and was sentenced to nine months in prison.

Then, starting in August 2009 and continuing for five months, the New York Police Department alleged that Williams deposited 11 fake checks totaling more than \$170,000. The checks were drawn on the accounts of five different individuals whose identities were apparently stolen, according to records filed in the New York City Supreme Criminal Court.

He was arrested in January and has been charged with 52 counts of crimes that include grand larceny and identity theft. His indictment alone spans 24 pages. The case is still pending.

A quiet morning, then a massive manhunt

But, police believe, Williams wasn't finished. While Princeton students were on spring break in March, Williams, Boyce and Gaskin allegedly prepared to steal thousands of dollars from the Chase bank on Nassau Street, across from the Rockefeller College dining hall.

On March 16, Williams and at least one accomplice allegedly defrauded the bank and another person of several thousand dollars. Williams, along with an unknown female, allegedly deposited a fake check for \$7,116 drawn on the account of a Brooklyn-based jewelry studio. The check was deposited using a fraudulently obtained debit card, which allowed Williams to then allegedly withdraw \$3,500 from that person's account, according to a criminal complaint obtained from the Mercer County Prosecutor's Office.

Police also believe Williams used a fraudulently obtained debit card in the name of that person to withdraw \$1,000 from the bank's ATM.

The next day, March 17, Boyce, 23, entered the Chase bank and

allegedly tried to deposit a fake check from a separate New York City jewelry store using a fraudulently-obtained Chase credit card. Police believe he was planning to deposit and withdraw the same amount as Williams had the day before.

But bank employees suspected the check was fake. It's not clear why they were suspicious, but Scott said the bank manager was aware of an internal Chase alert warning employees to be aware of similar check frauds. A Chase corporate spokesman declined to comment on the alert.

Apparently sensing the tellers' suspicions, Boyce fled the bank, police said. Gaskin and Williams were allegedly waiting in the getaway car, a white Mercedes, and the three drove off.

About five blocks later, Princeton Borough police officers ordered the vehicle to pull over on Nassau Street at South Tulane Street. But when an officer exited his cruiser and approached the car, the suspects sped off and were quickly out of sight, [Borough Police Capt. Nicholas Sutter said in an interview at the time.](#)

Moments later, the Mercedes crashed into a dump truck and ended up smashing into shrubs and mailboxes in the other lane of traffic, at the intersection of Nassau Street and Snowden Lane. Witnesses told responding officers that the suspects had fled on foot, and after a 15- to 20-minute foot chase through residents' yards, Boyce and Williams were arrested. Police said both had large amounts of cash.

But Gaskin got away. About seven hours after the manhunt began, Gaskin was spotted by a Princeton Township police officer and "there was a foot pursuit, but he was able to elude us," said Township Police Det. Ben Gering. Still, Gaskin was recorded on a police cruiser

dashboard camera as wearing grey sweatpants and a woman's coat with a fur collar.

Gaskin then allegedly broke into Nall's unlocked garage. He apparently took a shower and waited in the upstairs part of the garage — which has a window overlooking the house — for the couple to leave the next morning. Nall believes he then entered her house using a spare key that had been left in the garage for a pet sitter.

Gaskin allegedly stole a pair of Nall's Gap jeans — size 6 with a hole in the right knee — and a sweatshirt. He left behind the muddy coat, sweatshirt and boxer shorts.

Despite being muddy, Nall noted, Gaskin was surprisingly neat.

“As crooks go, this guy was a decent guy. He didn't leave a mess. He only took what he needed ... I actually didn't feel victimized,” she said.

Then Gaskin disappeared. After a 12-hour manhunt, police called off the search.

But Gaskin's attorney, Jason Foy, disputed the police's account.

“My client did not elude the police,” he said. When pressed on why the police said Gaskin ran, Foy said, “I'm not convinced that he was the person chased just yet. I need to reach that conclusion first.”

On the run, then under arrest

Foy also questioned how Gaskin managed to get away from Princeton and back to his native Brooklyn.

“If my client fled on foot in an area he's not from and broke into a house and was on the run ... he'd have to be pretty athletic and smart

about where he was going. [But] he's not from this area," Foy said.

"How does he get back to Brooklyn on foot?" Foy asked. "Something about that doesn't sound right to me."

When asked about Foy's concern, Scott was incredulous.

"There's the Dinky. There's buses. Someone [could have] come down from Brooklyn and picked him up. I mean, come on," Scott said. If Nall's neighbor is correct, it appears that the latter was the case.

"We're not talking about coming from Montana to get back to Brooklyn," Scott added.

In any case, the Mercer County Sheriff's Office believes Gaskin moved around frequently across the East Coast over the next few months. Then, Gaskin ended up in Brooklyn — and the same U.S. Marshals Service unit made famous by the A&E television show "Manhunters" was on his tail.

On July 26, the U.S. Marshals Service, in coordination with the New York Police Department and Mercer County Sheriff's Office, surrounded a residence where Gaskin was believed to be. The Marshals Service had classified Gaskin as an "escape risk" — given to suspects who have eluded police before — so they were prepared when Gaskin apparently tried to run again when agents came knocking.

Agents watched as Gaskin, wearing a red bandana, apparently tried to escape out of a second-floor window — but changed his mind when he saw the armed federal agents below, said Lenny DePaul, commander of the U.S. Marshals Service New York/New Jersey Regional Fugitive Task Force.

Gaskin then barricaded himself in the residence's attic, before agents were able to subdue and arrest him.

Gaskin was handed over to the New York Police Department and was detained in a facility on New York City's Riker's Island. Two weeks later, Gaskin was extradited to New Jersey.

All three men have been released on bail, according to Mary Gayles, the records supervisor at the Mercer County Corrections Center. Boyce and Williams, who posted 10 percent of their \$35,000 and \$75,000 bail, respectively, were released within days of each other in April. Both have court dates at the end of next month.

Gaskin posted his \$75,000 cash or bond Aug. 19, 10 days after he was extradited and the day before his 21st birthday.

Scott has offered all three defendants plea offers, and all three have rejected the initial offers.

From New York to Princeton

It is still unclear why the trio allegedly targeted Princeton.

Boyce's attorney, New Jersey public defender Chris Garrenger, and Williams' attorney, New York-based Mitchell Elman, both declined to comment while the case is pending. Elman is also representing Williams in the New York identity fraud and gun possession cases.

Foy said that he is not even sure if Gaskin was in Princeton on that day.

Scott said he too was unsure why the group decided on the borough, 50 miles southwest of New York City.

“I have no idea why they did it [here].”