



GREATER PHILADELPHIA AREA DOCENT CONSORTIUM

GPADC Winter Meeting / ESP Virtual Tour

February 9, 2021 via Zoom

110-115 Participants from 36 member organizations.

Welcome

GPADC Opening Remarks. GPADC Chair Anna Hadgis welcomed everyone to the GPADC virtual program, presented in collaboration with Eastern State Penitentiary (ESP). Anna was thrilled to welcome participants from Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware. She introduced us to the ESP staff who were our presenters. Sam Hunter, Senior Specialist, School and Youth Programs, received her MA degree from Villanova. She creates workshops and tours for educators and children at ESP. Matt Murphy, Tour Program Supervisor, oversees the hiring and training of ESP's educators and has worked as a Heritage Interpreter at Alcatraz and Independence Historical Park.

ESP Virtual Tour, presented by Sam Hunter

Introduction. Sam's presentation used videos as well as photographs to approximate the experience of an in person tour at what she called "America's most historic prison." Opened in 1829, ESP was abandoned in 1971 and then reopened as a historic site in 1994. Located just five blocks north of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, ESP had no nearby neighbors when it first opened. However, drawings from the time show that Philadelphia residents were curious enough to stroll immediately outside the prison's 30 foot walls. Originally ESP housed men, women and children. Over the 142 years of its operation, more than 80,000 people were incarcerated here. Sam showed Bertillon cards, i.e., prisoner identification cards, for two of those individuals, Leo Callahan and Lucy Stewart. These cards described the individual's physical and social characteristics as well as their crimes and included their photographs. Of the 100 people who escaped ESP over the years, Leo Callahan, who made his break in 1923, was the only one who was never recaptured. Lucy Stewart came to ESP in 1922 for the crime of murder. She was transferred in 1923 when the first women only prison was opened in the U.S.

Why do we care about ESP? Sam explained that the U.S. incarcerates more people than any other country. The U.S. has 5% of the world's population but 25% of the those in jail. This mass incarceration is unprecedented; people of color are always overrepresented in relation to their share of the population. Sam asked the participants to think about what the word "justice"

meant to them and to share their thoughts. She used these responses to summarize two of her main themes: 1) the ideal vs. the reality of providing or attaining justice and 2) the equitable or inequitable access to justice. Sam used two photographs of the Capitol Police in Washington, D.C. to illustrate these issues. One showed the Capitol Police in full riot gear as they faced a peaceful crowd of Black Lives Matter protestors last summer. The other showed Capital Police clad in their everyday uniforms and taking selfies with those who broke into the building in an effort to overturn the Presidential election in January 2021.

The History & Design of ESP. ESP was originally conceived as a correction to and improvement upon the old prison system exemplified by Newgate Prison in London. Such institutions held people in crowded common cells with little supervision. Necessities such as food, water, bedding, etc. were not provided and therefore prisoners often fought over such basic resources. People awaiting trial were thrown in with convicted criminals. Generally, those found guilty were subjected to public forms of punishment and shaming, such as the pillory or whipping.

In Philadelphia, Benjamin Franklin, Benjamin Rush and Bishop White formed a society (now the Pennsylvania Prison Society) to improve prisons. Their aim was to promote penitence and rehabilitation and to ensure that those convicted of crimes became productive members of society. They believed the way to achieve these goals was through isolation, study of the Bible, useful work, and constant surveillance.

The original building was designed by the English architect John Haviland. The site covers 10.5 acres and its walls are 30 feet high. The sole entrance, reminiscent of castle fortifications, was meant to look intimidating and to act as a deterrent to crime. ESP has a radial design: cell blocks radiate from a central hub, theoretically allowing constant and uninterrupted surveillance. This design was subsequently used in more than 300 prisons around the world. As second stories or additional cell blocks were added, perpetual surveillance from one central point became virtually impossible. The cell blocks have high, vaulted ceilings with skylights to bring in natural light. The building consists mostly of brick and stone along with horsehair plaster.

Originally, each prisoner was held in solitary confinement. 23 hours a day were spent alone inside one's cell; the prisoner could spend one hour in their private exercise yard. This outdoor area had 16 foot high walls so even here prisoners could see no one else. The basic necessities were provided for each inmate: meals, beds, toilet, washbasin, a Bible and work implements. (Note that ESP got indoor plumbing before the White House!) Generally, prisoners were kept in solitary confinement for one to two years. Women were housed in the 2nd floor gallery of Cell Block 37. Photographs show that the setup and furnishing of ESP's cells is virtually identical to solitary confinement cells in use today.

From the beginning, the concept of solitary confinement was controversial. Those in favor touted its benefits: it protected inmates and guards from violence; it eliminated bad

influences; and it prevented distractions. Those against it argued that solitary confinement was bad for mental and physical health and that it violated human rights. By 1913, solitary confinement was phased out and ESP switched to the congregate system found in prisons today, i.e., prisoners living, working and eating together. Sam asked the group to consider this question: “How should prisons use solitary confinement today?” She used the participants’ responses to highlight the importance of discussing this question.

Prison Work. Vocational training was always a major part of ESP’s strategy to rehabilitate the inmates. The skills taught under the congregate system became even more sophisticated and included auto repair, clerical work and laundry services. This, too, was controversial. Many felt that prisons should not compete with businesses. It also raised the question of how much, if anything, inmates should be paid. Sam pointed to the 13th Amendment that outlawed slavery and indentured servitude except in the case of criminals. Until the prison was desegregated in the 1960s, Blacks and Whites were trained for different types of jobs. Sam reminded us that many of the objects we use on a daily basis have been made in prisons. During the current pandemic, prison labor has provided masks and hand sanitizer. In California, prisoners can work as firefighters, literally risking their lives. Many prisoners say they want to contribute and often prison works gives inmates useful skills. Sam asked us to consider the following question: “Should conversations about the ethics of prison labor be put on hold during a national crisis?” Most respondents said it should be an ongoing discussion.

Sam noted that some former prisoners have positive things to say about their time at ESP, such as participating in sports, playing music or making art. Prisoners were able to decorate their cells to make them more personal. She showed a photograph of the cell of ESP’s most famous inmate, Al Capone. He obviously had the means to decorate as he chose. When asked, Sam said there was no evidence to prove that he received special treatment during his time there. She then asked us to ponder this question: “Do you believe a person’s income can determine their experience with the criminal justice system?” Most respondents said income would affect one’s experience.

Conclusion. ESP closed as a prison in 1970 and was abandoned in 1971. Sam asked us to consider these final questions: “What values and beliefs belong in our criminal justice system? How can we make sure those values and beliefs are accessible to all?”

ESP Now, presented by Matt Murphy

Introduction. Matt noted that it has been an interesting and challenging year. He gave us an overview of how ESP has adapted to the new circumstances. ESP’s Education Department consists of four staff, including its Director of Education and Programs, Lauren Zalut. Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, approximately 65,000 people participated in their various programs. Ironically, that meant that their biggest pre-shutdown problem was insufficient capacity to handle all the visitors. The abrupt closure caused by the pandemic resulted in a reduction of staff in Education and Visitor Services. Sadly, one of their guides died of COVID in April 2020.

Adapting to Virtual Programs & Furthering Antiracism. ESP started FaceBook Live tours so they could interact with people. They are also working with Zoom and YouTube. Matt and Sam created virtual guided tours and have done approximately 200 of them. Initially they put no limits on capacity but have since reduced it to a maximum of 50 people. They are still figuring out how best to interact with participants on a virtual program. They are also creating manuals and training staff.

Shortly before this staff training began, George Floyd was killed and protests erupted in Philadelphia and around the country. They recognized the ways in which the contemporary situation intersected with ESP's history and so they rethought the content and relevance of their programs to criminal and social justice. Some of ESP's primarily White staff were concerned that discussing race in educational programs was potentially traumatic for participants. On the other hand, there was pushback that ESP's statements on antiracism were not strong enough. Sam said that after discussion, they decided it would do less harm to discuss racism imperfectly than to ignore it completely. ESP staff did antiracism training, reading and reflection. Matt said they are working on an "Approved Source" for antiracism and they have begun to draft an Education Department Philosophy.

Matt told us ESP has received great feedback from teachers on their programs for schools. They reopened for tours in August. However, they had to cancel Terror Behind the Walls, an event that provides about 60% of their annual revenue. They did do a limited number of night tours around Halloween. They will probably feel the financial pinch for a few more years. ESP will reopen in March for audio, not guided, tours. Tours will have to follow a linear route through the prison to foster social distancing. Guided tours will probably not resume until Fall 2021.

ESP has created two new virtual tours. 1) Defining Justice: Past & Present highlights ESP's history and the way it intersects with criminal and social justice. 2) Virtual Excursions, for Grades 4-12, are focused on topics such as food, music or sports. Sam and Matt believe the virtual tours will continue post-pandemic because they provide access to a wider audience. They recently gave a program to a classroom in Hong Kong!

ESP provides programs free of charge to the Philadelphia School District. Everyone else is charged \$10 but they said they are very flexible on pricing.

Responses to Questions

Although they have not designed programs for Grades K-3, Sam believes there is always a way to talk with younger children about criminal and social justice issues. ESP staff do know how to adapt content for younger ages. For example, they have found the Food Excursion program appropriate for younger children.

ESP was one of the first prisons to have a synagogue. However, they did not provide kosher meals. The prison denied Muslims their religious texts.

The Returning Citizens Program began a few years ago. The guides on these short tours share some of their experiences of incarceration to foster empathy. The program started by offering short tours just a few times a week but expanded to one hour tours and the guides became regular staff. Lauren Zalut finds participants via various re-entry programs.

Surveys show that about 70% of ESP's audience is white and has no personal experience of the criminal justice system.

Recently ESP received a grant from the Institute of Library Sciences. This funds a fellowship for a formerly incarcerated individual, providing him or her with an opportunity to gain useful skills. It covers a limited period of time and is intended to be a transitional stage.

Pennsylvania's incarceration rate is above the national average. For a while, Philadelphia was a leader in sentencing children to life imprisonment without parole. Sam noted that "life without parole" has come to be known as "death by incarceration."

Matt said that New Jersey was the first state to make the legalization of marijuana retroactive.

Per Anna's request, Matt and Sam agreed to take additional questions via email.

Closing Remarks

Anna thanked Matt Murphy and Sam Hunter for a fascinating program. She particularly appreciated their transparency about their programs and processes. Anna encouraged everyone to attend one of ESP's Halloween events as it is a major fundraiser for them.

Anna thanked all the participants and she looks forward to seeing our members at the GPADC General Meeting this spring. She reminded everyone that GPADC is here for you.

Meeting Adjourned 11:50 am

Respectfully submitted,

Rebecca Butterfield, Recording Secretary