introduced—Such a system of punishments, aided and enforced in the manner I have mentioned, will not only have an auspicious influence on the character, morals, and happiness of the people, but may hasten the period, when, in the progress of civilization, the punishment of death shall cease to be necessary: and the Legislature of Pennsylvania, pursuing the key-stone to the arch, may triumph in the completion of their benevolent work.


DOCUMENT 11: An Account of the Alteration and Present State of the Penal Laws of Pennsylvania (Caleb Lownes, 1794)

Four years after the establishment of the first penitentiary at the Walnut Street Jail in Philadelphia (see Document 8), Caleb Lownes, one of the penitentiary’s inspectors, wrote a progress report on the reformed prison titled An Account of the Alteration and Present State of the Penal Laws in Pennsylvania.

Lownes was a Quaker merchant who long had worked toward prison reform and the abolition of capital punishment. Like his contemporary Benjamin Rush, he believed that solitary confinement was the key to reforming the criminal mind. The theory was that removal of the often negative stimulation of the outside world would make the criminal better able to contemplate his actions and thus see the error of his ways (Masur 1989:81-82, 86).

In his report, Lownes appeared confident that the newly reformed prison was a great success—beneficial both to the prisoner and to the community. He reported that recidivism was low among pardoned offenders, crime was down on the city streets and highways outside of town, and when crimes were committed, juries no longer were reluctant to convict, as they often had been when punishments were considered too harsh. Hence, at least in Lownes’ opinion, it seemed that Philadelphia was on the right track toward penal reform.

Our streets now meet with no intermission from those characters that formerly rendered it dangerous to walk out of an evening. Our roads in the vicinity of the city, so constantly infested with robbers, are seldom disturbed by those dangerous characters. The few instances that have occurred of the latter, last fall, were soon stopped. The perpetrators proved to be strangers, quartered near the city, on their way to the westward.

Our houses, stores, and vessels, so perpetually disturbed and robbed