Dark side of history

Tower from Angola dismantled to become exhibit at Smithsonian

The Alexandria Daily Town Talk

A crew from the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., spent several days on the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola grounds this week dismantling a security tower built in the early 1930s.

The tower will be housed in Smithsonian's newest museum, the National Museum of African American History and Culture slated to open in late 2015. The museum will be divided into three periods in American history: Slavery and freed people, segregation and 1968 and beyond. The tower will be part of the segregation exhibit.

“We’ll use the tower to interpret mass incarceration,” project manager Carlos Bustamante said. “It’s not so much about these towers in particular, but Angola reaches back to the Reconstruction period. It's a (reflection) of the brutal and dark side of mass incarcerations. The towers become a symbol of the story nationwide.”

To have this exhibit in a Smithsonian museum, where the general public can see the evolution, is an honor, Warden N. Burl Cain said.

“Ten percent of the people (incarcerated at Angola) would die in the first year,” Cain said.

“A 10-year sentence was a life sentence. And now, today, Angola is a model prison. We tour about 2,200 people a month — mostly to deter young people from being prisoners.”