

AASLH

SPRING 2017 VOLUME 72, #2 \$10

# HISTORYNEWS

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY

## Beyond Neutrality



Good Intentions  
Are Not Enough:  
Lessons for  
Inclusive  
Public History

I AM  
History

“We are **MORE** than Farmers”



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“The Big Graph” at Eastern State Penitentiary illustrates the nation’s soaring Rate of Incarceration and the profound racial disparity within the U.S. prison population over time. Text bluntly

identifies these trends as a crisis, and asks how our nation should respond. All visitors are invited to discuss these trends and reflect on their root causes. Photo courtesy of Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site, Philadelphia.

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### Cleaning House: A Guide to Deaccessioning and Abandoned Property

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**AASLH**  
**HISTORYNEWS**  
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*History News* is a publication of the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH). *History News* exists to foster publication, scholarly research, and an open forum for discussion of best practices, applicable theories, and professional experiences pertinent to the field of state and local history.

EDITOR Bob Beatty | ADVERTISING Hannah Hethmon  
DESIGN Go Design, LLC: Gerri Winchell Findley, Suzanne Pfeil

*History News* (ISSN0363-7492) is published quarterly by American Association for State and Local History, 2021 21st Avenue S., Suite 320, Nashville, TN 37212. Periodicals Postage Paid at Nashville, Tennessee. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *History News*, 2021 21st Avenue S., Suite 320, Nashville, TN 37212.

Article manuscripts dealing with all aspects of public history are welcome, including current trends, timely issues, and best practices for professional development and the overall improvement of the history field, particularly articles that give a fresh perspective to traditional theories, in-depth case studies that reveal applicable and relevant concepts, and subject matter that has the ability to resonate throughout all levels of the field. For information on article submissions and review, see [about.aaslh.org/history-news](http://about.aaslh.org/history-news). Single copies are \$10. Postmaster, send form 3579 to *History News*, AASLH, 2021 21st Avenue S., Suite 320, Nashville, TN 37212. Periodical postage paid in Nashville, Tennessee. Entire contents copyrighted ©2017 by the American Association for State and Local History. Opinions expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of the American Association for State and Local History.



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# Beyond

# Neutrality

By Sean Kelley

**Editor's note:** A shorter version of this article originally appeared in the *American Alliance of Museums' Dispatches from the Future of Museums*. It is reprinted here with permission.



Eastern State Penitentiary's influential "wagon wheel" floorplan visible from above.

Photos Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site, Philadelphia

**H**ere at Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site, we are rewriting our mission statement to remove the word "neutral." We believe that the bedrock value that many of us brought into this field—that museums and historic sites should strive for

neutrality—has held us back more than it has helped us. Neutrality is, after all, in the eye of the beholder. At Eastern State, more often than not, the word provided us an excuse for simply avoiding thorny issues of race, poverty, and policy that we weren't ready to address.



*Prisons Today* exhibit opens with the statement, “Mass Incarceration Isn’t Working.” The graph compares violent crimes and per capita incarceration before and after these policies took effect.

Most visitors to Eastern State are white. Most are middle class, and most are tourists to Philadelphia. Most report that they have never been arrested or know someone who has been incarcerated. Ten years ago I would have argued that these leisure travelers don’t want to explore the complex and troubling root causes of mass incarceration while on vacation.

We had already begun to commission artists to explore these issues, and I remain proud of many of those early site-specific installations that brought these issues into our programming. But we placed the artist installations at the physical edges of our property and kept our tours and historic exhibits focused squarely on the past. Nobody complained. Our attendance grew.

In some small ways, I was probably right. Bipartisan support for criminal justice reform has grown dramatically in recent years. Ten years ago, our staff was tiny, our resources modest, and our board of directors in transition. Perhaps we weren’t ready.

But mostly, I was wrong. Development of our first interpretive plan in 2009 forced us to look more critically at our choices. Looking at a map of programming around the site, I had to conclude that our version of neutrality was mostly taking the form of silence. As one coworker remarked to me in a planning retreat, “Oh, we talk about race and the U.S. criminal justice system every day. Our silence tells visitors exactly what we think about it.” *Ouch*.

I thought neutrality would create a welcoming space for all visitors, but it was becoming clear that our tours and exhibits were deeply uncomfortable for Americans who have experienced mass incarceration up close, within their communities.

We have tried to shift our focus from neutrality to critical thinking and inclusion. We have found that many leisure travelers really will engage with difficult subjects, but core elements of museum craft become more important than ever. Experiences need to be social, multi-generational, interactive, and accessible to visitors who don’t learn by reading alone. Most critically, they need to genuinely value the personal experiences and wide perspectives of our visitors themselves.

In 2014, we built *The Big Graph* (see cover), a 16-foot-tall, 1.5-ton infographic sculpture that:

- Represents the massive per capita growth of the U.S. prison population over the last forty years
- Compares the U.S. Rate of Incarceration to every other nation on earth (the U.S. has the highest by a dramatic margin)
- Divides nations into those that practice capital punishment and those that do not
- Tracks the consistent and disturbing racial disparity in the U.S. prison population over time.

Every visitor to Eastern State Penitentiary encounters *The Big Graph*. It concludes the main audio tour and is incorporated into every school tour. The text on the graph is direct and blunt: “How should our nation address this crisis?” The accompanying audio tour asks, “So why does the U.S. *need* to imprison so many people?” To our surprise, visitors consistently report that *The Big Graph* feels neutral.

But in developing the companion exhibit, *Prisons Today: Questions in the Age of Mass Incarceration*, we faced a cross-



Visitors to *Prisons Today* are confronted with the question “Have You Ever Broken the Law?” Those that admit they have are faced with the question “Does that make you a criminal?”

roads. We had dipped a toe into the pool of transparency about our perspectives, but we had maintained the illusion of neutrality. The new exhibit was shaping up to be a deep dive into issues of economic policy, race, enforcement, and the ineffectiveness of locking up so many people. Were we really going to tell our visitors, “On the one hand, there are powerful arguments against maintaining the highest rate of incarceration in the world, but on the other hand there are convincing arguments for it?” There are not convincing arguments. To set up arguments only to shoot them down felt patronizing.

There are too many Americans in prison. Our staff knows it, our advisors know it, our board of directors knows it. And so the organization united around a statement: “MASS INCARCERATION ISN’T WORKING.” That statement opens *Prisons Today* in 400-point block letters. Nearby, a seven-screen video installation tracks the political rhetoric that has driven American criminal justice policy since the 1960s. The video ends with admissions of humility and compassion from a set of current political leaders, stressing voices from the political right such as Speaker of the House Paul Ryan.

At a later point in the exhibit, visitors are forced to walk through one of two corridors, based on their willingness to admit if they’ve ever broken the law. Admitted lawbreakers are confronted with artist Troy Richards’s installation, asking if they see themselves as criminals. He invites visitors to leave written confessions of their law breaking, and he displays visitor confessions mixed with confessions from men and women living in prison. Visitors are consistently surprised by whose confessions are whose, thus destabilizing the idea of what defines “criminal.”

An interactive table called “Early Experience Matters” allows visitors to describe their childhoods in broad categories, including race, household income, and funding of their school district. While stressing that some people overcome obstacles and some people squander advantages, the interactive lets visitors know the incarceration rates of Americans with childhoods similar to their own.

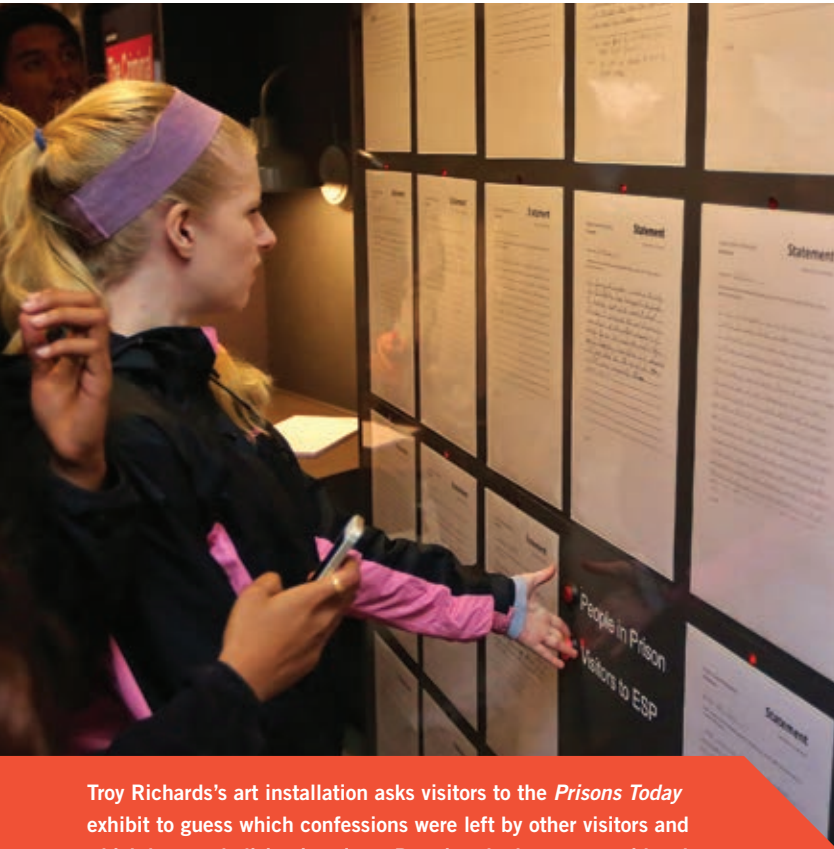
If there’s a message to this exhibit, aside from the failure of our criminal justice system to justify the scale of its growth, it’s a call for empathy. Exhibit cases contain objects on loan from members of our tour staff who have personally served time in prison. (These guides, under the leadership of Director of Education Lauren Zalut, joined our team to speak directly to our visitors about life inside the American prison system.) In one exhibit case is a headscarf on loan from Sheri, who worked in a prison kitchen for two months at \$0.19 per hour to afford it. It was her first discretionary purchase. She recalls it making her feel special at a very low time in her life.

Elsewhere in the exhibit, a beautiful and troubling film by Gabriela Bulisova tells the stories of six men and women impacted by the criminal justice system, including a man currently serving a life sentence and the Pennsylvania Secretary of Corrections. A reading table includes *The Night My Dad Went to Jail*, a children’s book for ages five to eight years old.

We invite visitors to “Send a Postcard to Your Future Self,” using a digital kiosk to create personalized electronic postcards that will arrive in two months, one year, and three years. The postcards remind visitors of what they were thinking during their visit, and recommend ways that they

can influence our nation's rapidly changing criminal justice policies based on their responses to the exhibit content.

**O**ur frontline staff has faced the biggest challenges. An exhibit can be crafted, prototyped, wordsmithed, and tested. A good graphic designer will make it appear authoritative. Then the exhibit development team will go back to their offices, for the most part. Our tour guides lead



Troy Richards's art installation asks visitors to the *Prisons Today* exhibit to guess which confessions were left by other visitors and which by people living in prison. Pressing the buttons provides the answers. Many visitors find their inability to guess troubling, and leaves them questioning how people are labeled "criminals."



Tour Guide Sheri uses her experiences as a recently incarcerated woman working in a modern prison kitchen to deepen the conversation during a tour of Eastern State Penitentiary's long-abandoned dining halls.

every group to *The Big Graph* and will invite comment on, for instance, the consistent racial disparity in our prison population over time. They provide content around difficult knowledge, in real time, with visitors who may be encountering this information for the first time. It doesn't always go smoothly.

We say we value inclusion, but do we really want our staff to engage *every* opinion in open dialogue with visitors? Many visitors find the patterns disturbing, and many recite the cliché, "Don't do the crime if you can't do the time." Lively and engaging conversations are common. Some visitors stay silent, perhaps taking it in for reflection later. Some visitors are impatient to move on, and we're happy to oblige. But angry, offensive, polarizing, or racist comments, although rare, do happen. It leaves us to wonder, is every opinion worthy of discussion by our paid staff?

**W**e have developed two "Non-Negotiables"—beliefs we hold throughout the organization. The first is, of course, that "Mass Incarceration Isn't Working." We believe crime rates can be lowered while lowering prison populations, and we encourage tour guides to cite four states where policies are currently accomplishing both. And second, we believe the crisis of racial disparity in our prison population is the result of policy decisions, and discussions around race and incarceration should focus on policy solutions and not blame communities.

Our guides are empowered to invoke the Non-Negotiables, but rarely do. Defining the limits of our intended dialogue aims to give the team the confidence to ask sensitive questions to total strangers in the first place. The contentious 2016 presidential election, and the political divisions that have only grown deeper since, made this work only more intimidating. On a good day, however, our team believes we're doing our part to support critical thinking, civil dialogue, and a respect for the wide diversity of opinion and experience in our audience.

The journey to create this programming has changed our organization. Our board of directors now includes a scholar who studies race and incarceration and teaches inside prisons. It also includes a reentry professional who was himself incarcerated for twelve years. But serious challenges remain. Like many historic sites, we lack adequate racial diversity on our management team, and we are working to attract more racially and culturally diverse staff into our leadership pipeline.

Sometime colleagues say that Eastern State is transitioning into an advocacy organization. I reject the term. We seek robust dialogue and we seek empathy for all people impacted by crime or by mass incarceration. Our willingness to admit our perspectives is intended to signal to our audience that we're honest and direct, but we want them to be honest and direct too. We do a lot of listening.

Our visitors—about 240,000 last year—aren't expecting this programming when they arrive. Most want to see Al Capone's cell or the site of the doomed 1945 tunnel escape. I've grown to think that makes them the perfect audience to engage. Exit surveys conducted after *The Big Graph's* completion reflect only 4 percent saying that the inclusion of contemporary content detracted from their visit.



Visitors in the *Prison Today* exhibit compare childhood factors such as race, household income, and school district funding.

A full 91 percent of visitors reported learning something thought-provoking about today's criminal justice system. Summative evaluation, press coverage, and social media comments have been encouraging.

**A**nd there is hope. Our audience has grown by more than 40 percent since we began addressing these complex and troubling aspects of American life. It grew by 12 percent last year alone, following the debut of *Prisons Today* with its explicit discussion of race, poverty, and incarceration. Many Americans do want to engage in honest and direct dialogue.

I once feared programming like this would suppress our attendance. I feared it would divide our board of directors and scare potential funders. I feared it would harm staff morale, including my own. And I thought neutrality, whatever that meant, had to guide all our programming decisions. I was wrong on every front.

Now I wonder what other misguided beliefs we're leaving unexamined. ●



Sean Kelley is Senior Vice President, Director of Interpretation at Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site in Philadelphia. He will host two AASLH workshops in the fall of 2017, one in Philadelphia and one in Austin, Texas (see right), to explore issues of neutrality and advocacy in historic site interpretation. For more information: [sk@easternstate.org](mailto:sk@easternstate.org).

**SEAN KELLEY**  
will be presenting a workshop  
**Saturday, September 9**  
from **1–5:30 p.m.** at the  
**2017 AASLH Annual Meeting**  
in **Austin, Texas.**  
**THE ADVOCACY / NEUTRALITY**  
**THROWDOWN!**

Some historic sites have begun to openly advocate for social change. They have left the pretense of “neutrality” behind, and admit that our organizations, by their nature, can never be truly neutral. But do these sites actually foster change? How do they measure success? And do they alienate some stakeholders with their approach? Join an open, honest, and energetic set of conversations about the pros and the cons of mixing historic interpretation with advocacy work, including many examples of successful and flawed projects. Advocacy skeptics welcome!