



In the years following the American Revolution, the newly formed United States aspired to change its public institutions and set an example for the world. Every type of institution that we are familiar with today – educational, medical, and political – underwent its own revolution in the late 1700s. These changes were largely shaped by the rational and humanistic principles of the Enlightenment. American democracy was one of the most influential and radical innovations born in this era. Another was prison design and reform.

In the 1700s, most prisons were simply large holding pens where people waited to be sentenced. Groups of adults and children, accused of everything from petty theft to murder, sorted out their own affairs behind locked doors. Guards and overseers were known to abuse prisoners. Flogging, whipping, heavy fines, and execution were some typical punishments of this era.

This was a cause for concern among many of America's new leaders. In 1787, a group of well-known and powerful Philadelphians met in the home of Benjamin Franklin to discuss the current state of criminal justice. These people, members of the newly-formed Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons, expressed growing concern about the conditions in American and European prisons.

Dr. Benjamin Rush and others in the Society hoped to outlaw public punishments and replace the current overcrowded and corrupt prison system with a system of private, solitary confinement. Rush proposed a radical idea: to build a true penitentiary, a prison designed to inspire genuine regret and penitence in the hearts of people convicted of crimes. The concept grew from Enlightenment thinking, but no government had successfully carried out such a program. It took the Society more than 30 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, unlike other prisons, did not use corporal punishment and strived, at least in theory, to end the ill treatment of prisoners. This massive new prison opened in 1829, and it was soon the most famous prison in the world.

Eastern State aimed to move beyond simple punishments and, instead, attempted to encourage the people incarcerated within its walls to reflect and change. The penitentiary utilized a Quaker-inspired system of isolation and labor to achieve this end. The early system was strict. To prevent distraction, knowledge of the building, and even mild interaction with guards, prisoners wore hoods anytime they were outside their cells. Proponents of the system believed that this isolation would allow prisoners to consider their behavior and the ugliness of their crimes, ultimately leading to genuine penitence for their actions. Thus, the new word penitentiary.

Eastern State's design was also revolutionary. Its seven earliest cellblocks may represent the first modern building in the United States. Designed by British-born architect John Haviland, the penitentiary originally consisted of seven cellblocks that radiated from a central surveillance rotunda. In this concept, each prisoner had their own private cell, centrally heated, with running water, a flush toilet, and a skylight. Adjacent to each cell was a private outdoor exercise yard contained by a ten-foot wall. This modern design was particularly impressive for its time. Even the White House, with its new occupant Andrew Jackson, had no running water and was still heated by coal-burning stoves.

Still, despite this innovation, the cells were simple and sparse. The only light came from a small skylight, and prisoners could only occupy their time with the word of God (the Bible) or honest work (shoemaking, weaving, etc.). The interior of the penitentiary resembles a church, with its 30-foot, barrel vaulted hallways and tall arched windows. In contrast, the exterior is a menacing, medieval Gothic façade, built to intimidate, that ironically implied that physical punishment took place behind those grim exterior walls.

Virtually all prisons designed in the 1800s were based on one of two systems: New York State's Auburn System, or the Pennsylvania System embodied by Eastern State Penitentiary. During the century following Eastern State's construction, more than 300 prisons in South America, Europe, Russia, China, Japan, and across the British Empire were based on its plan.

People frequently travelled to Philadelphia to study Eastern State and the Pennsylvania System. For many, Eastern State's distinctive form and its isolation practices became a symbol of progressive, modern principles. Still, as tourists flocked to the penitentiary in the 1830s and 1840s, a debate grew about the effectiveness and compassion of solitary confinement. Was it cruel to hold

people without outside visitors, without books or letters from home, without contact with the outside world? Accounts and opinions varied.

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 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 gentlemen 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. Later additions to the penitentiary complex are physical evidence of this shift in operations and practices. Warden Michael Cassidy added the first additional cellblocks in the 1870s and 1890s. They mirrored the existing cellblocks in design, but these new cells did not include exercise yards. Prisoners were issued hoods with, for the first time, eye holes. They would exercise together, in silence and anonymity. Mirrors were installed to provide continued surveillance into the new cellblocks from the central rotunda.

The system of solitary confinement at Eastern State did not so much collapse as erode away over the decades. By 1890, about half of all prisoners had a cellmate, and people incarcerated at Eastern State worked in congregate workshops. This was before the Pennsylvania System was officially discontinued. By 1912 a prisoner newspaper, *The Umpire*, ran a monthly roster of intra-penitentiary baseball league scores.

The penitentiary administration produced a silent movie in 1929 to celebrate the building's centennial. The film focuses on the recent changes made to the building. It shows new factory-style weaving shops, the commercial-grade bakery and kitchens staffed by dozens of prisoners 24 hours a day, and new guard towers with searchlights and sirens. People spill out into the yards and line up in new communal dining halls. These people move in the shell of the old Pennsylvania System. The cells, now used for two or three men, still have barrel-vaulted ceilings and skylights. Now, they also have a curious, walled-up door in the back. The workshops and dining halls are ten feet wide and hundreds of feet long; they are former exercise yards, roofed over, their dividing walls removed, and doors sealed shut.

Still more cellblocks 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 State cellblocks. These new cellblocks were invisible from the central rotunda. Subterranean and windowless cells, with neither light nor plumbing, brought a return to solitary confinement at Eastern State. 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: Cellblock 15, or Death Row. This modern prison block marked the final abandonment of any aspect of the penitentiary's original architecture. The fully-electronic confinement system inside separated the prisoners from the guards at virtually all times.

Some of America's most notorious lawbreakers were held in Eastern State's cells. When gangster Al Capone found himself in front of a judge in Philadelphia for the first time in 1929, he was sentenced to one year in prison. He spent most of that sentence at Eastern State. Bank robber Willie Sutton was also incarcerated at Eastern State and joined 11 other men in a doomed tunnel escape in 1945.

By the 1960s, the aged prison was in need of costly repairs. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania closed the facility in 1970, 141 years after it admitted Charles Williams, its first prisoner. The City of Philadelphia continued to use the prison to house short-term prisoners until 1971. The City purchased the site in 1980, intending to reuse or develop it. In 1988, with the 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 20-year agreement with the City to operate the site. A new nonprofit corporation, Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site, Inc., took over the agreement in 2001.

Today, the site's mission is to interpret the legacy of American criminal justice reform, from the nation's founding through to the present day, within the long-abandoned cellblocks of the nation's most historic prison. In service of this, the site connects the past to the present and offers dialogue-based tours and exhibits about American criminal justice to around 300,000 visitors each year.