# State Penitentiary for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania Records 1819-1955

Mss.365.P381p

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## **Summary Information**

**Repository** American Philosophical Society

**Title** State Penitentiary for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania Records

**Date [inclusive]** 1819-1955

Call number Mss.365.P381p

**Extent** 0.5 Linear feet 7 vols., 1 box

**Location** LH-MV-B-4; LH-MV-E-7 (Volumes B, D)

**Language** English

**Abstract** Intended as a model of Jacksonian penal reform, the Eastern State

Penitentiary operated in the Cherry Hill section of Philadelphia between 1829 and 1970. Designed to promote the moral reform of prisoners by imposing a regimen of silent, solitary self-reflection, the penitentiary became the purest example of the "Pennsylvania plan" of "cellular"

isolation."

The Records of the Eastern State Penitentiary consist of seven bound volumes and a series of miscellaneous records and correspondence that document aspects of life in Jacksonian America's model prison. The collection has been organized into four series: Series I, Bound Volumes; Series II, Miscellaneous Records; Series III, Correspondence of Elizabeth Velora Elwell; and Series IV, Prisoners' Correspondence. The bound volumes contain records of admission for prisoners between 1830 and 1892 (with some gaps), three of which were kept and annotated by the Moral Instructor at the prison, Thomas Larcombe. Larcombe provided interesting comments on the "moral state" of each prisoner, in addition to data on name, age, gender and race, religious affiliation, the charges, sentence, and final disposition. The unbound materials in the collection

are diverse, but include an important 70 page manuscript comprising the records of the joint commission charged with investigating management of the prison in 1835, with a partial transcript of testimony, and a series of 29 letters written to or from prisoners at Eastern State, 1845-1871, most unusually the inmate Elizabeth Velora Elwell, writing to her paramour and fellow inmate Albert Green Jackson.

**Preferred Citation** 

Cite as: State Penitentiary for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania Records, American Philosophical Society.

## **Background note**

Responding to a perceived crisis in the rise of criminality and the breakdown of civic virtue, Americans of the 1820s increasingly looked to the new concept of the penitentiary for a solution. Of all the prisons built during the spate of construction that followed, none was more famous or more imitated than the State Penitentiary for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, the wellspring of design for over 300 prisons in America and abroad. Built in the Cherry Hill section of Philadelphia, Eastern State was held up as a model of modern penal reform, the surest means of instilling repentance in hardened (or would-be) criminals, and it was considered one of Philadelphia's most noteworthy architectural achievements. In theory, the penitentiary facilitated intensive self-reflection through "cellular isolation" -- separating prisoners from each other, as well as the outside world -- coupled with equally intensive religious instruction. In practice, however, it became a pioneer in a new regime of harsh penal discipline.

Construction on Eastern State began in 1822, after an acrimonious contest to select the architect was settled in favor of a young emigrant from England, John Haviland. Although the prison's commissioners had initially appointed the more experienced William Strickland, America's master of the Greek Revival, Haviland's design was believed to be the less expensive alternative and had novel and appealing features. It was above all a brilliant expression of the penal philosophy of Benjamin Rush, Jeremy Bentham, and a host of Quaker prison reformers. Owing a debt to Betham's Panopticon, Haviland's prison was built upon a radial design in which prison observers were situated at the hub, allowing for unimpeded views of all cell blocks. Prisoners' cells were aligned along the spokes of the radii, but arranged to prevent any contact between them, and each was fitted out with a small outdoor exercise yard that was equally isolated. Forced to wear a concealing black hood over their heads, prisoners spent their time confined in near-total sensory deprivation, allowed neither to speak, communicate, nor see other prisoners, and permitted out for only one hour a day to exercise alone in confinement. During the early years, the silence of the cellblocks was broken only by the exhortations of a minister brought in to provide religious instruction.

Eastern State began accepting prisoners in October 1829 after only one of the seven cellblocks had been constructed. During its first four years, just over 200 males (75% white and 25% black) and four females (all black) were admitted for offenses ranging from murder and arson to prostitution and petty larceny. By the time the last of the original cellblocks was completed in 1836, the prison had become both a destination for sightseers, tourists, and dignitaries attracted by its reformist philosophy, and a lightning rod for critics. The totality of "cellular isolation" was a point of particular concern, and was thought perhaps to be conducive to mental and physical breakdown. Supporters of the influential "Auburn plan" of incarceration (named after the penitentiary at Auburn, N.Y.) argued that silent labor was more conducive to moral reform. Other advocates, such as Charles Dickens, who paid a special visit to the prison during his tour of America in 1842, denounced the "Pennsylvania plan" as inherently cruel, "immeasurably worse than any torture of the body." Still others argued that the penal system was simply ineffective in meeting its goal of reforming prisoners' behavior.

The central point of contention, however, may have been the extravagant cost and grandiosity of the prison's design. Originally budgeted for \$100,000, the construction costs had ballooned to an extraordinary \$772,600 by 1836. As a result of the mounting controversy, a joint legislative committee

was delegated in December 1834 to investigate the operations of Eastern State, and to evaluate charges of licentiousness on the part of staff, misuse of funds, embezzlement, and of outright cruelty to prisoners.

In the end, criticism of the system of cellular isolation slowly began to erode its practice, as reformers sought to reform the reform. Labor was introduced among the inmates in the 1830s, partly by directive of the state (and against the wishes of some of the prison's overseers). From that time forward, prisoners learned and labored at a trade within their cells, making shoes, textiles, picking oakum, or performing other manual tasks. By 1903, prisoners were no longer required to wear masks, and silence fell by the wayside shortly thereafter. The prison remained in operation until July 1970, and today it is a National Historical Landmark, still a draw for visitors.

Thomas Larcombe, the first moral instructor at the prison, united with the First Baptist Church in Philadelphia in 1807 at the age of 16, and was ordained a minister in 1821. He was pastor at churches in New Hopewell and Bordentown, N.J., and later at Colebrook, Conn., and he served at Eastern State from about 1837 into the 1850s.

## **Scope & content**

The Records of the Eastern State Penitentiary consist of seven bound volumes and a series of miscellaneous records and correspondence that document aspects of life in Jacksonian America's model prison. The collection has been organized into four series: Series I, Bound Volumes; Series II, Miscellaneous Records; Series III, Correspondence of Elizabeth Velora Elwell; and Series IV, Prisoners' Correspondence. The bound volumes contain records of admission for prisoners between 1830 and 1892 (with some gaps), three of which were kept and annotated by the Moral Instructor at the prison, Thomas Larcombe. Larcombe provided interesting comments on the "moral state" of each prisoner, in addition to data on name, age, gender and race, religious affiliation, the charges, sentence, and final disposition. The unbound materials in the collection are diverse, but include an important 70 page manuscript comprising the records of the joint commission charged with investigating management of the prison in 1835, with a partial transcript of testimony, and a series of 29 letters written to or from prisoners at Eastern State, 1845-1871, most unusually the inmate Elizabeth Velora Elwell, writing to her paramour and fellow inmate Albert Green Jackson.

### Arrangement

Series I. Admissions ledgers and bound volumes	1830-1892	7 vols.
Series II. Miscellaneous Records	1819-1835	5 folders
Series III. Elisabeth Velora Elwell correspondence	1862, 1955-1965	2 folders
Series III. Prisoners' correspondence	1845-1871, 1953-1955	1 folder

## **Administrative Information**

#### **Publication Information**

American Philosophical Society 2001

#### **Provenance**

#### **Acquisition Information**

The Records of Eastern State Penitentiary came from two disparate sources. Five manuscript items were acquired in 1960; while the seven bound volumes were donated by Jacob Gruber in December, 2000 (accn. no. 2000-1076ms) and February 2002 (accn. no. M2002-07).

#### **Processing Information**

Catalogued by rsc, 2001, 2004.

## **Related Materials**

#### **Related Material**

The Papers of William Parker Foulke (B F826) are rich in material relating to county and state prisons and prison reform associations, particularly the Philadelphia Prison Society, the New York Prison Association, and the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries in Public Prisons. Foulke corresponded with a great number of prison reformers, including Dorothea Lynde Dix (1802-1887), Louis Mathurin Moreau-Christophe (1799-1881), A. Blouet (probably Guillaume Abel Blouet, 1795-1853), H. C. King, Isaac G. Gordon (1819-1893), James Hall, and the architect John Haviland (1792-1852). In addition to the correspondence, Foulke collected biographical material on John Haviland for an obituary, including a list of prisons he designed and copies of a few of his letters one of which includes a sketch of a radiating plan for a prison. Two notebooks on prisons and prisoners are located at the end of the collection.

## **Indexing Terms**

#### Corporate Name(s)

• Pennsylvania. Board of Prisons

#### Genre(s)

- · Legal Records
- Official Government Documents and Records

#### Personal Name(s)

- Bennard, James S.
- Bradford, Thomas
- Brister, James
- Elwell, Elisabeth Velora, b. ca. 1843
- Gruber, Jacob W.
- · Iwanicki, Edwin
- Jackson, Albert Green
- Larcombe, Thomas, 1791-1861
- McCulley, James S.
- Starr, Edward C.
- Steel, Silas S.
- Williamson, Barbry
- Williamson, Henry

#### Subject(s)

- Government Affairs
- Law
- Philadelphia History
- Prisoners--Pennsylvania--Philadelphia
- Prisons--Pennsylvania--Philadelphia
- Social Life and Custom
- Women prisoners--Pennsylvania--Philadelphia

## **Other Descriptive Information**

These two volumes record the admissions to Eastern State Penitentiary for the years 1839-1850 (excluding, apparently, 1844). The records contain a wealth of information about each prisoner admitted. The entries often contain a physical description of the inmate, a description of the crime(s) committed, and, occasionally, statements the prisoner made. Most entries contain a detailed biographical history of the prisoner that includes information on the background of the criminal, such as their family life, how they were raised, previous incarcerations, and the social habits of the prisoner, such as drinking in taverns or their religiosity.

## **Bibliography**

Haviland, John, *A Description of Haviland's Design for the New Penitentiary, Now Erecting Near Philadelphia; Accompanied With a Birds-Eye View* (Philadelphia: R. Desilver, 1824) Call no.: Pam. 994:4.

Pennsylvania. General Assembly, Report of the Joint Committee of the Legislature of Pennsylvania Relative to the Eastern State Penitentiary at Philadelphia ... Read in the House of Representatives, Mar. 26, 1835 (Harrisburg: Welsh, 1835) Call no.: Pam 1001:14.

Pennsylvania. General Assembly, Report of the Minority of the Joint Committee of the Legislature of Pennsylvania, Relative to the Eastern State Penitentiary at Philadelphia ... Read in the House of Representatives, Mar. 26, 1835 (Harrisburg: Welsh, 1835) Call no.: Pam 1001:15.

Richard Vaux, Brief Sketch of the Origin and History of the State Penitentiary for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, at Philadelphia (Philadelphia: McLaughlin brothers, printers, 1872). Call no.: 365 V46b

Norman Johnston, Ken Finkel, and Jeffery Cohen, *Eastern State Penitentiary : Crucible of Good Intentions* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1994). Call no.: 365 J64c

## **Collection Inventory**

Series I. Admission ledgers and bound	1830-1892
volumes	

7 vols., 0.25 Volume 1 lin. feet

The seven bound volumes in the Eastern State Penitentiary Collection contains records of prisoners admitted to the prison from its opening until 1892, along with records of foodstuffs purchased for the prisoners (1841-1842) and an overseer's record of work performed by them (1843).

At least three of the five admissions ledgers (A, B and D) appear to have been kept by the Moral Instructor at the Prison, Rev. Thomas Larcombe. Each prisoner is represented in these books by a single brief entry, recording name, age, gender and race, religious affiliation, the crimes for which they had been found guilty, the sentence, and often a note on when they were freed (or died). Most interesting of all, in the three earliest volumes, Larcombe provided brief comments on the moral condition of each prisoner, whether they were repentant, resistant, religious, or recalcitrant. The completeness of the volumes makes possible some basic statistical analysis of the early prison population, and Larcombe's running commentary affords fascinating insight into cultural attitudes toward crime, criminality, race and gender, and incarceration. Women and men, black and white, are intermingled in the volumes. Each volume contains an apparently complete record of prisoners admitted during a given period, however there is no record of prisoners 1-19 or 1678-1940 (1843-1845) or for the years 1850-1853 or 1858-1876. The last entry is dated 1892.

Volume A: Admissions (no. 20-1124)

1830-1839

ca. 260p.

Volume A

Record of admission of prisoners number 20 through 1124, including name, crime, sentence, place of origin, race/ethnicity, time in and time out, and comments on moral and educational condition. Some also include notes on previous convictions or progress made while incarcerated. A typical entry: "No. 58, Dec. 14, 1830. Saml Davis, Mulatto, Rape 12 yrs. Exceedingly excited, Enraged at the Judge & threatened revenge, Swore if knife or Pistol could be had, would revenge his wrongs upon his prosecutor also had sold himself to the Devil & meant to rush on to hell for revenge -- did not wish to hear of religion. Pardoned Nov. 21, 1842."

Volume B: Admissions (no.1125-1677)

1839-1843

ca. 250p.

Volume B

Similar to above. Includes list of books received for prisoners from J.J. Barclay, as well as a list of Germans in the Penitentiary.

Volume D: Admissions (no. 1941-2600)

1845-1850

ca. 250p.

Volume D

Similar to above.

Concludes with passage on "Difficulties of the Moral Instructor": "Overseers conceive hostility against him for trivial causes of for none at all -- sometimes for the obvious discharges of duty. They either speak to their prisoners against him or insinuate something to his disadvantage & their prisoners to court the good will of those who can make their situation pleasant of afflictive, misrepresent him or having their imaginations imperfect, they watch him closely and often wrongfully interpret his language."

Memorandum of Prisoners

1853-1858

ca.150p.

Briefer record of admissions, including name of prisoner, racial identity, age, nativitry, trade, number of convictions, parents (living or dead), "learning habits," crime, sentence, county of origin, religious education (denomination), plea, and location (cell number). Occasional additional comments.

Memorandum of Prisoners

ca.1876-1892

288p.

Similar to above memorandum.

Daily rations/beef book

1841-1842

ca.75p.

Accounts for foodstuffs purchased for prisoners.

Overseer's Roll

December 31, 1843

9p.

Record of labor performed by prisoners (listed by inmate number), arranged by block.

#### Series II. Miscellaneous Records

1819-1835

5 items, 0.25 Box 1 lin. feet

The miscellaneous records appear largely to have come through the hands of Thomas Bradford, a member of the state commission charged with overseeing the construction and operation of the prison. The most important among these items is a 70 page manuscript comprising the records of the joint commission charged with investigating management of the prison in 1835, including a partial transcript of testimony.

1 Notes on expenditures

1819-1833

3p.

Notes on various categories of expenditures at Eastern State Prison, primarily between 1832 and 1834. The second sheet, possibly unrelated, includes notes on expenditures for provisions, clothing, cordwainers, and medicine, 1819.

#### Pennsylvania. Board of Prisons

March 24, 1823

1p. D. 1p. and

2 Resolution

end.

Resolution of the board of inspectors of prisons to erect a "stepping mill" at the Arch Street and Prune Street prisons in Philadelphia. Concerning the cost of a new jail. Signed T.Bradford, Esq.

#### **Thomas Bradford**

November 6, 1826

2p.

3 Letter to Vincent Lovekennan Bradford

Dover, A.L.S. 2p.and add.,end. Requests Vincent, his son, to attend Council for him and look at the minutes for Nov. 1825 for the election of Inspectors of the Prison; other personal matters.

Steel, Silas S.

May 21-August 21, 1833

2p. D. 2p.and

4 "Statement of the quantity of wheat, bread and tea consumed by the penitentiary"

end. Copy.

Copy of accounts of wheat, bread, and tea consumed at Eastern State Penitentiary, presumably associated with the joint legislative committee investigation of that institution.

State Penitentiary for the Eastern District 1835

70p. 64 pp.

of Pennsylvania. Committee.

5 Minutes

Minutes, containing reports of Dr. Franklin Bache, physician, and Thomas Bradford, Jr., Inspector, etc.. Detailed record of minutes and testimony relating to the joint legislative committee inquiring into the running of Eastern State Penitentiary, 1835.

# Series III. Elizabeth Velora Elwell 1862-1965 2 folders Correspondence

#### **Background note**

On September 12, 1861, a 17 year old servant, Elizabeth Velora Elwell, was arrested in Bradford County, Pa., on charges of taking merchandise from a store and stealing mail. Convicted of larceny, her first offence, on Dec. 3, she was sentenced to one and a half years confinement in Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia. When she was admitted to the prison as inmate no. 4587, Elwell was described as having a swarthy complexion, blue eyes, light hair, 5' 7", scar over left eyebrow and one on upper lip.

Elizabeth Velora Elwell's correspondence is the rarest of the rare: an intact series of letters from a female prisoner in the mid-nineteenth century. Elwell was literate, though not highly so, and her letters are written in a rough hand and rough prose. If they are to be taken at face, they suggest that Elwell carried a passionate love for a fellow prisoner at Eastern State, Albert Green Jackson, with hints that they may have met clandestinely on more than one occasion. It appears that the two had plans to marry when their terms expired.

Elwell's letters are lively, affectionate, and often joking, filled with romantic longing, and in some cases, they veer between despair at imprisonment and an almost light hearted wish for the future:

The second folder of material in this series contains correspondence between the Temple University anthropologist Jacob W. Gruber relating to his efforts to obtain more detailed information on Elwell and the circumstances of her arrest and to his attempts to have the letters published.

Elizabeth Velora Elwell letters	1862 Apr. 13-May 12	20 items	
Elwell, Elisabeth Velora, b. ca. 1843 To Elizabeth Velora Elwell	1862 April 13	ALS, 2p.	Folder 1
Includes note from E.V. Elwell to Alb	oert G. Jackson		
Elwell, Elisabeth Velora, b. ca. 1843 To Albert G. Jackson	1862 April 18	ALS, 2p.	Folder 1
Elwell, Elisabeth Velora, b. ca. 1843 To Albert G. Jackson	1862 April 22	ALS, 2p.	Folder 1
Includes poems "The Bride" and "Lill	ey of the West"		

Elwell , Elisabeth Velora, b. ca. 1843 To Albert G. Jackson	1862 April 24	ALS, 2p.	Folder 1
E.V.E. To Albert G. Jackson	1962 April 25	ALS, 2p.	Folder 1
Includes poem "Poetrysies"			
Elwell , Elisabeth Velora, b. ca. 1843 To Albert G. Jackson	1862 April 28	ALS, 1p.	Folder 1
Elwell , Elisabeth Velora, b. ca. 1843 To Albert G. Jackson	1862 May 1	ALS, 2p.	Folder 1
E.V.E.  To Albert G. Jackson  Includes poem: "For my love"	1862 May 2	ALS, 2p.	Folder 1
Miss H, Queen of Love To Royal Sir	1862 May 4	ALS, 2p.	Folder 1
Miss He To Peter James	1862 May 5	ALS, 2p.	Folder 1
[Miss H.]? To Peater [sic] James	1862 May 6	AL, 2p.	Folder 1
E.V.E. To Albert G. Jackson	1862 May 6	ALS, 1p.	Folder 1
E.V.J. To Albert G. Jackson	1862 May 7	ALS, 2p.	Folder 1
Jackson, E. V. To Albert G. Jackson	1862 May 9	ALS, 2p.	Folder 1
E.V.E. To Albert G. Jackson	1862 May 11	ALS, 2p.	Folder 1

Hollinger, Mrs. To Albert G. Jackson	1862 May 11	ALS, 2p.	Folder 1
Jackson, Albert Green To Elizabeth V. Elwell	1862 May 12	AMsS, 2p.	Folder 1
Poem/letter.			
[Elwell, E. V.]? Songs: "Evening star" and "Good Bye Sweetheart"	n.d.	AMs, 2p.	Folder 1
[Hollinger, Mrs.]? To dear sister	n.d.	AN, 2p.	Folder 1
[Hollinger, Mrs.]? To dear sister	n.d.	AN, 2p.	Folder 1
Correspondence about Elizabeth Velora Elwell	1955-1965	9 items	
Gruber, Jacob W. To Bradford County (Pa.). Clerk	1955 June 22	TLS Cy, 1p.	Folder 2
Kingsley, Gilbert I. To Jacob W. Gruber	1955 June 28	TLS, 1p.	Folder 2
Gruber, Jacob W. To Bruce Catton	1956 April 23	TLS Cy, 1p.	Folder 2
Gruber, Jacob W. To John Fischer	1956 May 14	TLS Cy, 1p.	Folder 2
Harper's Magazine. Editor To Jacob W. Gruber	1956 June 11	TLS, 1p.	Folder 2
Wainwright, Nicholas B. To Edwin B. Bronner	1957 Jan. 11	TLS, 1p.	Folder 2

#### Correspondence about Elizabeth Velora Elwell

<b>Iwanicki, Edwin</b> To Jacob W. Gruber	1965 May 21	TLS, 1p. Folder 2
Iwanicki, Edwin To Jacob W. Gruber	1965 June 6	TLS, 1p. Folder 2
<b>Gruber, Jacob W.</b> To Edwin Iwanicki	1965 May 24	TLS Cy, 1p. Folder 2

#### Series IV. Prisoners' Correspondence 1845-1955 2 folders

The nine letters in Series IV include two long letters from prisoners James Brister and James Bennard (or Baynard), 1845, two letters addressed to prisoners (also 1845), a petition from a prisoner convicted of murder for a retrial, and letter from Congressman William F. Smith on the advantages to be gained in constructing a third prison in the state.

Brister's letter gives a hint of repentance of the kind that would have appealed to Thomas Larcombe, while still maintaining the tough edge of a hardened prisoner:

James Brister, May 26, 1845

Amelia Clark wrote to he husband "Direct your letter to Amelia Horsford north Canaan my name hant Clark no more till we are marriage over again you may say Clark if you are aimin[g] to send me something."

As in Series III, the prisoners' letters are accompanied by Gruber's correspondence, in this case seeking -- partly successfully -- for information on Thomas Larcombe.

Prisoners' letters	1845-1871	6 items	
Brister, James	1845 May 26	ALS, 4p.	Folder 1
To Sarah Brister			
Bennard, James S.	1845 July 14	ALS, 4p.	Folder 1
To Rebecca E. Bennard			
Horsford, Amelia	1845 July 20	ALS, 2p.	Folder 1
To Harvey Clark			
Eshelman, Hiram Williamson,	1845 Aug. 15	ALS, 3p.	Folder 1
Barbary			
To Henry Williamson			
McCulley, James S.	1869 April 3	ALS, 1p.	Folder 1
ALS to State Penitentiary for the Easter	rn		
District of Pennsylvania. Board of			
Inspectors			
Smith, William F.	1871 Mar. 3	ALS, 3p.	Folder 1
To Richard Vaux			

orrespondence about the prisoners'	1953-1955	10 items	
Gruber, Jacob W.	1953 Nov. 11	TLS Cy, 1p.	Folder 2
To Raymond Larcombe			
Marin, Norman H.	1953 Nov. 14	TLS, 1p.	Folder 2
To Jacob W. Gruber			
Gruber, Jacob W.	1953 Nov. 17	TLS Cy, 1p.	Folder 2
To Edward C. Starr			
Starr, Edward C.	1953 Nov. 19	TLS, 2p.	Folder 2
To Jacob W. Gruber			
Gruber, Jacob W.	1953 Nov. 20	TLS Cy, 1p.	Folder 2
To Edward C. Starr			
Starr, Edward C.	1953 Nov. 23	TLS, 1p.	Folder 2
To Jacob W. Gruber			
Larcombe, Ray	1955 Jan. 6	ALS, 1p.	Folder 2
To Jacob W. Gruber			
Gruber, Jacob W.	1955 Feb. 28	TLS Cy, 1p.	Folder 2
To Rose Larcombe			
Larcombe, Rose	1955 Mar. 5	ALS, 1p.	Folder 2
To Jacob W. Gruber			
Gruber, Jacob W.	n.d.	TMsS, 6p.	Folder 2
"Jews in the Eastern State Penitentiary	in		
the 19th century"			