

Industry, Innovation, & Incarceration

December 23, 2023 – January 3, 2024

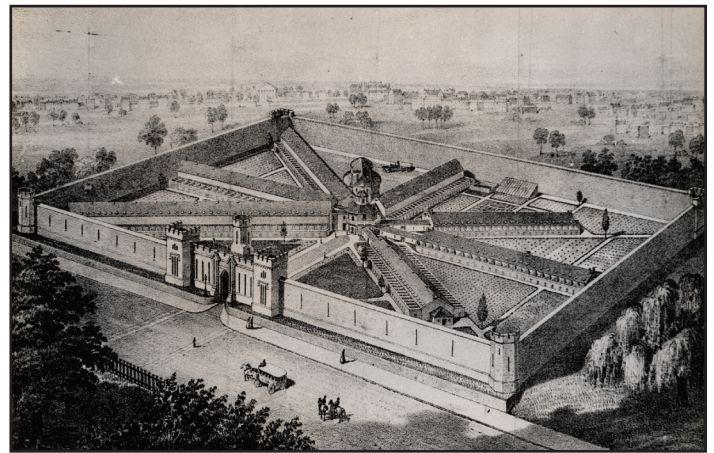
When Eastern State Penitentiary opened in 1829, its innovative design and ambitions for prison reform were internationally renowned. One of the founders' primary goals was to give incarcerated people the skills necessary to live industrious lives after their reentry into society.

While the founders did not stress inventiveness or creativity in early work programs, prisoners consistently innovated and found creative ways to express themselves. One of the first examples of this is Charles Souder (No. 107) who crafted a toy ship in his leisure time while imprisoned in the early 1830s.

The following decades are filled with similar instances of incarcerated people inventively using limited resources to generate spectacular literature, art, and ideas.

People who worked or were incarcerated at Eastern State saved most of these rare artifacts of industry and innovation. Many of them took keepsakes when the building closed in 1971. We thank these individuals for returning these fascinating objects to the historic site. Other items were discovered here, abandoned with the penitentiary itself.

All of the artifacts in this exhibit are from the collection of Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site unless otherwise noted.



While incarcerated in the 1850s, Samuel Cowperthwaite (No. 2954) created this drawing of the penitentiary. It is unknown how Cowperthwaite obtained such detailed information about the prison's layout.

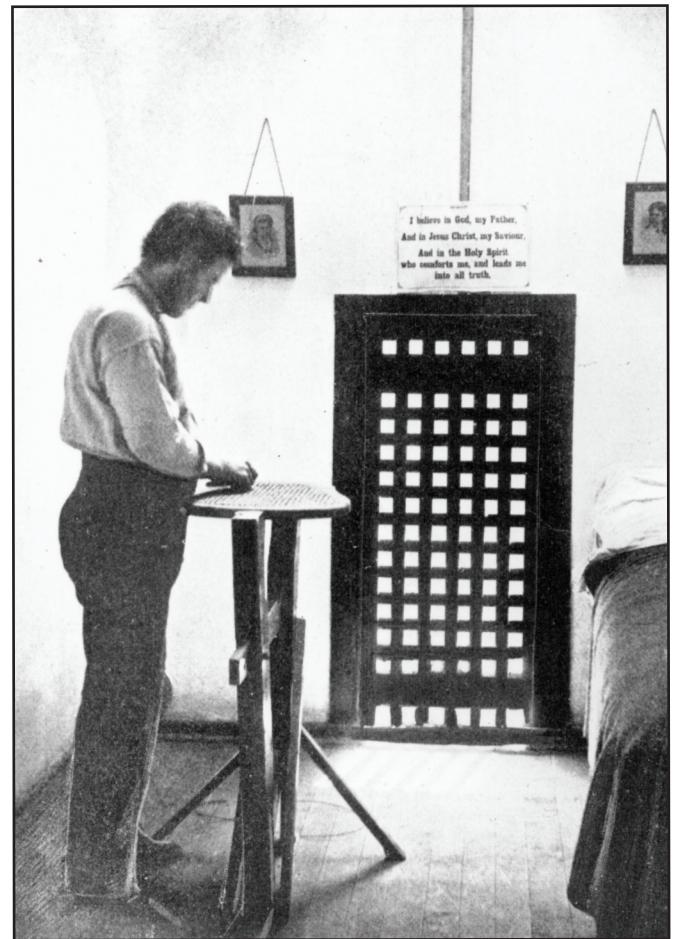
Case 1:

Individual Industries

In Eastern State's early years, weaving and shoemaking employed most prisoners. Other industries included chair caning, cigar making, rag making, tailoring, and woodworking.

Incarcerated people were pressured to be as industrious as possible, partially because their labor was expected to help pay for prison expenses; however, prisoners could also keep some earnings over their quotas. "Overwork" allowed motivated prisoners to leave the penitentiary with a financial cushion or send money home to their families.

Because prisoners were supposed to be kept separate from one another at all times, industrial activities took place in cells, allowing incarcerated people access to tools around the clock. In addition to earning money through overwork, some prisoners created items to sell outside the prison's walls. Many items were also given as gifts to visitors and social workers.



Prisoner caning a chair from "Brief Sketch," 1872.

Please ask any staff member for directions or more information about the artifacts.

In Case 1:

Folding lap desk made by William Carson (A-1723) in 1884. Gift of the Liberkowski Family: Hilary, Jeannie and Joe.

Brief Sketch of the Origin and History of the State Penitentiary for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania at Philadelphia, by Richard Vaux, 1872 shows an interior view of the cell with a prisoner caning a chair. On the opposite side, rules for the prisoner state, “apply yourself industriously, at whatever employment is assigned you; and when your task is finished, it is recommended that your time be devoted to the proper improvement of your mind.”

Warden Cassidy on Prisons and Convicts, 1897. Although each prisoner was supposed to have their own cell in this time period, overcrowding often made sharing cells necessary. Sometimes one incarcerated person would be asked to train another in a trade. In this photograph, two prisoners make shoes.

Prisoner Work Record Ledger 1878-1882 shows work completed by various prisoners in Cellblock 6. Most of the tasks involve making shoes, but other jobs such as washing, baking, and cooking are written in. The column marked O.W. shows how much overwork some prisoners earned. Prisoner 9641 earned \$5.41 in the month of October 1880: today that would be roughly \$160. In 2023, it would take a person incarcerated in Pennsylvania 44 days at the highest earning wage (61 cents an hour) to earn as much.

Baby doll with knitted clothing.

Gift of the Baginsky Family in memory of Albert and Mary Jane Fry. The clothes were made by a woman incarcerated at Eastern State and given as a gift to Mary Jane Fry, a social worker who visited the female prisoners while her husband visited the male prisoners. It is unlikely the doll itself originated at Eastern State.



Miniature bone cutlery set. The note accompanying this set states that it was made by a prisoner in 1856 by using the blade of his jack knife to carve his soup bones. It was gifted to Mary Anna Kaighn, a child at the time. She visited the prison with her father, a member of the Board of Visitors.

Shiv (shank) made from bone, c. 1950. Gift of the Scheerer Family.

Prisoner-made bookend shaped like the prison’s original front door, featuring a heavy bolt from that door, c. 1938. Gift of Katharine W. Sharp.

Should Prisoners Work? by Louis N. Robinson, 1931. Gift of Christine Erb.

9th Annual Report of the Board of Commissioners of Public Charities, 1879. The printed chart below is from this book. It shows that the most common occupation for white and Black prisoners at Eastern State was shoemaking.

Miniature leather cowboy boots

with a note that reads, “These boots were made by hand by the prisoners at the Eastern Penitentiary and given to my father, as a gift, from one of the prisoners sometime before 1910. My father and also some other men visited the prisoners every Sunday afternoon and had prayer with them. Laura H. Shupert.”



Inlaid wooden box. The bottom of this box’s drawer reads: “Feb. 27, 1908. Made by one of the convicts in the Eastern Penitentiary.”

Case 2:

Supporting the System

Prisoner labor benefitted the state by providing maintenance and goods needed at the penitentiary.

Prisoners worked in the kitchens, print shop, laundry, gardens, and grounds of Eastern State. Prison labor built Cellblocks 10, 11, 12, 14, and 15. Today, many incarcerated people work to create goods used at other prisons across the state. For example, people incarcerated at the State Correctional Institution (SCI) at Phoenix produce the shoes and boots worn by prisoners in all 23 Pennsylvania state prisons.



A prisoner assisting with an x-ray.

At Eastern State, some prisoners provided extraordinary services for the institution by working in skilled positions. We know that incarcerated people occasionally filled in for doctors, pharmacists, architects, and accountants. Such occurrences are largely unheard of today.

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In Case 2:

Dental tools.

Guard instructing a prisoner in the dental shop, where dentures were made for incarcerated people, c. 1950. Gift of the Scheerer Family.

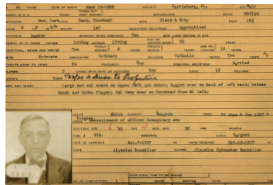
Medicine bottles found on the grounds of the penitentiary.

Norman Maisenhelder (E-4352) in the Hospital Block's Diet Kitchen, c. 1958. Courtesy of Norman Maisenhelder's daughter.



An unidentified prisoner (on left) assists with an x-ray procedure, c. 1958. Courtesy of Norman Maisenhelder's daughter.

Bertillon (Intake) Card for Aloysius Banmiller (C-4165). Formerly a bank treasurer, Banmiller developed an accounting system during his incarceration that was adopted by the prison. He was employed at Eastern State's farm branch, Graterford, after his release. His son, William Banmiller, later became the Superintendent at Eastern State.



Photograph showing two Black prisoners in cook uniforms, c. 1940. Gift of the family of Robert A. Cramer. Warden Brierley noted in an interview that the Eastern State kitchens were a predominantly Black workspace until integration of work assignments began.

Vegetable peeler, rolling pin, and salt shaker found on the grounds of the penitentiary.



Guard Bernard Kowalkowski receiving a shave and haircut in the Cellblock 8 Barbershop, 1956. Gift of the Kowalkowski Family. Prisoners, staff, and even the children of staff could pay a small fee for a haircut at the penitentiary.

Prisoner and a guard working on a car outside the garage, c. 1960. Gift of Alan J. LeFebvre.



Warden Cassidy on Prisons and Convicts, 1897. The model appearing in the book was created by Cuban-born Stephen De Ayala (A-6200), who was also the architect of Cellblock 11.

Prisoners posing in front of a wheelbarrow, date unknown.

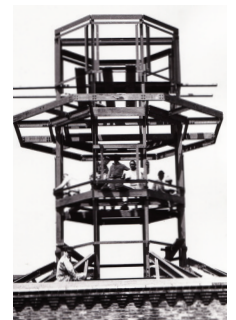


Prisoners install a dehumidifier, March 1963. Gift given in honor of Howard H. Haines, Captain of the Guards.

Incarcerated people using laundry pressing machines while guard supervises, June 1954. Gift of the Scheerer Family.

Wrench found on the grounds of the penitentiary.

Structural steel erection of Center Tower, c. 1951. Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Fulmer.



Case 3:

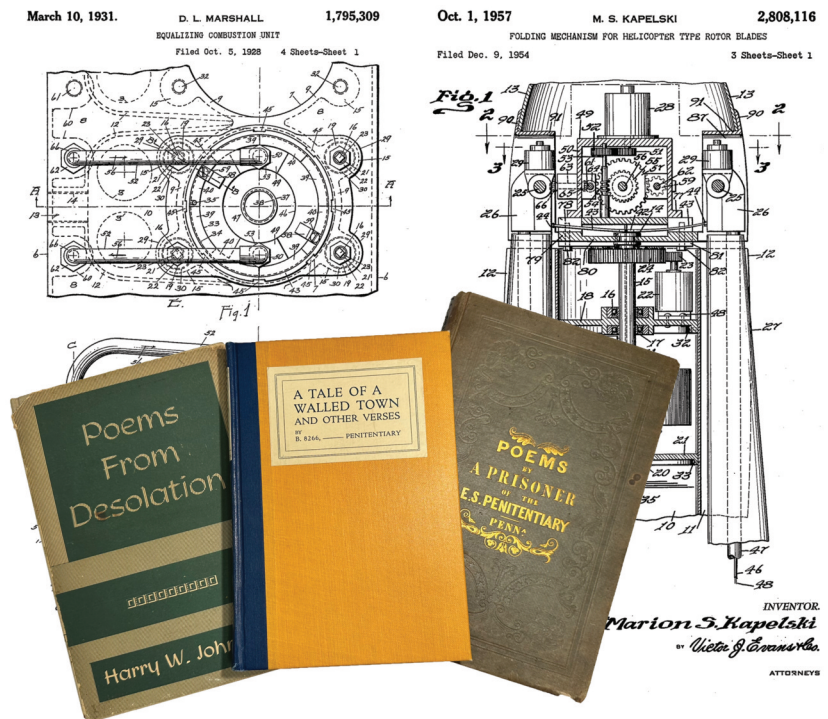
Patents and Poetry

Countless Eastern State prisoners relied on their talent, creativity, and ingenuity to adapt and survive inside the penitentiary. Some of their inventions stand out as reminders of the enormous potential locked behind prison walls, then and now.

Literary endeavors likewise hold a transformative power for incarcerated individuals, offering a gateway to imagination and empathy beyond prison walls. Through literature and the arts, incarcerated people can cultivate a sense of connection to the world outside and encourage personal growth.

Today, incarcerated people host and produce podcasts like *Ear Hustle* and radio stations like *Inside Wire*. Record labels such as Die Jim Crow Records give talented incarcerated people opportunities to write, record, and release music. Some prison programs teach coding and web development.

Unfortunately, these innovative opportunities are limited and inaccessible to most of America's nearly two million prisoners.



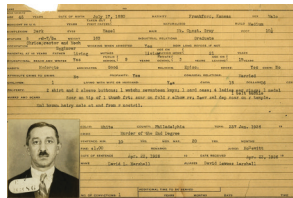
Examples of patents and poetry by Eastern State prisoners.

Please ask any staff member for directions or more information about the artifacts.

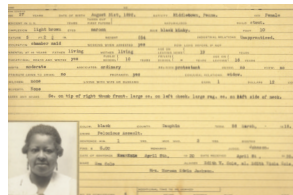
In Case 3:

U.S. Patent 1,795,309, Equalizing combustion unit, designed by David L. Marshall (C-3386), filed in 1928 and approved in 1931. The patent is witnessed by Eastern State's Chief Electrician H. Edgar Light, Jr. and Parole Officer Courtland Butler.

Bertillon (Intake) card for David Marshall (C-3386), 1926. Marshall invented and patented the above equalizing combustion unit, an adaptable addition to a combustion engine.



Bertillon (Intake) card for Eva Cole (C-250 formerly B-8312). Gift of the Scheerer Family.



"Ode to Mr. Mouse," from *The Umpire*, 1917.

Eva Cole was serving two to three years when she wrote the poem "Ode to Mr. Mouse" for the prisoner newsletter *The Umpire* in 1917. She is one of two women known to have been published in *The Umpire*, making her inclusion as a Black woman even more noteworthy.

Fred Winnai's car, built by prisoners, in the Indianapolis 500, 1932. Courtesy of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. The *Harrisburg Telegraph* reported that after destroying a previous car in an accident, six Eastern State lifers "completely rebuilt [Winnai's car], made many improvements and completed it with a first class paint job. One of the lifers, an expert engineer, redesigned and streamlined the body."

***Poems by a Prisoner of the E.S. Penitentiary Penna.: Buds and Flowers, of Leisure Hours,* by Harry Hawser (No. 1292), 1844.**

***A Tale of a Walled Town and Other Verses*, by Clarence A. Rae (B-8266), 1921.** In the forward, African American writer, poet, and literary critic William Stanley Braithwaite states, "I can say with the heartiest conviction that this poem of and from a 'walled town' deserves to be famous."

***Poems from Desolation*, by Harry W. Johnson (D-6881), 1953.** Johnson was serving a life sentence for murder when the book was published. He sent a copy to the members of the Board of Pardons as proof of his rehabilitation in 1954. He was paroled three years later.

U.S. Patent 2,808,116, Folding mechanism for helicopter type rotor blades, designed by Marion Kapelski (D-4811), filed in 1954 and approved in 1957.

Marion Kapelski (D-4811), September 1955. United Press (Getty Images). Kapelski was 18 when he was sentenced to life in prison for his part in a murder that occurred during a holdup. Despite having only a 9th grade education, he became a rocket scientist and inventor while incarcerated. After the judge who sentenced him pleaded on his behalf, he was released in December 1955.

Photograph of a model of Kapelski's invention, 1954.



Case 4:

Industry Opposition

From the late 1800s through the early 1900s, Pennsylvania enacted laws restricting how much and what kinds of work incarcerated people were permitted to do. Mass-produced prison-made items had to receive a stamp with the words "convict made" and the name of the institution. Items made at scale in prisons could *only* be sold to other state institutions; they could not be sold to the public. Prisoners could not utilize high-power machinery to make their goods.



Ornaments crafted at SCI Phoenix.

These policies prevented very inexpensive prison labor from replacing unionizing laborers outside the walls, but prison officials argued that the laws prevented incarcerated people from learning modern, useful skills. Additionally, large numbers of prisoners were kept idle, unable to earn wages for themselves or their families. Boredom caused mental difficulties and social disorder within institutions.

By the 1920s, reformers' concerns about the lack of occupation for incarcerated people led to the reversal of many prison labor restrictions. Today, millions of incarcerated people perform all types of work ranging from facility maintenance and agricultural work to producing goods for corporations and the state, such as school furniture and military equipment.

However, prison labor remains controversial. Wages for incarcerated workers are low and some states do not pay prisoners at all for their work: paying prisoners is not mandatory according to the 13th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

Please ask any staff member for directions or more information about the artifacts.

In Case 4:

Bowl stamped “Handcrafted at the Maine State Prison,” c. 2015.

On loan from an Eastern State staff member. The Maine State Prison has a publicly accessible showroom, open seven days a week.



Cigar box. The bottom is stamped, “Prison made E.S.P. 1934.”

Cigar shop, c. 1945. Gift of the Scheerer Family.



Creamed corn can. Gift of Retiree Bernard M. Sekula, Correction Officer I. Presumably, the corn was shipped to other institutions across the state.

Denim jacket (approximately \$60.00) and high-top work boots (approximately \$46.00), 2023, made by incarcerated workers in Pennsylvania who are paid between 23 and 61 cents per hour. The Pennsylvania Correctional Industries (PCI) online catalog is available to the general public.

Pennsylvania license plate made by incarcerated workers at SCI Fayette, c. 2023. On loan from Malik. The Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) is one of several state agencies that use incarcerated labor to produce products.

Eastern Echo, Summer 1959, “A stroll through the alley.” Gift in memory of Retiree Bernard M. Sekula, Correction Officer I. The article describes the shops along Cellblock 7 where model ships were created and other items were carved and painted. The article notes that prisoners estimated earning 7 or 8 cents an hour: “It is interesting to note that although most of the machinery utilized in the shops was purchased from the Inmates Welfare Fund, the men who operate their shops do so independently and consequently spend much of their money in the purchase of additional equipment and accessories. Of course, they pay for all of their own materials and supplies. They also contribute 10% of their gross earnings to the Prisoners Welfare Fund. This is a fee charged to the shop operators for the use of machinery and as a rental and utility fee. Thereby, each man has a financial stake in his productivity.”

Model ships and other crafts on display in Center, c. 1950s. Gift of the Scheerer Family.



Round jewelry box with clear lid and carved dog on top, c. 1955. Gift in remembrance of E. Parke Brown, Jr., Band Director, by the Brown Family.

Interior of gatehouse with cabinet where prisoner-made crafts for sale were displayed, c. 1960. Gift of the family of Howard H. Haines, Captain of the Guards.

Three ornaments crafted from apple cores by an incarcerated artist at SCI Phoenix, c. 2020, gifted from the artist to the lender, Damon McCool. Packaged and mailed in an inverted snack box from the prison commissary. Prisoners in PA are not currently permitted to directly sell their artwork.

Cases 5 and 6:

Crafting in Confinement

Generations of people incarcerated at Eastern State Penitentiary filled their hours with the careful, time-consuming work of making handicrafts.

It is likely many prisoners engaged in the work for the same reasons anyone might take up a hobby: for relaxation, stress relief, and as a means of personal fulfillment. Some incarcerated people may have seen creating gifts as a way to express gratitude or love.

While most crafters at Eastern State probably didn't see much financial reward for their unique and often intricate creations, some shop operators were successful enough to employ their fellow prisoners.

In 1929, *The York Dispatch* reported Louis Edwards' (C-1699) model ship making business in the penitentiary, "attracted such wide attention and their sales were so large that they were forced to move the little manufacturing shop out of the prison." Other articles estimate that family members employing formerly incarcerated people were able to run the business and accumulate \$50,000 on Edwards' behalf by the close of the decade.



Examples of common wood carvings at Eastern State, c. 1950s.

Please ask any staff member for directions or more information about the artifacts.

In Case 5:

Inlaid jewelry box. Gift of Barbara E. Smith. The box was gifted to the daughter of a guard.



Ceramic holly leaf candy dish. Gift given in honor of Howard H. Haines, Captain of the Guards.

Beaded "Peggy" bracelet, c. 1947. Gift of Margaret Moore Walker. The donor's mother ordered it at the penitentiary to give to her as a gift.

Soap carving of a small dog.

Shoe-shaped pincushion, c. 1925-1950.

Beaded necklace with matching clip-on earrings. Gift in memory of Retiree Bernard M. Sekula, Correction Officer I. Officer Sekula was a guard from 1949 to Eastern State's closing in 1970. He collected almost every issue of the prisoner-published magazine, the *Eastern Echo*, and his family has contributed many custom, prison-made items to the historic site's collection.



Inlaid wood bowl, c. 1960. Gift in memory of Retiree Bernard M. Sekula, Correction Officer I.

Wood carving of a fish.

Photograph of Jacob Pensendorfer (B-1381) with wooden handcrafts.

Acme Newspictures (Getty Images). Pensendorfer, nicknamed "Lifetime Jake," served 25 years of a life sentence at Eastern State for murder before being pardoned in 1926. Pensendorfer, a skilled craftsman and mechanic who created a clock for the penitentiary's tower (now replaced), built up a woodworking business while imprisoned. He sold it for \$6,000 upon his release.



Photograph of Jacob Pensendorfer's "Haven for ex-convicts," 1928. Acme Newspictures (Getty Images). After receiving his pardon, Pensendorfer established a woodworking factory where formerly incarcerated men received employment and a "chance to begin life anew." Today, hundreds of formerly incarcerated entrepreneurs own their own business. From restaurants and gyms to media companies, these business owners seek out and hire other formerly incarcerated people to provide a living wage and curb the cycle of recidivism.

Wishing well night light.

Wood carving of a horse.

Wood carving of a cowboy. Gift of John A. Eastman and Pamela Pertgen.



Wood carving of a Dachshund dog, c. 1950. Given to a Salvation Army Correctional Services Program worker by a prisoner.

Oil painting of *The Country Church*, by Jos. Davis (most likely B-6329), 1916. The frame, made of oak, was added later.



Renato Meyer (B-9560)

paints oil portrait of Governor Gifford Pinchot, 1924. Eastern State employees could commission portraits of their loved ones; the historic site has two such portraits in its collection.

In Case 6:

Upholstered miniature chair and sofa, April 1920. These pieces are among the few that are marked as having been made at the penitentiary.

Wood carvings of various dogs.

Gifts of Joseph D. Petrone, Sr.; Rev. and Mrs. Anthony DiBenedetto, Jr.; the McGraw Family; and the Goldis and Andreoli Families. The historic site has more than 60 examples of such carvings in its collection.



Tinsel (foil) art piggy bank in the shape of a television, c. 1960, created by painting the glass and applying a foil backing. Gift of Retiree Bernard M. Sekula, Correction Officer I.

Piggy bank in shape of radio. Gift of the Zelenski Family.

Wood carvings of boxing boxer dogs. Gift of the McGraw Family.

Soap carving of Santa Claus with gift sack. Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Fulmer.



Clipping from *House Beautiful*, November 1927. The article describes wrought-iron candlesticks made at Eastern State and directs readers to shop at the Prison Handicraft Shop in Philadelphia. Unlike the Maine State Prison Showroom, the Philadelphia shop no longer exists.

Wood carving of three men. Gift of the McGraw Family.

Wood carving of a ship captain. Gift of the Hassett and McNamee Family.

Wood carving of a swordfish.



Wallet made from Kool and Pall Mall cigarette packs. Gift of Richard Griffin. This wallet was said to be created by David Aiken, one of the 1945 tunnel escapees.

"Bossing a Hundred Workmen from a Cell," from *Everybody's Magazine*, June 1926. After four months at large following a daring escape from Eastern State in 1923, Louis Edwards (C-1699) was recaptured in Hawaii. This article tells how Edwards, while being transported back to the penitentiary, saw a picture of a ship and became inspired to build them for profit. He employed other prisoners in his work.



Model ship, c. 1932. Gift of Dr. Samuel Leopold and his family. Like the carved dogs, the ships were very popular items that could be purchased at the penitentiary itself or through local retailers at inexpensive prices.



Wood carvings of geese. Gift of the McIntyre Family.

Matchstick box, 1922. Gift of Historical Society of the Phoenixville Area.

Hand-tooled leather purse, c. 1948. Gift of Suzanne Campbell. Made as a gift for Margaret Martin Atkinson, whose father became warden a few years later.

Ceramic cat, c. 1960. Gift of Mary, daughter of William F. Derau, a former guard at Eastern State

Tinsel (foil) art rendering Jesus. Gift of Joseph J. Mucerino.

