A Look at the Illinois State Penitentiary of the 1870's: What Does the Nation's Largest Prison Reveal About Society? Fellowship Lesson 2006 Don Barbour Illinois State Archives

Abstract: This set of lessons will examine the social history of Illinois in particular and America in general during the 1870's by looking a 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 <u>photographs of the Illinois State Penitentiary</u>, 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 <u>reform</u> and to what extent it sought to <u>punish</u> felons. What conclusion can you then draw about the society that created this institution?

Don Barbour Illinois State Archives

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 <u>web, or concept map</u>, 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 <u>photographs of the Illinois State Penitentiary</u> and legislative commission reports.

Students will examine <u>photographs of the Illinois State Penitentiary</u>, 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?



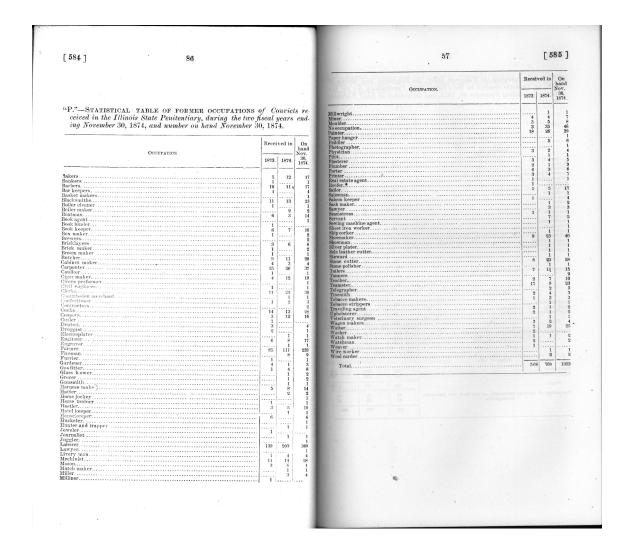


Essay # 2

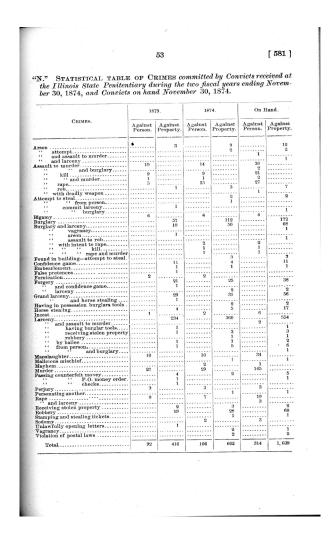
In a summary paragraph, students should describe the impressions they receive from the architecture of the Illinois State Penitentiary and predict if this institution was designed to reform or rehabilitate the men sent there.

Lesson 3

The next phase of the unit deals with the people in the Illinois State Penitentiary. Below is a list of the former occupations of the inmates received by and before 1874. Working in small groups, students should examine this list and create a Venn diagram dividing the occupations in terms of jobs performed on farms and small towns and large towns and cities, or both. They should also use a dictionary to look up the meaning of obscure job titles, like **cooper** or **milliner** to help them correctly categorize each occupation.



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.



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

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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.

RULES FOR GOVERNMENT OF CONVICTS.

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RULE 1.-The first duty of the convict is strict obedience, and it will be for his interest to obey all rules and regulations.

RULE 3.—Strict silence must be observed. No conversation allowed except by permission of the officer under whose charge they may be. RULE 3.—The convict must not speak to any visitor; give to, or re-ceive from them, anything without permission of the Warden or Deputy. RULE 4.—Convicts must not leave the line, or their place of employ-ment, without permission. If sick or unable to work, must make it known to the officer in charge, and act as he may direct.

RULE 5.—Convicts must approach an officer in a respectful manner —always touching his cap or forehead before speaking. He must be prompt in taking his place in line, march lock-step with his right hand upon the shoulder of the man in advance, incline his face towards the officer, and attend to and promptly obey his orders. Convicts passing through the yard must walk in file (never abreast).

through the yard must walk in file (never abreast). RULE 6.—On entering the cell-house, convicts will stand at cell with their right hand on the door. At a given signal, will open the same, step in, close within six inches, keep hold until the second signal is given, when they will close altogether, remaining with their hand upon the door until the bar is closed and the count is made. In case of mis-count, he will resume his position at the door until the count is correct. RULE 7.—He must keep his cell and furniture clean and in good or-der. No marking or scratching the walls, nor spitting upon the floor, will be allowed. At the ringing of the 9 o'clock bell, P. M., all convicts must put ont their lights, undress and retire. RULE 8.—At the ringing of the morning bell, he must turn out, dress.

RULE 8.—At the ringing of the morning bell, he must turn out, dress, make up his bed neatly, and be ready for marching out. At the signal, he must open the door, step out, close the same—holding ou until the bar is closed—and stand erect until ordered to march. RULE 9.—No convict will be allowed to gaze at visitors or strangers passing through the prison; neither will they be allowed to make any alteration in their clothing or the furniture of their cells.

RULE 10.—All convicts not employed in the Warden's office, or about the Warden House, on entering, must uncover. RULE 11.—All convicts are required to attend religious services on Sunday, unless sick or excused by the Warden or Deputy. In chapel, silence must be observed. No reading will be allowed, and strict at-tention must be given to the service. Spitting upon the floor, shuffing of the feet, or any unnecessary noise is strictly forbilden.

RULE 12.—Insolence in any form will not be tolerated. No smoking y convicts allowed on the prison premises. by

RULE 13.—Convicts will be required to bathe once a week in summer, and once in two weeks in winter, unless excused by the Physician, War-den or Deputy. BULE 14.—Every convict shall have permission to write once in five weeks. In case of special letters, written permission must be obtained from the Warden or Deputy. All letters written or received must first be examined at the office, under the direction of the Warden, before sent or delivered. Visits from friends allowed once in eight weeks. The permission to write or receive letters and visits from friends is depend-ent upon general correct deportment and obedience to rules.

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RULE 15.—The use of library books, and all reading matter, may be suspended by the Warden for violation of library rules. of library rules. R. W. McCLAUGHRY, *Warden*.

January 1st. 1874.

GOOD TIME LAW.

SECTION 1. Be it enacted by the People of the State of Illinois, repre-sented in the General Assembly, That every convict who is now or who may hereafter be confined in the Illinois Penitentiary, and who shall have no infraction of the rules or regulations of the Penitentiary or laws of the State recorded against him, and who performs in a faithful man-ner the duties assigned to him, in an orderly and peaceable manuer, shall be entiled to the diminution of time from his sentence as appears in the following table, for the respective years of his sentence, and pro rata for any part of a year where the sentence is for more or less than a year:

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

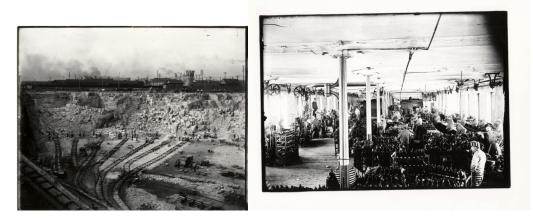
The employment of convicts at "hard labor" is provided for under our criminal statutes, and has been the policy adopted by this State ever since it had a Penitentiary. This is entirely proper, as a portion of at least of the expense attending the conviction and caring of criminals should be paid back 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 <u>prison shoe and boot shop</u> and <u>prison quarry</u>. Although these photos were likely taken sometime after the 1870's, The <u>Illinois Commissioners of the Penitentiary 1871 Report to the General Assembly</u> 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?