

Destination Death:  
Dark Tourism and the Tennessee State Prison

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## Introduction

Unlike any given travel destination, death is exotic to everyone. This may be why dark tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors of heritage tourism. By definition, these sites have a history associated with or are sites of death or suffering in the past. There is a myriad of concerns about the way history is interpreted in dark tourism sites. However, this shouldn't cause historians to back away from the difficult topics. Rather, we should embrace them and tackle these sites in a comprehensive way. Otherwise, sites are bought by private entities where the interpretation is consumerism focused and marketing driven.

For this paper I reviewed several scholarly works concerning the philosophy of dark tourism and scholarship regarding the interpretation of sites associated with death and suffering, visited a handful of dark tourism sites in person to engage with how they are being interpreted, and reviewed some of the media that informs the public opinion of these historic sites.

Lastly, I researched the historic Tennessee State Prison as a potential dark tourism site. As the main prison for the state of Tennessee through the majority of Tennessee's history and distinguished as being the exclusive site of executions by the state, it certainly meets the standard. A contemporary Tennessee prison, Brushy Mountain, was shut down a few decades after the Tennessee State Prison was and has now been bought by a private entity and repurposed into a tourism site, campground, music and motorcycle rally venue, and working distillery.

## Part One: Dark Tourism

A great deal of the literature surrounding dark tourism pivots on trying to define and categorize it. For the purposes of this paper, I will be using the term dark tourism, which is a larger umbrella for visiting sites of or associated with death, suffering, and the macabre. Other terms such as thanatourism (sites specifically associated with death) and grief tourism (sites of specific death or resting places of specific individuals) are useful subcategories, but dark tourism encompasses both of these. It also makes room for sites that have a carnivalesque, playful atmosphere and the solemn, sacred sites; sites that are commemorative, with a defined endpoint, and those that extend their suffering into the present (such as active war zones); and the least explored area, the “pale dark tourism” which embraces histories of real horror, the supernatural, and places where the mythology and reality have become deeply entangled.



*Figure 1 SS Morro Castle burning while crowds watch 1937. Courtesy LOC*

Dark tourism is a rapidly growing portion of the heritage tourism industry but is not by any means new. In 1937, while the SS Morro Castle burned, killing 137, the crowd swelled as the news spread. Battles in the 1800s often documented spectators picnicking as they watched the fray, including Waterloo, Gettysburg, and Bull Run (see Figure 2 below). As I will expand on in part

two of this paper, public hangings were some of the largest gatherings of crowds in early Tennessee. While these are all examples of visiting active suffering in the past, all of these historic battlefields continue to draw crowds each year to their hallowed ground.

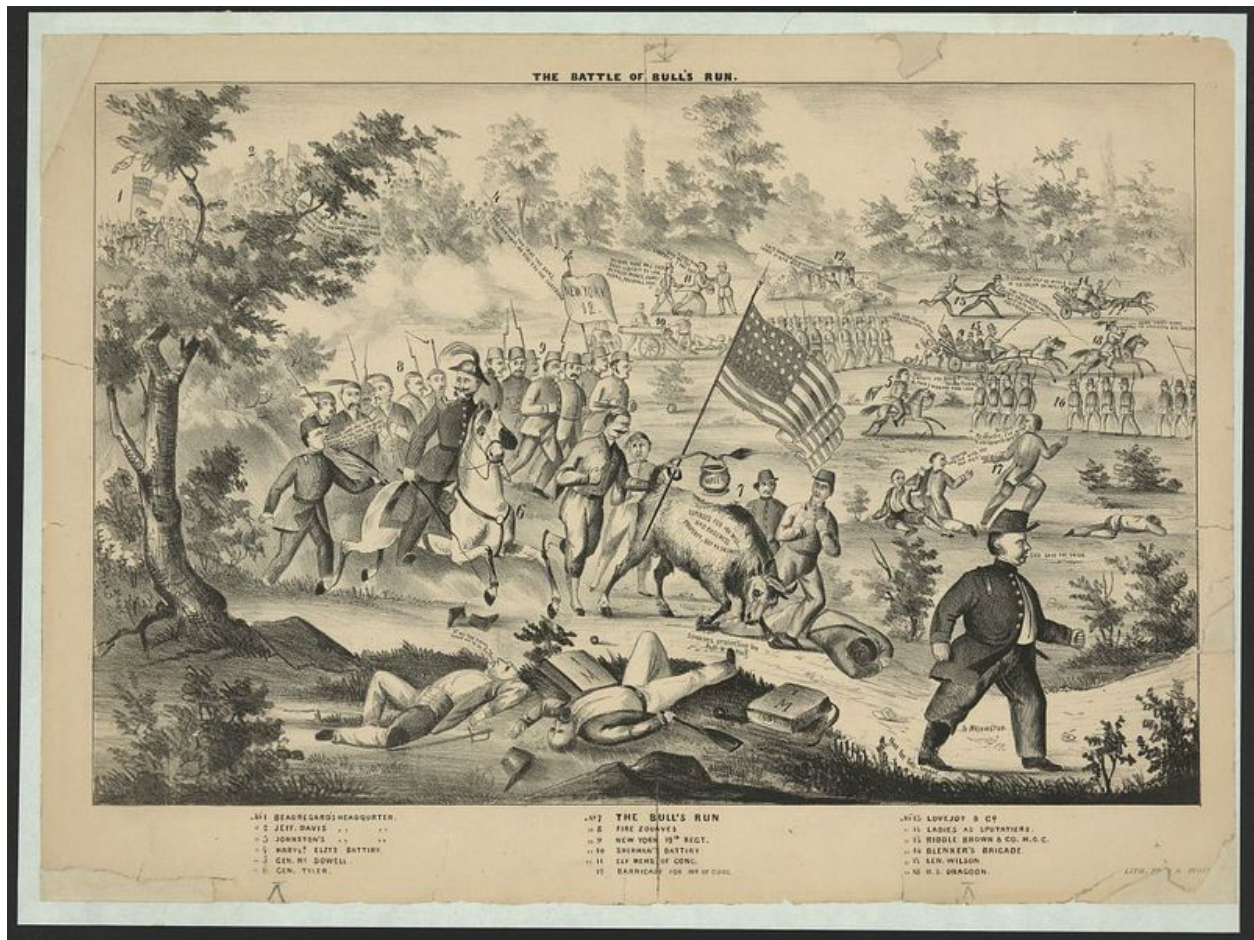


Figure 2 The Battle of Bull Run "14 LADIES AS SPECTATORS," Courtesy LOC.

More questions exist in this field than answers are offered. Some questions are as basic as, "Should these sites exist or in what capacity?" If we raised a monument to every tragedy, eventually we would have nothing but monuments. As the Shanksville, Philadelphia tragedy on 9/11 teaches us, sometimes the process of sorting out who tragedy belongs to is a complex

issue, especially if it happens on privately owned property. What right does the government or public interest have to forcefully take land or resources? What right do those same landowners have to profit from a national tragedy? One of the largest ethical questions is determining what capacity is appropriate to interpret dark sites. Which stakeholders are qualified to make that determination—local inhabitants, governing bodies, property owners, victims’ survivors, or surviving victims? How do we determine what sort of tone is appropriate? This seems to have the most variables—time since the incident, if there any living witnesses, how widely circulated and with what tone the media response used at the time, and perhaps most interestingly—how sympathetic do we feel toward the victims and perpetrators?

Dunn suggested the following alliteratively named categories: Perilous Places (dangerous places, towns of horror); Houses of Horror (dungeons of death, heinous hotels); Fields of Fatality (battlegrounds, Holocaust sites, cemeteries); Tours of Torment (mayhem and murder, now notorious sites); Themed Thatos (museums of death, monuments to mortality). However, sites can often fit into several or none of the categories. Where does the supernatural and cryptozoological fit into these categories? Duncan Light suggests that the classification of “dark” is largely unhelpful with the connotation it contributes. He suggests instead that much like works of art, it is more about what the viewer or visitor brings to the experience.

What is deemed acceptable in terms of marketing, promotion, commodification, and interpretation widely varies from author to author. Just like any historical site, there is a danger of focusing too narrowly on an aspect of the surrounding history and identity formation. I think that in order to interpret these dark sites, they need to be interpreted holistically. If done

correctly, dark tourism should embrace the full spectrum of what draws people to a historical site. As historians, we shouldn't recoil from the difficult parts of the past. For example, the plantation houses that shy away from the horrors of slavery are leaving out an important part of their history. Likewise, any site that focused only on the horrors without presenting the humanity and agency of individuals and the broader context surrounding these issues is doing an equal disservice to the public. Overall, the tone of scholarship surrounding dark tourist sites and tourists is judgmental, condescending, and overwhelmingly negative. Sadly, most scholarly attempts to understand what psychologically drives dark tourists boil down to morbidity and deficits in mental health and character or seeking to make sense of death. Though rarely mentioned, individuals seeking out the supernatural are often lumped in with those trying to find something beyond death. It is strange then, that we don't view many religious sites as dark tourism—none of the sources included discussion of pilgrimages along Via Dolorosa.

Most of the literature adopted a culturally myopic view. Día de Muertos, a Mexican holiday, celebrates communing with dead ancestors. Brightly colored decorations adorning the gravesites visited, cheerful music, and a spirit of festivities characterize the days and nights of this holiday, which while directly focused on the dead is anything but grim. Taoism believes that the living descendants and dead ancestors are all a part of one family with both looking after the other. Several Taoism festivals incorporate ancestor worship at their gravesites. The rituals are an important part of the culture and not to engage the dead would be seen as deviant. The existing scholarship rarely incorporates the cultural diversity surrounding our interactions with the dead. Sociologist Lee calls for discourse “without prejudice,” which is a step in the right direction.

Some exhibits like “Body Worlds,” which involves the display of dissected corpses suspended in a process called plastination, have drawn criticism over practices associated with early exhibits (which have been addressed in the current iterations) and are considered “morbid.” The presentation of the dissected and preserved bodies is in the vein of scientific education. When I spoke to the employees of the Body Worlds exhibit at the Museum of Tech in San Jose, California they said a negative reaction was rare, most people (including school children on field trips) found it interesting and were not particularly solemn. There is a strong argument to be made for participant observation and interviews as a tool of study in this field. Tone and auratic qualities are difficult to discuss without having experienced them. Podeshan refers to these sites as geographically accessible emotional and psychic experiences.

One particularly interesting facet of dark tourism in the present is the use of technology to “travel.” This can be anywhere from watching videos of actual death to engaging with sites and their stories through film, television, podcast, etc. Some even go as far as to include the media as one of the primary stakeholders. My experience at the Body Worlds exhibit, which utilized augmented reality (AR, which is like VR or virtual reality, but incorporates the real setting with a camera), echoes this integration of technology with these experiences.

In the field of history scholarship, the value of addressing dark history seems to be largely overlooked. Dark tourism is rich with opportunities for adaptive reuse. One such place is the Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary, which has been turned into a moonshine distillery. It is open for tours, camping, and as an event venue. The prison was sold to a group of private developers and serves as a wonderful example of the interest the public has in visiting dark sites, but also as a tale of caution for the state when selling property with historic value to



private groups with little history interest outside of monetization and potential profitability. The Tennessee State Prison is a site of arguably greater importance to the conservation of the carceral history in Tennessee, but it has yet to have its fate determined.<sup>1</sup>

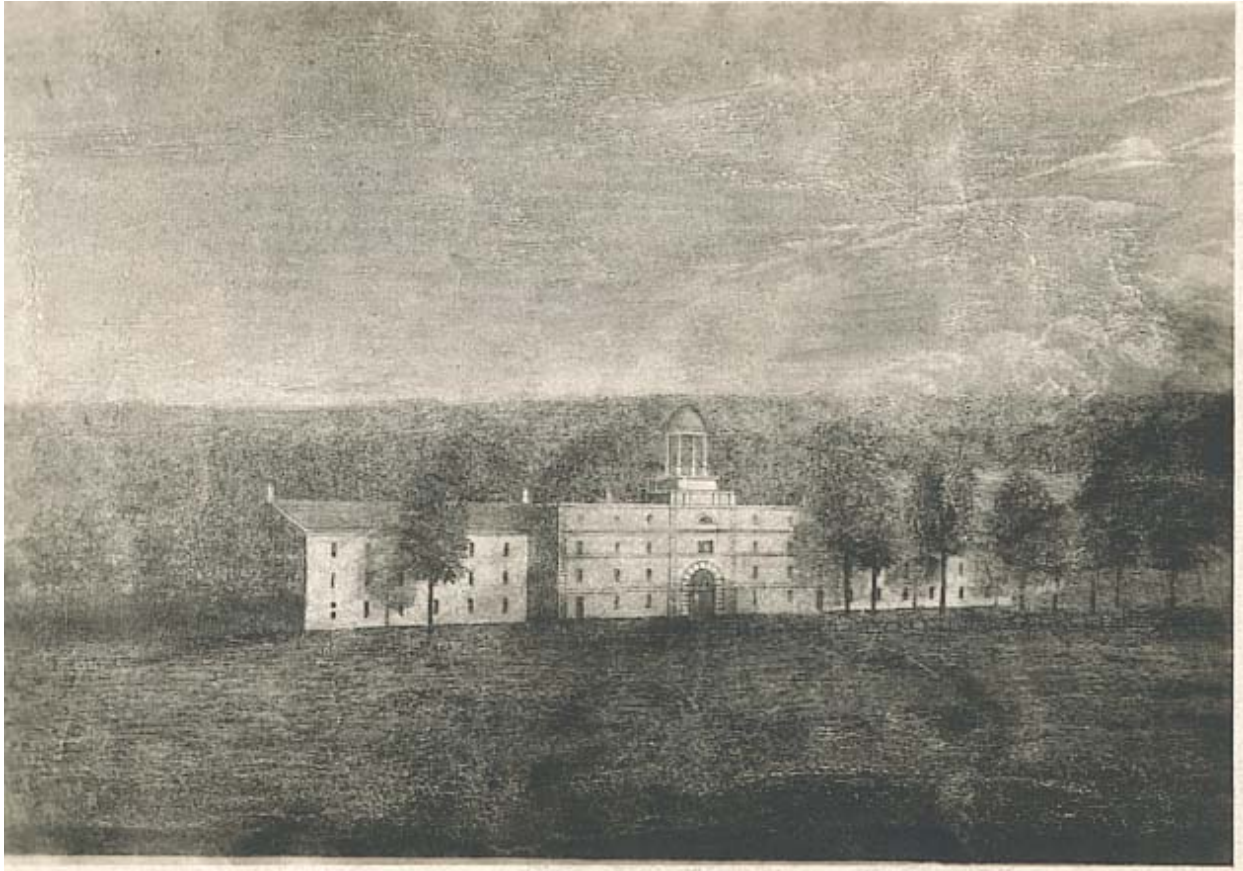


Figure 3 State Penitentiary 1831, TSLA.

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<sup>1</sup> Further reading on Dark Tourism: Bailey, Heather, "Hillbilly Skits to Buford Sticks: Sustainable Heritage Tourism in Tennessee," MTSU dissertation, 2010.; *Body Worlds Decoded* exhibit and staff interviews, Museum of Technology, San Jose, California, February 22, 2019.; Bonn, Scott A., "Moral Panic: Who Benefits from Public Fear?" *Psychology Today*, July 20, 2015.; Gibson, Kelli, "Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary: A Historic Landscape of Incarceration" MTSU thesis, 2017.; Hooper, Glenn and John J. Lennon, *Dark Tourism: Practice and Interpretation* Routledge, 2016.; Kamin, Debra. "The Rise of Dark Tourism: When war zones become travel destinations," *The Atlantic*, July 15, 2014.; Light, Duncan, "Progress in dark Tourism and Thanatourism Research: An Uneasy Relationship with Heritage Tourism," *Tourism Management*, Vol. 61, August 2017, P275-301.; Podoshen, Jeffrey S., Vivek Venkatesh, Jason Wallin, Susan A. Andrzejewski, and Zheng Jin, "Dystopian dark tourism: An exploratory examination," *Tourism Management*, Vol. 51. May 2015.; Sharpley, Richard (Editor) and Philip R. Stone (Editor), *The Darker Side of Travel: The Theory and Practice of Dark Tourism*, Tonawanda, New York: Channel View Publications, 2009.; Thompson, J. William, *From Memory to Memorial: Shanksville, America, and Flight 93*. University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017.; Winchester Mystery House, San Jose, California, Two guided tours and staff interviews, February 23, 2019.

## Part Two: The Tennessee State Prison

“Take a look at a castle. Any castle. Now break down the key elements that make it a castle. They haven't changed in a thousand years.

1: Location. A site on high ground that commands the territory as far as the eye can see.

2: Protection. Big walls, walls strong enough to withstand a frontal attack.

3: A garrison. Men who are trained and *willing to kill*. [...]

Now you've got yourself a castle.

The only difference between this castle and all the rest is that they were built to keep people out.

*This castle is built to keep people in.”*

– *The Last Castle*, 2001



*Figure 4 Tennessee State Prison, 1971. TSLA.*

### **Brief History**

If not for the guard towers and razor wire, one might mistake the administration building of the Tennessee State Prison for a castle. In fact, the prison's most popular nickname is "The Castle," though it was later referred to as "The Walls" in some sources. The imposing

four-story Victorian Gothic structure was constructed of materials indigenous to Tennessee, several stones having been repurposed from the first Tennessee Penitentiary which stood on Church Street one mile Southwest of the Courthouse in Nashville until it was torn down when the Main Prison was constructed in 1898 with the Chattanooga architect S.M. Patton. At the time it was built, this penitentiary was considered one of the most modern and humane prisons in the United States,<sup>2</sup> a sentiment that was echoed by visiting President Theodore Roosevelt. It had electricity and steam heat, both generated on site. The prison was built utilizing convict labor and cost approximately \$554,375.57 in 1898.<sup>3</sup>

For the purposes of this paper I will be referring to the prison which opened January 21, 1831 on Church Street near the courthouse in Nashville as the State Penitentiary, the second iteration of the prison which opened February 12, 1898 at the Cockrill Bend area of the Cumberland River in Nashville as the Tennessee State Prison or as it was also known the Main Prison<sup>4</sup>, and the replacement that currently is in operation as it is known—the Riverbend Maximum Security Institution. While I am focusing on the Tennessee State Prison, they are connected through their records, building materials, rough geographic location, administration, and occupants. The State Penitentiary did not keep much in the way of records for the first several decades.<sup>5</sup> Notably, much of what remains has extensive water damage. What records do remain provide information that the later records did not specify. The death records of the

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<sup>2</sup> 1970 Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) No, TN-33.

<sup>3</sup> Allen, J. W. *Prison operations, from December 1, 1898 to December 1, 1900 [State of Tennessee]: Report of... auditing accountant*. Reprint from the collections of the University of California Libraries. Originally published 1901. Many sources cite the rounded figure of \$500,000, however the report done in 1901 contains this specific sum. Notably, Brushy Mountain only cost \$200,275.69— less than half of the TSP in comparison.

<sup>4</sup> The Main Prison is sometimes referred to as Tennessee State Penitentiary, but not in the prison's internal records. The nicknames "The Walls" and "The Castle" are also referring to the Main Prison.

<sup>5</sup> Tennessee State Library and Archives. Record group 25.

first prison system established the cause of death. Later only the name, date, county, a number (likely cell block) are listed and the only cause of death ever recorded was when it was indicated as “electrocution” or “execution.”

In 1829, thirty-three years after Tennessee achieved statehood, the state built a central prison modeled on the Auburn system, which was characterized by lock-step marching, solitary confinement by night, and hard labor in groups while maintaining silence during the day.<sup>6</sup> The prisoners were classified into groups with the hardened criminals wearing stripes and the less dangerous convicts wearing solid gray. The men had their hair cut off upon entering the prison to prevent the spread of lice. The prisoners were also segregated into “white” and “colored” populations, which were kept in separate wings and ate at separate tables.

During the Civil War Union occupation of Nashville, the Federal Army commandeered the State Penitentiary for use as a military prison. At this time, the already overcrowded prison population triples. They leased inmates to the Federal Government. The lease system was abolished in 1867 and reinstated in 1870. There is a marked period where the crimes listed include “desertion,” “guerilla,” and “court martial.” After the Civil War and abolition, the African American population skyrocketed from an average of below 5% to well over half of the population.<sup>7</sup> Many formerly enslaved men and women were leased out to work in dire conditions in coalmines and constructing railroads with someone else receiving income for their work. They received meager rations and conducted long days of hard labor under the threat of beatings and abuse under the watchful eye of armed white men. It isn’t a stretch to say that

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<sup>6</sup> Tennessee State Library and Archives. State of Tennessee Prison Records, 1831-1992. Record group 25.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.; Inmates of the Tennessee State Penitentiary 1851-1870.

these individuals, mostly young men, may not have felt their living conditions had much improved from slavery.

The first woman was sentenced to the prison in 1840, but women were not separated into their own wing until 1892. However, soon they were mixed back into the general population when overcrowding issues were caused by the uprising of coal miners in East Tennessee, resulting in a mass transfer to the State Penitentiary.<sup>8</sup> When the Tennessee State Prison was constructed in 1898, it included a separate women's wing.<sup>9</sup> By 1905, out of the 969 inmates at the Main Prison there were "50 women in the prison, all of whom worked in the hosiery factory." The report makes note that their "discipline and sanitary surroundings" under their matron "are good."<sup>10</sup> Women during this period suffered notably far fewer deaths by disease, murder, or work accidents. The Tennessee Prison for Women wouldn't become operational until 1966, coinciding with the racial integration of Tennessee prisons. At this point, male inmates under 21 were kept separately from the "hardened class of criminals." In the same 1905 report, eleven insane inmates were recommended for transfer—indicating that it was the practice at the time to house the insane with the general population.<sup>11</sup>

The prisoners worked either onsite or in the convict lease system. The Main Prison had an ice plant, brickyard, and farm. There were several factories including the Paper Box Factory, Harness Company, Foundry, Hosiery Operations, and Shoe Manufacturing Company. In the years 1903 and 1904 alone, the Main Prison yielded a net profit of \$52,968.79, whereas Brushy

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Tollett, E.G. *Prison Operations From December 1, 1902, to November 30, 1904 Inclusive. Report of Committee on Part of the Senate to the Fifty-fourth General Assembly, Embracing Report of the Auditing Accountants.* Originally Published by Authority of House Bill No 936 Chapter 509, Acts of 1905. Foster & Webb, Printers and Stationers. Nashville, TN: 1905.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

Mountain yielded almost 4 times that amount, likely due to their more profitable (and deadly) coal mining operations. The lease system paid the prison for convict labor an average of \$0.50-\$0.80 per day with an average of 10 hours shifts.<sup>12</sup> While this is what the contracts state, other sources estimate the workday closer to 16 hours a day. One method of circumventing the overcrowding issue was to rotate shifts when men slept and worked so that four men could be kept in a two-man cell.

### **Prisoners of Note**

The State Penitentiary's first inmate was George Cook, a 21-year-old tailor from Jackson, Tennessee, who was convicted of stabbing and sentenced to serve two years on January 21, 1831. The first men executed at the Main Prison by hanging in 1909 were William Mitchell and Cecil Palmer.<sup>13</sup>

An infamous bandit leader known as the "Great Western Land Pirate," John Murrell, was incarcerated at the State Penitentiary from 1834-1844. His crimes mostly involved theft, but most outstandingly included multiple crimes of "horse theft" and "slave stealing." He was a part of the "Reverse Underground Railroad" as he worked to kidnap free blacks and fugitive slaves and sell them in the South. He claimed he never murdered anyone but was believed to have killed many slaves when in danger of being caught with stolen slaves. He died of Tuberculosis soon after his release. Upon his death, grave robbers dug up his corpse, which had been half eaten by hogs, and displayed his pickled head at Southern county fairs for \$0.10 a look. His

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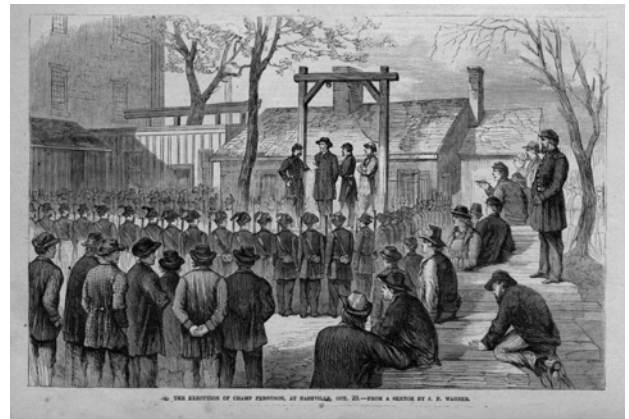
<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Lewis, Yoshie and Brian Allison, *Images of America: Tennessee State Penitentiary*, Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2014.

thumb, which was branded “HT” as a horse thief in 1823, is now part of the collection in the Tennessee State Museum.<sup>14</sup> Notably, in the book *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Tom and Huck witness “Injun Joe” digging up a grave and later claim “Murel’s treasure” as a result.

In 1847, the youngest prisoner on record, an eight-year-old boy, was sentenced to life in prison for the (later deemed accidental) murder of his four-year-old sister. The boy receives a pardon after years of abuse in the prison in 1850. A separate facility for juvenile offenders wouldn’t be constructed until 1907.<sup>15</sup>

On October 20, 1865, Champ Ferguson, a Confederate guerrilla fighter from White County, was executed by hanging on the grounds of the State Penitentiary. This was the only execution by hanging within the walls of the old penitentiary,



however they facilitated many near the courthouse.<sup>16</sup>



James Earl Ray, the assassin of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., was sentenced to 99 years in prison and originally held at Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary. After he escaped and was recaptured in 1977, several African American inmates stabbed him in 1981. He was transferred to the Main Prison hospital wing. He remained in

Figure 5 James Earl Ray during a transfer, 1973.

Courtesy Tennessean.

<sup>14</sup> "Inmates of the Tennessee State Penitentiary 1831-1850 Pt. 2: L - Z and Misc.," Tennessee State Library and Archives.; Wyatt-Brown, Bertram, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South*, p45.; Tennessee State Museum, "Tennessee State Prison Object – Brief (Hitlist)."

<sup>15</sup> Tennessee State Library and Archives. State of Tennessee Prison Records, 1831-1992. Record group 25. I can not independently corroborate this from the prison index, but some ages are not listed.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.



the Tennessee State Prison until he was transferred in 1998 to the Lois M. DeBerry Special Needs Facility. He later died at Columbia Nashville Memorial Hospital from complications of hepatitis C.<sup>17</sup> The Loraine motel in Memphis, where Dr. King died, is now the site of the National Civil Rights Museum and one of the most visited sites of a single death in the US.

The prison's history is not entirely without humor—some prisoners escaped in relatively comical ways. Escapes were very common in the early days of the prison, often averaging six escapes per month in the 1930s. In 1902, escapee T. Lowery, concealed himself in the Foundry. The guards searched for two days and kept the wall manned for eight. Lowery built a ladder in the chair factory and just climbed over the wall to escape. A \$50 reward was offered for his capture. At this time, bounties for escapees ranged between \$25-\$100 depending on the individual. The same year John Carnett escaped from the farm adjacent to the prison by simply walking away into the “tall corn” while plowing.<sup>18</sup>

The most famous escape was also in 1902 when 16 prisoners used dynamite to blow a hole in the wall of the prison-housing unit. Some sources suggest that the men may have purposefully left that wall weak when constructing the new building. One man, safecracker Ed “Hutch” Carney was shot and killed by guards during this attempt.<sup>19</sup> A later escape was more subtle—John Revinsky, multiple prison break out perpetrator, jewel thief, and murderer took up painting as a hobby. Revinsky used a canvas to cover a hole he was digging in the wall. In October 1926, thirteen prisoners escaped through the tunnel.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Gibson, Kelli, “Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary: A Historic Landscape of Incarceration,” MTSU dissertation, 2018, p35-45.

<sup>18</sup> Tennessee State Library and Archives. State of Tennessee Prison Records, 1831-1992. Record group 25.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.;

<sup>20</sup> Lewis, Yoshie and Brian Allison. *Images of America: Tennessee State Penitentiary*. Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2014.

## Deaths, Executions, and Suffering

When prisoners arrived, they passed under a large sign that loomed overhead, stating “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here,” a jarring reminder that they were the property of the state for the foreseeable future.<sup>21</sup> From 1872-1891, the leading causes of death were consumption, cholera, congestion, dysentery, typhoid fever, flu, pneumonia, chronic diarrhea, and other health-related conditions. “Slate falling” in the mines was the cause listed for many of the leased convicts during this period.<sup>22</sup> 1903 was marked by an outbreak of measles.<sup>23</sup> By 1905, 78% of the deaths were caused by consumption, with as many as 20% of the total population infected with Tuberculosis.<sup>24</sup> Some outlying, yet illuminating, causes of death listed include: shot while trying to escape, poisoning, drowned on the farm, found dead, and dead when received in transfer from Brushy Mountain (the hospital at the Main Prison was better equipped and dying inmates were often transferred). From the records available, only one instance of a cause of death is listed as suicide in March of 1879.<sup>25</sup> One man, Paul Joseph Payne, was murdered in the metal shop in 1939 and thought to have escaped until his remains were discovered 15 years later when the floor was replaced.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Tennessee State Library and Archives. State of Tennessee Prison Records, 1831-1992. Record group 25.

<sup>23</sup> Lewis, Yoshie and Brian Allison. *Images of America: Tennessee State Penitentiary*. Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2014.

<sup>24</sup> Tollett, E.G. *Prison Operations From December 1, 1902, to November 30, 1904 Inclusive. Report of Committee on Part of the Senate to the Fifty-fourth General Assembly, Embracing Report of the Auditing Accountants*. Originally Published by Authority of House Bill No 936 Chapter 509, Acts of 1905. Nashville, TN: Foster & Webb, Printers and Stationers, 1905.

<sup>25</sup> Tennessee State Library and Archives. State of Tennessee Prison Records, 1831-1992. Record group 25.

<sup>26</sup> Lewis, Yoshie and Brian Allison. *Images of America: Tennessee State Penitentiary*. Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2014.

As part of the 1877 Acts of Tennessee, “the State Legislature enacts minor changes in the law governing convict discipline in the lease system. The new law requires each lease camp to name a ‘whipping boss’ who would then be the only person authorized to whip a convict. In reality, this law creates even more problems as each camp named a guard to the job who was considered the most brutal in practice.”<sup>27</sup> Other methods of disciplinary action were so cruel that they border on medieval. Prisoners would be strung up by their thumbs and forced to hang for hours on end. The practice wasn’t outlawed in Tennessee until 1904.<sup>28</sup>

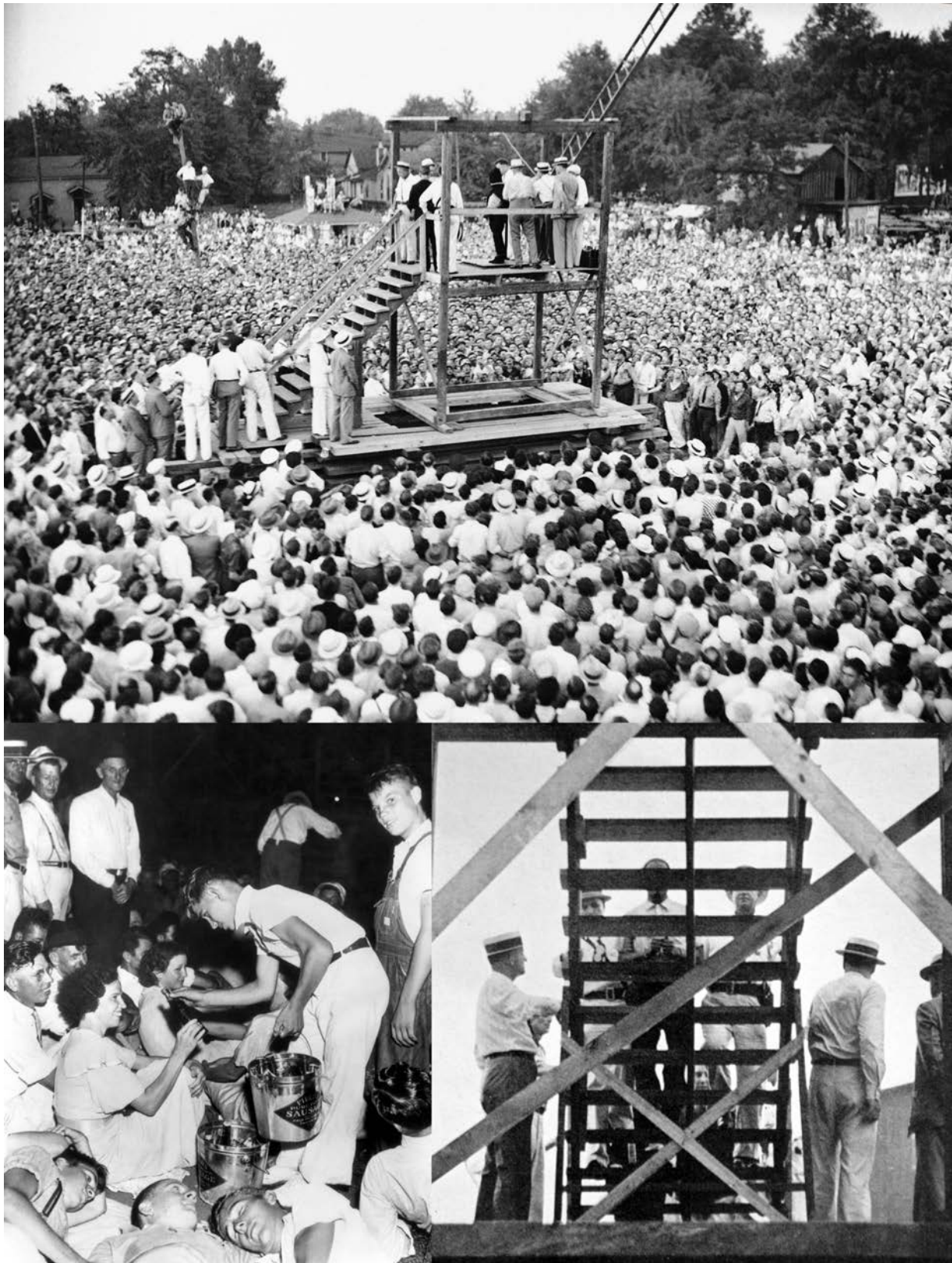
Before 1910, executions were public spectacle drawing crowds in the tens of thousands out of “morbid and illimitable curiosity,” often with a carnivalesque atmosphere including drunken revelry in the streets, food being served, vendors peddling wares, and children being excused from school to join in the festivities. In 1880, two African American men, John Hall and Burrell Smith, were executed by hanging in Murfreesboro, Tennessee (about 30 miles southwest of Nashville) in such an atmosphere. They had confessed to several robberies, arson, and murder. The event drew 12,000 mostly white attendees—three times the population of the city. Seats sold for \$0.25.

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<sup>27</sup> Tennessee State Library and Archives. State of Tennessee Prison Records, 1831-1992. Record group 25.; Acts of Tennessee, 1877.

<sup>28</sup> Lewis, Yoshie and Brian Allison. *Images of America: Tennessee State Penitentiary*. Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2014.

Figure 6 Below: The last public hanging in the United States. The death of Rainey Bethea drew a crowd of 20,000 spectators. Owensboro, KY, 1936. Bottom left: a vendor sells beverages to the onlookers. Courtesy Timeline.



It appears the indignities suffered by convicts in Tennessee were not limited to death. Having received multiple solicitations for their bodies while alive, they agreed to let their bodies be used for medical experimentation in exchange for “necessaries and other attentions during their confinement.” One doctor offered Hall \$15 for his cadaver, but his wife refused the money. The hanging lasted thirteen minutes. Smith reportedly “suffered a horrible death” with his body convulsing for at least five minutes. Once they were pronounced dead and cut down, their bodies were taken to separate doctors in Nashville and Murfreesboro. Drs. Burn and Murfree of Murfreesboro conducted a resuscitation experiment in the “presence of a number of physicians, medical students and reporters.” They stripped the bodies, wrapped them in hot wet blankets, readjusted their necks, administered artificial respiration, and applied electricity to different portions of the brain and spinal cord along with other stimulants. “Soon slight, but increasing movements could be seen, the pulse beating feebly until the temperature was raised to 103 degrees. The eyes opened and appeared as if directed to different objects in the room. With the regular breathing, muscular contraction, the peculiar expression of the face and eyes, and the sound of each inspiration and expiration of breath, the bodies presented a life like appearance. Dr. Steger then stated the object desired had been accomplished.” They then retained the cadavers for dissection.<sup>29</sup>

While this specific event didn’t happen at the Tennessee State Prison, it appears that it was not nearly an isolated event during this period and it provides excellent detail and context for the landscape in Tennessee in during the early development of the carceral and corporal punishment areas. The Tennessee State Prison was the site of executions for most of the state’s

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<sup>29</sup> "THE DEATH DROP." *Daily American* (1875-1894), Feb 21, 1880.

prisoners sentenced to death, but individual county sheriffs conducted hangings and mobs often lynched individuals without any help from the state. One cannot discuss the prison system without also discussing the racial violence that occurred within and around it.

The available records showed that a large portion of the executions of individuals at the prison were white, which isn't what I expected to find with the racial climate and majority of the post-1865 population being African American. "Between 1882 and 1968, 3,437 Black men were lynched in the United States, of which 3,029 occurred in the former Confederate South."<sup>30</sup> Looking through the newspapers of the time clearly indicates that it was far less likely for an African American man to ever see the courtroom, let alone Death Row, than to die at the hands of a mob.

A similar event that was carried out by the State Penitentiary in March of 1879 was the hanging of former slave and confessed murderer Knox Martin near the courthouse in Nashville. Martin constructed the gallows himself.<sup>31</sup> An estimated crowd of 10,000-12,000 gathered to witness the execution. Signs hung in store windows, "Closed on account of the death of Knox Martin." Notes to teachers asking them to dismiss students for the day included: "Please excuse Joseph—he wants to see the man hung—by request of his mother;" "If you will let the children go to see Knox Martin hung to-day, I will not ask you any more;" and "Please let Thomas go to the hanging. I hope it will do him good."<sup>32</sup>

Like Hall and Smith, Martin had sold his body before his death. He was pronounced dead and then left to hang for a further fifteen minutes by the order of Sheriff Price. Once he was cut

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<sup>30</sup> Russell, Carrie, *Reckoning with a Violent and Lawless Past: A Study of Race, Violence, and Reconciliation in Tennessee*, Dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 2010.

<sup>31</sup> "Knox Martin's Death Warrant." *Daily American*, March 16, 1879.

<sup>32</sup> "THE DEATH PENALTY: Execution of Knox Martin, the Bell's Bend Murderer..." *Daily American* 91875-1894). March 29, 1879.

down, he was immediately worked over by doctors and stripped naked in front of the crowd before being rushed to a cow-shed close by where they worked to revive him while the onlookers crowded the small shack as “nothing could contain the impetuosity of the crowd.” Some of the same doctors from the similar incident in Murfreesboro used comparable methods to try to revive Martin. The doctors commented, “The experiment proved interesting, if not an entirely successful one.” He was finally “dumped” nearly naked at the Medical College for dissection. In a strange twist, a few days later a man passed through Madison County, Alabama claiming to be Knox Martin. He said he had been hung, brought back to life by the doctors, and that he was on his way home to Jackson County where he used to live.<sup>33</sup>

**Knox Martin Heard From.**

The following is a *verbatim* copy of a letter received by one of the professors in the medical department of the University of Nashville and Vanderbilt University a few days since:

MADISON COUNTY, ALA, March 31, 1879.—Dr S——: I hear you were one of the resuscitators of the negro that was hung in Nashville last Friday. I want to ask you something about him.

Yesterday a negro passed through here, giving his name as Knox Martin, and said he was hung in Nashville Friday, and was afterwards brought to life by the doctors, and that he was then on his way to Jackson county, where he used to live.

Is this Knox Martin alive or dead? Please write and let me know. There is some excitement here about him. I am not satisfied, so ask you to write. Direct your letter to me at Winchester, Tenn., as I will be there next week.

Respectfully, - JAMES MASON.

**Col. W. F. Prosser's Residence Burned.**

Figure 7 The Daily American. April 06, 1879

<sup>33</sup> “THE DEATH PENALTY: Execution of Knox Martin, the Bell’s Bend Murderer...” *Daily American* 91875-1894). March 29, 1879.; “Knox Martin Heard From.” *The Daily American*. April 6, 1879.

## Artifacts

Indisputably, the single artifact that most connects the Tennessee prison system and death is “Old Smokey,” the electric chair that roughly 125 inmates died upon. When the law changed in 1913 requiring inmates to be executed by electrocution rather than hanging, the prison installed the first electric chair. The initial use was on July 13, 1916. Death row inmate, Julius Morgan, an African American man who confessed to and was convicted of “raping a white woman” was executed. The chair was kept in the “death house,” a small two-story building situated in the tuberculosis section which also housed death row inmate cells only a few feet away obscured from view by a cloth curtain.



*Figure 8 Death Row, 1962. Courtesy Tennessean*



Unlike the earlier public spectacles, executions were required by state law in the 1910s to be private. One newspaper described it as, “No one is permitted to witness the execution with the exception of the detail assigned by the warden... the prison chaplain and surgeon, one member of the prisoner’s family, his spiritual adviser, ...the sheriff of the county from which the prisoner is convicted from and the man who throws the switch.” While the death was more of a private affair, hundreds of people crowded around when Morgan was moved from the county jail to the state prison just prior to his death. Markedly, he was held and tried in Memphis rather than Dyersburg where the crime occurred for fear of mob violence.<sup>34</sup>

Locating “Old Smokey” was the most puzzling part of my research into the Tennessee State Prison. One source claimed it was a part of the artifacts held at the Tennessee State Museum (they do, in fact, have a miniature version which appears to be a souvenir<sup>35</sup>). When I spoke to a museum employee, they said they had heard it was a part of their collection as well, but when they checked their records, they did not have the chair. It showed that it had been in the state’s possession at one point, but had been sold to Ripley’s Believe It or Not in Gatlinburg. When I inquired to Ripley’s I was shuffled around for a bit, but finally spoke with someone who said that they have a replica of the chair. The rumor of Ripley’s owning “Old Smokey” had been widely circulated by prominent Holocaust denier, Fred Leuchter Jr. The Ripley’s corporate public relations representative said that she thought it might be at the Alcatraz East Museum in Pigeon Forge. Their collections specialist confirmed that they do in fact have the authentic, original electric chair that stood in the Tennessee State Prison.

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<sup>34</sup> “DEATH CHAIR’S FIRST VICTIM: Julius Morgan, Negro, Electrocutated at Penitentiary WAS CONVICTED OF RAPE Pays With His Life for Crime Committed in Dyer County. No Fear of Death,” *The Nashville Tennessean and the Nashville American (1910-1920)*, July 13, 1916.

<sup>35</sup> Tennessee State Museum. “Tennessee State Prison Object – Brief (Hitlist).”

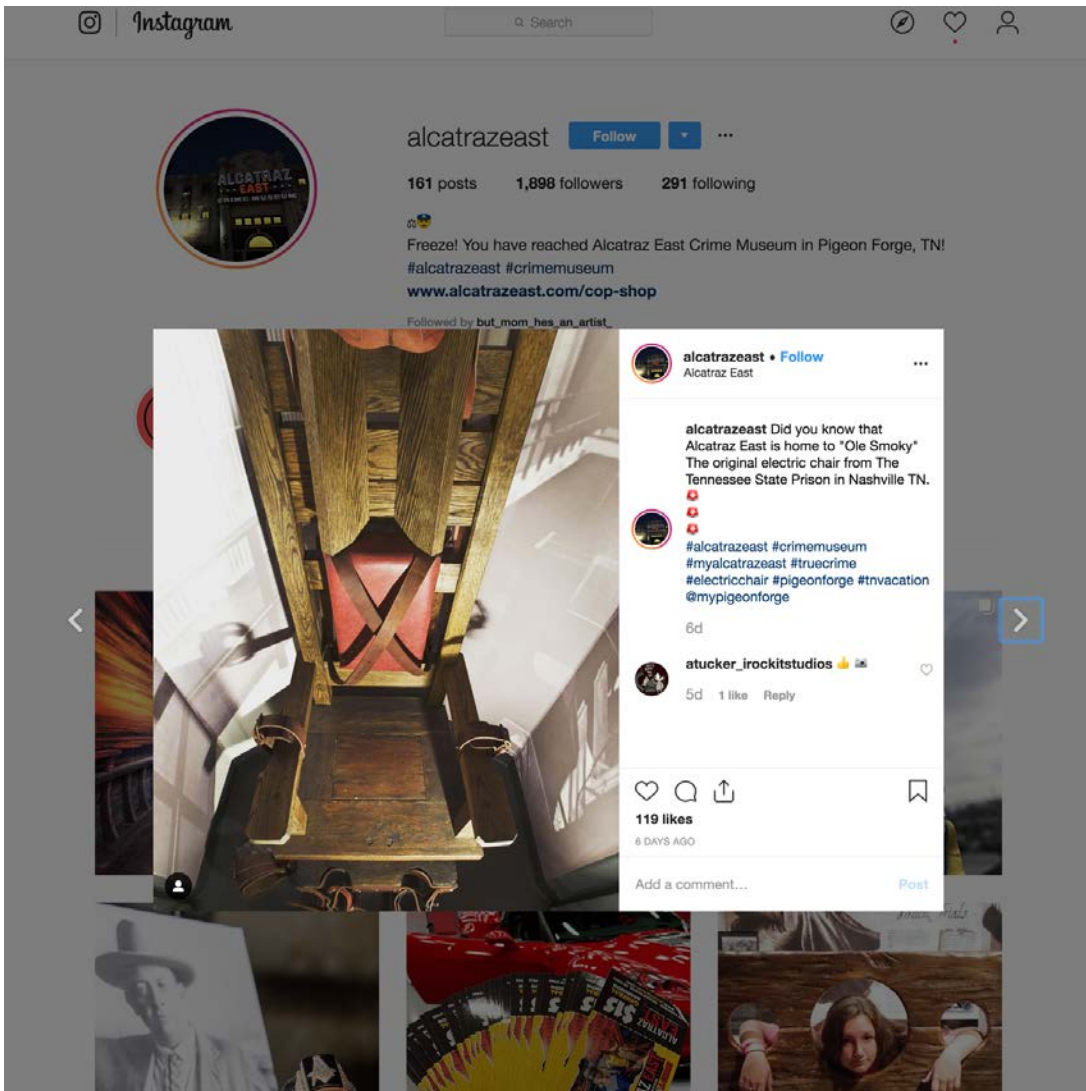


Figure 9 Photo of "Old Smokey" posted by the Alcatraz East Crime Museum Instagram on April 9, 2019.

The Alcatraz East Crime Museum, an “edutainment” enterprise built in 2016, invites the public to, “Explore American history from a different perspective in five unique galleries that burrow deep into criminal profiles, the penal system, victim’s stories, crime prevention, forensic science, law enforcement and our justice system.” The 25,000 square-foot tourist attraction was designed to reflect both the architectural hallmarks of both the Tennessee State Prison and Alcatraz. “Old Smokey” can be viewed for an admission fee of \$25.



 **alittlemoore** • Follow  
Alcatraz East

**alittlemoore** The @alcatrazeast Crime Museum was so much more than we expected! So much info and interaction for the whole family! Definitely recommend this when you come to @mypigeonforge #mypsummer #hosted

 #travelgram #travel #travelblogger #pigeonforge #tn #tennessee #alcatraz #alcatrazeastcrimemuseum #igcincy\_away #adventure #crime #ohheyvacay #momswithcameras #momtog #momlifeisthebestlife #thisismotherhood

41w

 **jenniferjordancruz** Wow ! Adore this☺

**253 likes**

JUNE 27, 2018

Add a comment... Post

*Figure 10 Tourist photo of Alcatraz East Crime Museum exterior as shared on social media platform Instagram.*

The Tennessee State Museum has 158 records of items connected to the State Penitentiary and Tennessee State Prison in its collection. Items include various hand tools, axes, shovels, barbells, photographs, Former Governor Frank Clement’s desk, clothing, furniture, weapons, props from films, and—most peculiarly—former inmate John Murrell’s thumb.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

## The Prison in Entertainment and Significance in Music History

Many of the “jailbirds” were also “songbirds.” John Lomax conducted [field recordings](#) of “work songs” in the 1930s as a part of a WPA Project.

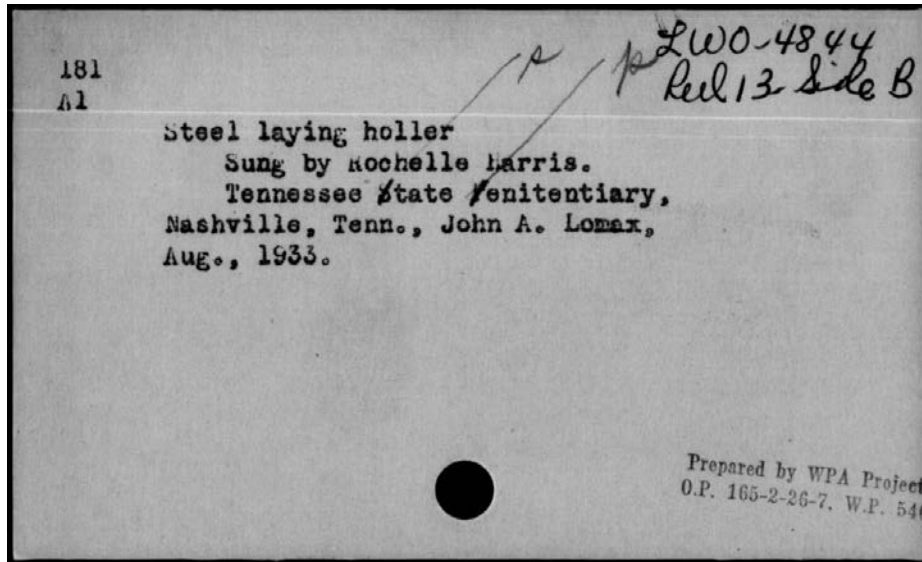


Figure 11 Library of Congress reference card for "Steel laying holler, Sung by Rochelle Harris, Tennessee State Penitentiary, Nashville, Tenn., [recorded by] John A. Lomax, Aug., 1933."



Figure 12 The Prisonaires, TSLA

The Prisonaires were a quintet made of Tennessee State Prison inmates. Sun Records owner Sam Phillips credited The Prisonaires as the reason that Elvis chose his label.<sup>37</sup> In 1953, while still serving time they were given passes to record and perform their hit record, [Just Walkin' in the Rain](#). Leader Johnny Bragg was known for rehearsing with a bucket on his head to achieve the right acoustics in his cell.

<sup>37</sup> *The Prisonaires Documentary – Special Presentation*. Short film. Published September 15, 2013.



Several musicians performed and recorded live albums at the Tennessee State Prison. The most famous of which was the 1976 [\*A Concert Behind Prison Walls\*](#), starring Johnny Cash, Linda Ronstadt, Roy Clark, and Foster Brooks. The performance was aired on television at the time, but the album wasn't formally released until after Cash's death in 2003. Other famous performers included Sonny James, Eddie Floyd, the Newcomers, Eddy Arnold, Minnie Pearl, and June Carter.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Lewis, Yoshie and Brian Allison. *Images of America: Tennessee State Penitentiary*. Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2014.

The prison has appeared on television several times. It served as the backdrop for two music videos by Eric Church, including a ballad about being executed by electric chair called [Lightning](#). The prison received much attention in news coverage of riots and hostage situations in the 1970s (during which the National Guard and a tank were brought in). One episode of *Nashville* and on two episodes of VH1's *Celebrity Paranormal Project* featured the prison. The short-lived VH1 show episodes "Season 1, Episode 3: The First Warden" and "Episode 8: Dead Men Walking" each feature four celebrities at a time including Olympic gold medalist Picabo Street, childhood actors Danny Bonaduce and Christopher Knight, and Mariel Hemingway spending the night in the "haunted" prison. They are armed with a thermal imaging camera, EMF meter, and EVP recorder and asked to go on "missions" to various "haunting hot spots" in the prison to perform tasks designed to engage with paranormal entities. The episodes include stories "that happened" at the prison including an incident where prisoners set fire to their bunks in an attempt to start a riot (which did happen), but the warden ordered the guards to stand down while several men burned to death (I can only find evidence of one death resulting in any of the fires started by inmates and it was not under this condition).<sup>39</sup>

Several ghost stories associated with the prison have been circulated through the media. The above story appeared in several of the paranormal themed podcasts with episodes about the prison. One account is of an officer in a guard tower hearing footsteps around the base of the tower, who then called for back up. Upon their investigation, barefoot tracks are found that circled the tower and finally ended behind the chair the guard was seated in (they include the chilling detail that the inmates that were to be executed were led down the corridor

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<sup>39</sup> *VH1 Celebrity Paranormal Project*, "Season 1, Episode 3: The First Warden" and "Episode 8: Dead Men Walking," 2006.

barefoot—which I could not corroborate anywhere). Another story is a death row inmate who was convicted of killing six people, but was a religious fanatic who believed he had to kill seven and upon being executed, haunts the prison looking for his seventh victim. The names and details given yielded no results when I tried to find any historical links to a basis for any of these tales.<sup>40</sup>

Since closing its doors, the main function of the prison has been to serve as a film set—first in *Up Against the Wall* as a stand-in for Attica; then as itself in *Marie*, a biopic of a woman fighting corruption in the TDOC; in the comedy *Earnest Goes to Jail*; *The Green Mile*; and *The Last Castle*. The exterior has been painted and repainted, fake walls have been built, but the overall architecture was not compromised. In the film *The Green Mile*, the filmmakers incorporated the story of a real prisoner, John Sanders, who kept a pet mouse. The annual 5k event is named after the film’s title referencing the “long walk” down death row to where the electric chair is and advertised as “Run the Green Mile.”

### **Grubbs v Bradley**

Eventually the conditions within the prison became unlivable. In 1983, Scotty Grubb and four other inmates filed a lawsuit, which eventually became a class action lawsuit, which led to an investigation of the living conditions at the prison. They were found “unfit for human habitation” and “cruel and unusual punishment,” a violation of the inmates’ eighth amendment rights. The prison was shut down for good in 1992.

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<sup>40</sup> *Boos and Brews* Podcast, “Episode 105: Tennessee State Prison vs. Carnton Plantation,” 2019.; *Two Hexy Mamas* Podcast, “Episode 18: The Walls and Eastern State Pen,” June 18, 2018.; *VH1 Celebrity Paranormal Project*, “Season 1, Episode 3: The First Warden” and “Episode 8: Dead Men Walking,” 2006.

The overcrowding meant that some prisoners had as little as 19-square feet in their cells, the noise levels reached “intolerable” deafening proportions in the four-tiered cellblocks, and that communicable disease was a major problem. Plumbing problems contributed to the health risk and “noxious odors” were common. “151 of the 189 cells in each of Units I-IV contain toilets that are directly cross-connected with the drinking water.” There were “minor” problems like broken windows and leaky ceilings, but some problems posed a serious danger such as the exposed electrical wiring which was present in every cell block and even the shower facilities. Many cells were almost completely dark. The report reads, “While stating that a minimum of 30 footcandles is considered necessary, the lighting in many cells was measured at less than 5 footcandles. Indeed, of the 57 readings taken by Mr. Hoover in TSP living units, only three met or exceeded the 30 footcandle minimum standard. The lighting level on some lower bunks was as low as 0.2 footcandles.”

While the prison was classified as a maximum-security institution, almost 98% of the men housed there were medium security prisoners including non-violent offenders. Tennessee has notably longer sentences and more serious laws surrounding property crime than other states—which was noted as a contributing factor to the problem of overcrowding. Violence was commonplace for men living in the prison. Problems included strong-arm robbery, stabbings, rape, and murder. While most of the violence was inmate-on-inmate, prisoners also attacked guards, and were the victims of guard-perpetrated violence as well. “The resulting atmosphere of fear, intimidation, threats, and coercion is simply a way of life for TSP inmates.” Guards were inadequately trained and had an extremely high turnover. Inmates alleged that the guards were paid off to allow inmates into another’s cell in order to rape them. They also claimed that



guards would take payment from inmates to bring drugs into the facility, have another guard “bust” the inmate, confiscate the drugs, and then resell them to another inmate.

Possibly the most horrifying element of all the findings was what happened in the hospital wing. Underfunded and understaffed, the hospital was allowing completely untrained, unlicensed, uncertified inmates with no prior medical experience to perform tasks such as x-raying unsupervised, cleaning equipment, and even assisting in major surgery (which the hospital performed in spite of not being equipped or authorized). This was not in the 1880s, but rather the 1980s.<sup>41</sup>

### **Current Use and Public interest**

According to the Tennessee Department of Corrections (TDOC), the historic prison grounds are still in use. The location currently houses the Office of Investigations and Compliance, archives, the criminal conviction records unit, transportation division, and other mission-critical areas of the department. TDOC offenders maintain the grounds area; therefore, they do not allow public access onto the site other than one opportunity per year, an annual 5K. The public may view, photograph, and tour the site while participating in the “Run the Green Mile” event benefiting Big Brothers Big Sisters of Middle Tennessee. The race sells out annually. Additionally, the prison has been the backdrop for several films and television shows. In 2018, the film revenue was \$3,300.

Beyond use as a film set, there is a clear public interest in the site. Regular police patrols are required to ward off the frequent trespassers. The TDOC commissioned a short film,

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<sup>41</sup> Grubbs v. Bradley, 552 F. Supp. 1052 - Dist. Court, MD Tennessee 1982.

*Tennessee State Prison 1898-1992: On the Inside*, in 2016 to offer interested parties a look inside the prison and the grounds. The film was made with drone videography and is artistically beautiful, but offers no interpretation or history.

The district 20 representative, Councilwoman Mary Carolyn Roberts, said, “the prime location has investors ‘lined up’ for a redevelopment.” Also a real-estate agent, she estimates the property will sell for around \$500 million. In 2016, the Nashville Metro Council rezoned the area around the prison to prevent industrial use.

She considers the property as a neighborhood landmark (which it is, but could easily be argued as a state or maybe even national landmark, as well). “I think people are more than eager to do it, but we have to somehow, someday convince the state that it’s time to sell it,” Roberts said.”<sup>42</sup> The question remains. If the state could be convinced to sell it, what should be done with the property?

### **Recommendations for Interpretation**

The overwhelming success of prison-turned-tourist-attraction of Alcatraz and Brushy Mountain clearly indicate that if this property and its story was put into the right hands, it could be immensely successful as both a historic site and investment. It even has the advantage over both sites of being centrally located near a major metropolis and not requiring a boat ride to access it.

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<sup>42</sup> Gonzalez, Tony. “Tennessee Shows Off Its Old Prison With A Sweet Drone Video In Hopes To Ward Off Trespassers.” Nashville Public Radio. October 16, 2016.

I would encourage an adaptive reuse model, which has been thoroughly proven a green and sustainable model for development. If a developer or private investment firm stepped in to do what they did at Brushy Mountain, but with an eye to the importance of the history of the site, it could be the best of both worlds. Brushy Mountain could be used as a model, but there should be deeper interpretation about the historical significance and stories of the people who lived and died there. The full history must include a conversation about the racial relations, carceral landscape, leasing system, architecture, and politics of the period. As a dark tourism site, it should incorporate the death and suffering that took place, but also the stories of the lives lived there. The site has been given over to the elements for some time and would require a great deal of work to make it safe for visitors, but that does not mean it is impossible (just expensive).

A great deal of the original architecture still stands. There is a wealth of historic images, documents, and artifacts that could be bought back and reclaimed for the site. More than enough material culture exists to make a museum. With the evidenced public interest, the prison would almost certainly generate income from tours.

Beyond stabilizing the structure, like many sites that are somewhat hazardous, precautions can be taken to protect both the tourist and site. The Winchester Mystery House in San Jose, California offers a tour of unfinished areas that excludes children and requires participants to wear a hard hat. One technique being utilized to preserve the dilapidated condition of places while making them safe and accessible is the addition of clear walkways that allow visitors to tread in dangerous areas without risk of injury or obstructing the view. Waivers would be good additional legal protection for the site. Signing a waiver has become a common

procedure for most consumers. From escape rooms to virtual reality stations, cave adventures, haunted houses, and skydiving—many recreational activities require a waiver.

Another way to bring the prison back to life while not imposing on the physical structure would be to utilize augmented reality. Tablets with headphones could be checked out as a part of walking tours with sites that activate in specific locations. For example, one could access the photographs or video of *A Concert Behind Prison Walls* while standing in the auditorium where the event took place. GPS fixed historic photos could be imposed over the video feed allowing visitors to move through time.

A variety of tours could be offered:

- General tour for all ages.
- Adults only tour that goes to the less stable areas where children would be at risk and includes some of the grislier details.
- Architecture enthusiast tour (maybe once a week per demand) that goes into depth about the rich history—much of which could be pulled from the HABS report which includes the architect’s original description of the plans and also condition report in the 1970s with the architectural assessment of value.
- Paranormal tour—this tour could take place after dark and involve the ghost stories linked to the site or allow ghost hunters access at a high premium.
- Seasonal activities—the site would be likely to draw huge numbers in September and October if the site engaged in “haunted house” type activities. For instance, the Winchester Mystery House uses electronic speakers throughout to create a specific auratic atmosphere. While bordering on the delightfully distasteful— flickering lights and

the sound of electricity humming hooked up to a motion detector aimed at the site of electric chair chamber (if Old Smokey cannot be repurchased, then a replica is recommended) would definitely appeal to that audience's sensibilities. The location near the current prison could contribute to the sense of danger for these thrill-seekers.

- One idea for tours that could humanize the stories of individual inmates would be to print rap sheets that give them information about a specific inmate's experience. We have detailed enough records that with some comprehensive research a few hundred different versions could be produced.

The surrounding buildings should be purchased and preserved as well. Some could serve as administrative offices. Repurposing the factories for artisans and vendors would be ideal. I'm not suggesting a full-on Colonial Williamsburg model, but taking the chair factory and reusing it as a space that small business artisan furniture makers or sellers could work and sell from would be true to its original use. The land the farm stood on is still there and could have a wide range of use either as event space or even as a working farm or berry picking area. Like Brushy Mountain, I think a distillery or brewery and taproom could be a great way to draw additional visitors and income. The scale of the buildings and vast area of the site could accommodate a variety of ventures.

The Tennessee State Prison and its predecessor the State Penitentiary have an enormous wealth of historic value. The structures are architecturally priceless and the stories of the people who lived and worked there are significant. I have barely scratched the surface of what I have included here. There are endless possibilities for interpreting this site. The ongoing neglect of this site is downright *criminal*.

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