

About Time: The FBI at Lorton Prison

By Karin McKie

The Wall, The Hill, The Hole, and The Quack were nicknames for incarceration zones in the DC Correctional Facility at Lorton, a now-repurposed microcosm of 20th century American social, political and carceral history. Decades before those colloquialisms arose, the prison workhouse was built at the urging of President Theodore Roosevelt's District of Columbia penal commission. In 1910, reform advocates sought a kinder and more effective rehabilitation system than what was happening at DC's jail. Lorton inmates constructed their own housing from bricks made on the premises, as well as operated the on-campus Lorton and Occoquan Railroad. The complex was nearly self-sufficient and initially raised its own crops and animals, including a dairy: "Saving souls and soils, that is the work this remarkable prison is doing" (Young Persons Weekly, 1927).

In 1914, the DC government built an adjacent reformatory, and then added a penitentiary in 1936. The entire reservation came under DC Department of Corrections administration in 1946. Lorton was also a civil defense site starting in 1959, secretly housing a Cold War emergency communications center for the District, as well as a large Nike anti-aircraft missile site with six magazines of four launchers. Those facilities became a showcase for national security practices.

In response to the Federal Youth Corrections Act, the Youth Center opened in 1960 (ironically, the only part of the prison *not* policed by federal agencies), to help prisoners aged 18-22 learn a trade or earn a high school equivalency degree in order to get their records expunged. Those buildings were designed to resemble a college campus, and implemented open plan dormitories. But eventual overcrowding caused older adult felons to be locked up next to the younger ones, in a prison with a growing national reputation for unaddressed recidivism, unprecedented corruption, violent drug gangs, and crumbling facilities that would cost almost a billion dollars to update. A landfill was also located next to the lockup, so the entire area was considered unsavory. The understaffed and underfunded prison, deemed increasingly dangerous within a growing suburban community, was permanently closed by Congress in 2001.

When Lorton closed, the District lost both the right and responsibility to control its prisoners and prison system, a constitutional power enjoyed by other states. Hundreds of employees lost their jobs, and prisoners were relocated to other facilities that were often much further away from loved ones, contributing to inmate isolation and desperation, and impacting rehabilitation.

Fairfax County Virginia purchased more than 2,000 acres from the General Services Administration when the prison shuttered. Some of the land was developed into residential properties but the majority was used for two parks, a public golf course, plus an elementary, middle and high school. The Workhouse Arts Center repurposed the former Workhouse as artists' studios, a



LUCY BURNS MUSEUM 91 YEARS OF PRISON HISTORY AT LORTON

theater, and community events facilities.

The Lucy Burns Museum opened in 2020, during the centennial of the passage of the 19th Amendment legalizing American women's right to vote. The museum is named for and commemorates the suffragists imprisoned there in 1917 for picketing outside the White House.

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Located 20 miles south of the Nation's Capital, Lorton Prison was under federal oversight because the facility was on federal land. Crimes committed in a federal prison were federal offenses, not under the auspices of Fairfax County or the Commonwealth of Virginia. Those prosecuted in US district courts were federal prisoners, who were then sent to either the DC Jail or to Lorton, one of the few nationwide facilities to house minimum, medium and maximum security prisoners in one place.

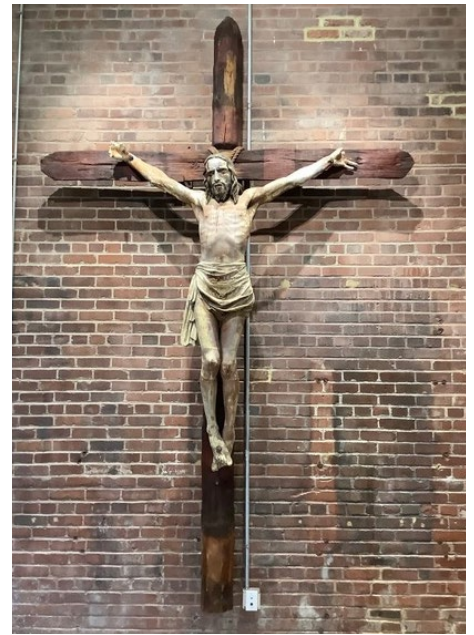
Federal Bureau of Investigation agents were summoned to handle any onsite crimes, including those committed by inmates as well as by corrections officers and prison employees, like corruption, theft or other misconduct. Any prisoners who failed to return from "work release" or who outright escaped were charged with the separate federal crime of "escaped federal prisoner." The Former Agents of the FBI Foundation funded an exhibit within the Lucy Burns Museum to highlight the unique relationship between the Bureau and Lorton.

Former FBI agent and Watergate burglar G. Gordon Liddy was incarcerated at Lorton, but most FBI agents fought crimes there rather than perpetrating them. Notable federal crimes committed at Lorton include the stabbing murder of Correctional Officer Michael Francis Hughes on February 13, 1958, when he tried to separate two inmates in the day room; the off-campus assassinations of FBI Special Agents Anthony Palmisano and Edwin Woodruffe, the first African-American agent to be killed in the line of duty, perpetrated while the pair was trying to apprehend escapee Billie Austin Bryant after a DC bank robbery, on January 8, 1969; and the inmate murder of CO Michael Roy Kirby on November 30, 1973, when he discovered



Above: Formerly a prison workhouse built in 1924 and renovated from 2004 to 2006, the Workhouse Arts Center is now home to the Lucy Burns Museum. Photo by Alan McKie.

Right: A crucifix created by a Lorton prisoner; now on display at the Lucy Burns Museum. Photo by Alan McKie.



prisoner-made contraband. Kirby's body was found stuffed in a manhole at the prison.

Former counterintelligence and espionage agent Ted Edwards recalls that the FBI's Washington Field Office had an entire squad dedicated to investigate "Lorton case" crimes, mostly scenes of prison violence where inmate disputes ended with a stabbing by a homemade weapon. The WFO assigned probationary special agents to gain experience working on criminal cases. Newer agents would enter the prison grounds and walk among the population to gather evidence, then take witness and victim statements.

"Lorton was essentially a 'throw away' for every entity that had a stake in it," says retired Special Agent Daniel E. Lund. Virginia authorities wanted nothing to do with the site, and the DC Department of Corrections was poorly staffed and managed. He adds that it didn't help that Lorton was never constructed to be a full penal facility, coupled with the fact that some inmate leadership grew so strong that they dictated policy to the administrators, rather than the other way around.

Many inmates had grown up together in the District and nearby, notes former agent Jim Hammock, and continued to run their criminal enterprises inside the facility. Retired agent Charlie Prouty adds that since most inmates came from DC, their pecking order was already established. Inmate leaders held tight control over the prison population and easily coordinated criminal activity like contraband smuggling, retaliatory violence and murder.

Hammock recalls that inmate Ian Thorne ordered another inmate to murder someone to prove his power within the prison, and that Darryl Stokes stabbed prisoners and officers who didn't show him respect. "When I had to work a homicide on his tier, I wore a suit because I knew I would have urine and feces thrown at me if I appeared to be an investigator," Hammock says. "I put on the suit to appear to be an attorney in order to process the scene. Inmates asked me for my business card, but I told them I was working pro bono."

Agent Richard Lack remembers that "the Lorton team and administrators treated us great because they wanted us to come back," including to play baseball versus the prison team. "The prisoners would attend the games and were quite vocal," he adds. "Lots of betting going on, and some even bet on our FBI team," despite the fact that, at one game, the FBI pitcher hit the prison's lead batter in the head. That inmate was doing life for murder, but laughed off the painful pitch.

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Retired FBI Special Agent and Judge Hal Neilson says the DC administration was under constant investigation, and doesn't think they cared too much about what happened at Lorton. After making prison arrests, the FBI would make suggestions that were ignored, likely due to understaffing. "Lorton was a horrible place to be incarcerated due to the lack of management and lack of reform," he says. "A lot of stabbings and murders could have been prevented. Lorton turned most people into animals instead of helping them to prepare to re-enter society. Poor administration is absolutely to blame for the crime inside and likely for its closure."

Neilson also remembers the limited education and rehabilitation programs, leaving "only hardened criminal inmates educating everyone on how to be better criminals."

Neilson worked Lorton's violent crimes, including escapes (some inmates wore officers' clothing to slip out), murders and stabbings by a variety of shanks, which were handmade weapons made of plastic, wood and metal, that were hidden in clothes, slippers, wall cracks, heaters and mattresses. At the time, surveillance cameras were limited and inmates knew where they were located so they didn't help prevent such assaults. Neilson would interview inmates who were more likely to cooperate if they were moved to better facilities or received sentence leniency. But

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he had to be careful to protect the interviewees, because snitches could get stitches, or worse.

A Lorton informant aided the high-profile prosecution of the murderer of civil rights activist Medgar Evers, Lund remembers. In exchange for an earlier release, prisoner Lester Paul Hockman shared conversations that he had with Byron De La Beckwith when they were both in Angola State Prison. Klansman De La Beckwith murdered Evers in 1963 but was acquitted twice by all-white hung juries. Hockman’s information identified new witnesses that helped secure a 1994 conviction, as recounted in the film *Ghosts of Mississippi* and the book *Never Too Late: A Prosecutor’s Story of Justice in the Medgar Evers Case*.

Judge Neilson was also an FBI case agent on numerous undercover sting operations, working with inmate informants to catch corrupt guards who smuggled drugs, guns and other contraband into the various incarceration levels. Some crooked COs would steal furniture from inside the prison to sell outside.

Many inmates tried cultivating relationships with correctional officers. They might have toys delivered to the officers’ children at Christmas, Hammock recalls. Then the inmates might ask for a Big Mac from McDonald’s, or vodka in a water bottle, or cocaine. Prisoners would also work to connect with outsiders, such as calling women from the phone book until they found someone who was lonely, develop a relationship, then start requesting contraband. One group of inmates claimed to be part of a religious sect and requested visits from women members, who were actually prostitutes. The prisoners sold sex in the closets and filmed the acts, then rented the tapes to others for money, drugs, or cigarettes, called “gold” because they were so valuable inside. (DC’s Go-Go music pioneer and one-time Lorton inmate Chuck Brown of the “Bustin’ Loose” Soul Searchers famously learned how to play after trading two packs of smokes for a guitar.)

“Most agents hated Lorton,” says Hammock, “But I loved the education!”

Former agent and current criminal justice lecturer Sam Simon, Jr., was one of the haters. “Lorton was the least favorite part of my job,” he says. “We had to leave our weapons locked in our vehicles, and enter a facility where I was personally responsible for a dozen or so inmates. I always felt most insecure and unsafe walking into that facility without my service weapon, handcuffs, or anything to offer self-protection.”

“The guards always traveled with us for our security, but processing crime scenes in a prison is not an exciting or gratifying job,” Simon adds. “It was an excellent opportunity for new, young crime scene investigators to hone their skills. But, in the end, it was always the same, one convict fighting with another convict over some perceived slight.”

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According to the Winter 2016 Harvard Kennedy School Magazine, America has five percent of the world’s population, but 25% of the world’s prisoners. The number of currently

incarcerated Americans is eight times that of the early 1970s, with minorities accounting for 60%: Latinx people are sentenced at three times, and African-Americans at six times, the rate of whites. In 1997, 95% of reformatory prisoners were Black. At the beginning of this millennium, more than eight million Black children, nearly ten percent of those under 18, have fathers in prison.

Judge Neilson says there were people who belonged at Lorton, and that there was no way to “fix” them for society. “However, the majority of inmates were people who made mistakes and committed a crime,” Neilson adds. “Those people should not have been forced to deal with the corruption inside the facilities, and sometimes resorted to other crimes to just stay alive.”

Sam Simon says that when Lorton was finally shut down, “our unit used the site to conduct squad training. We would practice clearing rooms and other defensive tactics at the facility. To be perfectly honest, I was not heartbroken to see it closed. I felt utter dread when I entered Lorton.”

The 20th century carceral experiment at Lorton started with reform in mind, but left a legacy of mismanagement, corruption and human rights abuses. Yet the facility also managed to be a meaningful training ground for federal agents, both before and after closure. But “prisons should not be operated that way,” says Judge Neilson. “I am certain the FBI made a difference and gave many hope. But realistically, we were just scratching the surface of what was actually going on there.”

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A feature about the history and creation of the Lucy Burns Museum is available here: <https://www.aam-us.org/2020/03/02/silent-no-more-the-new-lucy-burns-museum-speaks-to-the-centennial-of-suffrage/>

“Coping with Life Behind Bars,” a gallery of inmate art, music, theater and prose here: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1WU PmHLn51b5O9JSWzNF1gz9fxT2wNFDR/view>

Video of Frank Sinatra and the Count Basie Orchestra performing at Lorton in 1965: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1e8VFJkh61A>

The Lucy Burns Museum’s COVID visiting hours are on Saturdays. A virtual tour, additional videos and a donation portal are linked here: <https://www.workhousearts.org/lucyburnsmuseum/>

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Karin McKie is a Chicago-based writer, educator and activist — visit KarinMcKie.com