

New Mexico State Penitentiary

“Respecting our past to create a better future — is the motto”
-Corrections officer and guide of the tour of the “Old Main”

The Penitentiary of New Mexico is a maximum-security prison for men, operated by the New Mexico Corrections Department, located 15 miles south of Santa Fe, on New Mexico State Road 14. The current complex holds 790 inmates and consists of three separate facilities: Level V (opened 1985), Level VI (opened 1985) contains New Mexico's Death Row, and Level II (opened 1990) holds the minimum restricted.

After receiving authorization from Congress in 1853, and consent from the territorial government of New Mexico in 1884, the original facility opened in 1885. Initially, as part of a prison term, inmates produced bricks for the state, then in 1903, prisoners were employed to build highways.

The first riot at the Penitentiary occurred on July 19, 1922. Prisoners revolted over the facility's overcrowding, poor food, and the use of excessive force by the prison authorities. When prisoners refused to return to their cells, tower guards opened fire, killing one inmate, and injuring five others.

A second riot occurred on June 15, 1953, when inmates protested the use of excessive force. During the siege, inmates captured and held hostage Deputy Warden Ralph Tahash and twelve guards. In the fight that ensued, the guards killed two inmates and wounded others.

After a new facility was built in 1956, just 11 miles south of the original prison, the old 1885 buildings were demolished. By 1980, the new facility, which had a capacity to hold 900 inmates, was overcrowded with 1,157 men, and in a state of disrepair. Inmate, Dwight Duran, filed a lawsuit in 1977 that alleged prison conditions violated prisoners' constitutional rights to be free from cruel and unusual punishment.

In 1980, one of the most violent prison riots in the correctional history of the United States befell. On February 2-3, 1980, over the course of 36 hours, 33 inmates were killed, and 12 officers were held hostage and brutally beaten or sodomized by prisoners. Inmates who had escaped from crowded dormitories, located at the southern end from the Control Center, brandished metal pipes, chair legs and other makeshift weapons to overtake guards. Within 22 minutes, prisoners had control of the facility, they then raided administrative offices, dumping cabinets full of official records and setting them ablaze, looted the kitchen for knives and food, then ransacked the prison pharmacy.

Cell Block 4, located at the far northern end from the Control Center, was the scene of one of the most violent acts. A few dozen inmates participated in death squads that attacked other inmates; some were brutally butchered, dismembered and decapitated, hung up on the cells, and burned alive. More than 200 inmates were treated for injuries. This section of the prison closed permanently in 1998, and is believed to be haunted. Reported phenomenon includes prison doors closing and opening on their own, the sound of footsteps, and voices.

When rioters set fire to the penitentiary's main building, the crucifix that was hanging in the Santa Fe prison's Catholic chapel, was singed by flames, but survived the event. Archbishop Michael Sheehan said in an interview with KOAT-TV news, “Those inmates who during the riot were near the cross and prayed were spared.” The Cross became a symbol of survival for hundreds of inmates and prison officials who sought refuge and prayed. In 2011, the singed crucifix was moved to the St. Joseph's Chapel located in the Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi. A metal plaque installed commemorates the event and reads,

“The main facility at the State Penitentiary of New Mexico in Santa Fe was the site of one of the worse prison riots in our nation’s history. During the 1980 uprising thirty-three prisoners were killed at the hands of other inmates: in a final act of violence, the rioters set fire to the prison. During the conflagration, the fire consumed the Protestant chapel, but spared the Catholic one. The crucifix above was singed, but saved.”

“Pray for prisoners and those who watch over them, For I was in prison, and you came to visit me.” (Matthew 25:36)

Over three hundred inmates managed to escape, while many others hid or barricaded themselves, some were released as hostages in negotiating efforts that culminated with a requested meeting with media at noon on Sunday, Feb. 3, 1980. An estimated 800 inmates surrendered inside the perimeter fence of the facility, then spent a few days huddled under blankets outside, during winter temperatures, while the cleanup and assessment of the penitentiary began.

During the following year, more than \$100 million from state funding was used for cleanup and reforms. The “Old Main,” was closed in 1998 and became a movie set for many films. The Corrections Department began offering free tours, then started charging for tours of the “Old Main”. The tour season typically ran from May to October, on the first two Saturdays of each month, with the history of the riot as told from the perspectives of the Attorney General’s report and witness accounts. During the pandemic, all filming and tours were canceled for 2021.

Since statehood, 28 men were sentenced to execution: 19 by hanging, seven by the electric chair, and one by the gas chamber. New Mexico has executed only one person since 1960, Terry Clark, a child killer, in 2001. Clark was the only man to die by lethal injection, the method the state switched to in 1980.

In 2009, New Mexico became the 15th state to abolish the death penalty, leaving two men on death row. The bill replaced the method of lethal injection with a sentence of life in prison without the possibility of parole. New Mexico was the second state to ban executions since the United States Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976. New Jersey was the first in 2007, and as of 2009, 15 states have barred capital punishment. As a gubernatorial candidate in 2010, Susana Martinez, campaigned on a position to bring back the death penalty, but failed to do so during her term as governor.

In August 2014, the New Mexico Corrections Department approached the New Mexico State University, and the New Mexico Corrections Department to initiate a project that would provide horticultural vocational training to the inmates at the state penitentiary. Thirteen, Level II inmates, were selected from 80 applicants to participate in the Roots of Success program that included a course on environmental literacy and prison gardening.

Inmates at the Penitentiary of New Mexico, built four 32-foot-by-14-foot greenhouse structures, or hoop houses, in which to grow vegetables that would supplement the prisons’ cafeteria menu. Once the structures were completed, nine 4-foot-by-10-foot raised planting beds were constructed for each house, then the inmates filled the planters with wheelbarrows full of dirt and organic material, installed a drip irrigation system in each house, and planted seeds for winter greens. Hoop houses extend the growing season, generating fresh produce earlier and as late as November.

As of 2020, the state Penitentiary had nine hoop houses producing food to supplement the diets of the inmates. The vocational program was designed to provide life skills training and a sense of accomplishment:

“We want to teach our inmates to become entrepreneurs who can provide for themselves and their families upon release. It’s not enough to just teach someone a new skill; we have to change hearts, to make them feel part of a bigger purpose in life. These hoop houses do just that; these inmates have had to nurture these plants to provide food to feed other inmates. This program has really showed them that if you work hard, focus on your goals, and pay attention to detail, you can harvest meaningful and plentiful bounties.” — Secretary of Corrections Gregg Marcantel

Del Jimenez, Extension agricultural agent with NMSU’s Rural Agricultural Improvement and Public Affairs Project, conducted the training for the project. The prison garden program has the potential to be duplicated at all of the state’s correctional facilities.

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