PETER LANG

Seminary *of* Virtue

THE IDEOLOGY AND PRACTICE OF INMATE REFORM AT EASTERN STATE PENITENTIARY, 1829–1971

PAUL KAHAN

Introduction

In the summer of 2006, I took a summer job as a tour guide at Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, which bills itself as "America's Most Historic Prison." The administrative staff instructed new tour guides about Eastern State's revolutionary design and groundbreaking reformative methods. One of the things that they never discussed, however, was the penitentiary's role as an educational facility; this is not odd, for in the year that I worked at Eastern State, none of the visitors ever asked me about its educational programs. Yet evidence abounded that Eastern State educated as well as housed, fed, and sometimes brutalized its inhabitants: an exhibit on prison life featured a picture of a GED class as well as stops on the tour marked the "library" and the "school." Tour guides told visitors that famed bank robber Willie Sutton was involved in a flamboyant tunnel escape in 1945; no one told them that Sutton taught in the prison school during his incarceration in the 1930s and 1940s. In other words, Eastern State was filled with tantalizing clues about a rich, but forgotten, educational history.

As I worked in the cellblocks answering visitors' questions, I began developing my own: what and how did Eastern State teach its inmates during its 142-year existence? How did that program change over time? How did the prison's educational programs reflect changes in educational policy? And how did Eastern State's racially and ethnically diverse population of men and women benefit from these programs? These questions prompted further research into the voluminous literature on the history of American corrections, where I found little explanation of the connection between educational programming and the ideology of reform in America's penitentiaries over the last two centuries. *Seminary of Virtue* attempts to fill that vacuum.

Prisons are fascinating institutions that capture our attention and spark the imagination. The United States currently has no fewer than forty

museums dedicated to the history of prisons, jails, reformatories, and corrections spread throughout the country; tourists come from around the nation (and sometimes even the world) to experience part of a life they hope never to experience. The idea that prisons, jails, workhouses and penitentiaries function as educational institutions might seem odd, yet even a cursory survey of the history of European and American corrections reveals that penal institutions have provided educational programming to their inmates, usually as part of a reformative program designed to reduce recidivism. *Seminary of Virtue* aims to demonstrate that education of various types has consistently been a cornerstone of American attempts to reform its convict population.

For the purpose of this study, I am borrowing Pam Bedford's definition of correctional educational as activities undertaken by incarcerated individuals that are focused on remedying inmates' perceived educational deficiencies. These activities are designed to "correct" criminal behavior and change convicts' attitudes.[1] From at least the sixteenth century forward, European prisons and workhouses utilized correctional education as part of a reformative program. By the nineteenth century, correctional education had evolved into a program that blended religious, academic, and vocational education, all of which overlapped and reinforced one another. This program was intended to inculcate morality and ensure inmates had the skills and values to sustain themselves upon release. In other words, Eastern State Penitentiary was a self-consciously educational institution because educational programming was always the basis of its various reformative programs.

The dominant narrative in the history of American corrections is that, following the Civil War, American penal institutions lost their reformative focus and became merely custodial institutions. Eastern State Penitentiary's history challenges this narrative. Opened in 1829, the penitentiary was a self-consciously educational institution, and that educational programming was the institution's primary method of reforming or rehabilitating inmates. At Eastern State, reforming inmates meant reducing recidivism, which the administration attempted to achieve by inculcating disciplined work habits and morality and by teaching skills or knowledge that could be traded for gainful, legal employment upon release. The administration's primary method for achieving these goals was aggressive educational programming, which was an essential component of the penitentiary's famed "Pennsylvania System."

I chose Pennsylvania for this study because Philadelphia's Eastern State Penitentiary changed the penological world in the 1820s due to its separate system of incarceration. Though Eastern State was not America's first penitentiary, the institution was world-renowned for its innovative use of traditional hub-and-spoke architecture to implement the idiosyncratic Pennsylvania System, which called for the total separation of inmates from one another. A unique marriage of architecture and penal philosophy, the Pennsylvania System's adherents believed that separating inmates from one another (though not from all human contact, as is commonly believed) made reform possible. To that end, Eastern State was designed to minimize inmates' contact with one another by housing each convict in his or her own individual cell; an 11 feet 9 inches long and 7 feet 6 inches wide space that served as bedroom, workroom and classroom.

During Eastern State's institutional life, almost everything changed: the prison's unique physical arrangements, its system of prisoner discipline and its status (from a penitentiary to a state correctional institution). Yet the various administrations' faith in the reformative power of education remained undiminished, even though the actual educational methods changed. A cursory examination of *The Prison Journal*, published since 1845 by the Pennsylvania Prison Society (formerly the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons), a leading forum for discussions of penology and criminology, demonstrates that while scholars and reformers have debated the relative merits of various educational *curricula*, few seriously questioned the value of prison education programs during Eastern State Penitentiary's operational life. Even after Eastern State officially abandoned the Pennsylvania System in 1913, education remained the penitentiary's method of rehabilitating inmates until the institution closed as a state penitentiary in 1970.[2]

Despite the fact that the institution's administration remained steadfast in its devotion to education as the main method of reforming inmates, there were a number of important changes in Eastern State Penitentiary's approach to educating inmates between 1829 and 1970. As emphasis shifted from the religiously oriented "reform" of prisoners in the early nineteenth century to a medical model of "rehabilitation" a half century later, Eastern State's educational program evolved, shifting from a curriculum of rudimentary literacy skills, religious instruction and an apprenticeship of sorts to industrial education in the nineteenth century and then finally to a traditional

academic curriculum in the first third of the twentieth century. While the penitentiary's curriculum evolved over time, Eastern State remained committed to educational programming that, despite many hurdles, often succeeded in teaching inmates to read and write. Moreover, Eastern State's approach to reform – education – was not unique to the Pennsylvania System; various types of educational programming were available at many U.S. penal institutions during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Chapter one offers a brief introduction to the history of prisons and penal reform in order to demonstrate how firmly interwoven educational and penal reform was during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Particularly important is the prison reform movement inaugurated in England by John Howard in the 1770s and imported to the United States through his writings. The focus of the chapter, however, is the formation and operation of the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons (PSAMPP), which worked to reform Philadelphia's notorious Walnut Street Jail and then to build Eastern State Penitentiary. The PSAMPP placed great faith in the reformative possibilities of educational programming and put this faith into practice at the Walnut Street Jail between 1790 and 1810. Because they believed that ignorance caused crime, many eighteenth-century penal reformers advocated increased access to education for the general population. Many members of the PSAMPP were also involved in promoting public education, most notably Roberts Vaux, a prominent member of the PSAMPP who also agitated for the seminal education laws that created and expanded the Philadelphia public school system in both 1818 and 1836. The cross-pollination of educational and penal reform – two movements that shared people and assumptions – assured that Eastern State Penitentiary's program would be both didactic as well as punitive.

Chapter two, covering the years 1829 to 1866, illustrates how penal reformers' assumptions about the connection between ignorance and crime influenced Eastern State's reformative curriculum. One particularly important aspect of correctional education was its heavily religious content; the leading historians of correctional education have aptly called this the "Sabbath School" era of correctional education.[3] When it opened, Eastern State's mission was rooted in a pan-Protestant Christianity that relied on religion to remake inmates. The primary educator was the prison's chaplain (initially a volunteer position), assisted by visiting clergy from local churches and (later) by teachers. This was a very similar educational model to the nascent Philadelphia educational system, where Sunday schools dispensed

both literacy lessons and moral training, and where the Bible was an accepted text in the city's public schools. This should come as no surprise, given the fact that the men who built and inspected Eastern State were often heavily involved in administering Philadelphia's public school system as well. In addition, the penitentiary's reliance on volunteers and outsiders to achieve its educational goals established a pattern that existed throughout Eastern State's operational life. Whether local ministers in the early-nineteenth century or credentialed experts from Philadelphia's universities in the mid-twentieth, outsiders provided much of the expertise and labor that fueled Eastern State's educational program throughout its existence.

The penitentiary's educational program was not limited to religious and academic instruction; Eastern State also provided a comprehensive vocational education program modeled on apprenticeships. The penitentiary's guards, known at the time as "overseers," were responsible for conducting the vocational education program, and to that end, Eastern State's administrators hired trained artisans to guard the inmates. Overseers' dual role as both educators and guards neatly encapsulates the penitentiary's twin goals of punishment and reform. Unfortunately, this dual mission often led to a paradox: seemingly sincere attempts to educate inmates often coexisted with profound acts of officially sanctioned brutality. Yet, despite the penitentiary's history of officially sanctioned violence, Eastern State's discharge records demonstrate that the institution's educational program was fairly successful in terms of actually teaching many of the penitentiary's illiterate inmates (irrespective of gender or race) how to read. These records indicate that the penitentiary's goal was educating inmates and that Eastern State's administrators took that responsibility seriously. Eastern State's labor program, which was also a cornerstone of the Pennsylvania System, was less successful; while inmates were assigned labor regardless of race or gender, many of the skills they learned were geared toward an artisanal world that was gradually being eclipsed by industrialization.

Chapter three examines the years 1866 to 1913, a period when, according to most scholars, U.S. penitentiaries lost whatever reformatory zeal they once had and became merely custodial institutions. My research indicates that, far from abandoning reform, Eastern State remained committed to educating its inmates despite the numerous challenges that the administration faced in carrying out that mission. After the Civil War, Eastern State had more prisoners than cells, which compromised the