

Eastern State Penitentiary Archives
2027 Fairmount Avenue

Philadelphia, PA 19130
(215) 236-5111 x 10

Thank you for your interest in Eastern State Penitentiary. We receive many requests for information regarding former inmates, and try to help whenever possible.

By far the best source for inmate information is the Pennsylvania State Archives in Harrisburg. A complete guideline for searching those archives follows at the end of this message.

The Penitentiary Archives

We have a small archive here in the historic site offices, comprised mostly of annual reports and internal prison records that were removed from the prison at its closing and donated back to the historic site in the past few years.

We offer a service to have one of our staff members search our archives for a information regarding a specific inmate.

We do not recommend this service for inmates admitted after 1940, since we have very few records from that period. Our records concerning individual guards are even more limited. There is no guarantee that any search we conduct will come up with information on a specific inmate. If you call before sending in your request, our staff will be able to help you decide whether it will be best for you to begin your research at Eastern State or another repository.

Genealogy research costs \$10 for members of the historic site (see below) , and \$25 for non-members. Please send a check made payable to "Eastern State Penitentiary," and provide as much of the following information as possible:

- Inmate Name
- Inmate Number
- Crime
- Notable details of case
- Date of Entry to Eastern State
- Date of Release
- Home town or county

Membership:

It's a great way to support preservation efforts at this National Historic Landmark!
Thank you for your support!

Benefits include:

- • Free Unlimited Admission during all public hours.
- • Free "Behind the Scenes" Tours with historic site staff, twice a year.
- • Free "Preview Night" of our popular Halloween Tours.
(Household Limit: 2 Adults & 2 Kids)
- • Reduced rate (\$10) for search of historic site archives.
- • Free T-Shirt.

Membership Categories:

Individual \$30

Student \$25

Household \$50

Supporting \$100

Sustaining \$250

Sponsor \$1,000

We can charge memberships or search fees to your Visa or Mastercard; please call the historic site office.

The Pennsylvania State Archives

The Pennsylvania State Archives will conduct research for a fee and can be contacted at 717-783-3281

To research on ones own:

If you are interested enough in getting information about anyone who served time at Eastern State Penitentiary there is a place in Harrisburg that holds many, many different records from the institution's 142 years of operation. There are, however, NONE organized by inmate name so you need at least ONE other piece of information to have any chance at all of finding whatever may have been saved from the individual's incarceration. The following information is provided to help you decide (1) if going to Harrisburg is worthwhile and (2) what to ask for if you go there.

1. Institution records that were saved (much was destroyed in 1970 as part of the closing) are kept BY LAW at the PA STATE ARCHIVES, part of the PA Historical Museum Commission, and housed in a building attached to the William Penn Museum, 3rd and Forster Sts, Harrisburg. It is a short walk through the capitol or taxi ride from the Harrisburg train/bus train station and is open Tuesday thru Friday from 9:00 AM to 4:00 PM, and Saturdays 9-12:00 and 1-4:00 (microfilm only).
2. All records from Eastern State Penitentiary are held in Record Group (RG) 15. This is the file where all Department of Justice records are kept and is the first piece of information you will need after you register at the visitor's desk. There is a folder available in the manuscript reading room giving a complete list of the ESP documents held at the archives if you want to search around for other information. The archive's web site given below also lists holdings.
3. The most helpful piece of information you can have as you enter the state archives is the date of admission for your particular inmate. It also helps if you know the name under which the person was admitted but most admission records include aliases and, if known, the "true name" of the inmate. Given this information you will want to go directly to the admission records. Depending on when your person was admitted the admission records are called different things and in some cases the same information is in more document:

From 1889-1926 "Time Books" contain a 1 line record of each admission.
(These give hardly any information beyond the inmate's number)

From 1842-1929 "Reception Books" are on microfilm at the state archives.
(These give more information that do the time books)

From 1895-1957 "Bertillion Books" give very specific information- (length of fingers, distance between eyes, etc.) for each admitted inmate along with standard demographic data (birth date, race, residence, criminal record, etc.).

After 1950 the "Warden's Daily Log" is the best place to find a record of a specific inmate's admission. The daily entries include minimal information (name, sentence, county, charge) about admissions in the 24 hour period.

Once you find an admission record for a given inmate you have enough information to go elsewhere in the state archives. The critical new piece of information is the INMATE NUMBER. The other helpful information from the admission record is the length of the sentence and, in some cases, even a specific "planned" discharge date. The next

source of information is the collection of “discharge records.” As with reception records, these come in various names depending on when the discharge occurred and under what legal authority. Most will be found in “Discharge Dockets” but there are also commutation books, parole reports, and discharge summaries. All of these are ORGANIZED BY DATE- in chronological order- so you need to know the date to look for, rather than the inmate name or number. Depending on when the discharge occurred there will be a significant amount of information about what work the inmate did in the institution, where he was going to live when discharged, who the parole sponsor was going to be, etc. **Note that discharge date may be earlier than expected due to parole, commutation or court decision.**

4. Once you have an inmate number to work with you can browse through other ESP material held at the archives. Some items may be classified as requiring PA Dept. of Corrections permission to access (the report from an investigation of a 1951 escape attempt is an example), others are extremely incomplete (from 1884-1926 the prison kept a scrapbook of newspaper clippings about prisoners), and both trustee minutes (until 1924 they were called prison inspectors) and the warden’s log book give a version of prison life from the administration’s perspective. Finding a reference to a particular inmate in these documents is pretty much a scavenger hunt but they are worth looking through if you have the time and/or interest in either general activities or specific incidents if you know the time frame (the 1/8/1961 riot is reported at length in the warden’s log.)

5. If you bring even the most basic information about a former ESP prisoner to the state archives you will find the staff most courteous, knowledgeable and helpful. If what you are looking for is on microfilm they will show where to find it and how to use the reader and printer machines. If maintained as a paper record you will be given a numbered spot at the examination table and one of the staff will bring you the documents for review. You will only be allowed to write notes in pencil (ink can permanently alter history) but will have the option to purchase copies of records. The archivist on duty can provide information about copy costs and procedures.

6. The correct web address for the PA Historical Museum Commission is <http://www.phmc.state.pa.us> Phone# (717) 783-3281

The first link listed at this site is “State Archives” and this will get to RG15 manuscripts and microfilm. The Staff at the state archives suggest the following documents under “Prison Population Records” in their collection as starting points for research on inmates at ESP.

- Admission and Discharge Books, 1844-1888 (3 volumes)
- Bertillion Handbooks, 1895-1937 (12 volumes)
- Convict Reception Registers, 1842-1929 (93 volumes)
- Descriptive Registers, 1829-1903 (5 volumes)
- Population Indexes, [ca.1900] (2 volumes)
- Scrapbooks, 1884-1893, 1908-1917, 1925-1926 (3 volumes)

Good luck with your research. We hope you

can visit the historic site soon!