

Spring Lecture Series

APRIL: Lorna Poplak

The Don Inmates, Guards, Governors and the Gallows

Lorna Poplak traced the history of the Don Jail from its idealistic initial concept, through its century of decline into a place despised by inmates, staff and public alike, to its modern reincarnation.

What we know today as the Don Jail was the fourth prison to be built in Toronto. Its construction was a response to the horrendously overcrowded conditions in the jail on Front Street (between Berkeley and Parliament Streets). Inmates were not simply those convicted (or even suspected) of committing crimes. They included people whose behaviour did not conform to the socially accepted norm: those with mental health and alcohol issues, the sick, elderly, homeless or destitute.

Theories about the purpose of incarceration changed over the decades. Reformers tried to change the focus from punishment and social isolation, to providing an opportunity for personal reflection and penitence, to rehabilitation and retraining for reintegration into society. One of the beliefs of the 18th century British reformer John Howard was that the perfect location for a prison was beside a river. Fresh air, bright daylight and hard labour would give miscreants the opportunity to contemplate their wrongdoing and reform.

When the Scadding family offered the City Council land on the Don River in 1856, it was the ideal location for a modern prison. On the east side of the river, beyond the City Limits, it was relatively inexpensive. Its rural location meant it had potential for a prison farm.

William Thomas was chosen to be the architect. Construction was dogged by misfortune. First, the financial "Panic of '57" delayed the start of the project. Then, after it had begun, the Provincial Prison Inspectors rejected Thomas's original design and insisted the plan be changed. Thomas died in 1860, but work continued under the direction of his sons. Two years later, the almost-completed building was seriously damaged by fire and had to be rebuilt. It was completed in 1864.

Following reformer John Howard's recommendations, male and female inmates were housed separately. Prisoners had individual cells for sleeping, barely a metre wide. They had no plumbing, just a "night pail". It was planned that during the day inmates would be working the farm, or in common areas in the building. When it opened, this was a state-of-the-art jail, "a palace for prisoners." There were many rules (including silence), and corporal punishment for disobedience.

Like its predecessors, the Don soon became overcrowded. Working on the farm was abandoned, so prisoners spent more time in their cells. At times, as many as three men might be stacked in hammocks in a cell designed for one. As the outside world modernised, services inside the jail remained as they had been built and cells truly became "hell holes". As the Don continued this downward spiral, with frustrated staff and angry inmates, it became a violent place. In 1958, a new east wing was added, but it did nothing to address the longstanding issues. The Old Don Jail was finally closed in 1977.

Governors

Lorna introduced us to some of the Jail Governors, who were not always exemplary characters. The first Governor of the new jail was George Littleton Allen. He had held the same position at the Front Street jail, and was moved into the purpose-built apartment in the new administrative building which connected the two prison wings of the Don. Allen supplemented his income by selling alcohol to inmates. He was dismissed in 1872.

John Green was the next Governor. With overcrowding a tremendous issue, a separate Governor's House was built, and the Green family moved into it in 1888. The vacated space in the main building was converted to cells. The Green family lived in the Governor's House until John Green's death in 1900. Succeeding Governors were immoral or inept.

After the First World War, it was decided that the ideal candidate for the position should be a returning veteran. The aptly named Major George Hedley Basher (a police officer before he joined up) was appointed. He governed the jail from 1919 to 1931, and was reputedly tough but just. While

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Basher favoured capital punishment, and strapping inmates for rule-breaking, he was conscious of the overcrowding and unsanitary conditions of the Don, and advocated for reform, but to little effect.

Inside - and Out

There were 70 hangings at the Don between 1869 and 1962. Before Confederation, executions were a public event, but after 1869, they occurred inside prisons. The last hanging at the Don was of Arthur Lucas and Ronald Turpin. There were petitions to overturn their sentences, and crowds of protestors gathered outside the jail as Lucas and Turpin went to the gallows in 1962. Nobody else was condemned to hang before the abolition of the death penalty in Canada in 1976.

With the miserable conditions in the Don, it is not surprising that there were countless escape attempts. In 1926, Norman Neal, "The Human Eel" sawed through the bars of his cell, and escaped through a hole only 7 inches by 12 inches. He was picked up some months later in Oakville, when he broke into a henhouse.

Perhaps the best known escape artists are the Boyd Gang. Edwin Alonzo Boyd was a flamboyant snappy dresser - and a bank robber. He would jump onto the bank counter to make his demands, brandishing a gun. Among the banks he robbed was the Bank of Montreal on Avenue Road near Felbrigg. In 1851 Boyd was jailed for this and

several other robberies. In the Don, he met men in the same line of work. One had a hacksaw concealed in his wooden foot. They cut through the window bars, and let themselves down the walls using bed sheets.

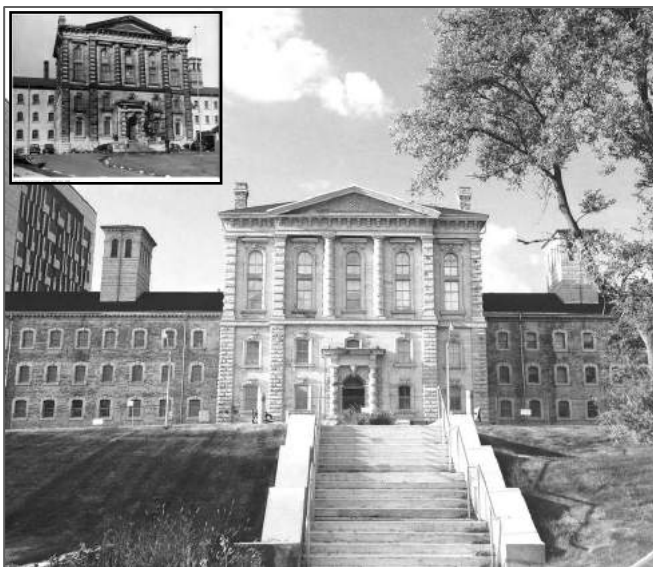
Together, the four of them continued robbing banks, including the Bank of Montreal on Avenue Rd. again, and also the Dominion Bank at 3052 Yonge St. (northwest corner of Lawrence). After two of the thieves (Suchan and Jackson) shot a police detective, they were tracked down and returned to the Don in September, 1952. But they didn't stay. They copied a guard's key and escaped again. This time, there was a major manhunt and they were recaptured. Suchan and Jackson were hanged.

A New Life for an Old Jail

When the Old Don Jail closed in 1977, there were calls from many, including Minister of Correctional Services Frank Drea, to demolish the horrible place and eradicate the ugly memories. But there were others who wanted to preserve the history and the architecture. The building sat neglected until an adaptive reuse project saw it open in 2013 as part of the Bridgepoint Active Healthcare campus.

The exterior was restored, and looks as William Thomas imagined it in the 1850s. Inside, significant architectural features were retained and restored, while making it a bright and airy modern workplace. The interior was modernised as the Hennick Bridgepoint Administration Building. The building's grim past has not been totally eradicated: some of the windows still have bars, and a few of the cells remain in the basement. The history of the site has been incorporated in an interpretative programme.

In 2016, the project won the Heritage Toronto Award of Excellence.



Inset: The Don about 1950.

Main photo: The newly restored façade.

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MORE ABOUT THE DON JAIL

Lorna Poplak, *The Don: The Story of Toronto's Infamous Jail*. (Toronto: Dundurn, 2021)

The History of the Don Jail pamphlet
<https://tinyurl.com/4p6m43k6>

Refurbishing the Don Jail: adaptive reuse
<https://tinyurl.com/3jhppezb>