

bbc.co.uk

Al Capone

Alphonse Capone was born into an immigrant family on January 17th 1899, in Brooklyn, New York.

Contrary to popular belief his family were not part of a criminal world, and there was nothing to suggest that Al's upbringing would have had any effect on his chosen profession in later life.

For whatever reason, at some point in his youth, Al Capone's life changed course, and he became one of the most notorious criminals at the heart of gangland Chicago.



 [printer friendly version](#)

By all accounts, Alphonse did well at school until the 6th grade, then at the age of 14 he was expelled for retaliating against a female teacher who hit him. Following his expulsion, the Capone family decided to move neighbourhoods - a chance move that would have a huge impact on Al's criminal future.

Just round the corner from Capone's new home was the headquarters of gentleman gangster Johnny Torrio's East Coast operation. And like many boys in the area, he became involved in running errands for Torrio, just to earn a little extra money.

Despite his involvement with Torrio and street gangs, Capone continued to work and support his family. However, when Torrio moved to Chicago, Capone was left open to some bad influences.

At the age of 18, Capone was hired by an aggressive gangster Frankie Yale to work in his bar, the Harvard Inn. It was an incident in the Harvard Inn that earned Capone his nickname "Scarface".

One night local gangster Frank Gallucio was drinking with his sister at the Harvard Inn, when Capone approached the young girl to pay her a compliment. Gallucio took offence to the young punk and began a brawl with Capone, it was during the scuffle that the older man pulled a knife and cut Capone's face three times - Scarface was born.

In early 1918, the career of Capone took another unexpected turn

when he met the other most influential person in his life, his future wife Mae. Later that year, on December 4th, Capone became the proud father of Albert (Sonny) Francis Capone, Johnny Torrio became the godfather to his son.

Such a dramatic change in lifestyle made him reconsider his career, and he resigned from the Harvard Inn and went to work for a construction firm as a bookkeeper.

Chicago's underworld beckons

In January 1920, the 18th Amendment of the Prohibition Act came into force, which made the brewing, distilling and distribution of alcohol completely illegal. The Prohibition era had begun, and Chicago's criminal underworld, including Johnny Torrio, was well prepared to make bootlegging illegal alcohol an extremely profitable business.

Back in New York, Capone continued to concentrate on his legitimate career right up until the end of 1920 when his father tragically died. Without this strong parental figure, he resumed contact with Torrio, who had built up an influential racketeering empire in Chicago.

It wasn't long before Torrio invited him to join him, and within a few months, Capone's life took a drastic turn that would change his destiny forever.

At just 22-years-old Capone became Torrio's partner in his Chicago businesses. Torrio's empire had grown following Frankie Yale's assassination of Big Jim Colosimo and despite Yale's intention to cash in on Big Jim's floundering enterprises it was Torrio who took advantage of the situation. On the back of this success, Capone was given greater responsibilities and an opportunity to expand the operation to the Chicago suburb Cicero.



With his considerable and steady income, Capone bought a family home in Chicago and moved several members of his family there, including his brothers Frank and Ralph. With Frank and Ralph on hand, Torrio decided to take a break from work. While he was away, he went on to win a significant political victory in Cicero, but at a devastating price.

The 1924 primary election was key to Torrio and Capone's dominance in Cicero. On Election Day Capone's men threatened voters and kidnapped the opponents of the candidates that their bosses were backing. The police looked on as Capone's men rigged this election and finally decided to retaliate. It was Frank Capone not

Al who bore the brunt of this reprisal and he was gunned down because he was unfortunate enough to be recognised.

Al's initial reaction to Frank's death was surprisingly controlled, but a month later he shot petty thug Joe Howard dead for assaulting his Jewish friend Jack Guzik. Until now Capone had conducted his criminal career with considerable discretion, but at just 25 years of age, his cover was finally blown.

O'Banion's set-up

Gangland florist and North Side gang leader Dion O'Banion was something of a loose canon. Already causing Capone and Torrio problems with the law, O'Banion's troublemaking culminated in a set-up that eventually led to Torrio's imprisonment.

But O'Banion was to pay the ultimate price for setting up Torrio when he was assassinated in his flower shop in November 1924. Immediately afterward the North Side gang appointed Bugs Moran as their leader and he swore revenge for O'Banion's death. In January 1925, he shot Torrio four times in an attempted assassination.

After recovering in hospital, Torrio was jailed for nine months for the Brewery Raid and whilst serving time he decided to retire and hand everything over to Capone. O'Banion's trouble making had ultimately led to Capone's biggest promotion yet.

Newfound power

With Torrio out of the picture, Capone relished his newfound status in Chicago and spent a considerable amount of time in the public eye.

However, his involvement with the accidental killing of prosecutor William McSwiggin in the spring of 1926, caused Al to go into hiding. And during his time away from Chicago, he rethought his image and even considered retirement.

By July of that year, Capone had returned to Chicago with a new philosophy. Capone was tired of the endless killing, and decided to organise a Peace Conference at which a reprieve was agreed. All parties agreed that there were to be no more killings and no past murders were to be avenged.



For two months the agreement held, but in January 1927 one of Capone's friends was found murdered. In response, Capone invited over several news reporters in order to announce his retirement. But

despite all his good intentions, it was clear to everyone who knew him that Capone may have had the desire to retire, but he didn't have the will.

The Sullivan ruling

In May 1927, the Supreme Court Sullivan Ruling finally gave the Internal Revenue Service the ability to investigate Capone, but it was to be a very lengthy task. Capone had ensured that all business dealings were done using third parties, with any transactions made in cash, this made his criminal activity difficult to trace.

Whilst the investigations were getting underway, Capone escaped from the Chicago winter and left for Miami. Tactically he had used a middleman to buy his Palm Island estate.

The following summer, he moved his official headquarters to the Lexington Hotel and began to diversify his business dealings. Yet again he ran into trouble with the North Siders gang, but this time he was not alone.

Capone's close friend and associate Jack McGurn had two attempts made on his life by North Siders new leader Bugs Moran, and McGurn was ready to take revenge. Before he did anything, McGurn allegedly set up a meeting with Capone in the winter of 1928 to plan what would be one of the most notorious gangland killings of all time.

St Valentines' Day Massacre

Ask anyone to name someone involved with the St Valentine's Day Massacre and they are more than likely to say Al Capone, yet it's not certain whether Capone was actually involved with the organisation and execution of this extraordinary hit. There is no doubt that the North Siders were a nuisance to Capone, but it was Jack McGurn's vendetta against Moran that drove him to take responsibility for co-ordinating the massacre.

The plan involved McGurn setting up a fake deal that Moran couldn't turn down. McGurn had an associate arrange to meet Moran with a delivery of very reasonably priced Canadian Whiskey at a garage on North Clark Street, but neither McGurn nor Capone would be personally involved in the team that carried out the seven murders.

On the morning of 14th February 1929 at approximately 10:30am, McGurn's men drove a stolen police car to the garage in time for the arranged "delivery" of whiskey. Three of the men were dressed as policemen and two in plain clothes. Believing Moran to be on the premises the men entered and told the seven men they found inside that it was a police raid, to put down their weapons and stand against the wall.

In just two minutes over 150 bullets were fired by McGurn's men, six of the seven men were killed outright. Continuing with the pretence, McGurn's five gunmen left with the three uniformed men leading the others out as though they had been arrested.

Despite the brilliance of the plan, the operation wasn't a complete success. Bugs Moran, the target of the attack, was not among those killed. Having spotted the police car outside the garage he had stayed away believing, like his other gang members, that it was a raid. When the real police finally arrived, the seventh wounded gang member, Frank Gusenberg, was still breathing, but he refused to name those who shot him.

Public Enemy No.1

Oblivious to the sensational publicity of the St Valentine's Day Massacre, and its catalytic effect on the Government's desire to put him away, Capone took no measures to tone down his violent criminal activities.

Usually preferring to stay at a distance from the murders he ordered, on occasion Capone would deal with certain people personally. Most infamous were the brutal murders of his hit men Scalise, Anselmi, and Giunta.

Capone had been informed that Scalise and Anselmi had been disloyal to him, which according to Capone was unforgivable. Standing by the old Sicilian tradition "Hospitality before execution" he invited them to a veritable banquet. However, once the feast was over, the men were beaten to death with a baseball bat and then shot with a single bullet in the back of the head.

Meanwhile, the Government were launching their crusade against Capone aiming to get enough evidence to prove his income tax evasion and Prohibition violations. Soon after this upsurge in government interest, Capone was arrested in Philadelphia for carrying a concealed weapon. While he was in jail, Eliot Ness began his campaign to shut down Capone's breweries. By the time of his release in March 1930, Frank Loesch, the head of Chicago Crime Commission, had released his Public Enemies list and Al Capone was named as Public Enemy No.1.



Eliot Ness and the IRS

In 1931, three legal indictments were brought against Al Capone. The first dealt with violations between the years 1925 - 1929, the second charged Capone with 22 accounts of tax evasion totalling

over \$200,000 and the third was brought according to the evidence provided by Eliot Ness and his team.

With evidence that could potentially imprison Capone for 34 years, his lawyers approached the US Attorney and made a deal for a short sentence if he pleaded guilty. The trial began on June 16th 1931, but Capone's deal did not hold up. At his sentencing hearing on June 30th, Judge Wilkerson made it clear that no bargaining was to be done with a federal court. This shocked Capone and he withdrew his guilty plea. The trial was rescheduled to start on October 6th 1931.

His only chance of reducing his sentence now was to influence the jury and during the summer before the trial, Capone's gang began the process of bribing and threatening all of the twelve jurors.

Realising what Capone would do, Judge Wilkerson made other plans, and on the day of the trial he openly switched juries with another trial. The following day, after nine hours of deliberation, the new jury found Capone guilty of some, but not all, counts of tax evasion.

A week later, Al Capone was sentenced to 11 years imprisonment and a total of \$80,000 in fines and court costs.

The end of an era

Al Capone's sentence began at the U.S. Penitentiary in Atlanta, but his crime syndicate provided him with money and a privileged existence, so he was soon moved to Alcatraz. You can see his actual cell on the right in the picture.



Unable to contact the outside world or buy himself a better lifestyle than the other prisoners, Capone continued to serve his sentence, which due to good behaviour was eventually reduced to six years and five months. Having suffered from congenital syphilis all his life, Capone's condition deteriorated, and the last year of his term was spent in the hospital section. He was released in November 1939, and treated in a Baltimore hospital until spring 1940.

The rest of his life was spent peacefully living at his Palm Island estate where he died, aged 48, of a cardiac arrest on January 25th 1947.

 [printer friendly version](#)

