

BRUSHY MOUNTAIN STATE PENITENTIARY:  
A HISTORIC LANDSCAPE OF INCARCERATION

by

Kelli Gibson

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts in History

Middle Tennessee State University  
August 2018

Thesis Committee:

Dr. Carroll Van West, Chair

Dr. Louis Kyriakoudes

## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the history of Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary and its role in shaping the cultural and physical landscapes of Morgan County, Tennessee. It begins with the historic prison's origins and traces its development into a twentieth century state penitentiary. Considering the impact of both historic and contemporary practices of incarceration on the region, the thesis argues that Morgan County's history of imprisonment had a profound and persisting impact on local identity. The thesis then considers the adaptive reuse of former prisons, using the current tourism redevelopment of Brushy Mountain as a case study highlighting the ways in which imprisonment continues to shape the region's legacy.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .....	iv
INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER ONE: ORIGINS, DEVELOPMENT, AND EARLY LANDSCAPE, 1893-1935 .....	6
CHAPTER TWO: THE SHAPING OF A TWENTIETH CENTURY CARCERAL LANDSCAPE, 1966-2009 .....	33
CHAPTER THREE: THE REDEVELOPMENT AND RE-ARTICULATION OF A CARCERAL CULTURAL LANDSCAPE .....	54
CONCLUSION .....	86
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	87

## LIST OF FIGURES

1.1	Image – 1890 illustration from Harper’s Weekly depicting Southern prisons.....	7
1.2	Image – Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary, 1896.....	14
1.3	Image – Brushy Mountain Ground Plan.....	16
1.4	Image – Barn in prison enclosure.....	17
1.5	Image – Office Building.....	17
1.6	Image - 1896 drawing of the Tennessee State Prison.....	20
1.7	Image - Interior of prison.....	22
1.8	Image - Petros, TN.....	26
1.9	Image – Superintendant’s home, 1899.....	27
1.10	Image – Guard dormitory.....	28
1.11	Image – Home of prison official.....	28
1.12	Image - Building used as school, church, and lodge.....	29
1.13	Image - New Central Building completed in 1935.....	31
2.1	Image - Map detailing the progression of Ray's escape.....	38
2.2	Image - The Tennessean, June 15, 1977.....	41
2.3	Image - Ray on cover of <i>Time</i> magazine. June 20, 1977.....	44
2.4	Image - Guild-style prison design.....	47
2.5	Image - Aerial view of Morgan County Correctional Complex.....	52

3.1	Image - Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary in 2009.....	55
3.2	Image - Brushy Mountain post-decommission.....	59
3.3	Image - Exterior of Auditorium/Gymnasium built in 1941 and Basketball Courts.....	62
3.4	Image - Entrance to old Wash House now used as the Chapel.....	62
3.5	Image - Partial view of High Security Annex built in 1989.....	64
3.6	Image - Brushy Mountain Group Site Development Plan 1/2.....	67
3.7	Image - Brushy Mountain Group Site Development Plan 2/2.....	68
3.8	Image - Bumper stickers distributed by the Brushy Mountain Group during the referendum campaign.....	70
3.9	Image - Products that will be for sale in the site gift shop.....	72
3.10	Image - Design for craft whiskey crates.....	74
3.11	Image - Campaign poster.....	76
3.12	Image - Referendum campaign materials.....	79
3.13	Image - Biker group touring the prison during “Brushy Mountain Devil Ride”.....	82

## INTRODUCTION

The closing of Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary in 2009 ended a significant chapter in the history of Morgan County. After a seven-year interim, the former prison is in the hands of the Brushy Mountain Group, an organization of private developers from Chattanooga. The Brushy Mountain Group is currently developing the site into a multi-use tourist attraction. The former prison will soon house a whiskey distillery, bed and breakfast, concert venue, RV park, and campgrounds. Demonstrating a clear lack of engagement with the site's troubling past, the current development plan serves as a sanitized re-articulation of the region's history. The history and current redevelopment of Brushy Mountain offers a compelling case study for examining the ways in which a notorious prison shaped a historic cultural landscape. By researching the historical origins, evolution, and contemporary legacies of incarceration in Morgan County, I will argue that incarceration has fundamentally shaped community identity and serves as a lens through which to interpret the region's cultural landscape.

Brushy Mountain's origins lie in the convict-lease era. The interdisciplinary study of the postbellum development of the South, often referred to as "New South studies," emphasizes the significance of the lease system for understanding historic landscapes. Early historiography included Pete Daniel's 1973 work, *The Shadow of Slavery*. The book provided the first in-depth analysis of peonage and provided the foundation from which contemporary scholarship emerged.<sup>1</sup> While early historiography emphasized the

---

<sup>1</sup> Pete Daniel, *The Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South, 1901-1969* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973).

system's brutality, its likeness to enslavement, and its lasting implications for social and economic conditions, later work explored the extent to which the system transformed the political and economic landscapes of the New South. Works such as Matthew Mancini's *One Dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South, 1866-1928* illustrate how the system provided a lucrative means to rebuild devastated Southern economies and contributed to the shift to a modern industrial economy.<sup>2</sup> For understanding Tennessee during this era, Karen Shapiro's *A New South Rebellion* provides an overview of the Convict Lease Wars and their impact on labor and state politics. Shapiro's work provides essential context for analyzing the early landscape of Brushy Mountain.<sup>3</sup> Larry D. Gossett's doctoral dissertation, "The Keepers and the Kept: The First Hundred Years of the Tennessee State Prison System, 1830-1930," gives a historical overview of the economic and political forces that shaped Tennessee prisons and provides insight into the distinct origins of Brushy Mountain.<sup>4</sup>

Scholarly analysis of prison landscapes is part of the field of carceral studies. Employing an interdisciplinary framework, the scholarship emphasizes the importance of a human geographical/ cultural landscape approaches to understanding contemporary practices of incarceration. *Historical Geographies of Prisons* provides a critical, historical-geographical overview of the development of different systems of incarceration

---

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South, 1866-1928* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Karen Shapiro, *A New South Rebellion: The Battle Against Convict Labor in the Tennessee Coalfields, 1871-1896* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Larry D. Gossett, "The Keepers and the Kept: The First Hundred Years of the Tennessee State Prison System, 1830-1930," (Ph.D diss., Louisiana State University, 1992).

from a global perspective. Emphasizing the historic impact of incarceration on communities, the work was the first to consider spaces of incarceration as a distinct category for geographical analysis.<sup>5</sup> *Carceral Geography: Spaces and Practices of Incarceration* builds on these concepts and provides an in- depth theoretical framework for the field.<sup>6</sup>

The thesis also draws from secondary literature on cultural landscape theory. In his 1994 book *Landscapes and Power*, W.J.T. Mitchell opened a new avenue of inquiry within landscape studies. Mitchell called for an expanded understanding of landscapes as a tool of cultural power, one which “naturalizes a cultural and social construction, representing an artificial world as if it were simply given and inevitable.”<sup>7</sup> The salience of Mitchell’s approach for analyzing carceral landscapes cannot be overstated. In the edited volume *Cultural Landscapes: Balancing Nature and Heritage in Preservation Practice*, preservation practitioners specializing in diverse contexts build the argument that the preservation field must recognize the value of cultural landscape perspective in developing better preservation practices.<sup>8</sup> Focusing on the historic prison landscape of the first Rhode Island State Prison, James Garman’s *Detention Castles of Stone and Steel: Landscape, Labor, and the Urban Penitentiary* analyzes how the prison’s landscape

---

<sup>5</sup> Dominique Moran and Karen Morin, *Historical Geographies of Prisons: Unlocking the Usable Carceral Past* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Dominique Moran, *Carceral Geography: Spaces and Practices of Incarceration* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, *Landscapes and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 1-2.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Longstreth, ed., *Cultural Landscapes: Balancing Nature and Heritage in Preservation Practice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).



reflected changing labor politics and evolving notions of discipline.<sup>9</sup> Past studies of Tennessee's cultural landscapes do not address its landscapes of incarceration.<sup>10</sup>

Relevant literature in public history and historic preservation concerns prison tourism and the conversion of former prisons for alternative uses. *The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Tourism* provides public history and tourism perspectives on issues related to prison tourism. It is the first of its kind to offer interdisciplinary perspectives on the topic.<sup>11</sup> "Carceral Re-tasking and the Work of Historical Societies at Decommissioned Lock-ups, Jails, and Prisons in Ontario" uses case studies to examine the role of historical societies in re-purposing former carceral spaces.<sup>12</sup> The chapter "Carceral Cultural Landscapes, Post-Prisons, and the Spectacle of Punishment" in *Carceral Geography* explores the idea of the "post-prison" and the various ways former prisons have been repurposed for different functions.<sup>13</sup> Finally, Randall Mason's article "Management for Cultural Landscape Preservation: Insights from Australia" provides a perspective on managing tourism within the historic prison landscape of Port Arthur.<sup>14</sup>

Archival sources include the House and Senate Journals of the Tennessee General Assembly and the Biennial Reports of the Board of Prison Commissioners and Department of Institutions. Newspapers, including *The Tennessean* and *The New York*

---

<sup>9</sup> James C Garman, *Detention Castles of Stone and Steel: Landscape, Labor, and the Urban Penitentiary* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Carroll Van West, *Tennessee's Historic Landscapes* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> Jacqueline Z. Wilson et al., *The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Tourism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Justin Piche and Kevin Walby, "Carceral Re-tasking and the Work of Historical Societies at Decommissioned Lock-ups, Jails, and Prisons in Ontario," in *Historical Geographies of Prisons*, 88-103.

<sup>13</sup> Moran, *Carceral Geography*, 129-145.

<sup>14</sup> Randall Mason, "Management for Cultural Landscape Preservation: Insights from Australia," in Longstreth, ed., *Cultural Landscapes*, 180-196.

*Times*, will represent national and state-level conversations concerning the prison.

Morgan County's local newspaper, *Morgan County News*, will represent local public perceptions.

The introductory chapter discusses the convict-lease era and its impact on the emergence of Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary as distinct from other state prisons.

The second chapter considers the prison's impact on the cultural identity of the community of Petros and the development of the county into a contemporary

Appalachian prison landscape by the turn of the twenty-first century. The last chapter focuses on the Brushy Mountain Group's development plan and its implications for the future of incarceration in Morgan County. As prisons are an underexplored topic in historic preservation, I hope to provide practitioners with a better understanding of their significance and improve interpretation and preservation practices applied to such sites.

## CHAPTER ONE:

### ORIGINS, DEVELOPMENT, AND EARLY LANDSCAPE, 1893-1935

Understanding Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary's origins requires a consideration of the broader post-Reconstruction penal landscape in the South. In the decades following Emancipation, the number of African Americans imprisoned in Southern penitentiaries increased immensely. With Southern economies in ruin, state governments developed plans to recuperate their institutions from the effects of the war. Fearing that Emancipation posed a threat to the racial hierarchy which governed the antebellum period, one component of rebuilding sought to regain control over newly freed African Americans. Black codes, laws which intensified criminal penalties for petty offenses, entrapped newly freed blacks in a cycle of involuntary servitude with stark parallels to the era of slavery. Southern states developed convict-lease systems in which state governments leased prisoners to private contractors for a fixed fee. Prison stockades, in which majority African-American male and female convicts built railroads, mined coal, worked on construction projects, and performed agricultural labor, emerged across the region. Southern prison systems, previously defined by central penitentiaries, had transformed into a system in which large portions of state prisoners worked for a lessee.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Karen Shapiro's *A New South Rebellion* provides an overview of the Convict Lease Wars and their impact on labor and state politics in Tennessee. Karen Shapiro, *A New South Rebellion: The Battle Against Convict Labor in the Tennessee Coal Fields, 1871-1896* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 47.



Figure 1.1 1890 illustration from Harper's Weekly depicting Southern prisons. Courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

Circumstances in Tennessee did not differ greatly from regional patterns. By the 1870s, the face of convict labor had shifted from private, primarily factory enterprises within prison walls to mostly labor outside of the penitentiary. Though all of the Southern states utilized convict leasing, Tennessee formed a part of the handful of states which leased every convict in its system to private enterprises.<sup>2</sup> To maximize profit from building railroads, lessees concentrated convict laborers in prison camps across the state.<sup>3</sup> Due to the decrease in railroad development by the 1880s and an increase in lucrativeness

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 48.

of coal, convict labor shifted from railroads to coal mining.<sup>4</sup> In 1884, the Tennessee Coal and Iron Company leased the entire Tennessee State Penitentiary for an annual fee of \$101,000. The company later authorized the sublease of prisoners to other companies, thereby increasing the pernicious nature of the arrangement. Around 60% of TCI's leased convicts worked in its mines.<sup>5</sup> The presence of cheap convict laborers in Tennessee's coal mines sparked resentment from free world miners competing for wages. This conflict reached a breaking point in 1891 when mine owners in East Tennessee began replacing civilian miners with convict laborers. Coal miners launched an armed attack on the prison stockades located in the Coal Creek Watershed in Anderson County.<sup>6</sup> Violent attacks ensued across the region as miners demanded that the state government end the practice. After a year of unrest, national media attention and the mounting cost of employing state militia resulted in a triumph for the miners. The state agreed to end its labor contracts with private businesses by 1896 and it soon developed a new system for utilizing convict labor in coal production.<sup>7</sup>

In the aftermath of the Coal Creek War, Tennessee legislators developed an alternative to the lease system. Enacted in 1893, the Penitentiary Act established the end of convict leasing effective 1896. It called for the construction of a new state penitentiary of "improved and modern plans" in Nashville and for the purchase of coal fields in East Tennessee on which to build another prison where state convicts would mine coal.

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>5</sup> James B. Jones Jr., "Convict Lease Wars," *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, published Dec. 25 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Shapiro, *A New South Rebellion*, 85.

<sup>7</sup> Jones, "Convict Lease Wars," *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*.

Convicts at the Nashville prison would be utilized in “diversified industries” such as factory production and farming.<sup>8</sup> The new state penitentiary would allow for a minimum of 1500 convicts and would embody “just, humane, and civilized principles.” In terms of quality, each prison was to represent “thorough workmanship” and include both a chapel and a hospital. The Act also called for a prisoner classification system to both prevent interaction between so-called “habitual” criminals and young petty offenders and to incentivize good behavior. The system would also separate prisoners by race in all areas excluding work.<sup>9</sup> The old Tennessee State Penitentiary would be closed and its prisoners moved to the new location. The Penitentiary Act established the state’s two central penitentiaries, the new Tennessee State Prison (referred to as the “Main Prison”) and Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary. Though the two institutions emerged from the same legislation, they would represent distinct narratives in the state’s penal landscape.

The Penitentiary Act had lasting effects on the management of the state prison system. The Act called for the formation of a Penitentiary Purchasing and Planning Committee to oversee the preparation and construction of the new prisons. Appointed by Governor Peter Turney, the three-member Committee had authorization to purchase property, visit prisons in other states for building ideas, advertise for construction, make contracts, and craft general prison regulations. They also had the authority to lease convicts at their discretion to complete the necessary labor. The Committee would consult with geologists and architects to best inform its decisions. Establishing a

---

<sup>8</sup> Acts of Tennessee, Chapter 78, 1893.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

headquarters in Nashville, the Committee began its search for a lucrative mining location in spring of 1893.<sup>10</sup> The establishment of the Penitentiary Purchasing and Planning Committee created the state's first board devoted to managing its prison system. Prior to this board, the responsibility of prison management belonged to a single Superintendent of Prisons. The Committee was renamed the Board of Prison Commissioners in 1895.<sup>11</sup> It would undergo a series of name changes throughout the twentieth century.

The Committee underwent a thorough process for selecting the future site of Brushy Mountain. The Penitentiary Act authorized the purchase of a maximum of 10,000 acres of suitable coal lands that included land for stockades. The Committee selected a mining expert to consult with the state geologist to determine a profitable site with consideration for transportation needs.<sup>12</sup> After inspecting fifteen sites across East Tennessee, the Committee selected Morgan County's Brushy Mountain coal fields north of Harriman.<sup>13</sup> Contributing to the site's assets were the presence of virgin timber and its mountainous surroundings that made escape very difficult. Pleased with both the site's vastness and abundance of coal and having the approval of both the Committee members and the state geologist, the Committee began negotiations with the East Tennessee Land Company.<sup>14</sup> For the price of \$80,000, the state would receive 9,000 acres of the coal

---

<sup>10</sup> "Report of the Penitentiary Purchasing and Building Committee to the General Assembly of Tennessee, 1895," House Journal, 1895.

<sup>11</sup> Acts of Tennessee, Chapter 125, 1895.

<sup>12</sup> Acts of Tennessee, Chapter 78, 1893.

<sup>13</sup> "Report of the Penitentiary Purchasing and Building Committee to the General Assembly of Tennessee, 1895," House Journal, 1895.

<sup>14</sup> Larry D. Gossett, "The Keepers and the Kept: The First Hundred Years of the Tennessee State Prison System, 1830-1930," Ph.D. diss., Louisiana State University, 1992, 125.

field. The East Tennessee Land Company also agreed to complete construction on the Harriman Coal and Iron Railroad to enable transportation between the prison mine and the nearby town of Harriman. Convicts would build a temporary stockade on the site and complete the railroad work that would precede the first stage of work on the coal seams.<sup>15</sup> With the transaction complete in 1894, the state of Tennessee officially owned the land on which it would build Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary.

As W. Calvin Dickinson noted in his history of Morgan County, the county's geography provides essential insight into its historical development.<sup>16</sup> Situated in the Cumberland Plateau in southern Appalachia, rugged, mountainous terrain and little farmable land characterize the region. Despite its challenging physical context, the region boasts a beautiful natural landscape abundant in timber and coal. Morgan County formed in 1817 through the combination of portions of Anderson and Roane Counties.<sup>17</sup> Access to the county was highly limited until the construction of railroads facilitated further settlement from the east. As a result, development was very slow compared to other counties in the state.<sup>18</sup> Between 1820 and 1850, the population of Morgan County increased from just above 1600 to 3430.<sup>19</sup> According to the 1830 census, there were 60 enslaved blacks and 6 free blacks in the county compared to 2516 whites. This stark

---

<sup>15</sup> "Report of the Penitentiary Purchasing and Building Committee to the General Assembly of Tennessee, 1895," House Journal, 1895.

<sup>16</sup> W. Calvin Dickinson, *Morgan County* (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1987), 1.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.



disproportion can be explained by the low socio-economic status of the county's white population along with the land's unsuitability for growing cotton.<sup>20</sup>

Morgan County experienced major growth in the second half of the nineteenth century. By 1850, the county saw a rise in European migrants from Germany and Switzerland, many of whom later left for better opportunities in the state's larger towns and cities.<sup>21</sup> In 1880, the Cincinnati Southern Railroad completed a route from Chattanooga to Cincinnati, passing through Morgan County. Products produced in the county could now be shipped to more profitable markets and citizens were better able to travel to and from the area. The establishment of land ventures in the form of health clubs and planned settlements also spurred growth. The railroad, the establishments of settlements and resorts, and the opening of Brushy Mountain in 1895 all contributed to a rise in population to 9587 by 1900.<sup>22</sup>

Though the harvesting of timber played a role in the county's economic development, coal was the region's most abundant resource and provided a large source of revenue.<sup>23</sup> The county's first coal was extracted in 1819 and by 1860, two mines operated in the county.<sup>24</sup> The county continued to open mines throughout the 1880s, contributing to its economic development into the 1890s. It is worth noting that prior to 1900, the county did not have a single bank but had three by 1911. This change indicates

---

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>22</sup> Between 1880 and 1900, the population of Morgan County rose from 5156 to 9587. *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

the economic growth the county experienced in this era. By 1910, Morgan County was the state's fourth largest producer of coal.<sup>25</sup>

The process of preparing the Brushy Mountain site was not without difficulty. Convict laborers had begun building the necessary railroads while paid miners began the development of the coal seams. Upon completion of the railroad, the state replaced the miners with convicts to continue the task.<sup>26</sup> As the work progressed, the Committee realized that the cost of opening the first mine along with the additional buildings needed would soon exceed the appropriation allotted for the construction of the entire penitentiary. Due to the fact that the convicts working at the site were under lease and then subleased to the state, the state ended up paying for the use of its own convicts.<sup>27</sup> Despite mounting costs and panic over the perceived lack of progress in preparing the mines, construction on the prison buildings moved forward.

Despite stark differences in their quality and style, both Brushy Mountain and the new Tennessee State Prison reflected historical trends in prison architecture. By the 1830s, most prisons in the United States represented a variant of one of the six major styles seen around the world. This layout consisted of a central administrative block building flanked by two multi-tiered cell houses.<sup>28</sup> As prisons became larger, the hollow-square layout characterized by rectangular buildings with interior courtyards evolved into a more complex design. Prisons became large, self-enclosed spaces containing cell

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>26</sup> Gossett, "The Keepers and the Kept," 127.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Norman Johnston, *Forms of Constraint: A History of Prison Architecture* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 88-89.

blocks, service buildings, and workshops.<sup>29</sup> While the Tennessee State Prison represented the latest systems and their associated architecture, Brushy Mountain reflected the bare adherence to the trends of the time.



BRUSHY MOUNTAIN BRANCH PRISON, PETROS, TENNESSEE.

Figure 1.2 Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary, 1896. Courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

The design of Brushy Mountain emphasized function. Designed by Chattanooga architect S.M. Patton, convict labor did not construct the prison.<sup>30</sup> In contrast to the Gothic-style new Main Prison in Nashville, the Board of Prison Commissioners described Brushy Mountain as “comparatively inexpensive in its construction, being plain and substantial rather than ornamental.”<sup>31</sup> Each building was made of wood, though

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Gossett, “The Keepers and the Kept,” 133.

<sup>31</sup> Biennial Report of the Tennessee Board of Prison Commissioners, 1897-1898.

considered “as comfortable and safe (except from fire) as a brick or stone structure” in the eyes of the Board of Commissioners.<sup>32</sup> The main wing had four stories, the lower story containing a dining room along with a tailor and shoe shops. The remaining floors were used as sleeping quarters and guard rooms. The sleeping quarters were barrack style with a swinging bed system adopted for sanitation. Each ward, separated by race, contained enough beds to accommodate 120 men. The rear wing was a three-story building with a ground floor bathroom with one of the upper floors used as temporary lodging for guards. The hospital building contained one 20x25 ward for white inmates and one 40x20 for black inmates, affording space for 25 men. Considering the number of black prisoners was around five times that of their white counterparts, it is clear that black inmates would have had lesser access to any form of care.<sup>33</sup> Also on the property was an eight-room, two-story frame office building with upper-story employee lodging. Another building on the site housed the prison kitchen and a separate kitchen and dining room for employees. Additional buildings included barns, stables, and supply houses.<sup>34</sup> The entire Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary encompassed seven acres along with additional houses outside of the perimeter for prison officials.<sup>35</sup> The only opening in the perimeter wall apart from the main gate was a “manway,” a narrow passage through which the convict laborers would pass to transport into the mines. Such a restrictive

---

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> In 1898, there were 441 black and 84 white inmates at Brushy Mountain. In total, the state system held 1,117 black inmates and 408 white inmates. *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

opening was beneficial for both counting inmates and lessening the chance of escape.<sup>36</sup>

The design of Brushy Mountain reflected its dual functions as a site of both imprisonment and production.

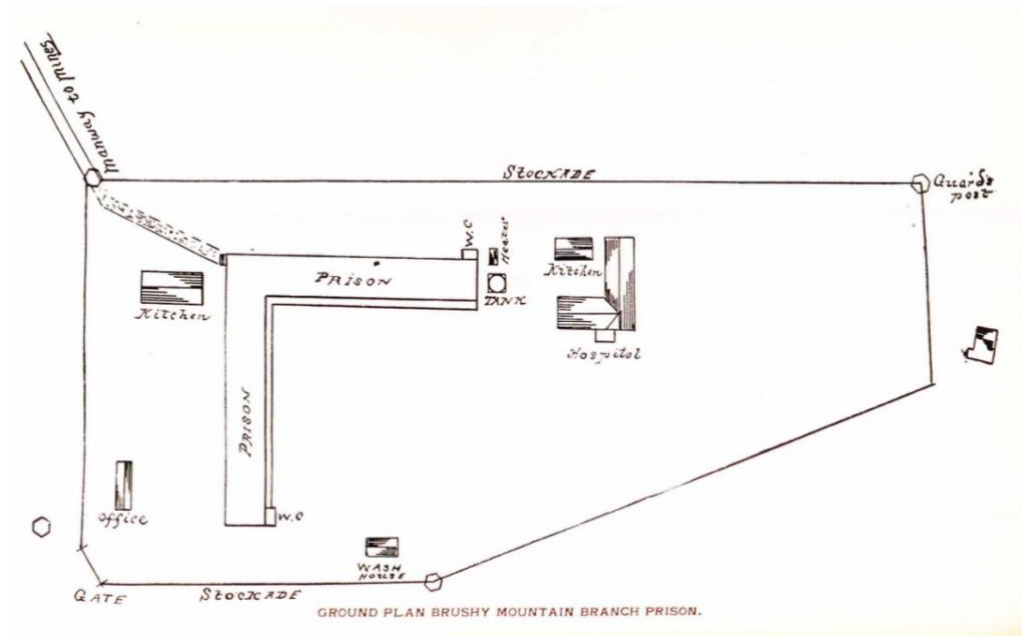


Figure 1.3 Brushy Mountain Ground Plan. Courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

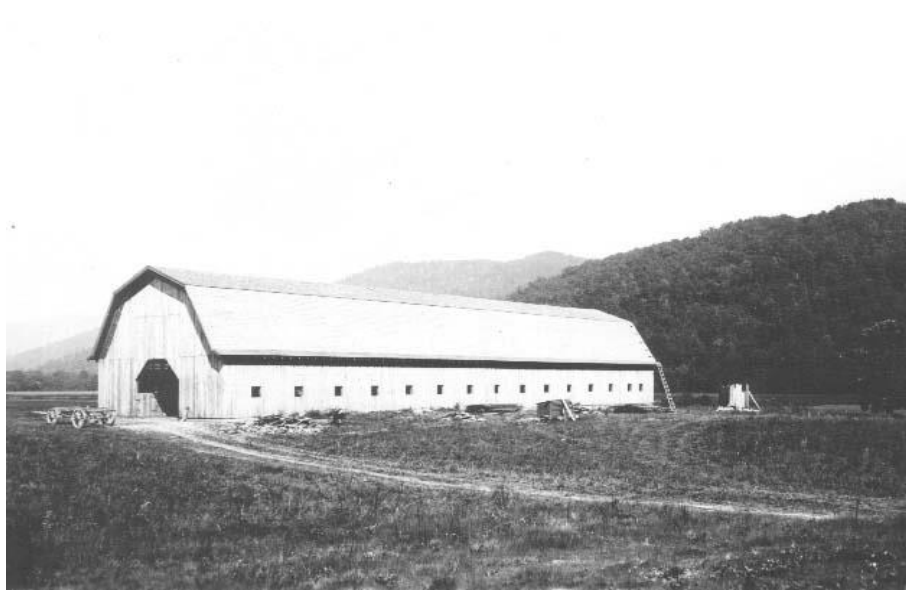


Figure 1.4 Barn in prison enclosure. Courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives.



GENERAL OFFICES, BRUSHY MOUNTAIN BRANCH PRISON.

Figure 1.5 Office Building. Courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

The modernity and institutional essence of the new Tennessee State Prison greatly contrasted with Brushy Mountain. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, beliefs among both lawmakers and reformers reflected the idea that prisoner labor should support the expenses of their imprisonment.<sup>37</sup> Prison designs that utilized constant isolation, such as the Pennsylvania system, were considered more expensive and unable to maximize labor output. As a result, the Auburn plan's adaptability to better labor production made it the most popular style in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>38</sup> After examining several options, the Committee selected a 1200-acre plot of land along Nashville's Cockrill Bend near the Cumberland River. The plot provided suitable land for both the penitentiary and a farm.<sup>39</sup> Also designed by architect S.M. Patton, the plan called for an Auburn-style penitentiary with an administration building, 800 individual cells for sleeping quarters, and several small buildings to be utilized as factories, warehouses, and additional offices. The compound would be surrounded by a twenty-foot stone wall.<sup>40</sup> Prisons utilizing the Auburn style were often built to resemble fortresses. The old Tennessee State Penitentiary had also utilized the Auburn system and found it conducive to making profit.<sup>41</sup> The farm located within the compound would provide both labor for inmates not employed in the factories and food for the prison. Unlike Brushy Mountain,

---

<sup>37</sup> Johnston, *Forms of Constraint*, 138.

<sup>38</sup> "Auburn-style" refers to the system developed in the early nineteenth century at Auburn State Prison in which prisoners performed factory labor in enforced silence during the day and slept in single-person cells. The Pennsylvania system originated at Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia in 1829 and prevailed throughout Europe. Despite its international popularity, few states adopted the system. *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Biennial Report of the Tennessee Board of Prison Commissioners, 1897-1898.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Gossett, "The Keepers and the Kept," 166.

which was constructed using paid labor, convict laborers leased to the Tennessee Iron, Coal, and Railroad Company quarried the sandstone and granite and made each of the bricks used to build the Main Prison.<sup>42</sup> The Committee reported that the design of the Main Prison also reflected the latest innovations in both sanitation and security.<sup>43</sup> The prison had a system for both heating and ventilation and each cell contained its own sink and toilet. Due to the fact that the individual cells were grouped along catwalks, guards were able to supervise and perform counts without requiring direct contact with prisoners.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>43</sup> "Report of the Penitentiary Purchasing and Building Committee to the General Assembly of Tennessee, 1895," House Journal, 1895.

<sup>44</sup> Gossett, "The Keepers and the Kept," 169.



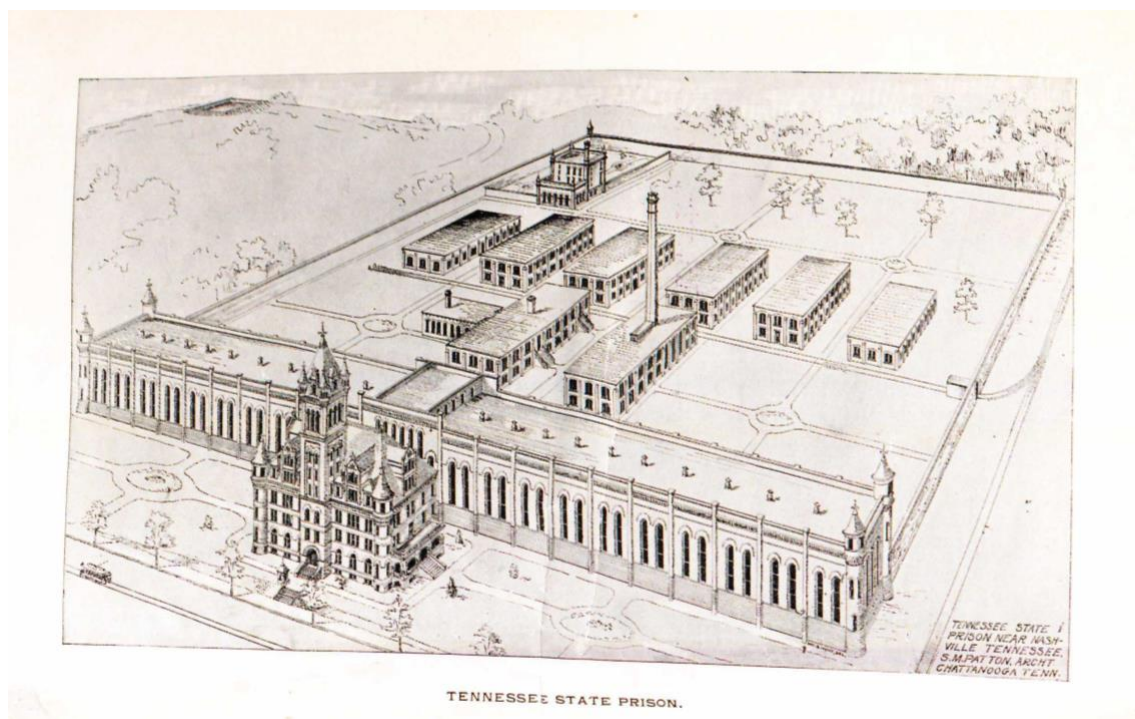


Figure 1.6 1896 drawing of the Tennessee State Prison. Two wings of prisoner lodging flank the central administration building. The buildings behind the penitentiary building are the prison factories. Courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

Another distinct aspect of the Main Prison was its diversification of labor products. Among the different factories housed at the prison were a soap factory, a tobacco factory, hosiery mills, a furniture factory, a shoe shop, and a commercial laundry.<sup>45</sup> The 1,000 acre farm located on the grounds provided work for both female inmates and those unable to perform factory labor. It included a cannery, dairy, and slaughterhouse which provided the majority of the food consumed at the prison. As the state emphasized the desire for its convicts to return the majority of their cost of upkeep through their labor, the various operations at the prison provided ample opportunity to

<sup>45</sup> Biennial Report of the Tennessee Board of Prison Commissioners, 1897-1898.

achieve this goal. Clear parallels existed between the new prison's factories and the convict lease system.<sup>46</sup> Though the inmates now worked for the state, it continued to contract with private entities in its prison factories, so that, for example, convicts working in the prison's shoe factory produced about 1,000 pairs of shoes per day for a single company.<sup>47</sup> They often worked sixteen-hour days, received inadequate food, and were not permitted recreation.<sup>48</sup> Prison conditions and the continuation of private contracts suggest more commonalities than differences in the new penitentiary system.

The state's convict lease system was to expire on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1896. On the eve of that expiration date, officials began the transportation of convicts to Brushy Mountain. Of the 440 convicts leased to the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company imprisoned in stockades in Tracy City and Coal Creek, officials took half to Brushy Mountain and transported the remaining men to the Main Prison.<sup>49</sup> Upon arriving by train in Harriman, the convicts marched a mile to a nearby railroad terminus to await the twenty-mile journey to the prison. Due to a lack of available passenger coaches, officials transported the men in bitter cold temperatures in open air coal wagons.<sup>50</sup> Work began the following day. After a legislative overhaul of the state prison system, planning, and construction, the state of Tennessee had realized its plan to replace the convict lease system with a coal mining prison.

---

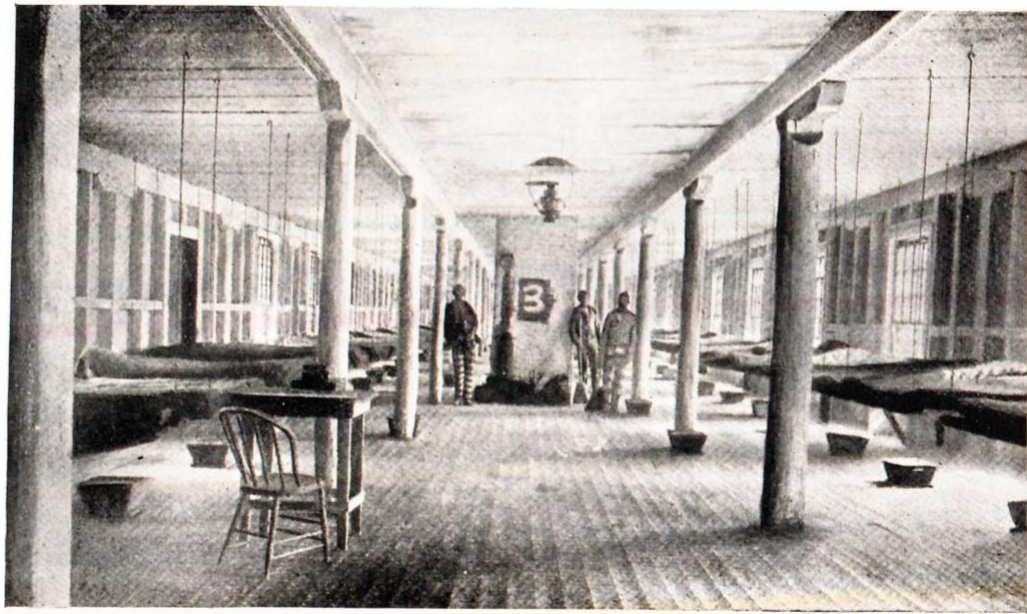
<sup>46</sup> Gossett, "The Keepers and the Kept," 174.

<sup>47</sup> Biennial Report.

<sup>48</sup> Gossett, "The Keepers and the Kept," 174.

<sup>49</sup> "The Lease System Now Ended in Regard to the Convicts of the State," *Leaf Chronicle Weekly* (Clarksville, TN), Jan. 3, 1896.

<sup>50</sup> Gossett, "The Keepers and the Kept," 138.



INTERIOR VIEW OF BRUSHY MOUNTAIN BRANCH PRISON.

Figure 1.7 Interior of prison. Courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

Within the first four years of operation, the Brushy Mountain mine produced steady revenue for the state.<sup>51</sup> Between its opening in January 1896 and the end of that year, Brushy Mountain's inmate population grew from 329 to 426 men.<sup>52</sup> As the demand for coal and the number of prisoners increased, the prison's single mine increased to five mines by 1905.<sup>53</sup> The Board of Commissioners then took on an expanded role in overseeing management.<sup>54</sup> In 1901, the Board contracted to purchase an additional 2,000 acres for the expansion of two of the Brushy Mountain mines. Between 1903 and 1917, the mines produced a net profit of \$1.7 million.<sup>55</sup> The profitability of the mines has been

<sup>51</sup> Shapiro, *A New South Rebellion*, 244.

<sup>52</sup> Biennial Report.

<sup>53</sup> Gossett, "The Keepers and the Kept," 150.

<sup>54</sup> Biennial Report.

<sup>55</sup> Shapiro, *A New South Rebellion*, 244.

attributed to the diversification of labor. In addition to mining, the site's 140 coal ovens allowed convict laborers to process slack into coke, thereby increasing the quality of product.<sup>56</sup> Prisoners not working in the mines performed agricultural labor and those with "trusty" status worked in the administrative offices and in the homes of prison officials.<sup>57</sup> The self-supporting nature of the prison, which included gardens and later a 60-acre farm, decreased the cost of providing food to inmates and guards.

The management of inmates also played a role in the high level of productivity. Officials maintained strict control through a system of hierarchy and rewards. Inmates were divided into squads of 80 men, each overseen by a boss.<sup>58</sup> Each man was assigned a set number of tasks based on skill level and fitness. Those who exceeded their allotments received bonuses along with other privileges. With the authorization of state legislators and officials, Brushy Mountain officials could even link inmates' work performance to their eligibility for parole.<sup>59</sup> The discussion of any "advantages," however, should not deemphasize the horrible conditions that characterized prisoners' existence. Along with dangerous and extremely strenuous physical labor, prisoners received low quality food and were routinely subjected to physical punishment including beatings and solitary confinement. An even more severe punishment existed in the form of "suspension," in which officers would hang an inmate by his thumbs from a hook in the ceiling.<sup>60</sup> Though

---

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Dickinson, *Morgan County*, 65.

<sup>58</sup> Shapiro, *A New South Rebellion*, 245.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Dickinson, *Morgan County*, 65.

conditions at Brushy Mountain reflected some improvement from the days of convict leasing, the harsh realities of racialized exploitation and deprivation did not diminish.

There are several documented incidents of prisoner resistance during Brushy Mountain's early period. Ten months into its first year, prisoners refused to work when they believed they were being forced to make up for a week of idleness caused by a mechanical issue in one of the mines.<sup>61</sup> In 1911, an incident occurred in which 300 African-American prisoners refused to work. The three-day mutiny ended with the deaths of three prisoners. Guards shot one prisoner accused of attempting to create an explosion in the mines and two others after firing into the stockade as retribution for the men's refusal to turn over the leaders of the uprising.<sup>62</sup> In 1933, 184 prisoners struck in protest against mistreatment by guards. The state responded by sending additional guards from the Main Prison.<sup>63</sup>

The prisoner population at Brushy Mountain grew steadily over the course of its first 20 years in operation and productivity remained high. Compared to 466 men at the end of 1896, the population grew to 776 by 1906.<sup>64</sup> Black prisoners continued to outnumber whites at extreme proportions. For example, in 1906, black prisoners represented 634 of the 776 men at the prison.<sup>65</sup> This continual growth resulted in pleas

---

<sup>61</sup> "Tennessee Convicts Mutiny," *The Atlanta Constitution* (Atlanta, GA), Oct. 13, 1896.

<sup>62</sup> "Mutiny at Brushy Mt. Prison Among Negro Convicts," *The Tennessean* (Nashville, TN), Oct. 1, 1911.

<sup>63</sup> "Extra Guards Sent to Petros Prison to Quell Trouble," *The Daily News Journal* (Murfreesboro, TN), Aug. 15, 1933.

<sup>64</sup> Gossett, *The Keepers and the Kept*, 158.

<sup>65</sup> In 1896, 399 of the 466 prisoners were black. By 1906, black prisoners represented 634 of the 776 men. African Americans represented about 23% of the state population during this period. *Ibid.*, 159.

from the prison's Warden to the General Assembly for relief from overcrowding.<sup>66</sup> Despite a significant decrease in the population of young men due to World War I, the prison's numbers continued to rise steadily into the early 1920s. The demand for coal and coke continued to rise as well.<sup>67</sup> By 1927, the population had risen to 919 men, around 150% of the institution's official capacity.<sup>68</sup> Much of this increase is attributed to Prohibition-related offenses as well as a general increase in crime during times of economic downturn. Overcrowding along with poor living conditions led to high rates of illness and death. Despite such circumstances, prisoner labor remained profitable. The state's plan to replace its convict-lease system with a productive prison mine was a financial success.

The development of the town of Petros, located next to the prison, coincided with the construction and operation of Brushy Mountain. Originally called Joynersville, the post office changed the name of the village to Petros in 1895.<sup>69</sup> After the construction of Brushy Mountain and the subsequent extension of the Harriman and Northeastern Railroad to the prison site, most town residents either worked at the prison or on the railroad. Prior to these changes, residents supported themselves through subsistence farming and small service industries. While corn was the primary crop, farmers also grew sweet potatoes, wheat, and tobacco.<sup>70</sup> The combined effects of the prison, the railroad

---

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Report of the Commissioner of the Department of Institutions to the Governor and the General Assembly of the State of Tennessee, 1927.

<sup>69</sup> Dickinson, *Morgan County*, 65.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

extension, and coal mining resulted in the town's fast growth. By 1930, the population had increased to just over 1,000 residents, making Petros the second-largest town in the county.<sup>71</sup>

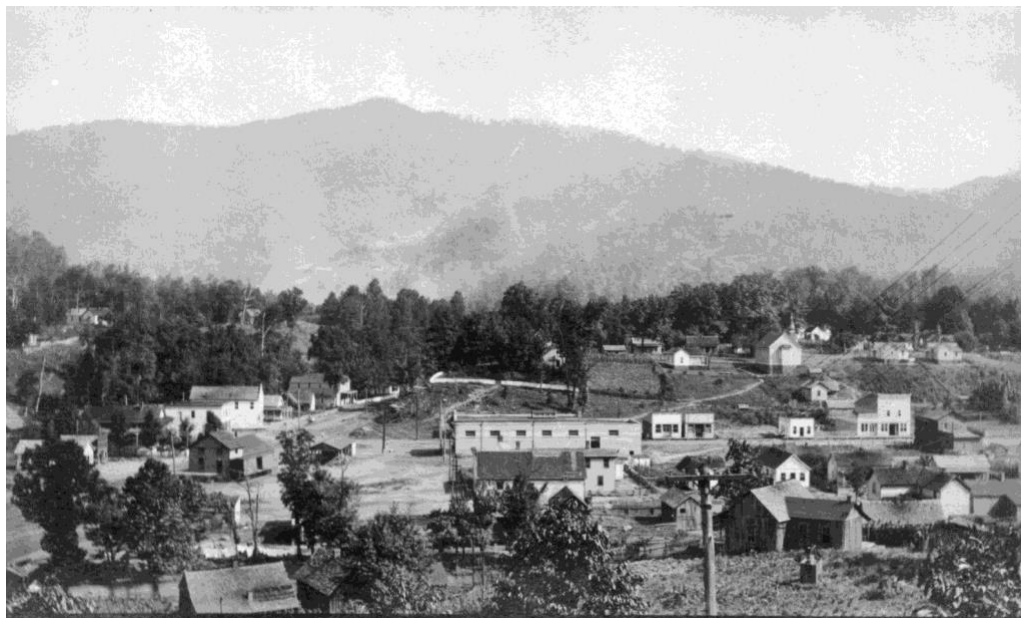


Figure 1.8 Petros, TN. Courtesy of Morgan County History and Genealogy.

From its earliest days, the prison was intertwined with the Petros community. In 1901, there were approximately 70 guards working at the prison.<sup>72</sup> While those with families lived in the surrounding community, single guards lived on the prison's third floor. In order to create space for additional inmates, the state constructed a 14-room dormitory for unmarried guards and seven three-room houses for those with families. It

---

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 64.



also built a new building to be used as a school, church, and lodge by the officials and their families.<sup>73</sup> Petros residents not working at Brushy Mountain benefitted from the town's close ties to the prison. In the event of an escape, the prison would sound a steam whistle signaling the town's men to join the mounted guards and bloodhounds in pursuit of the escapee. Among the incentives for joining the search was a \$25 reward for returned prisoners.<sup>74</sup> The growth of buildings on the periphery of the prison grounds reflects the prison's centrality in the development of Petros.



Figure 1.9 Superintendent's home, 1899. Courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

---

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 65.





Figure 1.10 Guard dormitory. Courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives.



Figure 1.11 Home of prison official. Courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives.



Figure 1.12 Building used as school, church, and lodge. Courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

Despite an expansion of the state's institutions between the turn of the century and the mid-1930s, the legislature continually ignored the need to replace Brushy Mountain's original building. The prison's wooden Central Building built in 1895 represented a mounting fire hazard. While the Main Prison received routine updates to its buildings, Brushy Mountain did not receive a similar level of maintenance. For example, in 1905, prison officials installed a modern sprinkler system in all of the buildings at the Main Prison in order to reduce fire risks.<sup>75</sup> The General Assembly did not approve a similar system for the building at Brushy Mountain despite documented instances of fires

---

<sup>75</sup> Biennial Report of the Board of Prison Commissioners of the State of Tennessee to the Governor, 1904-1906.

in the housing barracks.<sup>76</sup> As of 1930, the original wooden housing barracks meant for around 400 housed over 800 men.<sup>77</sup> After over 15 official requests, Governor McAlister acknowledged the extremity of the situation and the General Assembly approved a new building at Brushy Mountain in 1934.<sup>78</sup>

Workers completed the new Central Penitentiary Building in 1935. While the New Deal provided 150 Civil Works Administration workers to assist with construction, Brushy Mountain inmates performed most of the labor. Though the original plan called for the building to be built from stone from a nearby quarry, the process proved too slow and reinforced concrete became the substitute.<sup>79</sup> The three-story building contained four levels of cells able to accommodate 630 men. Two cell-blocks, separated by race, made up the left and right wings of the building. The front wing contained administrative offices and the rear wing contained a kitchen and dining halls. The Department of Institutions noted that although the building cost totaled \$45,960, it was valued at around \$176,000.<sup>80</sup>

Despite the construction of a new building, overcrowding and lack of sanitation continued to plague the prison. Two-man cells would house four men on alternate shifts in the mines, which contributed to an environment of dirt and illness. The capacity of the new prison was only 630, which meant the old building was still needed to house over 300 inmates. Though Brushy Mountain had received a desperately-needed new building,

---

<sup>76</sup> Gossett, *The Keepers and the Kept*, 181.

<sup>77</sup> Biennial Report of the Department of Institutions, 1928-1930.

<sup>78</sup> Biennial Report of the Department of Institutions, 1934-1935.

<sup>79</sup> Dickinson, *Morgan County*, 101.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

little had changed in terms of quality. A 1937 report by the Tennessee State Planning Commission called the facility “filthy” and “unfit for human habitation.”<sup>81</sup> The prison had received a new aesthetic, but its issues remained the same.



Figure 1.13 New Central Building completed in 1935. Tennessee State Library and Archives.

In *Landscape and Power*, W.J.T. Mitchell calls for an expanded understanding of landscapes as a tool of cultural power, one which “naturalizes a cultural and social construction, representing an artificial world as if it were simply given and inevitable.”<sup>82</sup>

---

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 1-2.

The early landscape of Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary reflected a culmination of political, economic, and social factors, all of which shaped the prison's function. Distinct from the new Tennessee State Prison, Brushy Mountain represented both the state's alternative to the convict lease system and its capitalization on the region's coal. The prison brought growth and development to an isolated Appalachian community as well as an identity that would shape it for decades to come. For the majority African-American men imprisoned at Brushy Mountain, the prison embodied the cruelties and exploitation that characterized Southern penal systems. The prison's architecture can be understood as artifacts tracing the state's evolving notions of punishment as well as the ways that institutions shape communities. Interpretation of Brushy Mountain's origins and early decades provides insight into its subsequent evolution into a contemporary rural carceral landscape.

**CHAPTER TWO:**  
**THE SHAPING OF A TWENTIETH CENTURY CARCERAL LANDSCAPE,**  
**1966-2009**

Changes to the state prison system, labor disputes, and the high profile escape of James Earl Ray all had lasting impacts on the cultural landscapes of Brushy Mountain and the community of Morgan County. Furthermore, the building of two additional prisons in Morgan County in 1980 and 2005 situated a historic landscape of incarceration within a contemporary phenomenon of rural prison building. This chapter will discuss the political and social events that shaped the development of the Morgan County's contemporary carceral landscape.

The years between 1966 and 1972 represented a tumultuous time in the prison's history. In 1966, coal mining at Brushy Mountain came to an end. Public criticism over the dangerous conditions in the mines along with a dwindling coal supply resulted in the state's decision to close the mines permanently. The prevalence of major inmate uprisings, which had greatly increased in the six years prior to the closure, also influenced the decision.<sup>1</sup> One effect of the closure was immediate overcrowding. The prison had operated at around double capacity by working inmates on opposite schedules, which enabled officials to house four inmates in cells meant for two. State officials floated ideas for building classrooms and workshops for vocational training, but little change took place and idleness among the inmates became a major issue.<sup>2</sup> In 1969,

---

<sup>1</sup> "State Seals 'Unsafe, Dry' Petros Mine," *The Tennessean* (Nashville, TN), Sept. 12, 1966.

<sup>2</sup> W. Calvin Dickinson, *Morgan County* (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1987), 119.

restructuring of the state system resulted in the re-classification of Brushy Mountain as a maximum-security institution. As short term offenders were transferred to barracks at the prison's farm, the previously diversified prison population became one dominated by inmates serving long sentences.<sup>3</sup> In 1972, 150 guards left their posts in strike after the firing of a fellow guard and reprimanding of another. Both guards were union representatives. The state prison commissioner fired the striking guards and sent state troopers to occupy their posts. Around 400 inmates were transferred to other state prisons. Governor Winfield Dunn ordered the prison's closure the following year.<sup>4</sup>

Brushy Mountain's closure had a major impact on both the local and state level. While the official justification was Governor Dunn's desire to restructure the state system to one of regional prisons instead of large state prisons, many suspected that the closing of the prison harbored the political motive of discouraging unionization of the guards. In the aftermath of the closure, thirty of the fired guards picketed the state capitol. The state later offered the former guards, excluding the two union leaders, new employment.<sup>5</sup> As Brushy Mountain was the county's largest single employer, with 265 employees, its closure meant the sudden unemployment of a large number of mostly male Petros and county residents.<sup>6</sup> One county official described employment opportunities outside of the prison as "a few saw mills and three clothing factories employing mostly women."<sup>7</sup>

Positioned as a key issue in the 1974 governor's race, Democratic candidate Roy Blanton

---

<sup>3</sup> "Prison Probers Visit Top Security Site," *The Tennessean* (Nashville, TN), Aug. 17, 1969.

<sup>4</sup> Dickinson, *Morgan County*, 119.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 120.

<sup>7</sup> "Prison Closing Hurts," *The Daily News-Journal* (Murfreesboro, TN), July 24, 1972.

stated that he would work to reopen the prison pending the results of a feasibility report, earning him considerable favor over opponent Lamar Alexander. The prison reopened in 1975.<sup>8</sup> A former guard stated that, “Ninety-nine percent of the people in the area are tickled to death that the prison is reopening.”<sup>9</sup> One journalist remarked, “There’s no doubt that Brushy and its job offerings will figure in this town’s future for as long as prisons are needed. After all, they grew up with prisoners as part of the community. And that’s the way things are.”<sup>10</sup> County residents celebrated the prison’s reopening, relieved at the return of prison jobs on which they had come to rely. The mid- 1960s through the mid-1970s was an era of major political upheaval for Brushy Mountain and the Petros community. The next chapter in the prison’s history would place the region’s prison identity in the national spotlight.

In 1970, James Earl Ray, convicted of the assassination of civil rights icon Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was transferred to Brushy Mountain to serve his 99-year sentence after being housed at the Tennessee State Prison during two years of appeals.<sup>11</sup> State-level media coverage of Ray’s life in prison developed a narrative of the “celebrity” prisoner even prior to his 1977 escape. The coverage exhibited a fixation on every aspect of Ray’s imprisonment, from his housing arrangement to his prison job, yet also emphasized his treatment as “just another prisoner.”<sup>12</sup> Other stories emphasized his supposedly well-adjusted perspective on life at Brushy Mountain. Alongside coverage of

---

<sup>8</sup> Dickinson, *Morgan County*, 120.

<sup>9</sup> “Detail of Inmates Going to Ready Prison at Petros,” *The Tennessean* (Nashville, TN), May 11, 1975.

<sup>10</sup> “Back to Brushy Mountain: a Big Job Ahead,” *Kingsport News* (Kingsport, TN), May 06, 1975.

<sup>11</sup> “James Ray Transferred to Brushy Mountain Cell,” *The Jackson Sun* (Jackson, TN), Mar. 25, 1970.

<sup>12</sup> “Ray’s New Home at Rocky Mountain,” *The Daily News-Journal* (Murfreesboro, TN), Apr. 09, 1970.



his prison life were reports on Ray's escape attempts. A year after arriving at Brushy Mountain, Ray attempted escape through a hole he made in his cell. Despite reaching the steam tunnel leading off of the prison grounds, officials recaptured Ray after half an hour. As punishment for the escape attempt, Ray received temporary isolation and a loss of privileges.<sup>13</sup> In 1972, Ray made another attempt at escape through the ceiling of the prison's gymnasium. This attempt was also unsuccessful.<sup>14</sup> Such consistent coverage built Brushy Mountain's reputation as home to James Earl Ray, a perception thrust into the national spotlight in 1977.

On a summer night in 1977, Petros residents heard the familiar sound of the prison steam whistle. When sounded off schedule, the whistle signified an escape from Brushy Mountain. On this night, the escapees were Ray and six other inmates. While the original escape plan included five men, an additional inmate seized the opportunity in the moment. Using a planned fight as a diversion, Ray and the other men escaped one-by-one over the outside edge of the prison's northeast wall, a small section without electric fencing, using a makeshift ladder made from plumbing supplies.<sup>15</sup> One guard, upon realizing the circumstances, began to shoot at the men and hit one. The inmate later recovered in the hospital.<sup>16</sup> Having successfully made it over the wall, Ray and his fellow escapees fled into the mountains.

---

<sup>13</sup> "James Earl Ray Disciplined for Escape Try," *The Jackson Sun* (Jackson, TN), May 05, 1971.

<sup>14</sup> "2<sup>nd</sup> Escape Effort by Ray Unsuccessful," *The Tennessean* (Nashville, TN), Feb. 15, 1972.

<sup>15</sup> "Mountains Are Part of Walls at Brushy," *The Tennessean* (Nashville, TN), June 19, 1977.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

The escape sent the town of Petros into a chaos that then radiated across the state. Overloaded from alarmed calls regarding the steam whistle, the local phone system went dead.<sup>17</sup> The acting prison warden, Stonney Lane, was away on vacation, adding to the mayhem. Within hours, state and local news crews, media representatives from national and international networks, and Tennessee state officials had gathered outside of the prison gates eager to obtain information from Brushy Mountain officials. Questions ranged from the practical to suggestions of elaborate conspiracy theories to get Ray out of the country.<sup>18</sup> The ensuing manhunt coalesced local, state, and national forces, representing various interests, in pursuit of Ray and the other prisoners.

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> “Manhunt in the Mountains: James Earl Ray and the Brushy Mountain Prison Breakout of 1977,” *Knox News Sentinel* (Knoxville, TN), Mar.25, 2018.

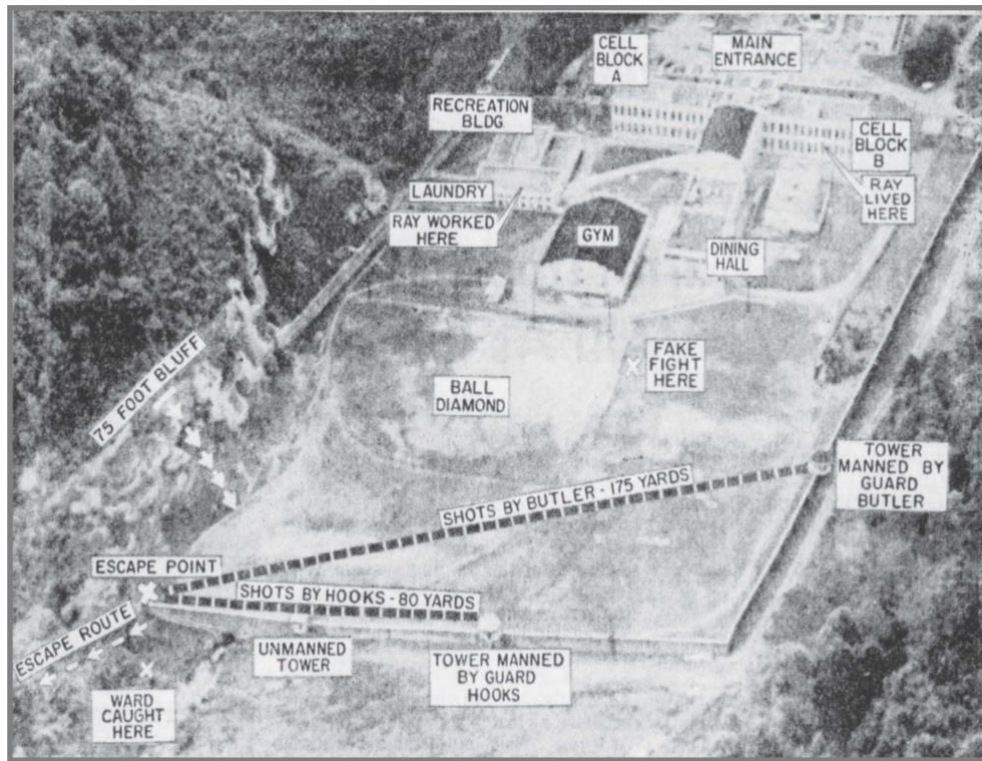


Figure 2.1 Map detailing the progression of Ray's escape. *The Tennessean*, June 19 1977.

The search plan quickly became complicated as multiple entities competed for authority. Guards and officials working the search recall a mayhem of contradictory orders as each entity saw the situation as a turf war in which to prove accountability and competence. State official Henderson along with prison staff devised a strategy to contain the men within two miles of the prison until morning, when they would launch a search involving helicopters and bloodhounds. By morning, the state had mobilized several Tennessee Highway Patrol SWAT teams and a mobile command post with advanced communications center to replace the failed local telephone system and coordinate radio correspondence between entities. By midday, officials had captured one of the men eight

miles away from the prison, causing them to widen the search radius.<sup>19</sup> The search team then received news that President Carter had ordered the FBI to step in and take over the operation. The House Select Committee on Assassinations, which had interviewed Ray weeks prior regarding his crime, also sent two members to observe the search. Rumors circulated that Ray was kidnapped, had inside help in escaping, and that the escape was a plot to kill him. The latter suggestion prompted Governor Blanton to issue an order that “Ray be taken alive, if possible.”<sup>20</sup> By Sunday morning, the team had captured two more men, one in an open field near Frozen Head State Park and the other in a church four miles from the prison.<sup>21</sup> Two days into the search, Governor Blanton announced that he would deploy two units of the Tennessee National Guard and that control of the search would shift to the state Safety Commissioner.<sup>22</sup> The chaos driven by the different entities involved would eventually give way to conflicting accounts of the manhunt’s last moments.

The community narrative of the search’s final moments emphasized local competence as the determining factor in capturing Ray. Brushy Mountain authorities organized a task force of guards who grew up in Petros and were familiar with areas of the land where the escapees might hide.<sup>23</sup> A resident of a nearby town reported seeing three men, one of whom matched Ray’s description, in an area non-local guards had

---

<sup>19</sup> “Mountains Are Part of Walls at Brushy,” *The Tennessean* (Nashville, TN), June 19, 1977.

<sup>20</sup> “Manhunt in the Mountains: James Earl Ray and the Brushy Mountain Prison Breakout of 1977,” *Knox News Sentinel* (Knoxville, TN), Mar.25, 2018.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> “Mountains Are Part of Walls at Brushy,” *The Tennessean* (Nashville, TN), June 19, 1977.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

already covered with search dogs. Convinced that a search of the area required local familiarity, the prison warden called on two local guards, Sammy Chapman and Johnny Newberry, to conduct their own search. Despite being told by federal authorities that they were wasting their time, the duo persisted and searched using Sandy and Little Red, dogs they had trained themselves. The dogs picked up a scent and, after three hours of searching, discovered Ray hiding under a pile of leaves. He was found with around \$100 and a travel map of the state. The duo led Ray, who did not resist, to the warden waiting at the bottom of the hill who then escorted him back to Brushy Mountain.<sup>24</sup> According to this narrative, the duo had proven that their local understanding of the terrain was superior to the technology used and expertise claimed by outsider state and federal officials. Growing up in a community where residents had participated in manhunts for generations afforded the men a distinct perspective outsiders were unable to appreciate.

---

<sup>24</sup> “Manhunt in the Mountains: James Earl Ray and the Brushy Mountain Prison Breakout of 1977,” *Knox News Sentinel* (Knoxville, TN), Mar.25, 2018.



Figure 2.2 *The Tennessean*, June 15, 1977.

The state narrative of the final moments of the manhunt emphasized the cooperation between local and state entities amidst arrogant interference by federal officials. Reports of a stolen vehicle in a nearby town caused the team to widen their search radius to twenty-five miles. Upon searching the mountains east of the prison, dogs

discovered tracks which led them to one of the escapees, Hill, and later to Ray. The governor then called off the National Guard, despite still having two escapees at large.<sup>25</sup> County officials found the remaining men within the following two days, though were not given credit because FBI officials wanted to “parade him before the cameras.”<sup>26</sup> Days after Ray’s capture, Governor Blanton called on President Carter to place Ray in federal custody, citing published interviews of federal officials criticizing the state for allowing Ray to escape. Blanton blamed federal regulation that prohibited the state from housing Ray in isolation where he would have been unable to escape. Blanton also claimed that the ongoing federal intervention in Ray’s case, which began after his conviction and transfer to the Tennessee prison system, had further complicated efforts to locate the escapees.<sup>27</sup> Ray’s presence had been a nuisance for almost a decade and his escape had embarrassed the state on the national stage.

The escape resulted in lasting change to Brushy Mountain. The state prison commissioner vowed to obtain funds from the State Building Commission to make the prison “the most escape proof possible.”<sup>28</sup> The warden hired eighteen new guards and built a new guard tower. Officials lengthened the electric wiring to cover the small area of fence through which the men escaped. They also built an additional fence to seal off a potential escape route through the drainage tunnel beneath the prison.<sup>29</sup> In 1981, a group of inmates stabbed Ray, landing him in the hospital with severe injuries. Following the

---

<sup>25</sup> “Mountains Are Part of Walls at Brushy,” *The Tennessean* (Nashville, TN), June 19, 1977.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> “Ray Escape Last Straw for Governor,” *The Leaf -Chronicle* (Clarksville, TN), June 14, 1977.

<sup>28</sup> “Mountains Are Part of Walls at Brushy,” *The Tennessean* (Nashville, TN), June 19, 1977.

<sup>29</sup> “James Earl Ray-One Year Later,” *Kingsport Times-News* (Kingsport, Tennessee), June 11, 1978.

incident, officials transferred Ray to the main prison in Nashville.<sup>30</sup> Along with the physical changes to the prison, the escape had a lasting impact on Brushy Mountain's public image. Brushy Mountain became "the prison that once housed James Earl Ray," a legacy that would remain even after its closure.

Ray's escape had a complex effect on local identity. Newspaper coverage emphasized the ordeal as an exciting event in the county's history. Contemporary coverage even suggests that, to the local community, the impact of the escape was comparable to that of the news of King's assassination on the nation.<sup>31</sup> As Brushy Mountain formed a major part of community identity, the elevation of Ray to celebrity status along with the national spotlight from the escape became a source of local pride. To residents proud of their prison, the state's decision to place Ray at Brushy Mountain represented confidence in their institution and those who ran it. Amidst general speculation during the manhunt was the suspicion that Brushy Mountain officials engineered the escape in order to get media recognition for a successful capture. As aiding in the pursuit of escapees was a community tradition, Ray's successful capture by two local guards symbolized the town proving its competence in handling prisoners to outsiders who may question it. As former warden Stonney Lane stated in his memoir, "Brushy officers have been doing this job for 80 years. Their ancestors had chased

---

<sup>30</sup> "Move Opens Rays Wounds," *The Jackson Sun* (Jackson, Tennessee), June 18, 1981.

<sup>31</sup> "Manhunt in the Mountains: James Earl Ray and the Brushy Mountain Prison Breakout of 1977," *Knoxville News Sentinel* (Knoxville, TN), Mar.25, 2018.



convicts through these mountains for 80 years. It was a proud tradition.”<sup>32</sup> The national attention gave the community something for which to be known and proud.

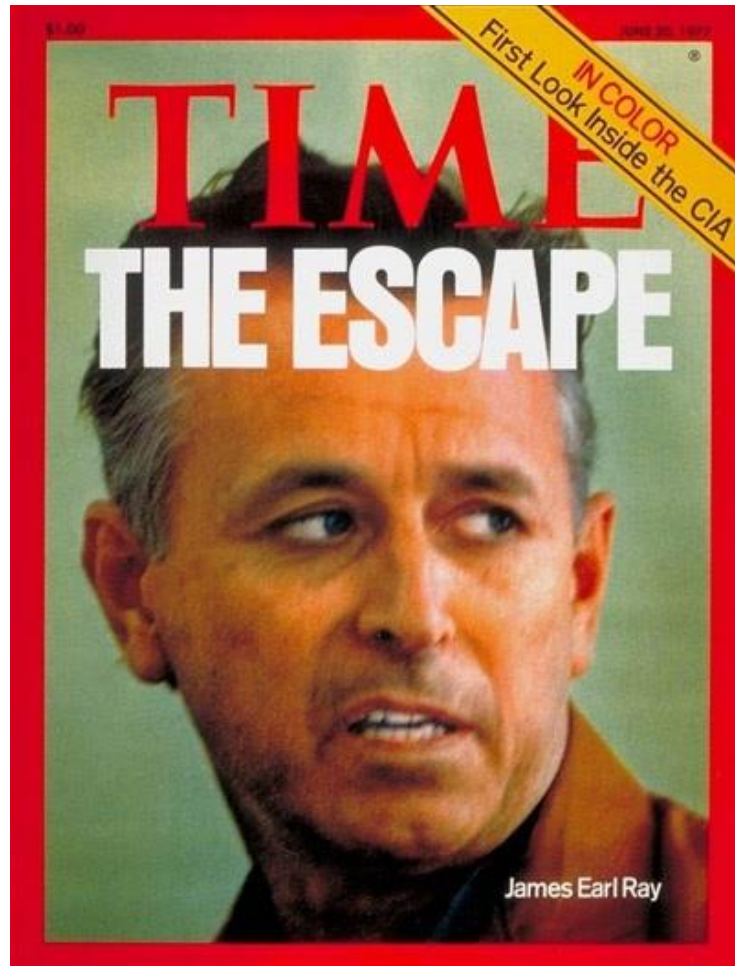


Figure 14.3 Ray on cover of *Time* magazine. June 20, 1977. Accessed April 15, 2018.  
<http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19770620,00.html>.

The racial implications of the escape add to its complex place in local memory. The racism entrenched in the prison’s origins continued to shape its functioning in the

---

<sup>32</sup> Matt Pulle, “Tales from Brushy Mountain,” *Nashville Scene* (Nashville, TN), Oct. 30, 2003.

twentieth century. Ray was the convicted assassin of a black civil rights icon. As Morgan County could not be considered racially progressive by any standard, it is not unreasonable to assume that some local residents would harbor sympathy for his crime. By the late 1970s, black inmates represented around 55% of the prison's population. The guard force was entirely white. Only one black family resided in the county.<sup>33</sup> Some members of the public speculated that Ray could have easily escaped with the help of local farmers, many of whom would be glad to help the man who murdered King.<sup>34</sup> A *New York Times* article detailed the environment of racial tension and violence that culminated in the shooting deaths of two black inmates by seven white inmates with guns thought to be smuggled in by a prison guard. Guards described the environment as a "race war" and "powder keg." Inmates claimed some guards promoted the violence to provoke changes in prison administration.<sup>35</sup> Whether or not Ray received assistance in his escape is unknown, yet his identity combined with the context of racial tension illustrates a continuation of the prison's troublesome past.

As the furor over Ray's escape quieted, a major transformation in the carceral landscape of Morgan County was on the horizon. In 1980, a new prison opened in the county. Located eleven miles from Brushy Mountain in Wartburg, the 400-bed Morgan County Regional Correctional Center formed part of the state's shift from central penitentiaries to "regional prisons." Developed with the intention of alleviating

---

<sup>33</sup> Wendell Rawls, Jr, "Fortress Prison Harbors Violence that Erupted in Death of Two Blacks," *New York Times*, Feb. 17, 1982.

<sup>34</sup> Matt Pulle, "Tales from Brushy Mountain," *Nashville Scene* (Nashville, TN), Oct. 30, 2003.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

overcrowding in the state's main facilities, the Department of Corrections planned regional prisons in Nashville, Bledsoe County, Morgan County, Pikeville, and Lake County. It had opened its first regional prison in Memphis in 1977.<sup>36</sup> The Morgan County Correctional Center stood on the grounds of the old Brushy Mountain minimum security farm, directly adjacent to Frozen Head State Park.<sup>37</sup> The combined capacity of the two prisons gave Morgan County an inmate population of around 800, making the Department of Corrections the county's largest single employer.<sup>38</sup> The same year, Brushy Mountain changed from maximum security to classification, meaning it would receive all East Tennessee inmates to determine their security risk and place them at a corresponding facility.<sup>39</sup> Officials designed the new prison using the "guild" concept, a communal-style arrangement consisting of sixteen one story brick buildings positioned in a semi-circle around a central building. Each building housed twenty-five men in single rooms. In contrast to the large guard towers characteristic of high-security prisons, security measures consisted of a series of fences. The style was considered ideal for housing and training minimum security inmates in various tasks including farming, kitchen work, and custodial duties.<sup>40</sup> Unlike the imposing, fortress-like presence of Brushy Mountain, the new prison resembled the campus of a community college.

---

<sup>36</sup> "Regional Prison Near Completion," *The Tennessean* (Nashville, TN), Nov. 20, 1978.

<sup>37</sup> W. Calvin Dickinson, *Morgan County* (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1987), 121.

<sup>38</sup> "Region Prison Plan Lags," *The Tennessean* (Nashville, TN), Oct. 11, 1980.

<sup>39</sup> Dickinson, *Morgan County*, 121.

<sup>40</sup> "Region Prison Plan Lags," *The Tennessean* (Nashville, TN), Oct. 11, 1980.

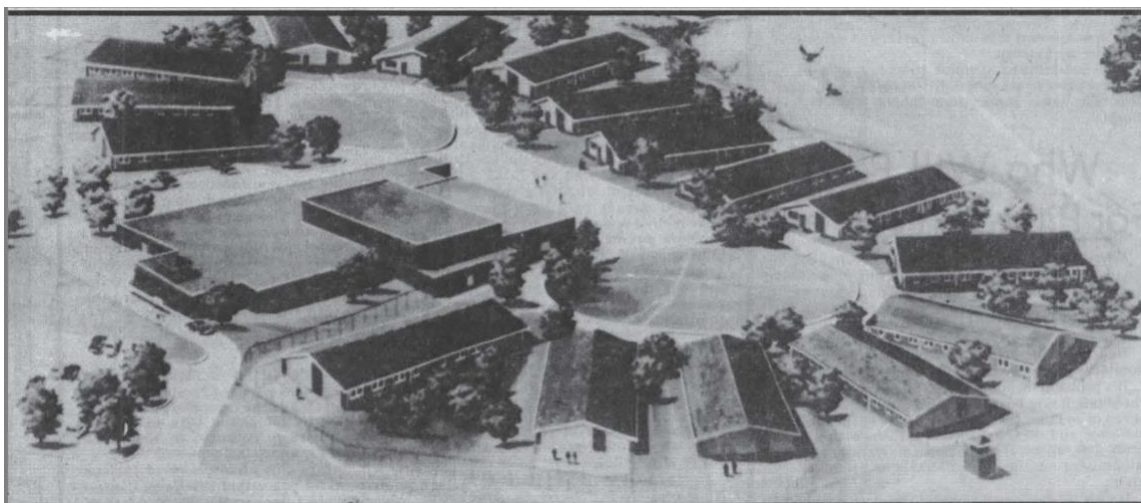


Figure 2.4 Guild-style prison design. *The Jackson Sun*, May 26, 1978.

Despite statewide opposition to regional prison siting, Morgan County residents had a generally favorable perception of the new prison. The original regional prison plan was to build low-security prisons in the state's urban areas in order to house petty offenders near their homes and to utilize the guild-style design to emphasize academic and vocational training. Public opposition, however, prevented siting of the prisons in urban centers and four of the five were instead placed in rural counties.<sup>41</sup> A plan to site a prison in Knoxville was canceled due to extreme public resistance. A special citizen's committee council agreed to meet and propose alternatives for the prison site.<sup>42</sup> Though not in an urban area, officials abandoned plans for a regional prison in Morristown after local opposition, which included a Ku Klux Klan demonstration, turned violent.<sup>43</sup> All

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> "Although Knoxville Prison Site Scratched, Blanton Still Committed to Regional Prison Concept," *Kingsport News* (Kingsport, TN), Mar. 17, 1977.

<sup>43</sup> "Locating a Prison," *The Jackson Sun* (Jackson, TN), May 26, 1978.

instances of opposition were not successful. Despite a civil suit on behalf of local landowners, construction of the new regional prison at Cockrill Bend in Nashville continued underway and opened in 1979.<sup>44</sup> Officials noted the clear disadvantages of rural prison siting, which included a lack of resources for on-the-job training and difficulty recruiting skilled instructors.<sup>45</sup>

Morgan County residents welcomed the prison for its economic benefits, which had been reinforced during the period Brushy Mountain was closed in the mid-1970s.<sup>46</sup> The prison's first warden, a Morgan County native, stated that he believed residents were open to the new prison because Brushy Mountain was already there.<sup>47</sup> A county whose development had evolved from a prison would adopt another, positioning itself within the late twentieth century landscape of rural prison siting.

The changing carceral landscape in Morgan County occurred in the midst of major shifts in the general economic landscape of rural Appalachia. Economic restructuring, characterized by farming crises, factory closings, shift to service sector employment, and the replacement of local business by major chains, had a devastating effect on the country's rural communities.<sup>48</sup> Other small, economically distressed towns turned to prison acquisition as a conscious means of bringing jobs and growth. As this

---

<sup>44</sup> "Prison on Schedule: Neighbors to Fight," *The Tennessean* (Nashville, TN), May 18, 1978.

<sup>45</sup> "Although Knoxville Prison Site Scratched, Blanton Still Committed to Regional Prison Concept," *Kingsport News* (Kingsport, TN), Mar. 17, 1977.

<sup>46</sup> Dickinson, *Morgan County*, 121.

<sup>47</sup> "Region Prison Plan Lags," *The Tennessean* (Nashville, TN), Oct. 11, 1980.

<sup>48</sup> Tracy Huling, "Building a Prison Economy in Rural America," in *Invisible Punishment: The Collateral Consequences of Mass Imprisonment*, edited by Marc Mauer and Meda Chesney-Lind, (New York: The New Press, 2002), 199.

phenomenon coincided with policy changes responsible for a sharp increase in the country's prison population, entire regions of the country became dependent on the prison industry as the backbone of their economies.<sup>49</sup> Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, an average of four new prisons were built in rural areas each year. This number increased to sixteen during the 1980s and twenty-five by the 1990s.<sup>50</sup>

Despite strong rhetoric promising growth, there is little evidence that prisons provide long term economic benefits. As the decline in coal and manufacturing jobs contributed to severe structural unemployment in the 1980s, local politicians and prison promoters throughout central Appalachia presented prisons as a "recession-proof" solution to the problem.<sup>51</sup> Some scholars make the argument that the region's prison economy, among the largest in the country, represents a continuation of the exploitation which has characterized Appalachia's history. Counties that welcomed prisons have not experienced long term job growth, the arrival of new industries, or any other measurable economic benefits. Several studies showed that prisons actually impeded private sector growth because industries did not want to be associated with them.<sup>52</sup> Though prisons do provide additional jobs, the tendency to rely on national firms as opposed to local companies for service contracts along with employment requirements that do not favor

---

<sup>49</sup> The number of incarcerated people in the United States grew from around 300,000 in the 1970s to over 2 million by 2012. Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>51</sup> Melissa Ooten and Jason Sawyer, "From the Coal Mine to the Prison Yard: The Human Cost of Appalachia's New Economy," In *Appalachia Revisited: New Perspectives on Place, Tradition, and Progress*, edited by William Schumann and Rebecca Adkins Fletcher, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016), 171.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 176.

local residents makes job growth limited. In 1985, a state representative registered a complaint with Governor Alexander's administration claiming it violated an "unwritten agreement" to staff the county's two prisons with majority Morgan County workers. Despite county natives representing the majority of the guard force historically, the practice began to change during this period. A Department of Corrections spokesperson responded that the state had no obligation to give preference to county residents.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, prisons had the potential to displace low-wage workers as local institutions contract free or low cost prison labor to complete work projects.<sup>54</sup> A 1997 article from *The Tennessean* noted that at that time, Brushy Mountain had 154 minimum security inmates working within the county performing grounds keeping and other tasks.<sup>55</sup> It is likely that the same practices were in place at Morgan County Regional Correctional Center. Economic benefits from housing a prison are, at best, limited.

Prison siting is also found to have a negative social impact on communities. Interdisciplinary scholarship has noted the various ways that prisons reflexively shape the communities in which they are located. Prison clustering, the siting of more than one prison within a single area, "inscribes" incarceration on small towns and has lasting effects on their identities.<sup>56</sup> The identity as a "prison town" creates a stigma that discourages new residents and businesses from moving in. While most prisons are in rural communities, inmates often come from urban and metropolitan areas within the

---

<sup>53</sup> "Hire More Morgan Staff for Prison, Burnett Asks," *The Tennessean* (Nashville, TN) Oct. 3, 1985.

<sup>54</sup> Ooten and Sawyer, "From the Coal Mine to the Prison Yard," 176.

<sup>55</sup> "Tennessee's Alcatraz," *The Tennessean* (Nashville, TN) Feb. 15, 1997.

<sup>56</sup> Dominique Moran, *Carceral Geography: Spaces and Practices of Incarceration* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2015).

state. In many states, this pattern means that large numbers of inmates of color are housed in majority white communities. Rural communities often express concern over “undesirables” relocating to their towns to be closer to family members in prison. The increase of prison family visitors can promote an atmosphere of prejudice and suspicion fueled by racism and urban-rural tension.<sup>57</sup> Prisons fail to provide towns with a “moral economy” that empowers community ties and promotes a strong local character.<sup>58</sup> They instead create an adversarial economy in which residents are obligated to be there and have no interest in “doing business” with outsiders who have family in prison.

In 2005, Morgan County became home to an additional prison facility. State officials made the decision to close Brushy Mountain, which had been in operation for over 100 years, and transfer its inmates to the new prison on the grounds of the regional prison, expanding the Morgan County Regional Correctional Center into the Morgan County Correctional Complex. The state selected Morgan County due in part to its low employee turnover rate attributed to its identity as a prison town.<sup>59</sup> Considered a design prototype for future state prisons, the \$90.3 million, 500,000 square foot complex added 19 new buildings including a central command center, an administration building, and housing units. It remains one of the state’s largest construction projects to date.<sup>60</sup> In 2009, officials closed Brushy Mountain after 113 years of operation.

---

<sup>57</sup> Susan Blankenship and Ernest J. Yanarella, “Big House on the Rural Landscape: Prison Recruitment as a Policy Tool of Local Economic Development,” *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 12, no. 2 (2006): 130.

<sup>58</sup> Ooten and Sawyer, “From the Coal Mine to the Prison Yard,” 181.

<sup>59</sup> “107 -Year-Old Brushy Prison to Be Replaced,” *The Tennessean* (Nashville, TN), Sept. 30, 2003.

<sup>60</sup> “Morgan County Correctional Complex,” *Bell and Associates Construction*, accessed February 12, 2018. <http://balp.com/projects/morgan-county-correctional-complex>.





Figure 2.5 Aerial view of Morgan County Correctional Complex. The upper right corner shows the original Morgan County Regional Correctional Center built in 1980. Accessed April 15, 2018. <http://balp.com/projects/morgan-county-correctional-complex>

A 1975 *Kingsport News* article stated, “Three facts dominate this corner of East Tennessee: coal, Appalachian poverty, and a big white hulk of a prison in the hollow north of town.”<sup>61</sup> News of Brushy Mountain’s closure produced community-wide nostalgia over the prison’s history. State and local newspapers interviewed staff members, many of whom represented the second or third generation in their families to work at the prison. Community members’ memories emphasized the central place the prison occupied in local identity. One staff member described having picnics with her family in the hills above the prison while watching baseball games between inmates and

---

<sup>61</sup> “Back to Brushy Mountain: a Big Job Ahead,” *Kingsport News* (Kingsport, TN), May 06, 1975.

local men. Another recalled going to the prison as a child for appointments with the town's only physician.<sup>62</sup> The history of Brushy Mountain will always be intertwined with that of Morgan County. Recognizing this deeply rooted interconnectedness remains essential for understanding how the presence of prisons has shaped the town's functioning.

Over the course of the mid-to-late twentieth century, Morgan County's carceral landscape evolved from a notorious historic prison tucked away in the mountains to a contemporary prison complex occupying a central, visible place on the Wartburg townscape. The Morgan County Correctional Complex resembles an industrial office park, occupying a location among the county's government offices. Though the appearance of incarceration has changed, linking the history of Brushy Mountain and the rise of the contemporary Appalachian prison landscape exposes the entrenchment of the prison identity in the county. Unlike many other "prison towns," Morgan County has a long history of incarceration shaped by over 100 years of political, economic, and social forces. Drawing connections between the region's prison past and present, the circumstances of its current redevelopment, and its contested legacy illustrates an example of the complex and troubling impact of incarceration on a rural landscape.

---

<sup>62</sup> "Tennessee: Bars Closing on Brushy Mountain After 113 Years," *Times Free Press* (Chattanooga, TN) Apr.5, 2009.

**CHAPTER THREE:**  
**THE REDEVELOPMENT AND RE-ARTICULATION OF A CARCERAL**  
**CULTURAL LANDSCAPE**

The closing of Brushy Mountain State Prison was a significant chapter in the history of Tennessee and Morgan County. The prison had been a foundational institution for the state and county for over 100 years. From its inception in the era of convict leasing, to its role in mid-century labor and penal reform, to its development into a modern penitentiary in the age of mass incarceration, the prison tells the story of some of the country's most shameful histories. While the prison is distinct in its own right, its history must be understood within the broader context of the rural communities it shaped. The social ideologies represented by the prison, a seemingly permanent fixture carved into the side of a mountain, inscribed meanings of race, crime, and punishment onto the region's cultural landscape.

Understanding the prison's history requires interrogating the ways in which the surrounding communities formed identities through the practice of incarceration. The work of human geographer Dominique Moran explores the role of decommissioned "post-prisons" on the cultural landscapes they historically shaped. She argues that former prisons continue to "reflexively shape the communities which interact with them as social, cultural, and political elites promote their own values through the inscription of

carceral sites.”<sup>1</sup> While the prison symbolized historic power relations, its relevance for contemporary circumstances cannot be overstated.



Figure 3.1 Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary in 2009. Courtesy of the Tennessee Historical Commission.

The adaptive reuse of prisons represents a relatively new area in the field of historic preservation. Since 2011, 22 states have closed or announced closures for approximately 94 prison facilities.<sup>2</sup> As this trend continues, the issue of repurposing these institutions into productive uses becomes increasingly relevant. Former prisons have been converted to suit a wide range of commercial uses, including museums, hotels, apartments, corporate parks, and education centers. In 2017, the company Broadway

---

<sup>1</sup> Dominique Moran, *Carceral Geography* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 145.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel C. Vock, “As More and More Prisons Shutter, Governments Wonder What to Do With Them,” *Governing* (Washington, D.C.), Nov.30, 2017.

Stages purchased the Arthur Kill Correctional facility on Staten Island, New York to redevelop into a film and television studio.<sup>3</sup> The former Lorton Reformatory in northern Virginia has been converted into luxury apartments and commercial space.<sup>4</sup> Despite a diversity of new functions, most re-developed prisons become sites for heritage tourism.

Geographic location is a major factor in determining adaptive reuse possibilities. Rural prisons offer fewer options for sustainable redevelopment due to their remote location. While historic prisons located in or near urban cores can be repurposed into museums, such as the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, this new use is not a viable option for former prisons in rural areas that offer little appeal to developers. Rural prisons often do not meet the same building codes as their urban counterparts, making their redevelopment more expensive.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, complex socio-cultural factors can contribute to the difficulty of establishing new uses. For many rural communities, prisons form a significant part of their local history and economy. Closures often generate anxiety over economic stability and communities often remain hopeful that the state will one day reuse the facilities in their towns.

Several adaptive reuse models reflect consciousness of a prison's community impact. In the Bronx, New York, the non-profit Osborne Association has plans to convert the former Fulton Correctional Facility into a community center to provide temporary

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Audrey Hoffer, "Former Prison is the Site of a New Development in Southern Fairfax County," *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), Jan. 3, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Kimberly Peters and Jennifer Turner, "Doing Time Travel: Performing Past and Present at the Prison Museum," in *Historical Geographies of Prisons*, edited by Dominique Moran and Karen M. Morin, 71-87, (New York: Routledge, 2015).

housing and resources to former inmates. The repurposing of both the Arthur Kill and Fulton prisons was made possible through New York State tax credits and a \$50 million capital program to assist rural communities facing prison closures.<sup>6</sup> The not-for-profit NoVo foundation redeveloped the Bayview Correctional Facility, a former women's prison in New York, into office space for women's advocacy organizations.<sup>7</sup> In rural Wagram, North Carolina, the locally based non-profit Growing Change converted the former Scotland Correctional Center into a farm and environmental education and recreational center for at-risk youth. Through partnerships with state agencies, universities, and other nonprofits, Growing Change's plans include a counseling program, a learning farm, vocational classes, and various outdoor recreational activities. Long-term plans include on-site housing and educational services for local veterans, as well as a community kitchen. Recognizing the importance of interpretation, the organization plans to transform an old prison bus into a traveling exhibition that tells the story of North Carolina's prison camps and connects the nation's history of enslavement and forced labor to the current trend of mass incarceration.<sup>8</sup>

To various extents, adaptive reuse projects around the country have used prison repurposing to engage with the impact prisons have on both the incarcerated and surrounding community. While some examples have placed community consciousness at

---

<sup>6</sup> Daniel C. Vock, "As More and More Prisons Shutter, Governments Wonder What to Do With Them," *Governing* (Washington, District of Columbia), Nov.30, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> C.J. Hughes, "Former Prison for Women to Become a Place That Serves Them," *New York Times*, Nov. 10, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> "How the Prison Site Will Be Used," *Growing Change*, accessed March 30, 2018.  
<http://www.growingchange.org/reclaim-attain-sustain/site-usage/>

the center of their new functioning, the development plan at Brushy Mountain fails to do so.

Incarceration has come to an end at Brushy Mountain, but its legacy remains entrenched in the site's current development plan. This paper will discuss the life of Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary after it ceased to be an operating prison. Currently, the property is undergoing private development into a multi-use tourist destination. Despite the prison's potential for rich historical interpretation, private developers have rearticulated its layered history to serve their interests in exploiting an incomplete narrative of the prison's past. Analyzing the dynamic between the state, county, and the Brushy Mountain Group, I argue that the current development plan serves as a sanitized reinterpretation of the prison's past with lasting implications for the region's history and cultural landscape.

On June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2009, the Tennessee Department of Corrections moved the last remaining inmates from Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary to the newly expanded Morgan County Correctional Complex in Wartburg. In reference to the closing, County Commissioner George Little stated, "With the Morgan County Correctional Complex, Tennessee clearly has an asset that will hopefully serve us as well in the next century as Brushy Mountain has in the last century." Invoking a clear sense of nostalgia, he added that Brushy Mountain staff looked forward to further accomplishments "blending the old with the new" at the new facility.<sup>9</sup> The old prison had become too expensive to operate

---

<sup>9</sup> Judy Byrge, "Brushy Closes," *Morgan County News* (Wartburg, TN), June 16, 2009.



and was not able to adapt to changing building standards. The newly expanded Morgan County Correctional Complex had cost the state \$158 million and had the capacity for over 2,400 inmates, making it easily able to take in the remaining Brushy Mountain inmates.<sup>10</sup> The prison had briefly closed in the mid-1970s, but it was now clear that Brushy Mountain was now closed permanently.



Figure 3.2 Brushy Mountain post-decommission. Courtesy of the Tennessee Historical Commission.

The State of Tennessee and the Department of Corrections immediately began discussing ideas for Brushy Mountain's future use. Initial suggestions included a visitor museum, tourist venue, and film set. The county reportedly received calls from the Film Commission and Ghost Tour companies expressing interest in the site.<sup>11</sup> County executives skeptical of using the prison for recreation looked into the possibility of

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.



restoring Brushy Mountain to its carceral function as a regional jail or juvenile facility. As various ideas were presented, the narrative from the county emphasized the need to incorporate the interests of the Petros community in development plans. Over the following seven years, the interests of the county, state, developers, and local residents converged into an adaptive reuse of the former prison.

The first step in determining the prison's future was a feasibility study. Months prior to the prison's official closing, Morgan County mayor Becky Ruppe requested a preliminary report from the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation assessing the site's potential for heritage development. The Center for Historic Preservation completed an architectural assessment of 14 of the prison's 20 buildings, noting both historical and architectural significance. The report noted that the properties were particularly significant for their craftsmanship, considering many were constructed by inmate laborers.<sup>12</sup> It also emphasized the ways in which the buildings conveyed multiple layers of history, effectively linking major changes in the state's penal history from the days of the convict lease system to its development as a twentieth century penitentiary.

The architectural properties at Brushy Mountain reflected the influence of the New Deal's Works Progress Administration on public institutions in the South, including the pervasive influence of Jim Crow standards for racial segregation. Each New Deal era property represents the work of inmate laborers who quarried the stone needed for each

---

<sup>12</sup> Memo from Carroll Van West, Director of Middle Tennessee State University Center for Historic Preservation to Becky Ruppe, Mayor of Morgan County, "Heritage Development Potential of Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary," 2009,6, MTSU Center for Historic Preservation Project Files, Murfreesboro, Tennessee.

building and constructed them under state supervision. The Central Prison Building is a Gothic Revival-styled building built in 1930 featuring separate cell blocks for white and black inmates. Other than safety measures and updates to the administration offices, the building has changed very little over the course of the prison's history. The original stone Wash House was built for black inmates with New Deal funding in 1938. Upon the abolition of segregated facilities in the late 1960s, the building became a law library and then the prison chapel. Though the evolution in the property's function resulted in several changes, defining features such as former showers and isolated punishment cells, known as "the hole", remained visible.<sup>13</sup> A third New Deal era building was the Auditorium/Gymnasium built in 1941. The building represented the era's cultural emphasis on opportunities for recreational activities and Tennessee's efforts to improve state prison conditions.<sup>14</sup> The final New Deal era property was the Laundry, constructed in 1938. With the exception of the Wash House, the prison's New Deal era properties underwent only minor changes through the end of the twentieth century. The socio-cultural influence of the era remains visible and serves as one of the layers of history told through the prison's architecture.

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.



Figure 3.3 Exterior of Auditorium/Gymnasium built in 1941 and Basketball Courts. Courtesy of the Tennessee Historical Commission.



Figure 3.4 Entrance to old Wash House now used as the Chapel. Courtesy of the Tennessee Historical Commission.

Architectural changes to Brushy Mountain's properties from mid-century onward reflect its development into a prison characteristic of the late twentieth century penal system. Changes made to the Central Prison Building in 1978 included the addition of administrative offices, perhaps reflecting the newly re-opened prison's adjustment to the new state and federal regulations of the early to mid 1970s. The High Security Annex built in 1989 featured four clusters of single cells each connected to a central core administration building. Known as "The Tombs" among inmates, the style reflected the latest in corrections architecture and technology.<sup>15</sup> The fact that the new building replaced the baseball diamond of a recreational yard could reflect changes in ideology influencing prisoner treatment.

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 4.



Figure 3.5 Partial view of High Security Annex built in 1989. Courtesy of the Tennessee Historical Commission.

The sharp increase in prisoner population which characterizes contemporary practices of incarceration began in the late 1980s, the time of the High Security Annex's construction. A few years prior to its construction, Brushy Mountain transitioned from a maximum security institution to a classification prison. All offenders sentenced to prison terms in East Tennessee arrived at Brushy Mountain for security classification before being sent to other prisons in the region. This process created the need to warehouse high-threat inmates in even more relative isolation because the previous high security wing, the D-Block, (built 1959), no longer provided adequate space.<sup>16</sup> Of the properties built post-closure, the High Security Annex reflects the starkest changes to national

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 5.

patterns in incarceration practices. From the earliest to those constructed towards the end of the twentieth century, the properties at Brushy Mountain convey several layers of history and reflect the story of both state-level and federal reform.

The report provided recommendations essential to future development of the site. Acknowledging that residents had recently discussed the options of a bed and breakfast, a museum, and a living history prison experience, Brushy Mountain would have to undergo considerable changes in order to fulfill any of these functions. The primary recommendation was to list the prison in the National Register. A 2009 survey facilitated by the Tennessee Department of Corrections confirmed the prison's eligibility.<sup>17</sup> As an eligible district, the development of a comprehensive overview of the prison's history and properties would serve as a foundational step for considering future plans.<sup>18</sup> The second recommendation was to prepare a heritage development feasibility study. This comprehensive report would include a detailed assessment of properties, a preservation plan based on National Register eligibility, a business plan to determine revenue sources, and an interpretive plan that would consider heritage development options. Other recommendations included the creation of a project website as a marketing tool to generate support and the improvement of the existing prison museum as a tool to promote further development.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Memo from Margaret Slater, Historic Preservation Specialist, Gresham Smith and Partners to the Tennessee Department of Corrections, "Brushy Mountain State Prison, Petros, TN Assessment of Historical Resources," 2009.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

The CHP report concluded that several factors would make Brushy Mountain difficult to develop for heritage purposes. Its geographic isolation and distance from interstates would decrease the likelihood of a sustainable number of visitors.

Additionally, the cost to maintain and preserve the historic properties rendered it unlikely that the site would bring considerable income to the county. Any form of preservation of the prison would be impossible without comprehensive planning.<sup>20</sup> Though somewhat discouraging, the report did not entirely discredit the site's potential for development. The necessary steps to realize the site's potential, however, were extensive for county resources. This preliminary report is a useful resource for understanding the eight-year progression which resulted in the current Brushy Mountain Group development plan.

In 2013, Chattanooga developers Pete Waddington and Brian May created a plan for Brushy Mountain, which had sat vacant since closing in 2009. Referring to themselves as the Brushy Mountain Group, the duo developed a \$4 million plan to convert the site into a multi-use tourist attraction. The former prison buildings would include a whiskey distillery, a bottled water operation, and prison tours. The surrounding grounds would be utilized as an RV park, an orchard, camping grounds, walking trails, a farmer's market, a restaurant, an event venue, and a bed and breakfast. The tourist park would be free and open to the public. The group's website states "a 100+ year old prison, whiskey, moonshine, and concerts make for one heck of a tourist destination."<sup>21</sup> Over the next four years, a dialogue persisted between the Brushy Mountain Group, Morgan

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>21</sup> "Brushy Mountain Group," *Maycreate*, accessed November 10, 2017.  
<http://www.maycreate.com/brushy>.









Figure 3.7 Brushy Mountain Group Site Development Plan 2/2. Accessed October 15, 2017.  
<http://brushymtngroup.com>

In early 2013, the Brushy Mountain Group began planning at the county level. The group made a presentation before the Morgan County Economic Development Board to discuss the benefits of their development plan. Presenting a “vision to bring Brushy Mountain back to life,” the group projected that the development plan would likely bring around 385 new jobs associated either directly or indirectly with the site. It would also create around 121 jobs in the company over the first five years. The Brushy Mountain Group would place advertising on the web, print media, and radio to attract visitors. Emphasizing the creation of jobs and potential for economic growth, many county officials held favorable opinions of the plan. The Executive Director of the Board stated, “It is absolutely going to be a win-win. The jobs it is going to create, and think of what it

will do for the Petros community. It is just going to be wonderful.”<sup>22</sup> The prospect of economic growth for a struggling community that historically relied on the prison proved unsurprisingly attractive.

Though both the Brushy Mountain Group and Morgan County officials harbored enthusiasm for the plan, the distillery aspect posed a hurdle. Morgan County Executive Don Edwards called the distillery “the one downfall,” but acknowledged that it was only one of the proposed amenities at the site. Though Morgan County is a “dry” county in which the sale of liquor is prohibited, a recently adopted state law expanded the legal production of distilled spirits from three to forty-three counties. With voter consensus, “dry” counties could now authorize distilleries.<sup>23</sup> From the beginning, Brushy Mountain Group partner Pete Waddington emphasized that the distillery would be a small but economically necessary part of the plan. Liquor made at the distillery would be sold throughout the country, providing the necessary revenue to maintain the rest of the site’s amenities. Commenting on the future distillery, May stated “We’re excited about telling the world about Brushy Mountain Prison. Let’s sell the world a little piece of Brushy.”<sup>24</sup> Though state law authorized the distillery, the future of the “Brushy Mountain” brand remained dependent on local politics. The group would have to secure 700 signatures from Morgan County residents asking for a special referendum on the issue. The county would then hold a referendum to accept or reject the plan.

---

<sup>22</sup> Brian Langley, “Big Plans for Brushy Mountain,” *Morgan County News* (Wartburg, TN), July 17, 2013.

<sup>23</sup> Cynthia Yeldell, “Ground Zero for Whiskey: Law Allows Production of Distilled Spirits in State,” *Knoxville News Sentinel* (Knoxville, TN), July 5, 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Brian Langley, “Big Plans for Brushy Mountain,” *Morgan County News* (Wartburg, TN), July.17, 2013.



Figure 3.8 Bumper stickers distributed by the Brushy Mountain Group during the referendum campaign. Accessed October 17, 2017. <https://www.maycreate.com/Websites/Maycreate/PhotoGallery/5187752/Campaign-Bumper-Stickers.png?48623>

From its inception, the Brushy Mountain Group’s plan reflected a failure to engage with the complicated history between the prison and the Morgan County community. Scholars of Appalachian Studies have noted the disconnect between the historical landscape of the prison and the current plan for its development. Schept and Mazurek discussed the Brushy Mountain Group’s approach to the site and its implications in representing the region’s past. They note that the group’s narrative mentions nothing about the historical context in which the prison developed and simply serves to “perform the ideology of punishment,” “evacuate other histories,” and memorialize state violence by perpetuating the notion that the site existed entirely as a

function of punishment as opposed to “racial class war.”<sup>25</sup> Articulating the site as a “notorious prison,” whose notoriety is implicitly derived from the nature of the men incarcerated there, evacuates the history of its origins as a monument to the convict lease system in which inmates experienced horrific abuse at the hands of the state.

The consumption-driven marketing of the development furthers this practice. The Brushy Mountain Group links consumption to a “common sense” approach to understanding imprisonment. Just as tourists can visit a state park or a museum and purchase a souvenir to remember the experience, visitors to Brushy Mountain can leave the site with prison-themed memorabilia in the form of beer koozies, t-shirts, and key chains. Common in gift shops at former prisons that have become tourist sites, these items allow visitors to take home a “piece” of prison without consideration for the destructive message these objects represent. This performative aspect will likely extend to the distilling process as well. Describing his plans to utilize the former prison cells for whiskey production, Brushy Mountain Group partner Brian May stated, “We are going to do this thing probably where the whiskey is ‘doing its time.’ We’ll put barrels in some of the cells and on some of the cots. The whiskey has to do its time, so why not let it do its time in a prison cell?”<sup>26</sup> Unlike prison museums, where engagement with a site’s troubling past is at least a possibility, the consumption-oriented repurposing of Brushy Mountain renders a critical interpretation of its history problematic.

---

<sup>25</sup> Judah Schept and Jordan Mazurek, “Layers of Violence: Coal Mining, Convict Leasing, and Carceral Tourism in Central Appalachia,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Tourism* (London: Springer Nature, 2017), 181.

<sup>26</sup> Jim Matheny, “Brushy Mountain Prison Distillery Plans Push Ahead,” *USA Today* (McClean, VA), November 11, 2015.



Figure 3.9 Products that will be for sale in the site gift shop. Accessed October 19, 2017. <http://brushymtngroup.com>.

The research of Schept and Mazurek, along with that of other scholars of Appalachian Studies, illuminates the significance of Brushy Mountain within the broader concept of eco-tourism in the region. Schept and Mazurek argue that the material aspect of the development plan reflects the emergence of a pattern termed rural “green-trification” which carries significant implications for rural Appalachian landscapes.<sup>27</sup> In their study of ecotourism in Appalachia, Al Fritsch and Kristin Johannsen examine the benefits and risks of the tourism industry to region residents. The beauty of Appalachia’s natural landscape has made it an attractive region for nature tourism. In the last 30 years,

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

the industry has become a significant source of income for the region's residents. As the influence of environmentalism has permeated popular culture, philosophies of sustainability and ecotourism are increasingly used to promote nature tourism sites. Fritsch and Johannsen define ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas that respects the environment and sustains the well-being of local people."<sup>28</sup> As this concept is open to interpretation, there is no single standard for what specific practices sites must employ in order to gain this status. This ambiguity leaves site owners free to use the term to suit their own agendas.<sup>29</sup> Though the Brushy Mountain Group markets the site plan with vague references to "nature" and "sustainability," it does not provide details on how they plan to carry out these ideals.

The plan also evokes the outsider-insider conflict dynamic that has historically influenced the region's culture. Appalachian-based tourism enterprises seek to attract middle class and affluent visitors, but tend to underemphasize the cultural impact on residents.<sup>30</sup> Due to the region's past, characterized by exploitation, poverty, and neglect, Appalachian residents tend to harbor mistrust for outsiders. The dominant stereotypes in popular culture depict residents as objects of ridicule, further complicating the dynamics of tourism. The Brushy Mountain Group, themselves a group from outside of the region, perpetuates the discourse of "revitalization" through economic investment by appealing to middle class tastes for "craft" and "green" products not reflective of the communities

---

<sup>28</sup> Al Fritsch and Kristin Johannsen, *Ecotourism in Appalachia: Marketing the Mountains* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2004).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

in which these commodities will be produced. While some residents may harbor suspicion over the extent to which the development will help the local economy, their desperation for even the possibility of improvement is easily understandable. In “selling” their development plan to the residents of Morgan County by promising jobs, the Brushy Mountain Group embodies the region’s history of outsiders extracting profit while promising to bring benefits to residents. Using this tactic to promote the development of the property and its products obscures the difficult social and economic realities of the region’s past.<sup>31</sup>



Figure 3.10 Design for craft whiskey crates. Accessed October 17, 2017. <http://brushymtngroup.com>

---

<sup>31</sup> Schept and Mazurek, “Layers of Violence: Coal Mining, Convict Leasing, and Carceral Tourism in Central Appalachia,” 182.

Along with promoting a sanitized version of the prison's history, the Brushy Mountain Group plan perpetuates incarceration as a source of pride and community heritage. In inviting future consumers of "End of the Line" Moonshine and Brushy Mountain Reserve Whiskey to take home "a little piece of Brushy," the group promotes the community's identity as inextricable, and proudly so, from the prison. While the prison forms a major part of the region's history, its larger connection to issues of labor, race, and resource exploitation are absent from this representation. For a community that has been defined, and defined itself, through the prison, the Brushy Mountain Group plan promises economic growth through the continuation of this identity. Responsible development of the former prison would have the potential to acknowledge a troubling history while creating a plan to generate economic growth reflective of residents' needs. Instead, the Brushy Mountain Group chose to exploit the region's legacy of incarceration for private gain that may, or may not, bring economic benefits to Morgan County. In doing so, incarceration remains entrenched in notions of progress and future sustainability.



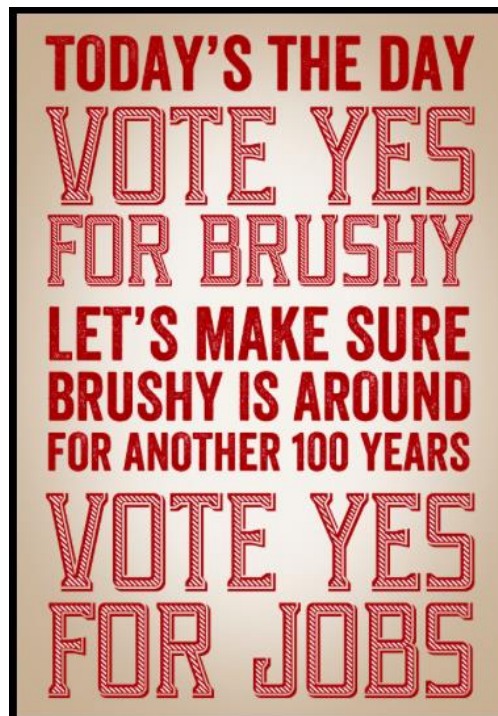


Figure 3.11 Campaign poster. Accessed October 17, 2017. <https://www.maycreate.com/brushy>

The future of the development plan was dependent on a successful outcome in the special referendum and subsequent steps taken by the State of Tennessee. While some community leaders expressed enthusiasm for the vote, several pastors of local churches expressed moral opposition. In a story by television station WBIR Knoxville, Reverend Roy Langley stated, “The scripture tells us, Thessalonians 5:22, abstain from the very appearance of evil, and if there's ever been an evil in our country, and not just our country, this state, this county, it's been alcohol.”<sup>32</sup> Voters did not seem to share these reservations. In November 2013, the special referendum passed by a 2 to 1 margin with

---

<sup>32</sup> “Morgan Co. Voters to Decide on Brushy Mtn. Distillery,” *WBIR* (Knoxville, TN), October 29, 2013.

over 3,500 votes cast.<sup>33</sup> The community voted to permit the distillery and therefore move the Brushy Mountain project forward.

The next step for the group was to secure the transfer of the prison from the state to Morgan County. For this transaction to happen, the Tennessee Department of Corrections needed to declare the Brushy Mountain property surplus and oversee a series of appraisals to determine a fair market value for the property. After this process, a local government entity would gain the authority to purchase the property and negotiate its transfer to a private developer.<sup>34</sup> After passing the referendum in November 2013, the Brushy Mountain Group began waiting for the state to carry out its side of the process. In January 2014, the group announced that the initial phases of the development plan would include the prison tour, gift shop, and restaurant.<sup>35</sup> The public narrative remained optimistic yet realistic regarding the lengthy wait periods characteristic of state bureaucracy.

Marketing used by the Brushy Mountain Group during the special referendum campaign illustrated a manipulation of the prison's history and how it has shaped the cultural landscape. During the period leading up to the special referendum, the group invested in banners, posters, clothing, and other memorabilia encouraging voters to vote in favor of the legislation. One election banner read "Let's Save Brushy. Let's Create

---

<sup>33</sup> Brian Langley, "Distillery Referendum Passes," *Morgan County News* (Wartburg, TN), November 13, 2013.

<sup>34</sup> Brian Langley, "Brushy Mountain Group Meets TDOC About Property," *Morgan County News* (Wartburg, TN), September 11, 2013.

<sup>35</sup> Brian Langley, "Waddington Provides Update on Brushy Mountain Project," *Morgan County News* (Wartburg, TN), January 15, 2013.

Jobs. Let's Rewrite History." Another read "Vote Yes for Brushy. Let's Make Sure Brushy is Around for Another 100 Years." The group also distributed t-shirts bearing slogans such as "Support Brushy, Support Jobs" and "I'm for Jobs. I'm for Brushy."<sup>36</sup> Though the Brushy Mountain Group anticipates between 120 and 380 new job openings at or related to the site, it has yet to provide residents with a more specific projection or timeline of openings. The promise to bring jobs to a poor rural county without a clear explanation for how the plan is intended to work reflects the familiar history of exploiting resources in the region without accountability for its impact on residents.

---

<sup>36</sup> "Brushy Mountain Group," *Maycreate*, accessed November 10, 2017.



Figure 3.12 Referendum campaign materials. Accessed October 17, 2017. <https://www.maycreate.com/brushy>

Between the referendum and the beginning phase of development, the Brushy Mountain Group experienced three years of both financial and bureaucratic challenges. By June 2014, the group was in negotiations with TDOC over the transfer of the prison site to the Morgan County Economic Development Board. By August, the state agreed to pass the property along to Morgan County who would then transfer it to the group.<sup>37</sup> Issues then arose between the developers, the county, and the Tennessee Historical

<sup>37</sup> "Econ. Board Takes Control of Brushy Mtn," *Morgan County News* (Wartburg, TN), August 13, 2014.

Commission over whether the development plan complied with federal historic preservation regulations. After conducting a Section 106 review, the Commission issued several conditions for the transfer of the prison from the state to Morgan County. Plans for the rehabilitation of any of the properties designated “Historically Significant” were subject to continued review by the Commission. While the Brushy Mountain Group would have final say in adaptive reuse methods, the site’s eligibility for certain grants and tax credits was dependent upon compliance with the THC’s recommendations. The Commission would also facilitate the nomination of eligible properties to the National Register and assist with potential grants that would contribute to preservation efforts.<sup>38</sup> The Memorandum of Understanding, signed by representatives from the THC, the Brushy Mountain Group, and Morgan County, added restrictions to the development plan which likely contributed to its delay. A noted resulting change was the Group’s decision to house the distillery in the non-contributing former maximum security building instead of the historic Central Prison Building.<sup>39</sup> By January 2015, the transfer was complete and the first stage of construction was set to begin the following spring.<sup>40</sup> The historic prison was now under the control of the Brushy Mountain Group.

Over the course of the first phase of construction, the site hosted several public events, each “performing” a sanitized narrative of the prison’s history. In the summer of

---

<sup>38</sup> “Agreements & Memorandum of Understanding Mutually Entered into between The Tennessee Historical Commission, the Brushy Mountain Group and with the Morgan County Economic Development Board.” Tennessee Historical Commission, 2014.

<sup>39</sup> Beth Braden, “Sealing the Deal,” *Morgan County News* (Warburg, TN), December 17, 2014.

<sup>40</sup> Beth Braden, “Completed Prison Transfer Celebrated,” *Morgan County News* (Warburg, TN), January 28, 2015

2017, a group of 1,000 bikers participating in the Southern Backroads Hog Rally took part in the “Brushy Mountain Devil Ride,” the 72-mile “Devil’s Triangle” route that passes through Morgan County complemented by a tour of the prison. The organizers of the event created a mock living history experience for the biker participants. Upon arriving at the prison, the bikers were greeted by prisoners and guards in costume. The guards reportedly behaved true to character, shouting orders at the bikers and actors playing prisoners.<sup>41</sup> A former Brushy Mountain inmate provided musical entertainment in the form of Johnny Cash songs while the guests enjoyed food from local vendors. In reference to the event, the *Morgan County News* commented that the group “very likely contributed quite a few dollars to the local economy.”<sup>42</sup> Given its significance to the history of the region, the fact that the organizers chose the prison for the event does not come as a surprise. The act of “performing” prison for outsiders, both in the form of the staged prison experience and the literal performance of music by a former inmate, represent the ways in which imprisonment continues to be used as a commodity in the region. Similar to the future products to be sold at the distillery, such as t-shirts bearing prison logos and slogans such as “Brushy: the perfect place for a little Tennessee Moonshine to do its time” and quotes from former inmates, the public experience at the

---

<sup>41</sup> Michelle Hollenhead, “Bikers Visit Brushy Mountain,” *Morgan County News* (Wartburg, TN), July 19, 2017.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

site is intended to provide a palatable, “fun and games” version of the prison’s violent past and perpetuate the sale of packaged incarceration as a Morgan County trademark.<sup>43</sup>



Figure 3.13 Biker group touring the prison during “Brushy Mountain Devil Ride.” Accessed January 18, 2018. <http://www.morgancountynews.net/content/bikers-visit-brushy-mountain>

Despite the fact that the tourist amenities will likely not open until late 2018, the site has offered “paranormal tours” since its transfer to the private developers. For \$1,500, groups of 12 visitors can experience both a guided tour and self-guided overnight exploration of the prison.<sup>44</sup> Morgan County locals lead the groups “hunting”

---

<sup>43</sup> The Brushy Mountain Group website advertises various merchandise featuring visual representations of the prison accompanied by quotes and slogans. “Brushy Mountain Group,” *Maycreate*, accessed November 10, 2017. <http://www.maycreate.com/brushy>.

<sup>44</sup> “Brushy Mountain Group,” *Maycreate*, accessed November 10, 2017.

for paranormal activity. The tours provide a source of income that does not interfere with the ongoing construction and development.<sup>45</sup>

The idea of paranormal tours at a former prison raises several questions. In *Historical Geographies of Prisons*, Dominique Moran describes what she terms as the “commodification of the macabre” at former prisons turned commercial heritage sites.<sup>46</sup> While Brushy Mountain will not function as a heritage site, the idea is applicable due to the pseudo-historical narrative depicting prison life that is used to frame the tours. These “paranormal” tours use the suffering and deaths of former prisoners as a source of entertainment through “othering” and an emphasis on the punishment aspect of incarceration.

Within this broad whitewashing of Brushy Mountain’s past, one aspect of the prison’s history never fails to sustain recognition. Entrenched in post-decommission representations of the prison is a disproportionate emphasis on the life of James Earl Ray, assassin of Martin Luther King, Jr. While the acknowledgment that Ray served part of his sentence at Brushy Mountain connects the prison to a broader national narrative, the continual emphasis on Ray’s eminence suggests an inverted sense of pride. Exhibit content at the former prison museum represented Ray as a central figure in the prison’s history, showcasing items with his signature as if he were a celebrity. A 2015 story in *The Oak Ridger’s Historically Speaking* shows East Tennessee Preservation Alliance members smiling for photos inside Ray’s cell, the only aspect of the prison’s racialized

---

<sup>45</sup> Joe King, “Brushy Makes Some New Room,” *Morgan County News* (Wartburg, TN), January 31, 2017.

<sup>46</sup> Karen Morin and Dominique Moran, *Historical Geographies of Prisons* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 71.



past mentioned.<sup>47</sup> As it is generally accepted that members of prison staff, themselves Morgan County residents, aided Ray in his escape, the promotion of this piece of history carries an insidious significance.

These patterns reflect the popularity of a distinct type of “dark tourism.” The term broadly describes tourism to “sites associated with war, genocide, or other tragic events for purposes of remembrance, education, or even entertainment.”<sup>48</sup> While many sites of dark tourism serve to educate, tours at Brushy Mountain clearly represent the entertainment category. At a site like Brushy Mountain, one wonders why there is a market for exploring fabricated danger or horror when the history of the prison is filled with actual instances of terror and atrocity. It is unlikely that the paranormal tour will discuss the victims of convict leasing who were deprived of basic necessities and routinely beaten, brutalized, and murdered in the name of profit. It will not likely discuss the deplorable conditions inmates experienced in solitary confinement as punishment for any actions deemed a transgression. Nor will it discuss in any meaningful way how the inadequacies characteristic of the prison’s history contributed to an environment of racial violence. The paranormal activity tour at Brushy Mountain serves only to promote a light-hearted, performative narrative of the prison’s history which sells a piece of incarceration void of critical context.

---

<sup>47</sup> “Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary—Soon to Be a Distillery and Tourist Destination,” *The Oak Ridger’s Historically Speaking* (Oak Ridge, TN), August 17, 2015.

<sup>48</sup> Michael Welch, *Escape to Prison: Penal Tourism and the Pull of Punishment* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 1.

In 2017, the Brushy Mountain Group continued to work through the early phase of construction. In January, the group advertised videos of construction progress on its social media pages, yet still did not provide a timeline for when the site was expected to open.<sup>49</sup> The major delay caused by the property transfer along with the unexpected departure of two financiers had seemingly halted the next steps forward. In July, the group reported that they had made major progress towards the site's opening. The gift shop, distillery, restaurant, and former guard tower were reportedly in various stages of development and the electrical infrastructure was scheduled for installation the following month. The distillery's still house had been delivered and construction had begun on the outdoor stage.<sup>50</sup> Brushy Mountain Group developer Steve Waddington revealed that the site will offer visitors a 20-minute film about the prison's history to complement information on artifacts displayed from the former prison museum. The group stated that both newly secured funding and grants from the state enabled these most recent advances.<sup>51</sup> The paranormal tours and other events, such as the biker gathering, continue to generate revenue and provide advertising for the development plan. Still unable to provide a firm opening date, Waddington described the outlook by stating "At the very least, we are looking at a spring [2018] opening."<sup>52</sup> That deadline passed with no openings having taken place.

---

<sup>49</sup> Joe King, "Brushy Makes Some New Room," *Morgan County News* (Wartburg, TN), January 31, 2017.

<sup>50</sup> Michelle Hollenhead, "Brushy Mountain Project Moves Ahead," *Morgan County News* (Wartburg, TN), July 26, 2017.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

## CONCLUSION

The development of the former Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary is a distinct chapter in this rural carceral landscape. While the economic impact of the plan remains unknown, its cultural implications are stark. The Brushy Mountain Group's development plan represents both a sanitation of the prison's history and a celebration of the region's tradition of incarceration. Within the broader historical context of Appalachia, it evokes a history of exploitation and deception. Despite the potential for responsible development, the current plan represents a disconnected, disingenuous engagement with the prison's past. From the introduction of the plan in 2013 to its current, ongoing realization, the Brushy Mountain Group has failed to meaningfully engage with the prison's lasting scar on the cultural landscape of Morgan County. Its only acknowledgement of the region's carceral identity is its attempt to brand and package it for private gain.

Brushy Mountain's architectural properties convey a rich historical narrative of race, labor, and violence through which the history of the county could be interpreted. The prison could be redeveloped to serve the needs of residents or to interpret both historic and contemporary circumstances of incarceration. With the recently expanded Morgan County Correctional Complex operating in nearby Wartburg, the county will remain a "prison town" into the foreseeable future. Though incarceration has shaped the county's historic landscape for over a century, its solemn significance should be memorialized without glorification.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Primary Sources

#### State Records:

Acts of Tennessee, Chapter 78, 1893.

Acts of Tennessee, Chapter 125, 1895.

Biennial Report of the Tennessee Board of Prison Commissioners, 1897-1898.

Biennial Report of the Board of Prison Commissioners of the State of Tennessee to the Governor, 1904-1906.

Biennial Report of the Department of Institutions, 1928-1930.

Biennial Report of the Department of Institutions, 1934-1935

Report of the Penitentiary Purchasing and Building Committee to the General Assembly of Tennessee, 1895, House Journal, 1895.

Report of the Commissioner of the Department of Institutions to the Governor and the General Assembly of the State of Tennessee, 1927.

#### Newspapers:

*Atlanta Constitution*. Accessed online.

[https://www.newspapers.com/title\\_406/the\\_atlanta\\_constitution/](https://www.newspapers.com/title_406/the_atlanta_constitution/).

*Daily News Journal*. Accessed online.

[https://www.newspapers.com/title\\_3753/the\\_daily\\_newsjournal/](https://www.newspapers.com/title_3753/the_daily_newsjournal/).

*Jackson Sun*. Accessed online.

[https://www.newspapers.com/title\\_3759/the\\_jackson\\_sun/](https://www.newspapers.com/title_3759/the_jackson_sun/).

*Kingsport Times News*. Accessed online.

[https://www.newspapers.com/title\\_278/kingsport\\_timesnews/](https://www.newspapers.com/title_278/kingsport_timesnews/).

*Morgan County News*. Accessed online. <https://www.morgancountynews.net>.

*New York Times*. Accessed online.

[https://www.newspapers.com/title\\_395/the\\_new\\_york\\_times/](https://www.newspapers.com/title_395/the_new_york_times/).

*Tennessean*. Accessed online. [https://www.newspapers.com/title\\_3707/the\\_tennessean/](https://www.newspapers.com/title_3707/the_tennessean/).

### Secondary Sources

Daniel, Pete. *The Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South, 1901-1969*. Urbana:

University of Illinois Press, 1973.

Dickinson, W. Calvin. *Morgan County*. Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1987.

Fritsch, Al and Kristin Johannsen. *Ecotourism in Appalachia: Marketing the Mountains*.

Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2004.

Garman, James. *Detention Castles of Stone and Steel: Landscape, Labor, and the Urban Penitentiary*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2005.

Gossett, Larry D. "The Keepers and the Kept: The First Hundred Years of the Tennessee State Prison System, 1830-1930." Ph.D. diss., Louisiana State University, 1992.

Huling, Tracy. "Building a Prison Economy in Rural America." in *Invisible Punishment: The Collateral Consequences of Mass Imprisonment*, edited by Marc Mauer and Meda Chesney-Lind, 197-213. New York: The New Press, 2002.

Johnston, Norman. *Forms of Constraint: A History of Prison Architecture*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006.

Jones Jr., James B. "Convict Lease Wars." In the *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*. Accessed Jan. 30, 2018.

<https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entry.php?rec=306>

Longstreth, Richard. *Cultural Landscapes: Balancing Nature and Heritage in Preservation Practice*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

Mancini, Matthew J. *One Dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South, 1866-1928*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996.

Mitchell, W.J.T. *Landscape and Power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

Moran, Dominique and Karen Morin. *Historical Geographies of Prisons*. New York: Routledge, 2015.

Moran, Dominique. *Carceral Geography*. New York: Routledge, 2015.

Ooten, Melissa, and Jason Sawyer. "From the Coal Mine to the Prison Yard: The Human Cost of Appalachia's New Economy." In *Appalachia Revisited: New Perspectives on Place, Tradition, and Progress*, edited by William Schumann and Rebecca Adkins Fletcher, 171-84. Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2016.

Schept, Judah and Jordan Mazurek. "Layers of Violence: Coal Mining, Convict Leasing, and Carceral Tourism in Central Appalachia." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Tourism*. London: Springer Nature, 2017.

Shapiro, Karen. *A New South Rebellion: The Battle Against Convict Labor in the Tennessee Coalfields, 1871-1896*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998.

- Slater, Margaret. "Brushy Mountain State Prison, Petros, TN Assessment of Historical Resources." Memo from Gresham Smith and Partners to the Tennessee Department of Corrections, 2009. Tennessee Historical Commission Project Files, Nashville, Tennessee.
- Welch, Michael. *Escape to Prison: Penal Tourism and the Pull of Punishment*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2015.
- West, Carroll Van. *Tennessee's Historic Landscapes*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995.
- West, Carroll Van. "Heritage Development Potential of Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary." Memo from the Director of the Middle Tennessee State University Center for Historic Preservation to Becky Ruppe, Mayor of Morgan County, 2009. MTSU Center for Historic Preservation Project Files, Murfreesboro, Tennessee.
- Wilson, Jacqueline Z., Sarah Hodgkinson, Justin Piché, and Kevin Walby. *The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Tourism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017.
- Yanarella, Ernest J., and Susan Blankenship. "Big House on the Rural Landscape: Prison Recruitment as a Policy Tool of Local Economic Development." *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 12, no. 2 (2006): 110-39.
- "Agreements & Memorandum of Understanding Mutually Entered into between The Tennessee Historical Commission, the Brushy Mountain Group and with the Morgan County Economic Development Board, 2014." Memorandum of

Understanding. Tennessee Historical Commission Project Files, Nashville, Tennessee.

“Brushy Mountain Group.” Maycreate. Accessed November 10, 2017.

<https://www.maycreate.com/brushy>

“How the Prison Site Will Be Used.” Growing Change. Accessed March 30, 2018.

<http://www.growingchange.org/reclaim-attain-sustain/site-usage/>.

“Morgan County Correctional Complex.” Bell and Associates Construction. Accessed March 1, 2018. <http://balp.com/projects/morgan-county-correctional-complex>