

“The Tragedy of the Penitentiary”: The Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons and the Formation of the Eastern State Penitentiary

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History

“The American penitentiary was born not of new ideas but of old conceptions that, set against a background of social change, seemed more sensible and attractive than ever before.”¹ – Adam J. Hirsch

Robert Vaux, one of the most prominent members of the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons, concluded one of his many writings with the telling statement, “with the expression of an ardent hope, that this favoured commonwealth may soon have the happiness to perfect the system of criminal jurisprudence and prison discipline, which boasts its origin within her borders.”² Vaux’s writing came during a period of great societal and moral reform in America. One facet of this, the one Vaux was most actively involved in, was the reform of the prison system in America. During the nineteenth century in America, Robert Vaux and thousands of others around the world began advocating for a massive improvement and reform of prisons in Western society.

The subject of prison reform in American history spans well over a century and encompasses a variety of ideas and theories. The Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons was only one of many organizations that were attempting to reform prisons during the 1800s.³ On May 8, 1787, the Society met for the first time in the home of Benjamin Franklin. Like other prison reform societies of the time, the Philadelphia Prison Society sought to make prisons more humane and effective institutions. The Philadelphia Prison Society, however would distinguish itself through its role in the construction of Eastern State

¹ Adam J. Hirsch, *The Rise of the Penitentiary: Prisons and Punishment in Early America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 112.

² Robert Vaux, *Notices of the Original, and Successive Efforts to Improve the Discipline of the Prison at Philadelphia*, (Philadelphia: Kimber and Sharpless, 1826), 64.

³ At its centennial in 1887, the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons changed its name to the Pennsylvania Prison Society. It still continues to operate in Philadelphia today. For the purposes of this paper, the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons will be referred to by its current name.

Penitentiary – a prison that was designed and built in order to provide the kind of penitentiary they thought best for rehabilitating prisoners. The research presented here is an examination of the Society’s ideas for reforming prisons in the early 1800s and how their methods were applied to the design and operation of Eastern State Penitentiary.

Many of the Philadelphia Prison Society’s prominent leaders were Quakers, and their devotion to this faith and its ideals is evident in the reformist and philanthropic endeavors they took part in. The central idea in their approach to prison reform was simply that every person, regardless of crimes committed, was redeemable.⁴ The Quakers believed in an inner light that existed in each person, a divine spark that was evidence of humanity’s direct connections with God. Understanding that all people possessed this inner light, it is easy to see how Quakers would have turned to the idea of repentance. This is not to say that they did not believe in punishment for one’s wrong doings, rather they believed in punishment as a means to achieving repentance.⁵

As Matthew W. Meskell discusses in his writing, this idea contrasted greatly with the Calvinistic theories that had governed previous methods of imprisonment.⁶ In this tradition, it was accepted that some people were born sinners and that nothing could be done to change that fundamental part of their existence. The idea of repentance as a way to reform prisoners was a relatively new concept that rejected this notion. It is, however also important to consider that during this period there was an emerging trend of moving away from corporal punishment that did not necessarily concern religion. Michel Foucault in particular wrote extensively on this subject and attributed, at least in part this change in thinking to the influence of Enlightenment ideas that inspired in humans the desire to act more “humanely”.⁷

When considering the actions of prison reformers, especially in Philadelphia and Pennsylvania, it is important to reflect on the sense of purpose these individuals had in their reform efforts. Many reformers of the nineteenth century are often accused of having insincere motives behind their apparent desire to help people; this, however was not the case for the prison reformers of Philadelphia. After only a short period of time spent researching these persons it becomes

⁴ Negley K Teeters, *They Were In Prison: A History of the Pennsylvania Prison Society, 1787-1937*, (Philadelphia: The John C. Winston Company, 1937), 122-123.

⁵ George G. Killinger, Paul F. Cromwell, ed., *Penology: The Evolution of Corrections in America*, (St. Paul, Minn.: West Publishing Co., 1973), 35.

⁶ Matthew W. Meskell, “An American Revolution: The History of Prisons in the United States from 1777 to 1877” *Stanford Law Review*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Apr., 1999), 839-865 – 852.

⁷ Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, (New York: Random House, 1995), 73-75.

obvious the members of the Philadelphia Prison Society, and indeed most prison reformists of the time, genuinely wished to help better the lives of inmates, both during their time in prison and once they were released.

The goals of the Society began as part of a broader movement to monitor prisons and see that they were effectively doing their job. During the early 1800s, the Philadelphia Prison Society’s Visiting Committee frequently toured the public prisons and found them in generally acceptable, if not good condition; the committee members often remarked in their reports that the keepers and the inspectors were making efforts to better conditions and that their efforts were noticeable. One of the many reports made by the Visiting Committee stated that they “were fully satisfied with the conduct of the keeper and his deputies and with the order and discipline maintained among the prisoners – All that can be done by the Inspectors and Keepers has been done to render the condition of the convicts and other there confined comfortable and salutary . . .”⁸ According to the writings of one Society leader, Thomas Bradford, in his report to the Acting Committee on behalf of the Visiting Committee, the prison officials often took the recommendations of the Society seriously and strove to incorporate them into the prison whenever possible.⁹

Despite the prison’s reputation, however, the prisoners were not always provided with everything they needed. In fact, much of the Society’s time during its early years was devoted to procuring material goods for them. One such incident was brought before the committee in January, 1800 when they “received information from two Members of this committee that there were a number of Prisoners in the Jail in want of cloathing [sic] & Blanketts [sic] appearing necessary that some attention should be immediately paid to the situation . . .”¹⁰ Members were immediately appointed to secure funds to this end, and at the next meeting they would report that they had purchased 30 blankets (costing £17.26) and that a “quantity of old clothing” was sent to the prison in response to a report they placed in the paper.¹¹

The attention of the early Society focused primarily on the Walnut Street Jail. The Society members set about ensuring that the jail provided sufficient food, clothing, and blankets; they even went so far as to make sure that the

⁸ The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, *Pennsylvania Prison Society Records*, (Collection 1946, Vol. 2, Acting Committee Minutes 1798-1835) Meeting Dated: October 9, 1806.

⁹ *Pennsylvania Prison Society Records*, Acting Committee Minutes, Meeting (Collection 1946, Vol. 2, Acting Committee Minutes 1798-1835) Dated October 31, 1811.

¹⁰ *Pennsylvania Prison Society Records*, Acting Committee Minutes, (Collection 1946, Vol. 2, Acting Committee Minutes 1798-1835) Meeting Dated January 29, 1800.

¹¹ *Pennsylvania Prison Society Records*, Acting Committee Minutes, (Collection 1946, Vol. 2, Acting Committee Minutes 1798-1835) Meeting Dated April 10, 1800.

administration was functioning effectively. Their efforts were well received and often more effective than even they could have hoped for.¹² However, the Society was in no way completely satisfied. Many of the members of the Society were coming under the influence of emerging ideas of prisons as places of reform and repentance. For the time being however, they were forced to content themselves with the changes they could make within the present framework while conspiring to bring large scale reform to the prison system in the future.

This passive, non-urgent approach changed on March 27, 1820, when several prisoners in the Walnut Street Jail managed to arm themselves with knives and begin a riot. The rioters spilled out into the prison yard, prompting local citizens, who feared for their own safety, to line the sides of the jail and begin shooting at the prisoners resulting in one prisoner being killed and three more injured.¹³ Only after the state militia was called in was the uprising finally quelled. It was this event that led to the Society's realization that the current prisons in Philadelphia (and indeed Western civilization) were no longer acceptable means by which to deter crime and reform criminals.¹⁴

It is evident from their records that the general tone of the Philadelphia Prison Society shifted almost immediately.¹⁵ Members suddenly condemned the Walnut Street Jail as unacceptable in every way. It was overcrowded with unemployed prisoners who had nothing to do but plot escapes and future crimes. More serious criminals were corrupting those who had committed lesser offences. Disease ran rampant in the close quarters and the small infirmary was simply not equipped to handle the sick. One report by the Visiting Committee stated that "The Com. found many in these wards in a destitute situation, many without shoes and stockings and about half without undergarments."¹⁶ They continued to lament the situation, explaining that they felt there was no hope for reforming the idle prisoners who were left to their own devices and given nothing to do, proclaiming: "It is a subject of regret that no employment can be furnished in these wards, as their whole time is now spent in Idleness excepting the small portion occupied in cleaning their appartments [sic]."¹⁷

¹² Teeters, *The Cradle of the Penitentiary*, 29-31.

¹³ *Pennsylvania Prison Society Records*, Acting Committee Minutes, (Collection 1946, Vol. 2, Acting Committee Minutes 1798-1835) Meeting Dated: April 10, 1820

¹⁴ Teeters, *The Cradle of the Penitentiary*, 101-103.

¹⁵ *Pennsylvania Prison Society Records*, Acting Committee Minutes, (Collection 1946, Vol. 2, Acting Committee Minutes 1798-1835) Meeting Dated: April 10, 1820

¹⁶ *Pennsylvania Prison Society Records*, Acting Committee Minutes, (Collection 1946, Vol. 2, Acting Committee Minutes 1798-1835) Meeting Dated: January 10, 1820

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Where the Society had once been willing to overlook the system’s shortcomings in favor of trying to help the prisoners, they now turned their attention to every perceived flaw they could find. Their efforts were to make an attempt to illustrate just how imperative it was that Philadelphia construct a new prison, where the reforms they had been advocating for since the turn of the century could be enacted in their entirety. It was the sincere belief of these reformers that the current prison system could not reform or rehabilitate prisoners in any way, rather it only served to perpetuate the cycle of crime and incarceration. The solution they devised would become one of the cornerstones of nineteenth century prison reform: solitary confinement.

The Society had many reasons for wanting to establish solitary confinement as standard practice in prisons, but the most important was the expectation that it would bring about repentance in the convict. It was understood within the Society that reform must be carried out through the prisoners themselves; reforming the prisons would not change anything in the long run. The prevailing notion that began to grip the Society was that it was not simply enough to punish prisoners; punishment was clearly not preventing or deterring criminals. Robert Vaux, conveyed the general frustration felt by the reformers stating, “To continue the system at present adopted, is extremely absurd . . . having been found, after a long trial, most lamentably to fail in answering the end intended by it; nay, to produce effects never contemplated by its advocates, viz. the increase of crimes.”¹⁸ Members of the Society saw prisons and their inhabitants in a constant cycle of serving time in jail only to be released, commit another crime, and returned to prison with the current system providing no means of stopping it.

The Philadelphia Prison Society brought its proposal for the use of solitary confinement to the forefront of the their undertaking. They had, in fact, been campaigning for a new prison that would be built with the appropriate facilities for such a practice for years, even going so far as to write to Harrisburg directly to address the issue. In an 1803 letter, the Society wrote to the legislature so as to “again respectfully submit to your consideration the propriety of granting another Building for the purpose of making such separation amongst the Prisoners as the nature and wants of this truly benevolent System require.”¹⁹

Vaux emerged as one of solitary confinement’s biggest proponents. He believed that if left completely to themselves convicts would eventually realize that their imprisonment came about as a result of their own sins. Knowing this, they

¹⁸ Robert Vaux, *To Reform the Criminal Code of Pennsylvania: With a Few Observations on the Penitentiary System*, (Philadelphia: Kimber and Sharpless, 1826), 16-17.

¹⁹ *Pennsylvania Prison Society Records*, Acting Committee Minutes: Letter to the Pennsylvania House of Representatives and Senate regarding the Auburn System and the need for a new prison, May 25, 1803.

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would have no choice but to lament them and thus reexamine their lives so as not to find themselves in a similar situation after being released.²⁰ Vaux was of the opinion that guilt and remorse would eventually lead those convicted of a crime back to a good and moral life, stating in his writings:

Left to himself, his own reflections will be melancholy and depressing; his evil propensities, instead of being confirmed by the unrestrained intercourse with his more wicked companions will infallibly be checked; the good advice he may have received from pious parents, will recur to his mind with a force it perhaps never possessed before, and thus, instead of being more vicious, as at present, when emerging from prison, than when he entered, he will be chastened, and disposed to follow his trade, and to lead a regular and sober life.²¹

The prevailing sentiment became that prisoners had to be sorry for their crimes before it could be guaranteed that they would not commit them again. It is worth noting that aside from a moral obligation, the reformers also felt a religious one towards these convicts. In keeping with Quaker teachings they believed that repentance for one's sins meant embracing salvation through God. Religion was of the utmost importance in the process of reforming criminals but it also added to the importance of the reformer's mission. They were not simply rehabilitating these people to reenter society, they were saving their souls.²²

The importance of God and religion as a tool of reforming prisoners was not new to the Philadelphia Prison Society; they had been bringing Bibles to inmates since its very founding.²³ The new system, however, would place special emphasis on the salvation of those who were incarcerated. In solitary confinement, the Bible would be the only reading material that the prisoners would have access to. For the Society members this ensured that the convicts would be forced to consider their sins; to allow them the opportunity to ignore this time for reflection and repentance “. . . would defeat the whole plan, which ought to be, to oblige them “to work out their salvation in fear and trembling; in tribulation and sorrow.”²⁴

²⁰ Teeters, *They Were In Prison*, 190.

²¹ Vaux, *To Reform the Criminal Code of Pennsylvania: With a Few Observations on the Penitentiary System*, 17.

²² Teeters, *They Were In Prison*, 360-361.

²³ *Pennsylvania Prison Society Records*, Acting Committee Minutes, (Collection 1946, Vol. 2, Acting Committee Minutes 1798-1835) Meeting Dated: January 29, 1810

²⁴ Vaux, *To Reform the Criminal Code of Pennsylvania: With a Few Observations on the Penitentiary System*, 16.

The second major reason for the use of solitary confinement in prisons dealt less with reforming the prisoners and more with preventing their exposure to other criminal elements. It became obvious to the Society members that not only was the current system unable to effectively prevent crime, but it was actually spreading it.²⁵ By exposing prisoners of all levels of crime to one another, jails were facilitating the corruption of otherwise common, petty criminals and making them more violent. This fact had been a chief concern of the Society long before Eastern State Penitentiary was built. The Walnut Street Jail Visiting Committee, for instance, noted on one tour that:

Vagrants and prisoners for trial, convicts under six months and disorderly servants and apprentices are all confined in one apartment in the east wing of the building and it frequently happens that one hundred and forty and sometimes a larger number of persons of the above description are confined together in the apartment. From this connection of persons many pernicious consequences arise. The young and untutored offender becomes hardened and (unintelligible) by association with old convicts – Apprentices and servants instead of being reformed, become worse and at length from the reforms they receive here become thieves and villains.²⁶

Through a system of solitary confinement, prisoners would not have the opportunity to interact with one another, something that had long been a source of frustration to reformers who felt “. . . when [convicts] are released from prison they are likely to come out intimately acquainted with the arts of Villany [sic] and combined with an extensive association of persons of similar characters . . . The health of the city is much endangered by having so many people crowded together . . .”²⁷ Reformists claimed that even the classification and separation of inmates based on the severity of their crimes did not prevent contamination. Additionally, as William Forsythe has revealed, during this time period, it was almost impossible to know a prisoner’s full criminal history and thus place them accordingly. Men

²⁵ Teeters, *They Were In Prison*, 45.

²⁶ *Pennsylvania Prison Society Records*, Acting Committee Minutes, (Collection 1946, Vol. 2, Acting Committee Minutes 1798-1835) Meeting Dated: Report by the Visiting Committee, October 9, 1806.

²⁷ *Pennsylvania Prison Society Records*, Acting Committee Minutes, (Collection 1946, Vol. 2, Acting Committee Minutes 1798-1835) Meeting Dated: May, 25, 1803

convicted of lesser offences may have committed more serious ones previously and as such might be placed with lesser criminals completely undetected.²⁸

What the Society members considered to be most frustrating about this situation was that they saw it to be completely preventable. Using solitary confinement as a way to make prisoners repent for their crimes required some sort of effort on the part of the prisoners; simply keeping convicts apart from each other did not. These sentiments were echoed in a report given by the Society's Visiting Committee that stated: "In vain do we boast of our penal code if such evils are permitted to exist. Our code it is true is mild and intended to reform the offender, but its intention is evidently destroyed by permitting so many prisoners to associate together. Hard work, wholesome diet, pure air, sufficient clothing, and all about seclusion from vice of every form is in our opinion the best plan of treatment that can be adopted to ensure the desired end."²⁹ The reformists felt that by separating the prisoners they were in fact protecting them by ensuring that their time in prison would not do them more harm than good.

The idea of using solitary confinement to reform prisoners was not without its opponents. Adversaries of the policy charged it with being cruel, inhumane, and likely to produce insanity in those inflicted with the punishment.³⁰ Vaux countered these attacks, writing in one of his many publications that, "It is answered that punishment is intended to be what its name implies . . ."³¹ He contended that despite all the fear concerning the possibility that inmates could become insane there have been no cases brought forward to establish this theory and so it remained just that. On the other hand, Vaux is able to make the argument that because there have been no reports of cases of insanity due to solitary confinement, the practice is shown to do more good than harm.³² While there are obvious flaws in Vaux's logic (specifically that he was advocating a new system and therefore it is only natural that there would not have been any reported cases of insanity), his impassioned writing demonstrates just how firmly he and other prison reformers believed in this policy.

However, even for as firm as their beliefs were, it is worth noting that Vaux and other Society members recognized that there were certain limitations to their work. It was possible that some criminals would simply refuse to be reformed. Vaux

²⁸ William James Forsythe, *The Reform of Prisoners, 1830 – 1900* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987) 25.

²⁹ *Pennsylvania Prison Society Records*, Acting Committee Minutes, Meeting Dated: Report by the Visiting Committee, October 9, 1806.

³⁰ Teeters, *They Were In Prison*, 237.

³¹ Vaux, *Notices of the Original, and Successive Efforts to Improve the Discipline of the Prison at Philadelphia*, 59.

³² *Ibid.*

acknowledged this possibility by saying simply that, “A criminal, therefore, who has undergone the moral and mild discipline . . . and commits a second offence, shows that he is unworthy of future trials, to reclaim him from the paths of vice, and the first law of nature requires his being removed from a community, whose laws he has so often outraged . . .”³³ What exactly Vaux meant by “removing” these men from a community is never explained, and one can assume that men with such profound Quaker convictions would never advocate for punishing these repeat offenders with execution and so Vaux illustrates a significant flaw in their system. Despite his assertions, Vaux and other reformers offered no solution to the problem of the “un-reformable” other than to remove them from the community. This conclusion is an interesting statement as it runs counter to their axiom that everyone could be redeemed. However, they also acknowledged there is simply no way to save those who do not wish to be saved.

Eastern State Penitentiary, however, was the Philadelphia’s Prison Society’s proposed method to save as many as possible. The idea of a penitentiary was not particularly new at this point in time, nor as George Killinger argues, was it solely of American design. British reformers had been advocating for prisoner reform and solitary confinement for several decades as well and were often exchanging ideas with American reformers. John Howard’s writings of plans to segregate prisoners to prevent them from interacting with each other, for example, greatly influenced the Society. However, despite the best attempts of British reformers and the support of the government it was in America, specifically Philadelphia, that such plans could be carried out and funded properly.³⁴

The Philadelphia Prison Society fought for years in Harrisburg to have land and funds appropriated for the construction of Eastern State Penitentiary. They lobbied tirelessly for years for the prison’s creation. They defended it both in published writings and “memorials” sent to the legislature.³⁵ Any time a bill was presented to the state government that might jeopardize the creation of the penitentiary, the Society sent members to Harrisburg to lobby on behalf of the Society’s ideas, convincing the legislators of the significance of their work and the importance of this prison to the state of Pennsylvania.³⁶

³³ Vaux, *To Reform the Criminal Code of Pennsylvania: With a Few Observations on the Penitentiary System*, 20.

³⁴ Killinger, *Penology: The Evolution of Corrections in America*, 16-19.

³⁵ The term “Memorial” refers to a written statement of facts to be presented to a governing body of some form in order to express a particular wish and petition to have it acted upon. The Philadelphia Prison Society sent over twenty of these to Harrisburg over the course of the 1800s, all of which concerned their continuing desire for reform and rehabilitation in public prisons.

³⁶ *Pennsylvania Prison Society Records*, Acting Committee Minutes, (Collection 1946, Vol. 2, Acting Committee Minutes 1798-1835) Meeting Dated February 27, 1821.

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The legislation authorizing the construction of the penitentiary was signed on March 20, 1821; the only condition placed on the Building Commissioners was to preserve the principle of solitary confinement when designing the prison. John Haviland was selected to be the project's architect and by all accounts he became obsessed with perfecting the structure.³⁷ The construction of the prison itself was a massive undertaking.³⁸ Aside from the sheer size and scope of the project, Haviland faced mechanical and structural issues that stemmed from requiring the building's design to provide the basic necessities to its prisoners without having them interact with anyone. As a result of this prerequisite, the individual cells of Eastern State Penitentiary would have features that most houses of the time did not, including centralized heat and flushing toilets.³⁹

Every precaution was taken to ensure that the prisoners would not be able to communicate with each other. The methods employed at Eastern State Penitentiary would come to be known as "The Pennsylvania System" among reformers. This design called for prisoners to be kept in complete solitary confinement without any human contact. As previously discussed, such an atmosphere would force them to contemplate their wrong doings and the need to repent as well as prevent criminals from being in constant contact with each other. It was unfathomable to the system's supporters that convicts could resist reform in such an environment.

On May 2, 1829, just before the penitentiary opened, the Philadelphia Prison Society was informed by Harrisburg that it was to be granted special status in the penitentiary as official visitors and monitors of the facility as an acknowledgement and reward for their work. While the title and privilege seemed almost perfunctory, it was a position that the Society members took very seriously, vowing to work towards the rehabilitation of their charges regardless of "conviction, age, sex, [or] color".⁴⁰ The Philadelphia Prison Society had accomplished the impressive feat of convincing a state government to build a penitentiary as they envisioned it should be and had been made stewards of the institution.

³⁷ Norman Johnston, *Eastern State Penitentiary: A Crucible of Good Intentions* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1994), 32-33.

³⁸ As a note of comparison concerning the size of the new penitentiary, the Walnut Street Jail encompassed an area of approximately 400 by 200 feet while Eastern State Penitentiary came to cover several square acres. Killinger, *Penology: The Evolution of Corrections in America*, 27.

³⁹ Eastern State Penitentiary Board of Trustees, "History of Eastern State Penitentiary" Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site. <http://www.easternstate.org/history/571page.php> (accessed May, 2008).

⁴⁰ *Pennsylvania Prison Society Records*, Acting Committee Minutes, (Collection 1946, Vol. 2, Acting Committee Minutes 1798-1835) Meeting Dated: May 2, 1829.

The Pennsylvania System, as well as Eastern State Penitentiary, became the model for future prisons and penitentiaries. Within only twenty years of its completion, New Jersey, New York, and Rhode Island constructed new prisons that followed the archetype of Eastern State Penitentiary. Eastern State Penitentiary and its design became famous throughout the world. The penitentiary attracted many prominent visitors including Alexis de Tocqueville, Charles Dickens, and Dorothea Dix. Dix, in particular, lauded the system of separation. She believed that crime was the result of weak, self-indulgent men and called upon them to win themselves over again through tests of will power, temperance, skill in manual labor, and the memorization of poetry and literature.⁴¹ Facilities like Eastern State Penitentiary were, in her opinion, the perfect environment for such things.

The predominate difference between prisons such as the defunct Walnut Street Jail and Eastern State Penitentiary was why the prisoners were there. The Walnut Street Jail, like most others of the time, served as little more than a large holding cell. There the prison had the rational goal of punishing convicts for their crimes through imprisonment. Eastern State Penitentiary, on the other hand, touted a religious and moral philosophy. Time spent at Eastern State was not to be considered solely as a form of punishment, but also time to reflect on one’s character and change it for the better.

However, despite the victory of building Eastern State Penitentiary, the actual success of the Philadelphia Prison Society and its reform efforts of the early 1800s are difficult to gauge. If one thinks purely in terms of accomplishments, then the Philadelphia Prison Society was certainly successful in accomplishing the reforms they set out to create. However, in dealing with reforms it is necessary to also consider whether or not the reformists succeeded in making any sort of actual change in society. The fact remains that the system of solitary confinement broke down in Eastern State after only a few short decades due to overcrowding. Eventually, solitary confinement was abandoned all together when the Pennsylvania legislature abolished it in 1913.⁴²

The merits of such a system and its effectiveness are still the subject of debate. Foucault believed that aside from the reformer’s stated goals, solitary confinement also promoted the idea of complete control over those incarcerated. Keeping individuals isolated from each other allows those who hold power over them (in this case the prison guards and staff) to force them into complete submission, eliminating the threat of rebellion.⁴³ He does, however, acknowledge the merits of

⁴¹ Thomas J. Brown, *Dorothea Dix: New England Reformer*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 129.

⁴² Teeters, *They Were In Prison*, 191.

⁴³ Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*, 237.

isolation as a method to induce remorse. He believes as Robert Vaux does, “Alone in his cell the convict is handed over to himself . . . he descends into his conscious, he questions it and feels awakening within him the moral feeling that never entirely perishes in the heart of a man.”⁴⁴

Foucault, for his part, also rejects the notion of prison reform in general, asserting that “The prison should not be seen as an inert institution, shaken at intervals by reform movements . . . The prison has always formed part of an active field in which projects, improvements, experiments, theoretical statements, personal evidence and investigations have proliferated.”⁴⁵ This statement is especially intriguing when applied to the Philadelphia Prison Society and its reforms in the early 1800s. There was no question in the minds of the Society members that they had set out to reform the existing institution of prisons, but according to Foucault’s thoughts, these reforms were merely part of a long continuation of societal experimentation in the ways in which crimes are punished. Whether or not this can be held as truth is important when weighing how successful these reform efforts could be considered.

Eastern State Penitentiary suffered the misfortune of becoming the type of prison it had been built to counter. Adam Hirsch believes that the irony of the penitentiary lay in that even as it sought to rehabilitate criminals, it in fact reinforced the concept of the criminal class, “And therein lies the tragedy of the penitentiary. For it is hardly clear, whatever the advocates’ administrative achievements, that carceral punishment ever truly held promise as a substantive solution to the problem of crime.”⁴⁶ Negley Teeters also concedes the flaws of solitary confinement calling attention to the fact that only the “protagonists of the system “the Society members and other reformers were understanding of it.” He adds that complete solitary confinement would have been inhumane, which may in part account for the reasons it collapsed after such a short period of time.⁴⁷

Eastern State Penitentiary closed its doors in 1971 after 147 years of service. The prison was simply no longer able to securely hold prisoners, even after its founding principles of solitary confinement and intense methods of reform had been long abandoned. Norman Johnston probably describes Eastern State Penitentiary best with the title of his book, calling the penitentiary “a crucible of good intentions.” The members of the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons truly believed that their methods were the best way to

⁴⁴ Ibid, 238.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 235.

⁴⁶ Hirsch, *The Rise of the Penitentiary: Prisons and Punishment in Early America*, 115.

⁴⁷ Teeters, Negley K., “The Pennsylvania Prison Society. A Century and a Half of Penal Reform”, *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology (1931-1951)*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Sep. - Oct., 1937), pp. 374-379.

reform prisoners and prevent them from committing further crime. Their motivations were founded in a sincere desire to better society by rehabilitating its most dangerous elements. While the successfulness of their system is questionable, their intentions are not.

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