

Eastern State lingers on death row; funding offers a stay of execution

By William C. Kashatus

With all the recent talk of historic preservation focusing on Independence Mall, efforts to restore Eastern State Penitentiary to its 19th-century splendor seem to have become lost.

While the Pew Charitable Trusts and the William Penn Foundation have generously supported preservation efforts in the past and the City of Philadelphia recently awarded the site a 10-year license to administer historic tours, the castle-like structure on Fairmount Avenue has deteriorated so severely that it will have to close its doors to the public unless the funding can be raised to restore its crumbling walls, rusting cell doors, and deteriorating, arched hallways.

Aside from Independence Hall, Eastern State is Philadelphia's most significant historical treasure. It once served as a model of idealism in penal reform and a model of prison architecture for the world.

Opened in 1829, the penitentiary was the creation of the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons, a group of free thinkers and Quaker reformers who understood that their "responsibilities to mankind were not canceled by the follies or crimes of our fellow creatures."

Instead of the traditional methods of punishment, such as torture, dismemberment and death, they advocated the idea of solitary confinement where prisoners were given the opportunity to meditate about their past sins and resolve to live a better life.

This revolutionary concept of "penitence" — better known as the "Pennsylvania System" — embraced the twin notions of punishment and reform.

In place of physical pain, the inmate would be punished by the loss of his freedom.

Prisoners were hooded upon their entry and every effort was made to isolate them from human contact with the outside world during their stay. All of the original cellblocks radiated from a central rotunda, allowing for maximum efficiency of security, movement and surveillance. Individual cells, each with a small exercise yard, were furnished with a bed, toilet, work table, skylight and Bible, reminding the prisoner that penitence would be

achieved through the light from heaven, the word of God and honest work.

The penitentiary's radial design had inspired the construction of 300 similar prisons in Europe, Asia and South America.

But prison reformers gave Eastern State mixed reviews.

Alexis de Tocqueville, who visited in 1831, became infatuated with the Pennsylvania System, believing that it "leads the prisoner through reflection to remorse, through reli-



quested \$2.3 million for the City Planning Commission to stop the dangerous deterioration.

That funding was to provide roofing for the seven original cell blocks, masonry repairs to keep other structures standing, and permanent restrooms for visitors. Hopefully, the request will be granted not only on principle, but for practical reasons.

At a time when the state is struggling to find ways to contain prison costs and overcrowding while also providing for the effective reform of inmates, Eastern State offers a valuable history lesson on how an earlier generation of prison reformers dealt with those same issues.

According to Sean Kelley, program director of the site, "Eastern State was constructed on the Quaker belief that people are innately good and that even those who break the law are still human and should be respected as such."

"If we ignore that belief as well as the historical developments of penal reform, our society will never be able to improve the conditions that plague our prisons today."

Kelley also points out that over the last three years when the site was open to the public on a limited, six-month basis, visitation increased by more than 80 percent. In the last year alone, 20,000 visitors toured the prison. And roughly two-thirds of them came from outside the Philadelphia region.

Those numbers are encouraging. They show it is possible to attract out-of-town visitors to the west end of the city where they could spend a few more days — and dollars — at places like the Franklin Institute, the Art Museum and Fairmount Park.

They also raise the hope that the penitentiary could be restored to its earlier status as the nation's premier location to discuss prison reform.

In turn, the national exposure and monies generated by the site could contribute significantly to urban renewal in Fairmount.

This year will be crucial for Eastern State. Either the city, state or federal funding needed to restore and preserve the structure will be secured or the old prison will fall into complete disrepair.

gion to hope, and makes him industrious by the burden of idleness."

British novelist Charles Dickens, on the other hand, became the penitentiary's most famous detractor, insisting that "this slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain is immeasurably worse than any torture of the body."

The controversy continued for years, eventually resulting in the abandonment of solitary confinement in the early 20th century. By the time the prison closed in 1971, inmates worked, ate and exercised in common areas.

Today, Eastern State is struggling for survival. The Department of Public Property, which together with the Pennsylvania Prison Society oversees the site, recently re-

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