

Prison Modeled After Bucknell University

If you ever want to stump one of your friends with a fun piece of Bucknell trivia, ask them which prison was modeled after Bucknell. That's right. A prison was actually modeled after Bucknell. Kind of scary isn't it? In the 1920s, Alderson Federal Women's Prison was built in Alderson West Virginia, and it was modeled after Bucknell's georgian architecture. Built in the Alleghany Mountains, it was the first federal prison for women. The History Channel did a series called "The Big House" that included a video on Alderson, and that video is in the library by the way.

In the early twentieth century, prominent women were sent to jail for protesting during the Suffrage movement, and their stories of mistreatment while behind bars helped begin prison reforms for women. Alderson was designed as one of the solutions. It was created to care for prisoner's needs and to reform. Some of Alderson's famous inmates include Billy Holiday and Tokyo Rose. Alderson was situated on 200 acres of land that was easily assessable by rail, but difficult to escape from because of the mountains. Alderson very much looked like a college.

Women lived in a cottage system at Alderson that was much more homelike than a typical jail or prison. Each cottage had its own kitchen, dining room, and typically contained thirty beds. Inmates cooked for themselves and were very self-sufficient. There were sixteen two-story cottages with groves of trees in between each. A network of paths crisscrossed the prison just like at Bucknell. There were no walls, fences, or guard towers at Alderson. Women stayed knowing that to escape meant a much stiffer penalty if caught.

Alderson Federal Women's Prison was an experiment in women's incarceration. It was meant to retrain instead of punish. There was a regular schedule of work, classes, and recreation. Types of work included a farm, dairy, greenhouse, and a garment factory. Inmates lined up at least twice a day to be counted when they heard a teacher's bell ring. Unlike Bucknell, everyone was required to attend church. In June 1928, the official dedication of the prison took place. It has been said that it looked more like a college graduation than a prison opening because of the more than 1000 visiting dignitaries who attended including women's rights groups. Once their time was completed, many prisoners reoriented into productive members of society.

In the early days of Alderson, women were allowed to keep babies they had while incarcerated. There was a playpen kept in storage of each cottage's attic just for this purpose. However, the state eventually decided this was not in the babies' best interests and required they be kept in foster care until the mother was released. A nursery was built, and once a week, mothers could visit their young there. Unfortunately, for various reasons, several babies did not survive and had to be buried at a cemetery at the prison, because the mothers could not afford anywhere else.

Due to what the state considers to be prohibitive costs of upkeep and renovation, the cottage system at Alderson is being abandoned. An 800 person, typical jail building is being constructed to house all inmates under one roof. The past success of Alderson's system is not being questioned just the willingness of the state to pay for it. Alderson had become a society of women where individuals could take pride in themselves and their relative freedom. It is unfortunate that such a success is now endangered.