A Power Point adaptation of John N. Miskell’s 1993-1994 carousel slide show & script
All images used in this PowerPoint are from Part 1 carousel of Miskell slide show.
Before Independence, crime penalties were fines or corporal: lash, stocks, branding, or worst. Long incarceration thought too costly.
16 crimes punishable by death until a 1796 law cut that list to 2: murder and treason.
New nation’s humanitarians made reform of the criminal the goal of the gaol. In 1797 NY’s 1st penitentiary, Newgate, opened.
Newgate didn’t deter crime. 1816 law OK’d setting up a new prison in Fingerlakes. 4 in Auburn donated 6 acres for the site 6/22/16
Auburn began with same goals as failed Newgate: To reform inmates thru habits of work & sobriety.
Prison planned as self-supporting. Wm Britton builder/1st warden. J. O. Daniele was architect.
As main building shows, it didn’t deviate from the conventional buildings of that era.
Onondaga limestone from local quarries was used throughout the prison. 58 prisoners were received at the site in 1817 to aid in the construction. Their arrival constitutes the actual beginning of custodial operations at the penitentiary they helped build.
The south wing was built between 1816 – 1819. 28 rooms holding between 8 - 10 inmates each.
Every cell in either wing came with handy plumbing: an iron bucket for personal needs. Only 61 cells in the south wing for single occupancy, or double when necessary. Apartment-size rooms were a source of discipline problems and corruption that led lawmakers in 1819 to order a new wing be built with only solitary cells. Every cell in either wing came with handy plumbing: an iron bucket for personal needs.
The north wing finished in 1821 became the model for future prisons in the U.S.
No longer were inmates lodged together but each locked in his own cell at night: 7 feet long, 7 feet high and 3 ½ feet wide.

In the so-called “Auburn Plan,” cells are enclosed within a great containing structure, cells back-to-back in a block.
Since the cells were arranged back to back in tiers, there was no way for an inmate to tunnel through his cell wall to the “outside,” only to an adjoining cell still inside the cell block. Thus the design was designated “inside cell construction.”
Advantages of inside cells: security & economy
Security obvious; economy self-evident: no frills.
Well-known feature of Auburn system: “Strict silent.” Each inmate silent in solitary cell at night, silent at congregate work during day.
The buckets & the bucket house under eye of keeper with his cane. An inmate morning ritual before workshop, then breakfast.
Whether to bucket house, workshops or meals, inmates marched, in a half-shuffle lockstep, the keeper rapping out orders with his cane.
The striped uniforms were meant to make inmates more aware of their subordinate status & more identifiable if they escaped.
Keepers rapped orders with canes rather than break silence speaking. Unless an emergency, all other kinds of communication were banned.
The lockstep formation was invented to make easier detection of moving lips, eye blink codes, hand sign language, facial signals as well as general supervisory aims.
To keep inmates fit to work plain food was cooked in huge drums: hash, mush, coffee.
The menu rarely varied, although vegetables & fruit were served in season. Molasses at night was served to help prevent constipation.
Places at tables were so arranged that keepers could immediately spot anyone’s absence. Inmates sat facing forward on just one side of the table to minimize opportunities to signal.
Housing hygiene was poor, but work areas provided sinks, tubs, showers. Use mandated.
The prison dam across Owasco Outlet was erected by inmates in 1818 – 1819.
At first, the state used the power for prison's own shops and leased rest to nearby mills.
But in 1821 to cut prison operating costs the 1st outside contract let Samuel D. Dunham manufacture tools in prison using inmates.
Contractor paid fixed sum per day for convict labor and supplied machines, materials and foremen and responsible for sale of the goods.
Prison supplied keepers, shops, heat & power. Soon other contractors followed.
In 1825 Elam Lynds took 100 inmates by canal & river to Sing Sing to start erecting a new prison modeled after Auburn. Construction completed in 1828.
Under the Auburn System at both prisons, “hard labor” was key to cut operating costs & reform convicts, for life outside was hard too.
To force men to do the work, Auburn System used horror, assault, breaking of spirit. Shaved heads humiliated, symbolized subjugation.
Those who rebelled were quickly punished with no recourse or defense. Whippings up to 39 lashes were permitted until a 1847 whipping ban except in “self-defense.” But some keepers on occasion ignored the rule because they knew the “whistling cat” struck fear in the hearts of the prisoners.
Medical services to keep men healthy enough to work were needed because sickly inmates, like above in MD wait room, were a costly drag.
Dispensary “medication” often just dose of salts & order to return to work.
Convicts needing further treatment might be kept in prison hospital few days, only brief “escape” from daily dull hard-labor grind.
Malingering, however, was frowned upon & often punished when discovered or suspected.
The Shower Bath, introduced in 1842 as a substitute for whipping, was an Auburn original. The inmate, usually stripped naked, his feet & hands secured, sat under a 4-foot high, 30-to-40 gallon barrel of cold water. Death of inmate from shock in 1858 ended practice. Replaced by paddle. It ended 1892.
Assaultive or insubordinate inmate would be put in “solitary confinement” on bread & water aka “cakes & ale.” Heavy metal yoke rarely used. Injuries might disable inmate worker.
Prison profitable 1828 – 1842, helped Auburn prosper, but merchants protested inmate-made goods. Clinton Prison opened in 1845 to divert inmate labor to mining & making iron.
In 1857, the Legislature ordered housing for the “criminally insane” be built at Auburn Prison, making NY 1st state to provide a separate facility for this type of offender. It opened Feb. 2, 1859. But by 1884, it had become overcrowded and was closed on April 25, 1895.
Since 1823 a silent witness has surveyed the scene at Auburn Prison and has watched the Auburn System of silence evolve, flourish and eventually die. His name: “Copper John.”
The colonial soldier figure first stood atop the 1st administration bldg, now tops the new one.
Carved by Dep. Keeper John Cray, the original wood figure decayed. In 1848 inmates under foreman John Gaylord hammered out a copper replica from a sheet of that metal which gave the figure its name. Weighs 600 lbs, has ¼ inch “skin,” stands toe to tassel tip 8 ½ feet. His rifle: 100 lbs, more than 11 feet long.
In contrast to Auburn’s hard labor approach, Elmira Reformatory received its first young inmates (30) from the prison in 1876, the goal being their reform through total personality re-education and their possibly being paroled before serving the fixed limit of their sentence.
The most publically visible educational practice was its marching drills which drew crowds.
Beyond showy drill marches, Elmira provided its inmates a total educational program.
Elmira’s program included athletics, vocational shops, and academic subjects.
By 1860s, Auburn’s system lost some glamour. Still did contract work. Inner court got facelift.
Evidencing that even Auburn felt the more humanizing trend in penology, the prison made an effort to beautify its inner courtyard.
In 1880s as unions gained legislative support, inmate-made goods were barred from open market. Contract labor was not seen as reform.
An unfortunate result of opposition to prison industries was enforced inmate idleness.
In 1890 to mitigate increased inmate idleness, the prison adopted a state-use policy, selling inmate-made goods only to public agencies.
Looking first north along State Street...
then looking south along State Street, it was apparent near the turn of 19th Century that Auburn had grown up around the prison.
In this trolley era postcard, prison can hardly be seen looking down State St. from Genesee.
In 1890s, prison housed 1200+, employed 200+.
Visitors interested in this room; less so locals.
It’s the room of world’s 1st electric execution.
On Aug. 6, 1890 Wm. Kemmler, 39, peddler from Buffalo, who killed girl friend with ax, was 1st of 55 executed in Auburn’s electric chair.
The web resource for NY correction history

NY Correction History Society

7,000+ files of text & images totaling 70+ megabytes.

www.correctionhistory.org