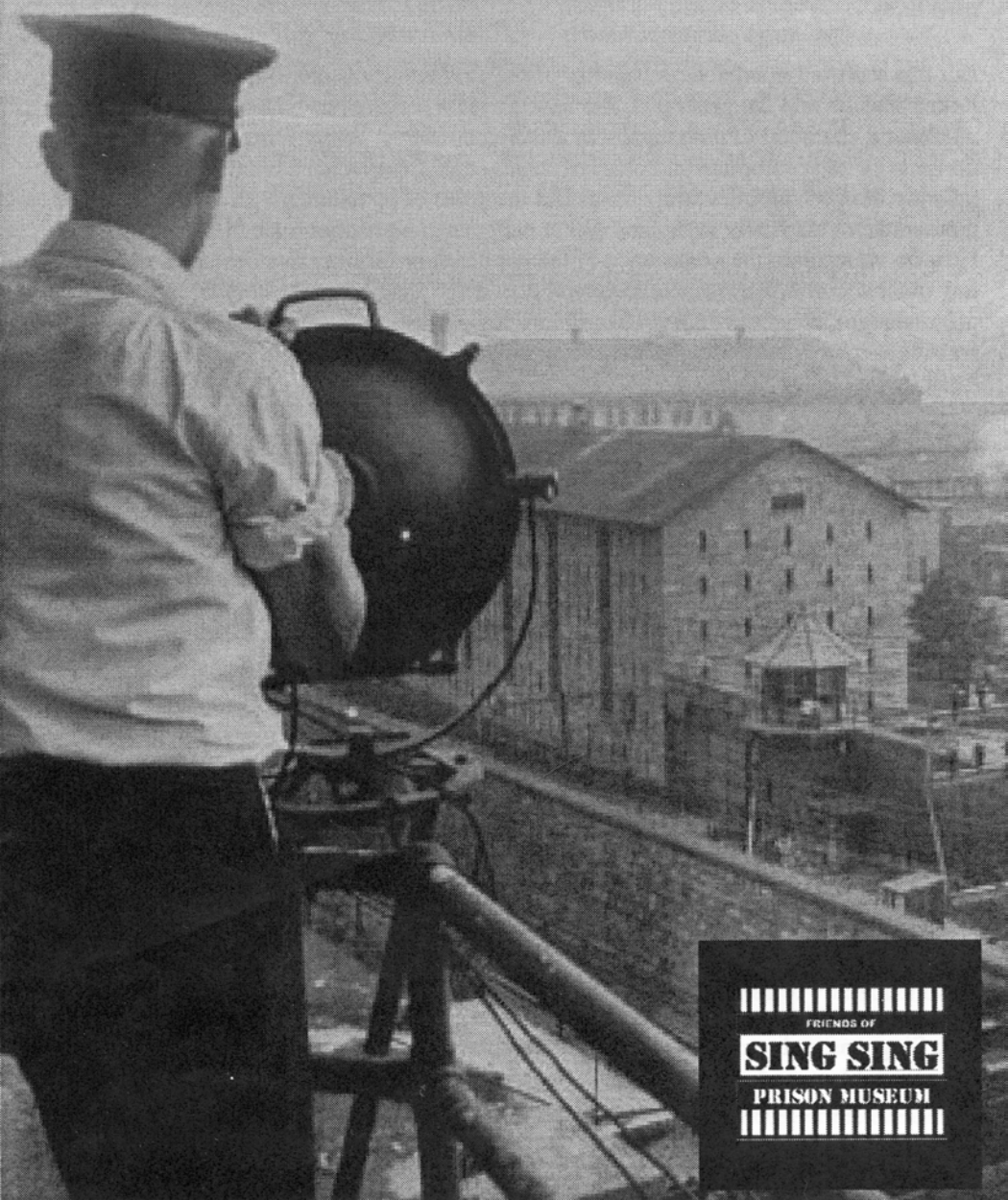


SING SING

PRISON MUSEUM



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THE HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE OF SING SING PRISON

By Roger Panetta, Ph.D.

Over the past thirty years historians have begun to explore American penal institutions as part of an effort to reconstruct the social history of the United States and to create a more democratic record of our past. They have opened the doors of these institutions and shed new light on the relationship between prisons and the public attitudes and legislative actions which brought them to life and sustain them in our own time.

But this renewed interest in the history of the penitentiary is not limited to scholars. Policy makers and the general public have raised a series of new questions about the nature and character of punishment in American history. Why do we punish? What do we hope to accomplish on behalf of society and the prisoner? What is the relationship between architectural design and the goals of punishment? How are the penitentiaries internally organized. What happens to a prisoner once incarcerated? How do we explain the persistence of the penitentiary for over two centuries when few other social institutions have survived as long? Sing Sing's history not only offers insight into these questions but more importantly provides the essential context for a fuller appreciation of the complexity of the history of crime and punishment in the United States.

In the first decade of our national history, American lawmakers began to search for forms of punishment which would transform a criminal into a citizen of the republic. They rejected the arbitrary and harsh punishments which they identified with monarchy and envisioned a series of just and temperate measures, ones which did not scar the body but renewed the soul. In 1790, when Pennsylvania designated the Walnut Street jail as "the penitentiary house" and New York State built Newgate prison in New York City, Americans took the first steps toward the penitentiary. By the 1820s, ideas about punishment had matured into two competing designs, the solitary regime at Eastern Prison in Philadelphia and the silent congregate approach at Auburn in New York State. These were designated the Pennsylvania and the Auburn systems and came to dominate penal discussions and institutional planning for most of the nineteenth century.

But although we identify the New York system with Auburn, it was actually Sing Sing that by virtue of national and international attention, became the representative of the congregate system. Sing Sing was the first penitentiary to fully embody the principles and design of the Auburn system. Sing Sing's history is key to the evolution of the penitentiary.

Sing Sing was and remains to this day one of the principal agents of punishment in New York State, and its reputation and image evoke a powerful response in the minds of Americans and Europeans. Sing Sing is fixed in the popular imagination as

the "American Bastille," "The House of Fear," "The Big House," and the "shock" prison of the penitentiary movement. From its very early days, Sing Sing was the destination not only of penologists but the curious general public who came in such numbers that they became a long term intrusion in the daily life of the prison.

Sing Sing's reputation as a place of dread and terror was, according to prison officials, legislators, and reformers, a function of the urban character of the inmate population, the overwhelming majority of whom were New York City criminals. The colloquial phrase "up the river" meant that a convicted New York City criminal would do his time at Sing Sing. The phrase reminded the public of the geographical links between Sing Sing and New York City and between urban crime and its punishment. New York City's connection with Sing Sing is not only a function of the number of urban criminals in the prison's population but a result of the intense focus of City newspapers and magazines on events at Sing Sing. *The New York Times* reported events at Sing Sing as if it were part of the local beat, published over a thousand about the prison from 1858 to 1980, and inextricably bound the prison and the City together.

Sing Sing's historic nineteenth century cellblock and its institutional history offer both scholars and the general public a window into the American search for a republican form of punishment. Its story is at the core of the history of punishment in the United States.

SING SING PRISON MUSEUM

The concept of a Sing Sing Prison Museum along the banks of the Hudson in Ossining has been supported by people and organizations that care about Sing Sing's unique position in the history of the American penal system as well as those interested in developing the museum because of its tremendous national and international potential as a significant tourist attraction for New York's Hudson Valley.

Attendance at the Museum is projected to be over 150,000 visitors per year. Considering attendance at other prison museums and local tourist destinations, this is thought to be a conservative estimate. Visitor spending in the region generated by the Museum is estimated to be over 13 million dollars; this is from visitors spending money on accommodations, food & beverages, transportation, shopping and, recreation activities. When the indirect and induced spending is added to the direct spending, the effects of visitor spending will be over 24 million dollars of spending and over 7.3 million dollars in wages. The estimated yearly tax revenue for state and local government is estimated at almost 1 million dollars.

The proposed Sing Sing Prison Museum Complex will consist of three components:

Component 1. The Sing Sing Prison Museum.

The interpretive focus of the proposed Sing Sing Prison Museum will be the history of punishment, the creation and development of the penitentiary and associated re-

form movements in America as seen through the lens of Sing Sing. Interwoven with the narrative of penal theory and practice and surrounding social and political context, will be stories of individual inmates, keepers, reformers and critics.

For the most part, the Sing Sing story will unfold over time. Chronological organization will help visitors connect what for many may be a very unfamiliar part of American history to the more commonly known succession of American events and ideas. As visitors learn how America, as a new nation with its own identity to establish, was compelled to – and continues to – grapple with ideas of crime and punishment – they will also learn how central this history is to the understanding of our culture. An exhibit of the 1825 Cellblock will be recreated in the taller section of the Power House.

The museum complex will also provide space for a gallery, theater, a research library and public assembly space.

Component 2. 1825 Cellblock Historic Site

The 1825 Cellblock is the original Cellblock of Sing Sing. Visitors will be able to enter the original cellblock where a portion will be reconstructed.

Component 3. Archive Research Library

The Library will be the depository for archival property associated with the museum. The library will also provide space for researchers to view materials.

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We hope you will join the **Friends of the Sing Sing Prison Museum** to establish the new museum. Show your support by donating or following us on Facebook and Twitter:

Facebook: www.facebook.com/singsingmuseum

Twitter: [@singsingmuseum](https://twitter.com/SingSingMuseum) or <https://twitter.com/SingSingMuseum>

Watch the Museum Proposal Presentation on Youtube: goo.gl/HqqEV1

YOU can join the Friends group or make tax deductible donations to the museum online at: www.hudsonriver.com.



Friends of the Sing Sing Prison Museum

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