

Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons records

Ms. Coll. 741

Finding aid prepared by Kelin Baldrige (Collection cataloged by Nancy Shawcross).

Last updated on June 29, 2020.

University of Pennsylvania, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts

2016 October 27

Table of Contents

Summary Information.....	3
Biography/History.....	3
Scope and Contents.....	4
Administrative Information.....	5
Related Materials	5
Controlled Access Headings.....	5
Collection Inventory.....	7
Series I. Administrative records.....	7
Series II. Case reports.....	7
Series III. Visiting reports.....	9

Summary Information

Repository	University of Pennsylvania: Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts
Creator	Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons.
Title	Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons records
Call number	Ms. Coll. 741
Date [inclusive]	1787-1883
Extent	0.8 linear feet (2 boxes)
Language	English
Abstract	The Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons (later the Pennsylvania Prison Society) was formed in 1787 to correct the issues of the city jail where prisoners were held together with little to no regard for age, gender, or nature of crime. This collection includes the Society's administrative records, case reports, and visiting reports.

Cite as:

Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons records, 1787-1883, Ms. Coll. 741, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts, University of Pennsylvania

Biography/History

After the peace of 1783, a group of prominent Philadelphia citizens led by Benjamin Franklin, Benjamin Rush, and others organized a movement to reform the harsh penal code of 1718. The new law substituted public labor for the previous severe punishments. Reaction, however, against the public display of convicts on the streets of the city and the disgraceful conditions in the Walnut Street jail led to the formation of the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons (a name it retained for 100 years, at which time it became the Pennsylvania Prison Society) in 1787, the first of such societies in the world. Members of the Society were appalled by what they learned about the new Walnut Street prison and the next year presented to the state legislature an account of their investigations of conditions and recommended solitary confinement and hard labor as a remedy and reformatory strategy. They aimed to correct the issues of city jail where prisoners were held together with little to no regard for age, gender or nature of crime. They advocated for the creation of large penitentiaries in order to ensure prisoners were being properly handled and were active in the construction and establishment of Eastern State Penitentiary from 1822 and 1829. Members of the society believed that the solution to disorder and corruption in prison was the separation of the inmate from other inmates for the entirety of his or her time in prison. After having helped create this model, the Prison Society's main roles were in oversight and advocacy, prison visiting, and assistance to released prisoners. In 1845, the Prison Society established the *Journal of Prison Discipline and Philanthropy*, which is still published today as *The Prison Journal*.

Scope and Contents

This collection is arranged in three series: Administrative records, Case reports, and Visiting reports. Administrative records includes the Society's account books and receipts, correspondence, a minute book of the Committee on County Prisons, Arch Street Prison hospital records, records of convicts, reports on discharged convicts, a 63-page manuscript treatise on penology by Roberts Vaux, and a scrapbook of newspaper clippings. While the collection does not contain a great many letters, researchers will find the 1787 letter to the Senate and House of Representatives of the State of Pennsylvania requesting incorporation of the Society as well as several letters relating to women prisoners and a letter regarding books for the Society's library. The records of convicts contain information on the race, gender, location and age statistics of the prisoners as well as giving information on the number of inmates committed for each listed crime: larceny, horse stealing, misdemeanor, murder 2nd degree, forgery, burglary, rape, receiving stolen goods, counterfeiting, arson, robbery, manslaughter, sodomy, assault and battery, and conspiracy to cheat and perjury. All the hospital reports are from the Arch Street Prison from 1832 to 1833 and include information on cholera cases. Financial records (including accounts and receipts) show that money was spent for fabric, clothing and shoes for prisoners, real estate, paper and bindings for reports, printing of notices, etc. The six reports of discharged convicts were written by Charles F. Driver and provide insight into the Society's desire to reform as well as punish prisoners and to provide assistance that would allow them to live productive lives following their imprisonment. The scrapbook of newspaper clippings was assembled by Townsend Sharpless and is entitled "Matters Connected with Prison Discipline."

The Case reports, arranged chronologically, report to the Society on convictions, appeals and acquittals. Frequently, there is discussion of how many prisoners were released (usually stating that many of them should not have been sent to prison in the first place), how many were sent to institutions for the mentally ill, etc. Of particular interest to researchers may be the in-depth reports on the unusual cases which follow the general statements at the beginning of each report.

The Visiting reports are provided by the Visiting Committee of the Society and report on conditions of the prisons, possible reforms (in particular to the system of confining debtors), and what efforts for comfort had been made for the prisoners. In many reports, information about clothing made by "vagrant female prisoners" is mentioned.

Administrative Information

University of Pennsylvania, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts

2016 October 27

Finding aid prepared by Kelin Baldrige (Collection cataloged by Nancy Shawcross).

Access Restrictions

This collection is open for research use.

Use Restrictions

Copyright restrictions may exist. For most library holdings, the Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania do not hold copyright. It is the responsibility of the requester to seek permission from the holder of the copyright to reproduce material from the Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts.

Related Materials

Related Archival Materials note

At the American Philosophical Society:
William Parker Foulke Papers, 1840-1865, Mss.B.F826

At the Historical Society of Pennsylvania:
Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons minutes, 1787-1793, #Am.3229
Pennsylvania Prison Society Records, 1787-1966, n.d. Collection 1946

Controlled Access Headings

FORM/GENRE(S)

- Account books
- Clippings (information artifacts)
- Correspondence
- Minute books
- Receipts (financial records)
- Reports
- Scrapbooks

GEOGRAPHIC NAME(S)

- United States--History--1783-1865

SUBJECT(S)

- Prison reformers
- Prisons

Collection Inventory

SERIES I. ADMINISTRATIVE RECORDS.

	Box	Folder
Accounts, 1797-1836.	1	7
Account book of the treasurer of the <i>Journal of Prison Discipline</i> , 1845-1847.	1	11
Correspondence, 1787-1864.	1	1
Minute Book of the Committee on County Prisons, 1856-1864.	1	9
Arch Street Prison hospital records, 1833, undated.	1	6
Receipts, 1829-1873.	1	8
Records of convicts, 1825.	1	2
Reports on discharged convicts by Charles F. Driver, 1871-1875.	1	3
Roberts Vaux essay, 1827-1828.	1	12
Scrapbook of newspaper clippings related to prison discipline compiled by Townsend Sharpless, 1843-1845.	1	10

SERIES II. CASE REPORTS, 1862-1883, UNDATED.

	Box	Folder
1862.	1	13
1867.	1	14
1868.	1	15
1869.	1	16
1870.	1	17
1871.	1	18
1872 January-April.	1	19
1872 July-December.	1	20
1873.	1	21
1874.	1	22
1875.	1	23
1876.	1	24
1877.	1	25
1878.	1	26
1879.	1	27
1880.	1	28
1881.	1	29
1882.	1	30

1883.	1	33
undated.	1	32

SERIES III. VISITING REPORTS, 1799-1866.

	Box	Folder
1799-1810.	1	4
1811-1866.	1	5