

Origins & Purpose

In recent years, few scholarly topics have generated wider interest than the history of incarceration in the United States. From Michelle Alexander’s pathbreaking book, *The New Jim Crow* (2010) to Heather Ann Thompson’s Pulitzer Prize-winning account of the Attica Prison Uprising of 1971, *Blood in the Water* (2016), to Ava DuVernay’s popular documentary film *13th* (2016), the question of how, when, and why the United States became the world’s leading practitioner of “mass incarceration” has captured the attention of policymakers, journalists, scholars, and ordinary citizens. Statistically, it is possible to date an upsurge in American incarceration to the late 1970s: whereas during the first three decades after the Second World War the American prison population slowly increased from about 250,000 to 350,000 individuals, from 1975 to 1985 it doubled in size (to 757,493) and then doubled again (to 1,625,124) from 1985 to 1995. By the early 21st century, the United States, with about 5% of the world’s population, accounted for about 25% of the world’s prisoners. Why this remarkable increase occurred is a more complicated matter, inspiring a string of studies that have broadened our view of the geography, demography, and chronology of American incarceration. In *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander drew attention to a historical pattern of racial discrimination against African Americans, which took a new, ostensibly “color-blind” form in the 1980s as part of broad political and cultural “War on Drugs.” Subsequent scholars have noted the dramatic increase in recent years of Latino prisoners (along with the expansion of immigrant detention centers); others have kept the focus on the punishment of African Americans but have offered a different periodization of the shift toward mass incarceration, beginning not with President Ronald Reagan’s “War on Drugs” but with an earlier (Nixon-era) “War on Crime” and (Johnson-era) “War on Poverty.”

In contrast to the rich literature on incarceration since the 1960s, comprehensive histories of incarceration before the 1960s are sorely lacking. We know that the number of American prisoners grew steadily from the end of the Civil War (25,994) to the turn of the century (81,447) to the start of the Second World War (272,955). But many questions remain, including a good number which digitized prison records will help answer. For example, is there evidence of regional differences in incarceration rates and prisoner populations? Of changing patterns with regard to criminal charges and sentencing? Of racial and other forms of categorization of prisoners?

The debate on American incarceration has engaged scholars across multiple disciplinary boundaries, from history to sociology to media studies and criminal justice; however, so far it has not taken advantage of an extraordinary new resource: digitized prison records. Although Alexander and other scholars have grounded their arguments in long-term historical developments, no one has attempted to compile and analyze prison records across a large span of American history, to see how earlier patterns of incarceration compare with recent ones. The increasingly widespread digitization of prison records makes this kind of analysis not only possible, but relatively easy to achieve. The successful creation of a British database of prison records (*The Digital Panopticon*) demonstrates that an American project of this type can attract
scholars, students, and the general public; in addition, this project should provide invaluable assistance to policymakers who wish to place the current state of the American prison system in historical context. Our long-term goal is to produce a broadly accessible and interactive database and website, which speaks to people interested in genealogy, to students and scholars of American history, and to individuals and organizations with a special interest in criminal justice. Our immediate goal with this Level 1 grant is to lay the groundwork for this ambitious long-term project by identifying relevant primary and secondary sources, discussing the applicability of the Digital Panopticon model to the American context, and determining the specific scope and practical plan needed to create our own database and website.

Studies of American prisons that make use of digitized prison records are scattered, and one purpose of our project is to gain a comprehensive understanding of this literature, and of the digitized sources they identify and utilize. Fortunately, a model for our project exists in the United Kingdom: The Digital Panopticon. Over the past six years, a team of British researchers and website developers have created a searchable database of approximately 90,000 British men and women who were convicted of crimes between 1780 and 1920. The database, which links together millions of records and offers users an assortment of research and learning aids, is housed at a free and publicly accessible website (www.digitalpanopticon.org). Citizens interested in genealogy can enter family names and examine all of the resulting records; secondary school teachers and students can read the historical background information, a series of convict biographies, and attempt their own investigations; scholars can use the data to develop original research projects and to support conventional research; and policymakers can learn from the general and specific patterns of crime and punishment that emerge from the records. The Digital Panopticon has already proven to be a popular resource: From its formal launch in September 2017 through March 2018, the website has attracted between five and ten thousand users each week, while garnering coverage by dozens of television, radio, online, and newsprint outlets. By involving the Principal Investigator of the Digital Panopticon, Prof. Barry Godfrey, as a co-director of this new project, and by soliciting the evaluative input of another contributor to the Digital Panopticon project, Prof. Kris Inwood, we are in an unusually good position to take full advantage of the expertise and experience generated by this British project, over the six-year span of its planning and development.

Preliminary Research (Summer 2019)

The NEH grant funded extensive research into the availability and condition of American prison records. Patrick Dougherty, a University of Georgia graduate student specializing in the history of the Georgia State Penitentiary, spent five full weeks gathering information on American prison records. He used archival websites but also reached out personally to archivists to determine which archives possessed prison records, and also which archives had already made some effort to digitize these records. Not surprisingly, American prison records reflect the great variety of our federal system of governance, the different levels of state-level funding, the unpredictable vagaries of archival preservation (and destruction), and – last but not least – the constantly evolving complexities of private enterprise partnerships with state archives. In particular, the contractual relationships between the large company Ancestry.com and archives pose a challenge to open public access to a variety of records, including prison records.
Workshop (Athens, Georgia – Oct. 3-4, 2019)

We invited an impressive group of specialists to the University of Georgia for a two-day workshop, aimed both at assessing the current state of digital humanities research on the history of incarceration in the United States, and at planning the future development and realization of a new database and website dedicated to this topic.

Here is the list of participants:

Barry Godfrey, Project Co-Director
Professor of Social Justice, Department of Sociology, Social Policy, and Criminology, University of Liverpool

Steven Soper, Project Co-Director
Assistant Professor, Department of History, University of Georgia

Catrien Bijleveld
Director, Netherlands Institute for the Study of Crime and Law Enforcement; Professor, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam

Marianne Fisher-Giorlando
Professor Emerita, Grambling State University

Kris Inwood
Professor of History and Economics, Colleges of Arts and Business and Economics, University of Guelph

Nora Krinitsky
Lecturer, University of Michigan; Interim Director, the University of Michigan Prison Creative Arts Project; Project Director, the University of Michigan Carceral State Project

Emily McGinn
Digital Humanities Coordinator, University of Georgia

Jayne Mooney
Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York

Nathalie Rech
Ph.D. candidate in History, Université du Québec, Montréal

Natalie Ring
Associate Dean of Undergraduate Studies, and Associate Professor of History, University of Texas at Dallas

Sarah Shannon
Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Georgia

Bjørn Stillion Southard
Assistant Professor, Department of Communication Studies, University of Georgia

Alex Tepperman
Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice, University of South Carolina Upstate; founder and moderator of the North American Historical Criminology Network (NAHCN)
And here is the schedule of events:

**Thursday, Oct. 3**

9:00-10:15 – Greeting, brief introductions (including areas of expertise with respect to the history of prisons and prisoners, and/or digital humanities), discussion of our goals for both days of the meeting.

10:45-12:00 – Aims and possibilities (Barry Godfrey)

1:30-3:00 – Meet at the **Special Collections Library** (300 S. Hull St.) to see the current exhibit on convict labor, and to learn about an upcoming theater performance on the history of incarceration.

**Friday, Oct. 4**

9:00-10:15 – Three 20-minute presentations by Alex Tepperman, Jayne Mooney, and Kris Inwood.

10:45-12:00 – Data acquisition and processing: group discussion of the information posted by our research assistant, Patrick Dougherty, on OneDrive; additional information from individual project members with experience seeking and analyzing American prison data.

2:00-3:15 – Politics and ethics of a prison database and website: consider the potential impact of the project on living persons, including descendants of prisoners; consider the political significance of different database parameters (e.g., a chronology that does or does not extend into the post-1970 era of mass incarceration); discuss the potential engagement with other academic and non-academic organizations and agencies (e.g., prisoner advocacy groups, criminal justice reform groups, historical societies, museums).

3:45-5:00 – Plans for further development and realization of the project: building a larger network of project leaders and participants; additional research tasks; ideas for a stage 2 NEH proposal; after we part: collaborating on a summary of our work and meeting.

As the principal host of this workshop, I made an effort to take notes and gauge the prospects of continued and expanded collaboration once the workshop was over. As a scholar specializing in modern Italian history with relatively little experience in American archives, I was struck by the wide range of archival holdings on prisons in the U.S. Several of the individual presentations at the workshop not only summarized the state of one or more American state archives, but also displayed – in PowerPoint slides – the appearance and condition of prison records in multiple states. The process of converting archival documents into data – as the British have done to create the Digital Panopticon – is likely to obscure at least some of these state and regional variations in American archives. Nevertheless, in my opinion, the workshop presentations did not disclose or clarify the best way to conceive an American equivalent of our British colleagues' database. The participants were almost all enthusiastic supporters of the project in general terms, but at the end of two days of meetings it was not clear who – and also where: in which American state or states – might take the lead in developing a concrete plan to develop an historical database of American prison records. It is also worth noting that some participants expressed misgivings or doubts regarding the ethics of the project, in particular our
limited effort (as of the workshop meeting) to assemble a racially and ethnically diverse team of specialists. As one of the principal investigators of the project, I can readily admit that this reminder was sobering and challenging. As I will explain below, despite a concerted effort to act on this challenge and reach out to a much more diverse set of individuals and organizations in the year 2020, I was still unable to address the problem. I may be foolishly optimistic, but I sincerely believe that: a) it is imperative to take this challenge seriously, and work to assemble a diverse team of participants; and b) once we – or a different team of researchers – begins to make progress in this area, the project will thrive and succeed.

**The Next Step: A Pilot Project**

During the winter and spring of 2019-2020, Prof. Barry Godfrey and I stayed in touch and discussed the possibility of attempting to build and analyze a small-scale database of American prison records. Working together with Dr. Emily McGinn of the University of Georgia's Digital Humanities Center, we reached out to a variety of individuals and organizations, including the Equal Justice Initiative; state archivists in Louisiana, Alabama, and Georgia; the National Archives; and a range of other scholars, administrators, and activists. We had two main goals in mind. The first was practical: try to establish a working relationship with archivists in the three southern U.S. states of Louisiana, Alabama, and Georgia, to work on building a small, regional database of prison records. The second goal was ethical: try to diversify the working group we established in 2019, both to reflect the actual diversity of the American public and to proactively consider the ethical challenges associated with publicizing the records of minority groups. With a grant deadline of August, 2020 looming and the Covid epidemic slowing and distorting communications between individuals and organizations, we were unable to assemble the diverse team we felt we needed to submit a successful application. We did, however, establish a relationship with state archivists in Alabama, which suggests that a similar pilot project can and would succeed in the future.

Here is the pilot project statement prepared by myself, Prof. Godfrey, and Dr. McGinn in the summer of 2020:

**Hidden Histories from the American South.**

Too often human lives are reduced to data points. What is often lost is that every person in the census, every inmate in the prison, and every person in the official records of the state - every data point - is a real person with their own story. This project attempts to recover stories from hidden or inaccessible archives to return them to the families of men and women incarcerated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; and to facilitate historians and social scientists in contextualising those individual lives into wider narratives.

We aim to use expertise on data-linkage and digital humanities developed in the UK together with museums, archives, and experts on race and imprisonment in the American South to democratise data and allow people living today to understand the lives and experiences of their ancestors. It also unlocks the potential of prison archives for academic historical and criminological research. We strongly support the impetus that COVID 19 and the Black Lives Matter campaigns has given repositories, archives and museums to further take the academy into the public realm and to reveal some of the stories of hidden lives which have been erased from the archival record. It seems timely for the digital humanities to make a contribution to the history of race, crime, and justice in the American South.

We intend to:

- Link data from multiple existing datasets to produce ‘life-archives’ for thousands of men and women imprisoned in Alabama, Georgia, and Louisiana between 1817 and 1960.
- Answer research questions about race and imprisonment; and provide downloadable data for the academic community to carry out their own research projects.
- Produce online exhibitions, short accessible explanatory essays, and video clips which can be used by archives and museums to engage with the general public and the media.
- Create a website which allows genealogists, non-professional historians, and the descendants of prisoners to access data and uncover for themselves the history of their ancestors.

Digitized prison records contain a huge amount of biographical and biometrical data on thousands of people for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. What they cannot do is provide details of the lives people enjoyed or endured post-release from imprisonment, or the lives they lived before they were incarcerated. For that longer-term perspective, we will turn to the digitised census records which tell us about family structure, occupation, and residential details. Prisoners were or became fathers, mothers, carers, workers, soldiers, and were sons and daughters, brothers, sisters. We aim to allow descendants to recover a rounded perspective of their relatives’ lives - people who have often been ignored or erased from history - together with explanatory essays which wrap global contexts around personal details.

This ambitious project will be grounded within the archives/museum sector, academic institutions, and human rights campaign groups that serve the community. Our partners will play a full part in developing and disseminating the project. The deadline for applications to the Arts and Humanities Research Council/National Endowment for Humanities is August 2020, with the project commencing in 2021.

*Steven Soper, Barry Godfrey and Emily McGinn. July 2020*