

Prison Systems—Then & Now

Subjects: Language Arts, Social Studies, Social Justice

Suggested Grade Levels: 9–12

Time Frame: 2 weeks

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Overview

The Eastern State Penitentiary (ESP) is located at 2027 Fairmount Avenue, (between 20th Street and 22nd Street on Fairmount Avenue). It is a National Historic Landmark. ESP was opened on October 25, 1829 and is considered the world's first penitentiary. Constructed during the period of Enlightenment, ESP was built to change incarceration with the intention of reforming criminals. At that time, prisons were simply way stations, holding large groups of assorted men, women and children who had committed crimes of varying severity until their term was completed. ESP broke with this tradition and sought to reform criminals through solitary thought, penitence and hard labor. Through this lesson, students will exam the history of ESP and its social mission. They will explore the experiences of visitors, staff and inmates and make connections to modern day prison systems.

Connection to Philadelphia World Heritage Tool Kit's Goal

This historical site provided the basis for the modern American prison system as well as prison systems across the globe. It marked a new age in prison reform and in the rights of convicts. Though its history is problematic, it serves as a rich source for understanding the history of America's prison system and modern day prison systems across the globe, and as an educational tool for exploring the rights of prisoners.

Core Curriculum Standards

- ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
- ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.5: Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the structure an author uses in his or her exposition or argument, including whether the structure makes points clear, convincing, and engaging.
- ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.6: Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness or beauty of the text.
- ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.7: Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.
- ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
- ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

Objectives

Students will read, synthesize and analyze a variety of texts to evaluate historical, cultural and social perspectives influencing the development of Eastern State Penitentiary. Students will explore the historical landmark to gain a first person perspective of its cultural and historical impact. Students will write creatively in order to evaluate the impact of principles guiding the construction and development of the Eastern State Penitentiary. Students will conduct research in order to analyze the influence of the Eastern State Penitentiary on other current and global prison system.

Essential Question

How has the purpose or goal of prison changed over the course of time? How does our treatment of criminals over time reflect our ideals and limitations as a society?

Materials Needed

Internet access, access to computers (ideally), print sources

Procedure

Complete Pre-Visit Activities: In preparation for their visit to the Eastern State Penitentiary, students will read a series of documents analyzing the history and philosophy surrounding the prison. Students will start by reading *Eastern State Penitentiary: A Prison With a Past* by Chai Woodham (link provided below). In addition to this text, students will be provided with Roberts Vaux's principles of the Pennsylvania system, taken from the *Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Structures Report* referenced in the additional resources section.

Roberts Vaux of the Philadelphia Society, who had been extensively involved in the planning of the penitentiary, summarized the basic principles of the system:

1. Prisoners should be treated not vengefully but in ways designed to convince them that through hard and selective forms of suffering they could change their lives;
2. To prevent the prison from being a corrupting influence, solitary confinement of all inmates should be practiced;
3. In his seclusion the offender was to have an opportunity to reflect on his transgressions so that he might repent;
4. Solitary confinement is a punishing discipline because man is by nature a social being; and
5. Solitary confinement is economical because prisoners do not need long periods of time to benefit from the penitential experience; fewer keepers are required, and the costs of clothing are reduced. The strong faith in reformation coupled with deterrence is very evident.

Students will be required to summarize and synthesize the readings by answering questions in both discussion format and in writing.

Students will read an excerpt (specifically chapter 7) from Charles Dickens' *American Notes for General Circulation* Volumes 1–2, which details Dickens' trip to Philadelphia and the Eastern State Penitentiary. Students will be required to compare and contrast Dickens' description of Philadelphia with their knowledge of the modern day city. They will also complete close reading activities with Dickens' description of the penitentiary. These activities will provide context for the students' next activity, visiting the penitentiary itself.

Visiting ESP: Through their visit, students will explore stories of the inmates as well as examining some of the problems the institution faced throughout its history. School District of Philadelphia and Charter school students receive free admission to ESP. Scholarships for buses are also available. Please visit the Eastern State Penitentiary's website for more information: www.easternstate.org

After Returning: Students will be required to write a reflection on their visit in the form of diary entries or letters from the perspective of an inmate or guard. In addition to this assignment, students will be asked to research another historical prison in a different country (websites to other historical prisons available on the ESP website) and compare it to ESP through a poster or presentation.

Current Practices Essay: Finally, students will research current practices in American prison systems after reading first hand accounts from inmates. Students will evaluate the principles set forth by Roberts Vaux and compare them to the modern day treatment of inmates through an analysis essay.

Formal essay assignment prompt:

“After researching current practices in the American prison system, review Vaux’s principles guiding the treatment of inmates at Eastern State Penitentiary. Choose two principles and evaluate their impact on modern day inmates as well as their effectiveness in reforming criminal behavior.”

Outcome/Assessment

Creative writing in the form of diary entries/letters. Presentation comparing ESP to another historical prison.

Special Education and English Language Learners Accommodations

Length and structure of assignments can be adjusted to meet student needs. Scaffolded graphic organizers should accommodate student readings.

Additional Resources

Web:

Eastern State Penitentiary Website: www.easternstate.org

Smithsonian.com:

<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/eastern-state-penitentiary-a-prison-with-a-past-14274660/?no-ist=&page=1>

Article providing books on inmate perspectives: <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/miranda/la-et-cam-beyond-orange-is-the-new-black-eight-prison-books-20140807-column.html#page=1>

Print:

Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Structures Report: Volume 1, City of Philadelphia & Eastern State Penitentiary Task Force. (1994). <http://www.easternstate.org/learn/research-library/history/571-page-history>

American Notes for General Circulation, Dickens, Charles. (1842). 233.

<https://books.google.com/books?id=BxAlAAAAQAAJ&pg=PA233&hl=en#v=onepage&q&f=false>

Eastern State Penitentiary: A Prison With a Past, Woodham, Chai. (2008).