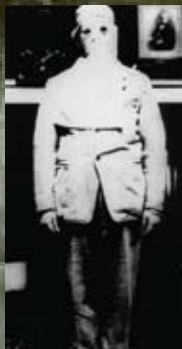


THE SLAMMER

When the door closed behind you at **Eastern State Penitentiary**, you said goodbye to normal human contact, often for decades.

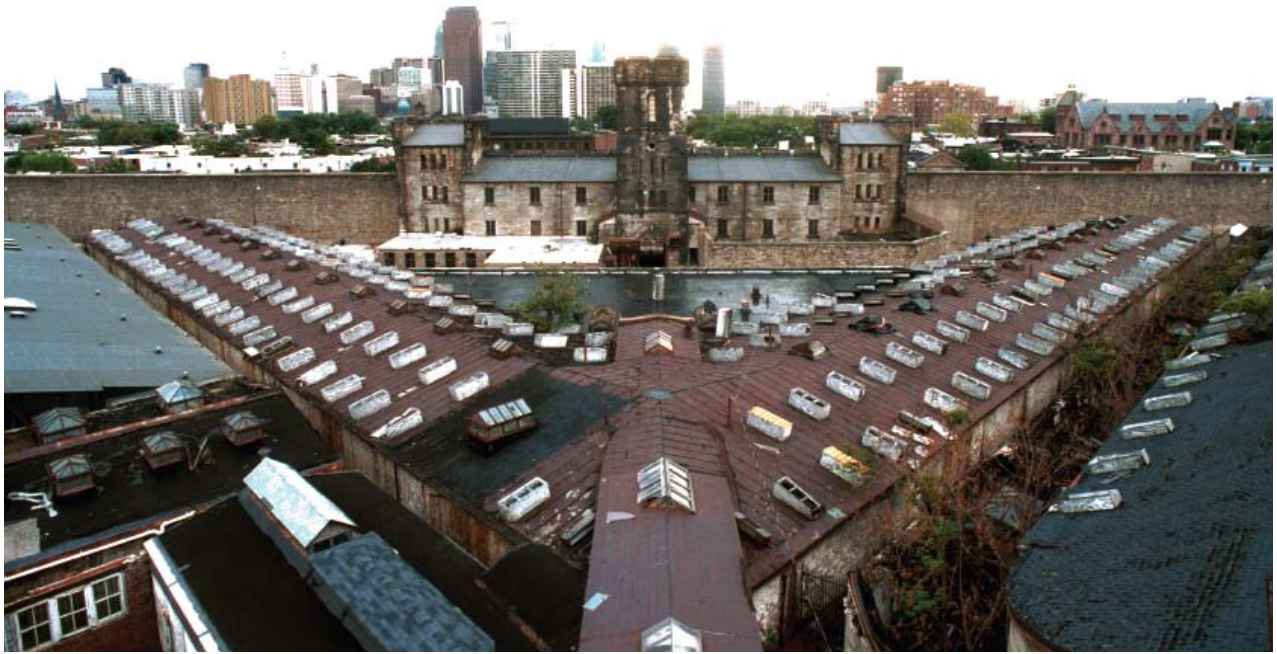
All in the name of redemption and good intentions.

By TODD PITOCK



Eastern State's **monastic vaulted corridors** (opposite) were designed to be morally inspiring, yet prisoners were **forced to wear hoods** (inset, opposite) to avoid being corrupted by contact with other inmates. The **castle-like turrets and gates** (right) continued to influence prison design for more than a century after its construction.





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inside many prisons, now and for centuries past, the rules of outside life are left behind. They are not good places; no evident good intentions, few positive outcomes.

Early 19th-century America may have been a land of opportunity, but with its rapidly growing population came a sharp rise in crime. Criminals were prosecuted and dealt with harshly, and most often they were confined in dungeons or in violent, disease-ridden jails packed with social outcasts.

Prime examples were Auburn (opened in 1817) and Sing-Sing (1826), both in upstate New York. Prisoners were grouped by day and isolated at night. They were forbidden to speak, and to maintain the prescribed silence, wardens took to terrorising and brutalising inmates. Violators could be flogged (“restricted” to 39 lashes), hung by the hands or wrists, or have their heads locked in iron cages.

But not all New Americans wanted prisons to be simply places of incarceration and physical punishment. The Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons included people of many

religions, but subscribed to the Quaker view that the light of God could be discovered in anyone. The society, which first met in 1787, pioneered the notion of prison as a place of penitence, a place where prisoners could atone for their sins. In other words, a penitentiary.

In their view, solitary confinement was not so much a punishment as an opportunity for contemplation and spiritual redemption. The society took 30 years to get the Pennsylvania legislature to act on its ideas, but Philadelphia’s Eastern State Penitentiary eventually opened its doors in 1829, representing America’s most ambitious, influential and high-minded attempt at penal reform. It housed its last inmates in 1971.

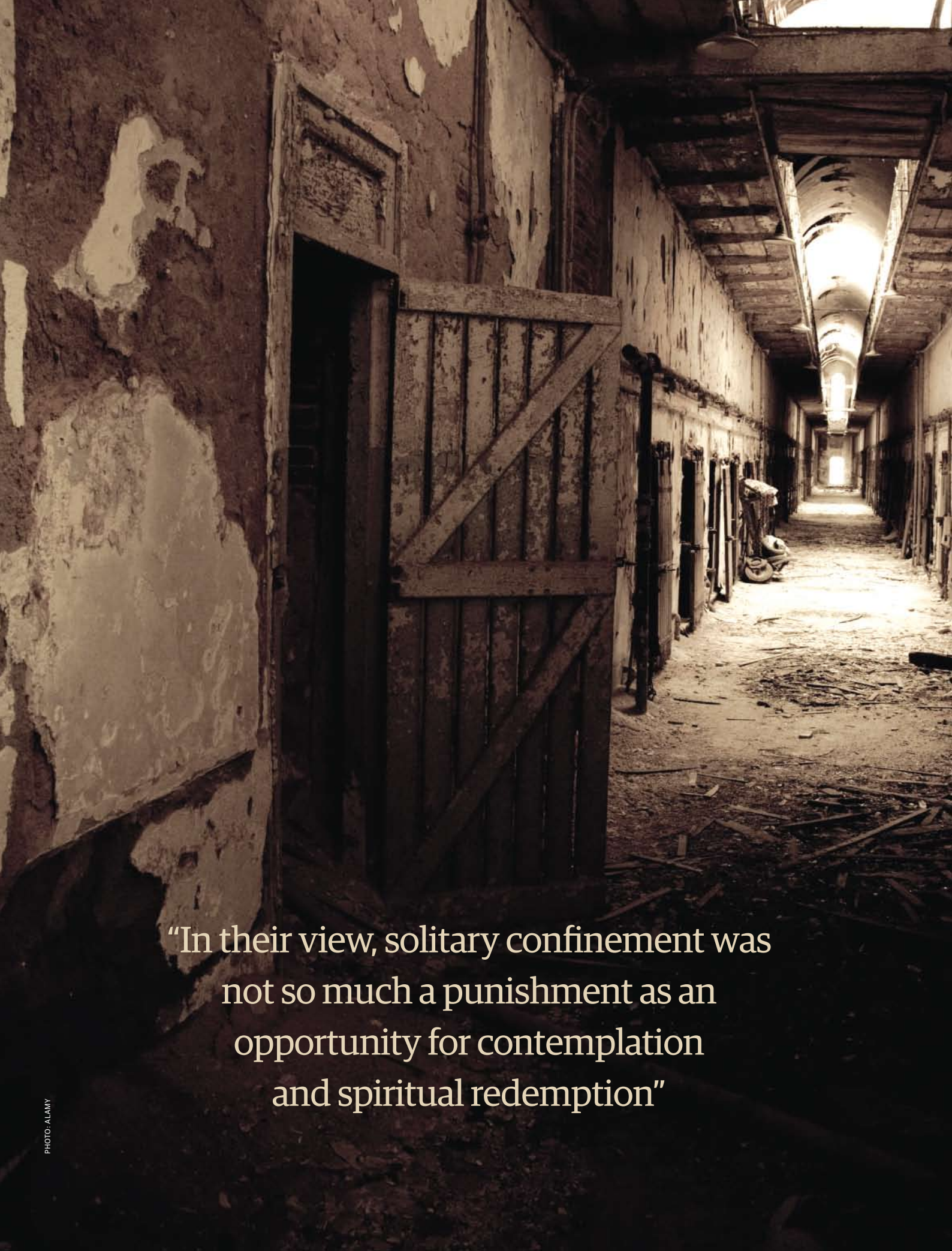
Inside the Big House

Eastern State is now a museum, but it’s still a forbidding place. The walls, nearly 2.5 metres thick at the base, stand more than 9 metres high, a stack of soot-stained blocks running for 800 metres on each of its four sides, castle-style, though rather than protecting aristocrats, it held people on the opposite end of the social ladder.



Two engravings of Eastern State (above) date from the early 1830s, a few years after it opened, when the prison was surrounded by farmland and lay more than 2 kilometres outside the city of Philadelphia. Nowadays, the city surrounds the compound (top).

PHOTOS: DENNIS FELTY; EASTERN STATE PENITENTIARY HISTORIC SITE, INC.



“In their view, solitary confinement was not so much a punishment as an opportunity for contemplation and spiritual redemption”

The interior was designed with church-like features, like barrel-vaulted corridors, pointed-arch windows and skylights to let in the light of heaven. Each cell was a self-contained unit. Within 45-centimetre-thick walls a prisoner had a bed and a desk, with a skylight and, outside, a courtyard for exercise periods. Prisoners had a flush toilet, running water and central heating – the first time such amenities had been included in a building of such scale. Their purpose, though, wasn't creature comforts but greater isolation. A wagon on wheels, a bit like a railroad, transported meals, which were delivered to inmates through feeding holes.

The isolation was total: prisoners received no visits from friends or family and reading material was restricted to the Bible. They could work at one of two productive tasks: as either shoemakers or weavers.

According to Jennifer Janofsky, a historian who wrote her doctoral dissertation on Eastern State, it must be viewed in the context of its times – the Era of Reform. “Institutions in general were on the rise,” she says. “Mental-health hospitals, schools for orphans, houses of refuge, poor houses and others were all being built in the big cities.” Eastern State was just another building erected by the fortunate for the less fortunate. Everything about it was designed to put the theory of reform and penitence into practice. Corporal punishment was abolished.

But its replacement was not a soft option. The unforgiving thick walls, with their flaking surfaces, evoke desolation rather than redemption. The echo of other people's footsteps and voices too indistinct to discern words must have magnified the loneliness. The high skylights would have had a similar effect; less a case of letting in the light of God than a reminder that liberty was out of reach. Inmates were managed by wardens who had complete control and power over them, regularly



Sparkling cleanliness and services like food carts, seen in this 1890s photograph (above), prompted one warden to boast that the prison was “**better than any room you could get for \$25.**” The prison's radiating spoke design, displayed in an engraving from 1855 (top), became **the model for more than 300 prisons** worldwide.

depriving them of all their individual humanity.

Prisoners' testimonials reveal the abject misery felt within the walls of the penitentiary. French philosopher and early social historian Alexis de Tocqueville and his companion, the equally influential Gustave de Beaumont, reported back to the French government after interviewing prisoners at

Eastern State. “No. 85. Has been here two months; convicted of theft,” they wrote. “Health good, but his mind seems to be very agitated. If you speak of his wife and child he weeps bitterly. In short, the impression produced by the prison seems very deep.”

Another inmate was “plunged in despair. This unfortunate man sobbed when speaking of his wife and children, whom he never hoped to see again. When we entered his cell, we found him weeping and labouring at the same time.”

“The effects of solitary were brutal,” says Norman Johnston, author of the book *Eastern State Penitentiary: Crucible of Good Intentions*. “People didn't understand mental health in Antebellum [pre-Civil War] America. To be cut off from human contact like that is just horrific.” Records tell of prisoners banging their heads on walls until they caused open wounds.

Despite this, many believed the system was still able to produce “honest” men. Supporters thought they were taking a humane approach destined to improve society. The cost alone indicates how seriously they took the idea: the US\$770,000 spent by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania on construction made it the country's second most-expensive building after the US Capitol in Washington, DC. Measured in today's dollars that would be more than US\$11.5 billion.

The new system fascinated people worldwide. Eager to see how well it worked, countries including France, Prussia, Brazil and even Britain sent



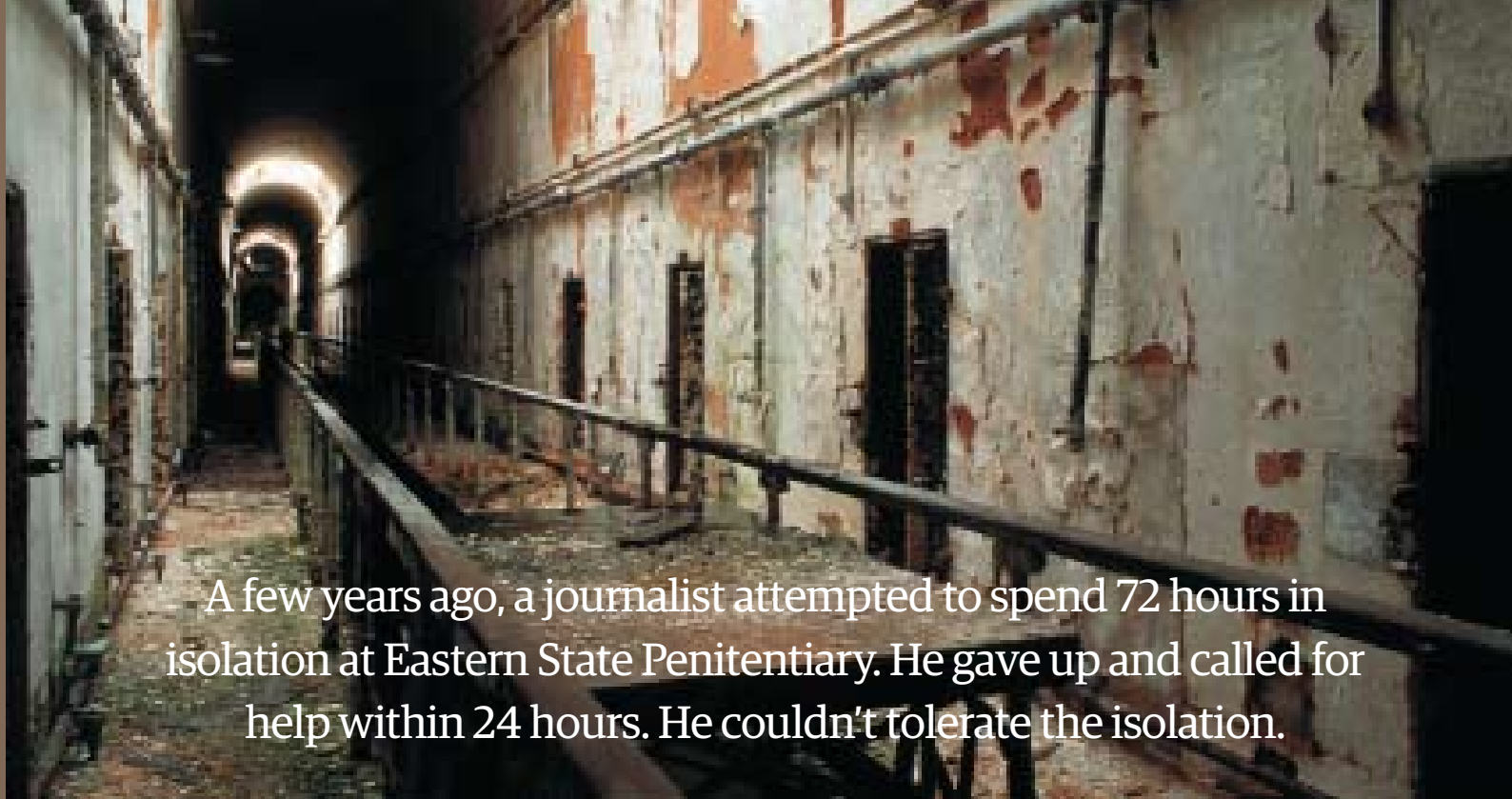
An operating theatre lies in ruins (above), though the **surgical lamps remain** suspended from the ceiling. Religious motifs on the gates embody the **noble, though severe** intentions of the prison's founders.



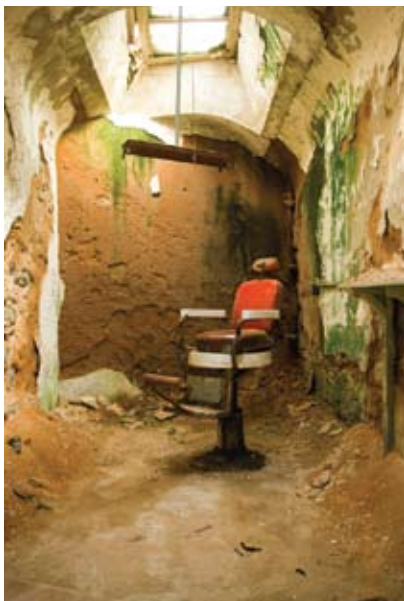


Of the estimated 75,000 people who served time at Eastern State, the most famous was Chicago gangster Al Capone, who spent parts of 1929 and 1930 there. Bank robber Willie Sutton was an inmate for 11 years and was part of a famous escape in 1945 when he and ten other prisoners managed to tunnel out. Sutton was caught within yards of the prison. Of all those imprisoned at Eastern State, only 100 escaped and just one, Leo Callahan, avoided being recaptured.

MAIN PHOTO: ALAMY; INSET: EASTERN STATE PENITENTIARY HISTORIC SITE, INC.



A few years ago, a journalist attempted to spend 72 hours in isolation at Eastern State Penitentiary. He gave up and called for help within 24 hours. He couldn't tolerate the isolation.



PHOTOS: ELENA BOUVIER; ALAMY

During his time at Eastern State, infamous mobster **Al Capone** (opposite, inset) was held in a lavishly furnished cell (opposite). While some inmates had **access to basic facilities** such as a barber (above), many were kept in solitary confinement. Their meals were delivered by food carts that **ran along tracks** (top).

representatives to Eastern State. Its design influenced more than 300 jails around the world, including the Peking First Prison (1909), Mexico's National Penitentiary (1900), Canada's Bordeaux Jail (1912) and Japan's Miyagi Prison (1879).

Penitent - or Practical?

The debate over the penitentiary system boils down to whether it was worse to torture the mind or the body. De Tocqueville preferred the Auburn/Sing-Sing approach, believing it was more "practical." Indeed, in Auburn prisoners made barrels, brooms, nails, boots and carpets, enabling the prison to run at a profit, whereas Eastern State was cripplingly expensive. The British novelist Charles Dickens, who visited in 1841, was appalled, describing it as a place that "produced an immense amount of torture and agony."

In 1980, the city of Philadelphia bought the site. Various plans to reuse it as a prison or develop it into condominiums were scrapped and in 1994, the Pennsylvania Prison Society started offering tours. In 2001, a new non-profit organisation called Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site took over the society's

mission and continues to lead small, almost silent groups through the same corridors that, for 142 years, housed some of the country's most wretched and damned individuals.

Did Eastern State fail? It's hard to say. No one really knows, as no statistics on recidivism rates - or redemption rates - exist. In some way, Eastern State succeeded by eliminating prisoner-on-prisoner brutality, insurrections and escapes. But the system was short-lived. America abandoned the Pennsylvania System in 1913, though the prison continued to operate until 1971.

"I think people realised that an institution cannot cure a societal problem," says Johnston, who has worked in and visited prisons since the 1950s. He points out that other factors cause crime: lack of education, mental health, the economic environment and so on. "I've visited prisons all over the world," he says. "I'm not sure anything (I have seen) works all that well."

Today, the corridors of Eastern State echo only with visitors' footsteps, but its historical echo, perhaps, is a call from its founders to revisit their good intentions, even if their solutions came up short. ■