



## NEWS RELEASE:

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## Washington State Historical Society wins prestigious national award for McNeil Island Prison exhibition



TACOMA, WA—May 21, 2020—The American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) announced that the [Washington State Historical Society](#) (WSHS) is the recipient of an Award of Excellence for the exhibition *Unlocking McNeil's Past: The Prison, The Place, The People*. The exhibition was on view at the Washington State History Museum in Tacoma from January 26 through May 26, 2019. The AASLH Leadership in History Awards, now in its 75th year, is the most prestigious recognition for achievement in the preservation and interpretation of state and local history.

“We are truly honored to receive this award,” WSHS Director Jennifer Kilmer said. “I’m proud of the work our team and partners did to bring this exhibition to life, and share the history of the island and the prison that operated there for more than one hundred years. It is a significant part of Washington’s story, and of our national story as well.”

The exhibition presented the history of McNeil Island and the facility that first officially opened there as a Territorial prison in 1875. The prison predated and operated far longer than the better-known Alcatraz island prison, and when the state’s correctional center on McNeil Island closed in 2011, it was the last prison in the nation only accessible by air or water.

“This exhibition represents those cherished moments in our practice where so many things come together and we really get to fully represent our mission in so many intersecting parts,” said WSHS’s Director of Audience Engagement Mary Mikel Stump. “It was a meaningful opportunity for people from a variety of communities to connect and better understand what each other had gone through. That was illustrated through the feedback elements in the exhibition galleries where folks could share about what they had experienced or learned, and the ways that the exhibition had impacted their viewpoints and opinions.”

The design of the gallery spaces supported museum visitors’ understanding of what McNeil Island, the place and the prison, were like. “Because McNeil Island is not accessible to the public, we had the challenge of conveying the deep impact of what it would have been like be removed from the mainland, and the resulting isolation,” said Stump. The galleries featured a series of spaces recreating the size of prison cells from different time periods, along with the crimes that would have landed a person there, emphasizing how the spaces, as well as the laws, changed as McNeil transitioned from a Territorial to Federal to State facility.

Records and documents about the prison were logged and maintained by those in charge, and the history they represent is filtered through that lens. To balance that perspective, the exhibition prompted visitors to

consider those whose voices were not represented in the records, including people who were incarcerated and people who worked there. Visitors in the galleries experienced McNeil's history through recorded stories, artifacts, ephemera, photos, and accounts from prison staff, inmates, and residents of the island. Perhaps one of the most fascinating aspects of the exhibition were stories of early settlement and the unique relationship between the prison and its island community, brought to light through extensive research which significantly added to the scholarship around this topic.

The Historical Society's Lead Curator Gwen Whiting said, "McNeil's story affected me in ways that are too profound to sum up easily. The prison reflects the history of incarceration in this country, both its darkest days and its proudest hours. At many points in its history, McNeil sought to look beyond punitive punishment and to examine the question of what rehabilitation should look like and what that could mean, not only to individuals but to our entire community."

Whiting and a team of WSHS staff and exhibition partners including members of the [McNeil Island Historical Society](#) and Washington State Department of Corrections were able to visit the prison grounds on McNeil during the course of creating the exhibition. "McNeil's closure was a cold closure, meaning people were evacuated and everything else was pretty much left there. It was remarkable to explore a place that has been largely untouched by anything besides nature. When you walk through the prison grounds, the echoes of lives are present in left-behind notes, crumbling boxes, desks where it seems that people simply stood up one day and left, never to return. At the same time, nature is reclaiming these spaces. Blackberries reach inside windows. Deer and raccoons wander freely, perhaps remembering the days when they were befriended by the people who were incarcerated there."

Stories of prisoners befriending wildlife and evocative interviews are woven into the fascinating six-episode podcast [Forgotten Prison](#), developed in partnership between NPR affiliate radio station [KNKX](#) and WSHS, and supported by a Storytelling grant from Humanities Washington.

"This project is one of my favorite things I've worked on as a journalist, and I am immensely proud of the team that put together both the podcast and the exhibition," said Simone Alicea, who co-hosted the podcast along with KNKX's Paula Wissel. "It's a privilege to be able to shed some light on this place and on prisons more generally."

During the run of the exhibition, WSHS partnered with University of Washington Tacoma to hold the panel discussion "Unlocking the Future: Life After Incarceration," moderated by Omari Amili, who earned multiple degrees after time in prison and has become a community organizer, Humanities Washington speaker, and award-winning Pierce College faculty member. The panel was comprised of people who were formerly incarcerated and community members involved in prison reform, including Dr. Christopher Beasley, Christopher Johnston, Tarra Simmons, Department of Corrections Secretary Stephen Sinclair, and Shaun Worthy. Stump added, "To be able to offer public programs that augment the history of a place and connect it to contemporary issues—that is when we know we are doing our best and most resonant work."

This year, AASLH is proud to confer fifty-seven national awards honoring people, projects, exhibits, and publications. The winners represent the best in the field and provide leadership for the future of state and local history.

The AASLH awards program was initiated in 1945 to establish and encourage standards of excellence in the collection, preservation, and interpretation of state and local history. The awards not only honor significant achievement in the field, but also bring public recognition of the opportunities for small and large organizations, institutions, and programs to make contributions in this arena. For more information about the Leadership in History Awards, contact AASLH at 615-320-3203, or go to [www.aaslh.org](http://www.aaslh.org).

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**Image credit:** Washington State Historical Society Director Jennifer Kilmer and Director of Audience Engagement Mary Mikel Stump stand in a space representing the size of a prison cell from McNeil's Territorial prison days.

#### **About AASLH**

The American Association for State and Local History is a not-for-profit professional organization of individuals and institutions working to preserve and promote history. From its headquarters in Nashville, Tennessee, AASLH provides leadership, service, and support for its members who preserve and interpret state and local history in order to make the past more meaningful to all people. AASLH publishes books, technical publications, a quarterly magazine, and maintains numerous affinity communities and committees serving a broad range of constituents across the historical community. The association also sponsors an annual meeting, regional and national training in-person workshops, and online training.

**Address:** American Association for State and Local History, 2021 21<sup>st</sup> Avenue S., Suite 320, Nashville, TN 37212, 615-320-3203.

#### **About The Washington State Historical Society**

The 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 downtown Tacoma on 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. *Note: The museum is currently closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.*

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

**Hours:** 10:00 AM–5:00 PM Tues.-Sun. Third Thursday of each month, 10:00 AM–8:00 PM.

**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.