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HARLEM

## A Treasure in the Attic, Too Toxic to Touch

By STEVEN KURUTZ

**S**ometimes, a tantalizing discovery is just out of reach. Such is the case at the Harlem Community Justice Center on 121st Street, where a long-forgotten attic storage room was discovered after a building renovation three years ago. Inside the room, stacked on wood shelves, are bound volumes containing court records, dating to the early 1900's, from a prison that once operated within the landmark structure.

The discovery at the building, now used as a courthouse, is the kind that archivists dream of, with one exception: for years, a broken window has encouraged birds to nest in the space, and the decades' worth of pigeon droppings that have accumulated there have made the room toxic, putting the retrieval of the records into question.

"This building fell into disrepair for many years," explained Mike Adamo, a court officer who, along with Charles Lopez, the chief clerk, recently offered a tour of the prison and the attic room.

As he walked, Mr. Adamo sniffed the moldy air. "You'd need guys in moon suits to get these documents," he said.

Katherine Franke, a law professor and legal historian at Columbia University, is one of the people who would like to see the documents rescued. The prison, built in 1893 and the oldest still standing in Manhattan, briefly served as a women's penitentiary, and the court records offer a window into the street life of the era. "Flipping through the minute books, I saw women arrested for the things late 19th-century women would be arrested for - running a 'bawdy house,' vagrancy," Ms. Franke said. "My guess is that ladies on Park Avenue don't appear in those legal books."

A few of the less damaged volumes sit on a table in a small room near the storage area. Though the information listed is basic - name, age, date, crime, fine, address - viewers can almost sense a stark narrative behind them. To cite one example, a 50-year-old man named Michael Faull, a resident of the Mills Hotel, was arrested for intoxication, fined \$3 and released on April 16, 1907.

Ms. Franke has contacted a state agency that pays for the restoration of old documents, but given the costly and involved procedure in desoiling the records, little progress has been made. Thomas McCarthy, who founded the New York Correction History Society, is another advocate for saving the documents and has posted photos of the attic room at [www.correctionhistory.org](http://www.correctionhistory.org), the society's Web site.

Mr. McCarthy sees a humbling lesson in the tantalizing predicament. "Here we are in the most powerful city in the world," he said. "There's our history. We can see it. But we can't get to it because of the birds of the air."