

BARTON'S PRISON JOURNEY 1998-TO PRESENT

By Wrongfully Convicted Barton Monroe McNeil | August 20, 2024

Awaiting the easily foreseen unjust verdict of my eventual one-sided 1999 trial, my first year behind bars was in the McLean County Jail where I was housed in the protective custody (PC) unit largely segregated from the wider jail population because of the serious nature of my case.



Picture of the McLean County courthouse. The county jail also known as the McLean County Detention Center is located in the basement area and run by County Sheriff's personnel with the jail having a separate elevator to take those awaiting trial to the 5th floor where the Judge's courtroom and chambers are located. The inmate population is 254



McLean County Sheriff's Sgt. Molly Churchill answers an inmate's question from his cell Aug. 18, 2012, at McLean County Jail in Bloomington. (Pantagraph/CARLOS T. MIRANDA)



A typical jail cell at McLean County Jail

Sentenced to “natural life” or what might better be described as a sentence of death on the day-by-day installment program, in September 1999 I was transferred to the notorious Joliet maximum security prison in, you guessed it, Joliet, Illinois—the site where the *Prison Break* TV show was later filmed and was also the prison used in *Blues Brothers*. The Old Joliet Prison just outside of Chicago was the site of hundreds of executions and held notorious criminals like John Wayne Gacy, Baby Face Nelson, Pretty Boy Floyd and John Dillinger.

The imposingly dark appearance of the prison casts a shadow on the surrounding area, featuring limestone walls and turrets built as a monument to 19th century gothic. It was designed to intimidate and impress upon inmates the power the State yielded over them.



Joliet Correctional Center was constructed in 1857 and at the time of Barton’s incarceration was the oldest operating prison in the State. The facility peaked at 1,300 inmates between 1999 and 2000



Interior image of a cell block at Joliet Correctional Center at the time Barton was incarcerated here.

Shackled hand and foot, as the jail's transport van approached the prison it looked to me like a medieval castle certain to have a dungeon beneath it. By this time Joliet was in the process of closing, it then being used only as an intake/processing center temporarily housing

inmates awaiting transfer to more permanent facilities. Most inmates there were “short-timers” soon to be placed in minimum or medium security prisons throughout the state. I stood out as older than most, the rare white guy, the lone transferee to a maximum-security prison, and the only one serving a sentence without an “outdate”.

After a brief stint at Joliet prison, I was then transported to Stateville maximum security prison—notorious in its own right—where I served about a year and a half ending in early 2001. In the prison's general population where whites made up five percent of inmates—fewer still my age—I now had to share a cell with a cellmate. Caught in the middle of some dangerous prison drama, I signed into the PC unit out of concern for my safety, and served several months segregated from the wider prison population, though also assigned cellmates. Unclean and in poor repair, the Stateville PC unit was better described as a roach motel.



Exterior view of Stateville Correctional Center that was opened in 1925 and was built to accommodate 1,506 maximum security inmates. The facility housed 459 inmates as of May 31, 2023 with a current operational capacity for 934



Interior view of Stateville Correctional Center. The principal feature of Stateville would be the circular cell blocks first espoused by Jeremy Bentham, an 18th century philosopher, that he called the Panopticon. A design in which an eye can be kept on many inmates at the same time.

On December 3, 1991, a reporter from the Joliet Herald News gave her impressions of “F House.”

“Standing in the entrance of F House, the last circular cell house in the country, was spooky. Stateville was in the seventh day of lockdown when we were there, and the prisoners began throwing their lunches out of their cells. They were yelling for showers and blinking the cell lights on and off. They were like animals. I couldn’t see faces; it was scary as hell anyway.

“I can’t imagine what it must be like to be stuck in those small cells for seven days straight... what hell! It was also interesting to see them feed off each other’s anger. It’s not hard to imagine why there are no other circular cell houses.”



Interior view of a typical cell at Stateville Correctional Center

Because the Stateville PC unit was in the process of being closed down at the time, I then donned ten pounds of chains again and boarded the prison transfer but this time for Pontiac maximum security Correctional Center, itself notorious also but at the time divided by inmates assigned to the PC unit and those in the disciplinary segregation unit, and a small death row contingent—no general population unit there.

As with Stateville and later Menard Correctional Center (described further below), inmates at Pontiac had sentences typically of 20 years up to a hundred years, effectively for their “natural life”. Of Illinois three maximum security prisons, Pontiac was cleaner, well maintained (if nearly a century old), less restrictive, and served much better meals. Upon my arrival at Pontiac, I was immediately assigned the coveted job at the officer's kitchen where the meals were better yet. Located in central Illinois near my hometown of Bloomington, I was only visited twice during what would eventually be my brief year-long stay at Pontiac.



Pontiac Correctional Center, one of just three Maximum Security prisons in Illinois, was constructed in 1892. The facility housed 633 inmates as of May 31, 2023 with operational capacity for 987



Interior view of a cell block at Pontiac



Another cell block view at Pontiac Correctional Center the guard on the right picking up a used food tray from the prisoner



An interior view of a typical 2-person prison cell at Pontiac Correctional Center

While at Pontiac, I happened upon a senior guard who was connected to my case via his Philippina wife who was good friends with my ex-wife and my late daughter's mother, Tita, So close to the case was he that he himself was questioned by the police during my daughter's murder investigation. Because of a policy prohibiting interaction between an inmate and

prison staffers involved in their case, I donned the metal restraints yet again and was put on another transfer bus. Destined this time for Menard maximum security Correctional Center in Southern Illinois near St. Louis after only having served a year in Pontiac.

Menard was to be my fourth maximum security prison “residence” in just three years (Joliet now closed in 2002). Lacking any say in the matter, I surely didn't want to be moved from Pontiac to Menard, the oldest prison in the state (previous to Joliet's closing).



Menard Correctional Center, the state's largest maximum security adult male facility located along the banks of the Mississippi river, was constructed in 1878. The facility housed 1,582 inmates as of May 31, 2023 with operational capacity for 1,849



Typical Menard cell block



Typical prison cell at Menard Correctional Facility

The largest of Illinois maximum security prisons, I arrived at Menard in early 2002. No longer in PC status, I've been in the prison system's general population units ever since. I was also strangely classified as a high escape risk, and separately, as a high level "security threat" in excess of most other lifers, the origins of which I could never get to the bottom of despite my inquiries.

After my arrival at Menard, because my "natural life" sentence was soon overturned I was shipped in chains back to the McLean County Jail for three months awaiting a sentence "reduction" that could have ranged between 20 to 100 years, with the same judge resentencing me to a mere 100 years, now technically with a genuine "outdate". Thanks for nothing!

Resentenced, I was then shipped in shackles again back to Joliet prison for another round of intake/processing as if it were my first time, then delivered to Stateville for a few-week stay before being packed into another prison transfer bus, chained up every which way, and transferred back to Menard.

For bogus reasons beyond the scope of this story, twice I landed in Menard's disciplinary segregation unit in 2004 and 2008 for 3 and 2 months respectively, also serving about 4 years in a "high aggression" cellhouse.

A prominent feature of the maximum-security prisons particularly at Stateville and Menard were the recurring prison wide lockdowns lasting from a few days to several weeks during which we're locked in our cells 24/7 except for a weekly 15-minute shower, despite summer cellhouse temperatures often over a hundred degrees. Eventually I made my way to a less

dangerous cellhouse populated by guys closer to my age and less prone to violence despite what amounted to mostly life sentences.

Once I hit the 20-year mark as per State policy, in 2018 I was immediately bussed (in chains again) to Pinckneyville high-medium security prison also known as a disciplinary joint for chronic rule-breakers from other prisons, but which also housed random general population inmates lacking disciplinary issues such as myself.

Pinckneyville Correctional Center is also located in Southern Illinois. As counter intuitive as it may sound, I didn't want to leave the maximum-security prison at Menard. After all, I'd spent the last 16 years of my life there where I'd managed to establish good friendships. At the time, I had a decent cellmate, was in the least violent cellhouse in a particularly good area, and with many friendly acquaintances.

Moreover, because it had such a bad reputation as the worst of the high-medium security prisons arguably worse even than Menard maximum security prison, once I learned that Pinckneyville Correctional Center was to be my shackle-laden destination, I really didn't want to transfer from Menard at all. Lacking any choice in the matter I was bussed in chains to Pinckneyville in late 2018.



Pinckneyville Correctional Center, a maximum/medium adult male facility that was opened in 1998 the year Barton was arrested. The facility housed 1,898 inmates as of May 31, 2023 with operational capacity for 2,387



Interior view of a prison day room cell block area at Pinckneyville

A newer prison by the ancient standards of the previous four century-old maximum-security prisons I stayed at, Pinckneyville was positively modern by comparison and not nearly as harsh as the rumors had claimed. Clean and well-maintained, the cells had tall narrow windows you could open and close at will, shelves lining one wall and a desk-like table and chair, and a solid cell door as opposed to open bars along the face of the cell allowing in the deafening noise of inmate banter. Absent from any of the above maximum-security prisons, each Pinckneyville 2-story cellhouse had a dayroom that we had access to for an hour twice daily during which we could shower (alone), use the phones, exercise, or just socialize with others. By this time tablet-like devices were available for purchase and the prison was fitted with Wi Fi for music streaming and for the use of the prison system's GTL Connect Network proprietary inmate email service.

While yard access was less than at Menard, each of the four recreation yards were huge at which I usually briskly walked laps with my pals and did light calisthenics.

The meals served at Pinckneyville were especially good. Past their “sell by” dates, because food wholesalers donated truckloads of food to the prison not normally part of the inmate diet, I counted 60 food items in just the few months after my arrival there that I'd eaten for the first time in two decades, as you may recall my account of at the time.

Once COVID swept through the prison which I happened to evade, the yummy above food donations came to an end, and the meals reverted to the crappy statewide norm that I'd reluctantly become accustomed to elsewhere during the last 20 years.

Despite my initial misgivings and its (overblown) bad reputation, the transfer to Pinckneyville was a marginal improvement in the quality of my incarcerated life after all,

during which I was able to kindle new friendships and maintain old friendships with a few others who'd recently transferred from Menard to Pinckneyville.

Perhaps the biggest positive change of all, while frequent prison wide lockdowns routinely lasted for weeks at the above maximum-security prisons, in the rare event of a lockdown at Pinckneyville usually confined to a single cellhouse, they never lasted more than one day.

In the meantime, I'd never given much thought about requesting a transfer to another of the state's medium security prisons nearer to Bloomington or otherwise, figuring it just too many hoops to jump through even to qualify. As the transfer policy criteria eased, others I noted had their transfer requests quickly approved, and after much delay had eventually been shipped largely to the prison of their requested choice.

Hearing that medium security Dixon Correctional Center in Northern Illinois was highly sought after, my own first transfer request to it was promptly granted in 2022. After a year of waiting, all approved transfer requests to Dixon were cancelled, everyone then directed to submit a new transfer request to anywhere except Dixon.

By this time, I'd heard much about Graham Correctional Center in Central Illinois said to be the least restrictive of the state's six or so medium security prisons. Able to speak to others who'd once served time at Graham, they spoke of daily yard access, better food, day-long dayroom access to showers and phones, a key to your cell, rare lockdowns, and more—all seeming too good to be true. Graham also happened to be located nearer to my hometown than any other medium security prison, Graham half as far from Bloomington than Pinckneyville at 120 miles verses 350 miles respectively.

After submitting my transfer request to Graham in February as did many other Pinckneyville inmates, I was quickly granted approval. At the time of my request, I had been at Pinckneyville now six-years all of which with noted good behavior with no write-ups like many other prisoners had for what is usually minor infractions but are infractions nevertheless and counted and weighed as such. Upon approval I had to wait several months in the hopes that I'd actually BE transferred, approval unto themselves no guarantee of a transfer to the prison such as Graham (and previously Dixon) I'd been approved for.

In early June I was told to pack my belongings, thinking I was subject to a random routine move to a different cell or to another cellhouse, since so few others had recently been transferred to Graham or to anywhere else for that matter.

To my surprise, I soon found out I was to prep for a transfer, presumably to Graham, but not certain. During the next two days I was placed in a separate cellhouse for inmates awaiting transfer where I said my final goodbyes to others in that area who I hadn't seen for ages, including my second cellmate in Menard back in 2002.

Classified as a medium security inmate now for the past six years, the shackles were fewer and less weighty as I rode the packed prison bus again, only two of us from Pinckneyville destined for Graham, others going to different prisons throughout the state.



Graham Correctional Center. Barton located in one of the sixteen or so "X" pattern prison blocks shown above. in 1998 the year Barton was arrested. The facility housed 1,898 inmates as of May 31, 2023 with operational capacity for 2,387



Graham Correctional Center

The chains and handcuffs were removed when the transfer bus arrived at Graham. As I stepped off the bus I said, "Where's the prison?" Except for tall fences topped with razor wire and guard towers in the far distance, Graham looked nothing at all like a prison. Instead, all the various administrative buildings were wood-sided, no cold concrete structures in sight. The grounds absent telltale signs of a prison, it looked more like a college campus.

After some cursory intake-processing, we transferees were taken to a cellhouse and I assigned a cellmate who happened to be the same guy who transferred from Pinckneyville with me, who I'd been acquainted with for several years, he with a lengthy prison sentence also locked up for over 20 years.

Compared to cellhouses everywhere else, those here were much smaller single-story buildings in the shape of an "X" with four wings of only 12 two-man cells each (96 or so persons if at full capacity) —16 plus or minus cellhouses here in all. Outwardly, they looked nothing like cellhouses at all with red brick and wood-sided facade and roofing shingles. Except for the tall narrow windows that can be opened and closed from inside the cells, the exterior of the cellhouses looked like a cross between a large lakefront ranch house and a small college administrative building. While lacking prison bars, the cellhouse interior was coldly concrete and looked more prison-like as opposed to the exterior.

Sure enough, upon entering the cellhouse for the very first time we were given keys to the cell. Thereafter, I could access the small dayroom anytime I liked between 8AM and 9PM minus a single hour during "count". With unlimited access to the dayroom, I could shower and use the phones to my heart's desire (with a required 30-minute wait time between each call), do some light exercising, or else just hang out and socialize with others. This level of all-day dayroom access is the biggest benefit of all over the former prison "residences" described above. Since my arrival at Graham I've taken more showers in a day than taken in a week at Menard.

Without A/C here, I've showered three times in a single day when the weather's been hot, especially on the heels of gym or yard sessions.

The cellhouse I remain in, to this day as I write this article, is half empty with only a few newer transferees trickling in every week. This unit was thought to be only for temporary housing, we expected to soon be moved to more permanent placement at other cellhouses. Some indeed were promptly moved to other cellhouses, while others I've talked to have remained in this cellhouse since their arrival here several months ago. With so few cells in this unit occupied, the small dayroom is rarely crowded, phones and showers always available for use. Nonetheless, were these cellhouse wings full and to capacity the dayroom would be pretty crowded, the phones and showers less available.

Less frequent even than at Pinckneyville, lockdowns are especially rare lasting only a single work shift. Even when under a lockdown due to staff shortages, we're usually still allowed dayroom access while all other movement is cancelled.

The cells here are a little larger than the prison norm with porcelain sinks and toilets rather than the usual stainless-steel combination sink & toilet. Along one wall is a table and chair

opposite our bunk beds. The top bunk is especially high and difficult for me to descend from; therefore, I am a bit fearful given my being aged 65 that I might lose my footing and injure myself. The cells have a tall narrow window we can open and close at will.

The meals here are much better than at any of the above prisons even if largely the same menu throughout the state, with only minor variations. But here the meals are properly cooked and seasoned nicely. Wholly absent from the above prisons, here the meal trays include salt & pepper packets, butter tabs, and a napkin. Items unheard of in any of my prior residences with the Illinois Department of Corrections.

Food items served here virtually absent from my diet in the last quarter century include coleslaw, peach cobbler, apple crisp, zucchini, taco salad, grilled Brussel sprouts, cauliflower & cheese, and more. Best exemplified by my improved diet is the frequent serving of fresh navel oranges which had never once been part of a meal served at any of my prior prison residences.

Because it's served so early in the morning and in an effort to keep from gaining weight, I never go to the chow hall for the breakfast meal, the lunch and supper meals plenty enough to keep hunger at bay. Rarely eating any of the snack foods sold at the commissary, I similarly haven't once eaten a cell-cooked meal since I arrived here—in contrast to my former Pinckneyville cellmate's insistence in sharing his many lavish cell-cooked meals with me.

Another major lifestyle improvement is our one-hour daily access to the recreation yard. Twice a week we're also afforded two-hour evening yard access during the summer months. In an effort to maintain my health, I never miss an opportunity to walk about the yard.

For folks over 50 years old, we also have daily one-hour access to the gym where there's free weights, weight machines, two basketball courts, and a pickleball court. Never much of a weightlifter, instead I do my daily aerobic/calisthenics routine at the gym if not out in the yard also. I am likely in better (physical) health today than I'd be had I never gone to prison, such was the state of my unhealthy lifestyle back in the day.

Note to health-conscious weight watchers: become a criminal and go to prison. I'll soon be trying my hand at pickle ball, and recently signed up for the yoga class.

When I'd first arrived at Pinckneyville six years ago, I was awed by how large the prison's recreation yards were. Here they're four times the size of Pinckneyville's largest yard, probably five or so grass-covered acres.

Out at the recreation yard there's a softball diamond, 3 concrete basketball courts, 3 concrete handball courts, a volleyball net, a quarter-mile walking/running track, and a large concrete area filled with free weights. Usually, I briskly walk the yard's lengthy perimeter at seven tenths of a mile per lap (I measured it). In an hour I walk about four miles—eight or so miles during the two-hour evening yard sessions. Between gym, the one-hour yard session, and the two-hour evening yard session I surely walked 13 miles that day. Walking is good for one's health, they say it even helps the brain. I could use all the help I can get in that department!

With there being a scale at the gym, I found I lost ten pounds in three weeks.

A week before I received my property from Pinckneyville, without my ball cap I received a pretty bad sunburn on my first day here, worsening in the days to follow during that especially hot week.

Intrigued by the interesting Killdeer bird species (Google it) so prevalent around Pinckneyville when I first arrived until they completely vacated the area in recent years, here I ran into two geese on my first day in the recreation yard guarding their cute newborn chicks. Gone for almost a month, a few days ago there were six geese walking about the yard. Today from my cell window I saw four geese walking about between the cellhouses as if they owned the place.

I've also occasionally noted the presence of some Killdeer birds out in the yard, but much fewer in number than once heavily populated the Pinckneyville yards. Smart and adorable, Killdeer's unique call is easy for me to recognize at some distance. Through the dayroom window we recently saw a large hawk perched upon the fence about 40 feet away.

The cable TV service has several channels not available at Pinckneyville, along with 70 digital hi-fi music channels. Oxygen Network available here, perhaps I can finally catch a re-run of the Snapped-Behind Bars episode about my case, that I "starred" in but have never seen before. It first aired in September 2021 and has aired dozens of times since and is now available on YouTube, Hulu, Peacock and a host of other streaming services so I have been told.

Dead spots in Pinckneyville cellhouses, here the WiFi signal penetrates everywhere, easy to seamlessly stream music from anywhere in the cellhouse. Unlike at other prisons, here we're allowed to bring our tablets to the yard and gym (listening to music only in offline mode).

Air conditioned, from its interior you could hardly tell the library is inside a prison, it instead like any smalltown library.

My guess is that Graham houses about 1,500 inmates in all, mostly "short timers". While white folks make up a tiny minority of convicts at all of the above prisons I was previously housed in, here whites far outnumber Blacks and Hispanics combined.

Since I arrived here, I've only run into ten or so other inmates who I previously knew from my days at Pinckneyville and Menard, some from so long ago that I hardly remember them despite their easy recognition of me. Because inmates so often are moved from one cell to another, from one cellhouse to another, and from one prison to another, friendships are often short lived as the likelihood of ever running into each other again isn't great given the vastness of the Illinois prison system that consists of four maximum security prisons (now including Northern R&C to replace Joliet, opened in 2014 and housing as of June 2023 1,312 inmates), eleven medium security prisons, and ten minimum security prisons. As such, I often forget about a friendly acquaintance who I don't expect likely to see again. My very first cellmate at Menard had a life sentence, but once he was moved to another cellhouse I never again saw him.

Once my second cellmate at Menard (mentioned above) was moved to another cell, it was 15 years before I saw him again after he'd been bounced between various prisons before landing at Pinckneyville.

Not everything here is an improvement over my above previous prison “residences”. Graham strictly enforces peculiar rules unique to this prison alone that are absent elsewhere. For example, stringent limits are enforced regarding inmates' ability to communicate with the outside world using exclusively the prison system's proprietary email system, the use of emoticons not allowed, further restricted to using only eight punctuation marks with my being unable to use none of the other hundred or so keyboard symbols.

Worse, use of the 3rd party email forwarding service I previously subscribed to for the last two years without any ado is strictly prohibited only at Graham. To those who I previously exchanged emails with using the forwarding service, this mode of communication is no longer available to me. As a result, this rule will seriously limit my ability to exchange emails with the wider outside world as few wish to go through the more laborious process of becoming an approved e-mail sender and receiver that further requires mails be sent and received using the company's proprietary e-mail system similar to Yahoo or Gmail.

Nonetheless, despite several peculiar restrictive policies unique to this low-medium security prison, at the end of the day it looks like this move to Graham amounts to an improvement in my carceral quality of life. Had I previously known that a move of this sort was this easy, I would've requested a transfer to Graham long ago. Should I live long enough, absent the tossing of my wrongful conviction that may never come despite its obviousness both on top of and beneath the surface for anyone who pauses to learn the details about my case and Misook's later strangulation of her mother-in-law Linda Tyda 13-years later, a future murder I easily predicted and made a permanent part of my 2002 resentencing hearing,, my next stop will be a minimum security prison a decade from now.

So ends the tale of my transfer to Graham Correctional Center.

Bart

To learn more about innocent and wrongfully incarcerated Barton McNeil, please visit his Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/FreeBart/> or website <https://freebart.org/>



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