

TO: Professors Andrea Armstrong and Nishi Kumar
FROM: Savannah Johnson
RE: “Better know a Jail” Memo
DATE: November 28, 2023

Franklin Parish Detention Center

Introduction

Franklin Parish, named after Benjamin Franklin, is a historically rich and agriculturally diverse region in Louisiana.¹ Established in 1843, through the Pioneer John Winn, is known for its significant contributions to Louisiana's agricultural sector, with extensive farming of crops like corn, cotton, and soybeans.² The government seat was established in Winnsboro in 1846, and it encapsulates the region's cultural and administrative activities.³ The area's economy is bolstered by a blend of agriculture, including livestock and agriculture, reflecting the parish's commitment to a variety of rural industries.⁴ The detention center is located at 388 Natures Acres Road, Winnsboro, LA 71295, with further details available on its website.⁵

Jail Characteristics

The Franklin Parish Detention Center, serves as a county facility primarily housing inmates awaiting trial, sentencing, or bond, and those serving short-term sentences, usually less than 24 months. It is a medium-security facility hosting inmates from the Louisiana Department of Correction and other parishes as well as Franklin parish.⁶

The Franklin Parish Sheriff Office maintains an online roster of all current offenders, detailing their name, age, race, and gender, that updates almost every minute.⁷ The current roster shows the population to be all males. The ages range vary with the oldest current prisoner being 74, born in 1949, and the youngest being 18, born in 2005. The current roster has 528 inmates of the African American race and 282 Caucasian inmates, 17 unknown inmates, and one American Indian/Alaskan Native inmate.⁸

Data from the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections, obtained by Voice of the Experienced (VOTE), indicates that incarcerated individuals come from across the state, with the largest numbers from populous cities like New Orleans, Shreveport, and Baton Rouge.⁹ However, less populous, rural areas such as Washington, Franklin, Caldwell, and Webster Parishes have some of the highest imprisonment rates per 100,000 persons in the state.¹⁰

¹https://www.lsuagcenter.com/portals/our_offices/parishes/franklin#:~:text=Franklin%20Parish%20was%20established%20in,agriculture%20and%20natural%20resource%20industries

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ <https://www.franklinsheriff.net>

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ <http://www.franklin.lavns.org/roster.aspx>

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/origin/la/2022/report.html>

¹⁰ *Id.*

The Franklin Parish Sheriff's Office also operates a Transitional Work Program through the Detention Center, providing rehabilitation opportunities and Trustee Workers for various community programs. Trustees, who are inmates working in the jail as cooks, orderlies, laundry, or commissary staff, receive a small remuneration and sometimes sentence reductions. When an inmate arrives, they are placed in a large holding cell with other inmates for intake and heightened observation. Violent and out-of-control inmates are segregated.

Since 2015, there have been five deaths in the facility, two in 2015, one in 2017, one in 2019, and one in 2020, all listed as natural causes, without further specifics.

Leadership

Sheriff Kevin W. Cobb, in office since 2012 making this his fourth term, has played a pivotal role in the facility's administration. In 2022, he served as the 77th president of the Louisiana Sheriffs' Association and continues as an Ex-Officio Member, highlighting his influence in law enforcement circles. In my research I discovered an article in a newspaper dated January 28, 1951, that recognizes Hiram Waller as Franklin Parish youngest Sheriff at the time at the age of 32. I attached a clip of the newspaper.¹¹

Financial Overview

As of 2022, the Franklin Parish Sheriff's Office, overseeing the detention center, reported total assets of \$25,355,266.00.¹² Notably, the criminal fund section of the statement mentioned \$356,226.00 in settlements, indicating issues that have been resolved financially but kept out of the media.¹³ This number is large compared to the fact that it's the only jail in the parish.

Evidence of Oversight

As of September 2023, the facility is accredited by the Louisiana Accreditations Correction Commission and the National Commission on Correctional Health Care, operating under the Louisiana Model Jail Standards. This adherence ensures that the facility meets essential health, safety, and operational benchmarks.

As part of the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) program, the center enforces a zero-tolerance policy towards sexual misconduct, highlighting its commitment to inmate safety and rights according to the Franklin Parish Sheriff Office website. The Louisiana Commission on Law Enforcement's database inclusion also suggests regular evaluations and oversight.

Transparency and Public Information

Public access to information on the detention center's operations is limited. However, the Sheriff's Office does maintain an updated jail roster online, providing some insights into the inmate population such as providing name, date of birth, gender, and race. The roster also updates constantly stating how many offenders they currently have.¹⁴ In my efforts to obtain detailed information through Public Records Act requests, I encountered numerous challenges. These difficulties indicate either inadequate record-keeping or a reluctance to share information. Despite requesting data dating back to 2014, I received only a single-page document listing five

¹¹ <https://www.newspapers.com/article/monroe-morning-world-hiram-waller-sherif/5054620/>

¹² [https://app.lla.state.la.us/PublicReports.nsf/0/E5C421D398F7D28D8625897A0066BACF/\\$FILE/00001089.pdf](https://app.lla.state.la.us/PublicReports.nsf/0/E5C421D398F7D28D8625897A0066BACF/$FILE/00001089.pdf)

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ <http://www.franklin.lavns.org/roster.aspx>

deaths since then. Contacting someone to provide answers proved challenging, and even when I did get a response, it was minimal – merely the names of the deceased, their birth dates, and their time of death at Franklin Medical Center.

I had to persistently reach out to the Sheriff's Office for information on the causes of death. The responses were generally vague, often summed up as "I believe it was natural causes." Attempts to contact the coroner were similarly unfruitful, with no responses received.

The Franklin Parish City Council and the Franklin Parish Sheriff's Office websites offer limited information, providing only basic details. This lack of transparency and responsiveness appears to be a widespread issue across the parish. The few articles I found predominantly praise the Sheriff's Office, with little coverage of any other aspects. Reporting on incidents within the detention center seems to be deliberately understated. The only notable negative incident I uncovered in my research was from 2016, involving an inmate named Josep Merrick Zachary who escaped custody during a work detail but was later recaptured.¹⁵ This scarcity of detailed information seems to be a common trait among many of the Louisiana prison systems.

Legal Challenges and Cases

Recent years have witnessed several lawsuits against the detention center, typically focusing on issues like negligence and inadequate medical care. Most cases were dismissed due to procedural grounds, but they underscore ongoing challenges in maintaining inmate welfare.

Watkins v. Franklin Parish Detention Center, a 2023 case for example, revolved around complaints of mold and unsafe conditions in the facility's showers. The plaintiff, Watkins, a prisoner at the detention center, filed a pro se lawsuit against both the detention center and Sheriff Kevin W. Cobb. He reported "mold all over the shower" and "thick, slippery slime" on the shower floor. After slipping and injuring his hip and hand in these conditions, Watkins claimed that his requests for medical treatment and care were ignored by the Warden, and his lawsuit was ultimately dismissed by the United States District Court due to immunity issues.¹⁶

In 2021, the *Berry v. Cobb*, case addressed allegations of excessive force by law enforcement personnel. The prisoner filed a pro se motion for summary judgment against Sheriff Cobb and Lieutenant Charles Johnson. The court granted Berry's motion against Lieutenant Johnson but denied the claims against Sheriff Cobb. These cases, among others, underscore the facility's challenges in upholding safety, health, and legal standard.¹⁷

The 2019 case, *Authorlee v. Franklin Parish Detention Center*, involved a prisoner who alleged a fall from a top bunk due to his medical condition and medication, which made him unsteady. The lack of safety railings and a ladder on the bunk led to a reinjury of his back. Despite his medical history and requests, he claimed the detention center's staff, including Nurse Smith and Warden Lee, negligently assigned him to a top bunk. He sought relief from Sheriff Kevin Cobb

¹⁵ <https://www.myarklamiss.com/news/local-news/update-work-release-inmate-captured-in-franklin-parish/>

¹⁶ *Watkins v. Franklin Par. Det. Ctr.*, No. 3:18-CV-01297, 2018 WL 6626522, at *1 (W.D. La. Dec. 18, 2018)

¹⁷ *Berry v. Cobb*, No. 3:19-CV676, 2021 WL 328865, at *1 (W.D. La. Feb. 1, 2021)

for the alleged negligence of his employees. However, the court dismissed the claim as frivolous and for failure to state a claim.¹⁸

While the Franklin Parish Detention Center does offer rehabilitation programs, the ongoing issues highlighted by these legal cases, alongside challenges in transparency and oversight, suggest significant areas needing improvement.

¹⁸ *Authorlee v. Franklin Par. Det. Ctr.*, No. 3:19-CV-00781, 2020 WL 1897175, at *1 (W.D. La. Mar. 26, 2020), *report and recommendation adopted*, No. 3:19-CV-00781, 2020 WL 1891242 (W.D. La. Apr. 16, 2020)

Hiram Waller Is Franklin Parish's Youngest Sheriff

By Otis B. Hassell

(Of The Morning World Staff)

Winnsboro, La. — Thirty - two-year-old Sheriff Hiram B. Waller is the youngest sheriff ever to be elected in Franklin parish and at the time of his political victory was the youngest sheriff in Louisiana.

Since taking office June, 1948 he explains, it seems I've had a wild-cat by the tail. With an overwhelming number of murders, suicides, fatal accidents and aggravated battery cases, he has become accustomed to 24-hour duty with a minimum amount of rest.

Upon taking office, Waller began studying plans for improving the local sheriff department and its service. His first step was to send his chief deputy, Ellis Tarver to an F. B. I. fingerprint school.



A. Waller and Myrtis Livingston Waller. In the spring of 1923 his mother died and his father moved to Gilbert, taking his three older boys and leaving Hiram and a younger sister with their grandfather in Miss.

Later his father remarried and young Waller and his sister joined the family in Gilbert. In 1930, the family moved into an old lumber shed at Ferriday, while they worked on the Panola plantation.

Two years later the family moved back to Gilbert, leaving Hiram in Ferriday, to make his own way and attend school.

His first job was at a bakery where he received five dollars a week and slept in a back room of the bakery. After the bakery closed he went to work at the Hutchinson Drug store. From Mrs. Maude Hutchinson he acquired the nickname, "Buster."

During this time he also had a paper route which covered the entire town of Ferriday and consisted of all papers that came into the town. Hiram's paper deliveries included the Monroe Morning World and News - Star, Natchez Democrat, Shreveport Times, Arkansas Gazette Commercial Appeal, and The Times Picayune.

With this varied and complex background, it's quite feasible that all these past experiences have enabled him to act with confidence and certainty in his position as sheriff.

In Dec. of 1938, Waller married Thelma Young of Benton, Ark., a former Ferriday schoolmate. They now have two daughters, Betty