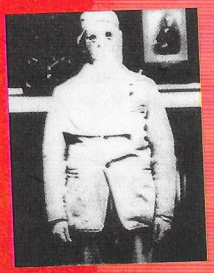
"Punishment Penitence and Reform"

Eastern State Penitentiary and the Controversy over Solitary Confinemen

by William C. Kashatu

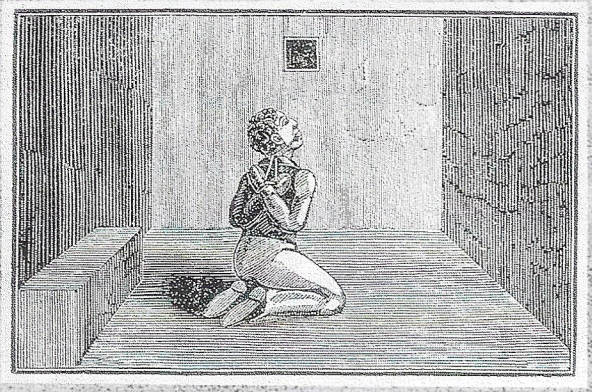


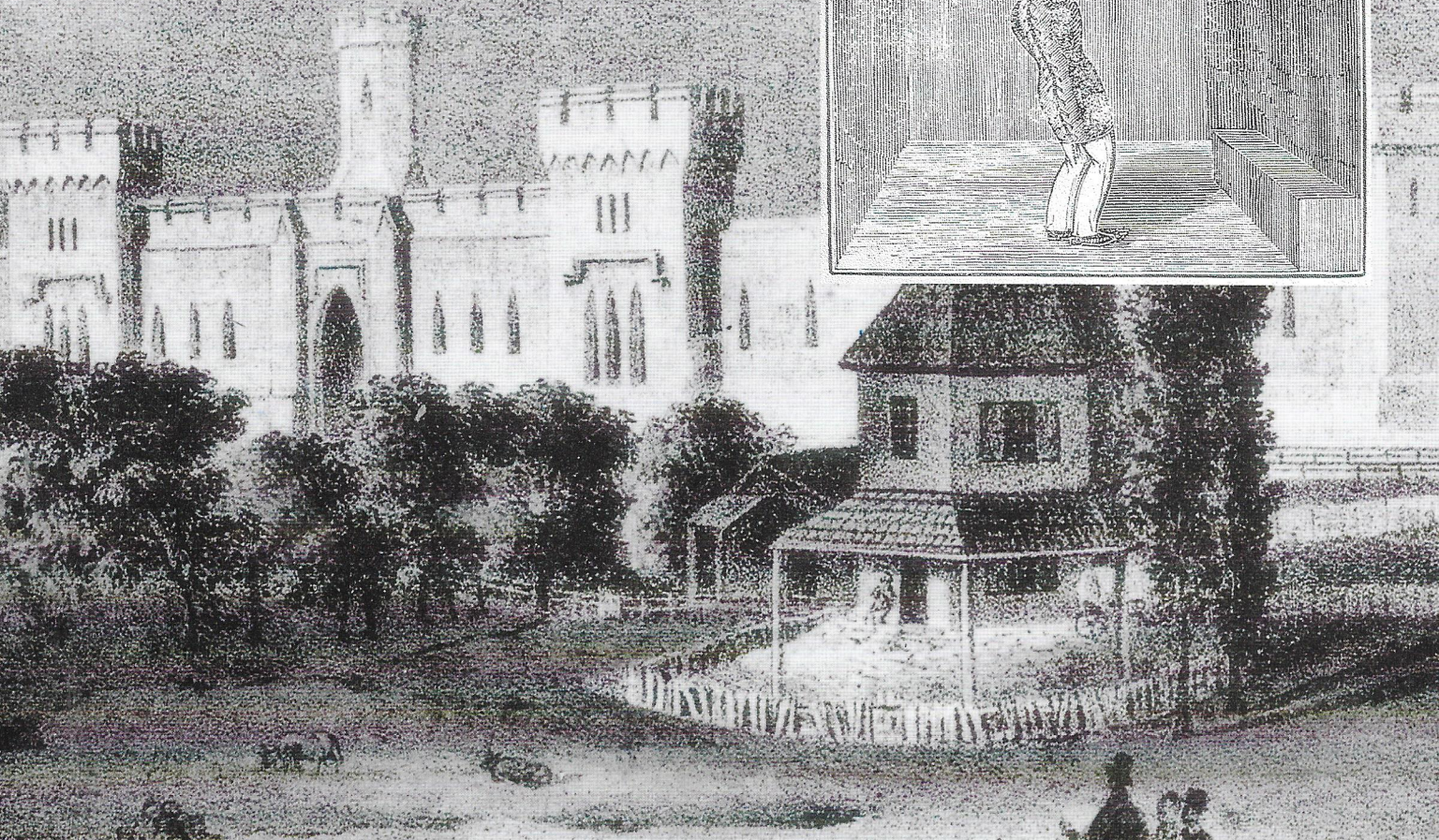
In 1842, popular British novelist Charles Dickens traveled to Philadelphia to visit the mam moth Eastern State Penitentiary. What he found caused him to lament the "picture of forlorn affliction and distress of mind." Surrounded by an imposing thirty foot high stone wall joined by castle-like towers at rising at each corner and dominated by a grim, turreted entrance, the prison looked more like a medieval fortress than what was being touted as an extraordinary progressive correctional asylum.

Opened little more than a decade earlier, in 1829, through the lobbying efforts of the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons (PSAMPP), Eastern State Penitentiary—unofficially known as Cherry Hill because it was built on property that contained an orchard—captured international attention because it departed from the traditional methods of physical punishment, which included torture and dismemberment. Instead, zealou Quaker reformers convinced Commonwealth officials to impose solitary confinement so that inmates had the opportunity to meditate about their past sins and resolve to live better lives.

Dickens' curiosity about this revolutionary system led him to spend an entire day at Eastern State Penitentiary, going from cell to cell ***conversing*** with inmates.

What he discovered **shocked him.**





Every effort was made to isolate prisoners from human contact. When first brought in or transferred within the facility, prisoners wore hoods to prevent their becoming aware of other prisoners or planning escape routes. All cell blocks radiated from a central rotunda, allowing for maximum efficiency in security, feeding, surveillance, and movement of staff and prisoners. Individual cells, each with a small exercise yard, were furnished with not only a bed and toilet but also a work table, skylight, and a Bible to remind the inmate that penitence would only be achieved through the light from heaven, the word of God, and honest work. Regardless of inmates' moral progress, their physical isolation reduced misconduct because, at least theoretically, human interaction had been eliminated.

Dickens' curiosity about this revolutionary system led him to spend an entire day at Eastern State Penitentiary, going from cell to cell conversing with inmates. What he discovered shocked him. Struck by both the resignation of some prisoners to the miserable conditions and the desperation of others, he confessed that he had never before encountered such pitiful circumstances. As he toured the facility, one anxiety ridden soul grabbed at his coat, pleading to be released. Convinced that Eastern's inmates endured the "most cruel and inhumane kind of suffering because its ghastly signs were not so palpable to the eye and sense of touch as scars upon the flesh," Dickens judged solitary confinement a "slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain, to be immeasurably worse than any torture of the body."

Charles Dickens returned to England and published his findings in a classic work, *American Notes for General Circulation.* His scathing attack on the penitentiary added to the heated controversy over solitary confinement raging among eminent and well-intentioned reformers on both sides of the Atlantic. At issue was whether the so-called "Pennsylvania System" of uninterrupted solitary confinement was more effective than a system used at New York's state penitentiary at Auburn, where prisoners' isolation was broken daily so that they could perform work duties in congregated workshops. In theory, Auburn's system enforced strict silence among prisoners during these work sessions, but it came to be regarded as the antithesis of the Pennsylvania System.

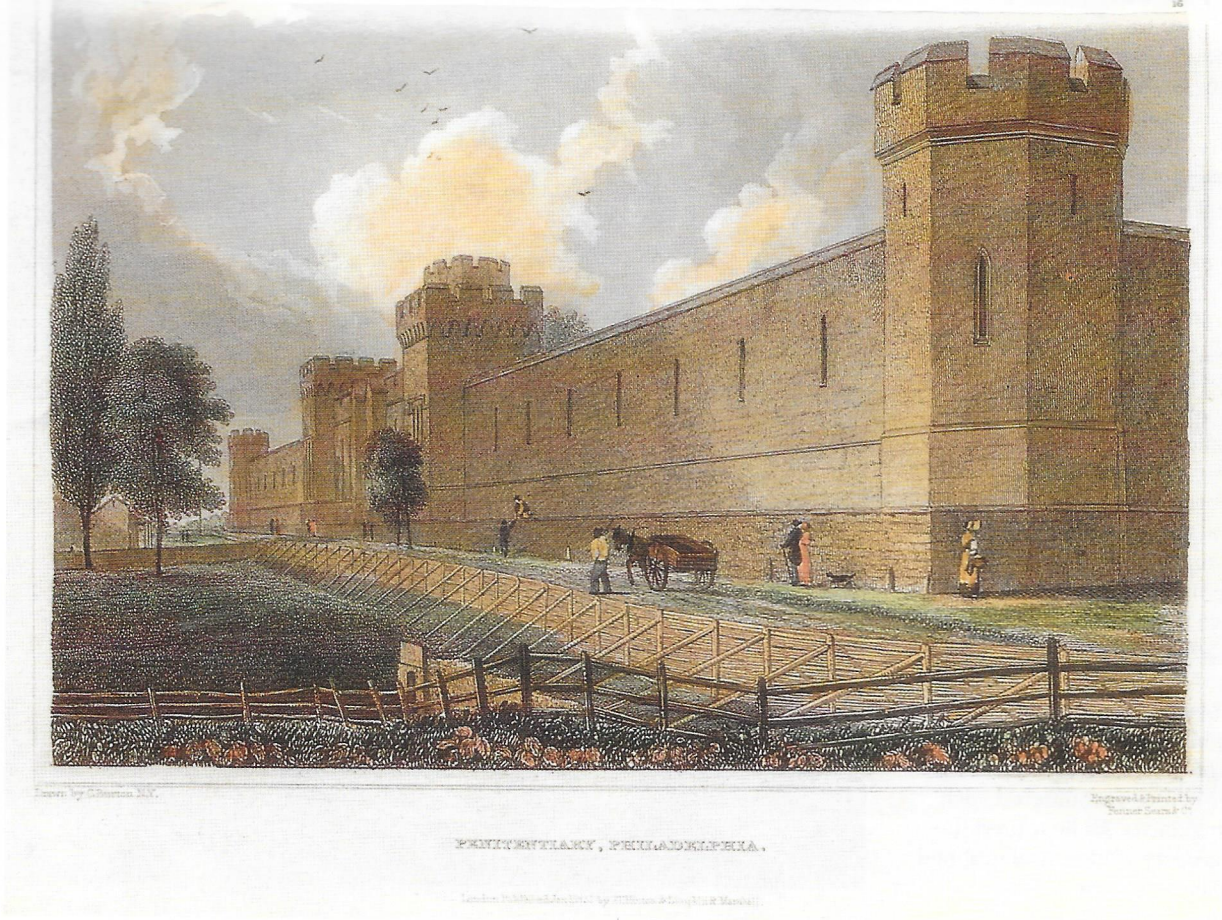
John Haviland (1792-1852) was a British architect whose design was selected over that of prominent Philadelphia designer William Strickland. Haviland, portrayed by John Neagle (1796-1865), was also hired by the prison's building commission to supervise the construction of the castle-like structure.

Arguments about the relative merits of the two systems dominated discussion of prison reform into the early twentieth century, eventually leading to abandonment of the Pennsylvania System in the United States. The necessity for placing more than one prisoner in a cell was obvious as prison populations spiraled in the late 1860s, and Eastern State Penitentiary gradually ceased to maintain true solitary confinement. In 1913, the state legislature authorized the prison to congregate prisoners for worship, work, educational, or recreational activities—an indirect admission that the Pennsylvania System had already been dropped.

Nevertheless, the Quaker attempt to replace corporal punishment with the more benevolent concept of penitence, as well as the progressive radial design of prison architecture, had allowed Eastern State Penitentiary to serve for more than a century as an ideal model of penology.

The foundations of the Pennsylvania System were laid during the late eighteenth century by Quaker reformers in Philadelphia. Believing that God had endowed every person with an inner light of goodness, the Society of Friends sought to appeal to this divine spark and set in motion a process of personal reformation in the most degenerate of souls. Their passion to "answer that of God" in criminals, as well as their own sect's experience of religious persecution in wretched prisons in both England and America, inspired them to pioneer in this area of reform. Philadelphia was much in need of change. Like all prisons in Colonial America, the Walnut Street Jail, which had been opened in 1773 and was the city's principal incarceration facility, had been marred by crude practices and unsanitary conditions. Regardless of age

From the exterior, Eastern State Penitentiary (facing page), constructed in 1829, was an immense and foreboding structure; behind the walls the methods of punishment were draconian. In the 1830s, tools of punishment—later ruled to be torture—included (facing page, from top to bottom) an iron gag, a tranquilizing chair, and a straitjacket.

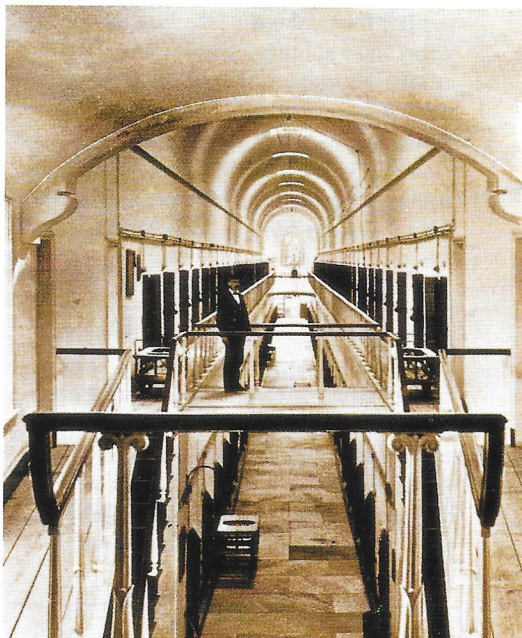


PENITENTIARY, PHILADELPHIA.

sex, or crime, all offenders were incarcerated together in one large room: aged men with young women, physically infirm with criminally insane, condemned murderers with juvenile offenders. Prisoners who had money or who literally traded the clothes off their backs easily obtained alcohol. Riots, frequent escapes, and overcrowding prevailed. Bedding was seldom provided, and there were no facilities for bathing. There was a high incidence of communicable disease. Inmates with money bribed the guards for favors, while the poor were reduced to begging from whomever might pass by the open windows. Punishment included bodily mutilation, public whipping, and torture, all designed with the added purpose of evoking fear and respect for authority in the general public.

Members of the Society of Friends found all this distasteful, believing it only encouraged even more crime and vice. To address prison reform, they joined together, in 1787, with prominent Philadelphians, among them Benjamin Franklin, renowned physician Benjamin Rush, and Bishop William White, rector of the Episcopalian Christ Church, to establish the PSAMPP. Believing that their "obligations to humanity were not canceled by the follies or crimes of their fellow creatures," these humanitarians concerned themselves with environmental factors that led to social deviance. Rush, for example, argued that human nature was inherently good but could be corrupted by the evils of an imperfect society. Consequently, the increase in crime at the turn of the eighteenth century was not so much a result of incorrigible behavior as a "reflection of a breakdown in society's traditional institutions." Negligent families, taverns, brothels, and gambling halls all served to encourage crime and depravity. "Criminals had to be removed from society," he contended, "and placed in a House of Repentance in order to put an end to mirth, levity, and other less sober tendencies that would interfere with good citizenship." Isolating the criminal in a "well ordered institution" would not only remove the temptations of crime, but "encourage proper habits of discipline and industry that would lead to reform." Rush wanted an institution for the punishment and the reform of criminals. "Let the doors be of iron," he proposed, "and let the grating, occasioned by opening and shutting them, be increased by an echo from a neighboring mountain

Early inmates wore hoods as they were led through Eastern State's cavernous halls to ensure complete isolation and anonymity.



that shall extend and continue a sound that shall deeply pierce the soul."

Benjamin Rush's vision came to fruition in 1790 when the Walnut Street Jail was reopened as a state penitentiary.

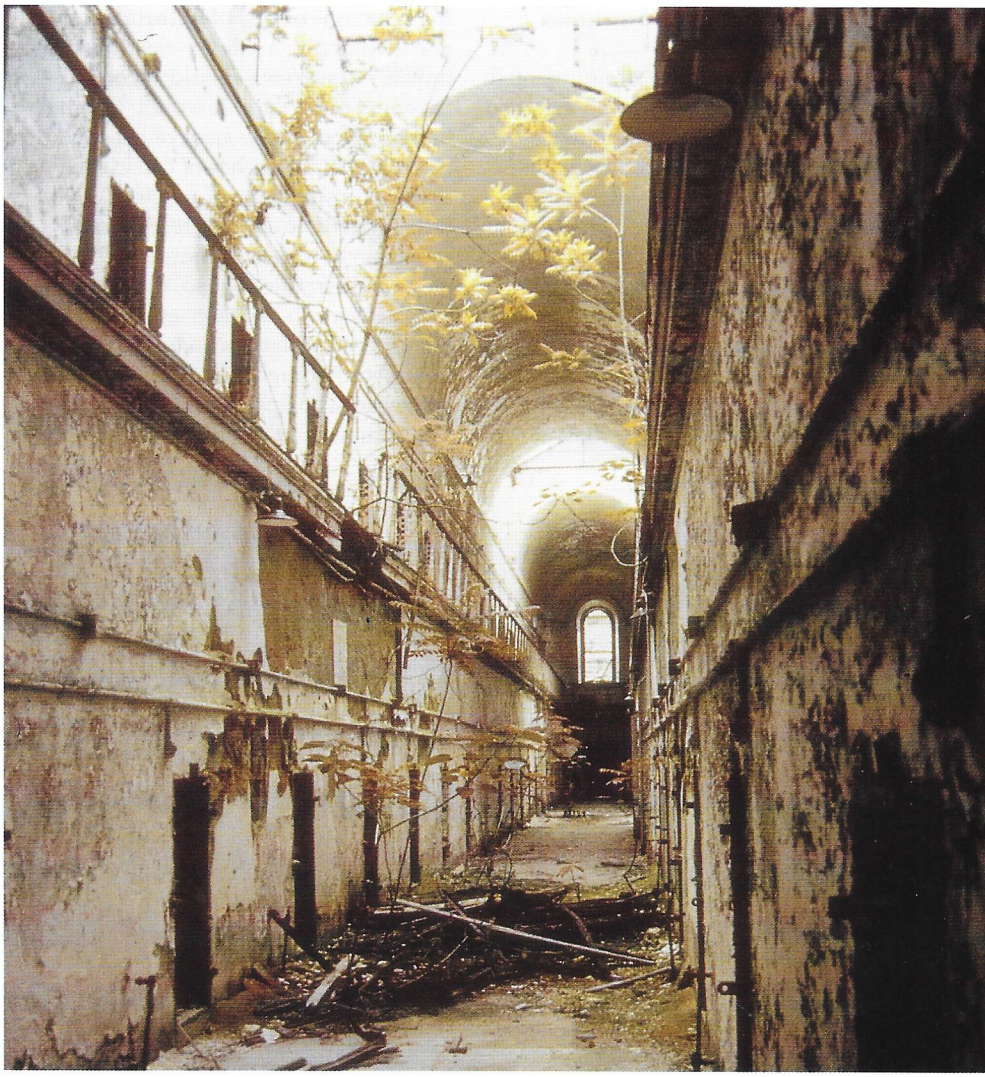
For the first time, inmates were required to wear uniforms to discourage escape attempts. Work opportunities were made available as a means of coping with lengthy prison sentences and to reimburse the Commonwealth for prison costs. Sixteen individual cells were designed to prevent communication between inmates. Convicts were permitted to read, but only religious literature. They were encouraged to reflect on their transgressions while spending most of their day in their cells.

By the 1820s, members of the Pennsylvania Prison Society—a reconstitution of the PSAMPP—agreed that solitary confinement was the most effective way to punish and reform criminals, but they faced two major hurdles. First, the city's population explosion had inevitably resulted in more crime and, hence, an overcrowded, outmoded prison. Second, opinion was divided whether incarceration should be coupled with labor. On one hand, prison manufacturing was not profitable. Not only did convicts lack incentive to produce quality goods, but they had no proper supervision; prison administrators did not know how to make a business succeed. On the other hand, prison reformers understood that labor had a beneficial, curative, and moral effect. Not only would hard work preserve the sanity of inmates serving lengthy sentences, but it would teach them habits of industry they would need to become productive, self-reliant citizens upon release.

Both concerns were answered on March 20, 1821, when the state legislature appropriated one hundred thousand dollars to construct a new penitentiary and stipulated that labor would be required for sentences imposing solitary imprisonment. A building commission selected and purchased, for $11,500, eleven acres of the Cherry Hill farmland, just north of city limits, as the site for the new structure. In May 1822, the commissioners adopted the radial (or "hub-and-spokes") design of British architect John Haviland (1792-1852) and hired him to oversee construction. The prison opened seven years later, although construction was not finally completed until 1836.

John Haviland's radial architecture resembled several late eighteenth-century English and European asylums which featured central administrative buildings and outward radiating wings for inmate cells, suggesting the spokes of a giant wheel. His plan included seven cell blocks radiating out from a central rotunda. Anyone walking the prison corridors could be observed at all times by guards stationed in this central hub. Similarly, Haviland purposely avoided placing other structures between cell blocks, to maximize surveillance of the prison yard, which was easily accomplished from the rotunda's second story balcony. The entire complex was surrounded by an immense stone wall, twelve feet thick at its base, and faced by a massive fortress-like entrance that fronted a two hundred-footlong admini tration building. The warden's apartment was located in the east end, an infirmary in the west, and a kitchen in the basement. The second level of the rotunda consisted of the gate keeper's quarters, a meeting room for the Pennsylvania Prison Inspectors, and quarters for female inmates.

According to an expert on the prison, sociologist Norman Johnston (whose *Eastern State Penitentiary: Crucible of Good Intentions*, with Kenneth Finkel and Jeffrey A Cohen, was published in 1994), Haviland originally planned for two hundred and fifty cells distributed among the seven cell blocks; when construction was completed in 1836 there were about four hundred and fifty, each approximately eight by twelve feet, with adjoining twelve-foot high, walled exercise pens where the cell occupant



Despite its shabbiness and general disrepair, Eastern State Penitentiary still exerts a powerful, intimidating presence, making it one of Philadelphia's most popular—if not unusual—attractions for visitors.

could get fresh air while still remaining completely secluded from fellow inmates. Walls between cells measured two feet thick so that no sound could be heard in the corridors. A skylight, called "the Eye of God," was set into the apex of a sloped, barrelvaulted ceiling, reminding the prisoner of the presence of the Almighty in his life.

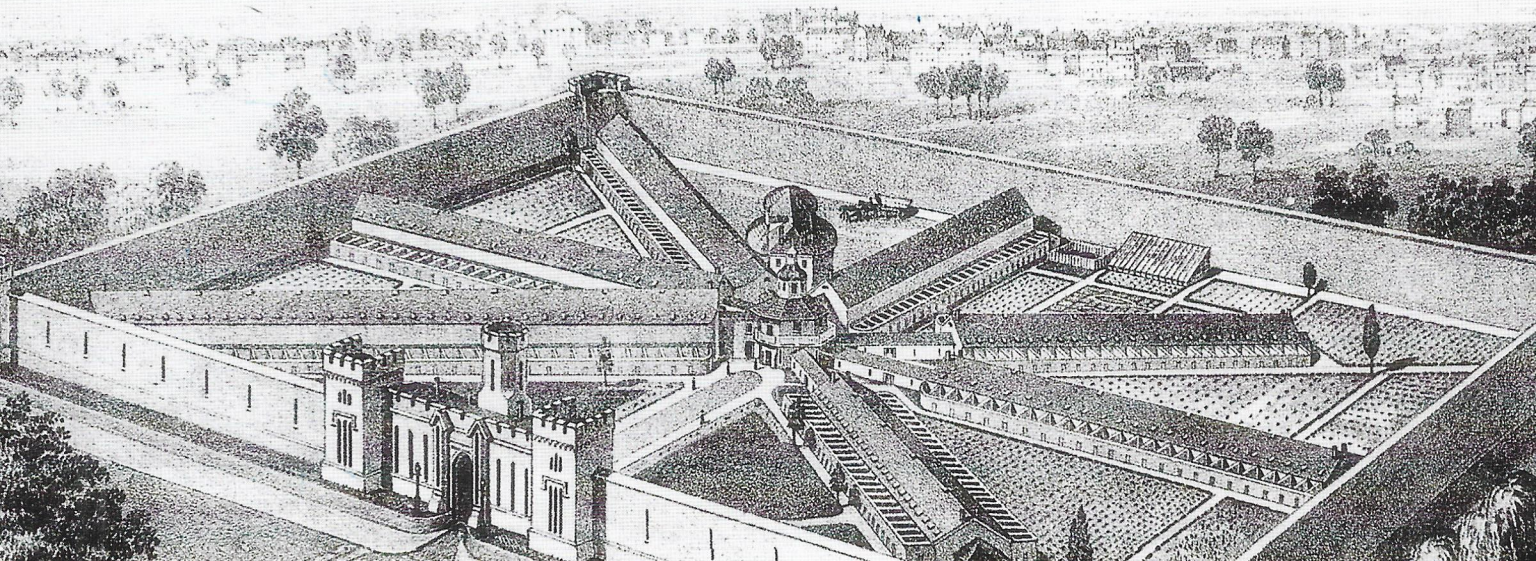
Although the dimensions of these cells were spacious by contemporary standards, they were designed to minimize communication with the outside world and maximize the opportunity for reflection and penitence, much like monasteries. Roberts Vaux, a Quaker philanthropist who long presided over the Pennsylvania Prison Society, underscored the connection between its mission and the design of the penitentiary. "Good design will produce, by means of sufferings of the mind and accompanied with moral and religious instruction, a disposition to virtuous conduct."

Haviland's architecture complimented the philosophy of solitary confinement so well that the Pennsylvania Prison Inspectors' report for 1831 noted that "no prisoner is seen by another after he enters the walls and can go forth into a new and industrious life of solitude." The basic goals of the Pennsylvania System were summarized as "punishment, penitence, and reform." Punishment was achieved through separation from any contact with the outside world. Upon admission to the penitentiary, a prisoner was stripped of all identity and placed in total isolation. Clothing and personal belongings were confiscated and replaced with a prison uniform: a close fitting jacket, shirt, two pairs of socks, a pair of leather shoes, and a pair of cotton or woolen trousers, depending upon the season. Each prisoner was then issued a number that corresponded to his place in the stream of admissions, beginning with the first inmate who had arrived on October 25, 1829. This number was fixed above his cell door and sewn on his uniform, and it was used in place of his name throughout his sentence. The convict was to remain in his cell for the length of his sentence, separated from fellow prisoners, and cut off from family and friends.

Advocates of the system contended that isolation would promote penitence by making the prisoner the "instrument of his own punishment." Removed from the "contaminations of a corrupt world" and confined to a solitary existence, the inmate's conscience would become the "avenger of society." It would "compel him to reflect on the error of his ways, to listen to the reproaches of conscience, and to the expostulations of religion." With little but a Bible and, by 1855, a small collection of religious, moral, and patriotic literature to read, the inmate was left to reflect on his offenses. His only authorized human contacts were with the guard who brought meals, the prison physician who appeared if he was sick, and a minister who preached on Sundays.

Advocates of the system contended tha isolation would *promote penitence* by making the prisoner the **"instrument of his own** punishment." Removed from the "contaminations c a corrupt world" and confined to a solitary existence, the inmate's conscience would become the **"avenger of society."**

Haviland's radial (or "hub-and spokes") design was thought to be cheaper to build and less expensive to supervise than Strickland's circular design. It proved to be neither.



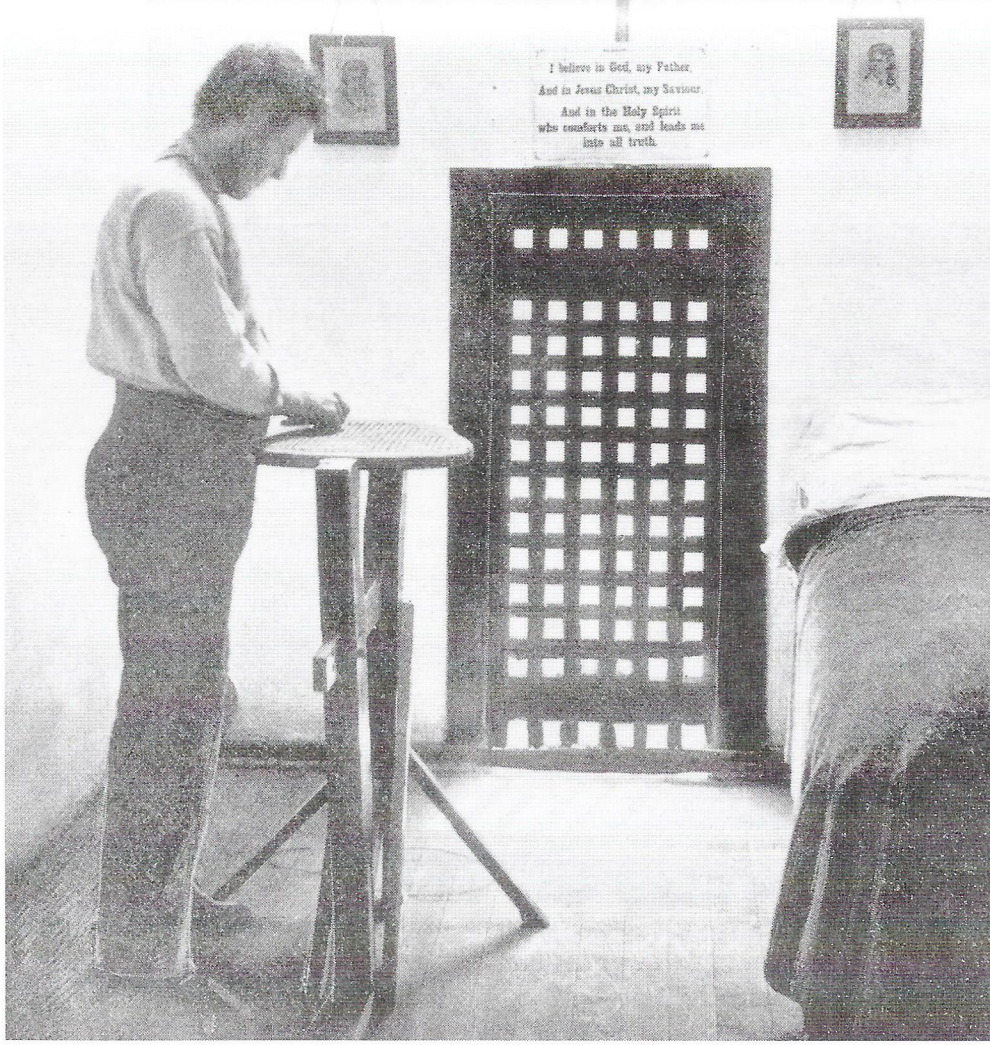
creating habits of order and regularity in the life of the inmate. This was done by providing the opportunity to labor as well as by the fixed regimen of daily life at Eastern. The day was organized around the meal schedule. Prisoners would rise at dawn and eat breakfast at seven o'clock. The fare was simple: corn meal or bread and a pint of coffee, cocoa, or green tea. If weather permitted, inmates were allowed one hour of exercise in their small individual yards. Alternate exercise periods were scheduled for adjacent cells to assure anonymity and isolation. Dinner, the primary meal, came at noon and consisted of a pound of beef or pork, a pint of soup, and unlimited servings of potatoes or boiled rice. Afterward, inmates engaged in some type of labor such as shoemaking, weaving, or carpentry. The work not only had a curative effect as penitence but also encouraged habits of discipline and industry. At six o'clock, a simple supper was served—often little more than Indian mush sweetened with molasses, sometimes sauerkraut, and tea. Lights went out at nine o'clock.

So impressed with the Pennsylvania System was French penal reformer Alexis de Tocqueville that he enthusiastically promoted its adoption in his own country. "Thrown into solitude, the prisoner reflects, learning to hate his crime," he reported after his 1831 visit to Eastern State. Other reformers were impressed by the system's apparent cost effectiveness. Guards had little contact with the inmates so few were needed. Solitary confinement eliminated marching prisoners to a dining hall or supervising them in a workshops or exercise yards.

But Eastern State Penitentiary also had harsh critics.

In addition to Dickens, the Marquis de Lafayette, Philadelphia newspaper editor Mathew Carey, and educator Francis Wayland, favored the Auburn congregate system. They cited the minimal exposure to other inmates made incarceration bearable and work rates more productive. Auburn advocates pointed to the increasing incidence of insanity at Eastern as evidence that uninterrupted solitary confinement was more detrimental to the inmate than corporal punishment. Throughout the 1840s and 1850s, other states constructed penitentiaries based on one or the other of these two models.

The Pennsylvania System did, indeed, have problems. Serious misconduct such as assaulting a guard, destroying prison property, or attempting escape had to be punished. In the early years, until 1835, punishment included the "shower bath" in which a prisoner was stripped to the waist, tied to the wall of his exercise pen in frigid weather, then doused with buckets of cold water until ice formed on his body; being bound tightly to a "tranquilizing chair" and sometimes whipped; and the "iron gag" in which leather was fixed to the prisoner's tongue and linked to his hands which were tied behind his back. Any motion resulted in pain and sometimes bleeding. These methods were abandoned after an 1834 investigation by prison inspectors. After that, misconduct was punished largely by withholding meals or other comforts.



Until overcrowding forced inmates to share cells, prisoners lived and worked in solitary confinement. Many prisoners caned chair seats in their cells.

Maintaining complete isolation proved to be difficult. From the very beginning, inmates communicated with each other through the walls and empty sewer pipes by using a "rapping alphabet," and by throwing notes weighted with pebbles over the walls of their exercise pens. Inmates were used for housekeeping chores and construction projects within the complex, bringing them into contact with others. By the late 1860s, overcrowding also worked against solitary confinement. Even though a second level was added to four of the original seven cell blocks, providing housing for an additional two hundred and ninety inmates, the prison population had ballooned to five hundred and sixty-nine. With only five hundred and forty cells, some prisoners were forced to cohabitate. By the close of the nineteenth century, Eastern State suffered severe overcrowding and restrictions on prison labor. Eleven hundred and seventy-five prisoners were sharing seven hundred and sixty cells. In 1923, the few female prisoners were reassigned to the State Industrial Home for Women at Muncy,

Lycoming County, but long before the Pennsylvania System had been redefined as "individual treatment," meaning there was only limited prisoner separation at certain times of the day.

The system further eroded in 1883 when organized labor, in an effort to halt competition from prison labor, succeeded in having legislation passed that required all products manufactured in state prisons labeled "convict made," to discourage consumers from purchasing products made by social deviants. Fourteen years later, the state legislature passed the Muehlbronner Act, stipulating that no more than ten percent of a prison's inmates could produce goods for public consumption. Together, these two statutes led to widespread idleness and discontent. From 1900 to 1925, prison labor was used to renovate the penitentiary. A new boiler and engine house were constructed, in 1901, to provide heat and electricity for the entire complex, and major improvements were made to the water and drainage systems. The penitentiary's gymnasium, built in 1887, was updated and, in 1908, an emergency hospital was built. The following year, a new block with one hundred and twenty cells was added.

Eastern State's architectural details—from fan-shaped windows (above) to the guard tower (below)—impart an undeniable permanence, even though years of neglect have taken their toll on the facility.

In 1925, when the Commonwealth overturned the Muehlbronner Act, nearly eleven hundred of the penitentiary's fourteen hundred and eighty-seven inmates found employment in some kind of trade, including shoemaking, weaving, and carpentry. That year the legislature approved the Eastern State Trustees' request to relocate prisoners to the country where they could be employed in farming and reforestation projects. A site was purchased at Graterford, Montgomery County, to which eight hundred inmates from Eastern were transferred in 1930. Within a decade, Graterford would be designated a medium security prison for nearly two thousand inmates. Eastern, on the other hand, became a maximum security prison for chronic recidivists, the toughest criminals who apparently could not be rehabilitated.

escapes became more frequent—and creative. Escapees mounted ingenious attempts using an ash truck, a collapsible ladder, a rope made of shoelaces, and several elaborately excavated tunnels. Other escapes were far less arduous. In 1877, for example, an inmate hid inside an empty molasses barrel which was carted away with the rest of the trash. Another, who had been working as a stonecutter, simply donned civilian workman's clothes and meandered out the front gate with the free hired workers at the end of the day. Perhaps the most famous escape, however, occurred on April 3, 1945, when, after a full year of digging a tunnel under the cell floors and the perimeter wall, Willie Sutton, the so called "Gentleman Bandit" who was serving a life sentence, and eleven others made their way to freedom, only to be caught several blocks away. In virtually every case, the escaped prisoners were returned to the penitentiary.

Ironically, gangster Al Capone actually sought refuge inside the penitentiary. Shortly after the 1929 St. Valentine's Day Massacre in Chicago, Capone summoned mob leaders to Atlantic City to arrange a truce. Fearing retribution if he returned to Chicago, Capone arranged his own arrest in Philadelphia on a charge of carrying a concealed weapon. He quickly made himself at home in the prison. His cell contained a cabinet radio, several tasteful paintings, a beautiful carpet, a polished desk, and a comfortable bed. He served a one-year sentence, the first in his criminal career, and was treated as a famous—and infamous—celebrity. He dined with the warden and was accorded privileges not given to other inmates.

In 1944, criminologists Harry E. Barnes, Negley K. Teeters, and Albert G. Fraser conducted an extensive investigation of the penitentiary, concluding that it was "hopelessly antiquated" and "one of the worst run prisons in any civilized state." To invest money in Eastern State Penitentiary "to renovate or extend it," they added, "would be a quasicriminal folly." Governor Edward Martin agreed, refusing to authorize funding to improve the facility. Despite the fact that Eastern was recognized as a historic landmark by city, state and, federal authorities, Governor Martin's successors followed suit so that by the late 1960s the penitentiary had fallen into disrepair. Having no further use for the dilapidated facility, the Commonwealth sold it in 1970 to the City of Philadelphia, which officially

Today, long-term solitary confinement is only used in special treatment units of high security prisons for convicts whose pasts suggest they are extremely dangerous, although varying degrees of isolation are imposed as punishment elsewhere. The subject continues—much as it did in the nineteenth century—to provoke controversy. There is no agreement whether solitary confinement can by itself produce insanity. Norman Johnston explains that while the new "super maximum security" facilities vaguely resemble the Pennsylvania System in the practice of single cell occupancy, solitary exercise yards, and restrictions on contact with the outside world, they were not brought about by the idealism and benevolence responsible for the experiment at Eastern State Penitentiary. Instead, these new prisons are designed to punish rather than reform the most violent of offenders. Since Eastern State Penitentiary was basically a penological failure, its lasting legacy is as a model of prison architecture.

Built on the idea that a prison should do more than punish criminals, Eastern State's radial design was meant to help bring about the Quaker mission to reform, educate, and enlighten those who deviated from civil laws and return them to society as productive citizens. Radial design became so popular among nineteenth-century reformers that it set a precedent for prison architecture, influencing the construction of about three hundred correctional facilities throughout the world, including Pentonville in London (built between 1840 and 1842); Mazas in Paris (1843-1850); Louvain in Belgium (1856-1860); San Vittore in Milan (18671879); Moabit in Berlin (1869-1879); Kresty in St. Petersburg (1884-1890); First Prison in Beijing (1909-1912) ; and Hakodate in Japan (1931).

Since 1988 the Eastern State Penitentiary Task Force, an organization of architects, museum curators, historians, academics, preservationists, civic planners, and members of the Pennsylvania Prison Society, has been working with the City of Philadelphia to secure funding to preserve this historic site as well as to find a productive use for it. Currently it is being interpreted as a historic attraction, called by the *Philadelphia Weekly* "the most chic tourist spot in Philadelphia." In view of contemporary society's renewed commitment to "punishment, penitence, and prison reform," Eastern State Penitentiary offers a history lesson on how earlier generations of reformers dealt with the persistent problems of overcrowding, fiscal inefficiency, and rehabilitation still being encountered by corrections officials to this day. Ultimately, its import is traced to its status as an artifact—colossal though it may be—of attempted prison reform and a model of prison architecture for the world. As visitors today file deep behind the massive stone walls of the cavernous Eastern State Penitentiary, they are entering a world which for a century and a half would have been the very last place on earth they would want to find themselves. ✣

Eastern State Penitentiary is literally a sight (and site!) to behold. It covers ten acres in a gentrified neighborhood just five blocks from the Philadelphia Art Museum; originally cost nearly eight hundred thousand dollars to erect, making it the most expensive building in America at the time; and contains fifteen cell blocks behind thick stone walls that rise thirty feet. Opened in 1994 as a penology museum, Eastern State Penitentiary, located at Twenty-Second Street and Fairmount Avenue, takes visitors on a tour through several cell blocks, the central rotunda, death row, and an early exercise yard. The facility is open from early May to early November. Admission is charged. For additional details, write: Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site, 2000 Spring Garden Street, Philadelphia, PA 19130-3805; or telephone (215) 564-6005 or 236-7236.

William C. Kashatus of Paoli is a regular contributor to ***Pennsylvania Heritage.*** *He is director of educational programs for the Chester County Historical Society in West Chester.*

The author wishes to thank Sean M. Kelley, program director of the Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site, for his assistance.

FOR FURTHER READING

Bacon, Margaret H. ***The Quiet Rebels: The Story of the Quakers in America.*** *Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1985.*

Barnes, Harry Elmer. ***The Evolution of Penology in Pennsylvania.*** *Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1927.*

Dickens, Charles. ***American Notes for General Circulation.*** *New York: Viking Penguin 1986.*

Johnston, Norman. ***Eastern State Penitentiary: Crucible of Good Intentions.*** *Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1994.*

_____ . ***The Human Cage: A Brief History of Prison Architecture.*** *New York: Walker, for the American Foundation, Institute of Corrections, 1973.*

Johnston, Norman, ed. ***The Sociology of Punishment and Correction.*** *New York: Wiley, 1970.*

Johnston, Norman B., and Leonard D. Savitz, eds. ***Crime in Society.*** *New York: Wiley, 1978.*

Meranze, Michael. ***Laboratories of Virtue: Punishment, Revolution, and Authority in Philadelphia, 1760-1835.*** *Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990.*

Rothman, David J. ***The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic.*** *Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1971.*

Teeters, Negley K. ***They Were in Prison: A History of the Pennsylvania Prison Society, 1787-1937.*** *Philadelphia: John C. Winston Co., 1937.*

Wolfgang, Marvin E. ***The Sociology of Crime and Delinquency.*** *New York: Wiley, 1970.*

A vintage photograph showing the prison's original gate through which convicts passed.