The final assignment for Professor Priya Joshi’s fascinating Detective Novel and The City course in fall 2012 called for a research paper about criminality and detection. Initially, I had an interest in looking at the earliest years at Eastern State Penitentiary (ESP) in Philadelphia and the women incarcerated there, detailing gender differences in treatment within the prison system. Gender as it relates to criminal justice is something in which I’ve always had an interest but never had much of an opportunity to explore through my coursework at Temple University. I began the journey by getting in touch with ESP’s research coordinator, Annie Anderson.

Anderson was quite helpful in my preliminary investigation. She provide me with an internal, unpublished database detailing the age, race, gender, crime committed, length of sentence, etc. of all ESP prisoners. She also suggested Jennifer Janofsky’s dissertation, which explores antebellum penal ethics at ESP; a portion is devoted to female prisoners. Samuel L. Paley Library has a copy of the dissertation as Janofsky was a Temple University doctoral student. It was a first for me: I’d never had reason to read a dissertation before. It was here I learned about the 1834 investigation into prison staff misconduct that stood counter to the austere environment prison planners intended, as well as the role female prisoners and the only female staff person played in the scandal.

My curiosity piqued, I located several peer-reviewed scholarly articles about the investigation using Paley Library resources (JSTOR and Summon). I learned more in these sources about Mrs. Richard Blundin (the wife of the prison overseer) and one of the first ESP female prisoners, an African-American woman named Ann Hinson. Some of the most interesting research I did, however, was in Thomas B. McElwee’s *A Concise History of the Eastern State Penitentiary of Pennsylvania, Volume 2* (1835), which gives an account of the hearings held to
investigate prison staff as well as the decision to hold only Mrs. Blundin accountable. Paley Library has an uncataloged, original copy in its rare books section, which I learned about in Janofsky’s dissertation. WorldCat reveals that a few other libraries in the country have copies on microfilm or non ORIGINAL physical copies, but Paley Library’s original offered the quickest access to a priceless historical document. It was the first time I had a reason to visit that section at Paley Library.

Convinced that Mrs. Blundin and Ann Hinson were scapegoated victims of misogyny and racism, this is where my project took a turn. Rather than write an analytical paper, I was moved to write a historically accurate but speculative short story. The mystery of what happened to Ann Hinson after she was released from the prison—she disappeared from public record—has never been solved. In order to satisfy myself that no record of her exists after that period, I did an exhaustive search for her name in Paley Library’s online archives of historical newspapers and other periodicals (another first for me).

To write about the time period, additional research was necessary. Using Summon and JSTOR, I located invaluable peer-reviewed scholarly articles about women’s imprisonment in the U.S. and discipline at ESP as well as Paley Library books about crime in Philadelphia in the nineteenth century and female prisoners. A senior thesis from Bryn Mawr College student Daniel Giansante (available through the Bryn Mawr College website) about the philosophy behind ESP and The Pennsylvania System of punishment was also uniquely helpful for background information.

I made a critical site visit to ESP. While Mrs. Blundin was relieved of her duties in January 1835, I chose a frigid day in November 2012 that might replicate the weather conditions. Mrs. Blundin, Ann Hinson, and the investigation into staff misconduct in 1834 is a popular topic
with ESP tour guides, and I engaged in a lengthy conversation with one of them about where Mr. and Mrs. Blundin may have resided within the prison. Of particular use for writing the story was a demonstration of the cell locking mechanisms. I had the opportunity to engage those—both the internal locks and padlock—from inside a cell. Additionally, I took photographs of the original prison structures for reference.

The project for Detective Fiction taught me a great deal about Philadelphia history as well as how to approach research outside of typical English literature criticism. It pushed me to explore library resources in a new way—both Paley Library and outside libraries—and the information found resulted in my questioning accepted historical records. The idea that the victors write the history, and those victors were generally white men, is not new to me; however, it was exciting to discover something so close to home that illustrates the point so neatly. As I move forward beyond my experience at Temple University, I will carry with me new knowledge and research skills that make me a more critical thinker and more effective researcher.