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Washington State History Museum and 88.5 KNKX Partner To Explore McNeil Island
An Exhibition and Podcast Examine the Prison Island’s Storied Past

Tacoma, WA – From its beginnings as a territorial prison through its tenure as a federal and state penitentiary, the story of McNeil Island reflects how incarceration in the U.S. has changed over time. The prison is the focus of a dynamic partnership between the Washington State History Museum and KNKX Public Radio.

Unlocking McNeil’s Past: The Prison, The Place, The People opens at the Washington State History Museum on January 26. The exhibition presents the island’s history through accounts from prison staff, people formerly incarcerated there, and residents of the island. It describes McNeil’s connections to significant state and national events. Visitors will also delve into the island’s early settlement and the unique relationship between the prison and its island community.

In partnership with the museum, and with support from Humanities Washington, KNKX Public Radio will present a series of six podcasts called Forgotten Prison. The series is hosted by KNXK reporters Simone Alicea and Paula Wissel. The first episode will be available to download on January 22, with new episodes every Tuesday. Each episode will examine a part of the island’s history through interviews, conversations, and oral histories.

"We spent a year reporting with the museum for the podcast, and the more I learned about McNeil Island, the more I wondered why I hadn't heard more about this place. The remarkable history of this prison really pushes you to think deeply about how and why we lock people up," said KNKX reporter and podcast co-host Simone Alicea.
The prison on McNeil operated far longer than the better-known Alcatraz island prison in California, yet after 143 years the isolated McNeil remains a mystery to many. When the state’s correctional center on the island closed in 2011, it was the last prison in the nation only accessible by air or water.

While McNeil’s history may not be widely known, many of us will recognize some of the prison’s better-known inhabitants, including: Charles Manson, incarcerated at McNeil Island Penitentiary from 1961 to 1966 for forgery; Robert Stroud, also known as the Birdman of Alcatraz, sentenced to 12 years at McNeil for manslaughter; Frederick (Fred) Emerson Peters, an impersonator, con artist and forger who signed checks as Theodore Roosevelt in the early 1900s and masqueraded as several celebrities of his time, sentenced to McNeil in 1924; Roy Gardner, one of the last “celebrity” train robbers, who was initially incarcerated on McNeil in 1920, escaped the island prison three times, and was ultimately moved to Alcatraz; Alvin Karpis, a Depression-era gangster and head of the Barker-Karpis Gang, named "Public Enemy #1" by the FBI from 1934-1936, incarcerated on Alcatraz and relocated to McNeil when Alcatraz closed in 1962.

“McNeil was first a territorial prison, then a federal penitentiary, then a state facility. Each of those phases is explored in its own section of the exhibition. Visitors will sense the feeling of containment in the transition spaces between each exhibit section, because the transitions are scaled to the prison cells of each era,” said the Historical Society’s Director of Audience Engagement Mary Mikel Stump.

The exhibition offers a rare opportunity to view artifacts including the 1,800 pound wrought iron entry gates to the prison, letters between a conscientious objector and his family, a violin built from wood scraps and crafted based on directions that were smuggled in, a well-used pay phone, art and furniture made at the prison, and much more.

On opening day, January 26, find out what it was like behind the scenes to research and create this exhibition during two scheduled curator-led exhibit tours, at 11:00 AM and 2:00 PM, free for Historical Society members or included with museum admission.

The museum is also inviting the community to participate in a conversation about life after incarceration at a March 2 symposium on Saturday, March 2, from 1:30 – 3:30 PM. A moderated panel conversation will provide an opportunity to learn about the challenges and opportunities of re-entry after incarceration. The panel moderator is Mr. Omari Amili, author, community leader, and a 2019 Humanities Washington Speaker presenting From Crime to the Classroom: How Education Changes Lives. Following the panel discussion, join a facilitated exhibit tour and talk with others at a reception. The symposium is included with museum admission.

A companion photography exhibition, Reclaimed, provides a visual survey of how nature and the climate of Puget Sound have begun to overtake the built environment on the island since the closure of the McNeil correctional center. Both Reclaimed and Unlocking McNeil’s Past: The Prison, The Place, The People will be on view January 26 through May 26, 2019.

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**Press tour** at the Washington State History Museum, 1911 Pacific Avenue, Tacoma, with WSHS and KNKX on Tuesday, January 22 at 11:00 AM. Email [Julianna.Verboort@wshs.wa.gov](mailto:Julianna.Verboort@wshs.wa.gov) to attend. Thank you.
Conscientious objector Howard Scott created the parts for this violin by hand using wood scraps found during his incarceration at McNeil Island during World War II. He also made by hand the calipers and board with pegs, used to bend and shape violin pieces. Violin and tools courtesy the Howard and Ruane Scott family. Image courtesy Washington State Historical Society.

Gallery installation of the 1,800-pound McNeil Island Prison administration building entry gates. The gates were added in 1924 and in use until the prison closed in 2011. Designed by George Gove, they were crafted from wrought iron by people who were incarcerated at McNeil.


During the state prison era, Warden Alice Payne paid special attention to families of people who were incarcerated. John and Sylvia Peterson of Agape Resource Ministry worked with inmates to create this children’s book, explaining what dads who were incarcerated might eat, how they would spend their day, where they live, why people may be incarcerated, and what dads and children could do together during a visit to the prison. The Petersons mortgaged their home to fund printing of the book. Where My Dad Lives collection of Washington State Department of Corrections, image courtesy Washington State Historical Society.


**Washington State Historical Society** partners with our communities to explore how history connects us all. The Society’s most visible activity, the Washington State History Museum (WSHM) is located in Tacoma’s downtown core along Pacific Avenue among a thriving cultural scene. The museum features interactive permanent exhibitions about Washington’s past in the Great Hall, unique rotating exhibitions highlighting the Society’s collections, and dynamic feature exhibitions.

**Address:** 1911 Pacific Avenue, Tacoma, WA 98402

**Hours:** 10:00AM–5:00PM Tuesday through Sunday. Third Thursday of each month, 10:00AM–8:00PM.

**Admission:** Free for members; Adults $14; seniors (age 65+), students (age 6-17) and military (with ID) $11; free for children 5 and under; family rate $40 (up to two adults and four children under age 18). Patrons with a Washington Quest card and licensed Washington Foster Parents can attend for $1 per person or $2 per family.

**KNKX** is an ambassador for jazz and blues, and a vital source of quality, non-commercial news, including NPR and regional coverage. The KNKX programming staff are storytellers who reach deeply into the community to reflect the voices of our people, our region and beyond. KNKX is funded by a loyal community of listeners who value the station’s independence. KNKX operates a network of 11 radio signals that cover Western Washington, reaching 400,000 listeners weekly. In addition, knx.org and KNKX’s 24-hour jazz stream, Jazz24 reach 350,000 listeners every month online. KNKX has more than 17 million views on its YouTube channel of live jazz and blues performances.