

**CLARA
WILBANKS
WATERS
1888-1977**



**WARDEN
AT
GRANITE
REFORMATORY**

Clara Waters became the first female warden of an all-male institution in American correctional history. Her prison reforms were sometimes controversial and other times innovative.

Clara Wilbanks was born in Slatonville, Arkansas in June 1888. She came to Oklahoma to attend Oklahoma A&M College before graduated from Central State College with her teaching degree. She began teaching at Pawnee before marrying Dr. George Waters of Ralston in 1906.

During territorial days, Oklahoma sent its prisoners to Kansas Penitentiary at Lansing. When Kate Barnard was appointed Oklahoma Commissioner of Charities and Corrections in 1907, she spearheaded the construction of a state prison at McAlester and reformatory at Granite in 1909. The Reformatory in 1910 originally housed young offenders under age 23 who could be rehabilitated and get an education. Dr. George Waters, a highly-respected farmer and dentist, became warden of the Reformatory in 1919. He trained the prisoners in scientific agriculture on the farm land surrounding the Reformatory, while Clara ran the library and mandated that every inmate without an eighth-grade education participate in her educational program.

In 1923, Governor Walton ousted Waters, hiring unqualified people to run the prison's shops, where they did considerable equipment damage. Due to corruption, Walton was impeached within a year and Waters was reappointed warden and began to clean up the damage at the Reformatory. When George died suddenly in 1926, Clara became warden due to her past experience with her husband.

Her unique form of punishment was for the young men to be dressed in women's clothing, taunted and ridiculed as they paraded in the Rotunda. She required all inmates to attend Sunday church services and expanded the library. Waters also began gardening and recreation programs, provided 24-hour medical services, and started a popular boys' band. Her educational program evolved into Lakeside School, the first fully accredited "behind-the-walls" high school in the United States. Waters was highly regarded locally as well as nationally. She was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame in 1934.

When E. W. Marland was elected governor in 1935, he had little respect for Waters, and wanted her replaced. On February 17th, 31 inmates made a spectacular break from the Reformatory. Armed with a couple of smuggled arms, the inmates forcibly took a guard's keys and stormed the visitor room, where 15-20 women and children were waiting for visits. Using them as human shields, the escapees made their way to the main entrance, where they murdered a tower guard and escaped by forcing drivers to surrender their vehicles. All but three of the inmates who made to the road were quickly captured.

The three ringleaders robbed the Seiling First National Bank about a week later. After one was wounded, they kidnapped a local doctor, and forced him to drive them to Texas. After returning to the state, they were captured on March 15th west of Fairview. They were convicted for the prison guard's murder and sent to McAlester. After being convicted of federal bank robbery and kidnapping, they were sent to Alcatraz in 1938. The day after the breakout, Marland fired Waters after eight years as warden.

She didn't let that setback stop her, though. She served as vice-chair of the state's Democratic Party, and was appointed by President Roosevelt to head the Oklahoma women's program of the National Youth Administration. Waters managed the family farm businesses in Pawnee until she died in April 1977 at age 89 in Stillwater.