The text on next 13 pages constituted the slide show “script” off which the webmaster of the NY Correction History Society worked in giving one of the presentations at the Researching NY 2007 conference “Looking at Old Records Anew” Session Nov. 15 in the Science Library Digital Workshop #4 at SUNY Albany.
Anyone here, besides me, remember matinee movie Westerns? Remember the grizzled old prospector who would proclaim, *Thar’s Gold in Them Thar Hills?*

Well, for today’s matinee show, I’m the grizzled old prospector proclaiming there’s historical gold to be found in old jailhouse (or prison) ledgers.

The 3 ledgers I cite to back up this claim also came from “them thar hills:” the Adirondacks. To be precise, from an old jail in Essex County that is on Lake Champlain.

Its Elizabethtown lock-up, first built in 1868 but virtually rebuilt as a new jail circa 1915. The 3-story brick jail structure was one of the smallest in NYS – only a few dozen cells. As Essex prepared to open its new jail in Lewis and “decommission” the old jail, these record books came my way for historical research:

1 — “Cash Book — Inmate Accounts (1952 - 1958)”
2 — “Operating Expenses Audit Book — (1904 - 1931)”
3 — “Record of Inmate Commitments — (1879 - 1924)”
We begin our virtual tour of pre-computer era jail record-keeping with the Cash Book. It tracked inmates’ personal purchase accounts of 1952 – 1958.

Up front are 30 index pages, with lettered tabs, for entering an inmate name according to last name’s first letter. Each index name entry made included a numbered page reference to find where that inmate’s account began.

Following the tabbed index pages are 272 numbered pages for data entries.

An example: the 16th entry on the index page reserved for “R” or “S” inmate lists inmate “C. R. S” and notes his account begins on Page 144.

I use only initials because I don’t know who was convicted and who acquitted. Blotting-outs, arrows, underlines, boxes, and circles were all done digitally, only on the images.

C. R. S. may not have had folding money on him when jailed. His account on Page 144 begins Jan. 21, 1957 with a check cashed for $36. On May 1 a federal check (Social Security? Disability?) was cashed for $99.75.

In 5 months, he spent $58.23 on such items as on a $9.95 pair of shoes, $1 haircuts, on $2 cigarette cartons, and on newspapers. He gave his mom $5 and a “Lucille” $1.

On June 11 C.R. S. walked out of jail, presumably in his new shoes, with the $77.52 balance.
Between unused Pages 180 – 270 I found the first of what I call “nuggets,” historical gold pieces.

I distinguish them from the “gold dust” of ledger layouts, column headings, etc.

This nugget was a sales slip with the name of “Kenneth Harrington.” Items, amounts and date on it track to inmate “J.T.” on Page 153.

Taped to the book inside back cover was another nugget, a staffing note showing “Ken” was one of the jailors.

So, purchases for inmates apparently were made locally by jailors who kept sale slips and made the ‘cash book’ entries.

Cash Book review observations:

— Cigarettes, banned in many jails today, were a major purchase items back then.

— Phone calls, candy, toiletries constituted major inmate expenditures then as now.

— Newspapers were major purchase item then; today they are available free in day rooms.

— Handwritten records of inmate purchases, a combination of sales slips and ledger entries, sufficed in the era before bar codes and PCs.

— Whereas a major city jail would have its own commissary, the tiny rural jail apparently bought items locally for inmate as requested.
Next studied was the County Board’s Purchasing Committee’s audit book recording jail operating costs from Feb. 1, 1904 through April 24, 1931. There I found my third gold nugget – an intriguing term, “Chinese Jail,” used 10 times among 1904-1909 entries.

Example: a $3 bill from the Port Henry Telephone Co. Other entries pointed to a county leased jail in Port Henry as a detention center for illegal immigration case detainees, mostly Chinese.

On bottom of Page 1 appears a note:

“A lease between Berne A. Pyrke and the County of Essex for a certain premises on Elizabeth Street in the Village of Port Henry to be used as a common jail for the detention of United States Prisoners was duly executed.”

A Page 2 note: “Committee, also S.W. Barnard, Sheriff, visited new building for the detention of U.S. Prisoners. Thought it to answer all requirements for which it was designed.”

The Essex County Historical Society sent copy of a page from its own “Compendium of Local History.” It confirmed “Chinese Jail” was the colloquial name for the immigration lock-up. It quoted a 1935 “History of Port Henry” that “when a large number of Chinese attempted unlawful entry into the U.S. [from] Canada, they were brought to Port Henry for detention... first they were quartered in the village hall jail. [Later] a lot was secured on Elizabeth St... The Chinese Jail was erected ...When no longer needed, it was converted to a tenement ... F. W. Dudley acted as Commissioner of Immigration.”

The page featured the image above and quoted Chinese Jail references in 1901 issues of a local paper. Some quotes referred Chinamen and celestials, and made them the butt of rather heavy-handed humor, comments perhaps consistent with the nation’s general support for Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and its renewals right into the 1940s.

Research in on-line historical newspaper archives turned up that Dudley, named area Immigration Commissioner in 1901, became Pyrke’s law partner 3 years later. The next year Essex leases Pyrke’s building to hold illegal aliens. Spoils of local politics?
I found 7 letters tucked together between ledger Pages 254 & 255. 4 letters were from a iron works company proclaiming itself “Jail and Prison Builders.” 3 were from Grand Juries foremen reporting on Elizabethtown jail inspections. I consider them another historical gold nugget. That’s because they link, I believe, to the Nov. 15, 1948 breakout in which the 2 escapees killed Jailor Earl Torrence. Separately from the ledgers project, I had been working on a web page about successful efforts by great nephew, NY State C.O. Joe Stickney – getting Earl’s name added a Washington D.C. memorial wall for law enforcement officers.

As the captured escapees’ court case proceeded in 1948/49, local newspapers repeatedly cited how the breakout had involved opening the jail “bullpen” door locking mechanism by jiggling it with bent wire.

The jail builders company letters were responses to Sheriff Crowley’s asking about changing jail lock keys and tumblers in 1943-44 but WWII restrictions apparently put off making the change.
The other three letters, all dated in 1949 reported to Sheriff Crowley about inspections of the Elizabeth town jail by the “current grand jury.” They lauded the jail’s appearance and operation. I believe some question about the bullpen locking mechanism posed during the jail inspections, but left unsaid in the jury letters, perhaps triggered lock-related research into past records.

With the jury letters in hand, the researcher retrieved the 1943-44 jail builders letters and was checking the 1904-31 ledger for any past lock-related outlays when interrupted by more pressing business. The letters were tucked in the book as a place-marker but the research was never resumed and the letters forgotten.

This theory doesn’t claim the deadly 1948 break would have been averted had keys and tumblers been changed in 1944. The door device fault might have been missed in any way.

Found on-line in 1949 newspaper was text that Earl’s widow wrote the DA not to seek the death penalty. Deeply religious, she also was a close friend of escapee Wm Moody’s mother.
The 3rd virtual tour book is the 1880-1924 in-take ledger. The other 2 books were generic off-the-shelf ledgers. This volume clearly had been custom printed. The spine leather label reads: “Record of Commitments to Essex County Jail.” So does the wording across the top of each two facing pages. Entries begin on Page 2 and end on Page 258. An entry begins on an even-numbered left page line that continues onto the facing odd-numbered right page, spreadsheet like. There are 27 entry lines each “spreadsheet” page.

Because of the ledger’s fragile condition, only the first two pages were scanned. Thereafter all other images of entries were taken using a digital camera in one hand and holding the book only half open with the other.

On even numbered pages the heading of 1 column was printed as “County” but that was repeatedly corrected with an “r” insert to read “Country” through 1883. Thereafter it continued to be understood as “Country” even without the penned “r” correction. Entries were mostly “U.S.”

But by March of 1895 (Page 58), the column heading came to be understood as printed — County — with “Essex” entries dominating.

Did closeness to Canada factor into that “r” insert?

Did it reflect a wariness of “foreigners”?
Some column head wordings are unusual by today’s standards:

“Color” instead of race.

“Parents” instead of next-of-kin.

“Social Relations,” not marital status.

“Habits of Life” focused on destructive life style issues, principally alcohol abuse. Most “bad” or “intemperate,” many as “good,” only a few as “fair.”

The book had no addresses for inmates or parents. Such contact data must have been in arrest records. There were NO inmate ID numbers. With so few inmates at any one time — rarely more than 2 dozen, often fewer than a dozen — ID numbers were not viewed as necessary.

Column heads on inmate’s literacy or lack of, are interestingly worded. Did “Classically Educated,” refer to college graduates.

Interest in inmate literacy reflects the emerging reformatory movement. It originated in efforts by pre-reformatory era chaplains and other reformers to teach inmates reading and writing as part of Bible study programs.

That may be why the next column is “Religious Instruction,” not “Religious Affiliation.” (Ignore ironic misprint.)

The connection between penal correction and inmate education goes back at least to the 18th century. A motto on a wall of San Michele reformatory, founded at Rome in 1704 by Pope Clement:

It is of little use to restrain criminals by punishment, unless you reform them by education.
The 10th inmate on the book’s 1st entries page was Frank Boardman, committed to the jail Jan. 30, 1880, for petit larceny and sentenced to 30 days.

A mere 13 years old but already his ‘Habits of Life’ are listed as “bad.” He is listed as able to both read and write. The 13-year-old was committed to the jail by Justice Cutting, a distant 19th Century kin of the current county jail administrator Major Cutting who made the jail ledgers available to NYCHS.

Listed for the teenager under “trade or occupation” was “farmer.”

“Value of Article Stolen” entry was $1. How did a 30-day sentence on Jan. 30 for a $1 theft result in an April 15th discharge 75 days later?

His discharge by “order of court” suggests his stay was court monitored and that, in turn, raises the possibility of special arrangements: He may have been unruly on the farm, perhaps the family’s farm. Could the both the family and the court have considered an indeterminate winter stay behind bars might make him mend his ways and still get him out in time for spring planting?

Consider that in 1888, Fred Stone, 14, a Canadian whose occupation was listed as a “miner” (not minor), served just 10 days for petit larceny.

The above 1911 Pa. boy miners photo was taken by National Child Labor Committee that evolved in 1904 from a NY group begun in 1902.
The farmer 13 and the miner 14 were among 45 juveniles – under 16 – whose entries were found among the more than 3,500 inmates named in the in-take book. 6 were girls. 1 was a witness in an adultery case. 1 was a “disorderly person.” 1 was a servant girl, Harriet Stone, 13, who was tried for murder & acquitted after 10 minutes of jury deliberation in 1881. It’s a case worthy of deeper research.

3 of the 6 girls were held as “vagrants” or “incorrigibles” era legalese allowing courts to address reputed waywardness, sometimes sentencing the girls to Houses of Refuge (reformatories).

Of the 39 boys, 1 was charged with Murder 1: John Hanson, 15, who pled to Murder 2, and whom Judge Berne A. Pyrke (the former Chinese Jail landlord) sentenced to return to the Protectory and remain there until 21.

The Catholic Protectory (1862) was a pioneer reformatory whose land more than 3/4 of a century later became Parkchester houses. Both teen murder cases involved poisoned persons in their hired care: a baby in the girl’s case, an old man on the boy’s case.

Above from a local legal notice is some text from the 1910 version of a law allowing courts to send females under 16 to a state training school for girls if found, among other described behavior patterns, “willfully disobedient to parent or guardian,” “in danger of becoming morally depraved” or “is a vagrant.” The latter could be read as being a “runaway.”
I had intended to devote the next four slides to listing 32 of the 39 boys jailed. Due to time constraints I will show only one slide with data for 10 boys. Persons to whom entries refer take on a kind of in-your-face reality beyond detached objective intellectual awareness that the data denotes actual people albeit long dead and forgotten.

The researcher begins to “see” them in the mind’s eye, an empathetic connection bridging time and geography.

When this researcher encounters an Ernest Stanton, jailed briefly at age 10, being jailed again at age 13, the first for whom “school” is entered as his “occupation,” the boy is no longer just an entry in a book.

The name of the 2nd of Essex’s 4 murderers executed was entered in the intake ledger after his 1882 arrest for killing his wife, a stout widow whose farm he wanted deeded over to him.

A house painter who styled himself during jailhouse interviews as soldier of fortune, Henry Deboynys, 46, was a native of Portugal. He was defended by A. K. Dudley, the father of ‘Chinese Jail’ Commissioner F. W. Dudley.

Names of the 3rd & 4th murderers executed and two “witnesses” were entered in the intake ledger after arrests within a few hours of the attempted robbery killing of a mine foreman in Mineville in 1916. That is, variations of their names were entered. Depending on where and when names of the “foreigners” were used, name spellings changed.
On Nov. 21, 1916, both Steve Mischuk (later Lischuk), 22, a miner, & John Kuschnuk (later Kuschnieruk), a pantryman, were entered in the jail ledger for Murder 1, their Russian background noted. The last data entered for them records their 1917 electrocutions. Extensive details on the case are available on the web presentation page entitled “Entries of 3 Inmates Convicted of Murder & Executed.” Likewise on that web page are details regarding the 3 other murderers mentioned.

The web presentation includes more details and sources than given here. Even so it can only point out avenues for more study. But that is precisely the message: Old jail/prison records hold a wealth of information to be mined. They can open up new or connect to on-going historical inquiries. Here are a few that occur to my mind:

What monitoring was done on jailors’ purchases for inmates?

What role did local politics play in administration of the Chinese Exclusion Act? Did local attitudes toward the illegal immigrants go beyond snide newspaper remarks? Did adding ‘r’ to ‘county’ in the ledger column head reflect suspicion of ‘foreigners?’ Did local judges manipulate the system to get the kind of results that later child offender laws codified? Why ‘only’ 4 murder executions?

Did local judges manipulate the system to get the kind of juvenile monitoring results that later child offender laws codified?

Why “only” 4 murder executions in 150+ years? Was this rural county’s seeming reluctance to execute typical or atypical in NY’s North Country?