

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 building 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.

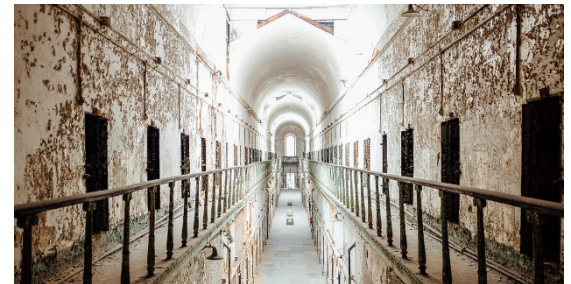
The early system was strict. To prevent distraction, knowledge of the building, and even mild interaction with guards, inmates were hooded whenever they were outside their cells. But the proponents of the system believed strongly that the criminals, exposed, in silence, to thoughts of their behavior 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, skylight 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, worldwide, were based on one of two systems: New York State's 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 progressive, 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 ..."

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 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. This time the isolation was not for redemption, but punishment.

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.

75 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
80 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.

Penitence - /'penitəns/

noun -- [uncountable]

A feeling of being sorry because you have done something wrong

He expressed suitable penitence for what he had done.

