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Chester County Prison and Its Inmates, June 1900

by Donald H. Bunnell, HIS 480 research paper
(submitted April 22, 1998, edited by Jim Jones)

At the turn of the century, Chester County's legal and prison system appeared quite different from that which exists today. In an examination of the Chester County prison and its inmate population circa 1900, the data collected revealed not only the demographic profile of the prisoners, but the nature of crime and punishment in the county during this era as well.

Data collection for this project proved somewhat difficult. The current prison was unwilling to cooperate and share their records. Indeed it is unclear if these records still exist in the prison archives. Therefore, an alternate route was taken to obtain the necessary information. The data collected led to some interesting conclusions.

The first step in the process was to determine just who resided at the prison in early 1900. The only source for this information was to be found in the census records. Under the supervision of D. Smith Talbot, the census of 1900 was taken in Chester County between June 1 and July 3, 1900 (Daily Local News May 28, 1900, July 03, 1900). While specific dates of data collection seemed of a low priority to the census takers, it appears the county's 8th Precinct, in which Chester County Prison was located, was surveyed around the 13th of June 1900. This date seems to be fairly accurate in that the latest date I found a prisoner admitted was June 7. The census information contains a wealth of information on the demographics of the prison population, as well as others residing at the same location. Not all of the residents at the prison were inmates.

The next step was to inspect records located at the Chester County Archives. These records included court docket indexes, the actual dockets and the accompanying case papers. Initially the docket indexes were combed to find

the inmate case numbers. There are two sets of indexes, the Quarterly Indexes that listed those charged with misdemeanors, and the Oyer and Terminer Indexes that contained those that were charged with felonies. The vast majority of cases found in the Quarterly Indexes were of a civil nature and finding the names of the inmates in question required a rather extensive search. The Oyer and Terminer Indexes were more direct in nature and therefore required less inspection. I found listings for 31 of the 40 prisoners in the combined indexes 23 in the Quarterly Indexes and 8 in the Oyer and Terminer Indexes. The next item was to inspect the dockets themselves, which again were split into two separate sets Quarterly Dockets and Oyer and Terminer Dockets. These records contained all court action taken against the accused. This information included the original charge, how the defendant pleaded, whether the Grand Jury returned a True Bill (an official indictment), the findings of the jury after the hearing and the sentence imposed. What these docket records did not include were the original date of incarceration, nor original date of the crime. I then began to examine the actual court documents that contained all papers relevant to the trial the Grand Jury Bill, often a Justice of the Peace complaint, as well as any affidavits or similar paper work. The Justice of the Peace complaints (which when present contain the original complaint) was the best source for determining the date of the crime and initial incarceration date with some elaboration on the nature of the offence. The Grand Jury True Bill usually contained a more detailed description of the criminal events, and the date of the trial that was frequently the same day as the issuance of the True Bill.

Thoroughness required an examination of the local newspapers printed in the county at the turn of the century. Located at the Chester County Historical Society, these local papers have been organized into files of clippings organized by subject. In the clipping files were reports on the Quarter Session court activities that contained details not found in the official material. Additionally, there were reports on the trials of four inmates that had not been accounted for through the docket search. In other sections of this clippings index I found material on the history and daily routine of Chester County Prison, as well as valuable census data.

I will preface my findings with a description of the legal process used in Chester County during this era. I could find no formal description of this process but from the examination of the court records this appears to be the procedure. A complaint would be made and the suspect would be taken to a Justice of the Peace. The Justice of the Peace at this time could have many other jobs as well one I found was not only a Justice of the Peace but also a

collector, real estate broker and insurance salesman (Dixon Letter). This initial arraignment made formal charges and set bail requirements. If bail was not rendered the defendant was remanded to the county prison. Here the accused waited until the next formal court session was convened. These proceedings, called `Quarter Sessions were held four times a year, at the end of January, April, August and October. So if an inmate were unlucky enough to be incarcerated just after a Quarter Session ended, he/she would be required to wait as long as four month in prison awaiting a hearing. When brought before the Grand Jury at the Quarter Session, it would return either a `True Bill (a formal charge) or a `Bill of Ignoramus (dismissal of the initial charges). With the defendant receiving a True Bill there was an almost immediate jury trial. It is interesting to note many of the defendants did not have legal representation attorneys were not provided to those who could not afford them. The trials themselves were speedy in nature (though one may have waited months in prison to receive their day in court) and a verdict was usually rendered quickly. Sentencing was immediate and all that were found guilty were required to pay the cost of their prosecution in addition to any fines imposed. Even those found not guilty could be required to pay the prosecution costs, and would be imprisoned until the payments were complete (Quarterly Sessions Docket V- 64).

Life inside the prison, as well as its history, proved an interesting exercise. Built in 1838 at the corner of Market and New Streets in West Chester, it remained in operation until a new prison was built in 1959 (Daily Local News May 05, 1955). It was designed to hold approximately 100 inmates after which it was deemed `crowded (Daily Local News November 14, 1958). In 1900, the facility was basically a family run institution. The prison officials were political appointees, and at the turn of the century the staff consisted of Warden Joseph James, Matron Mrs. Joseph James, the warden's wife, and Prison Clerk Miss Mabel H. James, the warden's daughter. Also on the staff were `keepers (presumably guards), a prison physician Dr. Joseph Scattergood and the county solicitor Thomas Baldwin (Daily Local News January 04, 1900). The prison housed a carpet making facility for which inmates, deemed able to work, were required to produce a minimum quota of five pounds of carpet rags a day. Those prisoners who exceeded this quota were paid a 2 cents per pound bonus (Daily Local News July 25, 1900). Spring was the busiest time of the year for the mill, presumably due to `spring cleaning and the need to replace musty carpets at this time (Daily Local News March 22, 1898). In addition to the carpet making facility, the prison also housed broom making and weaving departments as well (Daily Local News January 17, 1895).

The original census information provided a wealth of information on the individual prisoners in Chester County Prison. Of the forty prisoners incarcerated there, the ages ranged from seventeen to forty-eight. It was interesting to see three of the inmates under the age of eighteen, indicating that minors were housed in the facility. The average age of the prisoners was 26 «. There was a disproportional number of colored prisoners versus the county population as a whole (colored, in the census records would include Black, Asian and Native Americans as well)(Daily Local News August 15, 1902). Census records indicated that less than ten percent of the county population was `colored whereas in Chester County Prison, coloreds made up sixty-two percent of the inmate population, with twenty-five colored and fifteen white prisoners (Daily Local News August 15, 1902). There were two female prisoners as well, indicating there was no separate female prisons in Chester County. The ethnicity of the inmates proved quite interesting. Only one inmate was not a native born American, being from Ireland. Nine of the prisoners had at least one immigrant parent, five from Ireland, three from Austria and one Italian. None of the colored inmates had foreign parentage indicating either the inability or the undesirability for them to immigrate to the still highly racist society. Additionally, since it had been only thirty-five years since the abolition of slavery in America, immigration for the parents would have been unlikely even to the free northern states. A closer inspection of the birth locations of the inmates found that two were likely born into slavery. One man was born in the slaveholding state of Maryland in 1861, while another was born in Virginia in 1860. There is also the strong possibility that thirteen of the inmates were born to former slaves. One or more of the parents of these prisoners were born in these slave states: North Carolina (1); Maryland (3); Delaware (3); Tennessee (2); Virginia (2); South Carolina (1); and Virginia (1). The vast majority of the inmates were single with only ten of the forty being married. Domestic abuse was involved in only one case (Swartley Affidavit).

The occupations listed by the inmates reflected all were among the working class, usually unskilled labor. Twenty-eight indicated their occupation as either `day laborer or `farm laborer . Rounding out the other occupations were a cacophony of blue-collar work such as a barber, junk dealer, cook, ironworker and hotel porter. Two said they were `furniture polishers which strikes an odd chord as an occupation by today's standards. It follows that the prisoners would be in these low paying occupations since many of them were in the facility awaiting trial and unable to make bail, or subsequently convicted due to the inability to afford legal counsel. Of those whose occupations were laborers, sixty four percent were colored, keeping roughly the same percentage as their proportional representation in the prison.

The literacy rate amongst the prisoners was surprising. There was a thirty percent illiteracy found in the inmate population, consistent between colored and white prisoners. Only twelve of the prisoners indicated an inability to read or write. Only one inmate could not speak English the son of two Austrian immigrants. Having no data on the literacy rate in Chester County in 1900, it would seem this thirty percent rate of illiteracy, especially among a collection of unskilled laborers, is lower than would be expected.

The census questioned the citizenry about months unemployed . It does not however, specify if this period includes the time served in the prison. Thirty-four of the forty inmates indicated at least one or more months unemployed, with a range of one to nine months. This translates into an eighty- three percent unemployment rate with an average time of 2 months without work. Judging from these numbers it would seem that the times given to the census taker indeed does include the time spent in the prison. (1)

The types of crimes allegedly committed by the inmates were for the most part in three categories. The largest category were those that involved some type of theft. Thirteen of the prisoners were incarcerated for larceny. The second most prevalent crimes were types of assaults simple assault or assault and battery, of which nine of the inmates were charged. Four were charged with keeping a disorderly and/or bawdy house . Rounding out the crimes were fornication and bastardy, desertion and resisting an officer. There could be found no records on seven of the inmates, except for their presence in the prison during the census. Conceivably these inmates may have been in the prison for some short-term offense that did not require appearing before a Quarter Session inquiry. In the course of the investigation there was a reference to ride stealers , caught by railroad police and remanded to the Chester County Prison (Daily Local News May 05, 1900). There was no mention of these individuals in any court dockets so this may have been a case of a petty crime that went no further than the Justice of the Peace level. (A search for Justice of the Peace records proved fruitless but could be an interesting subject for future research).

The items allegedly pilfered by those charged with theft were indeed a reflection of the times. As would be expected, money was one item but in only two of the cases. Brass and copper were stolen in two cases, presumably for their scrap value. One of the female inmates was jailed for horse theft. Other items stolen, and what would seem strange by today's standards included a lard bucket and press, a stool, some knives, a harness and string of bells, a barrel of flour, bottles of beer and porter, books, and a set of clothing. Those

convicted of even these minor thefts received rather lengthy prison time, showing a low tolerance for theft of any kind in 1900.

The sentences doled out to the inmates garnered some interesting observations. There were twenty sentences rendered, with nineteen going to Chester County Prison and one to Eastern Penitentiary. Of the defendants sentenced, fourteen out of the twenty were colored a whopping seventy percent. The fine imposed in relation to the prison time was inconsistent. The range ran from no fine to \$100, with an average fine of \$23 «. However, there seemed little consistency between the amount of the fine and the length of confinement imposed. One example has a defendant receiving a \$10 fine and one-month in prison, while another man received the same \$10 fine but an eighteen-month prison sentence. A fine of \$25 was found for sentences ranging from 12 to 24 months. The highest fine of \$100 did however, go to the inmate who received the longest prison term of five years. There seemed little in the way of any official guidelines to follow for fines and sentencing, so judges had wide latitude in their imposition.

There were many inmates that spent months in Chester County Prison waiting the next Quarter Session only to be found not guilty. Of the eleven prisoners found not guilty, most had spent between two and four months behind bars. In one particular case a woman was found not guilty but commanded to pay one third of the cost of her prosecution. Until this fine was paid in full the woman had to remain in custody. The woman remained in Chester County Prison for a minimum of ten months even though she was found not guilty. Three of the defendants had no record pertaining to the outcome of their hearing but spent three to five months at the prison. Six cases had no court records at all. (2)

One interesting item found in the census records indicated the presence of a boarder at the prison. On the surface it seemed odd that anyone would wish to use the county jail as a boarding house. On closer inspection, it was discovered this `boarder' was in fact the infant daughter of one of the female inmates. Apparently it was not uncommon for women who had infant children, and no one else to care for them, to keep them in the prison with their incarcerated mother. This practice was very unpopular with the `keepers' for it required additional duties they wished to avoid (Daily Local News July 27, 1900).

In my attempts to spot trends in the inmate population demographics, the single most glaring trend was the uniformity of the prisoners. While the big difference lay in race, most shared the same sex, marital status, occupation and socioeconomic status. Little thought was given to the concept of bringing

a defendant to court quickly and many innocent people languished in prison for months until the next Quarter Session. Additionally, the length of sentences for very petty crimes is by today's standards cruel. The rate at which coloreds were convicted was slightly higher than the prison population as a whole. Both these rates however were far greater than the general population of Chester County and reveals that racism and prejudice were alive and well in 1900. An informative project for future consideration could be tracking these racial trends to see how consistent they have been over time.

NOTES

1. All information used for examination of the demographics was acquired from: United States Department of Census, "Census of 1900 Chester County Pa 8th Precinct," 129, located at the Chester County Archives on microfilm.
 2. The crime information was collected from both the Quarter Session Court Docket Volume V as well as the Oyer and Terminer Court Docket Volume 3. Additional information was found in the Quarter Session Court Records. All are located at the Chester County Archives.
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