INTRODUCTION

> But the public is not interested in the situation. It is only interested after a tragedy has occurred, and not before.
>
> —World's Work, *1930*

On April 21, 1930, having just finished their Easter Monday dinner, eight hundred inmates returned to cellblocks G&H at Columbus's Ohio State Penitentiary. Shortly after they were locked in, a number of convicts noticed the first wafts of smoke. At 5:21 a shrill cry announced, "Fire!" Within less than an hour 320 prisoners would perish in America's deadliest prison disaster (two more would die later from gunshot wounds indirectly related to the fire).

The tragedy captured front-page headlines around the world. Within twenty-four hours New York moviegoers were watching the Pathé News recording of the disaster, the first live sound newsreel account of an American disaster. Theater patrons not only witnessed some of the harrowing sights, but heard "the shrieking of the prison siren, the hissing as water hit the flames, the howling of desperate prisoners, the crackling of burning logs, the thud of falling beams, the commands of Army officers and jail officers." It was a production tailor-made for the nascent talking-film industry. Just three days after the inferno, Charlotte and Bob Miller released the first of four recordings of the weepy ballad "Ohio Prison Fire."[1] Commemorated in song, film, and newspaper reportage, the Ohio Penitentiary fire and its aftermath, except for two self-published books[2] and several articles and book chapters,[3] has since largely been forgotten.

I first came across references to the Ohio Penitentiary fire while researching a previous book related to the history of American criminal justice. My curiosity piqued, I sought a scholarly book on the topic and was astounded to find it had never received the attention it deserved. As I began conducting research on it in Ohio archives, I was surprised that outside of a coterie of local Columbus history buffs and genealogists, most of the residents I came in contact with were unfamiliar with what one would have thought had been a seminal event in the history of Columbus, Ohio (let alone the United States).

The Ohio Penitentiary fire was the deadliest prison disaster in U.S. history, and the worst in the world until the horrific Honduran Comayagua Prison Farm fire in February 14, 2012, in which 361 prisoners lost their lives. It still ranks as America's most lethal prison fire and third-worst building fire (excluding 9/11), just behind Chicago's Iroquois Theater fire in December 1903, which claimed 602 victims, and the November 1942 Cocoanut Grove Nightclub fire, which took 492 lives in Boston. These disasters, as well as many others with lower body counts than the 1930 Easter Monday fire, including the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist fire (146), the 1871 Chicago fire (200–300), the 1944 Hartford, Ringling Brothers Circus fire (167), and Chicago's 1958 Our Lady of the Angels School fire (95), have all been well documented.[4]

Although it caused only $11,000 in damage to the Columbus institution, 320 inmates perished from toxic smoke and flames in a little less time than it took to eat dinner. It was the quickest-acting building fire in American history until February 20, 2003, when, in less than ten minutes, 96 patrons died and 200 were injured at the Great White concert held at The Station in West Warwick, Rhode Island. (As in the Ohio fire, two more would die in the following days.)[5]

The dead came from many corners of Depression- and Prohibition-era America; among their numbers were shoemakers, mechanics, laborers and truck drivers, carpenters, butchers, tailors, electricians, motion picture operators, mill and iron workers, toolmakers, chauffeurs, blacksmiths, plumbers, painters and molders, bakers and marine engineers. Reflecting the punitive criminal justice system of the era, most were serving long stints for crimes ranging from robbery, larceny, and burglary to murder and rape. Still others were serving raps for violating Prohibition laws by making liquor. One victim was a former guard who was doing time for helping an inmate escape, while another had just been brought in for nonsupport of children hours before the inferno broke out. While most of the victims were sons of Ohio, others came from Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and West Virginia, still others from Mexico, Hungary, Austria, Ireland, Italy, and Russia. Of those who died, only eighteen were African American, in stark contrast to the ratio that one would expect to find in a modern-day prison facility.

By 1930 there were more Americans behind bars than in the military services. The Ohio State Penitentiary in Columbus was the biggest of America's big houses, housing more than forty-three hundred prisoners in a facility designed for fifteen hundred. The prison disaster climaxed a series of violent prison disorders that had occurred over the past ten months. The violence was attributed by some to myriad influences including recent legislation that demanded longer prison sentences, the elimination of good-conduct time, rampant idleness, and the granting of fewer paroles. Others blamed the brutality of the guards, or "screws" in convict jargon, a poorly paid and trained lot with few chances for advancement. They spent long hours watching their charges and probably often felt as locked up as the convicts. Add in unsanitary conditions, underfeeding, and

overcrowding, and all the requisite elements were in place to ensure that some form of prison mutiny was always brewing. The disaster in Columbus would focus the attention of government and state officials on the condition of American prisons like never before.

At various times in its tragic and colorful history the Ohio Pen had been home to a number of celebrity convicts, including members of the John Dillinger Gang; Confederate raiders; Dr. Sam Sheppard, who inspired the TV show and motion picture *The Fugitive*; novelist Chester B. Himes; and William Sidney Porter, who would go on to become the acclaimed short-story writer O. Henry. While all of these temporary members of the prison demimonde have been the subjects of multiple books, no comprehensive examination of America's worst prison disaster and its aftermath has been published until now.

One of the most perplexing questions this book addresses is "Why has it taken so long for the complete story to be told?" Central to any answer has to be the fact that the fire's victims were convicts. They weren't blameless immigrant women working in a sweatshop, nor innocent patrons at the theater or at a crowded nightspot. Nor were they families with children settling down to watch a circus show. The victims were killers, rapists, robbers, and society's castoffs. But as what follows demonstrates, many were capable of heroic action when least expected.

Fire in the Big House, with the fire as its centerpiece, explores the lives of convicts, guards, and the warden, the rise of the big-house prison, political patronage, prison violence, as well as penal history and reform in Ohio and America. It is also about much more: about the fire's causes and its human aftermath, about stories of lives put at risk because of tightfisted economic and political decisions. A reconsideration of this tragedy still resonates almost ninety years later, as the United States continues to lock up more people than any other country in the world. An article in the *London Daily Telegraph* published several months after the fire asserted in no uncertain terms that "the prison system of the United States is an unendurable disgrace to a civilized country" and that "while convicts are decreasing in other countries," American citizens were "clamoring for bigger and better jails to accommodate criminals." Sounds familiar. Today a prison disaster of this magnitude would instigate a fierce outcry in the press and beyond. But in 1930 the fire kept the attention of society for a relatively short time, as darkening world geopolitics and the most recent lurid events overshadowed the horror in Ohio.

In his account of a tragic blizzard on January 12, 1888, that suddenly left five hundred dead on the prairie across Nebraska, the Dakotas, and Minnesota, author David Laskin wrote, "Chance is always a silent partner in disaster. Bad luck, bad timing, the wrong choice at a crucial moment, and the door is inexorably shut and barred."[6] The same could be said about the events of Easter Monday 1930, when everything that could go wrong did go wrong.