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Project preserves prison's 'tapestry'

By Diane Valden

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HUDSON—When prisons close and the gates are locked for the last time, the stories of people who were there and the history of the place may get lost.

Founders of the *Prison Public Memory Project*, whose inaugural effort is focused on the Hudson Correctional Facility and its past incarnations, don't want that to happen here.

The project, called a “virtual center for prison memories and civic engagement” by its founders, is a new website and blog, www.prisonmemory.org, where anyone with a memory, experience or story about the place and can share it.

The Hudson Correctional Facility is now a state prison for the general confinement of males 16 years of age and older that opened in 1976. But it was built “in the midst of the nation's first great depression that began in 1873 with the collapse of the New York City financial markets.” With its opening in 1887, the House of Refuge became “only the second reformatory for women established by law in the United States and the only prison in New York at that time for women sentenced by the state,” according to the website.

The House of Refuge closed after 17 years and the place took on a new identity as the New York State Training School for Girls from 1904 to 1975. The training school established a separate place of confinement for “incorrigible” girls between the ages of 12 and 15 who had previously been housed with boys on Randall's Island in New York City or at the State Industrial School in Rochester. At one point the Hudson Training School held as many as 500 girls “but the population declined significantly as it neared closure in 1975,” says the website.

“In the mid-1930s, a 16-year-old Ella Fitzgerald, whose famous career as a jazz singer began while she was on parole, was incarcerated at Hudson, a period of her life she never spoke about in public,” says the website.

Currently, the state correctional facility at 50 East Court Street is classified as a men's medium security prison and work release facility with 230 staff members, 161 of them in security positions. The inmate population is 316. Within the prison's secure perimeter there are about 50 acres;

outside the perimeter is another 118 acres, according to New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision Assistant Public Information Officer Linda M. Foglia.

Project founders were drawn to Hudson mainly because of the facility's three-fold "rich history," Founder/Director Alison Cornyn told The Columbia Paper in a recent phone interview. Also, Tracy Huling, the founder/president lives nearby.

The creation of the space where prison memories can be housed is a non-profit endeavor funded by private supporters, though Ms. Cornyn said the plan is use the project as a model to seek New York Council on the Humanities grants for future history projects around the state.

The project also sets the stage for the airing of multiple perspectives about prisons themselves and surrounding issues, contributes to the collective insight about the institutions and presents "not one memory or experience, but creates a tapestry of understanding," said Ms. Cornyn, adding that understanding the past when prisons close can be incorporated into imagining the future.

For a year before the website launch in early September, project founders and a team of contributors from the Hudson Valley and around the state interviewed Hudson area residents including "prison alumni;" conducted research in local and state archives and libraries; and developed educational, interpretive and cultural activities to be offered in Hudson and on the website later this year and next year, according to a press release about the project.

"Visitors to the website can view current photos of former prison workers and inmates and listen to audio clips from their oral histories; see old photographs and maps of the prison; and read prison documents and letters from the 19th and 20th centuries. Short articles tell about ordinary as well as extraordinary prison-related events and people that influenced local, state and national history. One section of the website invites visitors to become history detectives helping the project team answer questions and find evidence and visitors are encouraged to contribute in other ways," the release said.

Ms. Cornyn is "an interdisciplinary artist at the convergence of technology and traditional medias with extensive experience in interactive and web design as well as in building online communities, and is founding partner and creative director of Picture Projects, a studio that produces in-depth new media projects that focus on telling complex stories from multiple perspectives," according to a biography on the website. She lives with her husband, Gilles Peress, and their two daughters in Brooklyn.

Ms. Huling is best known for her work on the complex relationship between prisons and rural communities. She has conducted original research, been published widely on this subject and consulted with national organizations and foundations. She also works directly with grassroots groups, community leaders and local chambers of commerce in dozens of rural towns across America. In 1991, she moved to the Hudson River Valley, where "she lives with her husband on an old farm which reminds her of childhood summers spent with her grandparents, small farmers and business-owners," says the website.

In a summary, the website says, the project “uses history, dialogue, the arts and technology to build public memory and safe spaces where people from all walks of life can come together to engage in conversation and learning about the complex and contested role of prisons in communities and society.”

Future plans include “work with local individuals and organizations in communities with prisons across the country to recover, preserve, interpret, present and honor the memories of what took place in those institutions, integrating community knowledge with more traditional forms of historic preservation.”