

# The Forum

Dedicated to the advancement of carceral interpretation for public benefit.

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## Featured Site

The Dubuque County Jail in Iowa was built between 1857 and 1858, designed and supervised by architect, John Francis Rague. The Old Jail is one of only three surviving Egyptian Revivalist buildings in the nation.

A cell block in the curved-ceiling basement held Confederate prisoners during the Civil War. Later, it detained prisoners accused of causing trouble in the upper cells. In 1874, six cells were added for juveniles and women prisoners. In 1971, the building ceased to be used as a jail, and it joined the National Register of Historic Places in 1972. In 1975, the Old Jail began operating as a Museum, thanks to the Dubuque Art Association.

Information courtesy of the City of Dubuque.



Photograph of the Dubuque County Jail, Iowa in 1977. Image courtesy of HABS (Historic American Buildings Survey).

## Monthly Meet-Up

The ACSM hosts monthly meetings for practitioners, scholars, and others involved with or interested in historic prison museums, and/or carceral sites. Meetings take place via Zoom on the second Monday of each month at 3:00 PM EST and cover a wide range of topics, including interpretation, community engagement strategies, and collaborative practices. Contact us at [thecarceral@gmail.com](mailto:thecarceral@gmail.com) to sign-up in order to attend. We hope to see you there!

## Prison Thanksgiving Events Date to 1860s

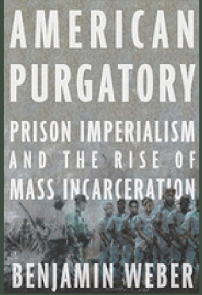
In 1868, a volunteer San Quentin chaplain organized a food drive to create a Thanksgiving feast for the population. "Rev. William T. Lucky desires that those who are willing to contribute fruit or other articles for use of the (incarcerated) of the state prison on Thanksgiving shall leave them with Blunt & Dalton (on) Davis Street," reported the San Francisco Chronicle on November 25, 1868. On Thanksgiving, Rev. Lucky helped run special church services, ministering to the incarcerated. "This was the first service of the kind ever held in the prison and will long be remembered," reported the San Francisco Examiner on November 27, 1868. These early efforts set the groundwork for decades to follow, as demonstrated in the 1890s. "The convicts in San Quentin prison were given a Thanksgiving dinner yesterday, which consisted mainly of roast pork and fruit," reported the Los Angeles Evening Post-Record on November 27, 1896.

Courtesy of CDCR. Contributed by Frank Vaisvilas of the Green Bay Press-Gazette (January 10, 2023).

# Book Club!

## American Purgatory: Prison Imperialism & the Rise of Mass Incarceration By Benjamin Weber (The New Press, 2023)

The story of American prisons is inextricably linked to the expansion of American power around the globe. This is a vivid work of hidden history that spans the wars to subjugate Native Americans in the mid-nineteenth century, the conquest of the western territories, and the creation of an American empire in Panama, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines, *American Purgatory* reveals how “prison imperialism”—the deliberate use of prisons to control restive, subject populations—is written into our national DNA, extending through to our modern era of mass incarceration. Weber also uncovers a surprisingly rich history of prison resistance, from the Seminole Chief Osceola to Assata Shakur—one that invites us to rethink the scope of America’s long freedom struggle.



## Prison Escapes That Captured Public Attention

Written by Derrick Bryson Taylor for The New York Times.  
Published September 8, 2023.

As long as there have been prisons, there have been people trying to break out of them. Numerous famous escapes have captured public imagination and attention over the years. In the 1930s, news accounts closely followed the hunt for John Dillinger, the Depression-era bank robber who twice escaped from jail, once with the use of a fake gun. Here are some other notable escapes from recent history.

### 1962: Escape from Alcatraz

More than 60 years ago, three inmates — Frank Lee Morris and the brothers Clarence and John Anglin — escaped from Alcatraz, the forbidding maximum security prison situated on an island in San Francisco Bay. Known as “the Rock,” Alcatraz was thought to be escape-proof, and during its 29 years as a federal prison, it was home to some of the country’s most infamous criminals, including Al Capone and James “Whitey” Bulger. Morris and the Anglin brothers were last seen inside their cells on the night of June 11, 1962. By the next morning, they had mysteriously vanished, leaving behind pillows under their bedclothes and lifelike papier-mâché heads with real hair and closed, painted eyes. A makeshift raft constructed with rubber raincoats was found on a nearby island, but the fugitives were never seen again.

### 1977 Ted Bundy escaped (twice)

Ted Bundy, who murdered 30 or more young women across the United States during the 1970s, escaped from the authorities twice. The first time was in Aspen, Colo., in June 1977, when Mr. Bundy was representing himself in a murder case. During a break in a pretrial hearing, he was led to a law library and jumped through a window, 30 feet to the ground. People in Aspen reacted as if Mr. Bundy was a modern Robin Hood instead of a suspected serial killer. Young people in town wore T-shirts with inscriptions like “Ted Bundy is a One-Night Stand” and a local restaurant offered a “Bundyburger.” He was captured after eight days. The second escape came in December of the same year, when he carved a hole in the ceiling of his cell and climbed through the duct work, according to ABC. He found his way down to a jailer’s apartment and changed into civilian’s clothes. He then traveled by plane, train and car to Florida, where he was arrested two months later. He was executed for his crimes in 1989.



## Report: Racial Disparities in Wisconsin Prisons

Wisconsin’s incarceration rates are higher than the national average, especially for Black residents, and the state has one of the largest corrections budgets in the nation, according to a new report from the Wisconsin Policy Forum. The report comes at a time of increased scrutiny of the prison system due to extended lockdowns that have included prisoner deaths and ongoing worker shortages.

The forum found 344 of every 100,000 Wisconsinites were in prison in 2021, compared to a national average of 316. The top cause of incarceration in Wisconsin is not new crimes, according to the report. Instead, it’s people on probation who are sent to prison for violating rules. Between the years 2000 and 2020, the policy forum found such revocations accounted for more than 30% of all new prison admissions each year.

The Wisconsin Policy Forum also found Black Wisconsinites are imprisoned at close to 12 times the rate of white Wisconsinites. Only New Jersey and California had larger gaps, at 12.8% and 15.6%, respectively. The number is calculated... based on data from the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics and the U.S. Census Bureau.

Wisconsin also had the highest Black imprisonment rate in the country in 2021, at 2,104 per 100,000 residents. Oklahoma, the next highest state, had a rate of 1,932 per 100,000.

“Historical developments, socioeconomic factors, and policy choices made over many decades have contributed to these incarceration rates and racial disparities in Wisconsin,” the report said.

Originally reported by Robert D’Andrea. Published October 30, 2023 by Wisconsin Public Radio.



# History in Brief

## HOW PRISONERS CONTRIBUTED DURING WORLD WAR II

A wave of patriotism swept the nation during World War II, and prisons were no exception. Publications of the era showcase the little-known ways that prisoners supported, or wanted to support, the war effort. The US is not known for having sent its prisoners to the frontlines to fight, unlike some other countries. The prison newspapers tell a different and more complex story, though.



Prisoners not only supported the war effort in surprising ways during World War II, they fought and died in it..  
Photo from [Paahao Press](#) (November 1943).

From editorials proclaiming love for democracy to calls to be released from prison in order to fight overseas, the initiatives seem to have been at least partly inspired by the incarcerated people themselves. Though some correctional administrators sneered at prisoners' patriotic proclamations, interpreting them as little more than a ploy to be released, parolees were among those killed in action. They chose risking their life to fight in the war over safely sitting out a few years behind bars. The myriad ways people in prison contributed have barely been preserved by history, but contemporary prison newspapers documented them extensively.

While only a tiny fraction of incarcerated people were able to parole to serve in the Armed Forces, even prisoners who stood no chance of being released maintained a deep desire to contribute. From manufacturing to farming to using their own resources, bodily and financial, incarcerated people found many ways to support the country during the war. Though some initiatives were surely imposed by the administration in top-down directives, prisoner-penned editorials of the time are uncharacteristically motivational.

"It is difficult, if not impossible, for our totalitarian enemies to understand that the products of our prison shops and prison industries are not the products of enforced labor; that the prisoner, along with the prison official, is working for those liberties he knows he will some day enjoy as a free American," wrote then-Attorney General Francis Biddle. Because of the 13th amendment, his statement is not entirely true, of course, and plantation prisons in the South producing food under rationing were likely using forced labor in harsh conditions. But his point remains: a sizable share of people inside correctional institutions contributed to the war effort with something that approximated willingness.

### Blood Donations

One of the most widespread ways prisoners supported the war effort was by donating blood. Perhaps they couldn't send their body to the front, but they could send their blood. The Ohio Penitentiary, it seems, held the record for most blood donations of any prison, at 10,000 pints. The military tribunals that replaced Hawaiian civilian courts during martial law would even allow blood donations to stand in for fines and days in prison. Under power imbalances, the notion of consent becomes distorted. One must adopt a hint of skepticism when reading of prison blood drives.



### “We Can Help”

In a Soonerland editorial written by an unnamed prisoner, he speaks with urgency of the need to support the very society with whom they once clashed:

“...[W]e must realize that the bullwhip of tyranny is lashing across the backs of enslaved Europe. Must we feel the lash before we understand that even our smallest contribution to the war effort might have prevented it?... Regardless of how subversive most of us have been toward the laws of our own country, the prison undertone is such that all are becoming heartened. Forgotten entirely is any previous clash with what is called society. And it is stimulating to listen to the discussions as to why we will win this war.”

In Hawaii, shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, one incarcerated man wrote an editorial titled, “We Can Help,” offering up the assistance of the thousands of people locked in prisons and imploring his peers to “take their places as needed workers in the vast mechanism of war whose wheels have started to revolve,” as well as for parolees to “justify their release” by contributing adequately. Though any prison press is subject to self-censorship or explicit censorship, the volume of content reflects a sincere and ample demand.

### War Bonds

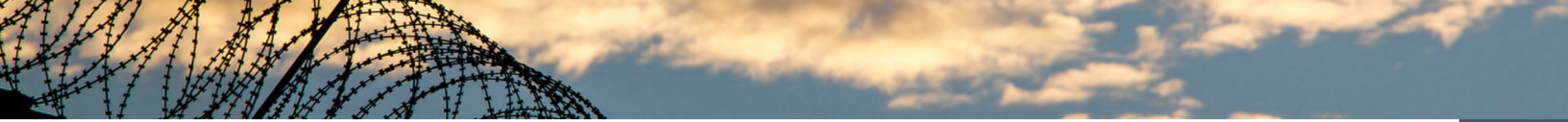
Prisoners across the nation were being encouraged to buy war bonds, as seen in the Indiana Boy's School Herald. The buying of war bonds is proudly announced across many different World War II era prison newspapers, at times taking on a competitive tone. “The U.S. Penitentiary at Lewisburg boasts of one inmate who has singly purchased \$1,300 worth of War Bonds,” a whopping sum equivalent to over \$22,000 today, paid by someone deprived of their freedom and the ability to earn high wages.

### Prison Labor

For much of the 20th century, federal restrictions severely curtailed how prison-made goods could be used. The arguments against them were not necessarily based in ethical concerns for prisoners' rights, but rather on the ways prison labor and goods had an innate, unfair advantage against the free market, chiefly that they didn't have to pay wages. Organized labor (and even what ethical concerns existed) around the use of prison labor were temporarily sidelined with President Roosevelt's 1943 executive order that allowed states and the federal government to procure any goods needed for the war effort from all territorial, state, and federal prisons.

Lewis E. Lawes, former warden of Sing Sing prison, is quoted in a 1943 issue of the Paahao Press as saying “prison morale is best in history,” likely referring to the fact much of the prison population was suddenly given meaningful employment, as the “idleness” that had plagued prisons since the Great Depression was seen as hurting morale.

(A warden might not be the best person to judge the morale of the people in his custody.) “Prisoners are just as interested in victory as you are,” former warden Lawes proclaimed, “Proportionately, convict blood donations are far greater than those on the outside; and that war bonds and stamps are the fastest selling things in prison.”



In the same issue of the Paahao Press, nationwide prisoner war efforts are lauded, including the record-setting war bond purchase. “The Federal Prison Industries at McNeil [Prison] has been awarded a contract by the United States Army to build six 95 foot vessels.” Not all prisoner support went to the war effort, as some incarcerated people ended up fighting in the war itself. “Paroles [sic] have been granted to 691 inmates of Illinois prisons... to enable them to enter the service of the U.S. Armed Forces...”

### Paroling to Fight

The law that expressly prohibited anyone ever convicted of a felony from joined the Armed Forces was modified in 1940. After a good deal of bureaucratic maneuvering, by 1943, “prison draft boards” had been established and were busily evaluating incarcerated men for their fitness to serve. In Soonerland out of the Oklahoma State Prison, Warden Fred Hunt proudly announced the protocol:

“If you are within the age limits and if the offense to which you were committed do not, by reason of selective service regulations, automatically require a low classification, it shall be my pleasure to submit your names to the draft board, provided your conduct has been good.

The men that are classified I-A will then be given physical examinations. I want you to remember that the physical requirements are rigid... Those that meet the physical requirements will be certified to the Governor by the draft board and, if approved, releases from civil custody will be issued and induction into the service will follow.”

While prisoners’ contributions to the war effort were mostly forgotten to history, they were formally recognized at the time by many national leaders, including then-Attorney General Francis Biddle, Director of the Bureau of Prisons James Bennett, Chairman of the US Board of Parole Judge Arthur Wood, and a resolution at the 72nd Annual Congress of Correction, published in The Outlook Out of the Federal Reformatory in Oklahoma. Judge Wood, Chairman of the Board of Parole, cautiously commends the pleas of prisoners to be allowed to “work or fight”:

“[T]he Board is cognizant of the fact that a substantial portion of the physically and mentally fit men and women confined in our institutions today are sincere in their manifestations of patriotism and are desirous of lending their energies in support of the war effort, both during their confinement and following release. There are others, of course, who are simply using patriotism as a subterfuge in an attempt to bring about a diminution of the Court’s judgment.”

In June of 1944, Oregon State Penitentiary resident Jim McCoy wrote a succinct summary of the many ways prisoners had contributed, published in Shadows:

“The nation’s prison farms produced approximately \$24,000,000 to the value of food during 1943, and the monetary value of its manufactured products reached nearly \$14,000,0000. In additions [sic] to those contributions prisoners gave thousands of pints of blood, purchased more than \$2,600,000 in War Bonds, and donated thousands of dollars to cigarette campaigns for soldiers.”

Many incarcerated people desired to serve their country during World War II, whether by paroling in order to join the military or by contributing to the all-encompassing war effort in prison factories and farms across the country. The many ways prisoners supported the war were hardly recognized by historians, but are well-documented in papers across the American Prison Newspapers collection.

Written by Morgan Godvin for JSTOR Daily. Published May 26, 2023.