ABSTRACT

TEWELL, MEGAN NYE CULLEN. Prisons in the Popular Mind: Historic Carceral Tourism and the Carceral State. (Under the direction of Dr. Craig Thompson Friend).

In the late twentieth century, historic carceral tourism emerged as a widespread and popular pastime in the United States, with thousands of visitors flocking each year to decommissioned jails, detention centers, and state and federal prisons. “Prisons in the Popular Mind” analyzes historic carceral tourism at the Ohio State Reformatory, the West Virginia Penitentiary, the Missouri State Penitentiary, the Old Joliet Prison, the Old Idaho Penitentiary, the Historic Iowa State Penitentiary, the Old Montana Prison, and Eastern State Penitentiary, contributing to an emergent “prison public history” that scrutinizes relationships between history, incarceration, and the public imagination.

Among those relationships is historic state prison museums’ role in perpetuating the current carceral state—the extraordinary and unprecedented mass incarceration of Americans since the 1970s. How do historic state prison museums, their preservations, managements, and interpretations, contribute to public consciousness regarding contemporary incarceration? Historic state prison museums generally fail to engage or educate the public in critical and meaningful ways, especially about the carceral past and present. This dissertation argues that the majority of historic state prison museums contribute to a punitive public mentality that does not challenge the carceral state, reinforcing societal stereotypes regarding systems and practices of imprisonment, and posturing such patterns as historical with minimal impact on contemporary carceral issues. In so doing, this dissertation offers a scholarly intervention at the intersections of literature on dark tourism, museum studies, and carceral studies. It builds upon recent scholarly and public interest in the causes and consequences of the modern carceral state to situate historic
prison museums as contributors to, and perpetuators of, Americans' uncritically romanticized conceptualizations of incarceration.
DEDICATION

For you, Ryan Tewell. Your patience, encouragement, and unwavering confidence sustains me.

As much as I love my work, I will always love you more.
BIOGRAPHY

Megan Cullen Tewell is originally from Shelbyville, Kentucky. She received a Bachelor of Arts in History from Butler University in Indianapolis, where she first worked on histories of outlawry. In 2016, she graduated from North Carolina State University, earning her Master of Arts in Public History. That same year, Megan became a doctoral student under the direction of Dr. Craig Friend at North Carolina State University. Currently, her professional interests include histories of crime, punishment, and vice in the United States throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As many of you know, I am rarely at a loss for words. And yet, as I pack away my research from the past four years and admire the final product, with both pride and some weariness, I cannot even begin to think of what to say. I am sure that I have rehearsed this acknowledgement, in my head and on paper, before now. But, in a truly extraordinary moment, words escape me, and I can only express simple, albeit sincere, gratitude.

First and foremost, thank you to my family, who have always supported me; their boisterous personalities and fierce spirits have often energized and encouraged me. In particular, I would like to acknowledge my parents. You gifted me a love of words and a love for people, both of which made this dissertation possible. Throughout this process, for many years, you have often reminded me, gently, but firmly, that “this too shall pass.” You were right. It did, and I am better for it. Thank you also to my sister; like my work, you bring me joy, and I am grateful to have you in my life.

Ryan, my love, we have done this together. Your fingerprints are all over the following pages. You have always been certain that I can do anything, and your patience and kindness has seen me through the toughest of days. Thank you for supporting me during the countless hours and thousands of miles that it took to produce this work— you labored alongside me from the first moment to the last. This is for both of us.

There are many individuals that I would like to recognize, but I would especially like to thank my advisor, Dr. Craig Friend. You have been a selfless mentor and I appreciate all of the time, energy, and effort that you have dedicated to my work over the past several years. It has been an honor to learn from you, and I hope that, one day, I am able to give of myself to others as generously as you do. It has been my greatest pleasure undertaking this project with you.
Thank you to my committee members for their support and their insights. Each of you has made an invaluable impression on my work, for which I will be eternally grateful. In particular, I would like to recognize Dr. Katherine Mellen Charron. I have always admired your kindness and conviction, which you have always freely offered to me, personally and professionally.

To my friends and colleagues: you have all been such an important part of this experience, and I appreciate every single one of you. The advice, the thoughtful feedback on my research and writing, the simple pleasures of talking passionately about history— they have eased the hardships and made the victories that much sweeter. Thank you to everyone who contributed to my work, in casual conversation, in formal workshops, in class, or at Mitch’s Tavern. Every influence made this dissertation what it is today.

Finally, thank you to the History Department at North Carolina State University, who generously funded my research, as well as Dr. David Zonderman and Dr. Tammy Gordon, who have helped emerging public historians find their place in the world. I would also like to recognize the various individuals at historic state prison museums across the country who were kind enough to participate in this study. My gratitude is endless.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES ........................................................................................................................................... ix

**Introduction: Prison Public History** ............................................................................................................. 1

- New Contributions to Prison Public History ............................................................................................. 5
- The Case Studies ........................................................................................................................................ 13
  - Ohio State Reformatory ............................................................................................................................ 17
  - West Virginia Penitentiary ........................................................................................................................ 20
  - Missouri State Penitentiary ........................................................................................................................ 23
  - Old Idaho Penitentiary ............................................................................................................................... 24
  - Old Montana Prison ................................................................................................................................... 26
  - Eastern State Penitentiary ......................................................................................................................... 28
  - The Old Joliet Prison .................................................................................................................................. 30
  - Historic Iowa State Penitentiary ................................................................................................................ 32
- Summary .................................................................................................................................................... 36

**Chapter 1: Historiographies for Historic Prison Museums** .................................................................... 38

**Chapter 2. A History of Prisons in the United States** .............................................................................. 59

- The “Punitive Turn” .................................................................................................................................... 83
- Transitions to Prison Tourism ....................................................................................................................... 91

**Chapter 3. Rehabilitations: Historic Prison Museum Making** .................................................................. 96

- Historic Prison Museums as Money Makers and Money Takers ............................................................... 101
- A Fraternal Order: Comparing Historic State Prison Museums .............................................................. 105
- Museums on a Mission ............................................................................................................................... 109
- The Search for “Authenticity” ..................................................................................................................... 114
- Interpretation (Then, Now, and Next) ................................................................. 118
- Stakeholders: Communities, Collaborators, and People of Prison.................. 124
- Salemates: Historic State Prison Museums and Community Partnerships........ 128
- Serving Time . . . Voluntarily: Volunteers and Carceral Sites........................... 130
- The Benefit of Historic Prison Museums........................................................... 132
- The Professionalization of Carceral Tourism—or Lack Thereof......................... 140
- Challenges........................................................................................................... 143

Chapter 4. Carceral Crowds: Historic Prison Museum Audiences...................... 147
- Penal Tourists..................................................................................................... 148
- Visitor Motivation............................................................................................... 158
- White Witnessing and the Racial “Othering” of Punishment............................... 163

Chapter 5. The People of Prison: Experiences and Representations of Carceral Citizens ........................................................................................................... 171
- Returned Citizens at Historic State Prison Museums......................................... 177
- Public Attitudes Towards Incarcerated Persons................................................ 187
- The Transformative Potential of Historic Carceral Tourism.............................. 190

Chapter 6. Stars in Stripes: Interpretive Themes in Historic Carceral Tourism......... 193
- Format of Tours.................................................................................................. 194
- Architectural Content........................................................................................ 201
- Interpretive Challenges....................................................................................... 220

Chapter 7. Corrections and Collections: Carceral Exhibits and Material Culture ....... 234
- The Collection.................................................................................................... 235
- The Exhibits....................................................................................................... 245
- Interpretive Approach......................................................................................... 249
The Public Imagination

Conclusion. The Final Sentence: Historic Prison Museums and the Carceral State

BIBLIOGRAPHY

APPENDICES
Appendix A: Graphs and Tables
Appendix B: Carceral Tourism Photographs
LIST OF TABLES

Summary of Historic State Prison Museums.......................................................... 35
Introduction: Prison Public History

In April 2017, the annual meeting of the National Council on Public History hosted a panel entitled “Doing Prison Public History: Examples and Challenges.” In their attempt to examine “how the histories of prisons, criminal justice, and mass incarceration are conveyed to the public,” panelists scrutinized historic prison museums and carceral sites. Using observational evidence and traditional historic research methods, panelists engaged with—and made sense of—historic carceral tourism, one of the fastest growing realms of public history. Yet, the panel achieved another, perhaps unintentional, outcome: it revealed that scholarship on such sites has failed to keep pace with the growth of historic prison museums and carceral sites. This dissertation, “Prisons in the Popular Mind: Historic Carceral Tourism and the Carceral State,” addresses this scholarly void. Through a survey of eight historic state prison museums across the United States, the following work contextualizes public history practices within the nascent historiography and, in the process, develops a preliminary theoretical framework for continued scholarship on historic prison museums and carceral sites. An examination of historic state prison museums promises to expose not only the purpose, importance, and influence of carceral tourism at public history sites, but the power and potential of public historical interpretation to address contemporary carceral issues, as well.

Many scholars abstractly or theoretically consider the development of prison tourism, their work often tracing the parallel lineage of prisons and museums, contextualizing such hybrid sites within dark tourism studies. Conversely, scholars discuss singular or limited institutional

---

case studies, often in local or international contexts without comparison to other case studies. No one has produced a survey of prison tourism in the United States, taking into consideration the similarities and dissimilarities of historic prison museums. This dissertation represents an initial step in that direction.²

Much of the scholarship on prison tourism has taken place outside academic or public history, proffered by criminologists, tourism experts, sociologists, and legal scholars. Such studies frequently expose the “broad national meanings” and “the significance of punishment conveyed in these dark tourism sites, which focus on human tragedies for education and entertainment purposes.” Implicit in this dissertation is an effort to move beyond such platitudinal conclusions to uncover the development, patterns, and scope of contemporary prison tourism as a subfield within public history. Public historians have an opportunity—if not an imperative—to contribute to this discourse. As former sites of incarceration are increasingly reimagined as museums and tourist attractions, public and traditional historians need to define, explore, and understand the origins and implications of such spaces for historical knowledge and analysis. As historian Seth Bruggeman explained, the rise of “new prison history signals an opportunity, especially for public historians, to engage Americans caught up in the carceral turn.” It also provides public historians a rare chance to engage a new frontier in terms of both practice and theory.³

Opportunity is often accompanied by challenge, and that is certainly the case with any attempt to analyze historic carceral tourism. Criminologist Jeffery Ian Ross described how prison tourism theory focuses upon many unanswered questions about historic prison museums, including: “How authentic is the experience? What type of information is disseminated and/or communicated? What purpose do these institutions serve? What kind of learning and/or entertainment experiences do visitors have? Who works in these establishments? What types of people are interested in these sites? Do tourists learn anything new and valuable, or do these sites simply reinforce existing attitudes, behaviors, and misrepresentations toward corrections?”

This dissertation answers some of these questions, embracing an emergent and significant chance to engage historic carceral tourism in the United States.

Yet, I move beyond such practical questions about the operations of historic prison sites to explore their collective impact. Historic carceral tourism is distinct from other forms of “prison public history,” meaning active sites of incarceration that are accessible to the public (such as the Cell Block 7 Museum at the State Prison of Southern Michigan) or off-site museums about prisons (for example, the Angola Museum at Louisiana State Penitentiary). Despite a lengthy history of institutional visitations and dark tourism practices, academics have yet to investigate satisfactorily the public’s ongoing fascination with prison history. Beyond offering a notable, comparative intervention in the burgeoning historiography, then, this examination of former sites of incarceration investigates the potential of historic carceral tourism to function as more than another form of historical entertainment. My dissertation asks: how do historic state

---


4 Ross, “Touring Imprisonment,” 117.
prison museums, as public history entities, contribute to the public’s understanding of the contemporary carceral state?

I propose that interpretations at historic state prison museums across the United States contribute to and perpetuate a punitive public mentality towards incarceration that contributes to the persistence of the carceral state. Former sites of incarceration commodify historic and current prison experiences in ways that distance visitors from the issues of our present moment of mass incarceration, situating incarceration exclusively within the past and, thereby, excusing visitors from considering the historical contexts of contemporary incarceration. This is because historic carceral tourism is an overwhelming white phenomenon that obscures and whitewashes the racial dynamics of past and present carceral practices. By historicizing incarceration as a phenomenon of the past and generally avoiding discussions about incarceration in the present, historic state prison museums present a heavily curated interpretation that does not educate visitors as much as it entertains them and reinforces their preconceptions. Consequently, audiences—which are also overwhelmingly white—often leave experiences with similar attitudes towards incarceration with which they entered, attitudes that are historicized but also fetishized around the idea of punishment. By commodifying the prison experience and representing historic carceral tourism as a form of entertainment and amusement, former sites of incarceration diminish the harsh realities, and human costs, of modern imprisonment.5

New Contributions to Prison Public History

“Prisons in the Popular Mind” provides origin stories for eight different historic prisons in the United States that engage in carceral tourism and operate as sites of prison public history. Examining and comparing these individual case studies allows us to identify trends in site preservation, institutional identity, and interpretation. Several of the sites have yet to receive scholarly treatment, so this study also introduces new historic prison museums into the discourse about carceral tourism.

Scholarly attempts at creating a typology, taxonomy, and/or an analytic/interpretive framework regarding sites of carceral tourism have been made before, albeit with questionable success. Most successful were criminal justice scholars Kevin Walby and Justin Piché who acknowledged difficulty in defining criteria for a “penal history museum,” but did distinguish historic prison museums from “justice museums,” “crime museums,” and “police museums.” They allowed a site’s interpretive focus to determine categorization and negotiated the differences among museums through a four-part typology consisting of fully dedicated museums, hybrid sites, peer-in sites, and rare-use sites. Jeffrey Ian Ross provided even more nuance, identifying ten categories of historic prison experiences, including “on one end of the spectrum, the highly personal experience of incarceration, and on the other end, attempts by individuals to understand and/or experience corrections without intimately engaging with the subject matter.” Although Ross argued that developing a typology is “a critical step in theory building” and in altering the perception of “prisons as remote and distant spectacles,” he admitted that, “trying to

2014). The majority of historic state prison museum managers and interpreters included in this study were white, and historic carceral tourism generally is characterized by a distinct absence of people of color.
establish a deeper appreciation of the theoretical and policy relevant aspects of prison museums is not easy.”

Much of the current literature on prison public history involves international comparison. Research on prison tourism and/or historic prison museums in other countries is much more developed than scholarship about those in the United States. Historic penitentiaries, prisons, jails, and lock-up museums have been analyzed in Canada, Australia, and South Africa. With the exception of Alcatraz Island in San Francisco, California and Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the United States remains largely understudied. Analyses of these carceral tourism sites found that they often utilize interpretive narratives that reinforce public punitiveness, and, in the process, undermine the historical and social integrity of the sites.

Robust scholarship on prison tourism, particularly in other nations, exists and can inform our understanding of American prison tourism. For example, England’s continued use of many of its Victorian prisons and the resulting research of that practice confirms how the United States is, in many ways, a distinctive case in prison tourism. According to Ross, at least in the United States, “the majority of work on prison museums has been done on selective correctional facilities that now operate as prison museums,” and “few academic, English-speaking

---

6 According to Ross, “prison museums also differ regarding the extent to which they focus on education versus entertainment.” Morin concurred, arguing that the purposes of these institutions “can range, however, across the scales of remembrance, education and study, local history and sightseeing, to pure entertainment”; see Jeffrey Ian Ross, “Varieties of Prison Voyeurism: An Analytic/Interpretive Framework.” *The Prison Journal* 95, no. 3 (2015): 399, 409, 410; Karen M. Morin, “Carceral Space and the Usable Past,” *Historical Geography* 41 (2013): 7.
publications have been produced on the decommissioned jails and prisons that now serve as museums, on the tour experience of these facilities, and on visitor reactions.” He critiqued scholars’ reluctance to compare case studies, particularly in international contexts.\(^9\) Clearly, a more comprehensive survey of historic carceral tourism in the United States is needed. Most studies that have been done are generally interpretive and composed of institutional histories, such as specific site practices. With few exceptions, extant studies omit theoretical considerations, and none provide broad, generalized overviews. Ross’s call for “more theory development in this area, including the building of an interpretive framework and/or a typology of the prison museums inspires this dissertation.\(^10\)

The survival of historic prison museums was not inevitable. Many operational prisons closed with the rise of “superjails,” incredibly large and highly regulated facilities, as well as the modernization and modification of existing prisons. For instance, in the mid-1960s, during the closure of Alcatraz Island in San Francisco, repurposing it as a prison museum became a low priority, superseded by commercial and recreational uses that would have erased its historical contexts and messages.\(^11\) Bruggeman explained how, after the decommissioning of Eastern State


\(^10\) Strange and Kempa, “Shades of Dark Tourism,” 389. Ross explains that many studies on carceral tourism have consisted of on-site fieldwork, including participant observation and interviews, as well as archival work; see Ross, “Touring Imprisonment,” 114.

Penitentiary in Philadelphia, “the racial politics of the US mass incarceration system, expressed in part through the reconfiguration of urban space during the late twentieth century,” made imperative its transition into a historic prison museum. The possibility of transforming decommissioned and abandoned prisons are abandoned into penal history museums is just one of many potential fates.

Preserving the historical character of a decommissioned prison, however, is not necessarily a good thing. From reproducing architecture, remodeling the grounds, repositioning artifacts inside the site, and reframing the prison or jail in the community, carceral retasking “continues to reproduce imprisonment as a dominant idea and/or material practice.” As Walby and Piché explained, “acts of restoration and reclamation add symbolic relevance to old stones and steel bars, creating local attachment to buildings that decades earlier would have been considered community eyesores or had a very different meaning in the years when they deprived individuals of liberty.” Ironically, perhaps, buildings that once served as sites of pain and stigmatization become venues for family and community recreation. Carceral retasking, then, can be understood as a remaking, not of the physical structure of decommissioned prisons, but of the personality and public suitability of these sites.12

Responding to a call for action prompted by past and present scholars on historic carceral tourism, “Prisons in the Popular Mind” fills a historiographical void, providing a broad overview

while also addressing the absence of site-specific analyses about which carceral geographer Karen M. Morin complained when she wrote that much of the scholarship “has also been to some extent space- and place-blind.” Americans have an unusual historical relationship with the imprisoned and with the buildings that confined them. The consequence is that “questions of narrative ‘choice’, and concomitant narrative exclusion, are of especial moment.”

The historic state prison museums examined in this study consist of fully dedicated museums typically housed in decommissioned carceral locations. They serve as main attractions, in contrast to former prisons that only partially address carceral history or those that have been repurposed as restaurants and hotels. These case studies also offer some form of planned historic carceral tourism, such as guided tours and exhibits. Fully dedicated museums are set apart by their architecture and spatial organization, which is generally similar to when the sites were decommissioned, allowing site managers to claim the “authenticity of carceral encounters as visitors pass through them, which cannot be claimed about sites that have been transformed to suit other purposes.”

“Prisons in the Popular Mind” also applies interdisciplinary methods to understand the development and meaning of historic prison museums and penal tourism. I employ a version of

---


geographer Richard H. Schein’s “genealogical approach” to historical geography. It entails four steps: documenting the creation and development of the landscape; examining the individual and collective meaning of the landscape for those connected to it; analyzing the facilitative role of the landscape in terms of social, cultural, political, and economic considerations; and asking “how the landscape works to normalize/naturalize social and cultural practice, to reproduce those practices, as well as provide a means to challenge those practices.” I consider the criteria of Nuala C. Johnson, an expert on society, space, and culture, who emphasizes understanding a site’s origin and context, as well as the selection and ordering of the site’s narratives, changes to the site over time, and current visitor and/or participant reactions.\footnote{Matthew Ferguson, Justin Piché, Kevin Walby, “Bridging or Fostering Social Distance? An Analysis of Penal Spectator Comments on Canadian Penal History Museums,”} Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal 11, no. 3 (2015): 357-74; Nuala Johnson, “Where Geography and History Meet: Heritage Tourism and the Big House in Ireland,” Annals of the Association of American Geographers 86, no. 3 (1996): 551–566; Morin and Moran, “Introduction,” 7-8; Walby and Piché, “Carceral Retasking and the Work of Historical Societies at Decommissioned Lock-Ups, Jails, and Prisons in Ontario,” 83; Richard H. Schein, “A Methodological Framework for Interpreting Ordinary Landscapes,” Geographical Review 99, no. 3 (2009): 377-402. Unlike other scholarship, including that of Turner and Peters, this dissertation does not address online visitor reviews or assess virtual/digital forms of interpretation; Jennifer Turner and Kimberley Peters, “Doing Time-Travel: Performing Past and Present at the Prison Museum,” in Morin and Moran, eds., Historical Geographies of Prisons, 83. In their work on Canadian prison tourism, Walby and Piché’s methodologies emphasize the backgrounds of various sites, as well as the packaging and presentation of narratives, and importantly, the “role of historical societies and heritage management groups in arranging these spaces to arrive at the shape they have taken in the present.” When combined with historical research and public history analysis, “Prisons in the Public Mind” acknowledges and responds to Morin and Dominique Moran’s argument that “a usable past can emerge through a subtle framing of the relationship between the
past and the present . . . through the integrated study of broad connections and specific contexts.”

Meaningfully, the “new prison history” deliberately addresses questions about race, class, and incarceration. Historic prison museums are especially important foci in examining the carceral state because they represent spaces where general publics, especially those who comprise typical museumgoers, encounter incarceration. Hence, historic carceral tourism’s ability and tendency to normalize the carceral state demonstrates active compliance with maintaining, instead of opposing, trends of mass incarceration. As a result, even if these sites’ embrace of actively intervening has been slow and incomplete, historic prison museums are poised for activist intervention in ways that other aspects of carceral studies are not. For instance, historic prison museums have the potential to comment on contemporary issues, such as mass incarceration, based on the history and symbolism that the facilities continue to possess.

Traditionally, histories of prisons have been organized according to events, people, space, and chronology. Morin suggested that the “[m]ost critical research on American prisons attempts to understand them by first of all highlighting key historical events such as: trends in criminal justice structures, sentencing laws, and the courts; changes in penal philosophies; the decades-long War on Drugs; prison resistance movements; changes in American government legislation

---


17 For instance, according to Morin, there are currently “many, many books about prisons . . ., and yet what strikes me most about them is how relatively little impact all this academic work over the last forty years seems to have had on stemming the tide of hyper-incarceration levels”; Morin, “Carceral Space and the Usable Past,” 2.
and economics which have driven it from a welfare state to a security state; prison labor practices; victims’ rights movements and the politics of a conservative ‘tough on crime’ stance; and the various demographic and other impacts of mass incarceration on prisoners’ families.”

Notable prison studies have also focused on the individuals who have shaped the narratives of prisoner experiences. Historical geographers have often employed “prison space” or “time-space” to analyze prison histories, in contrast to historians and other scholars who, according to Moran, tend to focus on time as the most important dimension of prison life. For instance, Jennifer Turner and Kimberley Peters have explained that their interpretive experiences “moved linearly through time while also experiencing overlapping time periods in the same space.”

While there are many ways to approach, structure, and understand histories of imprisonment, “Prisons in the Public Mind” is organized thematically. Each chapter addresses a separate topic related to historic state prison museums, as well as their histories and current interpretations, considering aspects of time, events, space, and personalities.

---

19 Morin and Moran, “Introduction,” 2; Turner and Peters, “Doing Time-Travel,” 72; Morin, “Carceral Space and the Usable Past,” 6. Morin suggested that this can be accomplished in three ways: “(1) in the study of the nature of the spaces of incarceration, individuals’ experiences within them, and their regulatory regimes and systems of punishment; (2) in the study of the locational or distributional geographies of carceral systems, particularly with respect to their impact on community economic development; and (3) in the study of the relationship between the carceral and an increasingly punitive state”; Morin, “Carceral Space and the Usable Past,” 2-3.
The Case Studies

As states decommissioned prisons, heated debate arose regarding their fates. Local or state preservation groups often played significant roles in determining their reuse and interpretation. Formerly off limits to the public, historic prisons became incredibly popular with late twentieth-century audiences. Public fascination continues, as evidenced by the rise and continuing popularity of former prisons as tourist destinations. Yet, historians have been slow in examining the interpretive and activist potentials for such public history venues. With millions of annual visitors, former sites of incarceration possess exceptional possibilities for commenting simultaneously on historic and contemporary social issues.  

“Prisons in the Popular Mind” examines eight historic prison museums, each in a different phase of preservation and development, as representative case studies of the preservation and museumification of historic prisons. They are the Ohio State Reformatory in Mansfield; the West Virginia Penitentiary in Moundsville; Missouri State Penitentiary in Jefferson City; the Old Idaho Penitentiary in Boise; the Montana State Prison in Deer Lodge; Eastern State Penitentiary outside Philadelphia; Old Joliet Prison in Joliet, Illinois; and the Historic Iowa State Penitentiary in Fort Madison, Iowa (see Appendix B).

Immediately notable is that many of these historic prison museums look alike, and are consistent in size, scale, and aesthetic. Gothic Revival and Romanesque features often dominate


21 To date, there is no comprehensive list of historic state prison museums. Ross also acknowledged that fact that there is currently “no database exists that systematically lists all the prison museums and includes relevant data on the operation of these institutions”; Ross, “Touring Imprisonment,” 114, 115.
the exteriors. They appear distinctly grandiose, historical, and institutional, often sharing architectural styles and occasionally replicating architectural patterns. For example, the Old Joliet Prison inspired the design of the West Virginia Penitentiary. These carceral sites also often share chronologies of development. The majority of American prisons arose during the nineteenth century, almost 37 percent of them opening between 1801 and 1850, and another 40 percent over the following half century. Many remain operational today, including San Quentin State Prison in California (1852), and the Auburn Correctional Facility (1818) and Sing Sing Correctional Facility (1826), both in New York. Historic carceral tourism—formally or informally—began at almost all of these sites in the last decades of the twentieth century or soon after the turn of the twenty-first century. The entities responsible for their preservation—historic groups, community members, and city officials—varied, as do the current managers of these museumified spaces. Additionally, financial resources, staff sizes, and locales differentiate them.

A careful reader may recognize the geographical dispersal of the eight prison museums: they represent all regions of the United States except the South (see Figure 1 in Appendix A). The carceral geography of the United States underscores the notable absence of historic prison museums in the South. Some scholars argue that, before 1865, plantations supplemented, indeed may have characterized, imprisonment in the South. By the onset of the Civil War, most southern states erected penitentiaries and reformatories. Only North Carolina, South Carolina, and Florida lacked a state penal facility. The institutions held white male prisoners since most African Americans remained regulated and controlled by enslavement, trapped on what historian Edward Baptist labelled “slave labor camps.” After 1865, however, state prisons began to resemble the old plantation system, looking little like the brick-and-mortar fortresses of the North. Particularly after 1877 when white southerners “redeemed” their states, African Americans filled the
penitentiaries, providing a captive labor force, once plantation-based, that now served the needs of the state through convict-lease and on chain gangs. Not surprisingly, during the late 1860s, the three southern states that had no penitentiaries before the war constructed their facilities and took advantage of imprisoned labor.\textsuperscript{22}

The South built its penitentiaries simultaneous to those constructed in the North, and yet, although there are several intact prison campuses throughout the region that could have been preserved, as of 2019, the South offered minimal carceral tourism and none in historic prison museums. Historic carceral tourism may be found throughout the South. Historic slave labor camps are found in every former Confederate state, most avoiding or refusing to interpret the perspectives of the enslaved. As throughout the rest of the nation, there are local historic jails such as the Mills County Old Jail Museum in Goldthwaite, Texas and the Moore County Old Jail Museum in Lynchburg, Tennessee, but they do little with state-level issues of incarceration, racialization, and labor. A few state prisons have drawn tourist interest. After five decades of relying on convict leasing from a privately-owned prison camp at the Angola Plantation, Louisiana purchased the farm in 1900 and enlarged the campus in 1976. Still housing the state’s prisoners, part of the penitentiary converted to the Angola Museum in 1997. The site does not present itself as a historic prison museum, however. Parchman Farm, Mississippi’s notorious

state penitentiary, also remains a functioning prison but is integrated into the state’s Blues Trail, a cultural heritage program that celebrates the prison for its inspiration of songs like “Parchman Farm Blues” by former inmate Booker “Bukka” White, and “Parchman Farm” by jazz pianist Mose Allison.23

More broadly, in terms of converting potential sites into actual prison museums, southern state penitentiaries posed specific problems. Often constructed of less durable materials than northern and western prisons, they were difficult and costly to preserve, and because many of them sprawled across hundreds of acres of farmland instead of being in compact, brick-and-mortar buildings, they were difficult and costly to preserve. They also proffered an interpretive challenge: because curators and visitors had to wrestle with the sites’ highly racialized pasts, they faced the ominous challenge of reflecting on the region’s continuing racial legacies. As the reluctance of southern plantation museums to reckon fully with slavery or its legacies demonstrates, this has remained too heavy a burden for most Americans. Curators and interpreters’ attempts to tackle these questions at sites beyond the South, where racial dynamics were less evident, are at the heart of this dissertation.24

---

The sites included in this study, then, represent the North, Midwest, and West. Although institutional histories have been written about several of them, only Eastern State Penitentiary has been evaluated routinely as “prison public history,” often in comparative international contexts. This narrow focus disregards the numerous other sites engaging in historic carceral tourism throughout the United States. Thus, “Prisons in the Popular Mind” promises a significant and timely intervention in prison public history, specifically exposing the extent to which former sites of incarceration idealize or exoticize the carceral experience, and how they engage with contemporary issues of mass incarceration.

Ohio State Reformatory, Mansfield, Ohio

In November 1886, construction began on the Ohio State Reformatory (originally named the Intermediate Penitentiary) in Mansfield. The first group of incarcerated people arrived in

---


26 The following analysis is based on participant observation, on-site fieldwork, archival research, and interviews that took place at numerous historic prison museums between July 2018 and January 2019. My early research also included Alcatraz Island in San Francisco. I chose to exclude Alcatraz because it was too incompatible with my other survey samples; for instance, Alcatraz operated as a federal prison (not a state prison) and is currently funded and managed by the National Park Service, which is a federal agency (and not a state, city, or volunteer organization).
September 1896 to an unfinished prison, and the Reformatory would not be completed until 1919. Conditions at the institution did not improve, with maintenance issues plaguing much of the prison’s history. Yet problems with the prison’s upkeep peaked in 1978 when The Counsel for Human Dignity, a coalition of religious and civic groups, filed a federal complaint that the facility’s conditions were “abusing and merciless.” A federal court instructed the prison to discontinue operations by 1986, but the Ohio State Reformatory did not officially close until 1990. The prison housed approximately 155,000 inmates during its ninety-four years of operation. It decommissioned in December 1990. At the time of the institution’s closure, “no one was trying to save or preserve” the prison. But according to Becky McKinnell, collections manager at the Ohio State Reformatory, the prison “caught the attention of Hollywood during the 1970s and again in the 1990s.” In 1994, the Ohio State Reformatory gained some notoriety as the set for the movie Shawshank Redemption, but otherwise it stood idle both before and after the filming. Despite its addition to the National Register of Historic Places in 1983, the Ohio State Reformatory did not receive any protections. McKinnell described how initially “the plan was to tear down the entire prison facility. But after it was determined there was enough room to build the two new prisons on the grounds of the honor farm and the yard, the main building could be saved.”

---

The Mansfield Reformatory Preservation Society, a local organization of self-identified historic preservationists, formed in 1994 “with the determination of reinstating the prison to its original state” and with the goal of using the site for tourism purposes. Originally, the prison provided critical employment for Mansfield residents, and also constituted a large part of the town’s identity. Located approximately sixty-five miles outside of Columbus, in the north-central portion of the state, the city of Mansfield contained a population of approximately 50,600 residents in 1990. The city’s population was predominately white (at nearly 81 percent). Occupationally, the majority of residents worked in managerial and professional specializations, technical, sales, and administrative support, or in precision production, craft, and repair. In 1990, the same year as the prison’s closure, the average Mansfield household earned a median income of a little over $23,000. Approximately 15 percent of residents survived below the poverty line. At that time, only 17 percent of Mansfield residents were high school graduates, and nine percent were unemployed.

After the prison’s closure, the nonprofit, which consisted mostly of middle-class, white volunteers, moved to acquire and preserve the prison. Dan Seckel, an architect and member of the Mansfield Reformatory Preservation Society, explained the group’s interest and rationale in the project in 1996: “It’s a natural attraction. It’s going to be someplace for people to go.” In their coverage of the prison’s restoration, Mansfield journalist Lou Whitmire reported that “the goal of the society is to create something fun in Mansfield,” Around 1997, the facility opened for

tours, and the state of Ohio essentially shifted responsibility for the prison to the Mansfield Reformatory Preservation Society.\textsuperscript{30}

Over the next two decades, “the Reformatory [was] cleaned, preserved, and restored by the MRPS, volunteers, and staff of the OSR,” explained Shannon Lusk, former curator at the reformatory. As Lusk noted, local “people love and value the history of this institution so much, they work all year round to help improve the conditions of the building so that the public is able to tour this magnificent building and understand what it was like to live and work within these confines.” Those involved in the Mansfield Reformatory Preservation Society officially acquired the site in 2000 from the state of Ohio, which auctioned the building for only $1.00. The Society continues as a 501(c)(3) organization to preserve, restore, and interpret the site for the public.\textsuperscript{31}

\textit{West Virginia Penitentiary (Moundsville Penitentiary), Moundsville, West Virginia}

Construction of the West Virginia Penitentiary began in 1866. From its opening in 1876 until its closing in 1995, the West Virginia Penitentiary witnessed “riots, fires and the execution of nearly 100 prisoners through either hanging or electrocution.” After a particularly notable riot in the 1980s, the Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia deemed the facility’s conditions inhumane and unconstitutional, which led to its closure.

Census data paints a bleak economic picture of Moundsville in the late twentieth century, even before the prison’s decommission which had benefited from an annual budget of eight million dollars. In 1990, only 64 percent of Moundsville residents had completed high school, and more than 9 percent were unemployed. After the closure of nearby coal mines, over one-

\textsuperscript{31} Lusk, “Redemption,” 28-29.
third of the city’s employed residents worked in technical, sales, and administrative support occupations, although more than 16 percent lived below the poverty line. Like other rural, carceral towns, the local population was overwhelmingly white, but at 99 percent, Moundsville differed in that it was almost exclusively white, as well as working class.  

Unlike the twenty-year evolution of the Ohio State Reformatory, the transition from prison to historic site at the West Virginia Penitentiary was immediate. The site began offering public tours in 1996. The headline of a Los Angeles Times article explained why: “Town uses former prison to escape hard times: Residents of Moundsville, W. Va., are hoping penitentiary’s notorious past will draw visitors, tourist dollars.” Some critics, including an inmate named Robert Leach, balked at the idea. Considering “the pen’s history,” reasoned Leach, “I don’t know why the public would want anything to do with it.” Other community members were more confident that, like Alcatraz Island in San Francisco, the prison might appeal to tourists, and “indeed captivate the public and provide a much-needed source of revenue.”

After its closure, the West Virginia Penitentiary was, and continues to be, owned by the state, although in February 1997 the Department of Corrections signed a Letter of Understanding with a local nonprofit, the Moundsville Economic Development Council, to lease the penitentiary for twenty-five years at the “sum of $10.” The Moundsville Economic Development Council initially consisted of sixty volunteers who banded together with the intention of reviving the town. Five former corrections officers offered their services as tour guides at the defunct prison. The lease allowed the Council “to occupy the old main prison complex” for the

---

33 David Lamb, “Town uses former prison to escape hard times: Residents of Moundsville, W. Va., are hoping penitentiary’s notorious past will draw visitors, tourist dollars,” Los Angeles Times, January 18, 1996.
“advancement of tourism, promotion of the general economy of Marshall County and to conduct the general business affairs of the council.” In January 2004, the Department and Council entered into a new lease that also included the National Corrections and Law Enforcement Training and Technology Center.\textsuperscript{34}

The Council Director estimated that, as a museum, “over the last twenty-two years the Penitentiary has welcomed nearly one million visitors.” Current site managers take full responsibility, as well as credit, for the prison’s survival. According to Tim Stiles, Director of Operations, the prison is in “good shape because of [the Council’s] own interest in the building.” The Moundsville Economic Development Council’s interest in the project was not merely economic, it was also motivated by personal, even nostalgic, concerns about the former prison.

Josh White, a corrections officer at the Moundsville Penitentiary for over two decades, explained that “Basically my job was to make sure they didn’t kill anyone or escape. That was it. But somehow it was a job you took pride in, though that’s hard to explain to outsiders.”\textsuperscript{35}

Although the 2004 lease remains in effect through 2028, the Council itself has struggled to remain viable. The Internal Revenue Service revoked its 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status for failing to file appropriate forms, and the Department of Corrections responded by insisting a new


\textsuperscript{35} Guided Tour, West Virginia Penitentiary, July 26, 2018; Tom Stiles interview by author, Moundsville, WV, July 27, 2018; Lamb, “Town uses former prison to escape hard times.”
Memorandum of Understanding in 2013, situating the Department to terminate the lease without cause, contingent on the Council providing written notice at least thirty days prior to termination.\textsuperscript{36}

\textit{Missouri State Penitentiary, Jefferson City, Missouri}

The Missouri State Penitentiary, located in downtown Jefferson City across the street from the federal courthouse, began operations in 1836 and housed 4,900 prisoners at its peak. Missouri State Penitentiary closed in September 2004 after 168 years, making it, according to Mark Schreiber, former deputy warden at the functional prison, the “oldest continually operating facility West of the Mississippi.” It immediately became a site of public interest. “One weekend right after closing the public was invited in,” Schreiber continued, and an “estimated thirty thousand people visited during that weekend.”\textsuperscript{37}

Interest in developing the prison as a site of public interest emerged at the time it ceased operations, as well. Soon after the prison’s closure, the Missouri State Penitentiary Redevelopment Commission formed, with members appointed by the Governor, the mayor, and the county commission. The Commission eventually developed a Master Plan to determine how to best preserve the Missouri State Penitentiary. The commission hosted “a forum where experts on development came in (such as architects and planners) and shared their ideas on the Missouri State Penitentiary site. We also brought in people from Jefferson City, from the community, such as businessmen, government officials, and architects. The Master Plan is a composite of all the best ideas from these different groups. Ideas included abatement of lead paint and asbestos, new

\textsuperscript{36} West Virginia Office of the Legislative Auditor, \textit{Legislative Audit Report}.

\textsuperscript{37} Mark Schreiber interview by author, Jefferson City, MO, September 22, 2018; Sheila Sanford and Diane Gillespie, interview by author, Jefferson City, MO, August 27, 2018.
roof, and some other things to benefit the structure.” The state of Missouri continued to own the site, but in the 2000s, it entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with Jefferson City, designating the Jefferson City Convention and Visitors Bureau as the group to manage and operate the prison. An early director of the convention and visitors’ bureau, “was persistent and went every month and asked to save the site,” until the city “decided to take a chance and let them [the Visitor’s Bureau] try it.” As a result, in 2009, the Visitor’s Bureau officially began offering tours of the site. Originally, administrators “thought the tours would last one year, and as of 2013 future tours were not guaranteed.” However, the city and state coordinated to fix the site’s environmental issues, including lead paint and asbestos removal. Afterward, the city and Visitor’s Bureau agreed upon a fifteen-year lease with two additional five-year options. Current guided tours explore four historic buildings, with possibilities for interpreting other structures in the future.

*Old Idaho Penitentiary (Old Idaho Prison), Boise, Idaho*

In 1872, the Old Idaho Penitentiary opened, incarcerating more than thirteen thousand individuals over the next century, including men, women, and children. However, no more than six hundred people resided there at any given time. The site operated for 101 years before closing in January 1973. By that time, “it was antiquated and outdated in every sense . . . [in]

---

38 Schreiber interview.

39 In 2013, the site closed for environmental issues, and the Memorandum of Agreement was for a nine-month period. The Memorandum stated that tours could operate from March to November. It is unclear if the Visitor’s Bureau had an agreement for 2014. In terms of a preservation plan, the “historic buildings will stay as is, but other elements of the campus will likely change”; Schreiber interview; Sanford and Gillespie interview.
short, the rising prison population, growth of the city and state, and higher standards in corrections made the move completely necessary.”

The prison decommissioned in December 1973 and was managed by the Department of Corrections until the state turned the Old Idaho Penitentiary over to the Idaho State Historical Society in December 1974. Earlier that year, the *Idaho State Journal* speculated on the historical society’s plans to transform the former prison into “an imaginative cultural-recreational-commercial center.” The hope was to capitalize on the penitentiary by converting it into “one of the state’s outstanding attractions,” complete with dining, shopping, recreation, and cultural offerings. Hoping to excite popular interest and encourage visitation, a publicity release from the state agency supposedly claimed that “the atmosphere of the penitentiary complex is that of a restful oasis for pedestrians.”

Even before its closure, the prison had become a site of tourism. According to Jacey Brain, an interpretive specialist at the site, management “gave tours of the facility when it was opened as a prison, in order to make money.” The desire to profit from the prison continued after its closure, and one local newspaper article, though skeptical, conceded that “the only way to preserve historic buildings is to make them income-producing.” And in Boise, there was increasing opportunity to attract not only out-of-town visitors, but also local residents, as the city’s population continued to surge. In 1970, a few years before the prison’s closure, the city of

Boise boasted almost 75,000 residents; by 1980, that number had grown to more than 102,000.\(^{42}\) Interestingly, the Old Idaho Penitentiary is one of the few historic prison museums still owned and operated by a state entity.

*Old Montana Prison (Montana’s Territorial Prison), Deer Lodge, Montana*

The Old Montana Prison, located in Deer Lodge, was the first territorial prison in the Western United States and Montana Territory’s first federal facility, opening in 1871 and operating for over 130 years before closing in 1979. Throughout its operational years, the prison was “plagued with overcrowding, insufficient funds, and antiquated facilities.” In 1970, Warden W. James Estelle confessed that the state was “spending too much just maintaining the physical institution,” and a newspaper reporter described the prison as “old, and in many areas badly worn,” and structurally “well below the average national standards.” In 1976, the Old Montana Prison joined the National Register for Historic Places, and although it was still an operational carceral facility, its listing clearly indicated that its historical value had become a point of local interest.\(^ {43}\)

Even as Powell County, in which Deer Lodge is located, maintained a little over 6,600 to 6,900 residents between 1970 and 1990, Deer Lodge itself lost approximately 20 percent of its population, declining from about 4,300 citizens in 1970 to around 3,400 in 1990. That same year, 97 percent of the residents Deer Lodge identified as white. These findings echo the reports of

---


other census records, which reveal that four of Montana’s largest cities—Billings, Butte, Great Falls, and Helena—also ranged from 97 to 98 percent white, a consistent demography across the state.\textsuperscript{44}

Local white residents staffed the prison, and in 1970, Warden Estelle spared no compliments for his employees, exclaiming that, “when a state can pay as little as we pay (\$417 a month to start) and get the commitment and dedication that we get . . . They’re just damn good people.” In 1972, just a few years before its closure, the “Deer Lodge Prison” employed 107 correctional officers, in addition to a treatment staff of 36 people, and an administrative and maintenance staff of 76 men and women. In total, 219 people worked at the prison, making it a sizeable employer in a town of 4,300 residents. However, the pay was still modest and the benefits were almost nonexistent. As one reporter observed, the state “doesn’t offer [staff] free housing, fancy fringe benefits or big salaries . . . they must get satisfaction from their work or it wouldn’t be worthwhile.” With limited employment opportunities, however, prison guards and staff, to some degree, took advantage of what was available to them locally.\textsuperscript{45}

In 1980, a local nonprofit organization, The Powell County Museum and Arts Foundation, agreed to a ninety-nine-year lease with the state on the Old Montana Prison. That same year, newly minted historical site first welcomed tourists, and Montana architect James R.


McDonald created a Historic Structures Report in 1981. Between 1980 and 1984, more than one hundred Deer Lodge residents volunteered to usher tourists around the former prison, completing a total of four thousand tours. One couple—Earl and Ramona Wahl—guided 197 tours alone, and Edward Towe escorted 114 groups through the facility. Volunteers proved essential to the early success of the site. According to Kristi Hartley, who managed tour guide training, “we certainly didn’t have the money to pay people” but contributing to town’s new tourist attraction “caught on in the community.” With seemingly endless public appeal, the Old Montana Prison offered up to ten tours per day. In 1984 the site switched to a self-guided tour format in order to accommodate an even greater number of guests, and eventually that became the site’s default tour offering. The Powell County Museum and Arts Foundation continues to operate and interpret not only the carceral spaces but also tangential spaces like the Montana Auto Museum, Yesterday’s Playthings, Frontier Montana, Cottonwood City, and the Powell County Museum.46

_Eastern State Penitentiary, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania_

One of the most historically influential prisons in terms of architecture and penal philosophy, Eastern State Penitentiary opened in 1829 and is one of the oldest facilities contained in this study. An estimated eighty thousand men and women served time throughout the site’s history.47 In 1958, the city of Philadelphia recognized the institution as a historic property, even as it remained an operational prison. In 1965, it became a National Historic

---


Landmark. Eastern State Penitentiary closed in 1970, its prisoners transferred to Graterford Prison and other prisons, and the city of Philadelphia purchased it for $400,000. After decommissioning, Eastern State Penitentiary experienced a “period of abandonment” between 1971 and 1991, during which weather and vandalism took a toll on the site. Several developers submitted proposals to repurpose the prison, hoping to capitalize on its location, size, and aesthetic, but little came of them. Numerous suggestions of demolishing the building arose in the 1980s and 1990s.48

Eventually, the Eastern State Penitentiary Task Force formed in 1988 with the intention of saving the historic site, and preservation efforts began in earnest in 1991. A Halloween fundraiser was the first public event in 1991, and the popular Terror Behind the Walls fundraiser has subsequently evolved into one of the nation’s most popular “haunted house” attractions, tapping into the prison’s dark history. Every fall, the museum offers a controversial program over seven weeks annually, attracting over 100,000 visitors and netting upwards of one million dollars. The penitentiary opened for daily public tours in 1994, and permanent museum exhibits followed in 1996.

The prison is currently under the auspices of Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site, Inc., a nonprofit group that evolved from the original task force in 1998. The nonprofit assumed control of Eastern State Penitentiary in 2001, and the place of an earlier local interest group, the Prison Society, had held with the city of Philadelphia. Today, the nonprofit is in the midst of a twenty-year lease, renewable for an additional nine years and eleven months. Sally Elk, President and CEO, explained that the arrangement is preferable to outright ownership, as the public

---

should own a site of such historical significance.\textsuperscript{49} Under Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site, Inc., curators and docents have expanded exhibits and programming, marketing the penitentiary as “the nation’s most historic prison.” As one of the most successful examples of carceral tourism, the nonprofit has raised $14 million in preservation funding since 1994, and Eastern State Penitentiary has experienced global visitorship of approximately 3.5 million people.\textsuperscript{50}

\textit{The Old Joliet Prison, Joliet, Illinois}

Opening in 1858, the Joliet Correctional Center incarcerated more than 86,000 people over approximately 140 years, including female prisoners from 1859 to 1896. At its peak, the prison housed 1,800 inmates. The more “modern” institution replaced Illinois’s first state prison in Alton. When the facility closed in 2002, the state effectively abandoned the site, and current tour scripts indicate that the building suffered as a result of vandals, arsonists, trespassers, and salvagers. Still, the state chose negligence over demolition because it would have “cost too much money to tear the building down.”\textsuperscript{51}

In 2000, a mere two years before the closure of the Old Joliet Prison, the population of Joliet was around 106,000 people. Unlike other rural, carceral towns, at the time the more urban Joliet qualified as one of Illinois’s “Fastest Growing Cities by Net Change,” exploding from

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{49} Sally Elk, interview by author, Philadelphia, January 28, 2019.
\end{thebibliography}
close to 77,000 residents a decade earlier. Given its proximity to populous Chicago, Joliet also
represented one of the more racially diverse carceral cities in this study, with just over 69 percent
of its citizens identifying as white.\(^2\)

As the facility devolved into a local eye sore, its condition prompted the city of Joliet to
take control in 2017, signing a five-year lease with the state that includes the Joliet Prison and
the Women’s Prison. In partnership with the city, museum leaders identified community partners
and formed a public/private partnership, The Old Joliet Prison Preservation Coalition.
Participants were motivated to repurpose the iconic prison for several reasons, including a certain
sentimentality for the site. As one reporter summarized in 2002, “Despite the riots, lockdowns
and infamous conditions, Joliet had a certain cachet, and some people—even inmates—will miss
the joint.” Summarizing the experience for both guards, staff, prisoners, and community
members, one inmate described how, “In a way, you’re saying goodbye to a piece of you.
You’ve done so much here. You have so many memories.”\(^3\) The desire for a continuation of
those stories and experiences motivated many to contribute to the site’s preservation.

In a more official capacity, the city and county’s involvement stemmed from financial
interests, as governmental leaders sought creative solutions to recent economic woes. Ralph
Schultz, of the Forest Preserve District of Will County (one of the coalition partners),
characterized the Joliet community as experiencing “a lot of stress,” due to declining jobs and
income. Revitalization of the Old Joliet Prison offered the town an opportunity to capitalize on

\(^2\) Illinois Economic and Fiscal Commission, “Ten Largest Cities” and “Fastest Growing Cities
and profit from its association with the historic prison. As one reporter concluded about such undertakings, “Joliet, a city known for its prison, is about to get a new distinction.\textsuperscript{54}

The Collins Street Task Force, a multi-partner collaboration, emerged as a result, asking how preserving the prison could “have a positive effect on the community.” Since the prison sat in a heavily commercial part of Joliet that included niche markets, planners considered not only use of historic and open spaces but economic development, as well. The Task Force sought grants and, given its location approximately forty miles away, worked with Chicago Metropolitan Planning to produce a vision and plan for the historic site. Currently, the city is experimenting with different uses for the prison, and in order to ensure that their ongoing involvement in the site’s management is feasible. As evidenced by other historic prisons, however, redevelopment takes time. At Joliet, according to Schultz, “when we’re looking at this site, we’re looking at a twenty-five- to thirty-year timeline, from acquisition, clean up, to phased development as funding and cleanup allows.”\textsuperscript{55}

\textit{Historic Iowa State Penitentiary, Fort Madison, Iowa}

Like many other historic state prisons, the Historic Iowa State Penitentiary (formerly the Iowa State Penitentiary) has seen better days. One journalist claimed that, “[o]nce the oldest operating prison west of the Mississippi, the facility is now empty, falling apart, and waiting for


\textsuperscript{55} Private Tour, Joliet Prison, September 18, 2018; Ralph Schultz interview by author, Joliet, IL, September 18, 2018.
its next chapter.”56 The original, all-male Iowa State Penitentiary opened its doors in 1839 and closed in 2015, plagued with “lots of issues.” Most notably, the Iowa Department of Corrections realized it would have to construct a new prison after a highly publicized 2005 prisoner escape from the aged institution. The state reasoned it was “cheaper to build a new prison than retrofit the old one.” As a result, in 2006, state government sponsored a systemic study to assess the old Iowa Penitentiary project. According to Rebecca Bowker, a current Department of Corrections public information officer, the old facility cost approximately $1,000 per day as it sat empty. Maintenance stopped in 2008. Bowker explained how local residents then “recognized different things need to happen, including a historic structures report, but reports are not cheap.” In 2015, the Historic Iowa State Penitentiary, Inc., a local nonprofit, formed when it became apparent that the city of Fort Madison could not officially or permanently acquire the site.57

Tours and programs at the Historic Iowa State Penitentiary are few. When offered, they mimic those that occur at other sites of carceral tourism. In May 2017, around 5,000 people attended a food drive in order to view the historic prison. According to Bowker, 3,500 people joined the first official prison tour, and approximately 2,400 to 2,500 visitors participated in two subsequent tours. These are relatively impressive numbers, considering that Fort Madison, the town in which the former penitentiary is located, maintained a consistent population of approximately 11,000 to 11,600 people from 1990 to 2010. Located over eighty miles from Iowa City, only about 59 percent of Fort Madison’s qualifying population are in the civilian labor force, and the median household income in the area is approximately $42,000. Based on

population estimates from 2019, the town is nearly 94 percent white, and over 16 percent of residents live in poverty.\(^5^8\)

Technically, the Historic Iowa State Penitentiary does not currently qualify as a dedicated historic state prison museum. The site differs from many other facilities in that it is not a fully functioning historic prison museum but rather a former historic state prison that engages in carceral tourism with the intention of expanding that tourism.\(^5^9\) Arguably, its most notable feature is the active managerial role that the Iowa Department of Corrections continues to play in the site’s reuse, particularly its sustainability. Bowker conceded that, as of 2019, “tourism is a small part of the overall plan,” and to survive as a viable tourist site, the facility needs “a multiuse strategy.” Concerns about sustainability have grown as tour participation decreased. Whereas ticket sales for previous tours averaged around one thousand, only about three hundred tickets sold for the 2019 event, a decline that Bowker attributed to a limited marketing area and low-threshold marketing strategies, consisting mostly of social media posts and newsletter announcements.\(^6^0\)


\(^5^9\) This distinction is important, considering Walby and Piché’s typology of carceral sites, which include fully dedicated museums, hybrid sites, peer-in sites, and rare-use sites; Walby and Piché, “Making Meaning out of Punishment,” 484.

\(^6^0\) Bowker interview.
## Sampling of Historic State Prison Museums

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prison Site</th>
<th>Date Opened (Prison)</th>
<th>Date Closed (Prison)</th>
<th>Date Opened (Tourism)</th>
<th>Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>West Virginia Penitentiary</td>
<td>1876</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Twenty-five-year lease between the Moundsville Economic Development Council and state of West Virginia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missouri State Penitentiary</td>
<td>1836</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Memorandum of Understanding between Jefferson City and state of Missouri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old Idaho Penitentiary</td>
<td>1872</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>1975</td>
<td>Owned and operated by the state of Idaho</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old Montana Prison</td>
<td>1871</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Ninety-nine-year lease between the Powell County Museum and Arts Foundation and the state of Montana</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sampling of Historic State Prison Museums, cont.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Museum</th>
<th>Year Started</th>
<th>Year Closed</th>
<th>Year Closed</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eastern State Penitentiary</td>
<td>1829</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Twenty-year lease with the city of Philadelphia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old Joliet Prison</td>
<td>1858</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Five-year lease between Joliet and state of Illinois</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historic Iowa State Penitentiary</td>
<td>1839</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Owned by the state of Iowa, operated by the Department of Corrections</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary

“Prisons in the Popular Mind” examines how historic state prison museums contribute to the public’s understanding of the contemporary carceral state. Each chapter addresses a theme directly related to the creation, management, interpretation, and/or impact of historic state prison museums throughout the United States. Chapter One discusses the combination of historiographies used to contextualize these sites, including aspects of carceral studies, museums, and dark tourism. Chapter Two provides an overview of prison history in the United States in order to explain how these institutions came to be, as well as the purpose that they served before their conversion into museum spaces. Chapter Three details the rehabilitation of these former prisons, including their preservation and emergence as sites of carceral tourism. Chapter Four chronicles the public’s fascination with prison tourism, and examines who visits historic prison museums and why. Conversely, Chapter Five explores the experiences and representations of
imprisoned people, those whose lives have been most directly affected by these particular sites or by the experience of imprisonment. Chapter Six analyzes the interpretation at various historic prison museums, including the themes and perspectives used to tell the stories of the site. Chapter Seven studies the material culture of historic prison museums, including the artifacts and collections that influence—and occasionally constrain—the site’s ability to interpret. And finally, The Conclusion offers final thoughts on the current state of historic prison museums, as well as their connection to contemporary issues, particularly mass incarceration.

Utilizing traditional and public historical research methods, “Prisons in the Popular Mind” offers a significant historiographical contribution that speaks to the past and present importance, as well as the future potential, of historic prison museums. Complementing and occasionally challenging previous scholarship, this dissertation merges historiographies, navigates disciplinary, chronological, and topical intersections, and above all, emphasizes a rare opportunity for historians to pursue, practice, and perfect a usable, and useful, public history. “Prisons in the Public Mind” addresses the mission of public historians to consider carefully the ways in which the public interacts with the past and the implications that has for the world around us, as well as for the future. An examination of historic state prison museums, the influence that they have on their audiences, as well as their relationships to the contemporary carceral state provides an opportunity to examine, critique, and perhaps improve one of the most contentious aspects of the modern carceral state.
Chapter 1. Historiographies for Historic Prison Museums

Historiographies of the carceral state, museums, and dark tourism collectively frame the study of prison public history. Combining these historiographies merges the theoretical, methodological, historical, and analytical frameworks necessary for understanding the origins, appeal, and incarnations of historic prisons, and the complexities and contradictions of on-site interpretations. The unique timing of historic carceral tourism historiographically situates the rise of the carceral state alongside the professionalization of public history.¹ Both historiographies typically begin with the emergence of the modern nation-state at the end of the eighteenth century and address the roles of social institutions, in this case, prisons and museums respectively, in exerting forms of disciplinary power on its behalf. Still, despite finding common historical origins for prisons and museums, scholars have concluded that, in recent decades, the two institutions intellectually diverged. Scholarship on the creation of the modern penal system often details the removal of punitive practices from public view, the role of discipline and supervision, and the changing nature of the institution over time. Scholarship on the introduction of the museum argues that a new “exhibitionary complex” increased public access, as well as attempted to manipulate visitor behavior.

Yet, in many ways, contemporary prison museums, as former sites of incarceration that have been interpreted for public audiences, are the product of both of these historiographies, acting simultaneously as both sites and subjects. Thus, “Prisons in the Popular Mind” requires a

new theoretical framework, one that merges prison and museum historiographies as well as engagement with dark tourism scholarship, so as to recognize how former sites of incarceration act concurrently as both museums and representations of prisons.  

The relationship between public history and issues of incarceration is a fitting and timely topic, given the rise and proliferation of carceral studies. Several scholarly and cultural trends help to contextualize this new subfield. First is the “contemporary carceral state,” a term that refers to the unprecedented size and scope of incarceration in the United States. With approximately two million people detained in prisons and jails, the United States possesses the highest incarceration rate in the world in terms of both the number of imprisoned people and the percentage of the population. Beginning in the 1970s, the War on Drugs and “law and order” political rhetoric created increasingly punitive legislation that swelled prison inmate numbers. Many former prisons, some in operation since the nineteenth century, became inadequate to house the targets of “the punitive turn”—the rapid increase in legislation, prison construction, and popular sentiment that helped to facilitate the rise of the modern carceral state. In order to accommodate the large numbers of the newly imprisoned, numerous states and the federal government decommissioned prisons across the country in favor of more modern and spacious facilities. The rise of the carceral state, or the network of formal and informal institutions of punishment that facilitate mass incarceration in the United States, is significantly responsible for the abandonment of historic prisons that later became public history sites.

---


Scholars have identified the roots of the carceral state in the early republic and credit the early nineteenth century with institutionalizing many of its facets.\(^4\) As will be explored in Chapter Three, the modern prison, as we know it, arguably emerged with a shift from public and highly performative spectacles of punishment to concealed and restrictive procedures. Instead of relying on visual displays of punishment to dissuade anti-social behavior, such as stocks and pillories used to humiliate publicly, the prison became a physical deterrent to the general public, sequestering perpetrators of crime and obscuring the punishment they experienced. However, as criminologist Alana Barton and historian Alyson Brown have observed, “this move to the imposition of punishment behind closed doors and high walls did not lead to a decrease in public curiosity about the ordeals of offenders and nor was this likely the intention.”\(^5\)


\(^5\) As Barton and Brown explained, “So, unlike public and exemplary punishments which aimed to deter deviant behaviour through visual display and public access, the prison performs this function through a combination of the visible signals emitted by its external structure and a concealment of its inner world”; Barton and Brown, “Dark Tourism,” 44.
One of the earliest and most significant scholars to influence the theorization of prions is French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault, whose considerations of discipline, state power, and incarceration resonated across disciplines. In fact, carceral geographer Karen L. Morin conceded that most prison scholars “have, in one way or another, engaged with Foucault’s ideas from Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (1977), particularly his critique of [Jeremy] Bentham’s panopticon design, surveillance power, and the production of docile bodies.” For Foucault, modern justice began “when punishment became a merely administrative act, versus the more spectacular public punishment that characterized the pre-modern form.” His reflections on the emergence of modern punitive practices ground much of the historical analysis on imprisonment.⁶

Foucault intended to uncover the originating relationship between prison and the nation-state. Following his ground-breaking interventions, the historical consensus is that the late twentieth century, after Foucault’s ground-breaking scholarship, witnessed the expansion and transformation of the carceral state into its contemporary form. Historians have increasingly grappled with its detailed chronology, but most agree that elements of racial control, economic exploitation, and government action undergirded its development. New scholarship emerged during the 2010s that addresses gender/sexuality, immigration, and juvenile delinquency, as well.⁷

⁶ Foucault, Discipline & Punish; Morin, “Carceral Space and the Usable Past,” 3-4.
The evolution of the modern prison over the twentieth century is the physical representation and artifact of changing penal philosophies. According to carceral geographer Karen Morin, penal philosophies evolved from the early reformatory movement (1920-1970) to the “therapeutic regime” (1970-1999). She suggested that the War of Drugs in the 1980s initiated a third “custodial period” that continues to define American prison culture. Changing penal philosophies led to a decline in the discourse of reform, contributing to less investment in prisons and prisoners. “Guard brutality, overcrowding, unsafe working conditions, infrastructural deterioration, and inmate civil rights challenges,” Morin continued, “led to a breakdown in the [Federal] Bureau [of Prison]’s ability to control its facilities, and uprisings occurred with increasing frequency.” In reaction, the Bureau increased use of solitary confinement and permanent lockdowns to control increasingly crowded and disgruntled prison populations, a pattern of response that filtered down to state prison systems, as well.  

Understanding the mass incarceration of the custodial period has been grounded in histories of prisons, practices of imprisonment, and philosophies of punishment. Historian Heather Ann Thompson is often credited with mainstreaming the phrase “mass incarceration” within professional history circles, a term that refers to the staggering numbers of those


physically imprisoned in the United States beginning in the late twentieth century, including a disproportionately high number of racial minorities (see Figure 2 in Appendix A). Mass incarceration catalyzed the growth and continuation of a carceral state, including the rise and spread of corrections systems, privatized prisons, punitive legislative policies, and increased policing. Carceral geographer Morin recognized that, in terms of the scale and frequency of imprisonment, “we have, in the US, a bigger problem than anywhere else in the world.” According to Morin, the “US has 5% of the world’s population but 25% of its prisoners, with an estimated 2.4 million men and women behind bars. This is the highest rate of incarceration of anywhere in the world, and the highest rate in US history.” Many scholars have also criticized the racialization of the United States’ penal system, as approximately “70% of the prison population is African American or Latino. African Americans make up 13% of the US population, but 50% of the prison population; and two-thirds of African American men in their twenties are incarcerated or on parole or probation.” Mass incarceration and the larger carceral state intersect with histories, as well as ongoing realities, of racialization in the United States which, according to some, build on a legacy of practices such as enslavement and Jim Crow. How carceral histories and realities are interpreted within museums and at public history sites in the form of exhibits, tours, and programming, then, is critical, although it remains an underdeveloped aspect of carceral tourism scholarship.9

Far more developed than the historiography of the prison is that of the museum, representing an intersection of disciplines such as public history, museum studies, material

---

culture, collections management, and tourism studies. Unsurprisingly, penal history museums and contemporary museums are portrayed in the literature as both similar and dissimilar. For instance, as criminal justice scholars Kevin Walby and Justin Piché argued, penal history museums “stray from the [display] aesthetic of contemporary museums,” reflecting instead late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century museums’ ambitions “to shape the sentiments and convictions” of visitors.¹⁰ Similar to the prison, the museum as a modern institution emerged within the contexts of nation-state building, and scholars have detailed how museums’ changing missions, methods, and audiences reflected nationalistic contexts.

Originally operating in the nineteenth century as “cabinets of curiosities” that merely displayed extraordinary artifacts, museums served as lieux de mémoire for the social elite, limiting access to the general public. Over the course of the nineteenth century, museums welcomed larger and more diverse audiences in order to educate and “civilize” patrons, thereby serving the nation’s needs in creating an imagined, nationalistic community. Democratic impulses of the late twentieth century transitioned museums from temples into forums. For instance, embracing “the new museology,” museums attempted to alter their role as social institutions, favoring public participation and reflection in lieu of public management and indoctrination.¹¹ Although certain elements of the museum experience such as exhibition

remained intact, the new museology forced public historians to acknowledge the ability of these institutions to exercise an educational “museum effect” on visitors that emphasized civic dialogue, social consciousness, and engagement with contemporary issues, thus bridging the history of the past with the lives of patrons in the present. According to Walby and Piché, “[f]rom the professionally curated to the more informal and local displays, museums are not neutral arenas for the production of social meanings.” The new museology appealed in the United States. In fact, historians Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen found that visiting history museums comprises one of the more common ways in which Americans “pursue the past actively and make it part of everyday life.”

Yet historic prison museums did not follow suit. They did not embrace their civic potential or provoke visitors to consider memories and histories in a more civic-oriented or

———


nationally-contextualized manner. Karen Morin described this failure as specific to white Americans, often the most common visitors to museums but not the population most severely affected by mass incarceration. Consequently, white citizens struggle “to place their personal pasts in a collective narrative [about incarceration] explicitly tied to the American national story.”

The historiography of museums, specifically its emphasis on citizenship, education, and the relationship between the museum and state, directly relates to the study of historic carceral tourism. Although historic prison museums share a dual museum/prison identity, the two institutions historically exercised comparable powers in moderating public behavior. Only in the late twentieth century did carceral practices disappear from public view as museums embraced new, and more visibly democratic, practices of exhibition and as they revisioned their missions through the lens of social responsibility.

Facing claims that museums are isolated, elitist, and obsolete institutions, in the 1980s and 1990s, the new museology shifted the purpose of the museum to a more active phase of ethical engagement, specifically representing changes in “value, meaning, control, interpretation, authority, and authenticity.” The emergence of the new museology raised considerations of the

---

16 For instance, the Declaration of Quebec: Basic Principles for a New Museology from 1984 claims that: “In a modern world . . . museology must seek to extends its traditional roles and functions of identification, conservation and education to initiatives which are more far-reaching than these objectives, and thus integrate its action more successfully into the human physical environment.” According to Pierre Mayrand, the new museology “is primarily concerned with community development, reflecting the driving forces in social progress and associating them in its plans for the future. It has become a way of bringing people together to learn about themselves and each other, to develop their critical faculties and express their concern to
role and responsibility of scholarly activism. As the new museology signified a shift in the function of museums, the conversion of former sites of incarceration into sites of memory and history represented a shift in the form of the museum. Although interpretive and methodological scholarship set forth by the new museology did not specifically address historic prisons, it did establish precedents for historic interpretation that would be applied to those sites. Public consumption of prison history is significant, then, because in light of the new museology and similar efforts to expand the societal role of the museum, it possesses ethical implications.

According to notable museologist Pierre Mayrand, the cause of the new museological movement “must lie in the museum establishment’s delay in coming to terms with a number of contemporary, cultural, social and political developments,” of which mass incarceration is undoubtedly one. The new museology “merely reaffirms the social mission of the museum as a new point of departure and the primacy of this function over the traditional museum functions: conservation, buildings, objects, and the public.” If traditional museums embrace this new


17 Self-identified activist-scholars include Karen M. Morin who queries, “What is a useful or usable past that could help both understand current carceral trends, and ameliorate them? I would argue that we must have at our disposal a usable carceral past in order to be able to confront the unmitigated propaganda about people incarcerated in American prisons and jails that confronts us daily, and continue the project of progressive social transformation”; Morin, “Carceral Space and the Usable Past,” 3.


19 The new museology “mobilizes the supporters of a radical transformation of the aims of museology, and advocates profound changes in the thinking and attitudes of the museologist.” Mayrand identified many of the potential criticisms of the new museology, such as the notion
imperative and consider it integral to their purpose, the educational responsibilities of historic prison museums remains even greater. As dark tourism experts Crispin Dale and Neil Robinson argued, like museums, “dark attractions have a purpose to inform how a better future can be developed by paying attention to the lessons of the past.”

The degree to which former sites of incarceration do not engage in conscientious interpretation speaks directly to this concern. For example, some scholars suggest that the legacy of penal secrecy and prisoner suppression has become part of the ongoing appeal for curious visitors. Historic prison museums open up the world of imprisonment and punishment to public view, ironically representing the opposite of functional prisons which continue to function under the same principles of indiscernibility. How do we reconcile the public’s ability to encounter and understand prisons—historic or operational—given these co-existing yet diametric philosophies?

The phenomenon of historic carceral tourism satisfies public fascination with places of death, atrocity, disaster, and other forms of human suffering. It is just one facet of dark tourism, also known as thanatourism, which tourism scholars Mark Foley and J. John Lennon defined as “the phenomenon [that] encompasses the presentation and consumption (by visitors) of real and commodified death and disaster sites.” Dark tourism studies inform not only visitor motivation that they are “more concerned with social considerations than “the ethics of conservation” or “irreverence or of succumbing to a passing fad”; Mayrand, “The New Museology Proclaimed,” 115-17.

20 According to Mayrand, the new museology builds upon earlier concepts and theories of scholars, such as the “integral museum”, the ‘global museum’, popular and community museology, interdisciplinarity, [and] development.” As a result, “their ideological foundations are the attempts made to socialize museology and change attitudes”; Mayrand, “The New Museology Proclaimed,” 116. In his work, Dalton also spoke to the interdisciplinary nature of historic penal tourism; Dalton, Dark Tourism and Crime, 9.
but also interpretations of authenticity, commodification, and conscientious interpretation. Yet, interpretive frameworks for dark tourism have proven elusive, undermined by inconsistent language and analytical concepts. Historian Carolyn Strange and criminologist Michael Kempa rejected the overly simplistic categorizations typically offered by dark tourism studies, arguing “for an analysis that accounts for the multiple shades of penal history marketing and interpretation.” According to another scholar, “the extension [of dark tourism] toward . . . a form of tourism whose importance is that it queries the nature of contemporary society” alters the initial meaning of dark tourism.

In terms of methodological practice and precedent, arguably the most beneficial historiography to the study of historic prison museums concerns dark tourism, as one of its many subfields alongside disaster tourism, grief tourism, volunteer tourism, “black spots,” and natural disaster tourism. Concepts of “penal tourism” have emerged within thanatourism scholarship, specifically addressing the resurrection of historic prisons as museums. Strange and Kempa argued that, “many shades of dark tourism develop and co-exist at penal tourism sites” because

---


22 Peter M. Burns and Marina Novelli, eds., Tourism and Mobilities: Local-Global Connections (Wallingford, UK: CABI, 2008); Dale and Robinson, “Dark Tourism,” 211; Dalton, Dark Tourism and Crime, 2; Strange and Kempa, “Shades of Dark Tourism,” 348. For instance, some scholars argue that the term “dark tourism” is “too generic a term and does not sufficiently cover all of the differing areas.” Even more extreme, some scholars claim that “there is no such thing as tourism: only production, consumption and mobility”; Dale and Robinson, “Dark Tourism,” 215.
as former prisons “shed their penal functions for new touristic identities, their historic relevance was interpreted within nationally distinct and dynamic cultures of memorialization.” Scholarship on historic prisons emerged primarily during the late twentieth century, despite the fact that dark tourism represents a much more historic phenomenon.\footnote{Chris Rojek, 	extit{Ways of Escape: Modern Transformations in Leisure and Travel} (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993); Strange and Kempa, “Shades of Dark Tourism,” 388-98; Michael Welch, 	extit{Escape to Prison: Penal Tourism and the Pull of Punishment} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015). Historic prisons are often sites with complex, and even contradictory, meanings. These meanings often possess implications for contemporary society. Alcatraz Island serves as one example. Aside from its penal past, it also served as a site of ongoing Native American activism. The “Long March” of 1978 “confirmed the status of the 1969-1972 occupation as a symbolic birthplace for cultural and spiritual renewal”; Sevinç Aslan, “Prison Tourism as a Form of Dark Tourism,” 	extit{The Journal of International Social Research} 8, no. 40 (October 2014): 601.}

Such contextualization made historic state prison museums well-established sites of dark tourism. For instance, thanatourism experts Crispin Dale and Neil Robinson concluded that although dark tourism is often viewed as an outgrowth “of the morbid curiosity for death and disasters of the 19th and 20th century,” the practice has been taking place for much longer. The perceived historicity of nineteenth-century prisons, now museums, reinforces this association with dark tourism. Furthermore, political scientist William F. S. Miles suggested that the temporal and spatial distances of remembered events affect the degree to which those events, and spaces, are considered dark, darker, or darkest tourism. Although the prisons themselves are generally associated with the late 1800s, the practice of punishment dates back much earlier and, therefore, produces a site of darker tourism.\footnote{The popularization of the Netflix television program 	extit{Dark Tourism}, for instance, has introduced this concept and related terminology into public conscientiousness, as well as the general lexicon. But Dale and Robinson argued that, “as early as the 11th century individuals were visiting locations associated with the darker side of travel”; Dale and Robinson, “Dark Tourism,” 205-206; Miles, “Auschwitz,” 1175-1178.}
The question for historic prison museums is: “exactly how dark is the tourism?” Philip Stone, executive director of the Institute for Dark Tourism Research, offered a typology of seven categories or “shades,” ranging from the lightest, associated exclusively with entertainment, to darkest, associated with remembrance and education.\(^{25}\) He classified historic prison museums—“sites and attractions which present bygone penal and justice codes to the present day consumer, and revolve around (former) prisons”—as “dark dungeons.”\(^{26}\) For Stone, dark dungeons refer to sites, typically former prisons or courthouses, that interpret penal and/or justice codes to contemporary audiences. Possibly, the most important word in Stone’s definition is “consumers.” He argued that historic prison museums use “a combination of entertainment and education as a main merchandise focus, possess a relatively high degree of commercialism and tourism infrastructure, and occupy sites which were originally nonpurposeful for dark tourism.” Therefore, dark dungeons and their mixture of both dark and light elements are located in the center of the dark tourist spectrum.\(^{27}\)

\(^{25}\) Dale and Robinson, “Dark Tourism,” 206. Philip Stone’s spectrum includes a variety of considerations, including an orientation towards education vs. entertainment, history vs. heritage centric approach, perceived authenticity vs. inauthenticity, location vs. non-location authenticity, the proximity and length of the time scale, the purposefulness of the supply, and the degree of tourism infrastructure. Some scholars critique Stone’s spectrum, arguing that such a “typological framework associated with the supply of dark tourism entities is possibly too subjective and tries to compartmentalize such sites into neatly defined segments”; Stone, “A Dark Tourism Spectrum: Towards a Typology of Death and Macabre Related Tourist Sites, Attractions and Exhibitions,” *Tourism* 54, no. 2 (2006): 151.

\(^{26}\) Stone, “A Dark Tourism Spectrum,” 145-60. Barton and Brown elaborate on Stone’s classification and “explore the operational prison as a (previously un-analyzed) tourist site”; Barton and Brown, “Dark Tourism and the Modern Prison,” 44.

\(^{27}\) Stone, “A Dark Tourism Spectrum,” 154. “Far from being a traditional tourist site, the prison museum is built upon consumer desire to access the inaccessible; to glimpse a life on the “inside” and all its assumed horrors from the comfort of being on the “outside”- with the choice and liberty, to enter, to leave, to accept, or to reject any given exhibition or display.” Turner and Peters discuss how “choice” or voluntary participation distinguishes prison inmates from prison tourists. Jennifer Turner and Kimberley Peters, “Doing Time-Travel: Performing Past and
According to Barton and Brown, dark tourism might be more figurative; they have suggested that former prisons are more symbolically, rather than literally, related to death. For example, prisoners often interpret incarceration as a form of “living death,” and such characterizations “evolve the timelessness and isolation of prison life and, moreover, imprisonment as a metaphor for the death of civil life, individual freedoms, and identity.”

Scholars have suggested that dark tourism occurs where death or disaster was most evident, making it slightly different from “fright tourism,” which geographers Robert S. Bristow and Mirela Newman determined “occurs when a tourist seeks a scary opportunity for pleasure at a destination that may have a sinister history or may be promoted to have one.” Instead, prison tourism seems to occupy a very narrow niche at the intersection of fright tourism and thanatourism. Indeed, Strange and Kempa decided that describing “prison history tourism as ‘good’ is too good, and ‘dark’ too stark.” Prison researcher Jacqueline Wilson agreed, concluding that some consider “the dark tourism phenomenon as little more than the commercial exploitation of people’s fascination with other people’s suffering; but such a judgment is too hasty.”

Despite recent and intense interest in the phenomenon of dark tourism, no survey of historic prisons within the United States has yet been completed. The current historiography generally consists of case studies void of an overarching theoretical framework, and it

Present at the Prison Museum,” in Morin and Moran, eds., Historical Geographies of Prisons, 71, 84.

emphasizes concerns over authenticity, commodification, visitor motivation, and sites’ relationships to, and portrayals of, violence. As an examination of historic carceral tourism, “Prisons in the Popular Mind” moves beyond attempts to merely classify historic prison museums in the theoretical sense, and instead explore the emergence, function, and influence of these peculiar institutions using concrete fieldwork, offering a new, and highly relevant, perspective to the well-established field of dark tourism.\textsuperscript{29}

As states decommissioned obsolete prisons in the late twentieth century, they found new uses.\textsuperscript{30} Part of this repurposing has been pragmatic because demolition is an expensive and difficult feat. So, some communities turned to “museumification” in order to solve the problems of empty, old penitentiaries. Indeed, one of the unique aspects of historic prison museums is the inherent change of meaning created by that process of museumification. In her studies of Australian prison tourism, Jacqueline Wilson contended that when “a prison built in the neo-Gothic style is decommissioned, it undergoes a transformation of its social meaning” and becomes “part of the post-prison cultural landscape.” Consequently, historic prisons became


\textsuperscript{30} Strange and Kempa, “Shades of Dark Tourism,” 388. Turner and Peters explained that these buildings were “rendered obsolete and unfit for use, owing to architectural degradation and the cost of maintenance”; Turner and Peters, “Doing Time-Travel,” 72-73. Ross’s research reveals that “the bulk of the prison museums were operational over the past 150 years and have been converted into prison museums in the post-1960s era”; Ross, “Touring Imprisonment,” 115-16. Over 50 percent of the institutions were opened as prison museums between 1961 and 2010, with a particular uptick after 1970. Wilson argued that a similar phenomenon occurred in Australia: “Virtually all of Australia’s nineteenth-century neo-Gothic prisons have been shut down over the past two or three decades, and many have been made over as tourist venues”; Wilson, “Australian Prison Tourism,” 565.
heritage sites that no longer function as spaces of incarceration but are nevertheless “still saturated with, and arguably communicative of, messages about the purpose of imprisonment both in terms of the system during which it was constructed, and during which it was protected, conserved, demolished, or left to decay.” Historic prisons survived because the American cultural, political, and economic systems that originally created penitentiaries sustained them in their afterlives as museums.\(^{31}\)

Museumification of former sites of incarceration is a phenomenon known interchangeably as penal tourism or prison tourism, or what I will refer to more specifically as “historic carceral tourism.”\(^{32}\) According to one account published in 2012, there were at least ninety-five prison museums operating across the globe, with advanced industrialized countries housing the majority of sites. The United States did, and still does, contain the highest number of prison museums, with historic carceral tourism taking place in almost every state. Karen Morin


\(^{32}\) Morin explained that several “former sites of punishment and incarceration have been converted into museums or heritage sites” and these “sites of incarceration and punishment . . . commodify suffering, tragedy, and death for public consumption”; Morin, “Carceral Space and the Usable Past,” 7. It is worth noting that Dalton pushed back against views that “penal tourism is [only] about places where criminals were housed.” He expanded the definition, accordingly: “I have no problem classifying penal tourism as crime-related both in terms of the relevance of prisons as sites of punishment and the fact that many inmates suffered state-sanctioned violence within these institutions”; Dalton, *Dark Tourism and Crime*, 12.
estimated that of the “three hundred decommissioning sites in the US today,” roughly three
dozen serve as prison heritage tourist sites. Plans for more suggest that the subfield of prison
public history is expanding.33

Despite the significant differences among American historic state prison museums, these
institutions have many things in common. For instance, geographers Jennifer Turner and
Kimberley Peters determined that historic prison museums “are often located inside or near
functional and/or decommissioned correctional facilities. In addition to original or restored cells,
cellblocks, tiers, and wings, these museums typically display prison memorabilia and
paraphernalia, archival photographs of inmates and prison life, prison hardware, confiscated
weapons and contraband, tools, mechanisms, rooms connected to the administration of the death
penalty, and examples of inmates’ arts and crafts. Some have gift shops that sell [merchandise],
and sometimes even arts and crafts made by prisoners.” And, using the resources at their
disposal, the majority of historic prison museums became adept at marketing their tourism
potential over time.34 Tracing the birth, growth, and maturation of historic prison museums is
important in understanding the larger process of carceral tourism and its development.

---

33 Morin, “Carceral Space and the Usable Past,” 9; Jeffrey Ian Ross, “Debunking the Myths of
113, 115; Ross, “Varieties of Prison Voyeurism, 409. Ross found that the majority “of the prison
museums in the United States are in California, Colorado, and Texas.” Additionally, seventeen
“countries operate prison museum. Most of them are located in advanced industrialized
countries. The majority of prison museums (57) are located in the United States (60 percent)”;
34 Many historic carceral studies experts have determined that “prison museums seem to lean
more toward voyeurism” and consumerism. Ross found that almost 60 percent of the historic
prison museums that he surveyed contained a gift shop; Ross, “Touring Imprisonment,” 113,
116. This is consistent with Dale and Robinson’s findings, which suggest that theming, in
conjunction with branding and merchandising, “is a marketing device used to generate demand”;
Why are there so many historic prison museums in the United States? Historians have explored various causes, many of which revolve around the basic theory of supply and demand. For instance, Ross’s research determined that “there appears to be an increasing number of relatively low-cost opportunities for the public to take advantage of prison voyeuristic activities.” Morin agreed, claiming that “states and cities saw opportunity in decaying former prisons . . . to turn these fortress-like piles of stone . . . into moneymakers.”35 In this, they actually did not depart from historical realities of exploitation; while they were in operation, many nineteenth-century prisons used inmate labor to generate profits for both state governments and private entrepreneurs, becoming massive revenue generators. Profitability continued as an undeniably attractive feature of, and rationale behind, historic prison preservation. Walby and Piché offered a handful of other explanations for the proliferation of historic prison sites, including the cultural (“hobby historians” and interested historical societies), the economic (the past and present impact of these sites on rural/local economies), and the influence of cultural and economic “tourism entrepreneurs.” American society’s obsession with crime, and especially with cruel and unusual punishment, may offer another answer.36

36 Curtis R. Blakely, America’s Prisons: The Movement Toward Profit and Privatization (Boca Raton, FL: Brown Walker Press, 2005); Walby and Piché, “Making Meaning out of Punishment, 494-95. Much as operational prisons provide economic stimuli to rural communities, so too do historic prison museums. Morin also contended that “prison is a site of memory for the townspeople” and local community. She argued that the phenomenon of prison towns has
Publican historians may well dismiss historic prison museums as a passing trend, failing to recognize not only their significant staying power, but also their appeal to the American public. Much as other, more traditional museums have influenced public attitudes, discourse, and perspectives, so too have sites of historic carceral tourism left an indelible imprint on American culture. To ignore the prominence, and potential power, of these institutions is to purposefully, or negligently, sidestep an important part of national history. More importantly than that, failure to recognize and engage with carceral tourism means that public historians—even intentional ones—miss an opportunity to engage with the present, and more importantly, with the future.

Historic prison tourism is not only a historic phenomenon but also a contemporary one. Continued museumification of historic prisons can be seen in recent conversions of the Joliet Correctional Center in Illinois and the Iowa State Penitentiary in Fort Madison. If museums and prisons separately evidenced the authority of the state, then historic prison museums proffer even more powerful messages. Morin suggested that, “we would do well to stay vigilant in questioning why and how the carceral state apparatus continues to impact the landscape.” But the calling goes far beyond mere questioning: prison public history demands recognition and engagement. If anything, the existence and proliferation of historic state prison museums

“created its own local geography with multiple and diverse spin-out effects for townspeople who now occupy a place specializing in prisons; as well as, of course, for prisoners and their families”; Morin, “Carceral Space and the Usable Past,” 15-16.

37 For instance, in his 2012 article, Ross determined that “only 22 of the 50 states in the United States have prison museums.” However, only a few years later, Ross explained in his 2015 work that, historic prison “museums can be found in almost every state” in the United States; Ross, “Touring Imprisonment,” 114; Ross, “Varieties of Prison Voyeurism,” 409.

38 “The local historical society and their remodeling and reframing work is . . . crucial in reclaiming the building and memorializing the site in museum form. In the name of community, they are attempting to mobilize notions of heritage to reclaim a site that previously kept some people away from others in their area for brief periods of time, transforming it into a museum through which locals may become united”; Walby and Piché, “Carceral Retasking and the Work of Historical Societies at Decommissioned Lock-ups, Jails, and Prisons in Ontario,” 95.
requires that public historians apply and make the best use of our professional skills, expertise, and abilities. As historian Seth Bruggeman has argued, public historians “need to grapple with the assumptions underlying [the rise of historic prison museums] to public life at the end of the twentieth century—a period that, not coincidentally, coincided with the nation’s carceral turn.”\(^{39}\) Beyond that, public historians need to approach historic carceral tourism as an opportunity to interrogate and understand America’s carceral present, not only for the sake of our profession, but for the future of our nation.

Chapter 2. A History of Prisons in the United States

Long before historic carceral tourism became a popular American pastime, prisons across the country were institutions that reflected societal, political, and religious attitudes about crime and punishment. Since their inception in the late eighteenth century, there have been many iterations of prisons in the United States. Originally intended to rehabilitate inhabitants, over time penitentiaries transformed into sites of punishment and containment. But what caused the rise of disciplinary institutions, like prisons? The following is an effort to consider, if not answer, that question.

Small colonial populations, as well as different understandings of crime and punishment, meant that “colonists could neither afford nor probably felt the need to institutionalize convicts.” Those that violated societal laws were punished swiftly, severely, and generally publicly. The public nature of punishment reinforced the power of community self-policing and operated as a form of social control. However, punishment in the colonial era relied on a fundamental and shared understanding: the perpetrator, despite his crime, was still a part of the community.¹

Criminal punishments in colonial America were generally physical in nature or were intended to humiliate the recipient. Common colonial practices included branding, maiming (i.e. ear cropping), gagging, dunking, public stocks, and whipping posts. In addition to disciplining an individual for their crimes, the public nature of punishments was also preventative, intended to deter other colonists from committing future crimes. So, before the creation of physical prisons,

the purpose of the colonial criminal system was deterrence. Largely influenced by the English criminal code, capital punishment played an important part of colonial systems of law and order. American understandings of crime and practices of punishment continued thusly until the late eighteenth century, when reformers organized to create a more humane and “modern” system.²

The colonial American population experienced dramatic growth during the late eighteenth century. Larger settlements and increased populations made certain punishments, such as the pillory, irrelevant, ineffective, and outdated. Additionally, Enlightenment thought inspired many Americans, especially male community leaders who considered themselves educated and worldly, to challenge the old social order. The conceptualization of human beings as rational meant that the law became an instrument with which to protect society and to “rationally regulate the interactions between its members.” In this way, the creation of prisons represented a societal retreat from public punishment. Instead, prisons reflected “republican ideology . . . combined with the experience of the American Revolution.”³

Throughout the late eighteenth and well into the nineteenth century, broad societal changes led to the creation and adaption of American prisons. Concerns about authority and societal order prompted the new republic to respond with “total institutions” intended to preserve civilization. Prisons were conceived in “the perception, in fact the fear, that once-stable social relationships were now in the process of unraveling, threatening to subvert social order and social cohesion.” Total institutions, including prisons, promised to rehabilitate prisoners, and

---
mitigate crime, insanity, and poverty. Essentially, prisons had the potential to become a model for larger society, by demonstrating order, good work habits, and morality.

The noted French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault has written extensively on the use of prisons as state-sponsored forms of organization and control. Foucault argued that the state did not merely create more disciplinary institutions like prisons; but rather, the state created a new and more disciplinary society. With the creation of the American republic, punishment became an extension of the nature and power of the state, although, paradoxically, reformers worked to make that state a liberal one. The success of the American Revolution resulted in the creation of a new nation with unique government and civil process. Punishment served as one unique aspect of the new legal system that led to a prison revolution that transformed American culture, where “the entire economy of punishment was redistributed.” These efforts at nation-building resulted in a fifty-year period of prison building beginning in the 1770s.

In 1777, prison reform became popularized in Great Britain after John Howard published his assessment of the country’s prisons, entitled “The State of the Prisons in England and Wales.” By the mid-1780s, a newly independent United States participated in similar critical self-reflection. For example, one of the “founding fathers,” the Quaker Dr. Benjamin Rush, argued that the “reformation of a criminal can never be effected by a public punishment” because “it destroys in him the sense of shame” and does not “reform obstinate habits of vice.” Instead, Rush contended that the goal of punishment should be reformation and deterrence, best achieved

---


through imprisonment, and not through public spectacle. The changing demography of the United States, combined with new intellectual ideas and a post-war optimism, remade American understandings of crime and punishment.

This shift in penological thinking resulted in the creation of the nation’s first prison reform societies, including the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons (hereafter referred to as the Philadelphia Society). In lieu of public spectacles of punishment, reformers instead professed the desire to restore “our fellow-creatures to virtue and happiness.” Revised criminal codes replaced capital punishment with hard labor, excepting the most heinous of crimes. This transformation built on earlier systems of hard labor practiced in northern colonial workhouses throughout the eighteenth century, which simultaneously benefited the government and served as a source of punishment. As they had created a new and revolutionary government merely a few years before, so too did these early Americans create an original penitentiary system that captured the attention and imagination of the world.

Prisons represented one of many modern, “total institutions” that emerged throughout the late eighteenth century, alongside insane asylums, schools, and almshouses. As one prison administrator noted, the “birth of the American republic and the birth of an organized prison system in this country occurred practical simultaneously.” These institutions served similar purposes: remove the inhabitants from society in order to reform and properly socialize them.

In many ways, prisons were the physical manifestations of Enlightenment thought. But local jails, which practiced some of the earliest forms of imprisonment, differed significantly

---

from subsequent facilities in that the inhabitants were confined, but not necessarily controlled. As of 1770, in Philadelphia’s city jail, “young and old, black and white, men and women, boys and girls were congregated indiscriminately in custody, for misconduct, misdemeanor, and felony, either before trial, after conviction, or for want of bail for surety of the peace.” Men, women, and children intermingled in common spaces, creating “a moral pest house.” This intermixing permitted those who had committed various infractions to gamble, consume alcohol, and brawl. Contemporary observers chaffed at the lack of order and decency within early jails, which they claimed were “scenes of debauchery, dishonest, and wickedness of every kind.”

Concerns mounted that such communal confinement led to the transfer of vice and thereby increased crime. Reformers hoped that by remaking the penal system, they would be able to remake society as a whole.

Several factors contributed to the eventual conversion of the early prisons. For instance, wardens could not quantify their success at reform efforts, and as a result, lawmakers pivoted to another metric: economic profitability. A series of public failures and embarrassments prompted early prison reformers to embrace a radical solution: the use of private, cellular imprisonment. Separate cellular imprisonment existed long before it became common practice in the United States. However, forcibly segregating and confining convicts did represent a departure in American penology. Prison reform groups, including the Philadelphia Society, took the lead in renovating and reorganizing old jails, including the one located on Walnut Street. In 1788, the Philadelphia Society argued that “punishment by more private or even solitary labour” would be

---

a better approach in reclaiming convicts, as opposed to “hard labour publicly and disgracefully imposed.” The Pennsylvania Legislature began experimenting with a system of “solitary confinement [to] hard labour,” where prisoners worked and slept alone in their cells; this formed the basis for the subsequent Pennsylvania system of prison management and discipline. Here, inhabitants were separated and confined to solitary cells and individual exercise spaces. As one observer noted, a “new era then commenced in the management of the jail.”

By 1790, the Pennsylvania legislature had “established the legal foundation for America’s first rue prison system.” As a result, prisons in the United States adopted reform measures initiated by English facilities. Prison reform would take place on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, inspiring international dialogue, and helped build a foundation for cross-Atlantic collaboration that also appeared in the abolitionist and women’s suffrage movements. For instance, an English prison at Wymondham in Norfolk introduced new strategies under administrator Sir Thomas Beevor that came to characterize American prisons, including the gendered separation of prisoners, division by the class of offense, and solitary confinement for each inhabitant. Americans eagerly embraced this model. Prison administrators welcomed solitary confinement because it promised to eliminate the poor conditions and negative influences that led individuals astray. Coupled with hard labor, solitary imprisonment promised to inculcate reflection, penitence, and contrition within the hearts and souls of convicts.

---


The physical designs of prisons also reflected changes in penological thinking. Officials refurbished buildings to include congregate spaces, such as workhouses and exercise spaces with outer enclosures, and “night rooms” or cells in which inhabitants slept. These cells were approximately eight feet long, six feet wide, and ten feet high, and included an outer wooden door, an inner iron door, and a single window. This type of prison design was the most common throughout the early nineteenth century and contributed to the emerging standardization of prisons in the United States.

American prison reform in the Early Republic resulted from several administrative innovations, including the separation of inhabitants based on gender and the nature of their crime, as well as the application of forced labor, and the practice of solitary confinement. Under these new administrative policies, inhabitants were also issued uniforms upon arrival; they were provided with meal and required to abstain from alcohol. Reformers considered these progressive changes. According to one contemporary, the “most signal good consequences were expected to flow from the system, by reforming the morals of those condemned to submit to it, and by preventing crimes.” By the mid-to-late 1790s, other cities began mimicking Pennsylvania’s approach. For instance, in 1796 New York developed a criminal code that emphasized hard labor and made plans to construct facilities that imitated Walnut Street jail.11

The reformation of convicts began paramount in American prison operations. For example, under Thomas Eddy, a prison reformer and the first warden of the Newgate prison in New York, inmates had access to religious worship, night schooling, and were encouraged to

11 “Punishment, Its Nature and Design,” in The American Biblical Repository, 2nd series, 10, no. 1 (1843): 19; Meskell, “An American Resolution,” 847. In only the most extreme cases would convicts be isolated to solitary cells without expectations of labor. Typically, this punishment was reserved for those accused of more severe crimes, or inhabitants who refused to follow the institution’s rules.
view their labor as a form of pride and self-worth (see Image 6 in Appendix B). Prison industries included nailmaking, carpentry, weaving, dyers, blacksmithing, and shoemaking; essentially, “labour of the hardest and most servile kind.” Meanwhile, Philadelphia residents credited their Walnut Street jail with a subsequent reduction in local crime rates, and the elimination of prison escapes encouraged other locales to adopt the penal philosophies and practices of these original institutions. Additionally, the profitability of prison labor incentivized prison construction. The success of these programs, coupled with strict discipline, encouraged a prison building boom that characterized the early nineteenth century.\(^{12}\)

Within the first two decades of the nineteenth century, several states across the North and South attempted to recreate prison reformers’ achievements in Pennsylvania and New York. These included New Jersey, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, Maryland, Virginia, Ohio, Kentucky, and Georgia. The development of a new national carceral system is often considered a Northern phenomenon, with Pennsylvania and New York leading early prison reform efforts. However, some states in the Upper South also embraced the “modern” institutions throughout the late 1790s. Virginia established a penitentiary system in 1796, and Kentucky opened a state penitentiary in 1798, modeled on the Walnut Street prison.\(^{13}\) One historian posits that Southern states were slower to open penitentiaries because of the prominence of slavery, which represented a “total institution.” But this initial wave of prison


\(^{13}\) Lewis, *The Development of American Prisons*, 265, 267. Tennessee followed suit, authorizing the construction of a penitentiary in 1830, during a subsequent wave of prison building, as did Georgia in 1817.
building was short-lived, coming to a swift end with a few decades. More broadly, even with thoughtfully designed facilities, policing prison inhabitants remained a challenging task, especially with congregate spaces, which prison officials believed nurtured plans for escapes and uprisings. An increase in prison riots and attempts to abscond increased concerns about public safety, and heightened criticisms of the penitentiary system, its operations, and its administrators.

Many of these issues resulted from an ongoing upsurge in the imprisoned population, a theme that would continue to plague America’s carceral system throughout its history, and the concomitant failure to update facilities accordingly. For example, in 1790, the Walnut Street prison housed 72 inhabitants in 1790 and officials decided to increase its size. By 1815, over 220 inhabitants tested the building’s capacity. This overcrowding “had a cumulative effect in demoralizing the prison discipline. The lack of space in the jail rendered the proper application of the administrative system impossible and thereby prevented it from exercising its proper reformatory and deterrent functions.” As a result, prison management at Walnut Street, and elsewhere, regressed and mimicked those prior to the 1790s. Indeed, by 1832 Boston’s Prison Discipline Society lamented that the nation’s penitentiaries had “been productive of a greater amount of evil than good; and a more perfect system for the dissemination of vice could not have been devised.”

Part of the rise in the imprisonment population was due to the natural growth of the general population. However, it also appears that many state governments, including

---

Pennsylvania, failed to plan or provide for the expansion of existing prisons or the creation of new prisons. Additionally, the politicization of prison administrative positions contributed to the breakdown of prison reform efforts in the early republic. Legislators, facing rising crime rates and concerns about the “ease of prison life,” demanded more severe prison management. Wardens responded by increasingly using excessive force, such as flogging and the stocks, to maintain discipline, often relying on much harsher punishments than those stipulated in earlier English criminal codes. Additionally, legislators seeking to avoid increased taxation to meet costs pressured prison administrators to “cover prison expenses.” As a result, convict labor transitioned from a practice of moral reform to an instrument of state-sponsored enslavement.\textsuperscript{15}

As the penitentiary system stumbled with no clear direction, reformers and state governments embraced new ideas and more elaborate facilities. Many of the earliest American prisons, like Walnut Street in Philadelphia and Newgate in New York, succumbed to disrepair and derision, and their failures led to increased criticisms of the “new” prison system. Public opinion dubbed the state prison the “mother of crime,” arguing that lenient treatment and frequent pardons, especially of young offenders and those perceived as capable of reformation, undermined claims that penitentiaries could successfully reform their inhabitants. However, neither the public nor state governments advocated a return to earlier methods of criminal control. Rather, such failures defined a new carceral philosophy.\textsuperscript{16}

A second wave of reformers emerged in the 1820s, reimagining prisons as instruments of reformation, facilities where criminals could be converted into upright citizens. Unlike earlier efforts, which were intertwined with and reflective of prison reformation in Great Britain, this new iteration of prison reform was distinctly American. In the process, emergent social reformers addressed concerns about social mobility and its negative effects that characterized Jacksonian America. Unlike earlier prison advocates who assumed criminals were born deviant or sinful, antebellum crusaders argued that the breakdown of the traditional social order created crime, believing that criminals were a product of poor social conditions. Reformers reasoned that removing criminals from society and placing them into properly segregated, rather than communal, prisons would allow for rehabilitation.

Reforming convicts through separation manifested in architectural designs and came with considerable costs. For example, the Building Commissioners of Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia explained that “the exterior of a solitary prison should exhibit as much as possible great strength and convey to the mind a cheerless blank indicative of the misery which awaits the unhappy being who enters within its walls.” Pennsylvania spent lavishly to construct a penal system grounded in these new beliefs about the purpose of prisons. Eastern State Penitentiary cost $775,000 to build and, when completed, contained approximately 450 to 600 cells. By comparison, an 1835 legislative investigation determined that Sing Sing Penitentiary in New York cost $200,000 for 1,000 cells, the Charlestown Penitentiary near Boston $80,000 for 300 cells, and the Baltimore Penitentiary $46,823 for 320 cells. Many individuals complained that the purported costs to build Eastern State Penitentiary were not only exorbitant and unnecessary, but

also fraudulent. But, to some, the extravagance served a purpose. In 1823, George W. Smith described the penitentiary as the only type of structure in the country that conveyed to the American public “the external appearance of those magnificent and picturesque castles of the middle ages, which contribute so eminently to embellish the scenery of Europe.” The design served more than an aesthetic purpose. According to Smith, the purpose of the design was to “impart a grave, severe, and awful character to the external aspect of this building. The effect which it produces on the imagination of every passing spectator, is peculiarly solemn, and instructive” (see Images 1, 3, and 9 in Appendix B).\(^1\)

The “panopticon,” a new design envisioned by eighteenth-century British reformer Jeremy Bentham, soon characterized prison architecture in the nineteenth-century United States. The panopticon featured a large circular building with tiers of cells lining the periphery. The cells contained barred fronts and other “modern” amenities like forced air temperature control. Prison administrators surveilled the cells from a central tower in the middle of the circular building. Bentham’s panopticon penitentiary was never built in Great Britain, but American architect John Haviland embraced the concept. His plans for Eastern Penitentiary in Philadelphia—based on the panopticon—became the model for prison design across the United States.\(^2\) The subsequent decline and closure of Walnut Street led to the establishment of two

---


\(^2\) For example, the design of Stateville Prison near Joliet, Illinois was a replica of Bentham’s panopticon design. Other institutions, like the Virginia Penitentiary in Richmond, Virginia modified the design, opting for half-circle or horseshoe shaped buildings instead; Johnston, *The Human Cage*, 20.
new additional penitentiaries in Pennsylvania: Western Penitentiary in Pittsburgh (1818) and Eastern Penitentiary (1821). Eastern Penitentiary gained global prominence and created the carceral management techniques that came to be known as the Pennsylvania system. Emphasizing solitary labor and silence, the Pennsylvania system acquired an almost monastic quality.

In 1816, New York approved the construction of a new prison at Auburn that differed from the Eastern Penitentiary in both design and function. Auburn contained blocks of back-to-back cells with intermittent alleys for guard movement, a design still in use in the twenty-first century. Instead of implementing policies of solitary confinement, prison managers at Auburn operated under the premise that severe discipline and corporal punishment would conform prisoners to societal will. Eventually, the administration introduced a congregate system in which inhabitants resided in separate cells but worked and ate communally during the day. However, prison administrators still demanded that prisoners remain silent, restricting communication with prison guards and forbidding communication among inmates. As reformer Orlando Lewis explained, “Reformation by horror, constant labor, and by the breaking of the spirit, was the Auburn method.”

The Auburn system, known as the “the silent system”, and the Pennsylvania system, characterized as “the separate system,” came to define American incarceration in the nineteenth

---

20 Roberts, “The Historic Roots,” 108. The design of Western Penitentiary was so disastrous that the Pennsylvania legislature ordered its demolition and reconstruction in 1833. Western Penitentiary and Auburn both operated on the premise of solitary confinement without labor, a short lived and ineffective policy that observers came to repudiate. Psychological studies throughout the 1850s emphasized the harmful mental effects that resulted from the practice. As one scholar explained, “for many of the criminals in a Pennsylvania System prison, incarceration was not a saving grace but a form of mental torture”; Meskell, “An American Resolution,” 855.

century. Eventually, most prisons throughout the country adopted the Auburn system, despite debates throughout the 1830s and 1840s about its merits. Advocates of the Auburn system accused the Pennsylvania system of generating poor health and insanity among inmates, in addition to the costs. They also argued that the Auburn system promised more financial benefits than the Pennsylvania system, which appealed to prison administrators and legislators. Cheaper to construct, Auburn-style prisons produced revenue for the state. Many of the historic state prison museums included in this study—the Missouri State Penitentiary (which opened in 1836), the Historic Iowa State Penitentiary (established in 1839), and the Old Joliet Prison (launched in 1858)—emerged during the early to mid-nineteenth century as replicas of the Auburn plan. Still, the Pennsylvania system drew attention. As French diplomat Alexis de Tocqueville observed in 1833, “the Philadelphia system produces more honest men, and that of New York more obedient citizens.” By the late nineteenth century, the majority of American prisons operated according to the Auburn system. Scholar Leonard Roberts argued that the Auburn system eventually prevailed over the Pennsylvania system because it “helped to create a trained and disciplined work force.” Prison labor produced goods that enriched the state, as well as private entrepreneurs, and resulted in a skilled, affordable labor bloc, making it an attractive alternative to the less profitable Pennsylvania system.22

America’s carceral systems remained relatively unchanged from 1840 to 1870, punctuated by occasional and minor reform efforts. The significant exception was the discontinuation of certain corporal punishments such as the whip or “cat o’ nine,” a result of reformers’ efforts during the early 1840s. Critics like Dorothea Dix brought attention to inhumane prison punishments and capably leveraged public support to force wardens to embrace disciplinary alternatives. As Dix recorded in her expose, Remarks on Prisons and Prison Discipline in the United States (1845), “the disadvantages [of prisoners] have within a few years, gradually awakened the attention of the humane and the benevolent.” However, the punishments that replaced the cat o’ nine often remained cruel and unusual. Authorities hung prisoners from pulley systems, beat them with leather covered paddles, and subjected them to the “shower” — a type of water torture — and the “gag,” a metal plated restraint that chained the mouth, neck, and wrists. Although critics like Dix worked to eradicate excessively harsh practices, prison administrators often acted with impunity until the late 1860s.

Reformers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century heralded emerging American prisons as “durable monument[s] of the wisdom, justice, and humanity of its legislators.” But public sentiments towards prisons changed. Between the 1840s and the 1860s, the plight of prisoners dwindled in the public consciousness. However, complaints about administrative corruption and prison abuse revived after the Civil War. In 1867, Enoch C. Wines and Theodore W. Dwight, two American prison reformers, published “Report on the Prisons and Reformatories of the United States and Canada.” The exhaustive survey assessed the efficiency of American prison penal reform, unceremoniously determining that all were “deficient in their principles and methods” and, as a result, “found wanting.” The report, and its stark conclusions,

---

23 Dix, Remarks on Prisons, 11.
refocused the attention of the American public on its prison system. Many determined that prison punishments humiliated and dehumanized prisoners, and that coerced labor was exploitive and oppressive. Wines and Dwight also criticized poor prison conditions that were both harmful and unhygienic. Their report pointed to a lack of educational and religious opportunities that prevented prisoners from achieving self-improvement. To resolve these issues, Wines and Dwight recommended a systemic overhaul to the American prison system that included changing the appointment process for administrators, creating increased accountability measures for guards, improving self-advancement opportunities, eliminating for-profit prison labor, and redesigning prison architecture. Essentially, “not satisfied with the system as it is,” Wines and Dwight wanted to replace it with something better.24

During the late 1860s, as in the earlier part of the century, ideals of reform never actually aligned with their pursuit. Prison administrators as well as legislators abandoned reformation efforts, if not in speech, then in practice. The politicization of prison administration appointments exacerbated the reality. Legislators desired maximum results at the cheapest costs and profits for the state coffers whenever possible. Rehabilitative efforts suffered because prison administrators lacked concrete means to measure and prove their efficacy. Recidivism data generally proved unreliable and unconvincing, especially compared to the persuasiveness of prison finances. Anecdotes, not authoritative data, became the only evidence that wardens had to offer, and that simply did not carry enough weight.

Labor played an increasing important role in the American prison system since its inception, tied to penal philosophies as a form of either punishment or rehabilitation. It also had a role in practical considerations of financing prison operations. By the 1830s, contract prison labor had coalesced into a powerful political force.²⁵ The system of contract prison labor forced the incarcerated into workshops and prison industries, the goods that they produced marketed by petty capitalists who oversaw prisoners’ labor and often used unsavory techniques to coerce work and commit fraud. Foremen bribed inmates with contraband or favors. Guards exploited prisoners’ vulnerability for their own gain. Prisoners who failed to meet the demands of these overseers received punishment. Even if prisoners complied, the private parties often refused to pay fully, blaming the imprisoned workforce for subpar performance. Poor conditions surrounding contract labor undermined the goal of labor within the prison system. The contract system remained intact through the nineteenth century, even with mounting resistance from a free labor force angered by what they considered to be unfair competition. By the turn of the twentieth century, prison laborers’ products and services started to become designated exclusively for state use.²⁶

By the 1860s, the profitability of prison labor and lack of funding to renovate or create additional prisons resulted in severe overcrowding. Facing increasing numbers of residents and

²⁵ Legislatures also allowed private contractors to lease prison labor, but the contract system was more ubiquitous, especially in the northern United States.
diminishing prison space, prison administrators housed multiple convicts in a confined space or in non-residential spaces such as chapels, attics, and infirmaries. Even the last bastion of solitary confinement, Eastern Penitentiary, succumbed to the pressures of overcrowding and revised the institution’s policy. Cohabitation made the “silent system,” which prohibited inmates from communicating, all but impossible. Penitentiaries devolved into holding pens for society’s outcasts. Meanwhile, public attitudes shifted, expecting punishment rather than rehabilitation, a move precipitated by a variety of factors including anti-immigrant sentiment in the Northeast and Midwest, ongoing and indeterminate debates over prison management systems, and “a general hardening of sentiment towards adult offenders that eventually led to public and legislative apathy,” as historian Matthew W. Meskell explained. The American public became less interested in reformation of imprisoned people, and more supportive of their general confinement.27

Ultimately, Wines and Dwight’s efforts were successful. The convening of the National Congress on Penitentiary and Reformatory Discipline first convened in Cincinnati in 1870 and issued its “Declaration of Principles,” which came to define American prison management for the following century. The Declaration recognized the central role of reformation in the treatment of prisoners, use of prisoner classifications, and a reward system for good behavior. It initiated the “reformatory movement,” a period in the late nineteenth century during which a new iteration of the prison emerged: the reformatory. Among the reformatories that arose were several of the historic state prison museums included in this study: the Old Idaho State Penitentiary (built in 1872), the Old Montana State Prison (constructed in 1873), the West Virginia Penitentiary (opened in 1876), and the Ohio State Reformatory (erected in 1886).

Carceral institutions operated under the premise of earlier penitentiaries in that inhabitants could be reformed, but differed in targeting younger, male wrongdoers guilty of first-time offenses. The regimes at the reformatories centered upon a combination of Christianity and military practices, religious worship, moral improvement through education and manual labor, and structured prison life. Unfortunately, the reformatory movement suffered many of the same challenges as the penitentiary movement, experiencing a similar, unsuccessful outcome. This reform movement, as well as ones that followed it, did little to improve the daily lives of most American prisoners.28

Significantly, the women’s reformatory movement occurred during this time, lasting from approximately 1860 to the mid-1930s. Unlike their male counterparts, female reformatories operated according to the doctrines of femininity, domesticity, and middle-class respectability. Their purpose was to inculcate the incarcerated with propriety, morality, and decorum. And just as imprisonment was not an exclusively male phenomenon, so too was it not just a northern phenomenon. Penitentiaries arose in the far West, but sparse populations and late settlement resulted in a reduced number of such facilities. In the post-Civil War South, incarceration rates rose as African Americans, no longer imprisoned on plantations, fell victim to racist systems of justice. By the end of the nineteenth century, the South possessed the largest prison population, most trapped in penitentiaries located on vast tracts of land and referred to as “prison farms.”29

28 The National Congress eventually became the American Correctional Association. Nicole Hahn Rafter and Debra L. Stanley, Prisons in America (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 1999), 7-8. One positive outcome of this movement was the creation of several juvenile facilities that emphasized an academic and trade education.
From the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth century, numerous developments drastically changed American carceral systems into something that would have been unrecognizable to early reformers. The Progressive Era saw a proliferation of facilities for women and juveniles. As one prison administrator remarked in 1922, “A new day has indeed arrived in American penological methods. Throughout the last half century, with rapidly increasing momentum, corrective social agencies other than the prison have developed in the constant and always necessary battle of society against crime.” The reformatory movement of the 1870s, the creation of “indeterminate sentencing,” the use of parole and probation, the development of juvenile courts, farm prisons and specialized institutions, intervention of philanthropic volunteer work, and inclusion of mental health experts like psychologists and psychiatrists within prisons contributed to “reducing the original functions and methods of the American prison to something quite different.”

An emphasis on reform, as well as the ideals of “scientific” prison management guided penal administrators throughout the early twentieth century. The prison reform movement eventually merged with emergent Progressivism, becoming one of many projects intended to achieve “Americanization” and reinforce governmental social control. The early twentieth century saw the rise of the “medical model” within penology which insisted that individuals who committed crimes did so because they were afflicted with some sort of sickness. Commentators labeled prisoners “defective,” blaming their deviancy on physical, emotional, and/or mental

---

inferiorities. In many ways, the medical model contributed to the “Othering” process of imprisoned populations because it offered a specific and “scientific” reason for differences among “regular” citizens and criminals. The concurrent eugenics movement bolstered these beliefs as scientists used germ theory to argue that criminality was inheritable and, thus, incurable. In his work *The Condemnation of Blackness*, historian Khalil Gibran Muhammad described how Progressives, using pseudo-scientific principles, racialized crime, viewing “black criminality” as inherent in contrast to white immigrant criminals considered capable of reform. The Progressive use of scientific principles and research to address societal problems not only affected penological theory and practice. It institutionalized white supremacist views that grounded “black criminality” in “science.” By the 1920s, as the Progressive Era dwindled, most states possessed a central penitentiary for serious, adult offenders, typically a renovated nineteenth-century structure. Most states throughout the North and Midwest also counted at least one to two reformatories for younger offenders, both male and female. Such facilities composed most state prison systems until the 1970s.31

The function of imprisonment remained relatively consistent throughout the mid-twentieth century, although the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s included efforts to recognize civil rights for prisoners. Imprisoned black activists worked to make incarceration publicly visible, and in the process became global, political figures that symbolized racial oppression. State powers also experienced a series of disastrous—and highly publicized—failures in terms of managing prison protests, in turn undermining confidence in authorities’

capabilities and intents. Subsequently, the “prisoner’s rights movement,” a period of litigation between 1965 and 1980, reaffirmed prisoners’ constitutional rights and required states to improve prison conditions, as well as the treatment of inmates. At the same time, however, prison populations became increasingly black and brown, a trend that continued and then escalated towards the end of the twentieth century.32

American penal policy in the late twentieth century evinced less concern with correction and reform, and instead focused more intently on confining individuals deemed anti-social. As the New Deal liberalism gave way to Reaganism, structural changes in the American political economy played into both who was perceived as “anti-social” and the evolving solutions to remove them from the general populace. In order to effectively warehouse prisoners, states built new facilities in remote and rural areas, abandoning facilities that had been surrounded by cities over the previous century. The role of labor in imprisonment changed as well with the outlawing of harsh, mandatory labor practices. Even as new physical structures arose between the 1970s and the 1990s, however, the actual legal structures that governed imprisonment changed relatively little.33

After reaching a significant low point in 1972, the American prison population began “a consistent and unprecedented climb.” As one scholar explained, the “thirty-five years after 1972 produced a growth in rates of imprisonment that has never been recorded in the history of developed nations.” Rates of imprisonment doubled by 1988 and then doubled again by 2010.

The explosion of the carceral population transformed the face of the American prison landscape. Changes in sentencing swelled prison populations as prisoners received flat sentences, or a specific amount of time, known as mandatory minimums, as opposed to indeterminate sentencing that had once constituted a range from minimum to maximum amounts of time. The War on Drugs of the 1980s and 1990s generated severe punishment for drug-related crimes, essentially doubling the nation’s incarcerated population. Moreover, mandatory sentencing laws jailed people for longer periods of time.\textsuperscript{34}

Faced with overcrowding and deteriorating facilities in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, states closed their antiquated nineteenth-century prisons. The Old Idaho Penitentiary, Eastern State Penitentiary, and the Old Montana Prison were among the first institutions to decommission, shuttering their doors in the 1970s. Prison conditions continued to worsen as carceral populations rose, forcing the Ohio State Reformatory and the West Virginia Penitentiary to cease operations in the 1990s. Other historic prisons remained functional during the first part of the twenty-first century, although ultimately, they were not immune to the challenges that overcame their peer institutions. After decades of operation, the Old Joliet Prison closed in 2002, the Missouri State Penitentiary decommissioned in 2004, and the Historic Iowa State Penitentiary shut down in 2015. In order to cope with overflowing prison populations, states built newer, more modern carceral complexes or turned to private prisons. Private, for-profit companies replaced the state in managing carceral populations, an entrepreneurial move that took advantage of the profitability of prisons. At the same time, changes in the nation’s political economy exacerbated the situation. Social unrest manifested in urban riots, resulting in

\textsuperscript{34} Zimring, “The Scale of Imprisonment,” 1127, 1230. Century-high imprisonment rates across individual states were nearly universal as of the mid-1980s.
widespread anxiety and belief that civil society was giving way to disorder, chaos, and crime. Additionally, the economic malaise of the 1970s embittered the white working class, contributing to the rise of a reactionary New Right. Economic crises throughout the later decades of the twentieth century resulted in surpluses of capital, labor, and land, which the state harnessed in order to create, and later expand, a new, expansive prison system. As a result of these conditions, the rehabilitative philosophy that had provided the basis for American penology faded away, and a new carceral system emerged, thanks to exploitative legislators, opportunistic profiteers, and an increasingly punitive public.35

The history of American prisons has been characterized by ebbs and flows, by progression and regression. Reformers embraced optimistic and “modern” techniques to address and resolve past mistakes. Yet, too often the practical demands of prison operations and the lure of profitability resulted in unrealized aspirations. Reform became intangible and lost out to the promise and pursuit of money, power, and profit. Imprisonment has always been funded, constructed, regulated, and managed largely by the states, even when they enlist private companies to act on their behalf. As of 2010, the federal government was responsible for less than 10 percent of incarcerated persons in the United States.36

It should come as no surprise that carceral tourism overwhelmingly takes place at former state prisons because of the number and widespread distribution of such facilities throughout the nation. The American prison system has experienced many changes throughout time, with only one constant. However government officials defined them—as jails, prisons, penitentiaries, or

reformatories—they built facilities with one purpose: to confine people deemed unfit for society. Who is incarcerated and why are some of the questions that historic carceral tourism could bring to the public consciousness, and yet these aspects of our carceral past remain unexplored.

Historic prison museums build on and take advantage of a carceral legacy, one that is uniquely American, and one that continues to thrive in its current form: a carceral state that targets people of color and imprisons more human beings than any other nation in the world.

The “Punitive Turn”

American prisons have always been filled with “Others.” Beginning in the 1790s, those were immigrants, most Irish. One account from the New York State Prison in 1823 claimed that the incarcerated inhabitants were “from almost every clime and country: Spaniards, Frenchmen, Italians, Portuguese, Germans, Englishmen, Scotchmen, Irishmen, Swedes, Danes, Africans, West-Indians, Brazilians, [and] several Northern Indians,” as well as natural-born citizens. Anti-immigrant and racist politicians stoked fears regarding European immigration and the northern migration of free blacks, contributing to the rise of nativism in the 1830s. One scholar found that since the earliest prison statistics were reported, the “combined percentage of foreign-born persons, blacks and other minority groups incarcerated by the criminal justice system has ranged between 40 and 50 percent of all inmates present.”

At the same time, the racialization of prison populations emerged as a disturbing trend in American carceral history: ethnic, and later racial, minorities have constituted a significant

---

segment of the prison population since the institution’s beginning. As de Tocqueville observed in 1833, “in those states in which there exists one negro to thirty whites, the prisons contain one negro to four white persons.” Policing, punishing, and confining people of color, especially black Americans, has a long national history, visible in other systemic practices like enslavement and Jim Crow. Mass incarceration built on these mechanisms of control, supervision, and discipline, rending families apart and devastating community stability. Incarceration rates for adults and juveniles of color soared, and those “on the outside” were not immune to the psychological, social, and economic effects. After the Civil War, the white American imagination increasingly associated crime with blackness and black urban spaces.

Between 1923 and 1981, crimes against property—robbery, burglary, larceny, embezzlement, forgery, and fraud—accounted for over half of state prisoner felony convictions. As functional prisons, almost 40 percent of current historic sites had a capacity of five thousand residents per facility, but most institutions frequently exceeded that limit. Thousands of formerly

---


39 Native Americans have also experienced long-term and systemic forms of incarceration or detainment, rooted in practices of settler-colonialism. These include confinement to reservations, coercion into boarding schools, and detention in prisons; Thompson, “Why Mass Incarceration Matters,” 703-705.

40 According to Thompson, “one in ten children in America had one or both parents under correctional supervision by the first decade of the twenty-first century.” Additionally, “as many as 70 percent of the children whose parents were imprisoned at the close of the twentieth century would end up behind bars themselves, and African American children were more than eight times more likely to have a parent in prison than were white children in major cities.” Thompson also referenced the negative effects of incarceration on education, employment, disenfranchisement, and public health; communities that suffer high rates of incarceration also cope with chronic poverty; Thompson, “Why Mass Incarceration Matters,” 714.
incarcerated individuals eventually left prisons and returned to the public realm, but many did not. In fact, hundreds of incarcerated men, women, and children died by execution or during escape attempts but many more were victims of disease, accidents, murder, and suicide. More than 200 prisoners died at the Ohio State Reformatory, the Idaho State Penitentiary recorded the deaths of 129 prisoners, and one tour guide claimed that at least 998 inmates died at the West Virginia Penitentiary. Recognizing historic prison museums as human institutions, and not as static historical artifacts, can illustrate how incarceration changed over time.

Many state prisons housed women and even juveniles, especially in their early histories. The Old Idaho Penitentiary incarcerated 13,000 people throughout its history, 215 of which were women. Incarcerated women lived in the West Virginia Penitentiary, Missouri State Penitentiary, and Eastern State Penitentiary well into the twentieth century, until each state relocated them to new, gender-segregated facilities during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s respectively. The state prisons in this study also incarcerated juvenile offenders, predominately during the late nineteenth century. The most common convictions in 1910 were larceny and “Disobedience,


42 Guided Tour, West Virginia Penitentiary, July 26, 2018; Guided Tour, West Virginia Penitentiary, July 27, 2018; Guided Tour, Missouri State Penitentiary, August 25, 2018; Guided Tour, Old Idaho Penitentiary, September 6, 2018; Private Tour, Old Joliet Prison, September 18, 2018; Guided Tour, Eastern State Penitentiary, January 26, 2019; Guided Tour, Eastern State Penitentiary, January 27, 2019. Sources indicate that the prison contained approximately eighty women prisoners who resided on the third floor until they were relocated in 1947. Women were confined in other historic state prisons, as well, but those were converted to single-sex institutions earlier. For example, women were incarcerated at the Old Joliet Prison before being moved in the late 1800s.
Incorrigibility, Running Away, Delinquency,” crimes that represented over half of all detainees in juvenile institutions. There were more serious juvenile offenders. James Oscar Baker, convicted of murder for killing a man in order to protect his father, arrived at the Old Idaho Penitentiary at just ten years old. Interpretation at the Old Montana Prison identifies one prisoner as a “fifteen-year-old murderess,” and Eastern State Penitentiary discusses Mary Ash, an eleven-year-old girl who died while in prison custody.43

More broadly, among juvenile prisoners, racialization became apparent. In 1910, black youth made up 71 percent of juveniles sent to prisons, jails, and workhouses in the United States, while white youth comprised only 31 percent. As of 2015, African American youth comprised 44 percent of those confined in juvenile facilities, although African Americans constitute a mere 16 percent of the total youth population. Some states originally intended to house young first-timers in institutions like the Ohio State Reformatory, protecting them from hardened adult criminals. More frequently, facilities possessed mixed populations, with adults and juveniles serving sentences under the same roof. From 1910 to 1981, the median age for incarcerated peoples remained between twenty-five and twenty-nine years, but children as young as ten years old arrived in state prisons where separation from adults was not assured.44

The racialization of prison populations was largely a twentieth-century phenomenon, as state prison populations moderately but consistently grew (see Figure 3 in Appendix A).

43 Guided Tour, Old Idaho Penitentiary, September 6, 2018; Self-Guided Tour, Old Montana Prison, September 12, 2018; Guided Tour, Eastern State Penitentiary, January 26, 2019.
Between 1925 and 1986, they increased at an average annual rate of 2.8 percent, with most of that growth occurring after 1980 when the annual rate escalated to 8.7 percent. Overall, the numbers of incarcerated in the United States tripled between 1880 and 1984.\textsuperscript{45} In 1926, white Americans made up 75 percent of those imprisoned at state levels, while black Americans represented 23 percent. Sixty years later, however, white Americans comprised only 53 percent of state prison admissions, while the proportion of black Americans had risen to 46 percent.\textsuperscript{46} Such dramatic increase in black prison populations was not proportional to black population growth which remained stable throughout much of the twentieth century, roughly 10 percent of the general population in 1926 and 12 percent of the population in 1986.\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{45} Cahalan, \textit{Historical Corrections Statistics, ”} 5, 64, 113, 122; Guided Tour, Old Idaho Penitentiary, September 6, 2018; Guided Tour, Old Idaho Penitentiary, September 7, 2018; Self-Guided Tour, Old Montana Prison, September 12, 2018; Guided Tour, Eastern State Penitentiary, January 26, 2019; Guided Tour, Eastern State Penitentiary, January 27, 2019.

\textsuperscript{46} Cahalan, \textit{Historical Corrections Statistics, ”} 1, 5, 27; Patrick A. Langan, \textit{Race of Prisoners Admitted to State and Federal Institutions, 1926-1986} (Washington DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1991); Patrick A. Langan et al., \textit{Historical Statistics on Prisoners in State and Federal Institutions, Yearend 1925-86} (Washington DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1998). National surveys of prison populations do not mention the race of prisoners specifically until 1870, although different agencies collected information about the racial composition over time, using diverse methods. Additionally, the 1880 Census is considered to be the first reliable report on carceral statistics (in that it is comparable to subsequent reports), despite the fact that information was collected as early as 1850. According to one source, “the Justice Department did not become involved in collecting data on State prisons until the Census Bureau dropped reporting in this area in 1946”; Cahalan, \textit{Historical Corrections Statistics,”} 5. One report reveals that the percentage of black Americans among State and Federal prison admissions more than doubled between 1926 and 1986, from an average of 21 percent to 44 percent; Langan, \textit{Race of Prisoners,} 6.

\textsuperscript{47} In fact, in 1986 the number of black prisoners was nine times larger than the recorded number in 1926, while the number of white prisoners was three times larger, and the number of other races was five times larger. Between 1926 and 1986, the combined percentage of Other races, including Asians, Alaska Natives, American Indians, and Pacific Islanders, remained relatively stable at 1 percent of admissions for State and Federal prisons. In 1970, the statistics of 43 percent represented both black Americans as well as those identified as Other; see Langan, \textit{Race of Prisoners,} 5-7.
Increases in black prison populations were not uniform across the United States as regional variations existed. In the 1920s, black Americans represented an estimated 45 percent of incarcerated in southern state prisons, even as their numbers in the North Central United States, Northeast, and West were much lower. However, by 1986, mass incarceration of Americans of color had grown throughout the United States, with blacks representing over half of all state prison admissions in the South and Northeast, and over 40 percent of admissions in the North Central. By 1990, nearly 8 percent of the adult African American population was under correctional care or in custody, compared to less than 2 percent of the adult white population. As the twentieth century came to a close, more people lived behind bars in state prisons than ever before, and increasingly they were people of color (see Figures 4, 5, 6, and 7 in Appendix A).  

The pivotal decade in this explosion in prison populations and the skewing toward black imprisonment was the 1960s, the same decade the civil rights movement achieved its successes and as public outrage over rising crime rates also began to escalate. Anxieties about crime revolved around a long history of innate “black criminality” and media sensationalism; that African Americans were once again demanding full citizenship contributed to increased racial paranoia among some white Americans. Although a noticeable increase in violent crime occurred from the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s, the numbers were not so alarming as public concern might have suggested. Yet politicians capitalized on the perception and stoked fear in their campaigning and then appeared to address it with legislation once elected. Often

48 Cahalan, *Historical Corrections Statistics*, 44.
49 The national homicide rate did rise throughout the 1960s. However, as Thompson argued, the American public “was not, however, experiencing a crime wave, and even this sort of jump in the murder rate cannot explain Americans’ . . . embrace of law and order.” In fact, “the offense distribution of State and Federal prisoners over the last 75 years has demonstrated a remarkable level of consistency”; Thompson, “Why Mass Incarceration Matters,” 727, 729.
overlooked in the public conversation is the fact that, by the 1980s, law enforcement agencies became eligible to receive federal funding, equipment, and resources to combat crime if they could demonstrate a need for it. Liberal and conservative political parties alike endorsed anti-crime fighting measures and championed “law and order.” Politicians refused to appear “soft on crime” as voters expressed doubts about safety, security, and social disorder.\textsuperscript{50} Anti-drug laws of the 1970s especially contributed to swelling prison populations with the War on Drugs widely recognized as the greatest contributor to the rise of the carceral state.\textsuperscript{51} State and federal agencies waged the War on Drugs primarily in urban spaces and against communities of color. By the 1990s, for example, drug offenses accounted for approximately 32 percent of incarcerated populations in New York. Between 1985 and 1990, adult arrests for drug violations increased by 74 percent, and arrests for sales or manufacture of illegal drugs by 137 percent. In her work on the rise of mass incarceration, historian Heather Ann Thompson encapsulated this massive shift as the “punitive turn” during which “more people were incarcerated in the United States than were imprisoned in any other country.”\textsuperscript{52}

\textsuperscript{50} President Lyndon Johnson, for instance, deemed crime intolerable for “a truly free people.” Substantiating his claims that crime had no place in American society, President Johnson allocated resources to fund tougher and more advanced crime-fighting measures; Lyndon B. Johnson, Special Message to the Congress on Crime and Law Enforcement, \textit{American Presidency Project}, March 9, 1966, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/238436 (accessed May 10, 2020).

\textsuperscript{51} Thompson, “Why Mass Incarceration Matters,” 707. Some scholars, as well as interpreters at sites of historic carceral tourism, have pushed back on this claim. For instance, one tour guide at the West Virginia Penitentiary claimed that overcrowding took place before the 1970s and the surge of drug-related incarcerations. He argued that the prison was most overcrowded during the late 1940s to the 1960s, but he was unsure of the cause; Guided Tour, West Virginia Penitentiary, July 27, 2018.

\textsuperscript{52} Thompson, “Why Mass Incarceration Matters,” 703.
Harsher sentencing meant that black Americans, regardless of age, became more likely to go to prisons instead of jails. They also received longer sentences.\textsuperscript{53} Introduction of mandatory sentencing at state and federal levels penalized those with drug-related convictions, resulting in more people—primarily people of color—going to prison for longer periods of time. By the end of the twentieth century, almost 5.6 million Americans served time in a state or federal prison, statistics never before seen in national history or matched by any other country in the world. The lives of all Americans had been shaped in fundamental ways by mass incarceration.\textsuperscript{54} Almost 2.3 million Americans remained trapped within the criminal justice system in the early twenty-first century, and prisons across the United States remain disproportionately filled with people of color.\textsuperscript{55} In 2014, the Prison Policy Initiative found that black Americans are five times more likely, and Latinos are almost twice as likely, to be incarcerated than white Americans.\textsuperscript{56} Thus, while thousands of white Americans tour decommissioned prisons every year, thousands more


\textsuperscript{54} Thompson, “Why Mass Incarceration Matters,” 734.


Americans of color—including African Americans, Latinos, and American Indians/Alaska Natives—are detained in active facilities (see Figures 4, 5, 6, and 7 in Appendix A).

Incarceration has always been racialized to a certain extent, and racial minorities have been imprisoned at higher rates dating back to the early nineteenth century. However, populations of state prisons undeniably varied throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with prisoners of different genders, ages, nationalities, and races occupying the same facilities. By the time that prisons decommissioned during the mid-to-late twentieth century, their populations were decidedly less multidimensional. This shift in carceral practice is often overlooked at historic state prison museums, where interpretations tend to focus on early institutional histories and the peoples—mostly white—who occupied the facilities, overlooking the story of the racialization of incarceration in the United States.57

Transitions to Prison Tourism

Public tourism of prisons, widely considered modern institutions, emerged with the formation of the nation-state. By the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a fascinated public gazed at prisons, asylums, hospitals, factories, and slums as the physical embodiments of democratization and of the production, destruction, and enterprise of industrialization. Societies built some of these institutions to specifically cope with victims of emergent modernity. Creation of new urban centers, and the proliferation of institutions associated with the state, provoked widespread commentary. Sociologist Michelle Brown suggested that “a kind of spectatorship emerged which permitted privileged glimpses of a world that both defined and distanced the

---

observer.” Understood as a form of “misery tourism,” such spectatorship laid the foundation for dark tourism generally but also carceral tourism specifically. Early prison tourism produced a culture of spectacle that encouraged voyeurism and dissuaded critical consciousness. Much like their predecessors, today’s penal tourists enter, and participate in, complicated viewing environments that rely on and encourage unequal gazes.

In the late nineteenth century, penitentiaries provided visible and significant proof that democracy, public works, and modernity were interdependent, evidencing how “the cosmopolitan nature of the prison is one of its peculiar features.” Purpose, design, and scale of prisons, as well as the punitive ideologies that governed them, became objects of public attention and debate. As Brown explains, “early American Pennsylvania and Auburn systems were points of international attention and commentary.” Some well-known and much-admired prisons inspired the design and aesthetic of other facilities. As national and international discourse about prisons became more fervent, architects, politicians, reformers, and citizens embraced plans for grandiose, imposing, and elaborate structures.

---

58 Many of these new “modern” institutions, including prisons, were exposed to outside scrutiny via outside investigations. Guided Tour, Eastern State Penitentiary, January 28, 2019; Michelle Brown, The Culture of Punishment: Prison, Society, and Spectacle (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 93.

59 There are exceptions; for instance, the public viewing of prisons was considered by some to be beneficial because it kept the institutions and their managers accountable for the prison’s conditions and the prisoner’s treatment. Prison tourism could be considered a form of transparency and ongoing connection between residents on the “inside” and visitors from the “outside.” Visitors were actually allowed to tour the operational prison at the Old Idaho Penitentiary and were charged $.25 for admission. Brown, Culture of Punishment, 93-94; Parry interview.

Yet with the punitive turn, operational prisons became increasingly restricted and private, and the frequency and degree of public visitation changed. In the 1960s and 1970s, prisons became more inaccessible, limiting public interaction with carceral sites even as events like the Attica Prison riot piqued public interest. During the 1970s and 1980s, tourism of defunct prisons increased as older, less functional facilities closed their doors. Alcatraz Island closed in March 1963 after only twenty-nine years of operation; its beginning to offer public tours ten years later makes it arguably the first defunct historic prison to do so. Tours of decommissioned prisons flourished throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, building on the long and well-established history of institutional visitation, which allowed the public to view or enter operational prisons. The decommissioned Ohio State Reformatory began offering tours in the mid-1990s, as did Eastern State Penitentiary; tours of the Missouri State Penitentiary began in 2004.

Like penal tourists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, large numbers of twenty-first-century Americans regularly flock to carceral spaces hoping and intending to see inside, with most prison tourism taking place in decommissioned facilities. Empty buildings, devoid of prisoners and prison staff, facilitate understandings of prisons and punishment as historic phenomena. The very emptiness forces tourists to rely on heavily curated historical narratives, reinforcing certain penal representations within purposefully staged spaces. Penal tourism

---

scholars have also determined that tourists expect sanitized narratives that align with their assumptions.\textsuperscript{62}

All of these factors converge to create and sustain carceral fantasies. As a result, prison tourism remains unlikely to engage visitors in socially conscious or civically critical ways. As Michelle Brown explained, because tours are “framed by punishment, the voyeuristic gaze is given greater legitimacy in its observation of other people’s pain as it carries with it authority and judgment. The idea of pain is thus reworked into a context of leisure and entertainment with very little, if any, interaction with those largely imagined ‘others.’” Visitors demand that their expectations align with the actual tour experience. As carceral tourists, people make an exaggerated effort “to read, decode, preserve, and collect this unusual moment.” However, the penal gaze implicit in prison tourism obscures, selects, or simplifies different historical truths, the production of those truths, and potential challenges or alternatives to the historic and contemporary practice of punishment.\textsuperscript{63} Still, tour participants consider their experiences to be authentic, reinforced by consumption, or purchasing souvenirs, photographs, and other symbols of having “gone to prison.” Visitors also assume they receive accurate portrayals of punishment because interpretation often evokes pre-existing cultural imaginings, reinforced by references to historical records that are seldom critically analyzed by site managers and interpreters.\textsuperscript{64} This process of selective and repetitive representation creates particular and harmful impressions of

\textsuperscript{62} Earlier carceral tourism took place in operational prisons. For instance, the Active Warden of the Montana State Prison extended an “invitation to tour and inspect the working of the prison” to the public. There are forms of carceral tourism that take place at operational facilities, but these examples are not included or addressed in this chapter. “Ellsworth Says Prison Tours Are Welcomed,” \textit{The Independent Record}, November 20, 1962; Ferguson, Piché, Walby, “Bridging or Fostering Social Distance?” 357-374.

\textsuperscript{63} Of course, there is an inherent challenge in defining and measuring civic uplift. Brown, \textit{Culture of Punishment}, 97-99; Williams, \textit{Memorial Museum}, 143.\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{64} Brown, \textit{Culture of Punishment}, 98.
incarceration that reverberate in the larger society, and affect carceral legislation, policy, and management.
Chapter 3.

Rehabilitations: Historic Prison Museum Making

In the half century after the 1960s, the majority of historic state prisons in the United States closed their doors as operational facilities. Some opened as tourist spaces. The process and timeline of converting carceral sites into public history venues varied, with some facilities opening for tours within weeks and others abandoned for prolonged periods. This chapter examines the means by which individuals saved or salvaged historic prisons, as well as their purposes for doing so. Moments of and rationales for historic preservation contributed significantly to the identities that particular historic sites developed. As historian Seth Bruggeman suggested about historic prison museums, their authenticity is “a preservationist’s contrivance shaped indelibly by the moment in which it [the prison as a museum] was conceived.” The origin stories of historic prisons initially and continually influence the sites’ identities, missions, and interpretations.¹

This chapter explores museum-making processes used to facilitate the transition of former operational state prisons into historic prison museums. More specifically, it considers the different approaches used to preserve, and later manage, sites of carceral tourism. Who decided that these prisons were worth saving, and why? How did preservationists convince the state, as well as local communities, that historic carceral sites possessed value? And how has this museum-making process affected the identity of historic state prison museums today?

Understanding the museumification of carceral spaces reveals a great deal about preservationists’ attitudes towards, and perceptions of, incarceration; ideas that the public encounter routinely at historic state prison museums.

Between 1980 and 2005, approximately half of decommissioned historic prisons were demolished. Those that survived proved challenging to repurpose: their architectural designs revolved around the philosophy and functionality of incarceration, and repurposes—recreational, residential, and commercial—often proved difficult to imagine in such spaces. Additionally, historic prisons are generally massive structures with sprawling campuses, the sheer size and scale of which can prove prohibitive. Faced with such daunting challenges and enormous expenses, states frequently entertained proposals from private developers who promised to fundamentally and irreversibly alter prison sites. As an example of the hesitance with which many investors approached preservation and adaptive reuse of historic prisons, in 2017, the city of Joliet, Illinois, explored repurposing Old Joliet Penitentiary and the separate Women’s Prison with the aid of regional developers. As Ralph Schultz, chief operating officer of the Forest Preserve District of Will County, explained, several “groups expressed interest and said maybe we can make something happen here. The city is kind of looking at the two sites [in different ways]; one as a tourist site with TV/film income potential and the Women’s Prison could be an incubator for other things.”

Historic prison museums today, as either complete or partial entities, result directly from hard-fought preservation efforts, often in the face of lucrative alternative-use plans that threatened the integrity, sanctity, and authenticity of the sites. Overwhelmingly, outside

---

intervention by community groups of concerned or invested citizens became the most common means by which communities saved or preserved historic state prison museums. Grassroots preservation efforts were typically local, and individuals involved in preservation efforts often continued in leadership roles with the historic prison museums. The local resonance that historic prisons enjoy, especially for adjacent or affiliated communities, arguably proved the main catalyst for their preservations. Economic incentives also motivated communities to capitalize on historic state prisons for tourism and rental purposes. Probably the most important rationale for saving historic prisons, however, was that demolishing the sites proved too expensive. Still, if not demolished, large historic sites can require exorbitant sums of money for preservation, restoration, and maintenance. For fiscal reasons, then, either option—demolition or preservation—is often done collaboratively.

Collaborations with city, county, and state governments—especially state departments of corrections—range from amicable to animus. Almost every historic prison museum considered in this study enjoyed some sort of relationship with its state’s department of corrections. In fact, departments of corrections managed many historic prisons even after their abandonments, occasionally using them for correctional training purposes or leaving them untouched and unmaintained. Most sites eventually turned the facilities over to nonprofit entities for ongoing management and maintenance.

When not managed by or affiliated with departments of corrections, most sites—staffed primarily by whites—still defer to state agencies. For instance, Becky McKinnell of the Ohio State Reformatory noted how, although the historic prison received no funding from the Ohio

---

Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (ODRC), the reformatory continued to be “a reflection on them.” Today, the site’s interpretation attempts to illustrate the department’s changing ethos and penal philosophies. McKinnell wondered if “the current ODRC [would] be happy with what I’ve got here, what I’ve presented?” Similarly, Diane Gillespie, Director of the Jefferson City Convention and Visitors Bureau, and Sheila Sanford, tour coordinator for the Missouri State Penitentiary, indicated that their cities work well with state agencies in determining content at their sites.⁴ Mark Schreiber, however, explained that developing the Missouri State Penitentiary Museum proved “a frustrating process for a lot of folks, but I’m excited. We have new enthusiasm because all these entities are working together. Frustration started initially with the inability to get people appointed to [the redevelopment] commission.” As Schreiber related, the ability to move forward became contingent upon renewed commitments by local and state agencies.⁵

Not all preservationists of historic prison sites are fortunate enough to have such a reciprocal dynamic with local and state governments. Affiliates of the Old Joliet Prison realized from the onset that they could not count on state support. Once the city decided to move forward without state assistance, “things started to happen at the historic prison itself.” Essentially, the city of Joliet was “renting to own” the prison, which created a problem of access rights but allowed the city the opportunity to gather more information about the feasibility of the project and enter a deal with “eyes wide open.” At the end of the five-year lease, according to the Deputy City Manager/Economic Development Director for the city of Joliet, Steve Jones, “we

---

⁵ Mark Schreiber interview by author, Jefferson City, MO, September 22, 2018.
should know by then” whether or not the site will be successful. The mayor and city manager supported repurposing the prison as a tourist site that could facilitate economic development. According to Jones, the Illinois Department of Corrections seemed pleased with the current project.

Conversely, Rebecca Bowker of the Old Iowa Penitentiary explained that her state’s Department of Corrections reluctantly donned “the tourism hat,” confessing that she has struggled with taking on that new capacity despite her comfort interfacing with the public. Development of the Old Iowa Penitentiary represented a different kind of project, and corrections personnel believed that the Department of Corrections should not manage the prison’s redevelopment long-term. In 2019, however, the Old Iowa Penitentiary opened only for occasional, irregular, and large-scale tours, a meager attempt to raise revenue for the site’s evaluation, maintenance, and improvement. Limited use provides a short-term answer to the question of the defunct prison’s fate. If a suitable developer who is willing to take on the

6 In December 2017, there was an “active, inter-governmental agreement” among the state, the city, and the Forest Preserve District which “co-functions with the county” to rehabilitate the site. Physical cleanup of the prison began in April 2018, although changes in governorships delayed progress since the new administration considered the prison “really wasn’t a priority”; Steve Jones and Greg Peerbolte, interview by author, Joliet, IL, September 18, 2018; Schultz interview.

7 The city of Joliet received stewardship of the nearby women’s prison, half of which Jones describes as being “in bad shape,” with only partial electricity. The television program Empire filmed at the women’s prison, the city profiting $10,000. Administrators are interested in a partnership with a third party, in which a developer would take on the rehabilitation in exchange for a rent deduction; Jones and Peerbolte interview.

8 Jones was not concerned that the state, including the Department of Corrections, would be interested in taking the prison back, as the state is “not in the prison museum business.” He conceded that the state might decide to eventually sell the prison, since the Department of Corrections referred to the site as “public trash.” However, Jones believed this decision would create a “bad precedent,” as well as constitute a poor political move; Jones and Peerbolte interview.

extensive repairs needed to revive the prison cannot be found, the site will just “sit.” Neither the city nor the county wants to accept complete responsibility for the penitentiary, because it is “too expensive [and] too much of a hassle.” The reality of the Old Iowa Penitentiary is that, without a full commitment to repurpose, “degradation is already happening.”

Although the relationship between historic state prisons, their affiliated nonprofits, and local/state government vary, mutual buy-in is key to the historic prison-making process.

**Historic Prison Museums as Money Makers and Money Takers**

Despite the fact that states own most historic prison museums, many sites receive minimal, if any, governmental support. Considering the prevalent “hands off” approach most state governments have towards their decommissioned carceral facilities, it is not surprising that these institutions generally do not attract more budgetary attention. After all, state departments of corrections are not in the business of preserving historic sites. At present, they remain more concerned with confining people and profiting from that confinement.

Historic carceral tourism thus provides the majority of funds for conserving, maintaining, and improving defunct prisons. The West Virginia Penitentiary does not receive any grant or state money. According to a 2018 Legislative Audit Report, its managing body, the Moundsville

---

10 According to Bowker, there is undoubtedly a “learning curve between the DOC and state historical agencies.” The Department of Corrections is responsible for the budget, the Department of Administrative Services is responsible for the building (as a state-owned property), State Historic Preservation Office is responsible for historic preservation, and the nonprofit board is responsible for repurposing the prison. As of September 2018, the nonprofit was “realigning its mission and role.” Bowker reasoned that “for the developer to maintain the historical piece [of the site], it has to make money,” perhaps taking advantage of historical tax credits; Bowker interview.

11 Again, historic prison museums refer to former state prisons and/or penitentiaries, not jails, detention centers, or federal facilities.
Economic Development Council, collects revenues from tours and programming at the penitentiary and relies on it “to fund its operations,” including “the refurbishment of the structure.” None of the revenues go to West Virginia’s Department of Corrections or the state. Similarly, the Ohio State Reformatory does not rely on financial support from the state, nor does it collect federal funding. Instead, the site receives an annual grant from the city of Mansfield, which it pays back with revenue earned from tours and programming. Collections manager Becky McKinnell described the site as “basically financially self-sufficient.” The Old Montana Prison also “operates without any state or federal funding. The principal source of funding is through gate receipts and fundraisers;” and the agreement governing the Missouri State Penitentiary requires that “any revenue over the operational expense goes [towards] preservation.”

Most sites are interested in, and attempt to actively cultivate, investment from the private sector. For instance, officials at the Missouri State Penitentiary explained that the site’s current Master Plan incorporates a future “private development component” in addition to “a historical component, a government building component and a public sector component.” Public-private partnerships come with their own burdens. As Schreiber adamantly stated, “when you get a Master Plan with a developer you get one chance. If you screw up, you’re done. The interests of various entities have to align.” Similarly, Steve Jones thought that the Old Joliet Prison possesses

---

12 McKinnell interview; Sanford and Gillespie interview; Schreiber interview; West Virginia Office of the Legislative Auditor, *Legislative Audit Report: Division of Corrections’ 25-Year Lease of Former West Virginia Penitentiary*, November 11, 2018, Audit report PA 2018-648, 84th Legislature, 2nd Session, http://www.wvlegislature.gov/joint/postaudit/reports.cfm (accessed May 10, 2020). The legislative audit report from 2018 claimed that, between “July 2013 to April of 2018, the DOC erroneously paid approximately $204,000 of electric utility costs, which were the responsibility of the MEDC”; Tom Stiles interview by author, Moundsville, WV, July 27, 2018.
numerous venue opportunities. Jones argued the prison’s library could be utilized as a potential event or rental space. Similarly, the prison’s chapel is “on the short-list to fix” in order to host banquets and weddings. As this example shows, site administrators believe these spaces have creative and cultural appeal that promises to attract visitors interested in the place-making power of prison spaces. Funds generated from rentals, events, tours, and programs can supplement the operation, preservation, and potential restoration of the Old Joliet Prison. Jones insisted that site administrators would do “nothing to compromise the integrity of the site,” since the prison is “hallowed ground.” As a result, site administrators profess a commitment to best practices, although fiscal imperatives driving the need to attract private investment can mean that definitions, concepts, and frameworks that define best practices remain vague.

Diversification of revenue sources has become a prevailing financial strategy among historic state prison museums. For Rebecca Bowker of the Historic Iowa State Penitentiary, as for other historic prison museum stewards, the big question is “who pays?” Who is expected—or required—to cover costs, and the question of how much takes on additional urgency when visitor-based revenue is insufficient to maintain, let alone improve, historic state prison museums. Revenue from initial tours at the Historic Iowa State Penitentiary paid for the

---

13 For instance, approximately two hundred to three hundred guests attended a disc golf event held on the prison’s campus, viewed by Jones as a “recreation event.” All of the proceeds were donated to the prison’s rehabilitation. Additionally, two separate “war game” events raised a total of $4,000. Site administrators are also considering third party operators for the prison venue; Jones and Peerbolte interview.

14 Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning created a study that evaluated the prison, including estimated costs and potential uses. The report estimates costs of approximately $30 million dollars. Jones does not “want to remove any of the buildings, just limit [the public’s] access” to them; Jones and Peerbolte interview.

15 At the West Virginia Penitentiary, the 2013 memorandum of understanding stated that: “The Moundsville Economic Development Council further agrees to assume all costs of keeping the penitentiary open for such tours, such costs to include, but not limited to, utilities, trash disposal/grounds cleanup, and other damages or costs which may be incurred or result from such
historic structures report, which cost approximately $180,000. But that represents a mere fraction of preservation and restoration projects, which range between $30 million for the Old Joliet Prison and $500 million for the Old Iowa State Penitentiary. And in September 2018, Bowker remained concerned that “the next tour [would have] lower interest” than the previous ones. Prior to previous prior tours, approximately one thousand tickets had been sold in advance. In September 2018, “only about three hundred tickets sold for the upcoming tour.” Part of the problem was a “limited marketing arena,” despite the use of social media and newsletters. Without such supplemented income, the lack of regular and necessary funds constantly threatens the viability of preservation efforts not only at the Historic Iowa State Penitentiary but at similar institutions, as well.

A notable exception is the Old Idaho Penitentiary, which, as a state agency, is partially funded by taxpayer money, and therefore somewhat immune to the budgetary woes faced by other historic state prison museums. Still, for historic carceral tourism to succeed financially, prison museums have to find a way to earn supplemental income, even at sites with guaranteed revenue sources. Jacey Brain, an interpretive specialist at the Old Idaho Penitentiary, explained that because the site “is highly visited by tourists and guests . . . we’re able to bring in a fair


16 Bowker admitted that, personally, it is “hard to wrap your head around the scope of the project when it [costs] half a billion dollars.” Approximately 3,500 people attended the site’s first tour, and between 2,400 and 2,500 visitors attended the next two tours, which cost $15 per ticket. As of September 2018, the firm was “midway through” the report, having completed a Phase I environmental assessment. The final historic structures report was due at the end of October 2018; Bowker interview.

17 At the time of the interview, the next event was scheduled for October 2018 and tours for April 2019 had also been scheduled; Bowker interview.
amount of income that way.” Taxpayer support can come with expectations, however. For Steve Jones of the Old Joliet Prison, the long-term goal of preservationists is for the historic prison to “be an independent entity” and “reduce [the site’s] dependency” on the city. Arguably even historic prison museums that benefit from governmental support are expected to supplement their budgets as much as possible. Thus, the economic benefit of historic carceral tourism is inextricably linked to the salvaging and survival of decommissioned prison museums.

Regular tourism, special programming, site rentals, and fundraising efforts constitute the most popular and most effective forms of site revenue. Given that a site’s operational budget, not to mention its preservation, restoration, and educational initiatives, depends on visitor attendance, the necessity of tourism cannot be overstated. Even if a city or county supplements its historic prison museum, the revenue generated from tours and other programming provides the main revenue for keeping the lights on and the facility doors open. As a result, the urgency of tourism directly intersects—and has the potential to compromise—interpretation at historic prison museums.

**A Fraternal Order: Comparing Historic State Prison Museums**

Despite the quantity and variety of historic carceral sites, historic prison museums rarely engage with one another in terms of inter-institutional dialogue. The most likely scenario that would stimulate that involves a prospective, emergent, or developing museum consulting with a well-established site for guidance, but such conversations are usually infrequent and short-lived.

---

18 Jacey Brain interview by author, Boise, ID, September 6, 2018.
19 As of September 2018, the city of Joliet had given $275,000 to the museum to cover the initial costs. In 2018, the city designated an additional $50,000 for the site. However, the Old Joliet Prison is “not the museum’s main outside project”; Jones and Peerbolte interview.
Historic state prison museums’ decisions to operate as independent entities and outside of a comparative context make it difficult to create interpretive standards across historic carceral tourism. For instance, Tom Stiles of the West Virginia Penitentiary “does not know” how the site compares to other historic prison museums. Minimal comparative experiences and an emphasis on individual site autonomy contribute to a lack of general practical or theoretical development regarding historic prison museums.

Most historic state prison museum administrators have little experience with, or visible interest in, other comparable sites. During guided tours and online, the most cited historic prison museums amongst visitors and site administrators alike are Alcatraz Island in San Francisco and Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia. Smaller or newer institutions that implement historic carceral tourism frequently reference these facilities because they epitomize some of the earliest and most recognizable in terms of economic and/or interpretive successes. According to Mark Schreiber at the Missouri State Penitentiary, “it’s probably unfair for me to make a comparison, because I haven’t been to most of those [other historic prisons]. I have been to Alcatraz. Our prison was open for one hundred years when Alcatraz opened.” Another administrator at the Missouri State Penitentiary claimed that the site is “often compared to Alcatraz since it is also a well-known facility and often on the list of recently visited prisons among our visitors.”

According to Anthony Parry, another interpretive specialist at the Old Idaho Penitentiary, “I’ve

---

20 Brain interview; Stiles interview. In terms of inter-institutional dialogue, Brain concludes that there is currently “nothing official, as far as I know.” However, “some sort of association of historic prison museums” would constitute “something worthwhile.” Site administrators at the Old Joliet Prison are “already talking to other sites,” but Jones recognized the “need to formalize”; Jones and Peerbolte interview. Schreiber, of the Missouri State Penitentiary, explained that “I did go to the Iowa Prison when it closed. The folks in Iowa didn’t care for my advice. They just needed to learn on their own, we were guests and it’s their project”; Schreiber interview.
been looking to make connections between us and Alcatraz. Some inmates have spent time at both our facilities,” in addition to collaborations and joint research with other institutions. Comparisons and contrasts with Alcatraz Island often assist sites in defining identities as historic prison museums, either in their similarities or dissimilarities.21

At the same time, historic carceral tourism managers are often quick to critique or dismiss Alcatraz Island, mostly because they consider it so dissimilar or irrelevant due to its affiliation with the National Park Service. But there is another institution they admire. Historic prison museum administrators frequently cite and often attempt to recreate the financial success of the tours, programming, and fundraising models at Eastern State Penitentiary. Site administrators at the Missouri State Penitentiary compare themselves to their counterparts at Eastern State, and aspire to host the same number and variety of events, although they recognize that their location and smaller local populations are problematic. Interestingly, however, upon visiting Eastern State Penitentiary, Missouri State Penitentiary staff members were “kind of surprised at their whole presentation, with the old facility and new age interpretation.” By “new age,” they meant engagement with contemporary social issues. “It was good, but not what [we were] expecting,” they continued, “We try to keep it period correct, not so much new age.” Jacey Brain of the Old Idaho Penitentiary conceded that, “I haven’t done enough research. On my end, most of my interest in other sites [like Eastern State Penitentiary] has been things that apply to

21 Schreiber interview; Sam Richardson, “Historic Prison Locks in 25 Percent Jump in Tourist Visits,” News Tribune, December 16, 2016. At the Old Idaho Penitentiary, Parry revealed that the site has been in contact with Alcatraz Island and Mansfield Reformatory. Parry claimed the experience at Alcatraz Island helped open his eyes to what people related to when they visited, but he did not elaborate on what those topics/themes were; Anthony Parry interview by author, Boise, ID, September 6, 2018. Gillespie and Sanford of the Missouri State Penitentiary maintained that architectural elements, such as the intact gas chamber and “the two different styles of housing units,” are a constant source of visitor appeal and differentiates their historic prison museum from others; Sanford and Gillespie interview.
my job: what their gift shops or Halloween events are like.”

Still, his references to the Wyoming State Penitentiary, as well as the Old Montana Prison, demonstrate some awareness of other defunct prisons in the region.

Given the fact that most state prison museums are clustered on the East Coast or spread throughout the American West, it makes sense that Eastern State Penitentiary (in Pennsylvania) and Alcatraz Island (in California) have come to represent the archetypical successful historic prison museum. In reality, they do not; the presence of decommissioned prisons throughout the country, from coast to coast, points to a widespread American carceral landscape. Nevertheless, though the Old Joliet Prison is not the only historic carceral facility in the Midwest, site administrators recognize a relatively low number of comparable museums. Steve Jones concluded that the Old Joliet Prison has an advantage by being five to ten years ahead of other comparable projects.

Most historic prison museum administrators acknowledge that their institutions share commonalities in historic carceral tourism. Two site administrators opined that, in terms of similarities, “we all have the same common goal to provide a very historic [story] for each specific location. There are different stories because of different timeframes. The common goal is to promote the history.” These site managers maintained that the Missouri State Penitentiary compares favorably to other sites that have greater opportunities for public interaction. Anthony

---

22 Richardson, “Historic Prison Locks in 25 Percent Jump in Tourist Visits”; Brain interview. Gillespie explained that because Eastern State Penitentiary “brought in 350,000 visitors in 2015” and that number would be hard to achieve for Missouri State Penitentiary, they possess a different “location on the map and population size”; Sanford and Gillespie interview.

23 The rise and use of prison tourism was actually addressed during a tourism conference in downtown Chicago (“Prison Break”). Jones suggested that convention and visitors’ bureaus in Germany, France, and the Czech Republic are also interested in carceral tourism; Jones and Peerbolte interview.
Parry of the Old Idaho Penitentiary seemingly agreed, suggesting that one of the most significant discrepancies is budgetary. At Alcatraz Island, for instance, “they have a bigger budget. That was the biggest difference [between their institution and Old Idaho Penitentiary]. Similar stories, but different budgets.”

Equally critical, the lack of inter-institutional dialogue prevents development of disciplinary standards, interpretive guidelines, and managerial recommendations. Isolated interpretive decisions such as language/imagery, thematic selection, and ethical considerations create inconsistency within the larger realm of historical carceral tourism. Until historic state prison museums engage more deliberately and regularly with each other, sites will remain disparate entities that educate similar public audiences in conflicting, and potentially detrimental, ways. Combined into a unified whole, they would have the power to provide effective, consistent, and informed interpretation while honoring and sharing their institutions’ singular histories.

**Museums on a Mission**

Historic state prison museums arguably differ from more traditional museums in that they represent the intersection of museums, cultural resource management, and historic site preservation. The missions of museums consist of more than just “conserving and exhibiting treasures and objects that provide us with information but include the provision of educational tasks.” For sites of carceral tourism, the emphasis shifts from an appreciation of physical objects

---

24 Sanford and Gillespie interview; Parry interview.

to an appreciation of physical space and the “power of place.” Thus, this “contextual architecture” must meaningfully influence the site’s mission. In this sense, historic state prison museums and historic house museums are very similar. Missions of carceral tourism sites prioritize preservation, followed by interpretation/education. In terms of institutional missions, site administrators overwhelmingly identify preservation and education as key objectives for historic state prison museums. Additionally, most acknowledge tourism or economic development as central to their sites’ missions and community impacts. Probing the missions of carceral tourism sites raises interesting questions about the purpose of these sites, aside from “preservation for preservation’s sake,” and leads to examining why—or even if—these spaces matter. What is the purpose of historic state prison museums? And what are the metrics for determining success?26

Understanding an institution’s desired outcomes, and the metrics for evaluating these, is integral, especially because “measuring success by the number of visitors [alone] is deeply flawed and threatens to have an adverse impact on the museum’s sense of mission and identity.” Tom Stiles identified the mission of the West Virginia Penitentiary as tourism and history. He claimed that the Moundsville Economic Development Council, who manages the site, wants to “preserve the building for its history, and tours make that happen.” The council’s overall goal is to keep the “integrity of the site intact.”27 A West Virginia legislative audit report in 2018 echoed these sentiments, concluding that the penitentiary is primarily promoted as a destination for tourists. Similarly, site administrators explained that the Missouri State Penitentiary’s mission is

27 The site’s website characterizes the prison as a place where “history meets mystery”; West Virginia Penitentiary, https://wvpentours.com/ (accessed May 10, 2020); Stiles interview.
historical education. They conceded that, “[w]e are just trying to keep the history, and trying to get the history of MSP out there as it ages.”

Anthony Parry of the Old Idaho Penitentiary identified that site’s mission as preserving and interpreting “local history,” as well as sharing “the whole development of the Old Pen along with Boise’s development growing at the same time.” According to Parry, he wants visitors to leave with certain knowledge that they “don’t want to commit a crime. I just want people to feel their freedom, [and to just] know a bit more of Idaho’s history and local history, and how prison works and why it works.” For Jacey Brain, also of the Old Idaho Penitentiary, “our educational mission is to be a steward of the stories of the people that this site affected. We want to be able to tell the story of the site responsibly and ethically, but also make it accessible.” For Brain, the prison was a community institution. It was a part of Boise, first as a territorial prison and then as a state prison that operated until 1973, meaning that many local residents have or had family incarcerated in the prison. So, the historic prison museum has to operate in the same context. This means interpreters at the site have to tell factual stories that “tell the entire history of the site, but also in a way that is sensitive to people that have connections here. You can’t dive deep into family history, [or] things that are off topic. You have to keep it mostly limited to what’s relevant to the site.”

Community does factor as an important consideration in mission-making. Interestingly, in 2018, the leadership at the Old Joliet Prison worked to clarify their vision for the site, including its mission. According to Steve Jones, a representative of the city of Joliet, the project’s key commitments include “history, education, and community events.” Undoubtedly,

---

28 Sanford and Gillespie interview; Schreiber interview; West Virginia Office of the Legislative Auditor, *Legislative Audit Report*.
29 Brain interview; Parry interview.
the Old Joliet Prison and its future as a historic prison museum is deeply intertwined with community development. A series of planned community meetings revealed that residents desired employment opportunities, economic development, and a tangible financial benefit from the refurbished site. According to museum director Greg Peerbolte, the institution’s goals include salvaging and interpreting such an incredible historic site because the town of Joliet remains synonymous with the prison, and the hope is to “capitalize on this identity and use it as an asset.”

Yet, the best laid plans can be easily derailed. Jones identified the first and most important task as stabilizing and preserving the prison, particularly by confronting episodes of major vandalism including multiple arsons. The majority of these fires took place between 2013 and 2017, serving as the catalyst for repurposing efforts. The city and the museum agreed that it was a “shame what [was] happening” during the prison’s period of abandonment, and they formed a collaborative partnership to revive the prison, as well as a nonprofit to strengthen is historical interpretation and education.

The language sites use to describe most historic state prison museum missions is fairly common, emphasizing the dual tenets of preservation and history. For example, the Old Montana Prison states that its mission is to “preserve, protect and present elements of local and regional history and culture,” although prison museum administrators also expressed concern about self-sustainability and benefit to the community. Some sites have opted to include a social justice component to their missions, increasing the meaningfulness of their engagement with carceral

---

30 Jones and Peerbolte interview. According to Shultz, “the prison is going to serve as a regional or larger tourist attraction, whereas the open space will serve the community”; Schultz interview.
31 One of the initial sections targeted for refurbishment includes the cellblock. Site administrators hoped to have a survey completed by the end of fall 2018. Because the project is in its first phase of environmental renovation, areas such as the first floor require attention, including the need to seal over the prison art. According to Jones, prison art is integral to the site’s identity, and the “Joliet thing is to have prison art and wider furniture”; Jones and Peerbolte interview.
tourism. For example, the mission at the Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site 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.” Eastern State Penitentiary envisions moving “visitors to engage in dialogue and deepen the national conversation about criminal justice.” Heightened awareness of the social and potentially political impact of museums is becoming more commonplace in the public history field. As museum professional Carol Scott observed, the “contribution that museums and other cultural institutions can make to the realization of public policy, especially in relation to greater equity, access and social inclusion, is acquiring prominence.” Although other sites of conscience—for example, the Whitney Heritage Plantation in Edgard, Louisiana, which wrestles with the impact of enslavement on African Americans, and Dorothea Dix Park in Raleigh, North Carolina, where the complicated legacy of early twentieth-century mental health practices are central to interpretation—engage in historical healing as part of their missions, few historic prisons do. Transcending preservation and institutional interpretation, carceral tourism has the potential to confront and negotiate spaces affiliated with or interested in the carceral past and present. Unfortunately, many historic state prison museums have opted not to include or address such a component in their missions.32

The main ethos of historic prison museum missions seems focused on preserving and sharing local, site-oriented institutional history. Carceral tourism today generally fails to participate in civic or socially oriented education, or engage contemporary interpretive topics, including ongoing carceral realities. Measuring the “success” of historic state prison museums is not grounded in social outrage or political activism. It generally relies on visitor feedback and other visitor-related metrics, such as attendance, revenue, and reviews.

The Search for “Authenticity”

Historic state prison museums, regardless of geographic location or institutional timeline, share one major characteristic: they address some aspect of the history of incarceration in the United States, despite their numerous institutional differences, including management, funding, and mission statements. Still, each historic state prison museum is generally saved or salvaged by white community preservation groups because they also inherently possess local value, either because of their institutional histories or their economic potentials as tourist destinations. As a result, historic prison museums are often interpreted as local phenomena, and rarely, if ever, connected to regional, national, or international considerations of incarceration. However, each historic state prison museum approaches the carceral experience from a different interpretive angle and utilizes diverse rationales and strategies when making curatorial choices.

Some historic prison museums use the banal aspects of imprisonment to frame interpretation. Anthony Parry, an interpretive specialist at the Old Idaho Penitentiary, claimed

---

33 However, precautions must be taken so that practitioners do not unwittingly or unintentionally become knowers that exercise “loving, knowing ignorance”; Lisa Gilbert, “Loving, Knowing Ignorance: A Problem for the Educational Mission of Museums,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 59, no. 2 (April 2016): 125-40.
that the site takes the “everyday approach, but occasionally we sprinkle in the escapes . . . [tour guides] are all given freedom to tell the stories that we want. The biggest emphasis is to give the picture of what the daily life was like but find specific examples to show the variation.” Jacey Brain, Parry’s colleague, reiterated how, during his tours, he enjoys focusing on how inmates’ routines would have been. Daily routines, as well as [how] their time would have been spent. What their experience would have been like when they first check in here, their privacy being decimated (taking clothes, photographing you, examining your body, uniform indicating you’re a new inmate). Then, [I] discuss for the middle of the tour how incarceration’s conditions changed over time. How the earlier cell houses were overcrowded, plumbing not being introduced until 1926, how older and newer cell houses compared, sprinkled with specific stories of prisoners from different perspectives. Someone who is in punishment, is suicidal, who is a woman, etc. And then ending with how the experience would end for different inmates: release or the gallows.

His approach counters the more sensationalist tendencies of carceral tourism, including frequent and heavy-handed attention to the exceptional aspects of incarceration such as escapes, riots, and executions.34

Historic state prison museums often approach carceral interpretation through lived experiences, relying heavily on memory and the underlying assumptions of authenticity. At the Historic Iowa State Penitentiary, retired staff members lead guided tours, each offering a unique perspective and telling a different story. Theoretically, visitors learn different histories from different guides. Contextualizing personal experiences within a larger institutional history, as Brain did at Old Idaho, is one way of effectively combining memory and history. Use of retired prison staff—wardens, corrections officers, administrators, and mental health professionals—can personalize the narratives, structuring carceral history from a correctional standpoint.35

34 Parry interview; Brain interview.
35 For Bowker, “lots of history needs due respect,” including the riots that occurred at the prison; Bowker interview.
Authenticity, or the perception of it, can manifest and be manipulated in numerous ways, and sites of carceral tourism take advantage of visitors’ interest in and expectation of authenticity. Turner and Peters suggested that “the experiences elicited on the tours are aimed to make visitors genuinely feel they are enfolded within the prison, at the various moments of the past that are represented and performed.” In one analysis of Eastern State Penitentiary, visitor surveys revealed how audiences value authenticity, or the impressions they receive of what life would be like in a “real” penitentiary. The authenticity that visitors seek, however, is not the prisoner’s authenticity. Penal tourism sites often omit, disguise, or oversimplify—intentionally or not—how race, class, power, politics, and community affected systems of representation and preservation. Instead, historic carceral sites stand accused of presenting visitors with “staged authenticity,” one that caters to narratives of prisons and punishment that feel comfortable and familiar to primarily white visitors.36 In her analysis of Australian prison tourism, Wilson located staged authenticity, or “the work which tourism providers do to make tourists feel as if they are having an encounter with the authentic,” in the alterations that a prison underwent before opening for public viewing. Often, such staged authenticity builds upon a site’s connection to popular cultural referents. Movies like Birdman of Alcatraz (1962) and Shawshank Redemption

(1994) introduced publics to specific prisons well before any opened as historic museums. Johnny Cash recorded a live performance at San Quentin where future country star Merle Haggard was imprisoned, making that prison familiar to county music fans. Sing Sing’s proximity to New York City made it a “one-word reference” in popular culture.\(^{37}\)

Preservation, not necessarily restoration, is the priority at the majority of historic prisons. Early in Old Joliet Prison’s site planning process, there was “no remodeling, just clearing up” the debris that has accumulated since the prison’s abandonment. Its development plan mimicked Eastern State Penitentiary’s development, including programming and preservation methods which Steve Jones believed will “mitigate costs.” He hoped to leverage some of Joliet’s stereotypes, including the movie *The Blues Brothers* (1980), filmed on site while the prison was still operational. He asserted that programming and events at the Old Joliet Prison respected the prison experience, as “incarceration is still a sensitive topic” and “incarceration is a community.” More broadly, such professed sensitivity is frequently and flagrantly compromised by on-site practices geared towards entertainment and profitability. Commercialization occurs in the form of “selfie” promotions and prisoner-themed playing cards which commodify the suffering, and even deaths, of the formerly imprisoned.\(^{38}\)


Many other historic state prison museums adopted a similar approach, capitalizing on their institutions’ relationships with popular culture. This interpretive approach may be effective in attracting guests, but it is hazardous to the historical and ethical health of a carceral site. Specifically, “[w]idespread media representations have managed to absorb the prison into popular culture,” which, in turn, has consolidated and normalized “punitive attitudes in the public consciousness.” Given the gravity of the historical events, particularly the traumas that occurred at historic state prison museums, the infusion and exploitation of popular culture threaten to undermine a site’s sanctity.

**Interpretation (Then, Now, and Next)**

Historic state prison museum staffs tend to interpret their sites within certain eras, effectively historicizing and truncating more complex, and contemporaneous, interpretation. Occasionally, some sites address prison conditions and history in the mid-twentieth century, but most tend to select popular and crime-affiliated time periods—such as the gang activity of the 1920s and the lawlessness of the nineteenth century West—in order to interpret the spaces. Doing so both draws upon and capitalizes on audiences’ impressions of prisons, incarceration, and those who are, or who have been, incarcerated, such as gangsters and outlaws. Not only are these eras far removed from the current carceral state and its immediate roots, but they also represent very distinct understandings of criminality.

Tours, either guided or self-guided, stand among the most popular forms of engagement at historic state prison museums. Some sites also provide exhibits, displayed in designated

---

museum areas or throughout the space. Many historic prison museums offer signage, ranging in both quality and quantity. A handful of museums have yet to finalize interpretive approaches or contents, mostly because they are in early stages of development. For instance, interpretively, there are “no topics off limits yet” at the Old Joliet Prison. At such an early stage, the current interpretive goal aims to ensure that visitors “don’t leave here less empathetic with prisoners.”

But, at the same time, that goal does not encompass making visitors more empathetic towards prisoners. The current interpretive curriculum attempts to balance the history of the prison with “individual stories.” But what other projects are these sites undertaking in order to improve, and subsequently share, new understandings about their historic prisons?

More established historic prison museums have been interpreting site histories for years, even decades. Tom Stiles maintained that historical interpretation at the West Virginia Penitentiary has “remained the same for 27 years” because “history doesn’t change.” He argued that there is no reason to improve the site’s current interpretation, although he conceded that the historical interpretation at the penitentiary site “needs to be credible.” Stiles argued that the interpreters “must do a good job,” because there have been “no complaints” from former prisoners or their families. According to Stiles, “we don’t fabricate” the site’s history but rather “let the prison tell its own story,” ensuring that “visitors have had a walk-through history.”

Yet, the West Virginia Penitentiary has drawn accusations of “unethical” historical interpretation. Scholar Allen Mendenhall argued that:

The [West Virginia Penitentiary, also known as the Moundsville Penitentiary] has re-imagined past events to appeal to the tastes of contemporary consumers—who love a scare or thrill—and in so doing has not only disposed of reality but also encouraged people to ignore problems that supposedly don’t affect them (as if an increase in state power, even on a small scale, didn’t affect everyone). It provides

40 Jones and Peerbolte interview.
41 Jones and Peerbolte interview; Stiles interview.
a pleasure that offsets any indication of the excessive financial, social, or personal costs of imprisonment—costs that ultimately dwarf the slight revenue that a site like Moundsville can generate. Finally, it distorts public perception of prisons’ atrocities and makes mass incarceration seem like a reasonable, efficient, and legitimate strategy.42

Like the West Virginia Penitentiary, interpretation at the Missouri State Penitentiary “has remained pretty consistent from a historical context.” Mark Schreiber acknowledged that interpreters ensure “the historical information being given is always factual and consistent.” Stressing the importance of interpretive quality control, administrators “don’t want things to get misconstrued or misinterpreted.” Schreiber’s colleagues reiterated how the prison’s interpretation “has pretty much remained the same” and any changes have merely provided additional information. Generally, the site’s interpretation highlights industrial, architectural, and labor histories.43

One difference between the West Virginia Penitentiary and the Missouri State Penitentiary is that the latter has an interpretive plan. Site administrators at the Missouri State Penitentiary lament how “the industries were a big part of MSP and a lot of those buildings have been torn down.” Consequently, there are “not a lot of visuals for the guides to share that history Schreiber contended that additional interpretation with storyboards would help to resolve this issue, especially near the gas chamber, the recreational field, and former industrial areas. Other future projects include locating an alleged prison cemetery, as well as excavating and researching

42 Still, Mendenhall cautioned that if the prison were to close, it “teaches nothing. Open, it teaches those who want to learn”; Allen Mendenhall, “Moundsville Penitentiary Reconsidered: Second Thoughts on Hyperreality and at a Small Town Prison Tour,” Libertarian Papers 2, no. 1 (February 2010): 11.
43 Schreiber interview; Sanford and Gillespie interview. Schreiber explained that he does not “address those experiences dealing with the paranormal,” because he has “never had such an experience.” Rather, during his time at the operational prison, he “dealt with the abnormal not the paranormal”; Schreiber interview.
buried cells behind one of the housing units. The Missouri State Penitentiary also considered an oral history initiative, a project somewhat popular among historic prison museums. For example, the Ohio State Reformatory has an extensive oral history collection. Schreiber rationalized that if, “you ever get to the point where you say, ‘this is perfect,’ it becomes stagnant. You always need to move forward.”44 But the direction of that movement, the intentionality of it, remains unclear.

At the Old Idaho Penitentiary, Jacey Brain explained that the site’s interpretation has developed over time. Administrators expanded the historical timeline into the recent past, pushing the narrative, as Anthony Parry described, “to include inmates or victims that could still be around.” In that way, the Old Idaho Penitentiary mimics Eastern State Penitentiary’s decision to engage in more recent history, an area that many administrators and interpreters at historic state prison museums are unwilling to explore. However, interpreters at the Old Idaho Penitentiary approach this subject matter more cautiously than Eastern State Penitentiary, whose unapologetic style has generated more controversy than the Idaho site, as a state-owned entity, is willing to weather. As a result, site administrators self-regulate when it comes to deciding what is or is not appropriate. Parry justified these curatorial decisions: “We are not creating a reality, this is the history, this person did serve here, so we kind of base that off that. We don’t mention their crime, just what they did what they were here.”45

---

44 Schreiber interview; McKinnell interview; Sanford and Gillespie interview.
45 Parry interview. Parry recalled that, “[f]amilies have seen their [relatives’] mugshots and approached us, and we just try to provide them with information. And then we ask, “how does that make you feel?” They say, “that’s history, that’s part of life.” We haven’t offended and haven’t hurt anybody. We are concerned with the victims.” In the past, “there was extensive research into inmate stories. We’ve really pushed everything from the early 20th century, especially in the women’s wards, and in the early exhibits there were inmates from the 1800s to the 1920s”; Parry interview.
Interpreting recent history and contemporary carceral realities is fraught with ethical dilemmas, privacy issues, and potential politicizing. Certain regulations and restrictions govern the access to and use of prisoner information, and many formerly or currently incarcerated individuals have family members who may be affected by interpretation. Additionally, incarcerated people represent a vulnerable population. Interpreting recent history and contemporary issues may also draw the ire of public groups or governmental bodies involved in corrections, which could result in provocation and controversy that would threaten any future development and/or financial support. However, analyzing recent history and using it to contextualize current events, including today’s carceral reality, is one of the most salient opportunities that historic state prison museums possess.

Current interpretations at historic state prison museums tend to feature the perspective of either the correctional administration or those incarcerated in the prison, and successfully balancing the two histories has proven elusive. In order to improve the Old Idaho Penitentiary’s interpretation in the future, Parry aspired to undertake an “officer and guard forward project,” to speak more about the administrators and guards who are often almost entirely forgotten.46 Interpreters at the Old Idaho Penitentiary expressed interest in cultivating connections with the

---

46 Parry continued that future projects include collaborating with Boise State University in “producing virtual reality,” as well as another partnership in order to conduct “ground penetration in the cemetery.” Like the Missouri State Penitentiary, the Old Idaho Penitentiary is interested in “trying to flesh out who and how many are buried there. Amber, Megan, and Anthony [staff] wrote Buried Secrets [a tour] about the cemetery. I’d like to get as close to possible to the number of how many are out there and figure out who is missing.” Parry would also like the site’s interpretation to provide “[m]ore emphasis on their duties and what they gave to the state of themselves. [Corrections personnel] lived in close proximity to the prison up until the end. The Warden may have continued residence beyond 1974,” but the current timeline is somewhat murky in this regard; Parry interview.
warden at the current prison, as well as former inmates; but these efforts have not yet been realized.

Some institutions struggle with interpretive choices, because their sites contain a multiplicity of collections or unrelated spaces. Jacey Brain of the Old Idaho Penitentiary elaborated how “exhibits have been installed over the years that are related to the state historical society, but not related to the penitentiary.” A weapons museum, drawing from the society’s collections, was installed in 2001.47 It took a decade before the interpretive focus became more specialized in terms of telling the story of the penitentiary and introducing items relevant to the site, corrections, or social justice.48 Many sites of historic carceral tourism face similar challenges; crafting interpretation that addresses or works around an institution’s multiple personalities in a cohesive and effective way.

Historic state prison museums experience the same existential challenges as other historical institutions: namely, how to remain relevant and appealing to visitors. Specifically, sites of historic carceral tourism have felt pressured “to keep up with the times, as far as the modern interest and expectations of guests.” Site administrators determined technology, mobility, and interactivity will help to solve this problem. Still, incorporating technological or interactive interpretive elements often proves challenging at historic sites with small teams and meager budgets, but most concede this is an inevitable future. One of the Old Idaho Penitentiary’s newer technological components is a “Curtis weapons exhibit,” which Brain described as “a virtual reality kiosk.” Although the exhibit is not related to the penitentiary,

47 Brain interview; Parry interview. “Exhibits on transportation and machinery; most of those exhibits are closed [now], but the artifacts are still owned by the agency”; Brain interview.
48 Specifically, Brain argued that, “[w]e’ve gone from new exhibits that have been installed, but haven’t been about transportation in Idaho, but have been posting inmate biographies in the cell houses about inmates in each cell, about routines, and riots”; Brain interview.
because a weapons museum became attached to the prison, “it’s part of an attraction, part of the appeal of [our] site.” Brain concluded that “this virtual reality kiosk is one of our first forays into something that’s genuinely interactive.” Similarly, the Ohio State Reformatory introduced kiosks to provide stories, memories, and information. Eastern State Penitentiary created interpretive panels paired with self-guided audio, allowing visitors to curate their own experiences. Interpreters at historic state prison museums have realized that they need “to provide things that are new and interactive, to get repeat visitors interacting with your site.”

Despite a few projects to make sites technologically modern, the grassroots preservation efforts that initially saved and later characterized historic state prison museums impede the professionalization of interpretation at such sites. Cutting edge projects, including the creation of technological and interactive interpretive features, frequently require outside partnerships. Interpreters do the best that they can but often lack the knowledge, ability, or resolve to meaningfully change or develop sites’ historical interpretations. As a result, individual stories—from the everyday to the exceptional—remain silenced, beyond the narratives of institutional histories.

**Stakeholders: Communities, Collaborators, and People of Prison**

Because historic state prison museums intersect with carceral histories as well as contemporary carceral realities, they are arguably accountable to a greater number and diversity of stakeholders than many traditional history museums. There are three easily recognizable

---

49 Brain interview; Ross Parry, ed., *Museums in a Digital Age* (New York: Routledge, 2010). Like the Old Idaho Penitentiary, the Ohio State Reformatory possesses a relatively small staff, and the curator/collections manager, Becky McKinnell, essentially “directs the interpretation” at the prison singlehandedly; McKinnell interview.
stake-holding groups affiliated with historic state prison museums: communities, collaborators, and the people of prisons. The latter means the constellation of individuals—from former inmates and employees to professionals—who have some kind of connection to these sites.

Historic state prison museums are rooted in, and are viewed as extensions of, the local communities in which the institutions, as operational prisons, once functioned. They may collaborate with regional and statewide agencies, but the prisons and later museums are particularly important to the towns and cities in which they are located. Although historic state prison museums attract visitors from across the United States, as well as foreign tourists, most sites of carceral tourism survive, and thrive, because of the dedication and involvement of local populations. These different entities, however, do not always collaborate well. As of September 2018, Rebecca Bowker worked at Iowa’s Department of Corrections and also sat on the nonprofit responsible for managing the Old Idaho Penitentiary. She recognized problematic communication between different community stakeholders—in particular the city, county, and state—as a major deterrent to progress. And yet, all represent key stakeholders in the project.

---

50 The people of prison include former or current corrections workers, former or current incarcerated individuals, their families, and other directly affiliated with or involved in imprisonment. People of prison, as a stakeholder group, also include those affiliated with carceral sites that are now museums, including staff, volunteers, and visitors.

51 Mansfield, Ohio was selected as the site of the penitentiary because of its geographic proximity and the fact that the penitentiary brought “jobs and attention to Mansfield.” One tour guide at the Ohio State Reformatory claimed that the city of Mansfield considered the prison “to be a positive thing,” and that the community was “isolated from what was happening inside of the prison”; “Behind the Bars Tour,” Ohio State Reformatory, July 21, 2018.

52 Jones and Peerbolte interview; Sanford and Gillespie interview. The Old Joliet Prison is in the early phases of interpretation, and community acceptance and approval is an important aspect of long-term success.

53 Jones and Peerbolte interview. At one time, Bowker served as the president of Historic Idaho State Penitentiary; Bowker interview.
Community stakeholders include special interest groups comprised of local residents. Eastern State Penitentiary works with community partners such as museum professionals and representatives from nonprofits, criminal justice, and prison re-entry groups. As Annie Anderson, Manager of Research and Public Programming at Eastern State Penitentiary, explained, “we’re shifting to interpreting more contemporary issues, we wanted to include a multiplicity of perspectives around race, class, poverty, some of the main topics that are thorny or difficult to talk about that we had decided to engage with and discuss.” The benefit of this approach is that it represents various stakeholders associated with the site, and presents visitors with a dynamic, multi-facted narrative.

Historic carceral tourism frequently implements projects that depend on the participation, resources, and/or expertise of outside entities. Often, they partner with nearby universities that help with research projects, archeological excavation, and digital history initiatives. For instance, at the Missouri State Penitentiary, the site seeks to partner with a university in order to excavate and interpret some buried cells on site which date from around 1841, located behind the death row unit. Another potential partnership with a university might include an oral history project. Similarly, the Old Idaho State Penitentiary partnered with local universities in order to process a collection of glass plate negatives that featured images of former prisoners. Collaborators may include private parties like developers and entrepreneurs who contribute to, and have a financial interest in, the site. Many historic state prison museums work with artists in order to create cross-disciplinary products, with the former prison frequently supplying space, materials, or inspiration for collaborations. Administrators at the Missouri State Penitentiary are interested in working with former inmates to preserve and restore art on the grounds, and both Eastern State

---

Penitentiary and the Idaho State Penitentiary have working relationships with local artists. Subsequently, collaborators have a vested interest not only in the success of the project but also in the success of the site itself.\(^5^5\)

Inmates, prison administrators, and guards, along with museum managers, docents and curators associated with carceral sites, constitute the “people of prison” and represent a significant collection of stakeholders. Families of those associated with prison should also be included in this category. Annie Anderson of Eastern State Penitentiary explained how “the largest chunk of stakeholders are our ‘bread and butter’ visitors, including formerly and currently incarcerated individuals.” Some of Eastern State Penitentiary’s staff, once previously incarcerated, participate in the museum’s program that allows them to “share their own experiences and perspectives.” Administrators at Eastern State Penitentiary enter active prisons, consulting with current residents as interpretive consultants. Such efforts not only include but also prioritize the experiences and perspectives of those most intimately acquainted with incarceration.\(^5^6\)

Historic state prison museums have numerous and diverse stakeholder groups with vested interests in sites’ histories, symbolism, and ongoing interpretations. Therefore, mission, interpretation, and programming at sites of carceral tourism must relate to these stakeholders and acknowledge that each group experiences the site differently. Communities and collaborators become invested in carceral tourism after they dedicate time, money, and expertise; nevertheless,

\(^{55}\) Parry interview; Brain interview; Schreiber interview; Sanford and Gillespie interview.\(^{56}\) Anderson credited one of her colleagues with initiating that program and explained that the program is a couple of months long; in 2018, it lasted from May to October. Anderson recognized that there are some ongoing “ethical questions, in terms of what kind of targeting or trauma we need to consider. But, bringing formerly and currently incarcerated people into the mix is important”; Anderson interview.
they make a conscious decision to become a voluntary stakeholder. The primary stakeholders for historic state prison museums, because of their relationships to the site and its histories, are arguably people affected by incarceration, including previously imprisoned people, those employed by departments of corrections, and their respective families and communities. Carceral tourism, after all, educates the public on carceral histories and occasionally contemporary issues. Representation of people who are associated with or who have experienced incarceration should be of the upmost importance. Historic state prison museums need to develop complex, dynamic and reciprocal interactions amongst these various stakeholders in order to represent the various perspectives, experiences, and interests that their stakeholders possess.

**Salemates: Historic State Prison Museums and Community Partnerships**

In order to generate additional revenue or, conversely, to minimize costs, some historic prison museums embrace community partnerships, including allowing reuse of their carceral campuses and buildings. For example, the main facility at the Old Idaho Penitentiary serves as a historic carceral tourism site, while the outbuildings have since been repurposed. Similarly, the Old Montana Prison is a part of a museum complex that seeks to attract as many visitors as possible by appealing to a wide range of interests. Potential collaborations at the Old Joliet Prison include an artists’ colony, which would allow artists to work at the former prison and use on-site materials in their projects. Steve Jones of the Old Joliet Prison envisions collaborating with Harley Riders, using some of the prison’s buildings to “house Harleys and work with tours.” The site is also considering an annual concert, much like the Ohio State Reformatory’s
yearly Inkcarceration Festival, but smaller in scale. Jones’s main goal is to raise money for the museum and “integrate into well-established entities” in order to ensure future success.57

Other community projects do not necessarily proffer immediate financial benefit. Instead they foster local awareness of and connections to historic state prison museums. For example, the Old Idaho Penitentiary has collaborated with local entities on programs and projects such as the annual 32 Cells event, a storytelling partnership with a local artist collective. Artists are not necessarily former residents of the prison, but they are tasked with interpreting the stories and experiences of the incarcerated via their work. The collaboration allows artists to address a variety of themes, including the origin stories of prisoners, their families and lives prior to incarceration, as well as aspects of politics, labor, and culture. Similarly, the Ohio State Reformatory partnered with the Cleveland Art Museum as well as prisons in Lucasville and Marysville, Ohio. Art-making and public history collaborations have become more frequent, reflecting a “widespread impulse to plumb the compelling visual and visceral material embedded within” historic sites. This type of community engagement demonstrates that historic state prison museums have the potential to be creative, interdisciplinary, and relevant to a variety of audiences. They also show that historic carceral tourism has the ability to provide more dynamic forms of community engagement than are currently being offered, especially in terms of contemporary social issues.58 Art-based projects, in additional to storytelling and historic narrative, can be leveraged to encourage social change.59

57 Brain interview; Jones and Peerbolte interview.
58 Brain interview; McKinnell interview.
Community support, in addition to robust tourism, is a necessary financial component of historic state prison museums, as well as an indicator of legitimacy. Acceptance by and relationships with academic, artistic, economic, recreational, and other partners situates a site to appeal to more audiences and increase its perceived relevance and community value. Very rarely are historic state prison museums able to exist on the merits of preservation alone; their historical value is tied directly to their ability to appeal to visitors, generate revenue, and provide services to community stakeholders.

**Serving Time . . . Voluntarily: Volunteers and Carceral Sites**

Carceral tourism is often characterized by ongoing participation of corrections employees, especially in a voluntary capacity. As tour guides at several historic state prison museums, former corrections officers or personnel have a vested interest in the prison. The 2013 Memorandum of Understanding between the managers of the West Virginia Penitentiary and the state’s department of corrections even specified that the site’s tour guides “be former employees at the West Virginia . . . to ensure an appropriate number of tour guides familiar with the physical layout of the West Virginia Penitentiary.” At the Missouri State Penitentiary, several of the site’s tour guides worked at the prison when it was operational. Administrators explained that each tour guide approaches interpretation with “their own stories, because they’re all from different aspects and from different timelines.” For example, tour guide Mark Schreiber was the former deputy warden. Similar participation occurs at the Old Idaho Penitentiary where

---

60 West Virginia Department of Corrections and the Moundsville Economic Development Council, “Memorandum of Understanding Between the DOC and the MEDC Concerning the Just Use of the West Virginia Penitentiary,” Appendix E, 20.
61 Former prison employees include guards and administrative personnel.
volunteers give most of the guided tours. Jacey Brain acknowledged that “a target for volunteers has been people who worked in corrections, such as former guards. A few of our volunteers still have that background.” At the Historic Iowa State Penitentiary, retired staff also lead guided tours, each possessing a unique perspective that tells a “different story.”62 At the Joliet Area Historical Museum, the one employed tour guide has no first-hand experience of imprisonment, though a number of former and current corrections officers volunteer as docents there.63

Volunteers with a background in corrections, especially those who worked at the former prison when it was operational, often have personal reasons for wanting to revisit and contribute to the site in its new iteration as a museum. In addition to the interpretive value of their memories and personal recollections, many sites of carceral tourism recruit volunteers for a more practical reason: budgetary and staff limitations. The role of volunteer labor—from forming nonprofits, to conducting physical site cleanup, to managing a large-scale historic preservation project—cannot be overstated or undervalued. The Ohio State Reformatory, which previously operated with volunteer labor exclusively, began hiring paid docents around 2015. Because many original volunteers worked regular jobs, they were unavailable on weekdays and occasional weekends. As a result, the site hired and trained docents in order to accommodate growth and satisfy an increasing demand for guided tours. However, volunteer participation at this and other historic state prison museums remains crucial. Despite the fact that the staff, including tour guides, at the Ohio State Reformatory are now paid docents, volunteers worked as early

---

62 Bowker interview; Brain interview; Sanford and Gillespie interview; Guided Tour, Missouri State Penitentiary, August 25, 2018.
63 Jones and Peerbolte interview; Guided Tour, Joliet Prison Museum, September 17, 2018. Project participants include Dennis Wolf, a former warden.
preservationists at the site and “created self-guided tours as an outlet for large audiences.”

Today, interested volunteers still assist with collections work at the Ohio State Reformatory. Additionally, volunteer participation is a crucial aspect of site clean-up and maintenance at the Old Joliet Prison. As of September 2018, approximately “$1 million in volunteer labor” had been gifted to the site, with over six hundred pieces of graffiti removed and around $136,000 raised in funds.” The majority of historic state prison museums could not operate, especially at first, without dedicated volunteer labor.

Many prison museum administrators argued that “visitors learn different histories from different guides,” usually former or current corrections personnel. This creates a historical narrative that favors correctional perspectives and experiences at the expense of other accounts or memories of prison life. However, the contributions of volunteers, former employees, and local residents cannot be discounted, and arguably the preservation of historic state prison museums would not have occurred without their ongoing participation. At every historic state prison museum, volunteer labor comprises a crucial component not only of initial preservation efforts but also of later site maintenance, interpretive development, and community outreach.

The Benefit of Historic Prison Museums

In 2002, The Economist quipped that the “Alcatraz route—tourism—is surprisingly popular” as a reuse strategy for decommissioned carceral facilities. The model, pioneered on Alcatraz Island on the West Coast and reaffirmed by Eastern State Penitentiary on the East

_____________________

64 McKinnell estimated that paid docents joined the site in approximately 2015-2016; McKinnell interview.
65 Jones and Peerbolte interview.
66 Bowker interview; Jones and Peerbolte interview.
Coast, became prevalent as more and more decommissioned prisons explored reuse. Many officials at smaller or newer historic state prison museums surveyed here cite Eastern State Penitentiary as their economic model, if not interpretive inspiration. Alcatraz has earned respect in the carceral tourism world as being one of the longest running, and therefore most established, historic state prison museums. Much as the architecture of the operational Eastern State Penitentiary inspired carceral copies around the world, the site’s reimagining as a public history site enthused up-and-coming museums across the United States. Communities that benefited from operational prisons later profited from the same prisons after their conversion into sites of historic carceral tourism.

Contemporary critics have argued that past leaders too often viewed prisons as moneymakers, resulting in unsuccessful prisoner rehabilitations and carrying economic consequences for others in the community. A few years before the erection of the Missouri State Penitentiary, the *Niles National Register* argued that the penitentiary system “altogether failed as a means of reformation . . . [and] that state prisons should be so established and managed as to prevent them from becoming objects of profit to the states, through the labor of their inmates.” Similarly, free laborers often bemoaned the unfair competitiveness of convict labor, made “at the sacrifice of the poor laboring man’s interests.” Outspoken citizens voiced discontent, demanding that prison laborers remain inside of prison walls, away from the industries of “honest” taxpayers.\(^{68}\) However, prison managers and legislatures countered that prison industries covered

---

\(^{68}\) “Miscellaneous,” *Niles National Register*, November 1, 1834; “Wayside Notes,” *The Independent-Record*, June 18, 1875; “Convict Labor in Coal Mines,” *Lexington Intelligencer*, December 14, 1878. As another detractor stated, the “system of leasing convict labor brings the felon directly in competition with the honest laborer”; “Convict Labor,” *Lexington Intelligencer*, January 25, 1879.
prison expenses and alleviated taxpayers’ burdens. Additionally, proponents of the convict leasing system reasoned that a strong and regular work ethic was integral to prisoner reform.69

However, prison managers and legislatures retorted that prison industries were necessary to cover prison expenses and alleviate taxpayers’ burdens. In 1879, the governor of Missouri identified convict labor at the penitentiary as essential to “preventing the institution from becoming a dead expense to the state.” Additionally, proponents of the convict leasing system reasoned that a strong and regular work ethic was integral to prisoner reform.70 Published accounts from former prisoners sometimes reiterated the need for regular, structured labor. Legislators looked to take advantage of this superimposed work ethic, and leasing contracts become increasingly profitable as the number of state prisons and the populations therein grew larger. In 1874, “labor in the Illinois penitentiary sold for a price nearly double” that of the Iowa State Penitentiary, encouraging administrators to increase their profits. Systems of contract labor remained intact and even escalated throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, financially benefiting both the state and private entrepreneurs.71

The identify and history of towns and cities became intertwined with the establishment and growth of nearby prisons. In the case of Jefferson City, Mark Schreiber of the Missouri State

---

69 “Penitentiary,” Wheeling Daily Intelligencer, January 13, 1877. “Convict Labor,” Lexington Intelligencer, January 25, 1879. As one newspaper summarized, the majority of “penitentiaries employ their prisoners in steady work; and wisely, too, for few confined men would make so good use of lonely cell life”; “What a Prisoner Made,” Centralia Fireside Guard, July 17, 1880. 70 “Penitentiary,” Wheeling Daily Intelligencer, January 13, 1877. “Convict Labor,” Lexington Intelligencer, January 25, 1879. As one newspaper summarized, the majority of “penitentiaries employ their prisoners in steady work; and wisely, too, for few confined men would make so good use of lonely cell life”; “What a Prisoner Made,” Centralia Fireside Guard, July 17, 1880. 71 “A Year in Joliet Prison,” Chicago Tribune, January 30, 1887; “The Penitentiary of the State,” The Bulletin-Journal, January 23, 1874. Similarly, the managers at the Iowa State Penitentiary reasoned that if the prison’s “contracts are to be re-let we should secure more favorable terms than we have at present”; “Penitentiary at Fort Madison,” Muscatine Weekly Journal, January 13, 1888.
Penitentiary explained that the “prison was a huge component of the industrial base of the city. The city’s identity and development has historically been interwoven with the prison.” Prisoners constructed and repaired public buildings, labored in local industries, and even built homes for private citizens. Nineteenth-century prisons and their inhabitants became visible parts of community life, as well as direct contributors to local economies. Names and locations of cities became associated with prisons, and corrections provided employment to local businesses and citizens. In some areas, state penitentiaries were among the earliest public buildings, imbuing the town with prestige. When Iowa became a state, the penitentiary at Fort Madison was one of only two public buildings, the other being the capitol in Iowa City.  

Throughout the nineteenth century, towns and cities across the United States clamored for legislatures to anoint them as a site for a new state penitentiary, hoping to profit from prison labor, prison industries, and the job-creation inherent in prison management. For instance, in 1864, the *Wheeling Intelligencer* enticed the legislature to construct a prison in Wheeling so “that the convicts can be profitably employed by the manufacturers.” When the city of Moundsville won the bid, the same newspaper lamented five years later that the city lost a “source of profit,” decrying that a “great done wrong has been done.”

Similarly, Mansfield seemed an unlikely choice for an “intermediate penitentiary” (later the Ohio State Reformatory), but the town beat out Zanesville and Chillicothe despite having “neither sewage nor water facilities.” As the *Times Recorder* pointed out in 1886, “there is a feeling that Chillicothe and Zanesville, both of which were former capitals of the state, are

---

entitled to some consideration . . . owing to their both being located on rivers and having other
great advantages.” The legislature selected Mansfield “after a careful and impartial consideration
of the claims of other cities,” likely due to its central location. Other state legislatures
employed similar strategic selection processes, often designating central towns and cities as the
sites of state penitentiaries and reformatories because of their geographical positions.

The label “prison town” continued to influence a community’s identity long after
facilities were decommissioned. Sometimes, states commissioned new facilities as historic
penitentiaries shuttered their doors. A wave of new prison construction in the late twentieth and
early twenty-first centuries, and the replacement of nineteenth-century prisons with more
spacious and modern institutions, reinforced the identities of prison towns. The new prisons—all
bigger, more secure, and accommodating more inhabitants—promised more money, jobs, and
ongoing prison-related industry. In fact, many of the same individuals who worked as wardens,
corrections officers, medical professionals, and administrative staff at former prisons often
transferred to and continued to work at replacement facilities. Since many prison towns were in
rural areas with modest populations, operational prisons frequently served as the area’s largest
employer. The loss of prison industry would mean financial ruin for individuals and

---

74 “The Intermediate Pen,” The Times Recorder, February 1, 1886; “A Pointed Question,” The
Times Recorder, February 3, 1886.
75 In 1867, one newspaper reported that the population of Fort Madison “contained a population
of about 4,000 of whom a considerable proportion [were] German”; “Fort Madison,” Muscatine
Weekly Journal, June 14, 1867. Over 150 years later, the town’s population had only grown
minimally. According to the US Census Bureau, the town’s population was estimated at
approximately 10,500 as of July 2018. “QuickFacts: Fort Madison City, Iowa,” US Census
Bureau, Population Estimates Program (PEP), https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/fortmadisoncityiowa/PST045218#PST045218
(accessed May 10, 2020).
communities who had benefited from systems of imprisonment for over one hundred years. But the advent of the carceral state appeared to promise economic prosperity for years to come.

Enlarging the carceral state proved lucrative. The latter part of the twentieth century witnessed widespread privatization of government services, including the field of corrections. Not only did private companies build and manage for-profit prisons, but mass incarceration also “meant major profits for companies that could provide prison goods and services.” With private vendors offering security and medicinal services, education, food service, facilities maintenance, and technological support, construction of new and numerous prisons resulted in moneymaking opportunities for business owners. Rural white communities benefited from construction of new prisons and the jobs that accompanied it, helping to relieve struggling white working classes. Prison populations also artificially inflated census populations because inmates were counted where they were imprisoned, not as members of their home communities, meaning that rural municipalities were eligible for increased governmental funding. Additionally, there were implications for political elections, since by 2006 almost all states had removed prisoners’ voting rights. That year, more than 47 million Americans—one-fourth of the adult population—had a criminal record. Yet, the passing of time has revealed that prison towns rarely revived the economic revitalization and sustainability as hoped or expected.76

The repurpose of decommissioned penitentiaries and reformatories as historic state prison museums created another way to capitalize on systems and legacies of incarceration. Most prison towns that once benefited financially from operational prisons and continue to do so via historic carceral tourism. Historic state prison museums generate a positive economic impact, carries additional weight in economically depressed communities. For instance, leadership in charge of

76 Thompson, “Why Mass Incarceration Matters,” 723, 734
redeveloping the Old Joliet Prison looked to the success of Eastern State Penitentiary, the Ohio State Reformatory, Sing Sing, and Alcatraz Island for economic models, and with good reason. Tourism of the West Virginia Penitentiary produced between $1.9 million to $2 million annually for the city of Moundsville. Similarly, in 2017, the Ohio State Reformatory accounted for over $7 million dollars of tourism-based revenue to the Richland County area, receiving recognition for the site as an “economic stimulus.”

Becky McKinnell of the Ohio State Reformatory suggested that after several years, the community realized “how important the prison is to the tourist industry here and how much money it brings into the area from visitors and ghost hunters who stay, eat, and visit other attractions here.” Mark Schreiber of the Missouri State Penitentiary asserted that carceral tourism “has had a positive economic impact for the city.” In 2016, the site brought in $648,000, with a net profit of $87,000 after expenditures. Schreiber also remarked that, carceral tourism “certainly helped with ‘heads in beds,’ restaurants, other museums here, or the Missouri State Archives.” Thus, the economic success of other historic state prison museums may incentivize communities with abandoned carceral buildings.

Anticipating positive financial returns, the rehabilitation of the Old Joliet Prison, “met with an enthusiastic response from the community of Joliet, culminating in over 6,500 volunteer hours, one million dollars in in-kind labor and donations, and nearly $200,000 in funds raised to

---


78 McKinnell interview; Schreiber interview. McKinnell explained that, “for a short time there was possibly some conflict about if the old Reformatory was saved then the state of Ohio might not build new prisons to replace it and therefore a significant number of jobs would be lost in the area. But then the state was able to use the land to build . . . new prisons. After that, I think the community was glad to see the effort, but some were skeptical that it would be able to be saved and be a going concern”; McKinnell interview.
benefit the site” as of fall 2018. In Iowa, site administrators considered the potential short- and long-term benefits of creating the Historic Iowa State Penitentiary as “obvious.” Over time, prison tourism promised to draw crowds to the town of Fort Madison and generate revenue, much as it had in other cities. Historic state prison museums promised to buoy tourism and create a positive economic impact for towns and cities with few other attractions or resources.79

Many residents of these prison towns are aware of, and appreciate, the prison’s history and influence as a historic site. Part of the reason that historic state prison museums invest in preserving the sites are the associated personal histories, memories, and connections. Journalist Avery Gregurich reported that individuals leading the Historic Iowa State Penitentiary (HISP) nonprofit grew up in the area and remained dedicated to finding reuse for the building. One citizen even commented, that it is “hard to find someone in Fort Madison who doesn’t know someone who worked at the penitentiary, because it’s always been there.”80 Growth of carceral tourism in the region promised to provide the rural southeastern Iowa community with economic development and historical preservation, something much desired by residents.

Carceral growth throughout the late twentieth century greatly affected rural areas, mostly by uplifting economically depressed communities that became prison towns, used to warehouse and surveil prisoners. The population of these prisons towns has traditionally been—and continues to be—predominately white. The same holds true for the locations of many historic state prison museums. Given the racial disparities of incarceration, the disproportionate

80 Avery Gregurich, “Sentencing the Old Iowa State Penitentiary,” Belt Magazine, March 12, 2019; Schreiber interview.
imprisonment of people of color—overwhelmingly mostly African American, the predominate whiteness of prison towns is one of many problematic aspects of prison economies. The emergence of mass incarceration during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s “widened the income gap between white and black Americans because the infrastructure of the carceral state was located disproportionately in all-white rural communities” (see Figures 8a and 8b in Appendix A).  

Historic prison museums later replicated the phenomenon.

Most crucially, then, whiteness inextricably bounds carceral tourism and the historic preservation of state prison museums. Almost every single historic state prison museum has been saved or salvaged in a predominantly white community with the intent of opening the facility up to the public and profiting from the site’s history, reputation, and ongoing appeal. The use of tourism not only allows for the preservation of former prisons, but it also continues the carceral legacies that have come to define many rural, mostly white towns. Carceral tourism allows many prison towns to continue their identity as such. Instead of boasting just one facility, they usually now lay claim to two: the old prison and the new

The Professionalization of Carceral Tourism—or Lack Thereof

The grassroots nature of historic state prison museum preservation is clear, as is the reality that individuals or groups responsible for the preservation of historic state prisons typically continue in leadership and interpretive roles after the sites transition to museums. But, how do historic state prison museums compare to other museums and historical sites, where academically or professionally trained personnel manage historic interpretation? Working at

historic prison museums can either be a labor of love or represent a job opportunity in the public history/museum studies field. Typically, a mixture of both elements attracts paid staff members to the site. Analyzing the present leadership at historic state prison museums reveals useful patterns in terms of who participates in carceral tourism, and why.

Mark Schreiber of the Missouri State Penitentiary served as Deputy Warden of Operations, the last person to do so at the former prison and the first person to do so at the Jefferson City Correctional Center, which replaced Missouri State Penitentiary. When he started at the Missouri State Penitentiary as a corrections officer in 1968, the prison was the only maximum-security facility in the state. Schreiber literally wrote the book on the history of corrections in Missouri, entitled Somewhere in Time: 170 Years of Missouri Corrections, and became one of the leading primary researchers on the Missouri State Penitentiary. His historical research on the prison, in addition to his personal experiences, helped to inform site interpretation, and continues to be utilized in the guided tour scripts. Like Schreiber, many employees, especially those local to the region, have extended histories with the historic prison museums at which they now work. For example, one of Schreiber’s colleagues at the Missouri State Penitentiary grew up beside the prison; they explain that “it was just something that was here; you never gave it a second thought. But it has a vast, rich history that affects the history of the state.” These white stakeholders’ desire to save and share these former prisons is often an extension of the personal relationship that they have with the site.82

---

82 Sanford and Gillespie interview; Schreiber interview. Sanford coordinated tours at the Missouri State Penitentiary and has been with the site for seven years, and Diane Gillespie directed the Jefferson City Convention and Visitors Bureau. Schreiber had served as a special investigator and has a cumulative forty-two years of experience in justice and corrections. Eventually, he worked his way up to Lieutenant Captain; Schreiber interview.
Others are public history professionals attracted to historic prison museums because of their interest in the museum field. For example, Jacey Brain is one of the interpretive specialists at the Old Idaho Penitentiary. Brain’s position revolves around the development of new exhibits and programming. However, with limited staff, his duties came to include visitor services, social media, the gift shop, and coordinating special events. He started part-time in December 2014 and became full-time in June 2017. For Brain, the Old Idaho Penitentiary “was the closest thing that the state offered that resembled” his interests, experiences, and background in history.\(^83\) Opportunity for employment in the field of public history can be modest in rural areas, especially throughout the Midwest and West; the lack of job opportunities was also a factor in his decision to join the museum’s staff.

Resources at most historic state prison museums limit staff size. For instance, as of July 2018, the West Virginia Penitentiary employed a total of seven staff members. The Joliet Area Historical Museum, responsible for historical interpretation at the Old Joliet Prison, employed eighteen people as docents and part-time staff in September 2018. Historically, the Eastern State Penitentiary has possessed one of the most professional staffs in terms of historical/public historical education, as well as one of the largest. It is also a member of the International

\(^{83}\) Brain interview; Parry interview. Brain “took field trips here, [and] worked in after school programs that came here.” Brain had experiences with the historic prison “as a kid, as a student, as a childcare provider, and now as an employee.” He “started as [a] part-time employee on weekends, giving tours and doing the front desk.” He then became the weekend manager.” This is typical of the site, where “some staff started as volunteers and [then] move up”; Brain interview. Anthony Parry, also of the Old Idaho Penitentiary, had been with the site since 2014 as an interpretive specialist. Many of his responsibilities involved research, as well as scheduling for photography/special permissions; Parry interview. Melanie Sanchez, curator at the Old Montana Prison as of September 2018, did not possess a background in museums, collections, or public history, but similarly took a position at a historic state prison museum because she found it interesting and available; Melanie Sanchez, interview by author, Deer Lodge, MT, September 12, 2018.
Coalition of Sites of Conscience, strengthening its ties with the public historical community. Many historic state prison museums act as independent entities and opt not to join professional networks or organizations, likely due to the lack of expert staff with knowledge, connections, or experiences with public historical resources. Substantial scholarly attention has been paid to the history and current museological operations of Eastern State Penitentiary, unlike other smaller institutions such as the Old Montana Prison.  

**Challenges**

So far, site administrators at various historic state prison museums have succeeded in keeping the lights on and the doors open. Does that mean that the preservationists’ battle has been won? Not necessarily. Many sites of carceral tourism struggle to maintain status and security as historically and economically viable spaces. Like other more traditional history museums and historic house museums, the fates of these sites remain constantly in flux, ebbing and flowing with the tides of finance, politics, and visitor interest and attendance.

The West Virginia Penitentiary serves as a case in point, exemplifying how saving many historic prisons does not guarantee their ongoing preservation. Such sites must frequently battle redevelopment efforts. Specifically, the West Virginia legislature considered Senate Bill 369 in July 2018, intending to streamline and consolidate the West Virginia Department of Corrections. The bill included language that revoked the twenty-five-year lease of the prison and outlined its re-use for training purposes. Similarly, House Bill 4338 stipulated that, “all current leases for or 

---

involving the West Virginia Penitentiary in Moundsville . . . are hereby abolished immediately.”

After an online petition, the legislature changed the language of the bill. However, according to Tim Stiles, Director of Operations at the West Virginia Penitentiary, the Department of Corrections continues to own the site and can resume use of it. Ongoing conflict means that future goals or dreams for the site, such as additional preservation, are delayed. With such turbulent and ever-changing conditions, historic state prison museums are often at the mercy of their local and state governments for cooperation and support.85

Additionally, due to size and lack of adequate surveillance equipment, many sites risk constant security threats. After undergoing protracted periods of abandonment, several historic state prison museums experienced—and some continue to experience—extensive vandalism. As security costs and funds to repair or expunge the effects of vandalism mount, the likelihood and ability of more local and cash-strapped organizations to manage the property diminish. There are also several other challenges associated with repurposing and maintaining historic state prison museums, such as safety concerns and hazardous materials. Time restraints and budgets affect and often limit project timelines. Steve Jones of the Old Joliet Prison explained that administrations cannot “try to do it all in year two.”86 The resulting demands for large amounts of time, labor, and money do not abate, and the largest sites are typically in poor condition. The

86 According to Jones, “the only negative is the amount of “money [needed] for on-site security” at the Old Joliet Prison, which costs between $700,000 and $800,000 per year.” But he believes “the costs associated with security will be “cut in half soon.” Jones claimed that a security presence helps to deter potential crime, including trespassing and vandalism, issues that have plagued the site in the past. Vandalism has also been a problem at the West Virginia Penitentiary, apparently during poorly supervised overnight tours; Jones and Peerbolte interview.
scale of operating a historic state prison museum remains inherently daunting. A historic state prison museum remains inherently daunting.

Lastly, sites engaging in carceral tourism frequently experience a basic lack of utilities, as well as accessibility issues. With the redevelopment of the Missouri State Penitentiary, site administrators anticipated running water and electrical options in the future, as well as permanent restroom facilities. Some of the practical challenges at these sites include lack of temperature control, running water, and sometimes electricity. As one administrator at Old Joliet Prison stated, museum managers will have to “retrofit everything in real time.” So, although the doors are open and the lights are on at many of these historic state prison museums, that fact itself often underscores a commendable and hard-fought achievement.

The difference between preserving, interpreting, and maintaining historic state prison museums is the essential size and scale of carceral spaces. Erected to contain hundreds, if not thousands, of individuals, former operational prisons as inherently immense, sprawling entities, reflect steep expenditures historically and in the present. Moreover, the mandate of prisons to hold people required durable materials, such as stone and iron, to construct them. Carceral institutions typically represented some of the most expensive building projects of their eras, requiring mountains of high-quality materials at astronomical price tags. Given the weight, size, and quantity of construction materials, preserving and restoring historic prisons remain incredibly expensive as well as time consuming tasks. Considering such intrinsic, and ongoing,

———

87 Sanford and Gillespie interview.
88 Sanford and Gillespie interview; Sanford interview; Stephen Weil, Making Museums Matter (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 2002), 2. According to administrators at the Missouri State Penitentiary, “no running water makes [having] food or events difficult. Portable toilets are all we have [here] so these things are kind of a hindrance. But, maybe in the future, the city will support more infrastructure”; Jones and Peerbolte interview.
challenges, it is truly impressive that so many historic state prison museums have survived. Ironically, cost also factors into their continuing existence as they can be as expensive to demolish as they are to preserve and maintain.
Chapter 4.

Carceral Crowds: Historic Prison Museum Audiences

In 1858, over ten thousand visitors toured the operational Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, far exceeding the 380 souls who were incarcerated. Perhaps the published comments of French diplomat Alexis de Tocqueville, who had visited the prison seventeen years earlier, or the critiques of British author Charles Dickens who had toured the facility in 1842, spurred public interest. Maybe the reputation of Eastern State Penitentiary as an architectural and technological wonder, described as “the most elaborate penitentiary plant which had yet been erected in the world,” aroused curiosity. Or conceivably, local and foreign sightseers alike desired to glimpse inside a place they hoped never to occupy. For whatever reason, visitors journeyed to the prison in droves, much like the thousands of people who tour historic prison museums today. As sociologist Michelle Brown noted, the “early functions of spectacle are currently being revisited and revised with the increased popularity of prison tourism.”

This chapter analyzes the audiences that visit historic state prison museums, in order to understand more about contemporary carceral tourists. Given the current American “carceral state,” the manner in which citizens engage with topics of incarceration, especially at former sites of imprisonment, is significant. This chapter asks: Who is attracted to sites of historic carceral tourism? Why do they choose to visit these sites? And how do historic state prison

---

museums facilitate encounters between the public and the topic of incarceration? Across the museum field, visitor surveys enable public historians to learn more about their publics; this chapter represents a similar effort, to identity who is – and just as importantly who is not – engaging in historic carceral tourism.

**Penal Tourists**

Given the rise of historic prison museums since the 1960s, especially between the 1970s and the 2010s, the number of penal spectators has grown substantially in recent years.² According to criminologist Jeffery Ian Ross, around 10 percent of the prison museums that he surveyed in 2012 hosted between ten and thirty thousand visitors per year. Site interpreters suggest the numbers are increasing, a fascinating trend given the relative remoteness of many historic state prison museums. At some historic prison museums, the number of visitors has grown dramatically, with certain sites experiencing or expecting between 200,000 and 250,000 visitors. Tourism at the Missouri State Penitentiary increased by 25 percent in 2016 alone. Collections manager Becky McKinnell claimed that administrators expected visitor attendance at the Ohio State Reformatory to reach 200,000 by the end of 2018. Steve Jones, a city official collaborating on the revitalization of the Old Joliet Prison, anticipated high public demand when the former prison is formalized as a tourist attraction. What is clear is that thousands of people visit historic prison museums every year (see Figure 9 in Appendix A). Those penal tourists are

---

overwhelmingly, although not exclusively, white, representing a sizable subsection of historical tourism.³

The appeal of historic prison museums has proven durable. However, according to prison tourism experts, “interest in corrections-related spectacles is not new.” The history of visits to prisons and asylums is well established. As historian Janet Miron explained, this particular type of “dark voyeurism was popular with the wealthy middle class of the Victorian period, tapping into people’s mental psyche and reinforcing antiquated beliefs associated with punishment, retribution and death.” The desire to visit, view, and interact with sites of death is consistent with the “thanatopic tradition,” or people’s inherent desire to contemplate death in public places. Historian Carolyn Strange and criminologist Michael Kempa argued that former carceral sites, or “places where the intentional state-sanctioned infliction of punishment, pain, and privation took place,” remain “among the most popular.”⁴

---


What can we learn about the specific composition of historic prison museum audiences? Although a few historic prison museums diligently and systematically evaluate their visitors, the majority of sites do not collect demographic data such as age, occupation, race/ethnicity, education, or residential proximity. However, based on participant observation and oral history interviews, carceral tourists, like historic state prison museum managers and interpreters, tend to be middle-class and white, and primarily visit while on vacation. As of March 2019, none of the studied historic prison museums asked visitors to identify what prompted their tours of the site, including operations that conducted visitor exit surveys. Without such information, a nuanced understanding of historic prison museum visitors becomes difficult. However, tour samples and observations made by guides and site administrators provide a general portrait of who visits historic prison museums and why.

As retired prison warden Jim Willett explained, carceral crowds include “all sorts of people . . . from all over the world” who “come just to try to learn something about what’s on the other side of those walls and fences.” But overwhelmingly, historic carceral tourism in the United States is peopled by white, middle-class Americans whose desire to see and experience decommissioned carceral spaces arises from their racially distinct experiences, collective memory, and notions of leisure. The interpretation of historic prison museums responds to the interests, experiences, and expectations of white visitors, reinforcing preconceptions towards incarceration that uphold the carceral state or, as penal tourism expert Jacqueline Wilson argued, encourage “visitors to tacitly endorse the suffering of the sites’ victims.”

---

Are historic prison museums culpable in appealing to a predominately white audience?

Site managers have a stake in and influence over the audiences that historic prison museums draw. After all, the presence of visitors at sites of dark tourism “is explained by the attractiveness of the site’s attributes, which are managed by the suppliers.” In other words, museum managers feature their historic prisons’ most desirable and sought-after characteristics, often at the expense of other important aspects of the institutions and their histories. Penal site administrators readily acknowledge the whiteness of their sites’ visitors as do many individuals with whom they collaborate, employ, and encounter on a daily basis. For instance, the Manager of Research and Public Programming at Eastern State Penitentiary claimed that the former prison’s “main audience is white tourists on vacation” who generally have “no relationship to the criminal justice system.” Historic carceral tourists usually find themselves touring cellblocks “out of serendipity, the direction of the tourism industry, or simple curiosity on a cursory outing. They are then the otherwise distanced spectators who are just passing through.” Yet, most sites in this study provide little to encourage empathy among visitors. More alarmingly, none have engaged in dedicated efforts to reach out to or work with communities of color, the people and publics most heavily impacted by incarceration.6


Statistics reveal that visitors at history museums and historic sites tend to identify as white. In 2006, the Institute of Museum and Library Services found that white tourists made up the greatest percentage of visitors to historic houses/sites (approximately 37 percent) as well as history museums (approximately 24 percent), and that African Americans composed the lowest percentage of visitors (approximately 18 to 22 percent). According to *Demographic Transformation and the Future of Museums*, a 2010 report by the Center for the Future of Museums, black Americans’ minimal interest in museums must be considered “against a backdrop of complex social forces rooted in history, politics, economic conditions, race, ethnicity, immigrant status, income, education, geography, age, work and leisure patterns, family life and social aspirations . . . that may have a larger impact on the way people approach and experience museums.” Historically, museums have excluded or neglected marginalized communities, and have thus become understood as spaces of whiteness, privilege, and exclusivity. Prisons must also be recognized as sites that have historically affected a disproportionate number of individuals and communities of color and continue to do so in the present. Therefore, the racialized legacy of collective oppression and trauma inherent in the very spaces of decommissioned prisons, regardless of their geographic specificity or the racial makeup of their inmates historically, may explain why tourists of color have little, if any, interest in visiting them.7

The lack of audience diversity at historic state prison museums, as well as the lack of staff diversity, means that narratives usually are crafted by and for white visitors. Resolving this

---

issue has proven immensely difficult not only for sites of carceral tourism but for other, more traditional museums, as well. The estranged relationship between carceral tourism and the African American community obscures any sort of easy answer. Would improved attendance by African Americans result in more relevant interpretation? Or would better interpretation draw more African American visitors? Unfortunately, many interpretations and administrators at historic prison museums have yet to ask themselves these questions.

Reluctance by visitors of color reflects how incarceration represents a real and prevalent experience in many minority communities, one too personal and painful to be considered a form of entertainment or leisure. For instance, at sites interpreting histories of racial inequalities and desegregation, African American students expressed how “the experience was a repeat of what they already knew. They . . . did not feel that they learned anything new about history from being in that place.” Given that African Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos are far more likely to be detained than white Americans, according to the Equal Justice Initiative, the proximity of people of color to incarceration through their families, communities, or personal experiences indicates that, as potential museum visitors, they would approach decommissioned prisons through different cultural lenses. Historic prison museums are sites particularly vulnerable to racialized historical understandings and misunderstandings as “personal narratives and life experiences that people bring to a site change their understanding of the facts and structures before them.”

Many museums lament the lack of audience diversity and undertake to increase visits and program participation by underrepresented populations. Surprisingly, administrators at several

---

historic prison museums across the United States seem less concerned about diversity. Rather, the majority of historic prison sites target a general audience that consists of “everyone,” anticipating, if not realizing, numerous demographics. One administrator at the Missouri State Penitentiary reasoned that, in terms of a target audience, former prison museums “have to pull in all components. We have adult bus tours that come in, students, younger student tours, with censored material, the ghost tours, and out-of-state tourism.” Interpretive specialists at the Old Idaho Penitentiary identified the target audience as “anyone interested in prison history and local history,” including local residents, tourists, families, and students. Most historic prison museums are not actively concerned about attracting individuals or communities of color specifically, given the emphasis on targeting everyone.” Part of this rationale, although not one vocalized by site managers, is that historic state prison museums are interpreted through a white lens and generally from a white perspective, reflecting the interests, attitudes, and expectations of their most regular attendees. Consciously, or not, they reproduce a “separate and unequal” narrative of carceral experiences in the United States.

White prison tourists include all ages, ranging from children to middle-aged couples to seniors. Most sites advertise themselves as family oriented, meaning that thousands of white children visit carceral sites every year. And although it is obvious that site managers “considered marketing, education, and suitability of the exhibits for children,” few researchers have studied

young people’s encounters with these sites, and the consequences of those experiences, once they arrived. The curator at the Old Montana Prison in Deer Lodge described the site as “family friendly,” despite some violent historical content on display. At the West Virginia Penitentiary in Moundsville, children participate in the regular guided tour, and Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia receives numerous children visitors. Many historic prison museum managers define ten-year olds, or fourth graders, as the youngest acceptable age for visitors. Children, exposed to spaces and histories of incarceration, develop impressions of and attitudes towards issues of crime, punishment, and confinement that they likely take with them into adulthood.10

Given the presence of school-aged children, many historic state prison museums assume a more passive educational role, especially in terms of “tough subjects.” Administrators take the stance that “parents are able to help their kids navigate the content of the site and get what they want their kids to have out of it.” According to one interpretive specialist at the Old Idaho Penitentiary, guests of all ages are welcome to join guided tours but the tough “questions may be redirected to parents.” If guests with children become uncomfortable, they are “advised to wander off or do their own thing.” Historic prison museum administrators rely on the intervention and discretion of parents, guardians, and chaperones to interpret site histories for children, alleviating museums’ responsibilities to develop suitable content and educational programming. This approach derives from research that visiting families “value their ability to

10 Mary Margaret Kerr, “Overlook Encounters: Young Tourists’ Experiences at Dark Sites,” *Journal of Heritage Tourism* 11, no. 2 (2016): 177-85; Melanie Sanchez, interview by author, Deer Lodge, MT, September 12, 2018; Tom Stiles, interview by author, Moundsville, WV, July 27, 2018; Anderson interview; Brain interview; Parry interview. During one tour of the Old Idaho Penitentiary, a young girl, observing the execution room, asked her companion, “is this where they died?” In response, a slightly older boy explained to her and the rest of the young cohort how execution via hanging worked; Guided Tour, Old Idaho Penitentiary, September 7, 2018.
choose what they attend to and exploit this strategy in order to pursue their personal agenda.” Allowing parents to act as interpretive mediators means that visitors and their children often leave historic prison museums with their extant views on the contemporary carceral state confirmed, rather than questioned. Many sites of historic carceral tourism, then, fail to embrace their true educational potential.11

Given the status of the United States as a carceral state, the perceptions, understandings, and attitudes of youth towards matters of punishment, discipline, and incarceration remain paramount. In her work scrutinizing young people’s understandings of the past and present, scholar Terrie Epstein argued that historical education that encourages public “examination of the failings of the nation’s past, as well as its virtues, may better equip young people to acknowledge and understand the roots of contemporary racism and inequality, to learn about the existence and effectiveness of cross-racial alliances, and to imagine themselves and act as citizens capable of change in a contemporary society.” In this way, historic prison museums provide ideal places to tackle the histories and ongoing legacies of incarceration as it is shaped by racism and inequality.12 Additionally, their shirking that professional responsibility assumes more importance.

One difficulty is that, in general, historic state prison museums find it difficult to court local audiences, especially in terms of repeat attendance. Instead, out-of-towners, usually vacationers and often international visitors, patronize them. In his analysis of memorial museums, one scholar theorized that international “tourists appear especially fascinated by

12 Terrie Epstein, Interpreting National History: Race, Identity, and Pedagogy in Classrooms and Communities (New York: Routledge, 2009), 137.
events where the state has inflicted harm on its own citizens. Precisely because of their lack of ties and everyday immersion in the foreign society, tourists are free to speculate, *in situ* and without normal social restraint, about imagined dramas of hurt, accountability, and retribution.”

Still, many interpreters do not like to tackle daunting and serious questions around incarceration, punishment, and inequality in the criminal justice system, viewing such conversations as antithetical to the historical integrity of the site and the entertainment value that often characterizes carceral tourism.¹³

Historic state prison museums attract occasional or “one time” visitors, in contrast to tourists who return regularly or frequently. Sometimes, guests visit the West Virginia Penitentiary more than once, but one site manager explained that most visitors are first-timers. By contrast, another group, consists of pilgrims to historic state prison museums. They often explore other, similar sites, indicating their sustained interest in carceral tourism who comment on and compare tour experiences at other historic prison museums, as well as at decommissioned hospitals and asylums. This suggests a widespread and ongoing attraction to historic carceral tourism that, if limited to a particular racial and class identity, is not isolated to a particular region.¹⁴

¹³ Paul Williams, *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities* (Oxford, UK and New York, NY: BERG, 2007), 142; Burgard and Boucher, “Same Story; Different History,” 696-717. Field trips by school groups are one of the most frequent forms of local and regular community engagement for historic prison museums; Anderson interview; Brain interview; McKinnell interview; Parry interview; Sanford and Gillespie interview; Schreiber interview.

**Visitor Motivation**

There is a distinction between places of death and places associated with death. Historic prisons are typically both. Dark tourists visit sites of pain, suffering, death, and tragedy for different reasons, including “contemplation, special interest, thrill/risk seeking, validation, authenticity, self-discovery, iconic sites, convenience, morbid curiosity, pilgrimage, remembrance and empathy.” Still, why do thousands of dark tourists visit historic prison museums, in particular? Does a common motivation exist that prompts carceral visitors or do these particular sites possess a certain appeal?15

Participants in historic carceral tourism purchase tickets, partake in tours, and attend programs for many reasons, including remembrance, education, and entertainment.16 According to carceral scholars Walby and Piché, “tourists seek encounters with so-called authentic carceral spaces at such sites.” Relatedly, historian Tiya Miles explained that some tourists come “seeking novelty and wanted to learn history from a different angle. Some desired community and

---

16 Anderson interview; Parry interview; Schreiber interview; Parry interview; Schreiber interview. Tourism theorists Gregory Ashworth and Rudi Hartmann identify numerous reasons that motivate people to visit dark sites, including curiosity (or the desire to encounter something unique and unusual), empathy towards victims of certain tragic or dark events, and people’s natural attraction to horror; Gregory Ashworth and Rudi Hartmann, eds., *Horror and Human Tragedy Revisited: The Management of Sites of Atrocities for Tourism* (Elmsford, NY: Cognizant Communication Corporation, 2005). The perceived paranormal qualities of historic state prison museums also entice audiences, although site managers consider this attraction secondary to the site’s historical appeal. One staff member at the Eastern State Penitentiary claimed that visitors tour the prison because they are interested in history, architecture, and photography, amongst other things; Anderson interview; Parry, interview; Schreiber, interview.
confirmation of supernatural experience. Others wanted to suspend rational belief and imagine
other realms of possibility.” Dark tourism sites, and especially historic prison museums, appeal
to those who view these museums as authoritative and valuable institutions. Other everyday
interests include family or community research and curiosity by former guards, returned citizens,
and their families. As one prison tourism scholar explained, the “motives of tourists at such sites
are as varied as the sites themselves, ranging from idle or morbid curiosity, to intellectual
interest, to reverent pilgrimage.”

However, one powerful source of attraction for the general public undergirds many of
these interests and revolves around the very nature of carceral spaces and experiences. Dark
tourists are attracted to historic carceral sites specifically because, as criminologist Jeffery Ian
Ross characterized, museumified sites of incarceration “offer a glimpse of what a functioning
prison might be like.” Historic prison museums specifically appeal to those intrigued by prison
history, as well as those fascinated with punishment, as they have not experienced it themselves.
Visitors express interest in overtly carceral topics and themes, including escapes, riots, and
famous prisoners, as well as executions and the “darker part of imprisonment,” all of which are
outside of their own personal realities.

17 Kevin Walby and Justin Piché, “Carceral Retasking and the Work of Historical Societies at
Decommissioned Lock-Ups, Jails, and Prisons in Ontario,” in Historical Geographies of
Prisons: Unlocking the Usable Carceral Past, ed. Karen M. Morin and Dominique Moran (New
York: Routledge, 2015), 90; Tiya Miles, Tales from the Haunted South: Dark Tourism and
Memories of Slavery from the Civil War Era (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press,
2015), 10; Wilson, “Australian Prison Tourism,” 562; Dale and Robinson, “Dark Tourism,” 208;
Dalton, Dark Tourism and Crime, 2, 6.
18 Sevinç Aslan, “Prison Tourism as a Form of Dark Tourism,” The Journal of International
Social Research 8, no. 40 (October 2014): 600-608; Karen M. Morin and Dominique Moran,
“Introduction,” in Historical Geographies of Prisons: Unlocking the Usable Carceral Past (New
York: Routledge, 2015), 9; Wilson, “Australian Prison Tourism,” 566; Maura J. Casey, “In the
Big House . . . Just Visiting,” The New York Times, May 11, 2007; Roy Rosenzweig, and David
Thelen, The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life (New York:
Like dark tourism more generally, historic carceral tourism satisfies audiences’ desires for voyeurism, escape, curiosity, and leisure. Criminologist Alana Barton and historian Alyson Brown conclude that, because prison tourism “may invoke feelings of sympathy for those incarcerated in years past, it essentially eclipses any space for critical dialogue or concern about contemporary penal practices.” Ironically, Americans overwhelmingly look to the past to identify personally with events and individuals. However, fascination with prisons deviates from the norms of most carceral tourists’ lived experience. In this way, carceral history and tourism is viewed as extraneous to living daily life. Acknowledging the “edutainment”—a mixture of entertainment and education—factor of historic prison museums is essential to understanding not only the site identities but also the characteristics and expectation of their visitors, and how interpreters work to meet their demands. When historic prison museums cater to the interests of white carceral tourists, often sensationaly, in order to increase attendance, they characterize historic prison museums as a popular-history product. For instance, Barbara Korte and Sylbia Paletschek argued that “Represented or performed in all media, often mixing fact and fiction, popular-history products entertain as much as they instruct.”

Columbia University Press, 1998); Ross, “Varieties of Prison Voyeurism,” 409; Anderson interview; Parry interview. One of the administrators at the West Virginia Penitentiary credited the prison’s “awe factor” with motivating visitors’ desire to tour the site; Stiles interview. Nicholette Phelps, Vice President of Visitor Programs and Services at the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, which includes Alcatraz Island stated that people have “a macabre interest in what could occur if you don’t stay on the right side of the law”; Benjamin D’Harlingue, “Specters of the US Prison Regime: Haunting Tourism and the Penal Gaze,” in Popular Ghosts: The Haunted Spaces of Everyday Culture, edited by Esther Peeren and Maria del Pilar Blanco (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2010), 141.

Anderson interview; Rosenzweig and Thelen, The Presence of the Past , 7, 9, 67; Barbara Korte and Sylvia Paletschek, “Historical Edutainment: New Forms and Practices of Popular History?” in Palgrave Handbook of Research in Historical Culture and Education, ed. Mario Carretero, Stefan Berger, and Maria Grever (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 191-205. Thelen and Rosenweig’s survey is well established and frequently referenced in the field of
As a staff member of the Old Idaho Penitentiary explained, unless guests “have a personal connection with the site, [most people] are coming to see something that isn’t within their realm of knowledge. It is something that is on the other side of their life; because, they haven’t been in prison before.” Sociologist Michelle Brown elaborated that this “distance shields us first from the most fundamental feature of punishment—its infliction of pain.” In fact, penal tourists, primarily white Americans, visit historic prison museums because they do not have personal experiences as recipients of formalized punishment, making historic carceral tourism an opportunity to experience—if only fictionally, approximately, temporarily, and with privilege—the spaces and facets of incarceration. The perspective of the penal tourist, therefore, relies on a social construction of racial, historical, and experiential differences that supposedly separates the Others from those who gaze at them.20

The tourism experience for individuals or groups associated with a particular dark site, its history, and its ongoing meaning differ from that of the general public. Interest in or curiosity about family history can attract visitors to the site. Former residents and employees of prisons and their descendants possess more material connections to the sites, and their desires to revisit may be intertwined with memory, lived experience, personal or familial identity, or local history. For instance, a site manager at the Historic Iowa State Penitentiary argued that, “in Southeast Iowa, everybody knows somebody that has worked in Fort Madison prison.” However, the

---

20 Rebecca Bowker interview by author, Ft. Madison, IA, September 21, 2018; Brown, *Culture of Punishment*, 9; Welch, *Escape to Prison*, 20. Historic carceral tourists “are coming to see something alien to them and imagine what it was like, whether it be [the] prison or paranormal activity; to see another side of life”; Brain interview. Site administrators at the Missouri State Penitentiary also believe that visitors come to the site due to “curiosity, because most people have never been in a prison”; Sanford and Gillespie interview.
personal connections that someone who worked in a prison may have to a site differs greatly from the personal connection that an incarcerated individual may have. Although the former may wish to share the experience with friends or family because they were associated with the prison professionally, the latter may not because they possess an intimate and injurious relationship with the site. For prison scholar Michael Welch, “the range of motives reminds us that there are several reasons why visitors attend prison museums; consequently, they each bring to the exhibit varied expectations and points of view.” Most points of view, however, operate within and rely upon a basic assumption of difference, especially racial difference. Penal tourism that takes place at decommissioned carceral spaces depends overwhelmingly on white Americans’ inexperience with incarceration.21

Although some dark tourists seek catharsis, which can be achieved by confronting unpleasant difficult histories and events to which they have no personal connection, most penal spectators do not have this goal. Historian Seth Bruggeman questioned whether, even when historic carceral tourism transcends escapism, sensationalism, and spectacle, visitors confront their assumptions about incarceration, occasionally prompted by exhibits and programming about contemporary issues. After all, a 2008 study found most visitors “only moderately likely to think about criminal justice issues or connect the past with the present.” Such unchallenged assumptions are reinforced by film, television, and music that “portray prison and people that live here in a certain light,” coloring public imaginations of and attitudes towards prisons and prisoners. That “certain light” is the romanticized images of prison life that audiences encounter in other contexts, such as film and music. Citing society’s fascination with the “killers” who occupied prisons, visitors lean towards morbid assumptions and questions that arise from a lack

---

of first-hand knowledge. Along with its inherent whiteness, that is the problematic foundation on which historic carceral tourism is built.

Notably, a cognitive dissonance endures between dark tourism theorists and site administrators. In fact, many people associated with the preservation, maintenance, and interpretation of historic prisons balk at the suggestion that their site is a dark tourism destination. Even when historic state prison museums leverage popular interest in dark tourism to attract audiences, site managers claim to avoid “dark” narratives or interpretation. These administrators maintain that they work to reconcile sites as legitimate historical venues with popular or academic affiliations with dark tourism.

White Witnessing and the Racial “Othering” of Punishment

The disconnect between penal tourists and the experience of incarcerated individuals is not only cognitive and temporal, it is also emotional. Human geographers Jennifer Turner and Kimberley Peters argued that “although the visitor knows that pain and suffering may be occurring at these sites, it is being enacted on others (and specifically, unknown others).” Dark tourism at penal sites arouses feelings of relief for visitors, allowing them to recognize their own distance from site specific suffering, which frees them to enjoy the show. Imprisonment, and thus the prisoner, is Othered by audiences, becoming a spectacle separated by time, history, and lived experience.


23 Anderson interview; Brain interview, Parry interview; Sanford and Gillespie interview.

Some scholars are less critical of prison tourism, contending that tourists are detached and seemingly uninterested in seeking a “cathartic ‘experience’ of history.” However, such analysis ignores the lived experiences of incarcerated African Americans, Latino Americans, Native Americans, and white Americans, and their families. Given the disproportionately high number of African American, Latino, and Native American prisoners, visitors of color do not have the luxury or privilege of emotionally and intellectually distancings themselves in order to experience the same “cathartic” reaction that other visitors might seek. In fact, data suggests that African Americans avoid sites that may be associated with such painful or unjust histories, opting for alternative sites of memory that “reflect a more positive contribution and success such as Civil Rights museums.”

Incarceration in the United States, particularly since the late-twentieth century, has been repeatedly defined along racial lines, sparking consistent criticisms. Yet, to date, no scholar has identified and critically analyzed the role of race in historic carceral tourism, or its contribution to the Othering process. Historic prisons represent an antithesis to much of the white public’s lived experiences. Eastern State Penitentiary found that approximately 70 percent of visitors had no relationship to the criminal justice system. Indeed, one of the defining features of historic carceral tourism is that visitors choose to spend time at a prison, knowing that the experience is

---

temporary. As one scholar suggested, few “vacationers would enter such a site with the risk of being kept, mistreated, or tortured. No matter how authentic those museums appear, they are not real prisons—and everyone knows that.” Scholars fail to acknowledge, however, that the correlation between historic carceral tourism and leisure is often built on the understanding of both visitors and site administrators that the great majority of carceral tourists are middle-class white people.26

Race plays a key role in visitations to historic state prison museums. Although explorations of the relationship between race and carceral tourism are nascent, intersections of race, historical tourism, and interpretive narrative have been examined in-depth at comparable historical sites: plantations. Like historic prison museums, historic plantation museums are categorized as sites of dark tourism, and both have been critiqued for lack of socially responsible interpretation.27 Scholarship on plantation tourism can inform how different audiences may experience sites of carceral tourism.


In recent years, numerous scholars have analyzed historical interpretations of plantation tourism, scrutinizing themes, topics, and perspectives that dominate the narratives. Most historic plantations promote similar aspects of plantation history: the architecture of the main residence, interior décors, and the lives and roles of original owners, including their businesses and politics. Notably absent are the experiences and perspectives of enslaved peoples, their hardships, and their historical contributions. Cultural geographers Anette Pritchard and Nigel J. Morgan, who argued that “the language of tourism promotion reflects a privileged White, male, heterosexual gaze.” Those tendencies manifest in site interpretations, as well. Much like historic carceral tourism, managers of plantation tourism employ narratives that they believe will attract the most tourists, relying upon and propagating common myths in order to appeal to visitors. With few exceptions, plantation tourism, then, offers a “whitewashed” historical interpretation of enslavement and little interpretation of the enslaved. The result is partial or imbalanced histories at plantation museums that misrepresent the totality of the site’s past.28

Interpretive choices, specifically the selection and presentation of certain narratives, perpetuate white supremacy and black Othering. Unfortunately, as a number of critical race theorists have shown, “whiteness and white-centric views have become the norm in society

---

through the storytelling process.” Traditionally, this has been the case at former plantations where storytelling has reinforced visions of a white, affluent, “moonlight and magnolias” version of the Old South. Because they prioritize white histories and narratives over black stories, these sites hold little resonance for African Americans whose interests in and relationships to historic plantations remain largely unaddressed.29

Few places compare to historic plantations as sites of racial oppression, injustice, and violence, where skin color intersected with every aspect of the lived experience, including labor, family, and religion. The findings from historic plantations have been telling, if not unsurprising then. Visitor data collected from historic plantations reinforces scholarly contentions that “tourist plantations do not generally seek slavery history and the owners and managers of plantation sites do not normally engage guests in critical discussions of slavery.”30 Similar to historic carceral tourists, white, middle-class vacationers constitute the bulk of historic plantation tourists, and visit the sites for leisure. One study of the audiences at the Laura Creole Plantation outside of New Orleans found that 85 percent of visitors self-described as white/Caucasian, with black/African Americans representing approximately 5 percent of visitorship.31 In another survey of four Louisiana River Road tourist plantations, researchers found that over 88 percent of visitors self-identified as white. Again, African Americans represented about 5 percent of historic plantation visitors in that region.32

30 Butler, Carter, Dwyer, “Imagining Plantations,” 292.
31 Butler, Carter, Dwyer, “Imagining Plantations,” 293.
Scholars have also suggested that black and white Americans view and approach historic plantations in vastly different ways. White audiences at historic plantations expressed the most interest in architecture, whereas black tourists sought out narratives about enslavement and the enslaved. Although African American tourists do not visit historic plantations to learn just about enslavement, in the analysis of the Laura Creole Plantation, researchers determined that whites visit historic plantations hoping not to be informed about enslavement at all. As the owner of the Oak Alley Plantation in Vacherie, Louisiana explained, white visitors arrive “looking for a Gone With The Wind brand of fantasy.”\(^3^3\) Enslavement is an incredibly sensitive issue, namely because its legacies of racial injustice, economic hardship, and discrimination continue to haunt the United States.

Visitors at historic state prison museums share the demographic characteristics of those who visit historic plantations, with white, middle-class vacationers dominating the tourist ranks. Their expectations drive incomplete portraits within prison tourism that either neglect or villainize blacks. Such interpretations miss the opportunity to situate prison tourism in a much larger historical narrative. For example, many of the penitentiaries that have become historic state prison museums were originally built in the 1870s, in the wake of Emancipation. In The New Jim Crow, Michelle Alexander argued that disproportionate incarceration of African Americans actually replaced enslavement as a system of racialized control and exploitation.\(^3^4\)

Over time, these facilities would come to contain a disproportionately high number of racial


minorities, mostly young, African American men. Most historic state prison museums refuse to
share that message with the public. But until interpreters at both historic plantations and historic
prison museums engage with the totality of their sites’ histories, meaningfully and critically
engaging the legacies of their pasts, they will continue perpetuating harmful myths and partial
truths.

Visitors to historical plantations avoid the “messy and potentially uncomfortable history
of slavery and the enslaved on vacation. Instead . . . they want an escape from daily routine while
at the same time seeking a confirmation of their existing beliefs.”\(^{35}\) The same might be said for
historic carceral tourists, who enjoy the suspension of reality as they walk through former
prisons, places where they have never been, gazing at artifacts from another time. The purpose of
their visits is not to challenge what they think they know about either incarceration or
incarcerated peoples. Rather, former prisons, as historic sites, help to reinforce preconceived
racialized notions of both the past and present that allow the carceral state to continue.

Discrepancies between lived prison experiences and imagined prison tourism raises a
critical question, one largely unaddressed in carceral studies: Is it possible to take on a
historically accurate portrayal of mass incarceration for the public? Historian Seth Bruggeman
maintained that questioning the carceral state, “particularly with those audiences who have
suffered the brunt of this unfortunate history, including ex-convicts and their families, surely
serves the public historian’s commitment to civic engagement and shared authority.” The
challenge of that threatens to overwhelm, both in terms of the number of stakeholders and the
societal importance of carceral issues. Almost one in thirty Americans experience some form of
correctional or disciplinary supervision, meaning that the potential audiences for such

\(^{35}\) Butler, Carter, Dwyer, “Imagining Plantations,” 300.
interpretation, engagement, and programming is enormous. And yet, due to long legacies of racial and cultural exclusion, as well as the lack of diversity among contemporary staff and stakeholders, historic prison sites will continue to struggle to attract and engage with communities of color. Until the broader society begins to reckon with the current crisis of mass incarceration and the suffocating injustices of the criminal justice system, it remains unlikely that historic prison museums will feel compelled to adapt their perspectives and their practices.

Chapter 5.

The People of Prison: Experiences and Representations of Carceral Citizens

There is a deep irony at work in historic prison museums. Most sites operate with at least a few “returned citizens” who agree to help interpret the prison they once occupied, usually by leading specialty “insider” tours or providing staff members with oral histories. However, the individuals and communities that preserve, maintain, and interpret historic state prison museums tend to be white, and so are the returned citizens who offer insight about their incarcerated experiences. The overrepresentation of white, male carceral voices in historic state prison museums minimizes and obscures the carceral experience of people of color, especially African Americans, who are proportionately the largest imprisoned population in the United States.

This chapter scrutinizes the involvement and representation of the “people of prison,” especially “carceral citizens,” at historic state prison museums. It asks how current and former inhabitants of prisons are represented at sites of historic carceral tourism and explores the effect this has on carceral tourists and their perceptions of incarceration. Given the widespread and highly racialized nature of incarceration, the need for first-person accounts is crucial to understanding the processes, experiences, and consequences of imprisonment. Collectively, former sites of incarceration have confined millions of people, whose experiences in prison could offer valuable, enlightening, and educational insights, and possibly provoke the public to action.

Since the late twentieth century, however, people of color in the United States have been incarcerated at disproportionately higher rates than their white counterparts, a trend that has continued and even escalated in the first decades of the twenty-first century. More recent data regarding prisoner demographics reveals continuing discrepancies in incarceration rates for
different races. In 2017, African Americans represented 33 percent of the prison population serving a sentence, whites accounted for 30 percent, and Latinos accounted for 23 percent of inmates. The disproportionately high number of racial minorities behind bars in the United States does not align with the disproportionately high number of white carceral tourists. These two systems—represented in the institutions of the prison and the historic prison museum—intertwine. African Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos occupy operational prisons; white Americans enter decommissioned prisons. The former make white Americans feel safe and secure by mitigating racial threats they perceive in the larger society. The latter also allows white Americans to feel safe and secure through penal-based leisure and indoctrination.¹

The overrepresentation of white people in historic carceral tourism maintains white ownership of and control over carceral narratives. White voices do not fully capture the history and realities of incarceration, particularly for the people who disproportionately experience it. Moreover, the “white gaze” affects the interpretation at historic prison museums as well as public perceptions of prisons, those who occupy them, and incarceration.² In short, historic carceral tourism is largely conducted by white people for white people.

Rarely and inconsistently do historic state prison museums discuss the racial composition of their carceral pasts. Sites generally make little to no mention about the precedents for the rise in incarceration rates, including the laws, policies, and practices that overwhelmingly targeted communities of color. As a result, many historic state prison museums suffer from institutional

amnesia—intentionally or not—in terms of their racial pasts and complicity in a white supremacist present.

When they do address race relations, some historic state prison museums commonly do so through discussions of white supremacist groups that arose towards the latter part of the twentieth century, including the Avengers and the Aryan Brotherhood. At the West Virginia Penitentiary, tour guides detail the prominence and influence of white supremacist sentiment, highlighting “gang-related tensions, race tensions, and guard tensions” that characterized prison life during the latter part of the twentieth century. A returned prison citizen—now tour guide—at the Ohio State Reformatory who served from 1969 to 1970 explained how, during his tenure there, it was “not a good time between black and white.” This simple statement alludes to an important and overlooked aspect of prison culture in historic state prison museums: the fact that by 1970, prison culture had evolved around racial conflict and avoidance. Unfortunately, site interpreters often neglect this history. Without a frank and thoughtful discussion about the role of race in conceptions of crime and practices of punishment, visitors may never understand or perhaps even know about the rise, spread, and ongoing existence of the carceral state.

Yet histories of incarceration in local, regional, and national contexts blatantly expose the increasingly racialized nature of imprisonment in the United States. Racial minorities are exponentially more likely to serve time behind bars, but a discussion of race and incarceration is notably absent in many historic prison museums. Yet sites of historic carceral tourism, intentionally or unintentionally, do not divulge information regarding the racial composition of

---

3 “Life of an Inmate Tour,” Ohio State Reformatory, July 21, 2018; Guided Tour of the West Virginia Penitentiary, July 27, 2018; James B. Jacobs, “Race Relations and the Prisoner Subculture,” *Crime and Justice* 1 (1979), 10, 11. This was the only explicit mention of race that occurred over the span of several tours. On the second “Life of an Inmate Tour” on July 22, 2018, the same guide reiterated the volatile race relations within the prison.
carceral populations over the institution’s history. This is the case for most historic state prison museums, like the Ohio State Reformatory and the Old Joliet Prison. Similarly, the Old Montana Prison did not address prisoner demographics, including the racial composition of the prisoners, the types of crime committed, or the number of inmates in total, or at any given time.⁴

There is also limited conversation about *de jure* or *de facto* racial segregation within historic carceral tourism. Missouri State Penitentiary partially addresses how “self-segregation was, and is, a feature of prison life.” For instance, like other penitentiaries, the prison yard divided into African American and white spaces. One tour guide, a corrections officer, explained how “prison is a very racial place,” conceding that “inside a prison is the most racialized place in the world.”⁵ And yet, the reality of the racialization of incarceration in both the past and present is not meaningfully or intentionally addressed at historic prison museums, despite of the many opportunities to discuss the intersections of race, crime, and incarceration throughout history.

Eastern State Penitentiary stands as the exception; there, interpreters explain that prisoners were segregated by race in the cellblocks until the 1960s, and that race determined the “hierarchy of trade,” meaning that whites were given preference in terms of job opportunities and placements. Although the hospital did not segregate patients by race, officials reserved work in the hospital wing for whites. Tour guides also identify Charles Williams, the prison’s first inmate, who was an African American, and the prison’s first African American guard, who came aboard in 1955. Other sites opt not to explore these dynamics in their interpretation. Thirty-nine photographs

---


⁵ Guided Tour, West Virginia Penitentiary, July 26, 2018; Guided Tour, Missouri State Penitentiary, August 25, 2018; Self-Guided Tour, Old Montana Prison, September 12, 2018.
hang inside of the gas chamber at the Missouri State Penitentiary showing the people executed in that space throughout the prison’s history. With only a few exceptions, the photographs depict young African American men, and yet, there is no engagement with this aspect of the prison’s history, no acknowledgement of the racialized nature of imprisonment and punishment. Mark Schreiber, former deputy warden of the Missouri State Penitentiary, acknowledged that occasionally an observant visitor has raised the point. Schreiber guaranteed “that some of those men were innocent,” but then conceded that “history is as it happened.” The failure to comment on the racialized information that the photographs convey, however, reinforces white visitors’ perception of black “criminality” rather than the possibility that past state actors executed many innocent African Americans.

Even if mentioned on tours or within exhibit texts, the racial composition and history of a prison’s population is generally not contextualized. One tour guide at the West Virginia Penitentiary claimed that “most prisoners were white” in 1980s and 1990s, while only 10 to 17 percent of the prison’s population was black. But historical records reveal that whites represented approximately 96 percent of West Virginia’s population in those decades with black persons comprising a mere 3.1 percent. Thus, West Virginia, like other states, incarcerated more African Americans with respect to its proportionate population and that overrepresentation extends to the history of the West Virginia Penitentiary, or at least in the public imagination of it. The tour

---


guide’s memory, whether accurate or not, reveals an assumed racialization of the narrative, obscuring and diminishing experiences that people of color had with incarceration by re-orienting confinement as a racially shared experience.

Whitewashing carceral interpretations silences perspectives and experiences of people of color by reframing carceral narratives in a way that does not fully represent them. Acknowledgement of the presence of people of color, their memories, lived experiences, and penal histories are especially absent in historic carceral tourism. “Contestations of memory” in these sites result in the “the erasure of African Americans and their vision of the past from a site to which they were historically tied.”

Nathan Kantrowitz, a staff sociologist at Statesville Penitentiary in Illinois, concluded in the late 1960s that, within the prison “the worlds of black men and white men are separate and in conflict.” Not surprisingly, perhaps, those worlds remain at odds within interpretation at historic state prison museums.

The absence of the memories and experiences of African Americans in historic state prison museums represents a sobering larger trend in the museum field: the prioritization of white-centric interpretations with supplemental inclusion of alternative histories of Others. This practice is especially problematic at historic state prison museums because many of these sites represent shared “points of reference not only for those who survived traumatic events, but also for those born long after them.” Still, as much as a site might try to incorporate non-white

---

8 Adam H. Domby, “Captives of Memory: The Contested Legacy of Race at Andersonville National Historic Site,” *Civil War History* 63, no. 3 (September 2017): 255.
narratives, historic carceral tourism revolves around the power, perspectives, and memories of white Americans.\(^\text{10}\)

**Returned Citizens at Historic State Prison Museums**

Historically, those who spend time in prisons—as residents, employees, or tourists—do so at state prison sites rather than federal ones. An interdependent relationship exists at historic state prison museums: interpreters rely on the accounts, expertise, and memories of the formerly imprisoned, both for research purposes and for guided tours; formerly incarcerated individuals return to the prisons in which they were confined because their imprisonment played a significant role in their lives. Many were incarcerated in the same facility repeatedly and have familiar experiences of life in prison in terms of the routine, the social connections, and the challenges. However, interpretation at historic state prison museums does not usually address returned citizens, and the public rarely has opportunity to learn about their lives before or after incarceration. As one interpreter explained, inmates “can have a fascinating life and just end up in prison.” Prison comes to define them in the public psyche, contributing to both their dehumanization and the cognitive distance that visitors have with formerly incarcerated people. In this way, “the people whose stories are represented at [dark tourism sites] represent a stakeholder group that has, to date, been largely neglected.”\(^\text{11}\)

---


What role do returned citizens play in historic carceral tourism? They can be involved in different ways, the most common of which include giving specialty tours, participating in general guided tours with other visitors, and engaging in oral histories with site administrators and researchers. For instance, former prisoners lead tours at the Missouri State Penitentiary and Ohio State Reformatory. Yet, as one historic prison manager explains, “former inmates are not normally involved in giving tours, but in taking tours, yes.” At the West Virginia Penitentiary, former inmates “come on tours sometimes, but otherwise they’re not involved” with the site or its interpretation. The degree and type of collaboration between returned citizens, current inmates, and historic prison museums vary greatly. Few sites have more than a handful of regular guides who are returned citizens, and almost no sites have hired former prison residents as consultants or staff members. Some historic prison museums actively seek out former residents, usually for information about their experiences or the chance to conduct an oral history. Other sites take more passive approaches, waiting for returned citizens to reach out.12

In contrast to the minimizing of prisoner voices and experiences in historic prison interpretation, the voices of former administrators and guards shape carceral tourism narratives. Former guards frequently frame the portrayals of prisoners, and interpreters often explain prison spaces through the perspectives of guards. Carceral tourists learn about guard responsibilities, routines, and struggles with handling residents. Typically, descriptions of guard experiences are more empathetic, humanizing them in ways in which prisoners are not. Still, some interpreters

12 Sheila Sanford and Diane Gillespie, interview by author, Jefferson City, MO, August 27, 2018; Mark Schreiber, interview by author, Jefferson City, MO, September 22, 2018; Guided Tour, West Virginia Penitentiary, July 27, 2018. At the Old Idaho Penitentiary, one interpreter suggests that in former occupants of the prison have come forward in recent years “quite a bit, without doing any searching”; Anthony Parry interview, Old Idaho Penitentiary, September 6, 2018; Guided Tour, Eastern State Penitentiary, January 28, 2019.
group prisoners and guards as equal residents. One tour guide at the Old Idaho Penitentiary reasoned that “the guards and inmates were not so different.” In her estimation, guards did not have much more education than the general prison population. Another guide argued there was a “thin line between the guards and inmates. Mostly, they needed jobs, especially after the war.” At the West Virginia Penitentiary, the narrative asserts that guards were “uncomfortable with the lack of training” that they received, and that the prison had high employee turnover. In reality, prison staffs wielded significant power over incarcerated individuals, which interpreters occasionally acknowledged. One tour guide went so far as to claim that guards “terrorized inmates.”

By prioritizing staff narratives and perspectives, historic prison museums tilt narratives in favor of white corrections officials and, by extension, the state, depriving inmates of agency, power, and platforms to share their own carceral experiences.

Most historic state prison museums interact with former residents or employees as members of general tours on an irregular basis. Site managers generally recognize the value of speaking with these individuals in order to ask about their lived experiences. As one interpreter at the Old Idaho Penitentiary explained, every time “someone comes through, who had that relevant experience, we come down and meet with them or we make sure they have our contact. We try to spend time with them, if they’re willing.” A former deputy warden at the Missouri State Penitentiary described how some credited their time in prison with changing their lives for the better: “The old prison has an appeal for them because it was their home. They will bring family back and show them, even if their family members didn’t know they were in prison.”

---

13 Self-Guided Tour, Old Montana Prison, September 12, 2018; Guided Tour, Old Idaho Penitentiary, September 6, 2018; Guided Tour, Old Idaho Penitentiary, September 7, 2018; Guided Tour, West Virginia Penitentiary, July 26, 2018; Guided Tour, West Virginia Penitentiary, July 27, 2018.
Undeniably, the prison “was a big part of their lives.” Sometimes, past prisoners refuse to cooperate and help develop site interpretations. At the Missouri State Penitentiary, a guide commented that some returned citizens were “really helpful” while “some are brain dead,” making collaborative practice or attempts at shared authority difficult. Few site managers acknowledge the hardships that former inmates often faced, however, after they walked out of the prison doors. Some former prison occupants, for instance “will never come back and would rather blow it up.” This conflict within the carceral experience rarely emerges in historic carceral tourism.\(^{14}\)

The Ohio State Reformatory and Missouri State Penitentiary offer tours led by former prisoners. As a more advanced form of historic carceral tourism, most of these guided tours offered by returned citizens are overwhelmingly popular, addressing visitors’ desire for “authenticity.” They follow a similar script: personal backstory including family life, the challenges and hardships that affected their lives, and the criminal activity that resulted in their incarceration. “Prisoner perspective” tours mimic tour routes of general history tours, but guides substitute personal memories for historical facts or institutional histories. For example, at the West Virginia Penitentiary, one guide wore a shirt embroidered with his name and an inmate number, visibly branding him as a former inmate. Although he recognized that at the time of his imprisonment the emphasis was on rehabilitation, with education and job training opportunities available, he concluded that the Ohio State Reformatory was a dangerous “hell-hole.”\(^{15}\) Such

\(^{14}\) Guided Tour, Missouri State Penitentiary, August 25, 2018; Jacey Brain, interview by author, Boise, ID, September 6, 2018; Guided Tour, Old Idaho Penitentiary, September 7, 2018; Schreiber interview. One historic carceral tourist stated that former inmates returned to historic prisons because, “for them, it’s like camp”; Guided Tour, Missouri State Penitentiary, August 25, 2018.

\(^{15}\) “Life of an Inmate” Tour, Ohio State Reformatory, July 21, 2018.
tours shift the prisons from historical relics to forums of memory, although they rarely merge memory and history into singular cohesive and comprehensive interpretations.

Despite the fact that site managers and interpreters claim to value encounters with returned citizens, the perspectives, memories, and opinions of former residents seldom appear in on-site interpretations. Part of the reason that historic state prison museums do not incorporate more carceral perspectives involves the lack of established and accessible archives alongside legal and familial issues. Limited and inconsistent standards exist for sharing historic or contemporary prisoner information at different historic prison museums. Although many prisoner files remained at sites after decommissioning, theft or vandalism violated many prisoners’ privacy by exposing documents and details to the public. Oral histories, too, pose problems. One interpreter explained that, in terms of sites’ oral histories, he still had not acquired permission to utilize the material in a meaningful way. The oral histories had not been processed, transcribed, or shared with other tour guides. Other legal difficulties prevent sharing and publishing of personal information, including the rights and preferences of descendants, complicating the information that sites may, or perhaps should, share as well as how they do so. But archival complications do not fully explain the absence of these voices in site interpretations. Many historic state prison museums possess working knowledge of their inmate populations. As of 2019, curators at Eastern State Penitentiary had “identified 45,000 prisoners thus far.” For many historic state prison museums, the absence of incarcerated people from interpretation reflects an administrative choice more than anything else.16

In the rare cases where contemporary representations of incarceration are visible at historic state prison museums, although not always intentionally, visitors frequently fail to make connections between the carceral past and present. For example, residents of a minimal security female facility that sits adjacent to the Old Idaho Penitentiary participate in work-release and re-entry programs around town, making prisoners visible, but not necessarily noticed in relation to the museum. Similarly, a medium security facility located near the former Missouri State Penitentiary arranges for “a crew of four [people to] help with cleaning and maintenance” of the museum. Prison-made products are often available for purchase in historic state prison museum gift shops.\(^{17}\) Although historic carceral tourists meander the campuses and cellblocks of defunct facilities, they seldom see or acknowledge those nearby still living under the yoke of the carceral state.

Returned citizens, then, are generally absent in the powerful processes of history-making that take place at historic state prison museums. This issue becomes complicated because historic prison museums overwhelmingly rely on white memories and management. Individuals and communities of color are notably missing in the narratives, physical spaces, and exhibits that interpret decommissioned carceral sites. Given the individual and collective traumas that mass incarceration inflicts, it becomes understandable why returning citizens of color are less eager to participate in historic carceral tourism than their white counterparts, contributing to their minimalization or even absence in site interpretations. In 1972, the New York State Special Commission on Attica, the site of a massive and widely publicized prison riot, suggested that the “young black inmate tended to see the white officer as the symbol of a racist, oppressive system which put him behind bars.” Returned citizens view historic state prison museums—and their

\(^{17}\) Brain interview; Sanford and Gillespie interview.
managers—as equally oppressive and marginalizing. For many, the racialization of the carceral state made the prison system a lived experience that they carried with them when they left. The institutions, then, are not just sites of past experiences but continuing realities. Consequently, returned citizens of color visit historic prison museums.  

People associated with the carceral system as prisoners, prison workers, and their loved ones share “an extreme sense of difference and isolation from society,” often believing that their most useful societal purpose lies in feeding the demands of the carceral state. In her analysis of carceral tourism, sociologist Michelle Brown summarized how people of prisons “are aware of broader societal attitudes, assumptions, and understandings of punishment and have, with all of us, experienced the rise of a popular punitiveness over the last four decades.” Brown continued, “they know the work that they do and the experience of being in prison are social realities that few outside of their worlds care or wish to know about—except in connection with a certain voyeuristic sensationalism.” Unfortunately, historic state prison museums have preserved and perpetuated that sensationalism, hesitating to complicate narratives or challenge visitors to move beyond preconceived stereotypes. Indeed, the absence of such voices and perspectives within those sites suggests that white staff and stakeholders feel little pressure to confront the structural racism embedded in the carceral history they attempt to represent because no one, and certainly not their white visitors, really holds them accountable.

Diversification of prison employees does little to assuage this problem. Like those who historically held other state-sanctioned positions of discipline and power, prison guards and

---

19 Brown, *Culture of Punishment*, 3-4.
administrators were historically white and male. The demographics of correctional officers began
to change during the 1960s, with greater numbers of women and minorities gaining employment.
In 1979, racial minorities still composed a minority of prison staffs in all regions of the nation.
Nor did slight and slow diversification of prison staff did not overturn pre-existing racialized
prison structures. Racial self-segregation persisted among staff as well as among prisoners well
into the late twentieth century.\textsuperscript{20} Moreover, as the carceral state grew, racial tensions, particularly
between white prison guards and incarcerated people of color, mounted, and conditions
worsened for corrections personnel. In 1972, the New York State Special Commission on Attica
found that “for both inmates and officers, ‘correction’ [means] an atmosphere charged with
racism,” and “racial polarity and mistrust [are] magnified by the constant reminder that the
keepers were white and the kept were largely black and Spanish-speaking.” Today, correctional
officers remain predominately white and male in the United States. As of October 2019, white
(non-Hispanic) Americans accounted for 62.7 percent of prison staff, while black Americans
made up 21.4 percent and Latinos accounted for 12.4 percent, according to the Federal Bureau of
Prisons. Men represented 72.5 percent and women around 27.5 percent of staff.\textsuperscript{21} The continuity
of white men in positions of power within prisons builds upon a legacy of white carceral

\textsuperscript{20} Brain interview; Donald Clemmer, \textit{The Prison Community} (New York: Holt, Rinehart &
Winston, 1940); Jacobs, “Race Relations,” 18; Lucien X. Lombardo, \textit{Guards Imprisoned-
Correctional Officers at Work} (Cincinnati, IL: Anderson Publishing Co, 1982).
\textsuperscript{21} Margaret Werner Cahalan, US Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics, \textit{Historical
Corrections Statistics in the United States, 1850- 1984} (Rockville, MD: Westat, Inc., December
1986), 64; Jacobs, “Race Relations,” 5, 6, 18; O. Hayden Griffin III and Vanessa H. Woodward,
437; McKay, \textit{Attica}, 4; “Staff Ethnicity/Race,” Staff Statistics, Federal Bureau of Prisons,
Updated October 5, 2019, \url{https://www.bop.gov/about/statistics/statistics_staff_ethnicity_race.jsp}
(accessed November 11, 2019); “Staff Gender,” Staff Statistics, Federal Bureau of Prisons,
Updated October 5, 2019, \url{https://www.bop.gov/about/statistics/statistics_staff_gender.jsp}
(accessed November 11, 2019).
authority, and the penal subjectivity of racial minorities. Historic prison museums do not account for this.

The few prison scholars who have explored intersections of race and incarceration asserted that wardens and other prison staff shared prejudices and biases with the largely rural white populations that surrounded state prisons. Many administrators responsible for managing active prisons worked with historic state prisons in creating prison museums, especially as tour guides, consultants, and managers. Former prison managers remained in positions of authority, invoking their experiences with and beliefs about incarceration in site interpretations. As a result, historic state prison museums heavily represent perspectives and experiences of former white corrections officers, wardens, and those affiliated with carceral management. Such focus fosters memorialization practices that encourage further distance between those telling the stories and those underrepresented in the stories, justifying and endorsing the existence of a large and punitive carceral state. Even interpreters not affiliated with or beholden to carceral agencies defer to those with first-hand experience.

In terms of exhibitions and on-site historic interpretations, some historic state prison museums self-censor. For instance, the curator at the Ohio State Reformatory asked whether the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction would “be happy with what’ve got here, what

I’ve presented?” Most of the virtual stories available on the site’s kiosk feature white inmates and guards, and the museum exhibits display images of white inmates from the early to mid-twentieth century. Notably, the museum’s “Inmate Experience” exhibit lacks representation of people of color. A life-size cardboard cut of Morgan Freeman’s character “Red” from the film *Shawshank Redemption* is among the only images of a non-white, albeit fictional, prisoner available at the historic prison. The site’s decision—consciously or unconsciously—to frame the carceral narrative in terms of the white experience is not unique. Most other sites adopt a similar approach. Rather than interrogate the roles of other white actors in the carceral system—judges and prosecutors, for example—the burden is fixed instead on the individual who committed the crime, stakeholders in the prison who have little authority over the interpretation of their own story.23 Similarly, white historic carceral tourists readily accept narratives constructed by former prison administrators with little to no pushback. Both historic and popular cultural portrayals of black and brown people as subjects of incarceration reinforce this narrative, one that erases the carceral narratives of people of color and results in forgetting, neglect, and refusal to deal with the realities of the situation. The result is that many of these historic prison museums reproduce a mentality of “us” (white visitors as spectators) as opposed to “them” (people of color as subjects) in a carceral context.

---

Public Attitudes Towards Incarcerated Persons

The sizeable and significant absence of former inmates in interpretive positions and the excessive clout of former corrections personnel have serious repercussions for tourists at former carceral sites. Specifically, historic carceral tourism reinforces a public “prison culture,” defined by Brown as “a society committed to the construction of prisons and the warehousing of mass numbers of people with little regard for the complexities of their lives, the lives of those hired to confine them, and the communities that surround them.” Historic carceral tourists are everyday citizens who perceive a physical, experiential, and emotional distance from incarceration that makes them feel unaccountable for the rise and maintenance of the current carceral state. As Brown concluded, “much of the popular knowledge about punishment is constructed . . . in spaces far from the social realities and the social facts that define mass incarceration.”

Enabled by their experiences at these sites to deny intentional involvement with carceral systems, white tourists claim distance from “the democratic burden of punishment as a kind of cultural work.” Historic carceral tourism throughout the United States thus invites white publics to choose when, where, and how they experience prisons, often detached from the realities of the prison-industrial complex, philosophies and practices of punishment, and the lived experiences of millions of their fellow Americans.

Part of the problem is that historic carceral tourists frequently approach former sites of incarceration with preconceived notions of prisons, imprisonment, and the people affiliated with the site. An administrator at the Old Idaho Penitentiary concluded that the site is popular because the public watches television and movies about prisons, and as a result, interpreters can

---

24 Brown stresses the “need to know something about the ways in which people who are removed from punishment imagine it—and why certain kinds of political rhetorics and cultural meanings are given so much privilege”; Brown, *Culture of Punishment*, 2-5, 9.
encounter their preconceived ideas. Despite how attitudes and interests of visitors vary, as do the questions that they ask about sites and their inhabitants, patterns of public thought emerge. One visitor from the United Kingdom explained that, even before his tour of Eastern State Penitentiary, “I have heard some pretty bad things about US prisons.” Most site administrators and interpreters anticipate many of the questions that visitors bring to tours. One tour guide at Eastern State Penitentiary characterized the public as “punitive, skeptical, and hesitant.”

Interpreters at the Missouri State Penitentiary described public attitudes towards incarceration as “mixed,” and when considering specific carceral figures, there are “some they love, and some they hate.” Visitors’ preconceptions deeply influence how they approach prison sites, and their experiences subsequently reinforce societal expectations of punishment. Tour participants often acknowledge the hardships of incarceration, specifically the draconian prison conditions, but they also express indignance at the notion of prisoners being comfortable.\(^\text{25}\)

Few aspects of historic carceral tourism challenge visitors to consider the intention, ideology, purpose, function, and consequences of prisons in an abstract or philosophical sense. When asked why society builds prisons, visitors cite protection, rehabilitation, punishment, and deterrence. Overwhelmingly, historic carceral tourists believe that prisons protect the public from criminals, justifying building big prisons and administering long sentences. At the Historic Iowa State Penitentiary, one site manager contended that “the general public doesn’t understand

\(^{25}\text{Guided Tour, Eastern State Penitentiary, January 26, 2019; Guided Tour, Eastern State Penitentiary, January 28, 201; Parry interview; Schreiber interview; Stiles interview; Strange and Kempa, “Shades of Dark Tourism,” 399.}\)
the socio-economic factors that influence that level of incarceration. Visitors think that it is a black and white situation.”

Historic prison museums have significant potential to challenge such preconceptions. Canadian researchers Matthew Ferguson, Justin Piché, and Kevin Walby argued that historic prison museums represent sites where “cultural meanings about prisoners and imprisonment are developed, communicated, and consumed.” They found that visitors to Canadian historic sites value the perceived authenticity that they encounter, and that historic carceral tourism connects to understandings of and attitudes towards carceral histories and realities. Unfortunately, experiences at historic state prison museums “seldom translate into humanizing conceptions of the criminalized and views that challenge punitiveness among visitors.” Instead, historic carceral tourism promotes sensationalized display and voyeuristic encounters. Visitors often fail to consider the human costs of incarceration, including pain, suffering, and even death. Jacqueline Z. Wilson, a scholar of Australian penal tourism, also found that tourists often lament the closure of historic prisons despite their severe and hazardous conditions. This collective sense of regret and loss essentially endorses the suffering of prisoners, to whom audiences are not personally connected. Thus, when visitors acknowledge the suffering of prisoners of the past and even the present, such recognition rarely generates empathy. Historic carceral tourists tend to feel little emotional attachment to decommissioned prisons or their inhabitants, visiting out of historical interest or admiration for historic penal architecture.

---

26 Steve Jones and Greg Peerbolte, interview by author, Joliet, IL, September 18, 2018; Guided Tour, Eastern State Penitentiary, January 26, 2019; Guided Tour, Eastern State Penitentiary, January 28, 2019; Rebecca Bowker interview by author, Ft. Madison, IA, September 21, 2018. 27 Ferguson, Piché, Walby, “Bridging or Fostering Social Distance?” 357-374; Wilson, Prison, 38, 42.
Historic carceral tourists appear to be attracted to the Otherness of prison public history. Visitors to former sites of incarceration perceive the site as something of the past, a relic of “back then.” Such tourists are also deeply curious about the Otherness of imprisonment, eager to encounter, if only briefly and safely, life as it was for incarcerated peoples. Such historical distancing results in a cognitive and emotional detachment that allows visitors to leave decommissioned prison and return to the outside world and their everyday lives either unaware of or ambivalent towards the carceral systems around them.

The Transformative Potential of Historic Carceral Tourism

Many former sites of incarceration do not discuss more recent history or contemporary realities due to a professed concern with overstepping, crossing a line of historical objectivity that might generate controversy. Historic carceral tourism stakeholders appear deeply skeptical, and afraid, of statements or stances that may be viewed as anti-prison, anti-punishment, or related in any way to penal activism. As one interpretive specialist rationalized, interpreters are merely interested in crafting institutional histories, albeit impartial ones: “We just try to relate the history, the facts, and the people can talk about it.”28 This perhaps makes sense, given their financial dependence, the precariousness of funding, and thus their site’s future viability.

Yet, a few site administrators willingly, even eagerly, connect their historic state prison museums to contemporary carceral realities. Some museum managers hope to humanize incarcerated people of the past and present by connecting interpretations to modern society. Many interpreters incorporate historical empathy into their narratives, challenging visitors to complicate understandings of who incarcerated people were, their motivations for crime, and

28 Brain interview; Parry interview.
why they faced incarceration. Eastern State Penitentiary actively and regularly works with currently incarcerated populations, a process that has increased staff awareness and heightened empathy for people going through incarceration. However, prison tourism scholars generally agree that prison public history tends to “represent the inmates of the distant past in more personal terms—far more empathy, and markedly more detail—than those more recently resident there.”

Historic state prison museums and historic carceral tourism at large have a transformative power to educate, inspire, and activate the general public in new and compelling ways. Interrogating the very existence of prisons, the definitions of crime, and the purpose of penal philosophies are all underutilized interpretive approaches. Additionally, historic carceral tourism often overlooks the human costs of incarceration for both individuals and communities, an oversight that deprives imprisoned persons of historical contexts and emotional depths. If transformed from disciplinary temples into forums that recognize “traumatic memory,” historic state prison museums could serve more useful civic purposes by humanizing confined persons and creating relevance between carceral pasts and the present. They could also serve more than one public, those that visit sites and those confined within them.

If done well, historic state prison museums can move beyond collaborating mostly with white people of prison, including corrections personnel and former inmates. They can correct narratives in which people of color are largely missing, and if truly dedicated, bring them into the

29 Anderson interview; Brain interview; Parry interview; Wilson, “Australian Prison Tourism,” 568.
administration and mission of historic carceral tourism sites, as well. This has not happened. The visibility and prominence of the white prisoner perspective remains hegemonic while experiences of people of color, those who make up the largest prison demographic in the United States, remain diluted and supplemental. Sites continue to collaborate more frequently and visibly with former wardens, corrections officers, and administrative personnel rather than those who were imprisoned, leading the public to trust and ultimately side with prison managers and accept their carceral narratives as “truth.” The result is a decidedly white and authoritative perspective on the carceral experience that reinforces the public’s trust in corrections and creates a “top down,” whitewashed narrative of incarceration in the United States.31

Chapter 6.

Stars in Stripes: Interpretive Themes in Historic Carceral Tourism

Historic state prison museums use a variety of mediums to communicate their sites’ histories and messages to the public. Like the majority of traditional museums and historic sites, former prisons utilize historic markers, promotional materials, websites/social media, and guided tours to appeal to guests. Moreover, carceral tourists understand prison visits, even to the most sensitive spaces, as consumable products. But what messages do these materials communicate and how does that shape visitor consumption? Collectively, guided tours at historic state prison museums reinforce punitive, romanticized, and sensationalized portrayals of incarceration, directly influencing public perspectives and attitudes. Prison historians’ decisions to not engage with the contemporary carceral state historicizes particular understandings of criminality, as well as accompanying problems of violence, overcrowding, poverty, punishment, and confinement. This results in cognitive distancing in the public imagination and propagating perceptions that incarceration is something that happened to other people in the past.¹ Such interpretation also hides the racialized nature of incarceration and avoids the topic of current mass incarceration of people of color.

This chapter explores guided and self-guided tours currently offered at multiple historic prison museums, scrutinizing the historical content presented to the public to determine what is and what is not being discussed. It considers the differences among institutions, most built during the mid-to-late nineteenth century, stylized with Gothic/Romanesque architecture, and closed

during the late twentieth century. What histories and narratives are unique to these sites? What common themes and tropes do they share? What kind of interpretation about carceral histories and realities do visitors learn from touring these historic prison museums, and why does that matter?

**Format of Tours**

Historic state prison museums generally offer both guided and self-guided tours of their facilities, usually several times each day. Some sites operate seasonally, while others open for regular tours throughout the year. As of 2019, the West Virginia Penitentiary in Moundsville offered three guided tours per day, the Old Joliet Prison opened to the public for two regular tours per week, and the Old Iowa State Penitentiary only offered tours a few times per year. Certain institutions allow advanced ticket purchases; others require on-site purchase. Most guided tours allow visitors to walk through parts of the prison, but also have prohibited spaces that have been deemed unsafe or insecure. The buildings are in such poor condition at the Old Joliet Prison that guests are restricted to walking around the prison campus only. In terms of tour group size, most of the guided tours at historic prison museums average between ten and thirty people, with occasionally larger groups.²

Some museums offer self-guided tour options, especially those with smaller annual attendance or sites that possess limited staff or volunteers. These tours are usually supplemented

---

by signage, audio recordings, or information booklets. The self-guided tour at Eastern State Penitentiary includes audio headsets for guests who navigate to different “stops” along the tour route where they hear place-based stories. At the Old Montana Prison, the self-guided tour consists of an information booklet that outlines the suggested tour route and contains historical information for each interpretive space. Self-guided tours vary in terms of technology, depth of interpretation, and sensory experience, all of which affect visitors’ impressions and reactions to what they encounter. Comparing the tour options at historic states prison museums throughout the United States reveals that historic carceral tourism varies greatly by sites, and depends on the location of the facility, the resources of the institution, and the age of the site’s tourism program.\(^3\)

Guided tours offer the most ideal approach to interpreting historic prisons because the public can interface with guides who present narratives that focus group attention and answer questions. The availability of dedicated tour guides depends on site size and resources. Some sites are too big to staff adequately, forcing managers to allow self-guided options. Other administrators hesitate to let visitors meander the large campuses on their own accord due to liability issues. Missouri State Penitentiary only offers guided tours due to the facility’s large size. The much smaller Old Montana Prison generally encourages self-guided tours of the campus.\(^4\)

---


\(^4\) Sheila Sanford and Diane Gillespie, interview by author, Jefferson City, MO, August 27, 2018; Self-Guided Tour, Old Montana Prison, September 12, 2018. The Missouri State Penitentiary has offered “guided tours from day one. We’ve never done non-guided tours.” Self-guided tour options would require the site to create and provide additional interpretive resources. “We would have to invest in interpretive signage; a demanding resource and it doesn’t bring the story to life”; Sanford and Gillespie interview.
Three types of regular, guided tours currently take place at historic prison museums: general history, those led by former residents, and paranormal. Some sites offer regular tours throughout the entire week, while others opt for weekend or even monthly programs, and a few, such as the Old Iowa State Penitentiary, only open occasionally for special event tours that generally serve as fundraisers. Most guided tours last between one and two hours, and consist of walking through a large part, but not all, of the massive facilities and the campus.5

Some facilities allow visitors to sightsee throughout the interior of the prison buildings, while others prohibit visitors from entering the structures, and instead conduct tours throughout the outside campus. Tours tend to follow a basic route, with variations due to weather, the preference of the tour guide, and even the number of visitors on tour. Tour guides have the ability to adjust tour structures based on preference and must usually accommodate concurrent tours. The tours at Missouri State Penitentiary began in different areas, one outside of the walls and one inside. The Old Idaho Penitentiary tours followed completely different routes, depending on how the guides structured historical narratives. Guided tours at Eastern State Penitentiary commenced in the same waiting room and moved to the same initial outside location but then they varied in route and narrative.

Prison tours typically leverage a variety of interests in order to appeal to a wide range of visitors. For instance, on the “History and Hollywood” tour at the Ohio State Reformatory, the guide primarily interprets the site through architecture and the film Shawshank Redemption.

5 Anthony Parry interview, Old Idaho Penitentiary, September 6, 2018; Guided Tour, Eastern State Penitentiary, January 26, 2019; Guided Tour, Eastern State Penitentiary, January 27, 2019; Guided Tour, Eastern State Penitentiary, January 28, 2019; Guided Tour, Missouri State Penitentiary, August 25, 2018; Guided Tour, Old Idaho Penitentiary, September 7, 2018; “History and Hollywood Tour,” Ohio State Reformatory, July 20, 2018; Guided Tour, Joliet Prison Museum, September 17, 2018. The tours examined in this chapter represent the public tours offered on-site, and do not reference the private or paranormal tours.
Other historic prison museums also boast of their depictions in film. Tour guides credit the popularity and visibility of prisons that served as filming locations for classic films such as *The Green Mile* and *The Blues Brothers*. The Ohio State Reformatory also offers a “Behind the Bars” tour, providing access to places not featured on the “History and Hollywood Tour,” described as “history heavy” for more avid enthusiasts. Consequently, no standard blueprint yet exists for carceral tours, although tourists do consider tour experiences as authoritative.

Almost every historic prison museum begins guided public tours by contextualizing the institution within local, state, and/or national history. The West Virginia Penitentiary’s tour opens with a brief historical overview, including information about West Virginia statehood, the city of Wheeling’s selection as the capital, and the city of Moundsville as the site for the prison. This was a highly contested decision at the time, with many opponents criticizing the selection of Moundsville as the prison’s location because many preferred the centrality and prosperity of Wheeling. One newspaper article expressed staunch disapproval, taking “the ground that a great wrong has been done to the best interests of the State in thus locating an institution” in Moundsville. The guided tour at the Missouri State Penitentiary mimics this narrative, in that the tour begins with Missouri statehood in 1820, as well as the prison’s opening in 1836, the same year “that the Alamo fell.” For further historical context, the guide explained that Missouri was at one time the furthest western state, and as a result experienced a population influx due to westward migration. The introduction to the guided tour of the Old Idaho Penitentiary is similarly structured. Interpreters provide a historical timeline of the site, including its opening and closure, as well as its acquisition by historical society. Guides contextualized the purchase of the land for the prison in Boise in 1868, as well as construction of the penitentiary’s first building in March 1872, emphasizing the popularity of the Oregon Trail, westward expansion, and
mining. Embedding the prisons’ histories within larger state, regional, and national histories helps visitors to understand the time and place of the institutions’ emergences. Notably absent are the history and practices of punishment that facilitated the rise of large-scale prisons.

Guides often present the developments of prisons as entwined with those of local communities, in that prisons often sprouted alongside new settlements. When the Missouri State Penitentiary opened, it lay within easy walking distance to the village that later became Jefferson City. The prison housed only a minimal number of prisoners at first, though one tour guide insisted that “the city grew around the prison,” making inmates visible parts of everyday life. In 1916, approximately half of the prisoners at the Old Montana Prison lived and worked outside of the prison walls. Similarly, the West Virginia Penitentiary influenced development of Moundsville, with families building homes across the street from the prison in order to be close to loved ones serving time.

Most tours at historic prison museums appear to be freeform. Guides choose stories or topics that interest them from a pre-approved list of possibilities. The guide at the Missouri State Penitentiary explained to the audience that “visitors direct the tour.” Still, audiences expect tour guides to discuss certain institutional benchmarks and themes. According to Diane Gillespie and Sheila Sanford, managers at the Missouri State Penitentiary, “we have some basic historical information that we ensure by all tours is the same. A lot of the tours guides are not usually date

---


7 Guided Tour, Missouri State Penitentiary, August 25, 2018; Guided Tour, West Virginia Penitentiary, July 26, 2018; Self-Guided Tour, Old Montana Prison, September 12, 2018.
specific; they will talk more about the era, if it’s something they are confident in, but otherwise they leave it general.” The commitment to tour guides’ expertise and authority, however, ensures that, as administrators at the Missouri State Penitentiary described, “every tour is different; even with the same guide, their tours and stories can and will be different. We rely on crowd feedback. So, we have flexibility instead of a canned tour.”

Other historic state prison museums are more heavily scripted to ensure accuracy and uniformity. The guided tour of the Old Joliet Prison utilizes a tour script. Guides at the Eastern State Penitentiary follow a set sequence of questions. According to the guide handbook, “the people on tour bring in stories,” and if they identify them as related to points they will make, guides are expected to “add in those items as you go.” Most interpreters recognize that “public tours are different” from specialized or in-depth experiences, and the “ideas need to be digestible.” Of course, as at any historic site, tours remain subjective, and the quality of the historical information and interpretation often varies by tour guide.

Researchers have found that guided walking tours typically focus more on reciting information than provoking interpretation. As one scholar cautions, if the purpose of the tour is to make the former prison “interesting and relevant to a broader audience, these types of tours risk failure.” This has implications for sites that rely on former inmates as guides, such as the Missouri State Penitentiary. There guides can personalize tours by merging history and memory and recounting their “own interests and experiences,” including negative experiences as well as “positive and even humorous experiences.” However, such guided tours need to move beyond

---

8 Sanford and Gillespie interview; Stiles interview; Guided Tour, Missouri State Penitentiary, August 25, 2018; Guided Tour, Joliet Prison Museum, September 17, 2018.
mere personalization. They also need to establish relevance, emphasize social history, and encourage self-discovery. Unfortunately, few sites of historic carceral tourism prioritize these criteria.10

Despite their idiosyncrasies, historic prison museums share a common theme: they emphasize the uniqueness of life inside. The “prison is a city behind the walls,” possessing its own complexities, customs, and connections unintelligible to outsiders. In prisons, worlds collide in ways that create a particular ecosystem, replicated only within sites of incarceration.11 Guided tours mediate visitors’ experiences, escorting them through this new and unknown world.

Tour guides occasionally explain to visitors how the sites selected historical and anecdotal content, the sources consulted, and why particular information became part of the narrative. A rare exception occurred at the West Virginia Penitentiary where one guide cited the contributions of former corrections officers and prisoners, as well as published books, as the source of his information. Guides seem to explain away their interpretive choices as inevitable because “sharing the whole history” is nearly impossible and interpreters have to “be selective” in the content they present to the public. At the Old Idaho Penitentiary, a tour guide indicated that some information came from wardens’ reports. Interpretation at the Old Joliet Prison relied on historian Robert Sterling’s book, *Joliet Prisons: Images in Time*, as well as information gleaned from former guards and wardens. At the Eastern State Penitentiary, architectural historian David Cornelius contributed a great deal of information to the comprehensive *Historic

11 Schreiber interview; Guided Tour, Old Idaho Penitentiary, September 7, 2018; Guided Tour, Joliet Prison Museum, September 17, 2018.
Structures Report. Such traditional historical research, however, seems secondary to experiences and memories.

Architectural Content

Tour frequency and style differ by site; but examining the tour content of different sites provides opportunity to scrutinize interpretation at and of historic state prisons, as well as identify carceral narratives, themes, and impressions that visitors encounter. According to Jacey Brain, interpretive specialist at the Old Idaho Penitentiary, there are “unavoidable shared themes” among historic prison museums across the United States. What are these themes? And how do they influence the understanding of prisons in the popular mind?

The most widespread interpretive approach at historic prison museums is an emphasis on prison architecture. Site administrators identify architectural significance as not only one of the most compelling reasons for preservation, but also to key public appeal. In their analysis of Canadian prison museums, carceral tourism scholars Matthew Ferguson, Justin Piché, and Kevin Walby found that tourists wanted to learn about “the originality of the artifacts, prison architecture, and tour narratives.” Prison architecture serves an important interpretive purpose because “authentic appearance helps create the historical context within which the men and women who made history at a particular time and place can be better understood.

---

13 Jacey Brain, interview by author, Boise, ID, September 6, 2018.
Public interest in prison architecture is problematic, however, because by focusing on physical space and location, audiences can miss much of the rest, such as the mundane sufferings of those inside of the buildings.\textsuperscript{15}

The unique architecture of historic prisons is often considered an artifact in and of itself, admired in the same way that audiences look upon and appreciate objects. The prison building becomes an exhibit with which audiences interact by walking through it. The originality, authenticity, and sense of authority that historic prisons display is similar to historic house museums, acting simultaneously as historical places and historical artifacts. The prison building, then, is a site’s most valuable asset, with the majority of conservation and cleaning dedicated to it. Most historic prison museums are maintained as “stabilized ruins,” but the expense and time involved in restoration projects means they have to be part of long-term initiatives. For example, at the Ohio State Reformatory, restoration of the Warden’s Quarters, located inside of the prison, was an on-going project estimated to last over a year.\textsuperscript{16}

In order to draw audiences’ attentions to the relevance of architecture, sites and guides often interpret prison designs through the penal philosophies that influenced construction. The Ohio State Reformatory’s guided tour repeatedly referenced architect Levi Scofield’s

appropriation of France’s Château de Chambord into his design to inspire “reverence and hope.” Intended to mimic a rehabilitative ethos that prioritized reform, the prison’s architecture was considered a novel concept at the time of construction, representing Scofield’s aspiration to “put some humanity back into unlivable conditions.” A 1986 report from the Montana State Prison included elements of this approach, suggesting that the prison prioritized “rehabilitation of these offenders so they can return to society.” It argued that “most violators’ behavior can be changed and their attitudes can be altered so that they accept these established laws or rules of society.”

Unfortunately, expanding prison populations and the resulting overcrowding complicated implementation of penal reform philosophies, affecting security and daily life, and forcing change in the physical buildings over time. One tour guide maintained that, by the 1970s, “overcrowding ended the practicality” of solitary confinement and terminated the “rehabilitative ethos.” Of course, such changes in penal philosophy also coincided with the rise of mass incarceration in the United States, a detail the guide did not mention. As philosophies became increasingly punitive, prison architecture began to reflect a new ideology, one that continues to undergird corrections today. Comments made by audiences during carceral tours demonstrate that, in the public mind, prisons serve a singular purpose, one often echoed in official prison publications: the “purpose of the prison is the protection of society.”

Eastern State Penitentiary claims special historical significance as “the first true penitentiary,” as well as the “grandfather of modern prisons.” From its opening, audiences

---

praised it as an “engineering wonder,” eventually influencing the design of over three hundred prisons worldwide. Eastern State Penitentiary became famous in the early nineteenth century for its “modern technologies,” including indoor plumbing, running water, and basic heating, even before the White House. Such technological advancements made this institution the “first modern US building,” and the “largest, most ambitious prison in the world.” The museum interprets the prison’s architectural significance, as well as the penal philosophies that contributed to its design. Tour guides explain how the association between the prison and European castles was intentional: “the walls, gate, and torrents are all for show—the architect [John] Haviland designed the outside perimeter to look intimidating and act as a physical deterrent.” Interpretive commentary on the architectural features at Eastern includes vaulted ceilings, which mimic the “shape of a cathedral,” and skylights. Visitors learn that Haviland integrated ecclesiastical architectural features to inspire penitence, prayer, and re-acclimation. The guide pointed out that, ironically, the “prisoners could not appreciate these architectural features because they were in their cells.”

Across the board, architecture often determines the content and chronology of tours as much of what guides discuss derives from spaces. For example, narratives naturally transition as

---


tour groups move from administrative to residential areas. On one tour of the Ohio State
Reformatory, a guide quipped that visitors should “say ‘goodbye’ to the beauty” as they stepped
away from the grandeur of the warden’s home and into the sparse living quarters of unmarried,
live-in guards. Through the tour narrative, visitors encounter a sequence of stories directly
related to the space—administrative, residential, carceral—through which they travel.
“Organized walking” maneuvers carceral tourists through specific areas in ways that affect
messages that audiences receive.22

With large and sprawling buildings and campuses in poor or decaying condition that
makes them unsuitable or unsafe for visitors, historic prison museums relocate certain features to
more centralized spaces so that carceral tourists may see and interact with them. For example,
cells at Eastern State Penitentiary have been moved out of the East and West Cellblocks, and
only one of the original nine hundred cells is currently displayed on-site. Unlike traditional
museums that merely house and display objects, historic prison museums and their sitedness are
very much connected to the style and content of exhibitions. As one museum scholar observed,
the “preserved aftermath of these sites, where some original artifacts are maintained in situ, is
itself a tactical effect that requires a willful dedication to keeping otherwise changeable sites
static.”23

Guides at historic state prison museums often utilize different architectural features, like
doors and windows, to relate building histories. Some, like the Missouri State Penitentiary, use

---

22 Michael Welch, *Escape to Prison: Penal Tourism and the Pull of Punishment* (Berkeley, CA:
University of California Press, 2015), 5; Williams, *Memorial Museums*, 99; “History and
Libraries, and Cultural Institutions Educate and Civilize Society* (Lanham, MD: Rowman &
the opportunity to build a sense of suspense, casting the petite cell doors as “one of the mysteries” of the prison. Others relate how prisoners had to bow their heads when entering or exiting, equating the act with humility and penitence. Still others describe how the doors saved on construction costs or how smaller doors made movement more difficult, providing better security. Windows, too, draw interpretive attention. At the Missouri State Penitentiary, guides describe how, because there was no electricity or air conditioning, large windows installed to provide natural light also created cross breezes.\(^{24}\)

Original architecture has disappeared from many facilities that have undergone alterations or remodeling, opening other interpretive possibilities. At the West Virginia Penitentiary, the bullpen, or common space, sits on the site of the former deathhouse. At the Missouri State Penitentiary, site administrators want to determine whether or not a cemetery is located on the grounds. As Mark Schreiber indicated, “I believe there was and still is. I suspect those people are really buried down there.” Such unknown aspects make it challenging to interpret certain aspects of prison sites, and their histories, which often conflict with first-hand memories. In some cases, institutional memory does not match current architectural landscapes. One guide at the Old Idaho Penitentiary claimed that the current grounds “did not look this way” when the prison was operational. Similarly, a guide at the Old Joliet Prison insisted that the “grounds were immaculate when the prison was operational.” Again, current conditions of the buildings usually do not reflect the sites’ historical realities. Instead, interpreters help guests to imagine what the site would have looked like. Guests, then, often have illusory encounters at sites of carceral tourism, reinforcing perceptions of incarceration removed from time or space.

Other sites opt, when able, for interpretive signage, like at the Missouri State Penitentiary where site administrators “approved some storyboards to put down by the gas chamber; it’s going to show a map, so that those open spaces where industry buildings were torn down can be visualized. We want people to be able to stand down there and if there’s a large group, then they can look at the storyboards and see what was in the open area.”

Historic carceral tourism commonly addresses prison walls, infirmaries and hospitals, chapels, administrative offices, library and classrooms, alleys, and recreation yards, and how prison life played out in such spaces. Historic prison museums frequently discuss healthcare, as well as the prevalence and negative effects of diseases, including tuberculosis, pneumonia, and typhoid. Yet, there is almost no mention of psychiatric care or the intertwined histories of mental illness and incarceration, despite the fact that up to 50 percent of prisoners today have a “diagnosable mental illness.”

There is also interest in more macabre areas of prison campuses, including cemeteries and death row. Death row is often treated as a sacred space, meaning a sensitive place of reverence and contemplation, but not one that is immune to sensationalism, voyeurism, and commodification. Interpretation of death row tends to emphasize violence, either that committed

---


by an inmate or that inflicted upon them as their ultimate punishment. Carceral tourists understand prison visits, even to the most profound spaces, as consumable products. Tour guides walk visitors through the execution process, discussing specific individuals who died in prison either through hanging, electrocution, or injection. They frequently rely on in-depth descriptions, aided by visual images, so that visitors encounter detailed stories of death during their tour. In this way, the “privilege of spectacle” allows the audience to encounter “the antithesis of ‘the happiest place on earth.’” As part of the initial prison reform movement, Pennsylvania abolished public hangings in 1834. Instead, each county carried out “private hangings” inside of the jails until 1913 when the electric chair replaced the gallows as the preferred method of execution. From 1915 to 1962, 350 people were executed via electrocution in Pennsylvania. In 1990, legislation replaced electrocution with lethal injection as the state’s official mode of execution. After retiring the electric chair, it was given to the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.27

Maximum security spaces also receive special attention. Tour guides at West Virginia Penitentiary pointed out the “Animal Tier” and the segregation unit or “The Alamo,” sections of the prison that housed the most violent and dangerous inmates. As one guide described them, “the worst of the worst.” Conditions in these units were especially draconian: prisoners were only permitted a weekly shower, no visits, no writing, and access to only one book, the Bible.28

In the way they sensationalize such spaces, guides participate in the dehumanization of inmates and use titillation to encourage visitors to do so, as well.\textsuperscript{29}

Areas of punishment within prisons are especially attractive to tourists, and historic prison museums accommodate their interests by providing detailed accounts of discipline. Of course, they do this safely distanced from the reality of carceral punishment. Tour guides dedicate most of their time to, and visitors appear most fascinated by, the practice of solitary confinement which was especially severe and acutely taxing for inmates deprived of food, water, light, and hygiene products for ten to thirty days or sometimes much longer. Pushed to their physical limits, prisoners spent indefinite amounts of time in “the hole,” time that did not count towards their sentence. Use of solitary confinement, especially of “holes,” continued well into the mid-twentieth century.\textsuperscript{30} The Old Montana Prison utilized a “hole” until the 1960s, and West Virginia Penitentiary’s “hole” was operational until the 1970s. Throughout its history, the Old Idaho Penitentiary employed a “dungeon” and later “the cooler” and “Siberia”—or “true solitary”—which operated until the prison’s closure. Prisoners who spent time in Siberia were supposed to “reflect on their choices.” Although “some changed,” crediting solitary confinement as “the best thing to ever happen to them,” others “killed themselves” because of the experience. The Missouri State Penitentiary had a subterranean “dungeon” where prisoners were starved and tortured until the practice ended sometime between 1907 and 1917. Various historic prisons utilized “hotboxes” or “bug rooms,” where prisoners faced harsh psychological and physical

\textsuperscript{29}Guided Tour, Old Idaho Penitentiary, September 7, 2018; Self-Guided Tour, Eastern State Penitentiary, January 27, 2019; Guided Tour, West Virginia Penitentiary, July 27, 2018.
\textsuperscript{30} Brown, \textit{Culture of Punishment}, 18; “Hands on History Tour” of the Punishment Cells, Eastern State Penitentiary, January 27, 2019; Guided Tour, Old Idaho Penitentiary, September 6, 2018; Guided Tour, Old Idaho Penitentiary, September 7, 2018; Guided Tour, West Virginia Penitentiary, July 27, 2018; “History and Hollywood Tour,” Ohio State Reformatory, July 20, 2018. These spaces were also referred to as “black out cells” or “punishment cells.”
treatments, including sensory deprivation, “Eight by Eight” prostration, strait jackets, iron gags, and whippings. Historic carceral tourism explores these practices in-depth, characterizing them as “creative punishments for people who didn’t or couldn’t follow the rules.” But by placing them in a distant past, historic prison museums minimize continued use of solitary confinement, if in alternative forms. For example, although the Ohio State Reformatory’s solitary remained functional until its decommissioning in 1990, the museum’s current interpretation makes no mention of claims by the American Civil Liberties Union of Ohio that solitary confinement is still regularly practiced in the state’s prisons.31

Popular sites of punishment also include execution chambers where prisoners died via hanging, gas, or electric chairs. Staff at the West Virginia Penitentiary “affectionately” refer to the museum’s electric chair, used to kill nine people between 1951 and 1959, as “Old Sparkey.” Visitors can also remember “Old Sparkey” through consumption, as its likeness appears on t-shirts, mugs, and other museum gift shop items.32 Visualizations of execution violence are popular with guests. For several years, West Virginia Penitentiary performed a “mock hanging” with a human dummy but ended the faux executions around 2013 because “the dummy quit working.” Other historic prison museums, like the Old Idaho Penitentiary, feature indoor and outdoor gallows. Public hangings occurred throughout Missouri until 1936, until the introduction of the cyanide gas chamber. The Missouri State Penitentiary then installed one for its executions.

Visitors tour the chamber, and guides encourage them to sit in the chairs where thirty-nine executions took place.33

Historic carceral tourists generally approach spaces of punishment with great irreverence, consuming them more as entertainment than actual spaces of death. The interpretive approach of most historic prison museums, including the language and interpretive framing used to discuss punishment and execution, reinforces an “us vs. them” mentality that inspires visitors to “gaze” upon the punishment of others. That mindset is not challenged when tourists have the opportunity to pretend to experience punishment. Historic prison museums reinforce ambivalent or punitive public mentalities that fail to recognize or consider what punishment meant historically or continues to mean while allowing visitors to claim a false moral authority for “having been there.”

Cellblocks are arguably the most sought-after destinations on any prison tour. Generally large in size and severe looking, prison cellblocks satisfy visitors’ desire for an “authentic” and recognizable prison experience. They occupy a unique intersection of architecture and lived experience, offering opportunities for textured interpretation. Typically composed of steel, brick, metal, and stone, cellblocks are often stacked several stories high, accessed by stairs and narrow walkways. Visitors peer directly into cramped quarters because the barred doors offer no privacy or solitude. Conversely, tours often allow simulations of confinement for visitors in which they

33 Kathy Deinhardt Hill, *Hanged: A History of Idaho’s Executions Book* (McCall, ID: Big Mallard Books, 2010); Guided Tour, Missouri State Penitentiary, August 25, 2018; Guided Tour, West Virginia Penitentiary, July 26, 2018; Guided Tour, Missouri State Penitentiary, August 25, 2018; Brown, *Culture of Punishment*, 16. Old Idaho counts 126 documented deaths, including ten prisoners executed via hanging. Guided Tour, Old Idaho Penitentiary, September 6, 2018. Due to civil rights victories in the mid-1960s, the death penalty was abandoned, and executions were commuted to life sentences without parole, although the Supreme Court reversed that decision in 1976.
are temporarily locked behind bars. This kind of “authentic” experience enables tourists to feel they have occupied the inmate point of view. In reality, both its brevity and the assurance of its impermanence creates greater distance for the visitors. Enormous in size, and mind-blowingly foreign to visitors unaccustomed to such conditions, cellblocks are one of—if not the most—popular aspects of historic carceral tourism (see Images 2, 4, 5, and 8 in Appendix B).

Visitors also find cellblocks architecturally fascinating and a recognizable symbol of carceral life. They are also deeply problematic in terms of historic interpretation. Tour guides utilize cellblocks to paint grim pictures of prison life. Inmates often endured overcrowding, extreme elements, such as sub-zero or sweltering temperatures, and issues with guards. Almost every historic prison experienced overcrowding, which ranged from a sporadic to a chronic institutional affliction. When Mark Schreiber began working at the Missouri State Penitentiary in 1968, he described the prison as “terribly overcrowded” with five prisoners sharing one cell. A guide at the Missouri State Penitentiary claimed that “most of the life of the prison was spent overcrowded and understaffed.” At the West Virginia Penitentiary, broken windows resulted in snow drifting into cells during the winter, and there was no air-conditioning to alleviate high temperatures in the summer, which often reached 140 degrees. The lack of air conditioning and limited airflow led to the deaths of several prisoners from heat stroke. Eastern State Penitentiary acknowledges similarly extreme “weather conditions” inside of the cellblocks which could feel either “like a freezer or a brick oven.” Prisoners chronically suffered from insufficient lighting and sewage disposal, as well as vermin infestations, resulting in living conditions that one guide described as “harsh and cruel.” Plumbing frequently backed-up and caused sewage to seep into
cells.\textsuperscript{34} Carceral tourists react strongly to these stories of abuses, although not always empathetically. The general disdain and contempt for prisoners often enables justifications for such conditions—or at least, their acceptability.

Cellblocks constitute an attractive feature of historic carceral tourism because in many ways they are seen as artifacts, remnants of the prison’s distant history. At the same time, any discussion of human rights violations in these spaces remains muted. In reality, early cells were not equipped with plumbing or electricity, and residents in the original cellblocks typically used “honey buckets” to collect waste. Such basic amenities did not arrive until approximately the 1920s, and sometimes well beyond. The cellblock at Joliet Prison did not have running water until 1956. States continued to use these archaic facilities, even when lacking plumbing or electricity, well into the twentieth century. The Old Idaho Penitentiary’s 1911 cellhouse remained active until 1968; over the next five years, if Maximum Security was full at the new prison, inmates occasionally lived there. Well into the 1970s, prisoners at the Old Idaho Penitentiary still received straw mattresses and wool blankets. Residents at the West Virginia Penitentiary did not have contact visitation as late as the 1980s. Interpretation at historic state prison museums takes advantage of such human rights violations in order to shock, awe, and disgust visitors. Tour guides and materials explain how residents in the mid-to-late twentieth century experienced conditions equal to or only slightly better than those of the nineteenth century. Few tour guides, however, use the opportunity to discuss ongoing inadequacies of prison conditions today. Eastern State Penitentiary is a notable exception. One tour guide

\textsuperscript{34} Guided Tour, Missouri State Penitentiary, August 25, 2018; Guided Tour, West Virginia Penitentiary, July 26, 2018; Guided Tour, West Virginia Penitentiary, July 27, 2018; Schreiber interview; Guided Tour, Eastern State Penitentiary, January 26, 2019; Guided Tour, Eastern State Penitentiary, January 27, 2019.
informed audiences that the historic prison’s 8’x12’ cells are larger than those of contemporary prisons, which house more people.35

Yet, historic state prison museums generally avoid such conversations. Acknowledging that prisoners experienced hard living and working conditions does not seem to convince people of the need to rectify human rights abuses.36 One tour participant at the Old Joliet Prison commented that contemporary facilities should revert back to the honey bucket system as a deterrent. Some visitors, responding to media representations of contemporary prison conditions as “cushy,” find justification in their beliefs when taught by tour guides that prisoners of the past had fewer choices regarding schedules, jobs, and meals.

Viewed as authorities on prisons’ histories, historic interpreters’ interaction with the public is paramount in countering dangerous, biased, and misinformed understandings of incarceration. Prison tourism scholars determined that tour guides “play a key role in facilitating the heritage experience, acting as mediators of knowledge that are essential for interpreting the tourist environment in a unique and educational way.” Carceral tourists’ interactions with tour guides, specifically, help them to “negotiate meaning and construct reality” at historic prison museums. Consequently, museum managers and interpreters have a responsibility to educate and

35 Guided Tour, Joliet Prison Museum, September 17, 2018; Guided Tour, Old Idaho Penitentiary, September 6, 2018; Guided Tour, Old Idaho Penitentiary, September 7; Guided Tour, West Virginia Penitentiary, July 26, 2018; Guided Tour, Eastern State Penitentiary, January 27, 2019; Guided Tour, Eastern State Penitentiary, January 28, 2019. The popularity of cellblocks mean that they are high traffic areas in historic prison museums, and experience great public exposure. There are ongoing concerns regarding the interpretation of cellblocks in terms of historic preservation/restoration; Volunteer, interview by author, Mansfield, OH, July 20, 2018.
not merely entertain audiences, especially because such visits are the closest that many tourists come to carceral spaces and issues.37

The starkness of prison spaces, then, is often startling for visitors. Cellblocks are such prison-specific spaces that most carceral tourists struggle to find them relatable. Still, visitors seemingly enjoy engaging in carceral fantasy or at least imaging what it would be like for other people not themselves. This is especially evident in interactive moments in carceral tours when participants are invited to temporarily experience some of the conditions of isolation, discomfort, and distress that prisoners regularly faced. Historic carceral tourism often includes brief reenactments of confinement when visitors are temporarily locked behind bars in order to simulate carceral living conditions.38 The individual experience may not meet the educational objective. Carceral tourists often equate the temporariness of their “confinement” with actual, authentic feelings of incarceration. Or, if they do take something aware from the experience, visitors who participate often express raw emotions rather than meaningful and thoughtful engagement with the issues at hand.

Such sensory voyeurism is common among historic prison museums. In one of the Missouri State Penitentiary’s cellblocks, lights are turned off to simulate nineteenth-century conditions, and tourists are invited to “step back in time to 1868.” What is not simulated are the noises, smells, and sights that permeated cellhouses when they were in use, given the impossibility of re-peopling empty cells or recreating conditions when the facility was

37 Ferguson, Piché, Walby, “Bridging or Fostering Social Distance?” 363.
38 “History and Hollywood Tour,” Ohio State Reformatory, July 20, 2018; Guided Tour, West Virginia Penitentiary, July 27, 2018; Guided Tour, Old Idaho Penitentiary, September 6, 2018; Guided Tour, Joliet Prison Museum, September 17, 2018. In their own findings, Ferguson, Piché, and Walby found that many “penal spectators praised the conditions of confinement and punishment presented as bygones”; Ferguson, Piché, Walby, “Bridging or Fostering Social Distance?” 357-74.
functional. This phenomenon is similar to historic house museums, which, after being emptied of “the people who animated them in the first place . . . tend to become mausoleums—meaningful in their permanence, but petrified and lifeless in their presentation.” In this way, empty spaces reinforce historicized perceptions of incarceration for guests. And in the “dungeon” at the Missouri State Penitentiary, guides usher willing visitors into the cells and turn off the lights in order to simulate the complete and extended darkness that prisoners in solitary confinement experienced. The experience is more humorous than somber for many guests who often laugh, giggle, or joke while standing in the same spot where numerous people perished. In such simulations, “strangers collectively bond around the replication of the infliction of pain and death,” as Michelle Brown put it, without acknowledging the physical, mental, and emotional reality of that pain. At their best, these types of experiences provide visitors a chance to engage in a tactile, physical way. At their worst, they cheapen and demean the severity of the prisoner experience.

Although historic carceral tourism generally focuses on daily prison life, sensational events such as riots and escapes draw the most attention. Sean Kelley at Eastern State Penitentiary noted that questions about escapes are the number one inquiry from visitors. At the West Virginia Penitentiary, the only maximum-security facility in the state, more than 500 escapes occurred over its 129 years of operation. Similarly, there were more than 500 escape attempts from the Old Idaho Penitentiary throughout its operation, with 90 successes. Yet, only a fraction of inmates escaped or attempted to do so, so the situations at West Virginia Penitentiary

---

and Old Idaho Penitentiary were atypical experiences. Uprisings and riots, many of which occurred during the 1950s and 1970s, provide another interpretive focus at historic state prison museums. Many guides describe the number of participants and general causes for their resentment or discontent. Seldom do historic prison museums contextualize such disturbances in the prison reform movements of the late twentieth century or the push for prisoners’ rights. Carceral tourists receive limited information, hindering understandings of the realities of prison conditions, reform, and growth of the carceral state.40

Although escape attempts, riots, and executions offer sensational and exceptional examples of prison history, they do not reflect daily, lived experiences of average prisoners. Explanations involving the everyday operation of the prison usually focuses on collective processes and protocols, further deemphasizing prisoners’ individualism. For instance, a few sites explain the intake process to visitors, who remain largely unfamiliar with prison operations and procedures. At the Old Idaho Penitentiary, new inmates met with the Warden, had their sentences read, were showered and deloused, reviewed schedules, and underwent interviews. Daily routine, based upon structure and repetition, defined incarcerations. At 7:30 AM, prisoners made their beds and walked silently to the dining hall for breakfast. They then worked, returned for lunch, and after 2:00 PM received time for recreation. Leisure included playing sports, card

---

40 Jonathan D. Clemins, *Images of America: West Virginia Penitentiary* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2010); Amber Beierle, Ashley Phillips, Hanako Wakatsuki, *Images of America: Old Idaho Penitentiary* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2014); Ferguson, Piché, Walby, “Bridging or Fostering Social Distance?” 357-74; Guided Tour, Eastern State Penitentiary, January 26, 2019; Guided Tour, West Virginia Penitentiary, July 26, 2018; Guided Tour, West Virginia Penitentiary, July 27, 2018; Guided Tour, Old Idaho Penitentiary, September 6, 2018; Brain interview. The Old Montana Prison is the only historic prison museum that did not interpret escape attempts, including the number or dates of various attempts, the rate of success, or retrieval. However, the prison did interpret other events, like insurrections and executions; Self-Guided Tour, Old Montana Prison, September 12, 2018.
games, or making hobby crafts. Dinner took place at 5:00 PM, after which prisoners returned to their cells for the night. Very rarely do guides provide individual perspectives or experiences to humanize these otherwise authoritative descriptions, framed by a correctional point of view. Visitors learn about daily life within prisons from the perspective of guards, wardens, and staff, rather than from the points of view of those who were actually incarcerated. From an operational standpoint, organizing and mobilizing large groups of inmates proved not only problematic, but also dangerous. Feeding and bathing inmate populations presented logistical issues, so residents generally washed only once per week in single-file showers known as “car washes,” “gang showers,” or under a line of spigots. Order pervaded everything that prisoners did, even bathing. But the psychological, emotional, and mental toll that this kind of procedure had on incarcerated people is absent. Historic state prison museums may address other aspects of inmates’ lived experiences, such as decorating cells, creation and exchange of contraband and weapons, and the quality of the food, but usually in generalized and abstract terms.\footnote{Tour, West Virginia Penitentiary, July 27, 2018; Guided Tour, Old Idaho Penitentiary, September 6, 2018; Guided Tour, Old Idaho Penitentiary, September 7, 2018; Guided Tour, Eastern State Penitentiary, January 27, 2019; “History and Hollywood Tour,” Ohio State Reformatory, July 20, 2018; Guided Tour, West Virginia Penitentiary, July 27, 2018.}

Inmate labor is another prominent theme in historic prison tours because convict labor often built and sustained prisons. One guide explained that “the whole place” relied on prisoner labor from the beginning. Prisoners quarried rock in order to construct their spaces of confinement, and worked in prison industries, as well as on the prison farm in order to feed the incarcerated population. The Ohio State Reformatory exploited prison labor to build the East Cellblock, completed in 1910. The Old Montana Prison utilized convict labor to construct the entire facility, as did the Old Idaho Penitentiary and the West Virginia Penitentiary.
Administrators justified prison labor through the penal philosophies that governed the prisons and the rhetoric of residents’ rehabilitations. One guide at the Missouri State Penitentiary frankly acknowledged that adoption of the Auburn System allowed administrators to work prisoners like “slaves” because “the money had to flow.”

Many prisons, including the Missouri State Penitentiary, implemented a “lease system” that allowed private individuals to operate the prison via a contract with the state, with guards considered “labor overseers.” Because the Missouri State Penitentiary was understaffed, prisoners filled certain administrative positions, including clerical roles, key makers, and schedulers. Convict lease systems exploited inmates and their health to minimize costs and maximize profits. For instance, the West Virginia Penitentiary “made money for the state; over $100,000 per year in the West Virginia budget.” Prisons often put residents to work in prison industries, factories, and agriculture, primarily to help sustain the prison and then to generate additional profits. Labor at the Eastern State Penitentiary was mandatory. Prisons assigned inmates a trade, often based on skill set or abilities. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries changing labor laws affected the eligibility of certain populations to work, as well as the items they were permitted to make. Although prison labor at the Old Joliet Prison began with construction of the facility, by the 1990s, inmate labor encompassed the physically less onerous tasks of laundry and data entry.\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{42} Guided Tour, Old Idaho Penitentiary, September 7, 2018; Self-Guided Tour, Old Montana Prison, September 12, 2018; Guided Tour, West Virginia Penitentiary, July 26, 2018; Guided Tour, West Virginia Penitentiary, July 27, 2018; Guided Tour, Old Idaho Penitentiary, September 6, 2018; “History and Hollywood Tour,” Ohio State Reformatory, July 20, 2018; “Behind the Bars Tour,” Ohio State Reformatory, July 21, 2018; Guided Tour, Missouri State Penitentiary, August 25, 2018.

\textsuperscript{43} Guided Tour, Eastern State Penitentiary, January 26, 2019; Guided Tour, Eastern State Penitentiary, January 27, 2019; Guided Tour, Joliet Prison Museum, September 17, 2018; Jones and Peerbolte interview; Self-Guided Tour, Old Montana Prison, September 12, 2018; Guided
Today, prison labor remains a central aspect of carceral life, one that interpreters could easily and effectively incorporate into their narratives. Historic carceral interpretation could also very easily engage with themes of gender, race, and economics because prison labor was, and continues to be, a prominent aspect of carceral life. Finally, narratives of modern prison labor could incorporate the impact that the system has on the job prospects, as well as the wages of those living in nearby communities.44

**Interpretive Challenges**

Prisons are ecosystems, with complementary and competing entities that struggle to survive and, in the process, contribute to a larger environment. While most prisoners are likely to be labeled “mainline” or “general population,” there are various types of prisoner experiences. When sites attempt to present an “inmate perspective,” visitors often do not understand that not all prisoners shared all experiences. Variables such as age, the nature of their crimes, their sexual orientations and preferences, and their abilities to self-defend influenced what the incarcerated underwent. Interpretation at historic state prison museums constantly oversimplifies or undermines the intersectionality of prison identity.

Comprehensive segregation of prison populations according to the severity of their crimes did not occur until the latter part of the twentieth century. In the 1970s, West Virginia placed special interest prisoners, such as those convicted of sexual offenses, crimes against women or children, child molesters, and snitches, in the penitentiary’s restricted block, also

---

known as “R Block,” and protective custody, referred to as “Rat Row.” Similarly, protective custody did not appear at Missouri State Penitentiary until the 1980s, and the facility did not make accommodations for “special needs” prisoners until the late 1980s and early 1990s. Although prisons segregated some residents for their own protection or for the protection of others, there were also honor-housing units for trustees, or prisoners who served as intermediaries between the guards and the general inmate population. Segregation at the Old Idaho Penitentiary included spaces for homosexuals, the elderly, and those accused of sex crimes. West Virginia Penitentiary contained an “Old Man’s Colony,” a collective of elderly prisoners from seventy-five to ninety-two years old who “couldn’t protect themselves” against younger inmates.45

The reality of historical segregation at functional prisons translated into interpretive emphases at historic prison museums that stereotyped the inmate as a one-dimensional entity, typically young, male, and violent. The absence of other imprisoned voices within carceral interpretation ignores the complexities of carceral demographics and experiences. This points to a critical omission in the interpretation at historic state prison museums: the dehumanization of carceral subjects, past and present. The definition of a prisoner is elusive. Does it pertain to an inherently immoral person, a permanent personality trait, a criminal mindset, or a temporary status? Does this definition change over time, or is it fixed? One of the necessary, and often overlooked, aspects of the carceral experience is the understanding of who occupied the prison

cell and why, as well as how their infraction reflected the moral or legal realities of their time.\textsuperscript{46} Few historic prison museums address the life of prisoners before or after their incarcerations, consequently limiting their identities solely to that of prisoner.\textsuperscript{47} This is partly due to a lack of information. One guide at Eastern State Penitentiary explained that prison officials collected data “regarding who came back, but not about what people did after their time at Eastern State,” such as employment, incarceration in other states, or the efficiency of the prison’s penal philosophy. Clarifying this element within tours is a critical step in explaining the histories of decommissioned prisons, and yet is one of the most neglected components of historic carceral tourism.

Historic state prison museums rarely discuss how punishment worked in different historical periods. Eastern State Penitentiary is one of the few sites of historical carceral tourism that addresses the greater history of punishment. It differs in its interpretive approach, in that it also includes the history of prison reform, which is deeply intertwined with carceral histories in Pennsylvania. Eastern State Penitentiary addresses the prison’s transition from the Pennsylvania System, or “separate system,” to the congregate system. Additionally, guides suggest that “if you go back in time,” such as to the colonial period, punishment did not revolve around incarceration but rather physical and public forms of discipline.\textsuperscript{48}

Historic prison museums also fail to address changing understandings of criminality. When the Ohio State Reformatory initially opened, the facility received first-time juvenile wrongdoers for nonviolent crimes. As an institution founded on the notion of reform and spiritual life, a reform ethos, the Ohio State Reformatory departed from the punitive mentality that originated at Eastern State Penitentiary. Similarly, during early decades at Eastern State Penitentiary, most prisoners were “mild” criminals, having committed theft, arson, larceny, and forgery. For instance, beginning in the 1920s, second-degree murderers arrived in higher numbers. In the site’s early history, sentences ranged between two and eight years, but there were no life sentences. The expectation was that prisoners would be reformed and released within two to three years. According to the tour guide, the “administration wanted prisoners to succeed.” It was only later in the twentieth century that Eastern State housed more severe and violent criminals with longer sentences. Other historic state prison museums contained capital offenders from the beginning. West Virginia Penitentiary housed federal prisoners alongside those from the state. All residents at Old Joliet Prison were capital criminals, many of whom served life sentences.\footnote{Guided Tour, Eastern State Penitentiary, January 26, 2019; Guided Tour, Eastern State Penitentiary, January 27, 2019; Guided Tour, Eastern State Penitentiary, January 28, 2019.}

Public perceptions seem to be that incarceration has historically been a male experience. Several historic state prison museums complicate this assumption by including, or at least mentioning, female inmates. The tour guide at the West Virginia Penitentiary informed visitors that women resided in the prison until 1947, when they relocated to a new facility. On another
tour, audiences learn that the West Virginia Penitentiary never executed a woman, although specifics on female experiences with prison labor and punishment are not fully explored. The Old Montana Prison exhibits a few prisoner intake cards, including three to four women, although contextualization of their experiences and crimes is absent. Female prisoners are more often discussed in the contexts of notable figures. At the West Virginia Penitentiary, the guide revealed that Charles Manson’s mother was incarcerated on site, and that “Charlie lived around here when he was young.” The Missouri State Penitentiary highlights a female prisoner who kidnapped and murdered a small child in the 1950s. She was the only woman executed in the prison’s death chamber.\textsuperscript{50}

Female imprisonment, while not widespread, did occur early in the history of most historic prisons. Carceral tourists learn of the first woman sentenced to the Missouri State Penitentiary in 1839, although two females sentenced before her had been pardoned. The guide explained that women mixed with men until 1900 when they moved to segregated residential housing. On one specialty tour, visitors explored the women’s cellblock, active between 1905 and 1926. Similarly, the Old Joliet Prison incarcerated women before the late 1800s. The Old Idaho Penitentiary actively discusses female residents and the prison’s second building, constructed to house them, that mimicked the architectural design of the original structure. Because women resided there until 1959, the Old Montana Prison is one of the few historic prison museums that has extant women’s quarters on site. Officials removed female prisoners

\textsuperscript{50} Guided Tour, West Virginia Penitentiary, July 26, 2018; Guided Tour, West Virginia Penitentiary, July 27, 2018; Guided Tour, Eastern State Penitentiary, January 26, 2019; Hands on History Tour of the Hospital Wing, Eastern State Penitentiary, January 27, 2019; Self-Guided Tour, Old Montana Prison, September 12, 2018; Schreiber interview.
due to concerns regarding their health and medical treatment options, as well as to prevent their intermixing with men.\textsuperscript{51}

Histories of female prisoners are popular with visiting tourists. Eastern State Penitentiary contained both men and women from the beginning, until female prisoners relocated in 1923 to a newly opened women’s prison. Display panels in Cellblock #7 explore how gendered crimes shaped carceral experiences, displaying those for which women were convicted such as prostitution and abortion, and how convictions changed over time. Women’s intakes cards, which provided background and personal information on each prisoner, are displayed, including that of Frieda Frosta, the prison’s last female inmate. Still, the daily life of women at Eastern State Penitentiary is generally unknown. They were typically located in Cellblock #7 or Cellblock #2, under the charge of a matron, who supervised their meals, treatment, and work. Approximately twenty-four women gave birth at Eastern State Penitentiary. Pregnant women were shown some leniency. For example, they were not required to follow the prison’s “no talking” rule, which was strictly applied to male inmates. But the sentences of expectant mothers were not shortened. Less is known about other aspects of their prison experiences, and interpreters make minimal efforts to fill these voids. The guide speculated that they might have sewn, because that is what female prisoners did in the Walnut Street Jail.\textsuperscript{52}


Only a few historic prison museums address the experiences of juvenile prisoners and how age influenced carceral experiences. The Old Idaho Penitentiary incorporates prisoner youth into its interpretation, profiling James Oscar Baker, the prison’s youngest inmate at ten years old who served an eight-month sentence in 1892 by living in the warden’s home. Visitors also learn of the prison’s second youngest inmate, Jimmy, an eleven-year-old boy who murdered his mother and served nine years in the penitentiary. Supposedly, Jimmy and Oscar rehabilitated during their tenures at the prison, with guides explaining that “prison was an improvement” in their lives. Aside from mentioning a “fifteen-year-old murderess” who resided in the prison, the Old Montana Prison does not discuss juvenile prisoners, only briefly alluding to them in a publication that explained how the prison received felons “from age sixteen and up.” Eastern State Penitentiary’s Cellblock #7 displays panels about how age affected the carceral experience, highlighting twelve child prisoners. The prison was “designed as an adult prison, but children were here.” The prison’s youngest prisoner was Mary Ash, an eleven-year old girl convicted of arson in 1876. She struggled living in the adult facility, dying two years later from tuberculosis.

The lives and stories of individual, everyday prisoners are most informative about the historic experiences of inmates, but museums capitalize on interest in their more famous occupants. Bank robbers such as Willie Sutton and Al Capone feature prominently in tours at Eastern State Penitentiary. Other historic prison museums feature bank robbers, including the Old Joliet Prison where “Baby Face” Nelson escaped. At the Missouri State Penitentiary,

---

carceral tourists stop to examine the cell of James Earl Ray, who escaped and then assassinated Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Identified as Old Idaho Penitentiary’s most famous inmate, Harry Orchard had assassinated the Governor of Idaho. The Old Joliet Prison boasts of inhabitants John Wayne Gacy and Richard Speck. Aside from notorious criminals, historic prison museums also feature athletes, artists, and musicians. Harry Snodgrass, a piano player known as the “King of the Ivories,” features in the Missouri State Penitentiary guided tour, as does boxer Sonny Liston. An emphasis on famous personalities leverages audience interest and adds to sensationalist portrayals of prison life.

Histories of sex, sexuality, and sexual violence are implicit in many of the current narratives at historic prison museums. Typically framed as humorous, unfortunate, or repugnant characteristics of prison life, these themes have yet to be fully integrated into interpretations. A guided tour of the West Virginia Penitentiary included a stop at a “glory hole” between two cells, briefly mentioning mutual sexual activities. The topic quickly became a subject of humor or disgust among the audience, with no further substantive conversation. Sexual assault of and by men and women took place at many historic prisons, including the Missouri State Penitentiary and the Old Idaho Penitentiary. Carceral tourism at the Old Idaho Penitentiary does bring up issues of sexual assault, although contextualizes it with one particular case at the beginning of the twentieth century. The Missouri State Penitentiary’s interpretation does not address the topic of sexual violence “on a regular basis,” preferring to “promote the history and not all the darkness.” Tours guides detailed how the arrival of a “good looking 18 or 19-year-old kid”

---

prompted older prisoners to say, “I want him in my cell.” Another guide claimed that some prisoners experienced the “best sex of their lives as prison prostitutes.” Research into carceral sexual practices remains underdeveloped, which means that discussions of it are uninformed, full of mischaracterization, and often tasteless. Again, Eastern State Penitentiary proves somewhat of an exception to this, as the site’s interpretation explains that different understandings of sexuality existed in the past, including predatory practices. Building upon the moral authority that visitors develop from their distance from carceral experiences, topics of sexuality situate audiences as judges as they associate the sexuality or sexual experiences of inmates with deviancy, criminality, and antisocial behavior.57

Historic state prison museums’ emphases on violence further sensationalizes carceral experiences and reinforce otherness between museum audiences and incarcerated peoples. Many commonly refer to themselves as “one of the US’s hardest prisons,” with “one of the most violent yards in the country” or as the “bloodiest 47 acres in America.” Historic carceral tourism often features narratives of extreme violence, including assault, murder, and suicide. Several sites claim the distinction of being the “toughest” or “most vicious” prison in the country, revealing an important interpretive theme premised on an imagined audience. Many historic prison museums fortify their reputations with staggering statistics, such as the approximately one

56 Brain interview; Guided Tour, Missouri State Penitentiary, August 25, 2018; Guided Tour, Old Idaho Penitentiary, September 7, 2018; Guided Tour, West Virginia Penitentiary, July 27, 2018; Hands on History Tour of the Punishment Cells, Eastern State Penitentiary, January 27, 2019; Guided Tour, Missouri State Penitentiary, August 25, 2018; Sanford and Gillespie interview.
thousand documented deaths at both the Missouri State Penitentiary and the West Virginia Penitentiary.\textsuperscript{58}

Guided tours usually conclude with discussions about prison decommissionings which occurred between the 1970s and the 2010s. By that time, the structures of historic prisons usually had deteriorated to a point where they amounted to “cruel and unusual” conditions and resulted in human rights violations. For example, prisoners wrote letters regarding the living conditions at the West Virginia Penitentiary, resulting in the 1986 case \textit{Crain v. Bordenkircher} (342 S.E.2d 422). Inmate complaints pertained to rats, cockroaches, exposed wires, toilets and sinks that were both old and ineffective, and the size of the cells, which the court ruled met the threshold of “cruel and unusual” punishment. Antiquated facilities also caused security issues. Lawsuits and investigations led to prison closures and construction of new, modern facilities. One guide characterized how the prison’s decommissioning was “largely the result of pressures because the institution faced circumstances it wasn’t designed to take.”\textsuperscript{59}

Some historic prisons are relatively close to the maximum-security facilities that prompted their decommissionings. Such proximity makes it especially easy, then, for historic state prison museums to address the contemporary carceral state. Museums provide a physical link between the carceral past and present. The Mansfield Correctional Institution and the Richland Correctional Institution sit adjacent to the Ohio State Reformatory’s property, located on the historic prison yard. Mansfield Correctional Institution actually replaced the Ohio State

\begin{footnotes}
\end{footnotes}
Reformatory as a maximum-security prison. However, the only mention of both facilities on the guided tour occurred when the guide cautioned visitors not to take photographs out of the back window, as it is a federal offense to photograph a functioning prison.60

When not adjacent to museums, such is the case at the Ohio State Reformatory, new facilities are relatively near. In 2002, prisoners at the Old Joliet Prison relocated to the Stateville Correctional Center, a maximum-security prison built in 1925, located approximately six miles away. The Jefferson City Correctional Center, a “mixed custody” prison that houses medium to maximum-security level inmates, replaced the Missouri State Penitentiary in 2004 and is located over eight miles away. After the Old Idaho Penitentiary closed, the Idaho State Correctional Institution opened in 1973 as a medium-security men’s prison approximately fifteen miles away. The new Montana State Prison opened in 1977 over three miles outside of Deer Lodge and accommodates all custody levels. In Iowa, the state’s department of corrections moved to a state-of-the-art facility a mile and a half from the original prison. In 1970, most prisoners at Eastern State Penitentiary relocated to Graterford State Correctional Institution, a maximum-security facility opened in 1929 and located approximately twenty-five miles from Philadelphia. Although distanced from the historic prison sites, many newer facilities stayed in the same area because local communities rely on carceral economies. Rebecca Bowker of Iowa’s Department of Corrections said that the people of Fort Madison, site of the historic and current penitentiary, “know prison.”61

Yet, dialogue is limited between historic prison museums and more contemporary functioning prisons. Historic prison museums simply do not take advantage of the comparative opportunities because administrators do not consider such connections necessary or relevant; they may even poise problems in interpretation to the extent that they call attention to less distant, in both the temporal and the geographic sense, carceral realities. But historic prisons affected the design, purpose, and operations of newer facilities in numerous ways. For instance, current prisons are only two stories, or tiers tall, instead of four, in order to prevent suicide attempts. Also notably absent from tour discussions are policies such as the War on Drugs and “tough on crime” legislation that could help explain why carceral populations increased, and why historic prisons could not accommodate larger populations. Again, only Eastern State Penitentiary’s interpretation tackles this history head on, acknowledging that the “population of prisons rose after the War on Drugs,” and that the 1980s and 1990s witnessed the increase in the rate of incarceration due to nonviolent drug crimes. Such interpretive absences arguably truncate histories of imprisonment, failing to demonstrate incarceration continuities in newer facilities.62

The failure of historic carceral tourism to facilitate encounters that “move from memory to action” reflects one of the greatest shortcomings of former prison museums. Across the Museum managers at the Missouri State Penitentiary claimed that the disengagement is purposeful: “Since we’re an inactive prison, we don’t get into those issues because it doesn’t really affect us.” Guided tours at the Ohio State Reformatory include almost no contemporary connections, except the personal points of view offered by staff and volunteers who were formerly inmates. One guide at the West Virginia Penitentiary commented on the continued

presence of the Aryan Brotherhood in the contemporary prison system, but this was the only reference to current carceral conditions. Moreover, discussions of prison labor, carceral demographics, changing penal philosophies, practices of punishment, and legislative policies are widely left unaddressed.  

For example, the Old Montana Prison does not interpret the penal philosophy that created or guided the prison at all. Changing penal philosophies are merely understood as a form of “penal progressivism” that naturally evolves towards its inevitable and perfect end.

The refusal to tackle contemporary issues is antithetical to current public history best practices. Even historic house museums and some former plantations, sites that share commonalities with historic state prison museums, have become “recommitted to the project of excavating their own histories, digging deeper to find relevance with contemporary audiences and identifying new methods for engagement along the way.” This should prompt sites of historic carceral tourism to reflect, and reconsider what the site’s core values are, and should be.

Of all the sites in this study, only Eastern State Penitentiary connects the history of the site with contemporary incarceration, especially the “challenges that people who are incarcerated face today.” Interpreters address contemporary prison industries as well as how prisons “brand” prisoners in terms of housing, education, government support, and financial stability. According to one guide, 45 percent of those freed from incarceration “will go back” to prison and thus “the branding continues.” Additionally, Eastern State Penitentiary’s guided tours address current rates of incarceration, detailing its rise from the 1970s to today. According to tour guides, incarcerated populations have risen 600 percent in the United States since the penitentiary’s early years, with

---

63 Lopez, “Introduction,” 12; Brown, *Culture of Punishment,* 92; Sanford and Gillespie interview; Self-Guided Tour, Old Montana Prison, September 12, 2018.

almost 2.2 million people behind bars as of 2019. The purpose of the tour and the site’s exhibit aims to explore why the United States has the highest rates of incarceration in the world, asking visitors to consider whether this is “something to be proud of or something to change.”

Other historic prison museums have begun to adapt Eastern State Penitentiary’s model of contemporary engagement. Many scholars believe that carceral tourism has distorted prison histories and distracted tourists from the acute and ongoing suffering that incarcerated peoples experience. Allen Mendenhall observed that interpretation at historic prison museums “dehumanizes prisoners and desensitizes tourists. It does not offer the story of prisoners, victims, or families of prisoners and victims—only the storyless thrill of horror-themed spectacle.” Jacey Brain, an interpretive specialist at Eastern State Penitentiary, hoped that historic prison museums could move beyond such empty interpretations: “As an educational and state agency, our goal is going to be to inform and educate, rather than persuade.”65 Until these niche museums develop some kind of standardization of practices that accounts for the moral and ethical issues that come with the nature of their sites, the public experience at historic state prison museums will continue to reinforce narratives that normalize the carceral state.

Chapter 7.

Corrections and Collections: Carceral Exhibits and Material Culture

Like guided tours, exhibits at historic state prison museums perpetuate punitive, romanticized, and sensationalized narratives of incarceration. Such displays mimic narrative themes of guided tours, and revolve around architecture, escapes, riots, violence, and a similar fascination with “pain, trauma, and violence.” Exhibits reinforce concepts of penal spectatorship by selectively collecting, curating, and displaying artifacts that align with visitors’ understandings and expectations of imprisonment. They also enable the visitor’s “penal gaze” to “claim particular effects of truth” and mask the uncertainties and nuances that might enhance deeper reflection on current carceral conditions. In conjunction with guided tours, exhibits situate carceral experiences firmly in the past, contributing to the dehumanization of incarcerated peoples and failing to engage actively with the contemporary carceral state.¹

Exhibit spaces at historic prison museums vary in size, design, and quality, but almost all represent a “difference between historic site and museum space.” Although some have designated exhibit areas, or “interpretive centers,” others mount displays throughout the actual prison buildings. For example, the Ohio State Reformatory and Eastern State Penitentiary have separate interpretive spaces that offer formal exhibits, while the Old Idaho Penitentiary and the Old Montana Prison have mounted displays in the outer buildings and throughout the tour space.² Often these display spaces are located near or alongside museum gift shops that feature

---


depictions or replicas of the historic artifacts. In this way, many historic prison museums have a material culture that merges original and authentic objects with commercialized and commodified products. Most tourists encounter some form of exhibition during visits to decommissioned prisons, which constitutes an important part of the historic prison museum experience. We must therefore ask: What are the contents of these exhibits, themes, and interpretive approaches? What effects do exhibits have on visitors? Such questions are central to understanding the relationship between tourists, historic prisons, and the overarching carceral state.

The Collection

Some scholars believe that the majority of museums are “built around collections,” but others have reconsidered this object-centered approach to museums and historical interpretation in recent years. At historic sites, in particular, the meaningfulness is inherent in the site itself as well as the people and events with which it is associated. The primary artifact is the historic site, which provides the basis for interpretation as encountered by the public throughout tours. Most historic state prison museums do use artifacts in some capacity to supplement their sites’ interpretations. As with any museum or site, historic carceral tourism is in part “the story of the items displayed and the people who made or used them.”

Ongoing and universal challenges associated with historic prison museums include the accessioning, organizing, housing, and display of objects and records associated with prison histories. After padlocking the doors and shuttering the windows of decommissioned prisons,

---

states showed little concern about the fate of the buildings or their contents. Vulnerable to trespassers, vandals, and a well-intentioned public craving a tour and a souvenir, the materiality of sites and their contents suffered. Keys, chunks of stone, inmate records, photographs, and more disappeared as years of neglect provided access and opportunity. For example, when functional, the Missouri State Penitentiary required more than one thousand separate keys to operate. In 2018, the museum possessed only six. Realizing that the closure of a prison was imminent, some employees such as guards and administrative personnel acted on a “nostalgic impulse,” absconding with various items, including keys, signage, books, and documents. Even during tours, the “public has stolen items,” including ripping display images off of the walls. Over time, critical records can go missing, dispersed through gifting, online auctions, and garage sales. For example, staff at the Old Joliet Prison argued that the facility had “been around so long” that various pieces of its history have been disseminated to “different places” over time. Few questioned the illegality of these activities. The frequency with which such thefts occurred, as well as lax enforcement when thieves were caught, reinforced the idea of these actions as acceptable, appropriate, and arguably normal.4

Intentional and coordinated collecting efforts began when historic prisons reopened their doors as museums. The new institutions needed to reclaim material culture associated with the sites before the items disappeared forever. Some historic prison museums published regular requests for items or contacted auction houses to track down leads. The Old Joliet Prison opted

for such an approach. After many of the site’s artifacts were sold, given away, moved, and stolen after the prison’s closure, administrators had to work to reclaim items. Technological changes in the 2010s enabled many historic prison museums to reach out through crowdsourcing for historic artifacts and ephemera. Dubbed “amnesty for artifacts” by some, such initiatives mine local communities for lost, stolen, and displaced objects by educating residents on the dubious provenance of their possessions. On its website, the Ohio State Reformatory encourages individuals to donate such items. The Old Joliet Prison made a similar request for locals to “donate their artifacts.” This casual, crowdsourced approach to collecting, including the framing of such returns as “donations,” is common across the museum field.⁵

Not all missing artifacts vanished by sinister means. Family members and descendants of prison guards often return keys, photographs, and documents to historic state prison museums that their relatives, former guards and administrators, took as memorabilia. For example, at former guard’s family returned some several missing mugshots to Eastern State Penitentiary. Other institutions take more passive postures, waiting for interested parties to reach out and initiate donations. In fact, many historic prison museums do not intentionally collect. The Eastern State Penitentiary officially began seeking out artifacts around 1998, and the site has “acquired a lot since then.” According to the Manager of Archives, Erica Harman, curatorial collecting and donations are a never-ending process. She explained that, although prisoners and guards who interacted in the prison are passing away, “their descendants are still donating

---

items.” Harman described the prison museum’s collection policy as casual. “If someone has something, they generally approach us with it. We haven’t aggressively solicited items.”

Once they acquire items, historic state prison museums often find themselves wrestling with issues of provenance, frequently unable to identify the origin of items or the parties responsible for donating them. Eastern State Penitentiary has decided to “mostly take people at their word that the donated items are generally related somehow to the institution.” The donor typically was a family member of a guard, prisoner, or someone who lived in the neighborhood around the prison. Because prison-made goods and art often circulated throughout local communities, curators also consider objects for their significance to those who took them.

Underdeveloped collections pose a continuing challenge for historic prison museums, even those that have been operational for years and that offer well-established tours and educational initiatives. Many of the Ohio State Reformatory records, especially from the 1970s, are missing, and one staff member suggested the loss, if not intentional, resulted from negligence. In 2018, after engaging the public in historic carceral tourism for several years, the Ohio State Reformatory remained in the early stages of processing archival records, with at least two rooms full of material to sort, catalog, file, and interpret. None of the collections have been catalogued with the exception of approximately fifty to sixty oral histories that have been indexed. Even so, these oral histories are not available to the public or to researchers because the participants did not sign release forms. Despite efforts to make the collections more organized

---

6 Erica Harman, interview by author, Philadelphia, January 28, 2019; Jones and Peerbolte interview. Erica Harman of Eastern State Penitentiary would like to retrieve the rest of the prisoner mugshots as well as the prison newsletters, but as of 2019 there were not coordinated efforts to do so. Harman interview.

7 Harman interview.
and accessible, limited manpower and unknown provenance hinder making or recovered material culture available for the public to access.⁸

Challenges persist in salvaging and cobbling together an archival collection. Such was the case for the Old Joliet Prison. Prison documents were abandoned when the state decommissioned the prison. Environmental elements and an arson not only destroyed most of the records but damaged the building, as well. Prison records, including inmate profile cards, administrative records, and government memos, that survived are charred, water damaged, and compromised by insects and rodents. The museum has done little to retrieve and preserve them. As of 2018, the documents remain in the remnants of the burned building, partially under a tarp for protection against the elements, conditions that would make any archivist shudder.

Without climate-controlled storage and adequate preservation methods, administrators have little choice but to salvage the records that are in the best condition and “keep everything quarantined.” Rather than wonder what the integration of such material could add to their interpretation, site administrators at the Old Joliet Prison claim there is “no lack of information” about the prison or its history.⁹

For interpreters at the Old Idaho Penitentiary, the most accessible records are those pertaining to inmates during the prison’s early years. The Idaho State Archives in Boise “has all of the inmate records and files, except for people still incarcerated here when it closed.” Curators turn to newspaper databases as well as prison newspaper and magazine publications for information, but, as one interpreter explained, “today’s coverage of inmates and crime is much

---

⁹ Jones and Peerbolte interview.
more limited.” Prison museums located in small towns have an advantage. Newspapers that serviced small communities are much more likely to contain personal details and minutia that allow interpreters to follow an inmate’s life before their incarcerations and often the circumstances heading to imprisonment. Jacey Brain, interpretive specialist at the Old Idaho Penitentiary, explained how early newspaper articles often described an individual’s “crime, trial, and incarceration,” information often not available in other records. Therefore, the collections of historic state prison museums are dependent on the availability of materials, a variable over which curators and interpreters have no control. More broadly, the method and focus of collecting 3-D objects and archival documents demonstrate an institution’s “compulsion to remember and a desire to forget, to preserve traces of some events and persons of the past and to exclude—to bury to destroy—others.”

Ownership and stewardship of prison records has proven especially complicated for historic prison museums as they navigate issues of legality, confidentiality, and sensitivity. Many museum administrators are uncertain about laws that restrict types of information they can disclose, such as the nature of internal prison operations, inmate specifics, prisoner numbers, crimes for which inmates were charged, their locations and experiences in prison, and if they died while incarcerated. As Becky McKinnell wondered “what can we legally tell people?” Additionally, ownership of certain prison-related documents can be unclear. It is likely that most decommissioned records legally belong to state departments of corrections, even though the departments do not have physical custody, access to, or even awareness of the materials. Steve Jones claimed that the city of Joliet owns the actual collection of prison-related objects, but a

---

separate board oversees the stewardship and development of the collection, which has been delegated to the museum.\textsuperscript{11}

Collection care and management remain problematic at many museums due to staff limitations. Cohorts of passionate volunteers saved the majority of historic prisons, and “friends of the museum” groups largely support and manage the museums. Although undoubtedly passionate, eager, and enthusiastic to preserve, interpret, and share their historic prisons, administrations with few staff members, many of whom have insufficient education, training, or experience in museums, confront additional challenges. Some historic prison museums employ just a few staff members to manage the site, develop and implement interpretation, and care for collections. At Eastern State Penitentiary, for example, Erica Harman joined the site staff in 2004 and her responsibilities changed constantly in order to meet evolving needs of the site. Harman explained that, “Since I’ve been here, my job title has changed. I’ve done a little bit of everything.” Often, staff and administrators place the emphasis on making enough revenue to keep the lights on and the doors open. Collections sit unsorted, uncatalogued, unindexed, unpreserved, and undigitized simply because museums lack manpower and funds.\textsuperscript{12}

For historic prison museums, designating physical spaces for archival departments and collections storage can also prove difficult. For instance, the Ohio State Reformatory’s Archive Department is situated in the former chaplain’s dining area. The archival room took one year to renovate, and it was approximately two years before Becky McKinnell could effectively work in the space. In 2008, the collections at Eastern State Penitentiary moved into a temporary collections space where they remained as of 2019. Numerous abandoned artifacts, including

\textsuperscript{11} McKinnell interview; Jones and Peerbolte interview.
\textsuperscript{12} Harman interview.
furniture like bunk beds and side tables, remain in cells where they have sat since the 1970s. But these are not climate-controlled spaces. Thus, they are susceptible to damage caused by fluctuating hot and cold temperatures, moisture, mold, and vermin. The prison’s Manager of Archives, Erica Harman, referred to the artifacts as an “abandoned collection,” claiming that museum managers “don’t know much about them, and they are ‘not as stabilized,’ because they are subject to the conditions of the building.” Harman stated that Eastern State Penitentiary has “an inventory of items throughout the site, but it is very rough. We do have a long-term plan, but it will be several years before it is finished.” The sheer number of items on the premises can also overwhelm. “We want to undertake a more detailed study in the future in order to identify attributes that may be similar or unique between items,” Harman explained. Staff determined that the best approach in the interim is to keep the items where they are, so as to retain some sense of provenance.13

Prison museum collections are also complicated by the many “unconventional items” that pose specific challenges regarding cleaning, storage, maintenance, and interpretation. Curatorial staff explain that the mission of the collection is the same as every other historical institution: properly care for and preserve the material culture of the past for future generations. The association of many carceral collections with violence, suffering, and death, however, requires additional consideration about the ethics of preservation, display, and interpretation. The Old Idaho Penitentiary displays contraband and weapons fashioned by residents, many of which were used in violent acts. Old Joliet Prison and the West Virginia Penitentiary possess, display, and interpret artifacts associated with capital punishment such as electric chairs and gallows,

13 McKinnell interview; Harman interview; Guided Tour, Eastern State Penitentiary, January 27, 2019.
instruments of death used at most historic prisons. For example, the Old Joliet Prison counted thirteen confirmed executions. Site managers maintain that this legacy has imbued the prison with “a sense of gravity,” but not necessarily one that they are required to treat with sanctity. Many historic state prison museums frame objects associated with death in sensationalist ways that leverage visitors’ interests in the macabre, without exploring the origins or implications of state-sanctioned punishment. In the process, visitors recognize the function of artifacts created and used to cause harm to other human beings, but rarely are they forced to navigate the deeper meaning, significance, and symbolism of these pieces. Historic state prison museums generally share this shortcoming: the majority of them benefit from displays of death without doing the hard work of responsible and thoughtful interpretation.14

Despite the unusual items that add character to historic prison museums, a dearth of physical collections continues to pose the greatest problem. Because tours are the most regular and popular programming, physical collections are needed to inform, revise, and verify information presented to visitors—to assure the transmission of the most accurate interpretation possible. Many collections consist of memorabilia dedicated by former guards or administrators and their families. Yet, as Erica Harman noted of Eastern State Penitentiary, such collections are often small and not very useful. The “State Archives doesn’t have payroll documents, so there is no way to know how many guards were here or when they were employed. The current list of staff is incomplete, only about eight hundred so far. We do our best to glean guard information from annual reports and the Warden’s journals.” Still, administrative histories are far better

represented than those of inmates, and because historic objects make visitors “aware affectively of attitudes and values,” the overrepresentation of corrections workers and the underrepresentation of current and former prisoners means that these artifacts “provide only limited amounts of data.” Combined with the narratives provided by former prison staff as guides and research consultants, the absence or loss of material representations of former inmates ensures their erasure from institutional memory. As a result, the collecting practices of many historic state prison museums reproduces historical narratives that reflect an “uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means for such production.”\textsuperscript{15} The primacy of administrative power remains unchecked in the museums’ physical collections.

Some museums attempt to fill the void with interviews and oral histories. As of 2018, the Ohio State Reformatory had conducted approximately fifty to sixty interviews and indexed between twenty and twenty-five oral histories spanning the 1940s to 1990. Like institutional documents, oral histories can be somewhat problematic in that they contain sensitive and personal material. If recorded without proper oral history training and protocols, they can be unusable, as well. Former guards and prisoners often did not sign releases making the content inaccessible to researchers and the public. Guides and interpreters can use the materials only in the most generalized ways, without identifying individuals by name. At Eastern State

Penitentiary, creating an index of oral histories is underway with the ultimate goal to make them available online, although the museum’s lack of manpower has slowed the task.16

Since the decommissioning of most of these sites occurred before the 1980s, there is also a rush to preserve stories from former staff, administrators, and prisoners. Site managers like those at the Missouri State Penitentiary sought out “retired staff, which is getting harder and harder to find.” At issue is “how do we document that history so when those tour guides can no longer do it they can pass it on and share those stories? We’d like to preserve that personal experience and touch.” Similarly, interpreters at the Old Idaho Penitentiary are rushing to capture oral histories before it becomes too late. Anthony Parry, one of the museum’s interpretive specialists, reached out to former inmates and guards in order to collect as many first-hand accounts as possible.17

The Exhibits

Museum displays are incredibly important in terms of transmitting information to audiences and affect the overall message of a historic site and its significance. In her analysis of museum staging, design expert Valerie Casey explained that a “museum effect” occurs in the site’s production of cultural knowledge, which is influenced by the organization and viewing of objects. If guided tours represent the curation of perspectives and stories that visitors consume audibly, then historic carceral exhibits signify a type of powerful visual communication that has the potential to represent other narratives.

16 “Behind the Bars Tour,” Ohio State Reformatory, July 21, 2018; McKinnell interview; Harman interview; Sheila Sanford and Diane Gillespie, interview by author, Jefferson City, MO, August 27, 2018.
17 Sanford and Gillespie interview; Anthony Parry interview, Old Idaho Penitentiary, September 6, 2018.
Use and display of objects at historic prison museums varies. Some sites, such as the Old Montana State Prison, do not possess the capability, or the desire, to house permanent exhibits, displaying an assortment of items without much signage or context. There is no defined exhibit space at the Old Montana Prison and the content repeats several of the same prison events throughout different displays. Visitors encounter objects throughout the grounds on self-guided tours. Similarly, the West Virginia Penitentiary displays an assortment of items in the visitors’ lobby, complemented by a research desk with notebooks containing information about the collection, which makes it incumbent upon a visitor to learn more. Other institutions such as the Ohio State Reformatory and the Missouri State Penitentiary offer dedicated museum spaces and more refined exhibits that concentrate collections in a display area while rendering the rest of the site free of objects to emphasize the architectural elements of the prison. Although visitors encountered intermittent signage through its buildings, the Ohio State Reformatory possesses minimal exhibits, all within a designated museum space. Eastern State Penitentiary also has a dedicated exhibit space but claims that the museum cannot display objects on-site because of the building’s conditions. The museum does offer an “annual pop-up exhibit in the big conference room for two weeks every year, as well as a pop-up gallery guide.”

For institutions in early phases of acquiring and processing items, exhibits limited to available materials create interpretive limitations. Becky McKinnell, collections manager at the Ohio State Reformatory, explained how the site’s exhibits and tours were based on random and incomplete evidence. Ironically, some of the Reformatory’s records ended up at other prisons,

---

not an uncommon occurrence. Other historic prison museums such as the Old Idaho Penitentiary partner with other institutions in order to access and use their collections. One interpreter explained that the state museum possesses site-specific artifacts such as escape kits, ropes, and hoods that interpreters use by partnering with the agency’s curatorial team. After the closure of the reformatory in 1990, “materials scattered all over the state,” many of them stolen, making it difficult to curate high-caliber exhibits. Without material cultural and physical records, the Ohio State Reformatory had to rely on oral tradition as well as partnerships with other institutions with more complete collections. Similarly, when the Eastern State Penitentiary closed, its records moved to the State Archives and other governmental agencies. As Erica Harman explained, “[t]here was not much left. There was limited paperwork, such as maintenance records or blank forms. There were a few mugshots and parole records.”\(^\text{19}\) At the Old Idaho Penitentiary, resources that were available to the prison when it turned over to the state historical society, including paper documents and unique artifacts, went to the State Archives and the State Museum collection.

Struggling with limited collections, curatorial staffs at historic prison museums often proceed by taking inventory of available items, identifying pieces that can “tell a story,” and figuring out the best way to interpret those materials. McKinnell conceded, “[d]o I want to do far more? Yes. But I have to work through what I’ve got.” Due to the scarcity and inconsistency of carceral collections, the presence of borrowed artifacts from other prisons or institutions becomes necessary. This means that the exhibits at sites of historic carceral tourism are often dependent on what they can borrow, which affects the stories that they are able to tell effectively.

\(^\text{19}\) McKinnell interview; Brain interview; Harman interview; “History and Hollywood Tour,” Ohio State Reformatory, July 20, 2018.
Many institutional materials are split between historic prisons and archival repositories such as local libraries, state archives, and universities, with different, and sometimes strict, governing policies. Issues of access, transport, and storage may also complicate inter-institutional loan agreements. In other words, every historic prison museum faces overwhelming challenges in accessing and relating the full range of their histories.\textsuperscript{20}

Building upon the violence and macabre themes that draw historic carceral tourists, most historic prison museums display shanks and other weapons retrieved from cells and alleys after the prison’s closure. The exhibits at historic prison museums also promote the idea of “inmate exceptionalism,” or the idea that only a select number of inmates’ stories are worthy or interesting enough for representation. The application of “inmate exceptionalism” also appears in the selection of tour guides formerly incarcerated at the site. If their presence in historic prison museums adds a sense of “authenticity,” it also promotes the idea that only a few inmates are capable, qualified, and competent enough to be involved with a site, usually as a tour guide. Often visitors take these first-hand accounts as absolute truths, and the opinion of the “exceptional inmate” becomes the rule regardless of a topic’s complexity or contradictions. At the other end of the spectrum, discussion of infamous prisoners fails to integrate fully the experience of most “mainline” residents throughout the prison’s history. As one tour guide at Eastern State explained, there are “not a lot of records of daily lives of inmates” that still exist.\textsuperscript{21}

\begin{flushright}

\textsuperscript{20} Harman interview; McKinnell interview.
\end{flushright}
Interpretive Approach

Without inter-institutional dialogue or professional interpretive standards, most historic prison museums allow curators to develop exhibits based on their personal tastes, just as they permit flexibility in tour guides’ narratives. Most curators at historic state prison museums are conscientious about “Disneyfication,” acknowledging that there is a very thin line between historical education, entertainment, and exploitation. “This isn’t Disney Land or Ripley’s Believe It or Not,” Becky McKinnell protested about visitors’ attitudes at Eastern State Penitentiary.

Recognizing the seriousness of the subject matter, she tries to “keep my exhibits PG” since a fair number of children visit the prison museum.” It is a daunting and complex task considering the mature content that emerges in historic carceral tourism. Consequently, McKinnell presents limited interpretation about the “darker side of prison life.” Still, the use of spectacle has been and is still used by many historic prison sites in their interpretive exhibits, even if lack of artifacts and resources make it difficult. The Ohio State Reformatory displays an electric chair but refuses to make it “zappable,” play a soundtrack, or provide reenactments of electrocutions, tactics taken by some other sites of historic carceral tourism (see Image 7 in Appendix B).

Historic prison museums often lack scholarly institutional histories to inform their interpretations and contextualize their collections. Academic or professional literature has addressed a few individual sites, including the Missouri State Penitentiary, but museum managers grant that, because of the history, development, and relative newness of the sites, there are “always new material, new discoveries, and new unanswered questions.” Lack of physical, on-site records inhibited research efforts and ongoing projects at a variety of historic prison

22 McKinnell interview; Guided Tour, Eastern State Penitentiary, January 26, 2019.
23 Schreiber interview.
museums. Subsequently, attempts to understand and interpret spaces for the public has proven difficult, as traditional historical sources may or may not exist. The Ohio State Reformatory encountered such a dilemma when interpreters attempted to research the prison’s “Attic,” a space used for housing as well as an ad hoc infirmary. Former prisoners had carved their names into the walls alongside their identification numbers, and museum staff endeavored to match the graffiti with prisoner records. One tour guide admitted this initiative proved a difficult undertaking because the records are housed at the Ohio History Center in another city over one hour away. Absence of physical records also hindered other projects, including those that pertain to prison cemeteries. At the Old Idaho Penitentiary, site administrators struggled to identify prisoners buried within the cemetery grounds and their locations.

As elsewhere, visitors interpret exhibits at historic state prison museums as authoritative texts, consuming the objects, narratives, and information as definitive interpretations of site histories. According to one museum scholar, “there is an increasing sense that the object is not so much the truth from an earlier time, as a prop in the larger dramatization of the story. Information and objects are valuable primarily in the staging of experience.” Unfortunately, historic prison museum curators and site managers seem to undervalue the effect that their exhibits have on audiences as well as on public attitudes towards incarceration. When historic prison museums produce exhibits of dubious quality—with meager artifacts, insufficient archival evidence, and indecisive narratives—they ignore, whether intentionally or not, the ethical stakes and contribute to the commodification of the carceral state.

---

25 Williams, Memorial Museums, 99.
Most notably, historic state prison museums have refused to utilize their collections or exhibits in order to engage in contemporary issues. This is antithetical to a key tenant of material culture theory: that historical objects should be utilized in a way that creates a “narrative that is compelling, fresh, and relevant to contemporary concerns.” For public historians, critical engagement with contemporary issues has become a more prevailing philosophy and common practice over the past several decades. Yet even as early as the 1970s, historic sites were deciding not “to limit our story to just the events connected with the site itself.”

The Public Imagination

The general public enters historic prison museums, encountering displays and objects associated with prison history with certain preconceptions and assumptions that site managers must consider. Jacey Brain, interpretive specialist at the Old Idaho Penitentiary, explained that “there is always going to be the traditional aspects of the site that people associate with the Wild West. There’s always going to be the mustachioed guards and the illusions of the outlaw lifestyle.” Brain was quick, however, to point out that the prison’s history spanned over a century, and so those impressions do not represent its entire lifespan. The chasm between popular assumptions and historical accuracy is where expansion of meaningful interpretation can arguably occur.

Exhibits at many historic prison museums merely reflect extant, and stereotyped, public perceptions of and perspectives towards incarceration. The topics and themes of these exhibits often impart “a sense of authenticity, a validation of [visitors’] inner self in its connection to”

27 Brain interview; Guided Tour, Old Idaho Penitentiary, September 6, 2018; “Behind the Bars Tour,” Ohio State Reformatory, July 21, 2018.
objects and ideas associated with imprisonment. On its website, the Old Montana Prison claims to have “exhibits that highlight not only the prison life of male inmates, but also the women and law enforcement.” As a local museum, however, Old Montana Prison has expanded beyond prison history, offering exhibits on the “evolution of the automobile, Milwaukee Railroad, childhood toys and memorabilia, artifacts of the American Cowboy, Native Tribes, frontiersmen, ranchers and women, re-creation of Cottonwood City, local history, mining, family life and local art.” Many of the exhibits at this and other historic prison museums merely reinforce, instead of challenge, the public’s understanding of carceral history. In this way, carceral collections present “a selective semi-fictionalized account of the past that reflects cultural memory,” if not cultural reality.28

If successful interpretation can be understood as “linking a tangible resource to its intangible meanings,” then it is necessary to consider what intangibles historic state prison museums, as well as their tours and exhibits, address. Becky McKinnell has approached carceral interpretation as an opportunity to complicate public understandings of incarceration. During her time at the Ohio State Reformatory, she has tried “to present the information that shows the sides of prison life that the public may not be familiar with. I don’t pretend that the seedier side of prison life didn’t exist, but I try not to focus on it.” This reflects a desire to address and interact with mainstream public beliefs about incarceration, if only as a starting point for further education and conversation.29

To such ends, some historic prison museums attempt to engage with contemporary issues, including the Old Idaho Penitentiary whose Faces exhibit addresses “how laws evolved and

28 Williams, Memorial Museums, 99; Rabinowitz, Curating America, 233; Self-Guided Tour, Old Montana Prison, September 12, 2018.
29 McKinnell interview.
affected various groups within Idaho’s population,” including indigenous populations and religious groups. The exhibit also discusses how laws and understandings of them have changed and influenced social issues. One of the most innovative aspects of the exhibit is the museum’s decision to “profile a wide range of inmates, [including] folks with disabilities, countries of origin, religions/ethnic backgrounds, age, [and] orientations.” It also examines “changing times and changing crimes,” as well as the demographic composition of the prison population.

Similarly, Eastern State Penitentiary’s “Big Graph” installation presents a large-scale visualization that shows the changes in incarceration rates over time. The Big Graph highlights the rates of incarceration as of 2012, compares the United States to other nations, and demonstrates the intersection of race and mass incarceration. The guide used other countries in order to underscore the severity of the United States’ current carceral situation. One visitor pointed out that other countries utilized different metrics, laws, and forms of law enforcement. Although various nations do indeed have different penalties for a variety of crimes, the guide tried to identify comparable countries in order to utilize the distinct differences in the United States. Such exhibits prompt critical reflection for visitors who are then challenged to bridge their preconceived understandings of carceral history and spaces with current carceral realities.

One of the visitors asked, “why is the US’s prison rate so high?” The guide indicated this was a “good question,” considering that the violent crime rate has remained relatively steady during recent history, and the system is expensive, costing taxpayers almost $80 billion per year.30

From an ethical standpoint, creating opportunities for visitors to learn about and question the contemporary carceral state should be—but rarely is—an important tenant of historic carceral tourism. Some historic prison museums have successfully leveraged popular interest in their sites

30 Brain interview; Parry interview; Guided Tour, Eastern State Penitentiary, January 28, 2019.
in order to achieve more educational and civic-minded ends. Roughly 70 percent of visitors to Eastern State Penitentiary claim that they have no relationship to the criminal justice system. In response, Annie Anderson and other staff members have created public programming, exhibits, and audio with a general audience in mind. Anderson explained it as an “opportunity to interpret the past, present, and future of corrections for this disengaged audience- the main, everyday Eastern State audience.” The interpretive approach of Eastern State Penitentiary, and to a certain extent that of the Old Idaho Penitentiary, highlights historic carceral themes and relates them to issues in modern corrections, including financing and profit, privatization, penal philosophies, the purpose of imprisonment, and prisoners’ rights. In this, they provide leading models for the development of best practices for other sites.

Historic prison museums face ongoing and nearly universal challenges in terms of collecting, processing, and storing traditional archival records. Availability of and access to these records is limited, creating hardship for interpreters as they design museum programs, tours, and exhibits. Artifacts used in carceral exhibits tend to center on themes prevalent in dark tourism, including violence, punishment, death, and execution. Out of necessity, perhaps, interpreters craft exhibits that favorably portray prison guards and use their stories and objects in a way that makes them the official authors of their sites’ histories. However, the lives and experiences of prisoners, especially those who were incarcerated in the past, are sensationalized in a way that downplays not only their humanness but also their connection to current carceral practices. Exhibitions portray prison life as something abnormal and unknowable, although for millions of Americans, incarceration and the systems that govern it are all too familiar.

---

31 Annie Anderson, interview by author, Philadelphia, January 28, 2019; Brain interview.
Conclusion.

The Final Sentence: Historic Prison Museums and the Carceral State

Historic prison museums occupy a unique place in the American public’s psyche. These palaces of punishment are often viewed as relics of the past, where criminals suffered punitive practices seen as products of a bygone age. Simultaneously, they are often viewed as theatres of sensationalism, places where dark tourism allows curious visitors to explore the macabre, the violent, and the inhumane, but safely and from a distance. In both cases, incarceration is a phenomenon of the past, one whose barbarism and inhumanity seem foreign. Many historic carceral tourists struggle to relate to the conditions and treatment experienced by imprisoned people throughout time, and this cognitive dissonance reinforces an “us vs. them” as well as a “now vs. then” mentality.

The truth remains: in the United States incarceration is more prevalent than ever before and affects millions of Americans who are disproportionately people of color. The public imagining of Gothic prisons and draconian imprisonment as a thing of the past creates a comfortable, if unintentional barrier, between the general public outside of prison and both the historic and current the carceral populations inside. Due to political, economic, social, and cultural conditioning of the American public to accept the carceral state without question, the reality of the correctional system in the United States, its expansiveness and severity, goes widely unnoticed and unremarked upon, especially within historic carceral tourism.

There are many reasons why it is important for visitors to historic prison museums to engage in critical thinking, reflection, and analysis. But most simply, the stereotypes, misunderstandings, and assumptions that the public has developed about incarceration—as well
as criminality, punishment, and its connection to race and socioeconomic status—are too often reinforced through historic carceral tourism. Moreover, these penal mentalities, validated by experiences at historic prison museums which have been deemed as sources of authority and authenticity, create a punitive and even retributive public. This makes it more imperative and urgent for historic prison museum managers to bridge the carceral past and present.

Historization and sensationalism of the carceral past allows the contemporary carceral state to flourish. When former sites of imprisonment do not engage with today’s carceral realities, they reinforce public apathy, complacency, and ignorance. Places of past incarceration, and historic state prison museums specifically, are unique and powerful sites of memory and history. They have the potential to educate, inspire reflection, and stimulate remembrance. Rather than reinforcing stereotypes and misunderstandings about incarceration, including its history and present function, historic prison museums can serve a critical civic purpose, raising public consciousness about the current carceral state through informed, provocative, and timely interpretations. Such a mission allows historic prison museums to do something that other historical sites cannot: leverage the intersections of time, place, history, and memory not only to share the history, but to expose the reality of the carceral world in which we live.

Carceral geographers Karen Morin and Dominique Moran, argue that “carceral geography studies share a distinctly activist component, an imperative to contribute to positive social change.” Public history professionals must work to make this true of historic prison museums, as well. These museums symbolically hold power, which feeds their potential to make a difference in terms of contemporary social issues. As historian Seth Bruggeman argued that the “time has come for historians to confront mass incarceration.” Similarly, in their analysis of prison tourism in the United Kingdom, scholars Alana Barton and Alyson Brown contended that
“[b]y opening the otherwise closed world of the prison to the public, prison museums could potentially be used to challenge dominant, popular stereotypes and ideologies. They have an occasion to present the visitor with the personal, emotional and psychological aspects of imprisonment, as well as the broader historical and structural contexts within which it has developed and exists.”¹ The majority of historic prison museums in the United States have yet to take up this calling.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Archival Sources


Department of Corrections: Missouri State Penitentiary, Record Group 213. Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City.

Historical Conduct Record (Admissions), 1896-1968, State Archives Series 1706. Ohio History Connection, Columbus.


Record of Inmates 1926-1974, State Archives Series 5327. Ohio History Connection, Columbus.


“Souvenir—September 22, 1910: In honor of the visit to the Ohio State Reformatory by the Delegates to the International Prison Congress held at Washington, D. C., October 2-8, 1910.” Sherman Room, Mansfield/Richland County Library, Mansfield, Ohio.

Published Primary Sources


“National Register of Historic Places Inventory- Nomination Form: Iowa State Penitentiary


Digital Sources


Newspapers and Magazines

Centralia Fireside Guard (Centralia, MO)

Chicago Tribune (Chicago, IL)

Los Angeles Times (Los Angeles, CA)

Muscatine Weekly Journal (Muscatine, IA)

News Journal (Mansfield, OH)

News Tribune (Jefferson City, MO)

The Bulletin-Journal (Independence, IA)

The Daily Inter Lake (Kalispell, MT)
The Des Moines Register (Des Moines, IA)

The Idaho State Journal (Pocatello, ID)

The Independent Record (Helena, MT)

The Joliet-Stateville Times (Joliet, IL)

The Lexington Intelligencer (Lexington, MO)

The Missoulian (Missoula, MT)

The Montana Standard (Butte, MT)

The New York Times (New York, NY)

The Niles National Register (St. Louis, MO)

The Northwest Herald (McHenry County, IL)

The Southtown Star (Chicago, IL)

The Times Recorder (Zanesville, OH)

The Times-News (Twin Falls, ID)

The Wheeling Daily Intelligencer (Wheeling, WV)

The Wheeling Daily Register (Wheeling, WV)

Oral Histories


Tours


Guided Tour, Old Idaho Penitentiary, September 6, 2018.


Private Tour, Joliet Prison, September 18, 2018.

Self-Guided Tour, Eastern State Penitentiary, January 27, 2019


**Secondary Sources**

**Articles**


Rice, Jim. ““This Province, So Meanly and Thinly Inhabited”: Punishing Maryland’s Criminals, 1681-1850.” *Journal of the Early Republic* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 15-42.


Virgili, Sandrine, Hélène Delacour, Frédéric Bornarel, and Sébastien Liarte. “‘From the Flames to the Light’: 100 Years of the Commodification of the Dark Tourist Site around the Verdun Battlefield.” *Annals of Tourism Research* 68 (January 2018): 61-72.


**Chapters**


Books


Childs, Dennis. Slaves of the State: Black Incarceration from the Chain Gang to the


APPENDICES
Appendix A.

Graphs and Tables

Figure 1: Map of Historic State Prison Museums Included in This Study
**Figure 2:** Twentieth Century Incarceration Rates for All US State Prisons (as of Census Day)

![Graph showing the trend of incarceration rates from 1920 to 2000.](image)

**Figure 4:** Total White Population and Incarcerated Population by State (2010)

![Bar chart showing total white population and incarcerated population by state](chart.png)

**Figure 5:** Total Black Population and Incarcerated Population by State (2010)

### Sources:
Figure 6: Total Latino Population and Incarcerated Population by State (2010)

![Bar chart showing the percentage of State’s Total Population and Percentage of State’s Incarcerated Population for various states.]

**Figure 7:** Total American Indian Population and Incarcerated Population by State (2010)

*American Indian/Alaskan Native*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Percentage of State’s Total Population</th>
<th>Percentage of State’s Incarcerated Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Idaho</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montana</td>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Virginia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figures 8.a and 8.b: The Whiteness of Local Populations**

**Figure 8.a**

*Total Local Population (2010)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Philadelphia</td>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>1,526,006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boise</td>
<td>Idaho</td>
<td>205,671</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joliet</td>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>147,443</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mansfield</td>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>47,821</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jefferson City</td>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>43,079</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fort Madison</td>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>11,051</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moundsville</td>
<td>West Virginia</td>
<td>9,318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deer Lodge</td>
<td>Montana</td>
<td>3,111</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 8.b**

*Percentage of White Population (2010)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>% White</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moundsville</td>
<td>West Virginia</td>
<td>97.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deer Lodge</td>
<td>Montana</td>
<td>96.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fort Madison</td>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>89.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boise</td>
<td>Idaho</td>
<td>89.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jefferson City</td>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>78.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mansfield</td>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>73.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joliet</td>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>67.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philadelphia</td>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>41.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Description:** The tables above describe the racial demographics of various cities across the United States, all of which currently possess a historic state prison museum. In accordance with historian Heather Ann Thompson’s findings regarding the “whiteness” of operational prison towns, this survey of historic carceral tourism reveals that historic prison museums are also predominately located in overwhelmingly white towns or cities, with few exceptions.

**Sources:** Statistics taken from US Census Bureau QuickFacts for the states of Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, Montana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia (accessed January 5, 2020).
**Figure 9:** Annual Attendance at Historic State Prison Museums

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Historic State Prison Museum</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Attendance (Approximate)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Missouri State Penitentiary</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>34,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old Idaho Penitentiary</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>42,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old Montana Prison</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>40,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Virginia State Penitentiary</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio State Reformatory</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>80,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern State Penitentiary</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>270,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sources:** Mark Schreiber interview by author, Jefferson City, MO, September 22, 2018; Sheila Sanford and Diane Gillespie, interview by author, Jefferson City, MO, August 27, 2018; Jacey Brain interview by author, Boise, ID, September 6, 2018; Anthony Parry interview by author, Boise, ID, September 6, 2018; Melanie Sanchez, interview by author, Deer Lodge, MT, September 12, 2018; Tom Stiles interview by author, Moundsville, WV, July 27, 2018; Becky McKinnell interview by author, Mansfield, OH, July 25, 2018; Annie Anderson interview by author, Philadelphia, January 28, 2019; Erica Harman interview by author, Philadelphia, January 28, 2019.
Appendix B.

Carceral Tourism Photographs

**Image 1:** Exterior of the West Virginia State Penitentiary. Photograph by author, July 2018.

![Image of exterior of the West Virginia State Penitentiary](image1.jpg)

**Image 2:** Interior cell at the West Virginia State Penitentiary. Photograph by author, July 2018.

![Image of interior cell](image2.jpg)


