

The Lives of the Officers

August 10 – 14, 2022

We know that about 80,000 people were incarcerated at Eastern State Penitentiary, but the number of people who worked at the institution remains a mystery. While prisoners' names, records, and photographs were carefully documented, officers' experiences have largely been lost to time.

However, our curators have assembled photographs, artifacts, and oral histories from our archives to paint a complex and fascinating picture of the lives of the officers and staff.

People who worked or were incarcerated here saved most of these rare artifacts. Many of them took keepsakes when the building closed as a state prison in 1970. We thank these friends for donating such fascinating objects to our collection. Special thanks to Doug Desmond for his recent donations that anchor this exhibit.



On Screen:



Tour of Eastern State's Central Guard Tower
From *TowerCam!* Exhibit (on view 2010-2014)

Case 1:

Not a Uniform Approach

Change was a constant at Eastern State Penitentiary.

Methods of recordkeeping, codes of conduct, personnel, and the architecture regularly evolved. Even the uniforms worn by officers changed with the seasons. In 1885, Warden Cassidy remarked, "The overseers were furnished with uniform straw hats for the summer."



Officer's hat, c. 1950. A hat, jacket, and keys were likely always part of the standard "uniform."
Gift of the McIntyre Family.

Officer's jacket, c. 1950. Note the buttons are stamped with the state seal and say, "Eastern Penitentiary."

Adam Tyson in uniform, c. 1950.
Gift of the Miller Family.

Sergeant's badge in leather case with pad of paper, c. 1950. In 1923, the new Warden, Col. Groome, stated, "certain forms of military practice would now be required of the guards." This may have included instituting a military-style chain of command. Gift of Amy, Rachel, and John – great grandchildren of Milton Sloan.

Department of Justice patch and "Mr. Sekula" pin, c. 1960. Gift of Retiree Bernard M. Sekula, Correction Officer I.

Officer identification cards, c. 1956 – 1970. Photo identification

provides an extra layer of security, creating another challenge to anyone hoping to impersonate an officer. Gifts of the Biedermann and Boone Families.

Silver collar pin, c. 1969.
Gift of Dr. Joseph L. Ross.

Rules governing Overseers and Watchmen of the Eastern State Penitentiary, 1902. Formal officer training may not have existed until 1880, and it varied over time after that. This book contains only four pages – manuals for Corrections Officers are *much* longer today.

Manual of rules, regulations, and required duties for Corrections Officers: Eastern State Penitentiary, 1957.

Bureau of Correction Officers' Training School, spring 1962.
Gift of the Biedermann Family.

Cellblock 2 (Women's Block) Logbook, 1922-1923. We know less about the female officers, called "Matrons," than their male counterparts. A few remaining

logbooks provide critical clues to their work. Gift of the family of John D. Shearer.

Lieutenant Jack Skelton at desk, c. 1944. The officers' assigned primary objective was to ensure the security of prisoners. Gift in memory of Lieutenant Jack Skelton.

Photograph of Donald Vaughn, 1995. For most of its history, Eastern State's paid staff were entirely white. By the 1960s, more equitable hiring policies resulted in Black staff employed across the institution. This change did not solve most racial challenges at Eastern State but did serve as an important step forward. Donald Vaughn served among these early Black officers. He later rose to become the Deputy Secretary of Corrections for the Eastern Region of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. *Morning Call* photo by John C. Anderson.

Case 2:

Security and Control

In Eastern State's early years officers rarely carried weapons of any kind. In 1872, the warden bragged that a group of officers, "not one of whom carried a pistol or other firearms," transported 27 prisoners to Western Penitentiary without incident.

It's unclear why administrators decided to increase the number of weapons held at the institution in the early 1900s. A high-profile escape of six prisoners in 1923 prompted a second, larger expansion of weaponry in the penitentiary – including supplying the towers with Thompson submachine guns and Krag repeating rifles.



Thompson Guns catalog, 1929.

Gift of the Biedermann Family.

Photographs of officers at firing range, possibly at Eastern State's farm branch at Graterford, c. 1948.

Gifts of the Scheerer Family.

Locks and keys. Gifts of the Scheerer Family, Katharine W. Sharp, and Russell David Schaefer.

Colt official police pistol marked "E.S.P. No. 38," c. 1929. Sometimes the weapons were used for unintended purposes. Officer Edward Bishop died in 1940, presumably by suicide, from a bullet wound in the chest while serving alone in the Cellblock 7 tower. Today, guards experience suicide rates much higher than the national average and have one of the highest occupational rates of injuries and illness. Gift of Doug Desmond.

Remington rifle with saddle ring, c. 1908.* Engraving next to the saddle ring reads, "Property Eastern State Penitentiary, Philadelphia, Penna."

It's possible this rifle was used for horseback patrols – horses were used at Eastern State until at least 1913. Gift of Doug Desmond.

Winchester semi-automatic rifle, c. 1910. Firearms were intended to prevent escape and maintain control over the prison population. Prisoners were aware of the threat, but Joseph Larimer (C- 698) made an escape attempt despite the armed guards. He was shot and killed during his attempt in 1923. Gift of Doug Desmond.

Remington shotgun marked with "E.S.P. No. 1", c. 1908. Gift of Doug Desmond.

Photographs of the armory in the lower level of the Administration Building, c. 1955. Gifts of Howard James.

Guards in front of the original front gate (demolished in 1938), c. 1926. At least three of the officers are wearing pistols on their right side.

President of the Board of Trustees confirming receipt of report in the case of the murder of Officer Edwin Lichtenberger by Steven Saunders (D-1264), 1944. Prisons can be dangerous places although they have many security measures in place. We know of at least three Eastern State officers who were killed while on duty in addition to Officer Lichtenberger: James Gaston, Michael Doran, and James Bloomer. Gift of the family of John D. Shearer.

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

* The guns on display have been decommissioned and stored without ammunition.

Case 3:

Responsibilities and Relationships

Despite the serious nature of supervising a maximum security prison, guards and administrators who worked at Eastern State often speak fondly of the relationships they formed with prisoners and one another.

Guards provided more than just security and discipline. In the penitentiary's early years, "overseers" served as guards, but also taught trades and *oversaw* production of products prisoners made in their cells. In later years, some officers still served in a teaching capacity.



Piggy bank in shape of a TV, c. 1960. Prisoners regularly gifted or sold items to staff through much of the building's history. It wasn't until 1960 that the practice of gifts was stopped to prevent those who could not afford to participate from being excluded. Gift of Retiree Bernard M. Sekula, Correction Officer I.

Major Brierley's dog, Lady, July 7, 1957. In 1957, Officer Brierley brought Lady to work with him on Sundays. She was a particular favorite of a prisoner called "Swampy." The prison newsletter reported, "All day they run around visiting, sniffing, lifting spirits and playing games." Gift of the family of the Howard H. Haines, Captain of the Guards.

Portraits of Guards John and Walter Slizofski in frame made by prisoners, c. 1943. On several occasions, Eastern State employed multiple family members at the same time. Gift of Walter Slizofski's daughter Margie.

Guards instructing prisoners in the electrical building, c. 1960. Gift of the Scheerer Family.

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

Clerk Typist Carol Tanner and Guard Howard James, c. 1965. In the mid 20th century, female staff began working in administrative roles. They also formed friendships with other staff and prisoners. In at least one instance, a female employee married a prisoner after his release. Gift of Carol Tanner.

Prisoners and guards in front of a Christmas tree in Center, c. 1960. Staff and prisoners found ways to enjoy the holidays together. On the audio tour, Jesse DiGuglielmo, former prisoner, recalls giving gifts to the officer on his block who brought in Christmas decorations. Gift of the Biedermann Family.

Chess pieces, c. 1960. Warden Joseph Brierley recalled that chess united people at Eastern State in the 1960s. He encouraged its play, and in oral histories, prisoners recall playing chess with guards while they kept watch from their desks. Gifts of Dr. and Mrs. Fulmer.

Glenn Hyatt, Dr. I. Ralph Hyatt and an unknown prisoner, c. 1959. Many children of staff had their hair cut by Eastern State's barbers. Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Glenn A. Hyatt, son of Dr. I. Ralph Hyatt.

Franklin Hespell, grandson of Deputy Warden Myers, in baseball gear with Guard Walter Tees, 1921. In addition to working with relatives, some staff, like Deputy Myers, lived here with their families. Wardens and deputies lived in the front building until the mid-20th century. Gift of Franklin Hespell.

Guards on step into Administration Building, c. 1940. One officer holds a brown bag – perhaps they were about to enjoy lunch together. Courtesy of Joseph P. Beggin.

Banquet Card Commemorating Capt. Joseph G. Smith's 50 years at Eastern State, 1935. It seems that Smith's coworkers were comfortable "roasting" him in the program, though it's not clear today what the jokes mean. Gift of the Scheerer Family.

Banquet photo. The historic site's collection includes several pictures from banquets showing staff taking time to enjoy their achievements and one another's company. Gift of the Scheerer Family.

Certificate for 25 years of service, c. 1960.