

# **A Look at the Illinois State Penitentiary of the 1870's: What Does the Nation's Largest Prison Reveal About Society?**

**Fellowship Lesson 2006**

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**Abstract:** This set of lessons will examine the social history of Illinois in particular and America in general during the 1870's by looking at primary sources associated with the Illinois State Penitentiary at Joliet, which was the nation's largest prison at that time. Resources in this unit include government reports and statistics, warden's records, and period photographs. Students will understand American society during the end of Reconstruction, particularly in the North before the Great Migration.

**Assessment:** Students will create a series of short essays describing the nature of the Illinois State Penitentiary at Joliet, drawing inferences and conclusions from a variety of primary sources created in the years 1869 through 1874.

## **Essential Questions:**

- What can you tell about life in the 1870's by looking at the Illinois State Penitentiary during that time?
- Who was incarcerated during the 1870's and why were they in prison?
- What was prison life like in Illinois in the 1870's?

**Setting the Purpose:** Prisons are interesting places to think about for students.

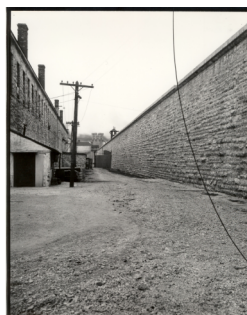
Considering that schools occasionally inhibit freedoms, restrict personal expression, and seem like foreboding institutions at times, they can relate to the prison experience. Students all have some impression of what modern prisons entail: small cells, armed guards, and threats of violence, but what did prison look like 120 years ago?

## **Lesson 1**

The first lesson involves a discussion of the nature of penal institutions themselves, and concludes with an essay challenging students to debate the purpose of prisons.

## **Lesson 2** (may take several days)

Students will examine [photographs of the Illinois State Penitentiary](#), drawing conclusions about the nature of the institution based on its architecture. They sum up their impressions of the buildings in an essay at the end of the lesson.



### Lesson 3

The next phase of this unit deals with the people in the Illinois State Penitentiary and the jobs they worked. They will then draw conclusions about the types of crimes committed by unskilled workers.

### Lesson 4

This final segment of the lesson deals with how prisoners were treated in the early 1870's. There is clearly a desire on behalf of the state to create a self-sustaining prison system that would not draw upon public resources and financially burden the state. Work was not seen as redemptive as much as it was sound fiscal policy. Students examine photos and documents to draw conclusions.

**Final essay question:** Consider all the evidence throughout the lessons, and describe to what extent the Illinois State Penitentiary sought to reform and to what extent it sought to punish felons. What conclusion can you then draw about the society that created this institution?

## **Lesson 1**

The first lesson involves a discussion of the nature of penal institutions themselves. Working in 2's and 3's, students will create a [web, or concept map](#), brainstorming answers to these questions:

- How should prisons be built and what should they look like?
- Who should have to go to prison; what are some crimes worthy of prison?
- If prisons should change people (reform them), how should they do this?
- If prisons should punish people, how should they do this?

Once every group is working on a set of prison rules, the class should come together as a whole and each group should summarize its response. The teacher should create a general summary of the answers on the board, overhead, or computer projection.

## **Essay #1**

Class should conclude with a writing assignment that challenges students to pick a side of the debate as to the purpose of prisons. In a thoughtfully written paragraph, students should articulate which side of this debate they support are they to punish or rehabilitate?

**Punishment:** Prisons should punish people who commit evil acts, and should be as harsh and unpleasant as possible.

**Rehabilitation:** Prisons are places to rehabilitate people, so treating them with respect and dignity will help teach them to not inflict harm on others again.

**Lesson 2** (may take several days)

**Place:** Using their webs from the previous lesson, students will examine various primary sources to discern how the state of Illinois did in fact address the four questions raised earlier:

1. How should prisons be built and what should they look like?
2. Who should have to go to prison; what are some crimes worthy of prison?
3. If prisons should change people (reform them), how should they do this?
4. If prisons should punish people, how should they do this?

In exploring each of these questions, students will examine photographs and records from this time period, including [photographs of the Illinois State Penitentiary](#) and legislative commission reports.

Students will examine [photographs of the Illinois State Penitentiary](#), drawing conclusions about the nature of the institution based on its architecture. These can be projected for all to see at once, or copied and distributed to individuals or groups of students. In a guided discussion, students should address the following questions:

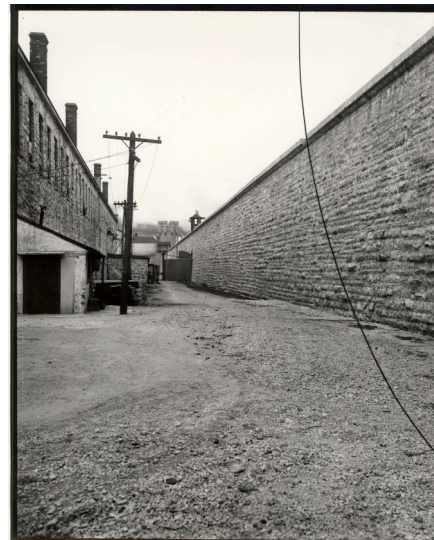
What is the Illinois State Penitentiary made out of?

Why does it look like a castle?

How would you feel if you were walking into this place?

What message were the architects trying to send to the public about this place?

Are buildings made to look like this today? Why or why not?



**Essay # 2**

In a summary paragraph, students should describe the impressions they receive from the architecture of the Illinois State Penitentiary and predict if this institution was designed to reform or rehabilitate the men sent there.



**Crimes:** Students should look at the table of crimes and create a list of the five most common offenses. They should also define any crimes that seem unfamiliar as they examine the list. Also, they should list anything that was illegal in 1874, but is no longer punishable today.

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**"CN." STATISTICAL TABLE OF CRIMES committed by Convicts received at the Illinois State Penitentiary during the two fiscal years ending November 30, 1874, and Convicts on hand November 30, 1874.**

CRIMES.	1873.		1874.		On Hand.	
	Against Person.	Against Property.	Against Person.	Against Property.	Against Person.	Against Property.
Arson	3		9		12	
attempt			2		3	
and larceny			1		1	
and assault to murder	19		14		36	
Assault to murder	9		9		2	
and burglary					21	
kill	1		1		2	
and murder	5		15		27	
rape					7	
rob					1	
with deadly weapon					2	
Attempt to steal			1			
from person					1	
commit larceny					1	
burglary	6		6		4	
Bigamy						173
Burglary	27		112		68	
and larceny	18		50		1	
vagrancy					1	
arson						1
assault to rob			2		2	
with intent to rape			1		1	
kill			1		1	
rape and murder					3	
Found in building—attempt to steal			4		11	
Confidence game	11		1		1	
Embezzlement	1					
False pretences	1					
Fornication	2		2			
Forgery	21		25		38	
and confidence game	1				2	
larceny					2	
Grand larceny	29		31		56	
and horse stealing					2	
Having in possession burglars tools			2		17	
Horse stealing	4		5		6	
Loose	1		2		254	
Larceny	234		260		2	
and assault to murder					1	
having burglar tools	1				3	
receiving stolen property	1		1		1	
robbery			1		2	
by bailee	1		1		5	
from person					1	
and burglary	10		10		34	
Manlaughter					1	
Malevolent mischief			1			
Mayhem	27		29		145	
Murder	4		2		5	
Passing counterfeit money	1				1	
P.O. money order						
checks	1				3	
Perjury	3		3		1	
personating another	9		1		10	
Rape					3	
and larceny					3	
receiving stolen property	5		5		60	
Robbery	19		28		1	
Stamping and stealing tickets			1			
Sodomy						
Unlawfully opening letters	1		2		1	
Vagrancy			2		2	
Violation of postal laws						
<b>Total</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>416</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>662</b>	<b>314</b>	<b>1,039</b>

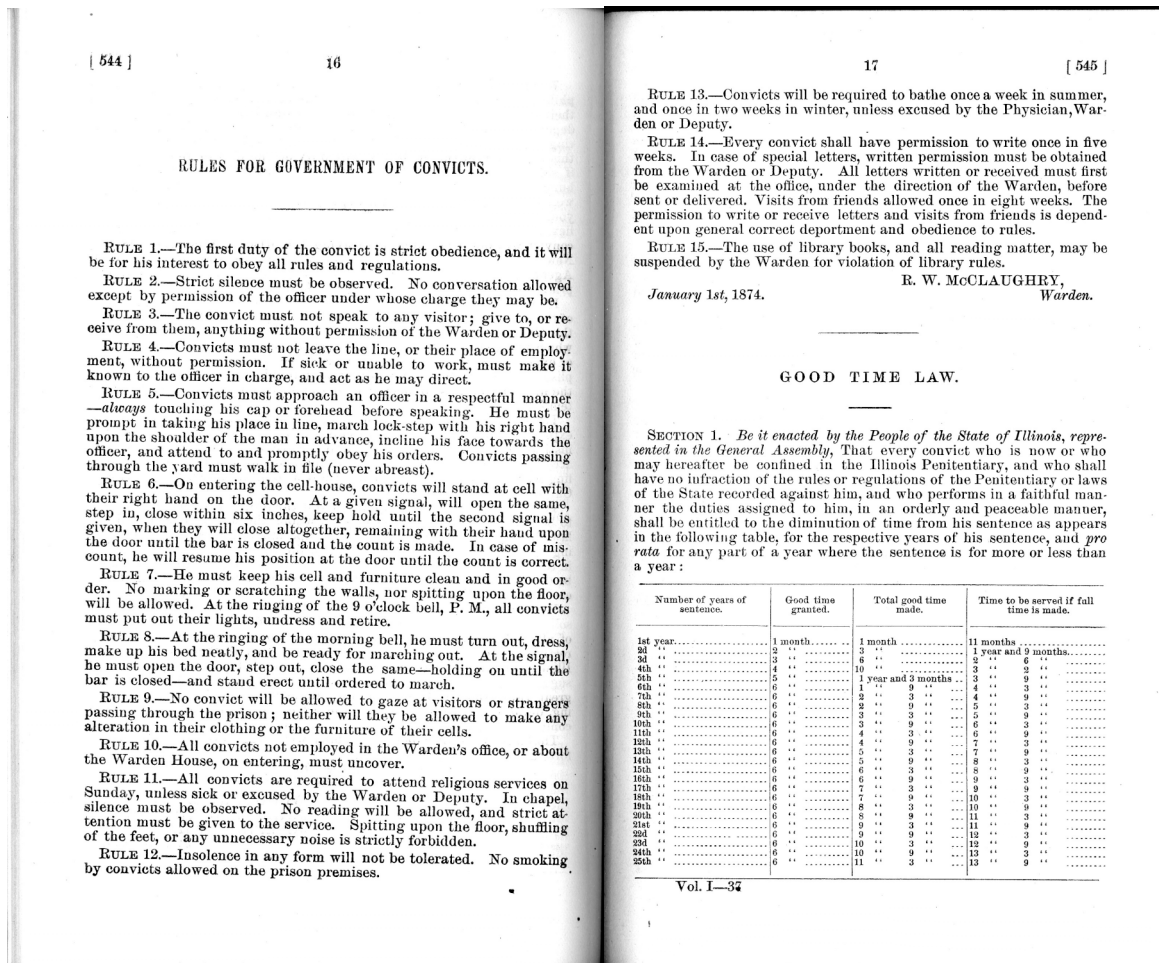
**Essay #3**

Using the list of former occupations and crimes committed by convicts, write a general summary of what kinds of people were committing what types of crimes. What conclusions can be drawn about who is in prison and what did they do to get them there? (A guided discussion may be useful in helping students discern a trend of unskilled workers committing crimes of theft of property).

Lesson 4

This final segment of the lesson deals with how prisoners were treated in the early 1870's. There is clearly a desire on behalf of the state to create a self-sustaining prison system that would not draw upon public resources and financially burden the state. Work was not seen as redemptive as much as it was sound fiscal policy. Students will look at the [Rules for Government of Convicts](#), the [General Assembly Report of the Joint Committee Jan. 24, 1872](#), and the [Commissioners of the Penitentiary Minority Report to the Illinois General Assembly in 1871](#).

The first document students should study is the [Rules for Government of Convicts](#), published in the 1874 edition of Illinois Reports to the General Assembly. There are 15 rules for prisoners to obey. Assign a rule or two each to small groups and have each group of students read the rule verbatim, then paraphrase the rule for the class, then assess the fairness of the rule. Groups should articulate why they judge a rule to be unfair if they so maintain. The teacher should maintain a record of all rules deemed appropriate and all rules deemed inappropriate by the class.

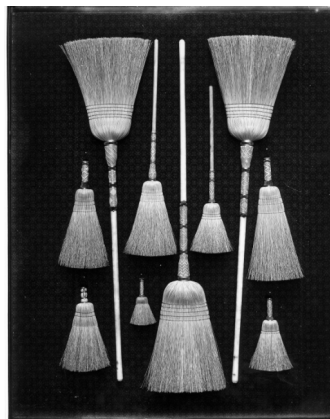


The following is an excerpt from Illinois Reports to the General Assembly Report of the Joint Committee Jan. 24, 1872 p 4:

*The employment of convicts at "hard labor" is provided for under our criminal statutes, and has been the policy adopted by this State ever since it had a Penitentiary. This is entirely proper, as a portion of at least of the expense attending the conviction and caring of criminals should be paid back by the convict in fulfilling his sentence. The acts of 1867 and 1871, providing for the management of the Penitentiary, evidently contemplated a system both punitive and reformatory in its character. Labor is necessary as a reformatory measure, as it is generally conceded that a reasonable amount is essential to reformation, as is a necessary condition of the right application of punishment. It should not be the paramount object to make it a source of income, but rather that it should serve partly to preserve and promote as well the bodily as the mental and spiritual condition of the convict, and also, in part, educate and prepare him to earn an honest living when he shall have obtained his liberty. It was a maxim with (John) Howard, "make men diligent, and they will be honest." These should be the considerations which should govern prison officers in making choices of occupation or trades for convicts, keeping in view the pecuniary consideration in making such selections, so that the public interest may be protected, and, as contemplated by the present law, make the Penitentiary self-sustaining.*

Students should consider the ramifications of convict labor, where convicts are expected to work, not to earn wages for themselves, but to provide the penitentiary with income to offset the cost to taxpayers. A class discussion should ensue as to whether this is a fair working environment that would truly "*and promote as well the bodily as the mental and spiritual condition of the convict.*"

Below is a photograph of prison-made brooms.





Next, students should carefully examine the photographs of the [prison shoe and boot shop](#) and [prison quarry](#). Although these photos were likely taken sometime after the 1870's, The [Illinois Commissioners of the Penitentiary 1871 Report to the General Assembly](#) describe these and other industries (machine and blacksmith shops and foundry, wagon and agricultural implements manufactory, cooper shop, paint shop, chair making and rustic work, broom shop, cigar shop, harness shop, tailor shop, and the making of army tents for the United States Government, under contract) within the prison to make it as self-sustaining as possible.



Discussion questions for whole group:

Consider the nature of this work and the fact that prisoners performed it wearing a striped uniform. What effect might have this had on the morale and attitudes of the men involved? What rights might these men have had regarding the length of the work day, the possible dangers of the work, and the fact that they were essentially working for free?