



EASTERN STATE PENITENTIARY

A NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK

1. History of Eastern State Penitentiary, Philadelphia

In the ambitious age of reform following the American Revolution, the new nation aspired to change profoundly its public institutions, and to set an example for the world in social development. Every type of institution that we are familiar with today—educational, medical and governmental—was revolutionized in these years by the rational and humanistic principles of the Enlightenment.

Of all of the radical innovations born in this era, American democracy was, of course, the most influential. The second major intellectual export was prison design and reform.

Most eighteenth century prisons were simply large holding pens. Groups of adults and children, men and women, and petty thieves and murderers, sorted out their own affairs behind locked doors. Physical punishment and mutilation were common, and abuse of the prisoners by the guards and overseers was assumed.

In 1787, a group of well-known and powerful Philadelphians convened in the home of Benjamin Franklin. The members of The Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons expressed growing concern with the conditions in American and European prisons. Dr. Benjamin Rush spoke on the Society's goal, to see the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania set the international standard in prison design. He proposed a radical idea: to build a true *penitentiary*, a prison designed to create genuine regret and penitence in the criminal's heart. The concept grew from Enlightenment thinking, but no government had successfully carried out such a program.

It took the Society more than thirty years to convince the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to build the kind of prison it suggested: a revolutionary new building on farmland outside Philadelphia.

Eastern State Penitentiary broke sharply with the prisons of its day, abandoning corporal punishment



and ill treatment. This massive new structure, opened in 1829, became one of the most expensive American buildings of its day and soon the most famous prison in the world. The Penitentiary would not simply punish, but move the criminal toward spiritual reflection and change. The method was a Quaker-inspired system of isolation from other prisoners, with labor. The early system was strict. To prevent distraction, knowledge of the building, and even mild interaction with guards, inmates were hooded whenever they were outside their cells. But the proponents of the system believed strongly that the criminals, exposed, in silence, to thoughts of their behavior and the ugliness of their crimes, would become genuinely penitent. Thus the new word, penitentiary.

Eastern's seven earliest cell blocks may represent the first modern building in the United States. The concept plan, by the British-born architect John Haviland, reveals the purity of the vision. Seven cell blocks radiate from a central surveillance rotunda. Haviland's ambitious mechanical innovations placed each prisoner had his or her own private cell, centrally heated, with running water, a flush toilet, and a skylight. Adjacent to the cell was a private outdoor exercise yard contained by a ten-foot wall. This was in an age when the White House, with its new occupant Andrew Jackson, had no running water and was heated with coal-burning stoves.

In the vaulted, skylit cell, the prisoner had only the light from heaven, the word of God (the Bible) and honest work (shoemaking, weaving, and the like) to lead to penitence. In striking contrast to the Gothic exterior, Haviland used the grand architectural vocabulary of churches on the interior. He employed 30-foot, barrel vaulted hallways, tall arched windows, and skylights throughout. He wrote of the Penitentiary as a forced monastery, a machine for reform. But he added an impressive touch: a menacing, medieval facade, built to intimidate, that ironically implied that physical punishment took place behind those grim walls.

Virtually all prisons designed in the nineteenth century, world wide, were based on one of two systems: New York State's Auburn System, and the Pennsylvania System embodied in the Eastern State Penitentiary. During the century following Eastern's construction, more than 300 prisons in South America, Europe, Russia, China, Japan, and across the British Empire were based on its plan.

Delegations came directly to Philadelphia to study the Pennsylvania System and its architecture. For many nations, Eastern's distinctive geometric form and its regimen of isolation became a symbol of progres-



sive, modern principles.

As tourists flocked to Philadelphia in the 1830s and 1840s to see this architectural wonder, a debate grew about the effectiveness and compassion of solitary confinement. Was it cruel to hold these men and women without outside visitors, without books or letters from home, without contact with the outside world?

Accounts vary.

Alexis de Tocqueville visited Eastern State Penitentiary in 1831 with Gustave de Beaumont. They wrote in their report to the French government:

Thrown into solitude... [the prisoner] reflects. Placed alone, in view of his crime, he learns to hate it; and if his soul be not yet surfeited with crime, and thus have lost all taste for any thing better, it is in solitude, where remorse will come to assail him.... Can there be a combination more powerful for reformation than that of a prison which hands over the prisoner to all the trials of solitude, leads him through reflection to remorse, through religion to hope; makes him industrious by the burden of idleness..?

Charles Dickens did not agree. He recounts his 1842 visit to Eastern State Penitentiary Chapter Seven in his travel journal, *American Notes for General Circulation*. The chapter is titled “Philadelphia and its Solitary Prison:”

In its intention I am well convinced that it is kind, humane, and meant for reformation; but I am persuaded that those who designed this system of Prison Discipline, and those benevolent gentleman who carry it into execution, do not know what it is that they are doing....I hold this slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain to be immeasurably worse than any torture of the body; and because its ghastly signs and tokens are not so palpable to the eye,... and it extorts few cries that human ears can hear; therefore I the more denounce it, as a secret punishment in which slumbering humanity is not roused up to stay.

The critics eventually prevailed. The Pennsylvania System was abandoned in 1913. In some countries in Europe and Asia the separate system continued until the post-Second World War period.

The later additions into the Eastern State Penitentiary complex illustrate the compromise reached when this munificent, ill-fated intellectual movement collided with the reality of modern prison operation. Warden Michael Cassidy added the first cell blocks in the 1870s and 1890s. They retain the barrel vaults and skylights, the feeding doors and mechanical systems. Mirrors provide continued surveillance into the new cell blocks from the Rotunda. But the cells did not include exercise yards. Inmates were issued hoods with—



for the first time—eye holes. They would exercise together, in silence and anonymity.

The system of solitary confinement at Eastern State did not so much collapse as erode away over the decades. A congregate workshop was added to the complex in 1905, eight years *before* the Pennsylvania System was officially discontinued. By 1909 an inmate newspaper, *The Umpire*, ran a monthly roster of the inter-Penitentiary baseball league scores.

The Penitentiary administration produced a silent movie in 1929 to celebrate the building's Centennial. The film focuses not on the historic nature of the building, aside from occasional references to its age, but on the modern improvements and recent changes made to the building. It depicts the new; factory-style weaving shops; the commercial-grade bakery and kitchens, staffed by dozens of inmates twenty-four hours a day; and the new guard towers with searchlights and sirens. Inmates are seen by the hundreds, filling the yards between spokes of the cell blocks. They line up in the new dining halls. But these inmates move, throughout, in the shell of the old Pennsylvania System. The cells, now used for two or three men, have barrel-vaulted ceilings, skylights, and a curious, walled-up door in the back. The work shops and dining halls are ten feet wide and hundreds of feet long; they are former exercise yards, roofed over, their party walls removed.

Still more cell blocks were constructed. Reinforced concrete replaced stone. The new cells were small, square, and lit by ordinary windows, but the halls had the catwalks and skylights typical of the early Eastern cell blocks. The cell blocks were invisible from the Rotunda. Subterranean and windowless cells, with neither light nor plumbing, brought a return to solitary confinement at Eastern. This time the isolation was not for redemption, but punishment. The cells were nicknamed "Klondike."

The last major addition was made to Eastern State Penitentiary's complex of buildings in 1956: Cell Block Fifteen, or Death Row. This modern prison block marked the final abandonment of any aspect of the Eastern's original architectural vocabulary. The fully-electronic confinement system inside separated the inmates from the guards at virtually all times. Within the Penitentiary's perimeter wall, built with the belief that all people are capable of redemption, prisoners awaited execution.

Some of America's most notorious criminals were held in Eastern's cells. When gangster Al Capone found himself in front of a judge for the first time in 1929, he was sentenced to one year in prison. He spent



most of that sentence in relative comfort at Eastern State, where he was allowed to furnish his cell with antiques, rugs, and oil paintings. Bank robber Willie Sutton joined eleven other men in a doomed 1945 tunnel escape.

By the 1960's, the aged prison was in need of costly repairs. The Commonwealth closed the facility in 1971, 142 years after it admitted Charles Williams, Prisoner Number One. The City of Philadelphia purchased the site in 1980, intending to reuse or develop it. In 1988, with the prison site threatened with inappropriate reuse proposals, the Eastern State Penitentiary Task Force successfully petitioned Mayor Wilson Goode to halt redevelopment. The Pennsylvania Prison Society opened the Penitentiary for the first season of regular guided interpretative tours in 1994, and, in 1997, signed a twenty-year agreement with the City to operate the site. A new non-profit corporation, Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site, Inc., took over the agreement 2001.

