



## Historical Society of Pennsylvania

### Eastern State Penitentiary and the Quaker Model of Penitence

For better or worse, penitentiary-style prisons are still seen in today's modern prison system and it all began in Philadelphia. The Walnut Street jail served the city for many years, but only two decades after its construction, it was updated to include cells for solitary confinement. In 1790, a penitentiary with 16 single cells was built within the jail. The shift to single cells reflected the work of the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons, which promoted solitary confinement as a way to help prisoners find penitence.

By the early 1800s the jail was overcrowded, and in 1821 the Pennsylvania legislature approved the building of the Eastern State Penitentiary. The penitentiary was designed by John Haviland and included only solitary cells. The building of Eastern State Penitentiary was a turning point in the modern prison system because the model was copied in cities the world over. Learn more about the history of penitentiaries in the collections of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

**Search Terms:** John Haviland; Eastern State Penitentiary; John Howard; Benjamin Rush; William White; Pennsylvania System; Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons

#### **Recommended Collections:**

Pennsylvania Prison Society records, 1787-1966  
Collection# 1946  
Vol. 1 Minutes, 1787-1809

Vz.8 Eastern Penitentiary. *Annual Reports of the Inspectors of the Eastern State Penitentiary of Pennsylvania, 1829-1917, 1919, 1927, 1928*. Philadelphia, 1831.  
(two volumes)



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Vv\* .39 Pennsylvania. Commissioners to Superintend the Erection of the Eastern Penitentiary., Thomas Sparks, Pennsylvania. General Assembly. Senate, and Pennsylvania. Commission to Revise the Criminal Code. *Letter Report and Documents, On the Penal Code,*. Harrisburg [Pa.]:: Printed by S.C. Stambaugh., 1828.

Wxt\*.7. Tyson, J. R., and Law Academy of Philadelphia. *Essay On the Penal Law of Pennsylvania : Published By Order of the Law Academy of Philadelphia.* Philadelphia: Published by the Law Academy, 1827.

UPA/Ph HV 9475.P4 M3 1835. McElwee, Thomas B., and Penn. General Assembly. Joint Committee to Enquire into the Management of the Eastern Penitentiary. *A Concise History of the Eastern Penitentiary of Pennsylvania : Together With a Detailed Statement of the Proceedings of the Committee, Appointed By the Legislature, December 6th, 1834, for the Purpose of Examining Into the Economy and Management of That Institution, Embracing the Testimony Taken On That Occasion, and Legislative Proceedings Connected Therewith.* Philadelphia: Neall & Massey, Printers, 1835.

UPA/Ph HV 9469.C37 1897. Cassidy, Micheal John. *Warden Cassidy On Prisons and Convicts : Remarks From Observation and Experience Gained During Thirty-seven Years Continuous Service in the Administration of the Eastern State Penitentiary, Pennsylvania.* Philadelphia: Patterson & White, 1897.

UPA/Ph HV 9475.P42 S73 1872. Vaux, R. (1872). *Brief sketch of the origin and history of the State Penitentiary for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, at Philadelphia.* Philadelphia: McLaughlin Bros., Printers.

Am.3181 James Morton Writings 1852-1853. Morton was an Eastern State Penitentiary prisoner. These writings were undertaken to relieve the monotony of Morton's sixth and seventh years of solitary confinement. Included are a treatise on the decay of the Christian Church, especially the threat of popery, and an



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indictment of the penal system, police, courts, solitary confinement and the Pennsylvania Prison Society, naming officials particularly responsible for his treatment.

\*Extensive information on *Benjamin Rush* and *John Howard* is available in the PC1 card catalog.

### **Other Sources of Information:**

Eastern State Penitentiary Online Research Library—  
<http://www.easternstate.org/learn/research-library>

The Library Company of Philadelphia – 1314 Locust St., Philadelphia—  
[www.librarycompany.org](http://www.librarycompany.org)

The Pennsylvania Prison Society – [www.prisonsociety.org](http://www.prisonsociety.org)



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