

Jail's other dark moment?

Site of last public hanging in Pennsylvania

By Justin Strawser
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SUNBURY — Northumberland County Prison was built in 1876 to replace a two-story jail constructed of stone. It was the third prison to serve the county since the municipality's organization in March 1772.

John L. Moore, a Northumberland author who specializes in Valley history, and Cindy Inkrote, the Northumberland County Historical Society director, explained that the contract to build the prison was awarded in May 1876 to Ira T. Clement at his bid

of \$91,636, which did not include iron or water pipes. The total estimated cost was \$140,000.

The prison was famously known for the last public hanging in Pennsylvania.

On Oct. 9, 1879, Peter McManus, the last of the Molly Maguires to be tried and convicted for murder, was hanged in the yard of the Northumberland County Jail.

Molly Maguires Peter McManus and John O'Neil were convicted in separate trials of the murder of Frederick Hesser, the night watchman at the Hickory Swamp Colliery



Bruce Kovach
Warden

near Shamokin, in December 1874.

O'Neil's sentence was commuted to life in prison and he eventually died in the Sunbury jail from disease.

Before a fire consumed the jail Wednesday, the castle-like facility was rife with issues in its past. It, as prisons are wont to do, was a magnet of lawsuits, including one filed by the Lewisburg Prison Project

on behalf of 12 inmates, alleging medieval conditions at the jail and practices that violated constitutional rights.

By the time the lawsuit was settled in 2010, leaving the door open to sweeping changes in the facility, the bill reached a half-million dollars.

It was just over a year ago that a kitchen fire at Northumberland County Prison broke out, but it caused only the movement of female inmates to the library.

All inmates returned to their cells after approximately 90 minutes.

The warden has also seen three wardens in five years. Bruce Kovach, the latest warden, started Jan. 5.

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