

# Vocational Programs in the Federal Bureau of Prisons: Examining the Potential of Agricultural Education Programs for Prisoners

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## Abstract

*The Federal Bureau of Prisons has a long-standing desire to be the pinnacle in corrections and correctional education. In 1891 Congress passed the Three Prisons Act, which established the federal prison system, prior to this Act federal inmates were housed in state, city, and county jails (Keve, 1991). The Act not only established the first three prisons, but also allotted \$100,000 to each institution to create workshops for the employment of inmates (Fields, 2005). These workshops culminated the early precursors of Vocational Training; programs that have grown and have become a cornerstone in correctional education over the past century. In 1930 Congress passed an Act establishing the Federal Bureau of Prisons. The Act charged the new Bureau with establishing industries and farms with activities to provide for the proper rehabilitation and reformation of inmates (H.R. 7832). The programs that resulted from this charge have grown and changed over the century, where they were once agriculture based they have grown to include a variety of occupational skills to better aid inmates. Through continued research vocational training has proven to be a key implement that aids in reducing recidivism.*

Keywords: history of prison programs, inmate education, vocational training, federal prison

One of the Federal Bureau of Prisons' core ideologies is to provide skills building programs we can afford, to offer inmates the opportunity to live crime-free lives (<http://www.bop.gov>). Part of these "skills building programs" is vocational training programs offered throughout the Bureau in an effort to reduce recidivism. Inmates who participate in vocational training programs are 33% less likely to recidivate (Federal Bureau of Prison, 2001). Vocational training is regarded as an essential component of correctional training programs (Carter, McGee, & Nelson, 1975). Dailey, Conroy, and Shelley-Tolbert (2001) indicate that the core of agriculture education consists of three components: classroom instruction, experiential learning, and leadership activities. Two of these components can be found in vocational training programs, classroom instruction and experiential learning.

Allen and Simonsen (1975) said the Bureau makes three assumptions in the development of vocational training programs. The first assumption by the Bureau is ex-offenders will be less

likely to return to crime if the released inmate can earn a legitimate living upon release. The second assumption is that an ex-offender's employment potential will increase if the person possesses work skills for which there is a ready demand. The last assumption made is that these work skills can be provided through effective institutional training programs, provided in prisons.

Vocational training has played an important role in the rehabilitation of the inmate population. Agriculture as a vocation has been an integral part of this vocational training; it had served as a backbone for the Federal Prison System. Federal prisons historically have used inmate labor to build the prisons, and provide the population with necessities. Lumbering, animal production, and crop production have been just a few areas where inmates have traditionally worked. Keve (1984) indicated that inmate labor was used to clear the land around the prison on McNeil Island, and that logging was a key industry for the institution. He later wrote that

the logging had cleared land that would provide for farming use. The Federal Prison System have utilized inmate labor in regards to agriculture in the Federal Prison Industries from its beginning in 1934 (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2009).

Priority 5 of the *National Research Agenda* for Agricultural Education indicates that successful instructional programs should address evolving needs of diverse students regardless of location (Doerfert, 2011). To better understand the need of not only agriculture as a vocation, but all vocational training programs in the Federal Prison System we need to gain insight of how these programs got their start. This paper explores the beginnings of vocational training programs in the Federal Prison System and what these programs entailed. The topic of understanding the roots of vocational training programs in the Bureau is imperative to study, because from the reflection of how these programs came into existence we may better understand why these programs were important at the time of initiation and the effects of these programs on the inmate population. In addition to deciphering the history and need of these programs from a historical perspective we may assimilate this need to what is offered today and better understand the areas these programs may be deficient in, in regards to the quality of programming for inmates.

### Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to examine how vocational training programs in the Federal Bureau of Prisons were instigated. The study was focused on the early history of prison vocational training programs before the Bureau was created and through the first few decades of the Bureau's existence. Specifically the study focuses on answering the following objectives:

1. Describe the types of vocational or occupational training that existed before the Federal Bureau of Prisons;
2. Describe how vocational training programs begun in the Federal Bureau of Prisons; and

3. Describe early vocational training programs in the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

### Methods and Procedures

Historical research methods were used to accomplish the objectives of this study. Historical research involves the systematic search for documents and other sources of historical facts to answer the historian's question (Borg & Gall, 1983).

Primary and secondary sources were used to conduct this study and obtain information. Primary sources came from government documents, annual reports, and congressional proceedings. Secondary sources were obtained from articles and journals written regarding vocational training programs in prisons and historical pieces about the Federal Prison System. Literature was found from the Federal Bureau of Prisons Library, the National Criminal Justice Institute, and the Texas A&M University Library. Journal articles were retrieved from the *Journal of Agricultural Education*, the *Federal Probation Journal*, and the *Federal Prisons Journal*. The researcher reviewed all documents for internal and external criticism. Internal criticism was established by addressing the worth of the context of the documents for validity to the study. External criticism was established by determination of authenticity and originality of each document.

### Results and Findings

Before there was a Federal Prison System the Government relied on territorial, county, and state jails to house federal prisoners (Keve, 1991). Congress passed the Three Prisons Act in 1891, which established the federal prison system. The first three prisons to start the Federal Prison System were placed in Leavenworth, McNeil Island, and Atlanta. The Act not only established the three prisons, but also allotted \$100,000 to each institution specifically to create workshops for the employment of inmates (Fields, 2005). These workshops would be the early precursor for the Federal Prison Industries and vocational training for inmates.

This legislation was not the first appearance of vocational training for inmates in American

history. The Walnut Street Prison, which had been established in 1773, had already been in the practice of training inmates in vocational trades (Johnston, 2004). The Walnut Street Prison, located in Philadelphia, PA, had been known to offer vocational instruction since the 1830's. The prison was set in the Pennsylvania style system. The Pennsylvania style system required complete separation of the inmates, allowing for quiet contemplation, reflection, and sometimes vocational instruction in the individual's cell (Johnston, 2004). This system was created upon the petition of The Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons. Another system soon appeared, called the Auburn System.

McShane and Williams (1996) remarked that the Auburn system is one that still denied inmates communication with one another, but required inmates to labor together in the industrial workshops during the day and were isolated from one another at night. The uses of these workshops were not meant for training purposes, but to offset costs of the prison.

Though these two systems were popular at the time, another system was forming. The Elmira System, or the Reformatory System, came into existence after The New York Prison Association tasked Enoch Wines and Theodore Dwight with surveying prisons in the United States. The two men traveled throughout the United States surveying prisons and compiling an assessment of what they witnessed at each institution. In their assessment Wines and Dwight reported that silence, flogging, and solitary confinement were ineffective tools, but instead education should be used as a preventative measure on crime (Wines & Dwight, 1867).

Meskell (1999) wrote that this newer system of reform was initiated at the Elmira Reformatory in New York. The new reformatory emphasized education and trade training to encourage positive behavior. Soon after many states adopted this style of incarceration to utilize in their own prisons, which at this time were housing federal inmates.

With the passing of the Three Prisons Act in 1891 two prisons were built, and one was taken over and expanded. The first prison built in the new federal prison system was Leavenworth in 1895. The prison took two decades to build and

utilized inmate labor to construct. The cellblocks were finished in 1919, shoe shops were completed in 1926, and a broom factory was completed in 1928 (LaMaster, 2008). These shops and factories along with the construction projects and maintenance details alleviated idle time for the inmate population as well as provided skills for the inmates (Garret & MacCormick, 1929).

The next institution to be constructed was the United States Penitentiary in Atlanta, Georgia. USP Atlanta was opened in 1902, the institution utilized prisoner labor to complete the task of constructing USP Atlanta. In 1919 USP Atlanta opened a textile mill to alleviate idleness. Attorney General, T.W. Gregory, originally proposed the cotton duck textile mill and he requested for the purchase of machinery (House Documents, 1917). The cotton ducking was used for US Postal bags, and during World War II the ducking was used in the war efforts.

The last institution that was created as a result of the Three Prisons Act of 1891 was McNeil Island. McNeil Island was originally a territorial prison erected in 1871 and opened in 1875. The institution was built with the use of federally appropriated money and remained in the hands of the federal government, but was a territorial prison. In 1907 the institution was designated as the third federal penitentiary. McNeil Island was an isolated island in the Puget Sound; for this reason the prison had to be self-reliant utilizing inmate labor in many of the day-to-day tasks, and in efforts to provide resources to the institution. Eventually the prison would have its own gardens, dock, and shipyard all utilizing inmate labor in their construction. In 1924 Warden Finch Archer obtained an old printing press and the inmates started their own newspaper called the Island Lantern. McNeil Island's main industry was logging, which was used during World War II to build tugboats for the war effort (Keve, 1984).

At the time these three institutions were erected vocational training along with educational programming was not a priority in the appropriations that were used to build and run the institutions. Vocational training was seen as the work inmates performed in their various occupations in the prisons. Rarely were there formal classes on the subjects, but more of a journey-

man/ apprentice relationship for the inmates to learn by. The general education programs were typically left up to the chaplains who, with inmate teachers, would lead classes in the evenings where there was room (Garret & MacCormick, 1929). Vocational trades were used as a tool to keep inmates from being idle and to supplement the cost of keeping the men incarcerated.

In September of 1923 Mrs. Mabel Walker Willebrandt, Assistant Attorney General, attended a conference called for by the Subcommittee on Institution Relations of the General Federation of Women's Clubs. Mrs. Willebrandt expressed three concerns for the Federal Department of Prisons. There was a need for an institution for federal women prisoners, a need for an industrial reformatory for young men serving their first sentences, and employment for the prisoners in the three federal prisons at the time (Federal Reformatories for Women, 1962). The populations of female federal prisoners were housed in local and state jails at the time. Mrs. Willebrandt saw a need for a federal prison specifically designated for women; she did not want a typical prison, but a reformatory. Reformatories were built on the ideas to reform the incarcerated and give them competencies in making a living while providing a greater satisfaction in life (MacCormick, 1931).

The need for an industrial reformatory for young men was due because of the current custom of mixing young men and older men together. Prisons did not segregate the younger impressionable first time offenders from the older hardened repeat offenders (Tucker, 1934). The answer to both dilemmas came one after the other. In 1924 an Act was passed to establish the Federal Industrial Institution for Women in Alderson, West Virginia. From the initial planning of the institution the concept of reforming women was paramount in all considerations for the institution. Alderson was planned with the concept of reforming women. The institution was headed by a female staff member, Dr. Mary B. Harris, and was designed on the "Cottage Design," where instead of cells the women were housed in large cottages, much like a modern home of the time. The women were treated as humanely as possible. Harris (1936) commented that we (staff at the reformatory) are trying to

make the women feel that the judge did them a favor by sending them here, they learn to make an honest living and go out feeling that they are no longer a liability to the community. By 1929 the reformatory offered classes in sewing, laundry, cooking, table service, household economics, stenography, typewriting, and a Red Cross practical nurses training course (Garrett & MacCormick, 1929).

In 1926 the Federal Industrial Reformatory in Chillicothe, Ohio opened. The Reformatory housed around 350 young men from the ages of 16-30 who were first time offenders. The reformatory was situated on Camp Sherman, a training camp from the First World War. By 1936 the reformatory created new facilities on the same grounds and had expanded the vocational training programs to include: machine, carpenter, sheet metal working, plumbing, steam fitting, furniture upholstery, automobile body upholstery, automobile painting and finishing, automobile engine and chassis building and repairing, ignition repairing, vulcanizing, electrical wiring and supply repairing, typewriter repairing, and sign painting (Langeluttig, 1927).

A notable fact to include is that prior to the opening of the Federal Industrial Reformatory in Chillicothe there was already the National Training School for Boys in Washington, D.C. The school was started in 1908 by an Act in Congress; the school was a reformatory for boys ages 17 and under (Committee on Expenditures in Justice Department, 1915). The school required the boys to attend school for half a session each day, and offered a variety of vocational training programs. The programs included were farming, carpentry, cabinetmaking, bricklaying, plumbing, blacksmithing wheelwrighting, tailoring, shoemaking, laundry work, baking, and cooking (Committee on Expenditures in Justice Department, 1915). The school was transferred to the Bureau of Prisons in 1939 and finally closed in 1968 (Roberts, 1990).

In 1930 Congress passed an Act establishing the Federal Bureau of Prisons. The Act charged the new Bureau with establishing industries and farms with activities to provide for the proper rehabilitation and reformation of inmates (H.R. 7832). Though the text is broad the 71<sup>st</sup> Congress was setting a standard for the newly formed Bureau of Prisons to find ways of creat-

ing programs to reform inmates, which at this time had been found in the current federal prisons through work programs and vocational training programs.

The Assistant Attorney General appointed Sanford Bates as the Director of the Bureau of Prisons. Mr. Bates created three Assistant Director positions, one of which was in charge of Academic and Vocational Training; the person he chose for this position was Austin McCormick (Keve, 1991). The creation of the Bureau was an attempt to unify the once disorganized federal prison system; and to create prisons that would serve as an example for others in the treatment and rehabilitation of inmates (Federal Prison Industries, 2001).

Garrett & McCormick (1929, p. 47) wrote about the prison of the future stating, "every phase of the program of the institution will be related to the educational purpose. Interest will be stimulated in all phases of general and vocational education and in health education." McCormick traveled the country recording all educational pursuits in each prison that existed in the United States, except for three. McCormick wrote "The Education of Adult Prisoners," where he reported on the educational and library work in American prisons, as a result of his travels. McCormick established a standing committee for adult education in prisons under the American Prisons Association. This committee would eventually develop into the Correctional Education Association.

With the new Bureau of Prisons established the agency's leaders inherited an array of issues to be tackled. One of which was the problem of overcrowding. At the time the Bureau was established there had come to be 14 federal prisons in operation and over 13,000 inmates. The Bureau began to activate camps, which are prisons without fences (Carter et al, 1975). The camps were effective for two reasons. First camps could be built quickly and inexpensively and second the inmates would serve the needs of an adjoining government facility. For an example the camp in Montgomery, Alabama performed construction and janitorial services for Maxwell Air Force Base (US Department of Justice, 1938). The camps still included a system of classification that the Bureau was quickly implementing at its' various institutions.

The classification system that the Bureau had begun to implement was a groundbreaking revolution in corrections. The classification system profiled an individual and housed him in an institution according to his age, mental status, and type of crime. The camps were a place to house individuals with small sentences who would be a low risk to escape. Another part of the classification system was based on the individuals' educational and vocational needs, which took place at the institution he had already been designated at (U.S. Department of Justice, 1933).

During the 1930's many new institutions and camps were activated, all based on the classification system. Education had become a primary part of the Bureau, but vocational training was still considered part of the maintenance departments (U.S. Department of Justice, 1933).. The education department in cooperation with the trades shop from the maintenance department offered courses over the various vocations the inmates were working in, this cooperation was called Related Trades Instruction. Inmates who were in a particular vocation would also spend two nights a week in an educational class where the inmate would work on general education in order to become an individual who could not only work on an engine, but also be able to read and write (U.S. Department of Justice, 1933).

Prison industries were in existence during the creation of the first three prisons. These industries were seen as inexpensive ways of providing vocational training, without the high cost of an instructor (US Department of Justice, 1933).. In 1934, Congress approved an Act that established the Federal Prison Industries (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2009). President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the bill that would start an industry whose purpose was not personal profit, but would employ inmates during incarceration, reducing idleness, and give the individuals vocational skills that could be utilized upon release (Federal Prison Industries Inc., 1939).

The Federal Prisons Industries (FPI) was designed to be a stand alone Corporation who's profits would sustain itself while providing funding to vocational training and job placement services (Factories with Fences, 75 Years of Changing Lives, 2009). FPI, which is still in

existence today under the trade name UNICOR, employs inmates to build different products at the institution that the factory is housed at. The products produced at FPI are solely sold and used by the US Government.

During the 1930's the Bureau had also begun issuing certificates for the courses inmates were taking (US Department of Justice, 1939). Foreman at Lewisburg, Pennsylvania were being instructed in vocational training teaching methods in a fifteen week course in an effort for the Bureau to strengthen its' vocational training program. The programs grew for the Bureau and to test the inmates' knowledge on subject areas a test was administered to the inmates in each program to begin gaining insight into how much they were learning from each program. Bates in his annual report further stated that inmates underwent an interview from the classification committee to determine the limitation and abilities of the inmate, and which vocational program or related trades program would best suit the need of the inmate. Related trades programs were classes used in conjunction with a maintenance shop.

In Bates' Federal Bureau of Prisons Annual Report in 1939, he pointed out that after several years of experimentation and trials in education and curriculum; the education program as a whole was being developed around four principle units. The units were elementary education, modified form of academic education for inmates who were above a fourth grade level, related trades & occupational classes, and special classes that met the practical and cultural needs of inmates. Up till this point in the Bureau's growth of vocational training programs, maintenance foreman were teaching the classes. In the Annual Report of 1937 Bates stated that there had developed among the vocational training instructors a realization that they were teaching men to work and to become skilled craftsmen. Bates further reported that the inmates who worked for these foremen, but were utilizing these trades not only as a work assignment in the prison, but also as a class were different from the other men working in the same trade. The men who were utilizing this trade as a class were required to carry on in a program of related schoolwork, and had progress records that were maintained on them. These men also could not

have their work assignment changed unless done so by the classification committee.

Not all of the new institutions were able to have vocational programs in the sense of formalized classes, due to the nature of the prison. One such prison of the time was Alcatraz, due to the heightened security of the prison. The Bureau did consider the maintenance shops as a form of vocational training for the inmates; instructed by the foreman of the shops (Bates, 1938). At the camps inmates built roads and cleared forests, these skills were considered to be part of vocational training (Bates, 1938). The inmates would learn to operate tractors, bulldozers, graders, and trucks.

Bennett (1943.) reported that the Federal Prison Industries had intensified their production to aid in the War leading to net sales of 7,062,017.07 a portion of which went to vocational training which had 1,600 inmates enrolled Bureau wide. During the 1940's the U.S. was engaged in World War II. This war was unlike any other, because it called for a mass uprising of the nation and its peoples to engage in the war effort (Wolf & Conners, 2009). The Bureau was not absent from doing its part, and engaging inmates in productive efforts to aid the war effort.

By 1945 the Bureau had grown from four large overcrowded institutions to 28 smaller specialized institutions (Bennett, 1947). The focus at the time was to expand the area of vocational training, primarily to assist with the war effort. Bennett (1947) wrote 35 new vocational training courses were organized to contribute to the war program. These new courses that were used in the war effort were called Vocational Education for National Defense (VEND); these courses began at a camp at Fort Lewis, but quickly spread to other institutions and camps. Bennett (1947) reported that slightly less than 8,000 inmates Bureau wide were enrolled at the time in vocational training courses.

Snarr and Wolford (1985) discussed how the Post-world War II era saw a dramatic rise in crime, and vocational training. The emphasis was placed on vocational training to better able inmates with skills to enter the job market upon release. By this time vocational training had been organized into four major divisions (Bennett, 1947). The four divisions were on-job training, trade training, related-trade classes, and

vocational agriculture. The division of on-job training gave inmates instruction by their general foreman; a manual was completed this year that would standardize the training throughout the Bureau. Trade training was formal training for a specific trade, with shops and classrooms setup explicitly for that vocation. Related-trade classes were created to give inmates the background knowledge necessary for better understanding of a trade. Vocational agriculture was introduced in 1944 to provide instruction suited for inmates in rural areas, who would return to a farm upon release. In addition to organizing vocational training at the institutions the Bureau began working with local trade boards as well as state and federal departments to ensure the training that was being received by the inmates would be relevant to the trade (Bennett, 1947).

Hershberger (1979) indicated that the 1950's and 1960's were a period of true change in correctional philosophy for the Bureau. The change was geared toward a philosophy that rehabilitated the individual offender. Though this philosophy was the general thought since the creation of the Bureau, it was during this time period the Bureau saw growth that reinforced this philosophy. Congress passed in 1950 the Youth Corrections Act, which would broaden the range of correctional alternatives for younger offenders. Federal facilities opened in Ashland, Kentucky; Englewood, Colorado; and Petersburg, Virginia, all of which were created for youth offenders, with a heavy emphasis on education, vocational training, and rehabilitation (Escarcega, 2004).

The medical model was implemented during the 1960's (Factory With Fences, 1996). This model focused attention on crime as an illness that could be treated. The treatment of crime came from a focus on the individual, counseling, education programs, and classifications based on the individual's needs were implemented (Roberts, 1990).

In 1962 the Manpower Demonstration and Training Act was passed, which provided programs for released prisoners to aid in skills improvement for employment (McKean & Ransford, 2004). In 1965 President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Federal Prisoner Rehabilitation Act into law (Long, 1965). Part of the bill would allow inmates to work in private employment or to participate in community training

programs, all while still committed in prison. Before President Johnson signed the Act he appointed a commission to answer a number of questions about which programs worked best at deterring crime. Part of the Act supported recruitment and retention of qualified personnel including vocational instructors.

Through its first forty years the Federal Bureau of Prisons saw rapid increases in their population. With the increase came more institutions and camps to house and rehabilitate inmates. By 1978 the Bureau would have over 50 institutions activated (Keve, 1991). With these new institutions came better designs that would equip the institution with vocational trades shops and educational facilities. These 50 institutions would seem modest compared to the 113 institutions under the Bureau's authority today, which include over 900 vocational training, Advanced Occupational Education, and apprenticeship program.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

At the time that the Federal Bureau of Prisons were established vocational training was not a new phenomenon, but was a tool to reduce idle time. When the Federal Government passed The Three Prisons Act vocational training was seen as necessary to incorporate into prisons, however this type of occupational skill training was left to the maintenance shops at each institution. As more emphasis was placed on education, inmates found themselves splitting time between the shop and the classroom. Dyer and Williams (1997) indicated experiential learning as beneficial to occupational skills. The focus to train these incarcerated men quickly shifted to a larger focus to include women, children, and young adults who were incarcerated. When the Bureau of Prisons was finally established in 1930, Austin MacCormick sought out the possible training programs that could be included in the Bureau.

Before the Bureau was established and through the Bureau's early years there were many changes that took place. The skills taught in prisons began more in the agriculture sector, but were greatly widened to include occupations that would encompass a wider array of job skills to aid persons being released from prison. The vocational training programs in the Bureau had a

disorganized start; with much of the skills being taught by maintenance foreman. The importance of these programs and the positive effects on inmates' lives were soon realized. These programs were soon developed into better-organized classes being taught by industry professionals.

Directors of the Bureau have continually emphasized the importance of these programs as a tool to not only combat idle time, but to ensure a reduction of recidivism. As the American prison population continues to rise so should more research and focus be placed on these worthwhile programs that will aid in the betterment of incarcerated individuals.

### Recommendations

Recommendations for further studies should be focused on identifying the multitude of vocational training programs that have come into existence in the Bureau. To expand this study other components that are imperative to study

would be programs that have had great success and others that have failed; and the causes of these outcomes. Additional studies that would provide great insight into quality programs that work would be research that focuses on the relationship of existing high growth occupations and how these occupations relate to programs currently being offered in the Bureau. To narrow down these occupations, a researcher could look at occupations that are directly related to agricultural productions.

Future research should reflect the need to understand why the different vocational training programs were added and to develop a comprehension regarding the program dynamics. This would help to better understand the goals of the different programs and could aid in the determination of what future programs may be added in the Bureau. Developing future vocational goals should assist program planners in addressing the diverse needs of inmates regardless of penitentiary system (Doerfert, 2011).

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