A PHILADELPHIA MASTERPIECE
HAVILAND’S PRISON

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The Museum has in its collection of American portraits an interesting, characteristic work by the Philadelphia painter John Neagle: it is a portrait of the architect John Haviland. This painting has always been considered one of Neagle’s best works, and in the conventional view of the history of American painting it retains this importance. But in the larger view of art and history in general there can be little question that the subject of the picture has an even broader interest and value which has been somewhat overlooked.

The portrait was painted in 1828 at the moment of Haviland’s greatest achievement, showing him at the age of thirty-four. In the background Neagle has placed a view of the façade of the Pennsylvania Eastern State Penitentiary, the building that made Haviland one of the leading American architects of his time and, according to experts in such matters, the greatest prison architect in history. On the desk lies a sketch of the revolutionary radial ground plan of the prison; Haviland’s right hand holds a pair of calipers and rests on a stout calf-bound copy of Stuart’s Athens, the architect’s bible of that day.

When this portrait came to the Museum (in 1938) some effort was made to identify the building shown in the background. First it was suggested that it was a view of the Philadelphia prison, but later it was decided to retire into safe generalization and to call it merely a prison. As it turns out, the first guess was correct.

This remarkable structure was for many years one of the most widely known buildings in the United States. It was famous throughout the entire Western world as the first and best model prison. It was designed and built by Haviland in Philadelphia in the years 1823–1829 and is his greatest work, unquestionably his masterpiece; but it is also, in a very special sense, a Philadelphia masterpiece, and in the broadest sense it may perhaps be thought of as a work of art.

Penitentiaries as a rule are seldom considered in this way. The name alone—penitentiary—has a chill and somber ring to it that has perhaps been influential in curbing a tendency towards such consideration. The idea that a prison building could have the qualities of a work of art is a somewhat arresting paradox. However, without pressing the point too far we may say that this prison comes nearer to being a work of art than any other building of its kind, and makes the examination of its unusual structure worth while and the story of its creator, John Haviland, worth retelling.

At the time the prison was built it was one of the largest construction jobs ever undertaken in this country. It covers approximately ten acres of ground, and its massive outer walls of gray granite measure twelve feet thick at the ground level, some thirty feet high, and six hundred and seventy feet long on each side of the square. Only one entrance breaks the bitter monotony of this penitentiary stronghold.

Haviland has been criticized by some writers for fastening on prison architecture the heavy gloomy Gothic fortress style. However much he may be to blame for this from the point of view of modern penologists, they fail to take into account the fact that it would have been almost impossible for any architect of that romantic era to design a prison in anything but the Gothic or Egyptian style. Actually, the few Gothic details not only serve to emphasize the entrance but also add to the design of the façade by breaking the monolithic fabric of the outer wall.

In Haviland’s day this ponderous and impenetrable medieval keep was meant to have an improving moral effect upon the observer. An old description of the prison brings out this point: “The design and execution 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 impressive, solemn and instructive." Whether such moralistic stage setting had any real effect as a rather passive measure in crime prevention it would be difficult to say.

However, the most important aspect of Haviland’s design for the penitentiary from the artistic as well as from the historical point of view lies not at all in the few Gothic details of the main façade, which can be seen by any pedestrian, but in the total design of the interior structure, hidden from public view behind the granite cliffs of the exterior wall. It is in the planning of this internal complex that one finds the evidence of Haviland’s original powers as an architect; here is shown his ability to assimilate the radically new ideas of experimental prison reform and to translate theory into functional architecture. It was his success in making this transformation that raised him from being merely a builder to the status of a creative artist. His design was in fact so successful that for a hundred years little further improvement was made in prison architecture, although penological practice and theory changed greatly in that period. His answer to the problems of prison architecture was so good that it established a precedent which in effect brought experiment in prison architecture to a halt for a century.

The historical importance of this building is perhaps best stated by Harry Elmer Barnes in a recent report on Pennsylvania prisons, in which he says that it is “one of the two great historic prisons of the world” and “in penological history . . . as important as Independence Hall in our political history.”

Perhaps it would be well to set down briefly a few of the often forgotten facts of the history of prison reform to provide a background for these statements, and in this way to place Haviland, as Neagle did in his portrait, in proper relation to his work. The movement for the reformation of prisons and penal systems started in England with the extraordinary work of John Howard, who published in 1777 his famous *Report on the Prisons of England and Wales*. In this country agitation for prison reform started with the organization in Philadelphia of the Society for Alleviating the Miseries of the Public Prisons in 1787.

Conditions in America, and especially in Philadelphia, were then remarkably favorable for advances in prison reform to be put into effect. There were no old buildings suitable for conversion to prison use as there were in Europe. Convicts could not be transported to Australia as they were from England. The old Walnut Street Prison was too small and merely a provincial copy of the worst London jails. The cumbersome penal system inherited from England was brutal, chaotic, and antiquated. The new outlook brought about by setting up a new government in a new country presented unparalleled opportunities for sweeping changes to be made. The apathy of old custom was replaced by enthusiasm for experiment and improvement.

Philadelphia’s especial contribution to the solution of the grave problems of prison reform was the active part played by its Quaker citizens in tirelessly working for the improvement of prison conditions and in persistantly presenting the state legislature with memorials pointing out the necessity of completely overhauling the existing penal system and building a suitable prison. But they went beyond this, and Mr. Barnes in his summary of Pennsylvania prison history says:

“The vision of these far-seeing realists . . . made Philadelphia for years the Mecca of visiting penologists, lawyers and judges from other parts of the world. Out of the work of these pioneers there ultimately emerged not only the first historic system of prison discipline, but one which seemed . . . to have solved the knotty problems of the reformation of criminals. This was the Pennsylvania system of separate confinement . . . supplemented by prison visiting by substantial and public-spirited citizens of the community. This was truly the expression of a feeling of responsibility on the part of the free citizen for the less fortunate. . . . At no other time in the penal experience of the state or of the nation have so many important citizens taken so diligent and so personal an interest in the well-being and destiny of the man confined in the prison cell.”

The revolutionary innovations in prison dis-
The Pennsylvania Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, designed and built by Haviland 1823–1829, from a lithograph of about 1822. This print is probably an illustration from Haviland’s pamphlet describing the prison.

discipline planned by the Philadelphia prison reform group consisted in what seem today to be some rather simple basic proposals. They believed that if each prisoner were placed alone in a clean cell, given some work to do and regular religious instruction, there would be some hope of redeeming him. These theoretical qualifications posed problems of construction, heating, ventilation, sanitation, and supervision, which the architect had to synthesize into a workable design. Without going too deeply into the oppressive history of prisons, it will perhaps suffice to say that Haviland’s prison—harsh and gloomy as it may seem to us—was, by contrast to the prisons of the past, a veritable haven of wholesomeness and comfort.

Haviland seemed by many circumstances to be particularly selected by Providence or fate to be the designer of the first prison that embodied the most enlightened and humane principles of the prison reform movement of his time. Though he was born and educated in England he was gifted, as Talbot Hamlin points out, “with a kind of adaptability that allowed him to adjust himself to his new American environment with amazing rapidity and success.” The man who trained him in architecture, James Elmes, was also the author of a treatise, Hints on the Construction of Prisons (1817). Haviland’s uncle, Count Morduinoff, by coincidence, was one of those who befriended John Howard during his last illness (Howard died in Kherson while making a tour of inspection of the hospitals and prisons of South Russia in 1790). Later, Haviland visited his uncle and doubtless heard from him about the famous John Howard whose life had been dedicated to awakening the world to the terrible state of the prisons of Europe. Curiously enough it was in Russia that Haviland decided to go to America, for there he met General George von Sonntag, a Philadelphian then serving in the Russian army. Most probably it was Sonntag who suggested that the young architect should settle in Philadelphia—in any case, shortly after his arrival there Haviland married the general’s sister.

Though Haviland was introduced to polite society in Philadelphia by the Sonntag family in 1816, his exhibition of the design for a prison in 1818, the publication of his book The Builder’s Assistant in that same year, and the commissions he won to build two churches must all have been
factors in bringing him to the attention of the two leaders in the Philadelphia prison reform society, Bishop William White and the Quaker Roberts Vaux. At any rate Haviland and his patrons were brought together and united in a common cause: the planning and building of the Eastern State Penitentiary.

Some biographers have remarked that Haviland's early days in Philadelphia are quite obscure. However, if he first lived in obscurity there is plenty of evidence that he was not idle. It appears that he was so fortunate as to arrive at the scene of his labors at precisely the time when his remarkable talents and abilities were required. He was well prepared, being thoroughly grounded in architecture, and he was aware of the prison reform movement and its dependence on architecture. His patrons, the members of the Society for Alleviating the Miseries of the Public Prisons, had spent almost twenty years in preparing the minds of the public and the state government officials to accept—if not to demand—the innovations necessary for the introduction of a planned system of prison discipline and the specially designed building needed before this new system could be put into practice. Haviland's skill in seizing and developing his great opportunity resulted in the creation of an architectural masterpiece.

Upon the completion of the new prison its fame spread throughout the world. In 1834 special commissions from England, France, Prussia, and Russia journeyed to Philadelphia to survey Haviland's prison in operation. Needless to say, such attentions have seldom been accorded to any American work of art before or since. Haviland's anonymous biographer, writing in the Pennsylvania Journal of Prison Discipline, says that when these commissioners "returned to their respective governments the plans which they reported for adoption were essentially the same with that of the Eastern Penitentiary."

Haviland spent his entire professional life in Philadelphia. From the time of his arrival from England in 1816 until his death in 1852, he was busy with his chosen work there. His success in designing the Pennsylvania Penitentiary naturally led to his being awarded the commissions for the designing and building of many other state, county, and city prisons, and other institutional structures of a similar nature where large groups of people were to be housed. He designed state prisons for New Jersey, Missouri, and Rhode Island, as well as a state insane asylum for Pennsylvania, the U.S. Navy Home at Norfolk, and the Deaf and Dumb Asylum in Philadelphia. He is said also to have designed a hotel, a sort of deluxe variation of the prison cell block.

His contribution to the New York scene was the Tombs—the city court rooms and prison formally known as the Halls of Justice. Its

Detail of a print of the Halls of Justice, New York, commonly known as "The Tombs," built by Haviland in 1836 and demolished between 1897 and 1902. Photograph courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York
Egyptian façades are remembered today by architectural historians as "the grandest example" of that style of architecture ever erected in this country.

In 1824, after the building of his great prison was well under way, he began another pioneering venture in a new field when, at the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia, he inaugurated the first formal courses in professional training for architects to be given in the United States. In 1836 he was one of the founders of the Institution of American Architects (forerunner of the American Institute of Architects), and later he was elected an honorary member of the Royal Institute of British Architects.

Both the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia and the Tombs in New York, and doubtless Haviland's other prisons in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Rhode Island, and Missouri, were all models of modern prison architecture when they were first built; but during the later years of the nineteenth century, as the prison population grew and overcrowding and unsanitary conditions increased, brutality and callousness, indifference and forgetfulness, allowed them to become barbaric sinks of corruption with the most sinister reputations.

The Eastern State Penitentiary, once the pride of an older generation of Philadelphia philanthropists, is now the despair of modern penologists, who, while fully realizing its importance as a historical monument, deplore the fact that after a hundred and twenty-six years the structure remains more or less unimproved and still in use. Mr. Barnes reports that "from the physical side, the Eastern Penitentiary is an archaic nuisance.... It is high time to recognize that its value and virtues are today, exclusively historic." He suggests that the old prison be abandoned and demolished except for one wing of the cell block. This he proposes to save for use as a museum of penological history. Perhaps it would be best to demolish the whole thing and transform the land it occupies into a park dedicated to the memory of all the courageous and persistant Philadelphians whose humanitarian ideas of prison reform were crystallized by Haviland into an architectural design which prophetically took the form of a star: a star of hope against the black night of prison history, a star which first rose upon the plain Quaker horizon of Philadelphia.

The quotations in this article are from H. E. Barnes, Pennsylvania Penology—1944 (Pennsylvania State College), and Talbot Hamlin, Greek Revival Architecture in America, 1944.