

PRISON MUSEUM POST

The Official Newsletter of the Historic Burlington County Prison Museum Association
Incorporated in 1966

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NEW GRAFFITI VIDEO NOW ON PMA WEBSITE

The Prison Museum Association is pleased to announce that we have produced a video about the Jail's graffiti available for viewing on our website, www.prisonmuseum.net. We hope you enjoy it and welcome your comments, which can be sent to us via email at pma1811@verizon.net. The three-minute video, written by PMA vice-president **David Kimball**, features 50 or so photographs of graffiti drawn on the walls of the upper floors by inmates between 1955 and the 1965, when the Jail was closed. The video was edited by PMA member **Lisa Kruczek**, who manages our website and produced our audio tour. It is narrated by the award-winning actress **Susan Riley Stevens**, who appears regularly on Philadelphia's main stages.

The history of the PMA's efforts to preserve the graffiti goes back to at least the 1980s and is outlined below. In 1992, the PMA had a professional photographer shoot what remained of it. Board president **Janet Sozio** had the 500 photos, originally in slide format, transferred onto DVDs in 1997. PMA member **Brenda Marris** uploaded, compiled and assigned identification numbers to all of them for Lisa's use in editing the video. We plan to put all of the photos on the website in the future. Kudos to Dave, Lisa and Brenda for all the great work they did on this project.

PLEASE RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP

We greatly appreciate your support, which makes it possible for us to preserve the history of the Jail through projects such as the graffiti video. Your dues are more important than ever as the closure of the museum due to the pandemic has terminated all

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Please help us preserve and promote the Prison Museum by joining the PMA. Annual dues are \$15(individual)/\$25 (family). Membership benefits include a quarterly newsletter, event updates, 10% off gift shop purchases, and free admission to the museum.

Go on the website for an application.

income from admissions and gift shop sales. If everyone renews, we will be able to keep our website and email on line, maintain our computer and continue to research and produce newsletters and other articles until the world finally goes back to normal, which will happen sooner or later. As most history enthusiasts know, mankind manages to survive all sorts of incredible and awful events.

THE SAGA OF THE JAIL'S GRAFFITI

The long and the short of this story is that the graffiti was an important piece of the history of the Burlington County Prison which should have been conserved, or at least photographed, when the Prison closed as a jail in 1965. We can't blame the PMA or the County too much, though. Photography was a much more complicated and expensive process than it is today, when people routinely whip out their cell phones to take pictures of their meals in restaurants and put them on Facebook, all in about ten seconds. Luckily, in 1992, Dave Kimball, then the President of the PMA, had the foresight to have photographs taken of what was left of the graffiti at the time. Fast forward to 2020, when we are rapidly losing the very little that remains. The PMA seeks to conserve what we can, and to memorialize, through videos and articles, the history of what has been lost and what will probably, inevitably, be lost in the near future.

Why the graffiti is important

One of the most important aspects of historical structures is the human one. With regard to our Jail, we want to know about the man who designed it, the men who built it, the freeholders and sheriffs who operated it, the guards who worked in it, the judges who sentenced people to it, the lawyers who defended and prosecuted the inmates and yes, the inmates themselves. It is only through them that we truly understand our culture and our history, which of course is the whole point.

Graffiti is recognized as a reflection of culture, society and psyche. In the spontaneity of graffiti may be found a level of candor that you rarely see in traditional art. Moreover, unlike graffiti written outside and meant for others to see, graffiti written on a jail cell wall is intended to be seen only by the artist or those who come after him or her. These self-affirming pieces uniquely reflect culture, society and psyche.

The drawings left by the inmates at the Burlington County Prison are not like the graffiti found in most other prisons, i.e., pornography, obscene language and violence. Rather, much of the graffiti in our jail contained remarkable examples of convict art from the 1950s and 1960s. We are not alone in that opinion. Lynne Poirier of the Strong Museum of Rochester, New York, wrote in a 1985 report for the American Association for State and Local History that the graffiti in our Jail was "extraordinarily poignant and important to the history of penology". Constance Silver, a New York City conservator who was able to conserve a small amount of the graffiti, was particularly struck by one cell that contained religious art, including an image of Jesus and a highly personal version of the Ten Commandments ("thou shall not steal" being written in red ink). She remarked in a 1986 report that "the iconography, design and execution are so planned in many instances that mural art is a more accurate description than graffiti." Frank Martero, the director of the Center for Preservation Research at Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture and Planning, agreed with Silver's assessment. In a letter dated April 22, 1986, he urged that the graffiti be preserved. He bemoaned the fact although federal guidelines for historic restoration recommended the retention of "significant accretions", most historic buildings are usually "stripped back to an idealized - and thus inaccurate - historic appearance." That is what happened to the Jail: the "significant accretions", including the graffiti of the 1950s, were stripped away.

Plaster, whitewash and paint - not perfect together

The walls of the prison were constructed in 1811 from bricks covered with plaster and whitewash. This reflected the goal of architect Robert Mills to build a durable, fireproof, clean and cleanable prison. Whitewash is typically made of lime, and was often used in the past on interiors of institutions because of its mildly antibacterial properties. It was especially compatible with masonry because, when properly applied, it was absorbed easily and hardened quickly. It was easy to clean and of course less expensive than paint.

At some point in the 20th century, commercial oil-based paint was applied over the whitewash. The paint was mostly ochre reds and golds, and dark green. As far as we know, the last application of this paint was in 1955. The convicts executed their murals on these painted surfaces.

Where to begin with all the problems in our Jail resulting from plaster, whitewash and oil-based paint? Briefly, well-installed plaster holds up well -- as long as it doesn't get wet. Whitewash works well on plaster -- as long as it doesn't get wet. Oil-based paint, which we now know is toxic, doesn't stick to whitewash very well -- especially if it gets wet. And guess what's wet? Our Jail. It has been and is getting increasingly moist from a long history of water problems, including leaking roofs, broken water pipes and water seeping up from the ground through the basement floor. All these issues came to a head in the 1980s.

By the mid-1980s, all the paint, including the graffiti, was peeling off at an alarming rate. In February of 1985, the PMA received a consultation grant from the American Association for State and Local History to pay Lynne Poirier of the Strong Museum in Rochester to make recommendations regarding the Jail's structure and conservation. The PMA also hired conservationist Constance Silver of New York City to assess the graffiti, and applied to the New Jersey Historical Commission for a grant to pay her to repair the damage. The grant was denied on the basis that there was no plan to address the water problem, which caused the damage in the first place. Nevertheless, money was somehow raised to pay Ms Silver to perform some "emergency conservation treatments" in early 1986.

By 1990, it was obvious that the building would have to be completely renovated, starting with a new roof. It would be two more years before the project was funded. Dave Kimball realized that most of the graffiti that was chipping off would be left on the floor from the vibration of the roofing work. It was at that point that the PMA used \$2900 it had earned from haunted events, admissions and gift shop sales to pay a company called Studio Productions to take the pictures in the fall of 1992. Photographer Greg Schlight did the shoot.

The roof was replaced in 1993. The museum closed and did not re-open completely until 2001. In the interim, the museum was renovated. Most of the lead-based paint was removed. Most of the graffiti went with it. The graffiti that remained was covered with a Plexiglas shield which has the unintended consequence of trapping moisture against the walls. Moreover, the Jail continues to have a moisture problem in the basement which we believe is affecting the entire building. The moisture, intensified by the Plexiglas, has accelerated the deterioration of the graffiti that remains. Most of it is now beyond recognition.

There are still a few sections of the graffiti that are not beyond conservation, such as the image of Jesus, which was repaired by Ms Silver over 30 years ago. We hope that those sections will be conserved. Attached is a photo of the Jesus image as it was before Ms Silver's renovation and as it appears today. The image was drawn on an inner wall and up near the ceiling, thus escaping some of the devastating moisture.

The Graffiti - What is gone and what remains

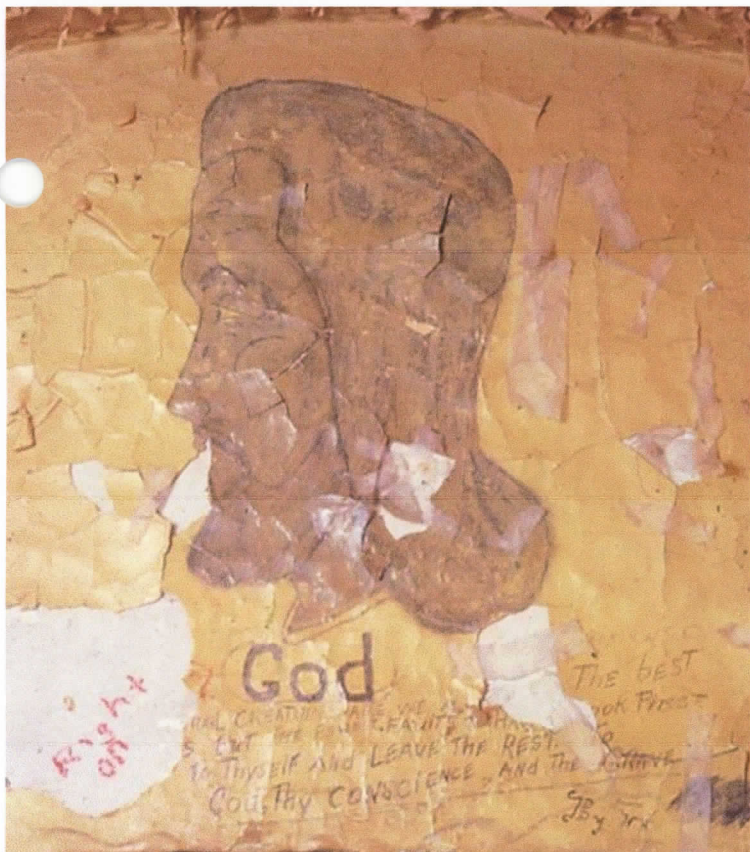
The graffiti contains a lot of names: "Gary L was here in 1953", "I was here. Bungalow Bob", "C. King" (a vagrant who managed to get 120 day sentences each year when cold weather arrived). One man recorded his exercise regimen: "Pushups 50, Situps 7...". A poem: "My Life is in Darkness, Where is God, can you tell me? Ever fin (sic) him, I hope so."

We have attached photos of some of the graffiti. We suggest that those of you who have internet look at this newsletter on our website or your email so that you can enlarge the photos.

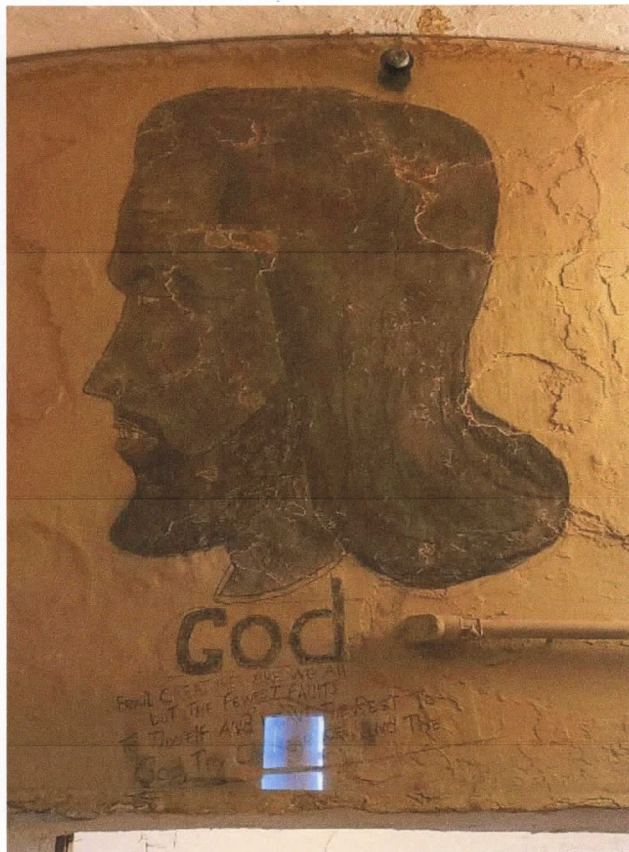
- The first two photos are the image of Jesus before and after Ms Silver's conservation. This is one that we definitely would like to save.
- The next photos are of a calendar; you can see how it has deteriorated.
- The next picture is a portrait of a ladies' head. This was found in the women's wing during the renovation on a previous coat of paint. It is our oldest example of graffiti and another one that should be preserved.
- The next photos are that of the famous "eyeball". It is basically unrecognizable now. On the opposite wall was a dire warning "Don't look over the door behind you" (where one would see the eyeball).
- The last page includes a nightgown-clad "Miss Luck", an 18th century map of Philadelphia drawn from memory, and interesting star motif that appears throughout the jail drawn by "Dan", apparently enamored of "Kathy". Can you see their names? Finally, a sketch of the two thieves crucified with Christ on Golgotha. But where is Jesus?

Do you have any ideas or comments about the graffiti? Please send us an email.

***In the Next Issue -
How the Museum became a National Historic Landmark***



God – Before Restoration



God – Current Photo



Calendar c. 1992



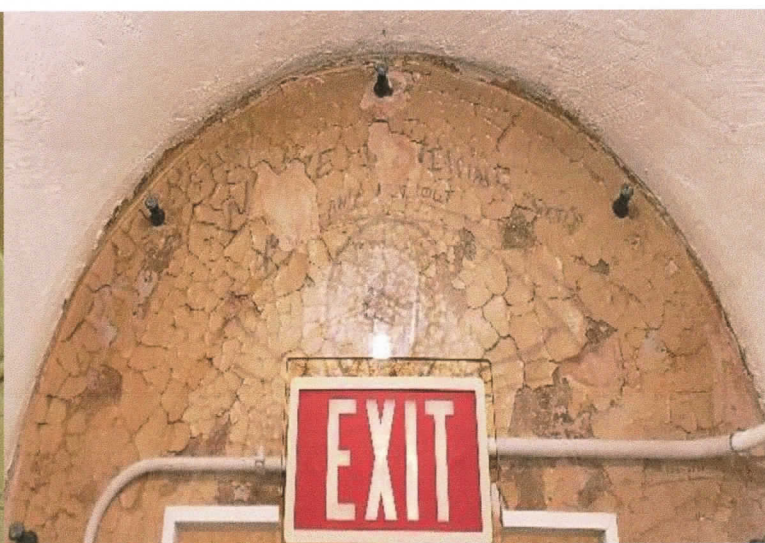
Calendar – Current Photo



Portrait of Lady 1890-1910



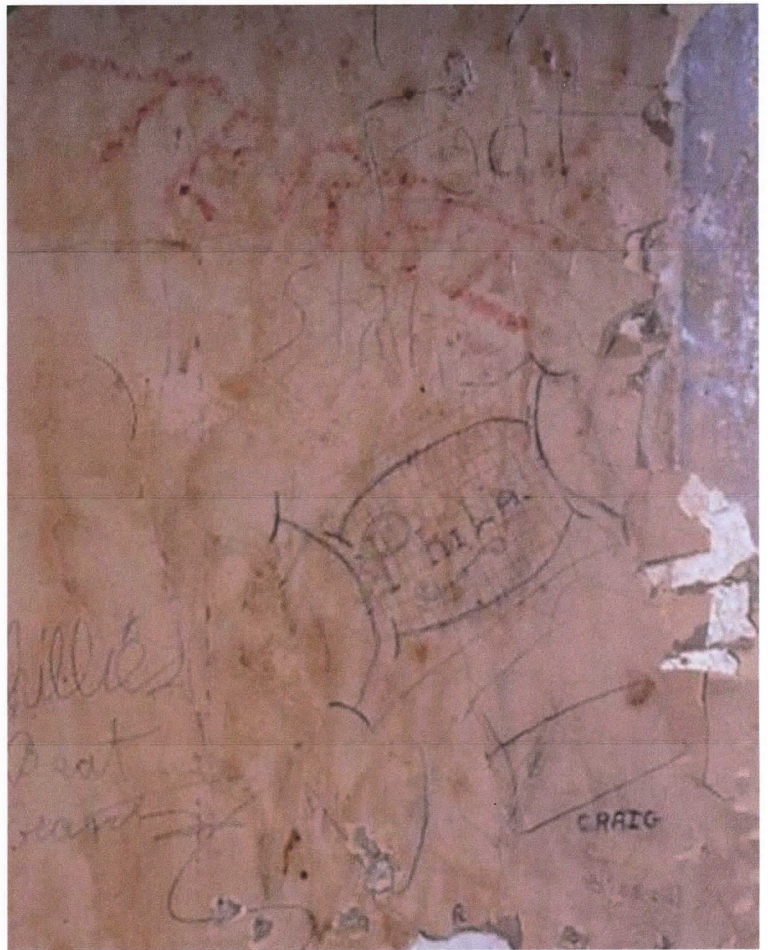
Eyeball c. 1992



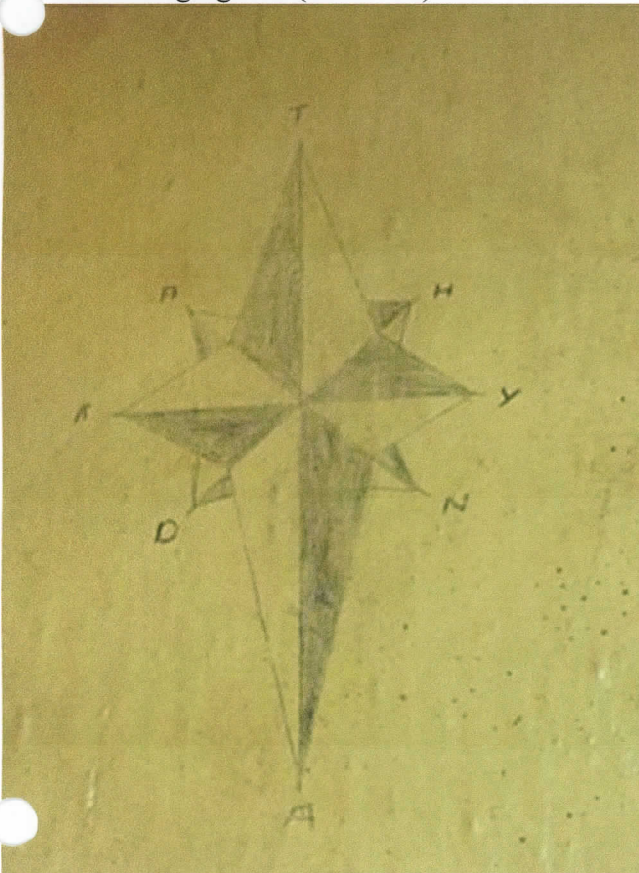
Eyeball – Current Shot



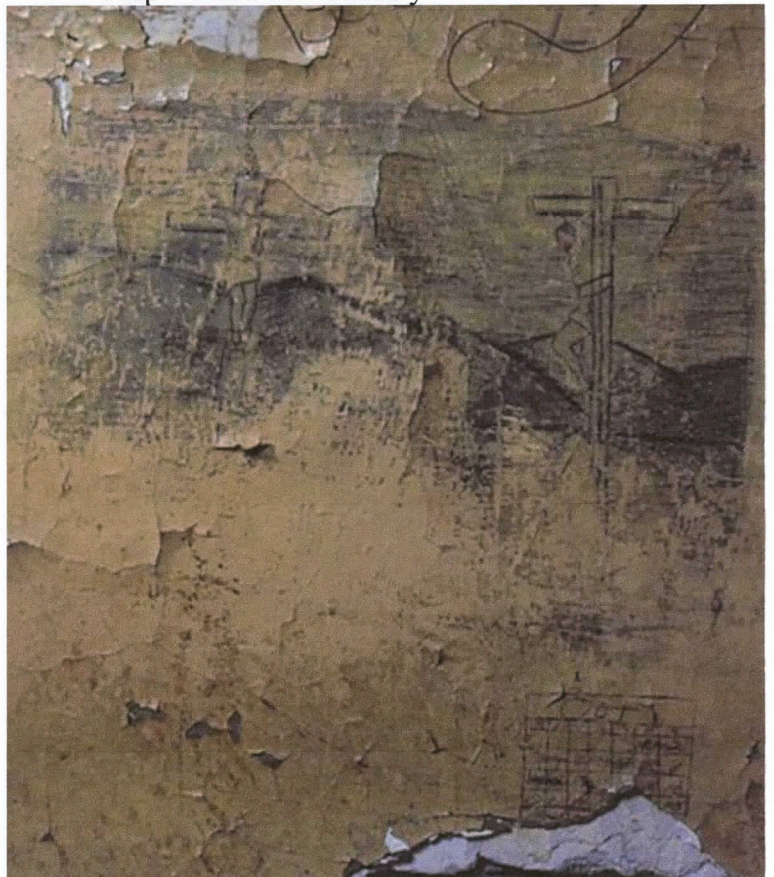
Woman in Nightgown (36-23-36)



Map – Phila 18th Century



Dan and Kathy



Thieves crucified with Christ

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