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Illustrating Progressive-Era Reform in Pennsylvania: The Anna Wharton Morris Papers

“**A**S WE STOOD OUT on the pavement in the cool air, the smell that came from the jail door really frightened me.” Anna Wharton Morris gamely entered the jail at Scranton, Pennsylvania, on October 22, 1915. What she found inside confirmed her fears: a “young man lying on his bunk, blood-spattered & feverish, but receiving no attention. Each cell had a double bed for two prisoners; horrible!!”¹

One of the most active Progressive-era prison reformers in the state of Pennsylvania, Anna Wharton Morris (1868–1957) was described by a contemporary newspaper article as a “tall, forceful woman” who was “keenly interested” in prison reform and well-informed, articulate, and outspoken on the issue.² Hailing from Philadelphia’s social and cultural elite, she seems an unlikely person to have had an intimate knowledge of prisons. Her father, Joseph Wharton, was the prominent industrialist who founded the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. Her husband, Harrison S. Morris, was an author, magazine editor, and managing director at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. She traveled to Europe, won horticultural awards, and rubbed shoulders with such artists as Violet Oakley. However, she was also an active member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), a sect noted for its members’ engagement in social reform movements and a history of imprisonment for their religious convictions.³ Much of Morris’s early prison work was done within the context of Quaker communities.⁴

¹ Anna Wharton Morris, “Journal of Prison Work,” p. 4, series 6, Anna Wharton Morris Papers (RG 5/106), Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College (FHL), Swarthmore, PA.

² Rudolph W. Chamberlain described Anna Wharton Morris as the “Quaker leader of prison reform in Pennsylvania” in *There Is No Truce: A Life of Thomas Mott Osborne* (New York, 1935), 398. Laura Lee, “Politics Blamed for Prison Evils: Mrs. Harrison S. Morris Believes It’s a Duty to Prepare Inmates for Useful Life, Would Teach Officials,” *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, n.d., series 6, Anna Wharton Morris Papers, FHL.

³ Anna Wharton Morris’s great-grandfather, Samuel Rowland Fisher, was imprisoned during the Revolutionary War. She published his journals of his experiences in the *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 41 (1917).

⁴ “Journal of Prison Work,” p. 3, Anna Wharton Morris Papers, FHL.

Morris served in leadership roles for such organizations as the National Society of Penal Information, Pennsylvania Prison Society, Pennsylvania Committee on Penal Affairs, Prison Reform Committee of the Public Charities Association of Philadelphia, and the Thomas Mott Osborne Memorial Fund.⁵ In about a twenty-year period, she spent nearly \$100,000 on prison work.⁶ She published articles and letters and spoke on prison issues on dozens of occasions.⁷ Thomas Mott Osborne, one of the most influential prison reformers of the twentieth century, told her in 1921, “You are the only person I can trust in [Pennsylvania]!”⁸

The Anna Wharton Morris Papers at the Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College is a wellspring of uncommonly well-organized sources on the Progressive-era prison reform movement. Morris kept diaries throughout most of her life, with mentions of prisons helpfully indexed and extracted into a “Journal of Prison Work” covering the first two decades of her efforts. The “Journal of Prison Work” features a list of nearly fifty prisons and jails Morris visited, with reports on the physical facilities as well as comments on the demeanor of guards, administrators, and inmates. Her visits were concentrated in Philadelphia but ranged across the country from San Quentin (California) to Sing Sing (New York) and beyond. These first-hand observations offer glimpses into a wide variety of carceral institutions.

Morris was also a prolific letter-writer, and her prison-related missives are conveniently sorted together. She corresponded with a vast network ranging from local activists and nationally significant reformers to current inmates. Her letters are rich in discussions of goals and strategy. Her most extensive correspondence was with Thomas Mott Osborne, a renowned prison activist from New York who counted Morris as a fierce supporter, key collaborator, and trusted confidant.⁹

A highlight of the collection is a series of fourteen cartoons drawn by Eastern State Penitentiary inmate Frederick Funk while incarcerated in the 1920s (cover image, figs. 1–2).¹⁰ There are drawings illustrating the unsanitary and cruel conditions of prison life, as well as incisive political cartoons dramatizing the investigations into warden Robert J. McKenty. These

⁵“Journal of Prison Work,” p. 3, Anna Wharton Morris Papers, FHL.

⁶Morris spent \$94,504.04 between 1916 and 1937. “Journal of Prison Work,” inside cover, Anna Wharton Morris Papers, FHL.

⁷“Journal of Prison Work,” p. 3, Anna Wharton Morris Papers, FHL.

⁸“Journal of Prison Work,” p. 12, Anna Wharton Morris Papers, FHL.

⁹Chamberlain, *There Is No Truce*, 398.

¹⁰Convicts and Ex-convicts file in Prison Reform Correspondence, series 6, Anna Wharton Morris Papers, FHL.

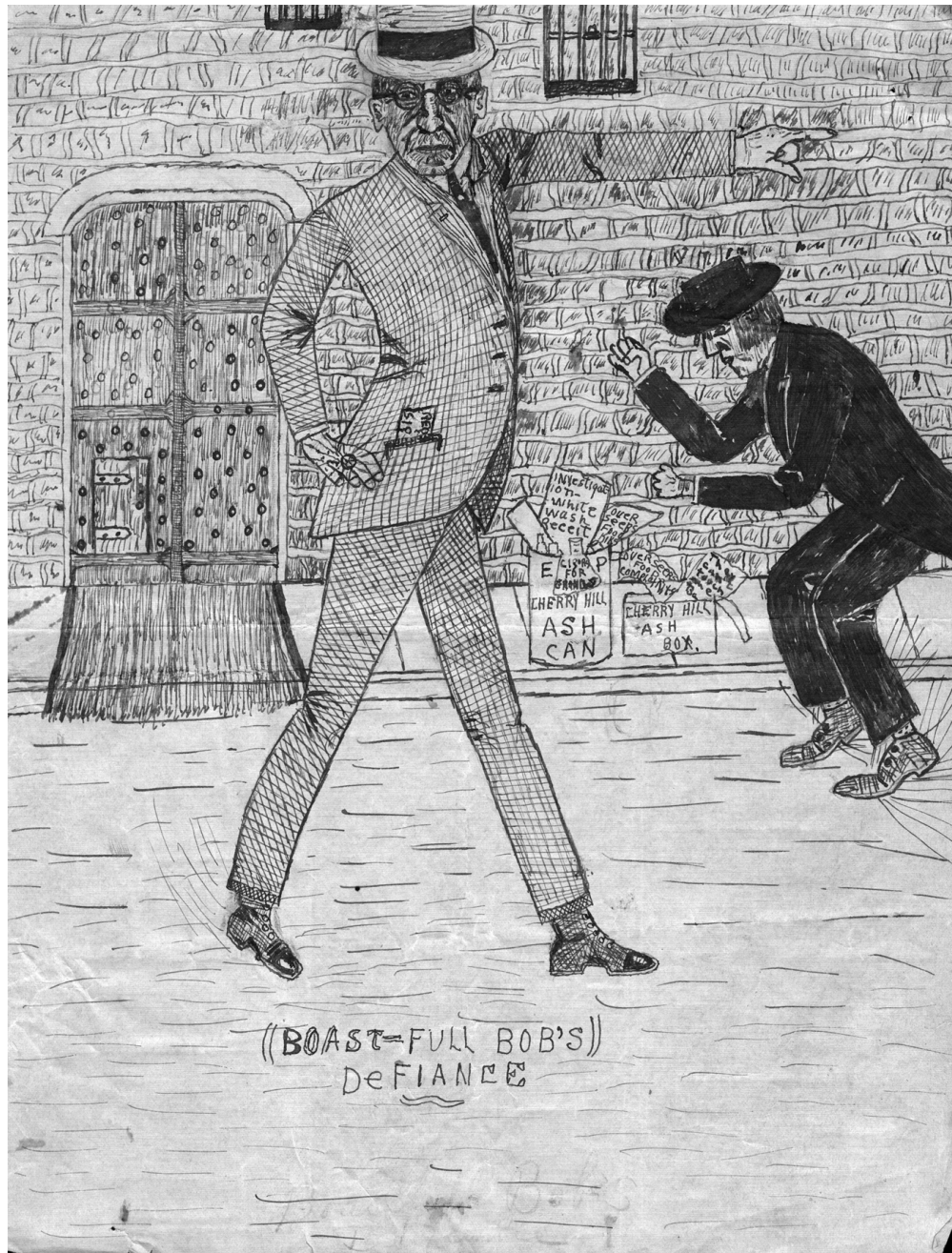


Fig. 1: Frederick Funk, "Boast-full Bob's Defiance," ca. 1920, Convicts and Ex-convicts correspondence, Anna Wharton Morris Papers, SFHL-RG5-106, Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College (FHL).

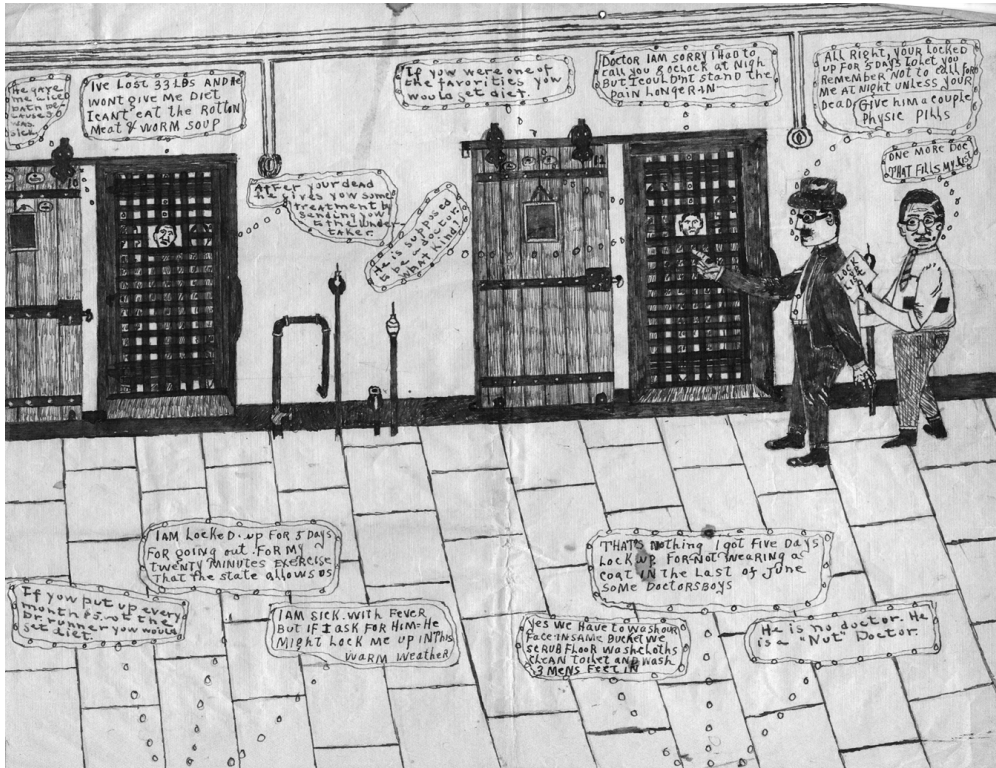


Fig. 2: Frederick Funk “He is no doctor. He is a ‘Nut’ Doctor,” ca. 1920, Convicts and Ex-convicts correspondence, Anna Wharton Morris Papers, FHL.

remarkable documents provide a unique view on prison reform from the perspective of someone with an intimate understanding of its implications.

The Anna Wharton Morris Papers comprises an extraordinary resource for understanding the Progressive prison reform movement in Pennsylvania. Despite its richness, the collection has scarcely been cited by scholars. The underuse of this incredible source material reminds one of Morris’s words in a 1915 pamphlet: “Let us abandon the outworn method of secrecy in prison affairs! Let us take every opportunity to bring them and to keep them openly before the public, so that all may understand the vast waste of human material that has been practiced.”¹¹

*Friends Historical Library
of Swarthmore College*

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¹¹ Anna Wharton Morris, *The New Idea in Prison Reform*, Friends’ Social Service Series Bulletin No. 14, 10mo 1915, Other Writings and Material on Prison Reform, series 6, Anna Wharton Morris Papers, FHL.