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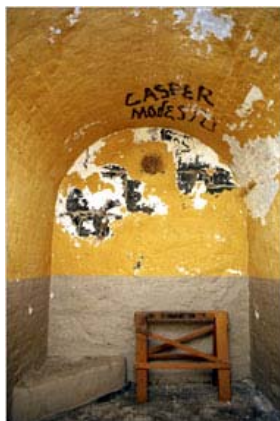
SAN QUENTIN JOURNAL

# Prison Makes Way for Future, but Preserves Past

By PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN  
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SAN QUENTIN, Calif. — The dank crypt for the living still wields emotional power, its peeling ocher walls and low vaulted ceilings suffused with chill and darkness.

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Thor Swift for The New York Times

A new hospital is being built at San Quentin, but the original dungeon, with its grim history of pain and misery, will remain.



Thor Swift for The New York Times

The facade of the original hospital will be saved.

With its oaken, iron-latticed door and two-foot-thick granite bricks, San Quentin's dungeon looks so stereotypically medieval that it might have been dreamed up by one of Hollywood's masters of the macabre. But as niches for wooden pegs that once secured chains and shackles attest, these gloomy catacombs bore witness to "an enormous amount of human history, pain, misery and atonement," said Kevin Starr, the [California](#) historian.

As a federal court-ordered overhaul of California's prison medical system begins, the storied prison overlooking San Francisco Bay is tearing down several outmoded buildings on the 432-acre property, including the original 1885 hospital built in the institutional Italianate style. A \$146 million, state-of-the-art primary care health services complex will open in 2010.

Before demolition, state historians called in to survey the site discovered the significance of what had been a forgotten space used for storage. The space, a dungeon, was the original San Quentin and is believed to be the oldest surviving building constructed by the state.

The now-moldering cloister will be preserved because of its importance, while demolition proceeds above it. It was completed by prisoners in 1854, four years after statehood. "It was the state's first public work, before the Capitol building, the roadways, the public colleges and universities," Dr. Starr said. "Its preservation is not trivial. Like the catacombs in Rome, it's where people suffered."

Its history is indeed grim. Originally intended to house 45 inmates, it was built out of local rock and clay brick quarried by convicts living aboard the Waban, a prison ship anchored in San Francisco Bay.

More than 150 men were piled into the dungeon's cells, which were sealed off with iron doors with a small slit

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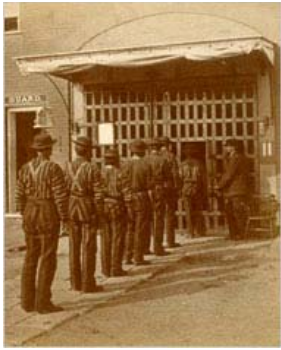
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Prisoners lining up at the prison gate, probably in the late 1800s.

known as a “Judas hole.” The men slept on vermin-infested straw matting. “Night buckets” for waste were left uncovered. Floggings with a rawhide strap were standard punishment, along with “shower baths” — a precursor of water-boarding — in which naked prisoners were tied to ladders and then sprayed in the face, chest and genitals with a high-pressure stream of cold water.

In 1869, a visiting physician, Alfred W. Taliaferro, wrote of the deplorable conditions: “men literally piled up on one another; this fills the room with animal heat and impure air.”

The dungeon eventually became a “hole” for solitary confinement, modeled on Pennsylvania’s Quaker-inspired system in which isolation was viewed as a path to reflection and penitence (thus the term “penitentiary”). In 1880, the last flogging was officially administered at San Quentin and 60 years later, the warden, Clinton Duffy, abolished the use of the dungeon altogether, removing the iron gates as a symbol of reform.

Federal historic preservation law requires surveying potentially historic structures on state or federally owned property and saving those deemed very significant. The Italianate facade of the 1885 hospital will be incorporated into the new medical facility. The dungeon, “a microcosm of how prisoners were treated,” in the words of Madeline R. Bowen, an architectural historian for the firm Jones & Stokes, had languished for years until it was unsealed so that historians could document it.

“There was nothing cleaned up about it,” said Gerald T. Takano, an architect who documented the dungeon for the Historic American Buildings Survey, part of the [Department of the Interior](#). “You can still really sense how it was.”

Unlike Alcatraz, which has more than a million visitors a year, San Quentin is still an active prison where convicted killers like [Scott Peterson](#) wait out their death sentences in limbo, as the controversy over lethal injection continues. Sgt. Rudy Luna, administrative assistant to Warden Robert L. Ayers Jr., said future use of the dungeon would be determined once the building is finished and might include storage, public tours on a limited basis or “keeping it as is.”

Many of his co-workers are unaware of the dungeon’s history, Sergeant Luna added. “I think it should be preserved,” he said as he escorted a reporter around the prison yard, which retains its crenellated Gothic aura. “If you know history, then you won’t make the same mistakes.”

Although few survive intact, dungeons were a fixture of 19th-century prisons, said Norman Johnston, a professor emeritus at Arcadia University in Pennsylvania and the author of “Forms of Constraint: A History of Prison Architecture” ([University of Illinois Press](#), 2000). The concept of solitary confinement, pioneered at the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia in 1829 and then repeated later in the “dark cells” of San Quentin’s dungeon, was developed as a more effective means of rehabilitation.

The reliance on isolation continues in today’s “super-max” prisons, like the administrative maximum, or ADX, federal prison in Florence, Colo. “The technology is more advanced but the basic operating principles are pretty much the same,” said Prof. Craig W. Haney of the University of California, Santa Cruz, and the author of “Reforming Punishment: Psychological Limits to the Pains of Imprisonment” (American Psychological Association, 2006).

There is evidence that public fascination with prisons is growing: Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, for instance, closed to prisoners in 1971, is now a major tourist attraction that draws 110,000 visitors at Halloween, when it is converted into a haunted house. The prison’s current “Winter Adventure tours” feature “an hour-long tour

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of the beautiful winter cellblocks with an expert guide and a cup of hot chocolate!" the Web site says.

"People want to know what's behind the wall," Professor Johnston said. "There's a certain morbid curiosity about prisons, just as there is with automobile wrecks."

In Boston, the historic Charles Street jail has been converted into a luxury hotel, the Liberty, complete with a restaurant called Clink, where tapas-style small plates are served amid the atmospheric original cell bars.

Should the dungeon at San Quentin ever be open to the public, even on a limited basis, it would have much to teach, said Ari Wohlfeiler, an organizer for Critical Resistance, an advocacy group that opposes prison expansion.

"The history of imprisonment in the U.S. has been marked by poor conditions, overcrowding and an endless cycle of construction, which continues to this day," Mr. Wohlfeiler said. "It would be an ironic history lesson."

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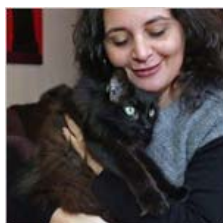
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