

**" MINNESOTA STATE PRISON " \***  
IN  
**HISTORY**  
OF THE  
**SAINT CROIX**  
**VALLEY**

EDITOR IN CHIEF

**AUGUSTUS B. EASTON**

ASSISTED BY AN ABLE CORPS OF CONTRIBUTORS

**ILLUSTRATED**

**VOL. I**

CHICAGO  
H. C. COOPER, JR. & CO.  
1909

---

\* MLHP editor: The following chapter appeared on pages 64-71 of the first volume of this two volume regional history. It has been reformatted and page breaks added. Several spelling and grammatical errors have been corrected; otherwise it is complete.

## CHAPTER XL

## MINNESOTA STATE PRISON.

First Institution and Location—Serious Irregularities in Management—  
New Buildings—Number of Convicts at Various Periods—Convict  
Labor—Making of Twine—Ideal Conditions—List of Wardens—  
New Prison Being Built.

The prison was located at Stillwater by an act of the legislature, passed November 1, 1849. In 1851 a lot 400 feet square was inclosed by a 14 foot wall, 4 feet thick at the bottom and 21/2 at the top. In this was the prison house, a building 30 by 40 feet, 3 stories high, back of which a wing, 20 by 60 feet, contained 6 cells and other rooms for the closer confinement of prisoners. In 1853 an addition containing 6 more cells and a dungeon was built. The entire cost of buildings and grounds, \$5,000, was paid by the United States government. The machinery, costing \$8,000, was the property of the warden, and consisted of sash and door and shingle machinery. By an act of the legislature, approved in 1853, the control of the prison was placed in the hands of a warden and a board of inspectors, and in accordance with the act, F. R. Delano, the first warden appointed, entered upon the discharge of his duties in March, 1853. The first year there were no convicts. The second year there were two, and seven or eight persons from counties which had no suitable quarters for their confinement; in 1856, one, and in 1857, none. The warden was authorized to receive all persons committed from counties unprovided with suitable jail buildings. In consequence of this regulation the prison was filled to its capacity. The rule requiring that \$3 a week should be paid for board, and payment for five weeks in advance, was adopted. If, at the expiration of that period board was not again paid in advance the prisoner

was released. This led to such abuse of power and carelessness on the part of the prison officials that the attention of the grand jury was called to the matter. This body, consisting of Jonathan McKusick, H. W. Greeley, Thomas Wright, James Shearer, W. C. Penney, W. P. Spencer, George Harris, William H. Mower, Sylvander Partridge, Alfred Wright, Salma Trussell, J. R. Merideth, James R. Moore, E. D. Farmer, A. D. Kingsley, George Holt and Samuel Goff, after a thorough investigation, reported on the 2d day of November, 1857, that "since April, 1855, there have [65] been eleven escapes of prisoners, and that five have been discharged and set free by the officers of the prison for the reason that the county commissioners of the several counties have not paid their board in advance, many of whom were committed for high crimes, and some of them for the highest crime known, murder, as is shown by the records of the prison." The warden, F. R. Delano, and his deputy, Michael McHale, received due censure, as did the prison inspectors, the legislature which passed the act and the executive of the state who lent his official signature to the same. This state of affairs was amended by special legislation, and the management of the prison henceforth gave better satisfaction. March 4, 1858, Frank Smith received the appointment as warden, and assumed the duties of the office; but resigned after a few months' service; and on August 4, 1858, Henry N. Setzer became warden. Shortly after this the Republicans came into power, and January 1, 1860, John S. Proctor was appointed to the office of warden. At that date there were ten convicts in the prison, who were provided with a uniform designed by Mr. Proctor. Previous to this one-half of the head was shaved to distinguish the prisoners from other people. The prison garb, cap, close-fitting hip coat, and trousers, was made of heavy blanket cloth, with black stripes on white ground. In 1861 the number of convicts had reached

sixteen; in 1862 all that could possibly be cared for. This led to an application for increased facilities. Mr. Proctor, after a term of eight years as warden, was succeeded by Joshua L. Taylor, of Taylors Falls, February 15, 1868. The necessary appropriation having been made, steps were taken to enlarge the grounds and erect more commodious buildings. The contract for building a dry house and shops, costing \$14,500, was awarded to Seymour, Sabin & Co., May 3, 1869. During this year the walls were extended, enclosing nine and a half acres. In March, 1870, A. B. Webber was appointed warden, to succeed Mr. Taylor; but Mr. Webber only remained until October of that year, being succeeded by Henry A. Jackman. During this year, 1870, the principal prison building was erected, costing \$74,000, which has been enlarged from time to time to meet the wants of the contractors and to give room for the steady increase in the number of convicts. This building, however, seemed at the time adequate for many years, as it contained, in addition to the hospital, deputy warden's residence, chapel, guard's room, mess room, kitchen and prison offices; 294 cells for males and five for females. Later the engine and boilers were taken by the state at an appraised value of \$19,906.55, to be paid in convict labor at the rate of 40 cents per man per day. The total number of commitments to November 26, 1880, was 1,243; number of inmates at that date, 252. J. A. Reed became [66] warden on August 3, 1874, and retained the position until 1887, when H. J. Stordock was appointed. The following list shows the number of convicts each year up to the present time: In 1853, none; 1854, 2; 1855, 8; 1856, 1; 1857, none; 1858, 2; 1859, 5; 1860, 16; 1861, 12; 1862, 7; 1863, 8; 1864, 7; 1865, 11; 1866, 29; 1867, 36; 1868, 31; 1869, 47; 1870, 39; 1871, 60; 1872, 59; 1873, 64; 1874, 93; 1875, 96; 1876, 90; 1877, 145; 1878, 218; 1879, 254; 1880, 254; 1881, 247; 1882, 279; 1883, 301; 1884,

356; 1885, 395; 1886, 416; 1887, 412; 1888, 437; 1889, 440; 1890, 314; 1891, 317; 1892, 329; 1893, 418; 1894, 502; 1895, 473; 1896, 469; 1897, 510; 1898, 501; 1899, 509; 1900, 496; 1901, 527; 1902, 553; 1903, 581 (11 of whom were women); 1904, 609; 1905, 703 (14 of whom were women); 1906, 690 (12 of whom were women); 1907, 685. In 1880 the board of prison inspectors consisted of E. G. Butts, Stillwater; L. E. Reed, St. Paul; John De Laittre, Minneapolis; the warden, ex-officio clerk of the board. The officers of the prison were: J. A. Reed, warden; Abraham Hall, deputy warden; W. H. Pratt, physician; W. H. Harrington, chaplain; M. E. Murphy, Catholic chaplain; J. W. Dinsmore, clerk; W. H. Smithson, steward; D. W. Bolles, hospital steward; Miss Ann Dowling, matron; W. C. Reed, usher; W. H. H. Taylor, hall guard; A. H. Chase, H. C. Pierce, Lester Bordwell, Detloff Jarchow, George Sincerbox, John C. Gardner and Leonard Craig, wall guards. The state prison is located on North Main street, in an opening between high bluffs, on the grounds where a bloody battle was fought between the Sioux and the Chippewas in 1839, and the place was known for many years thereafter by the grewsome appellation of "Battle Hollow." The front gate of the institution is about one hundred yards from the shore of Lake St. Croix. To the north, west and south the hills rise precipitously, and on these sides the walls are built into the banks. On the east side a stone wall thirty feet high frowns on the city street. The administration building of the prison fronts on the public thoroughfare. In it are located the warden's and business offices, board rooms, a few private apartments for such of the guards and employes as live on the premises, the officers' dining rooms and the female prison. Behind the administration building, separated from it only by the convict kitchen and bakery, is the main cellhouse, with hardly enough quarters for the 659 cells. Between the south wall of the

inclosure and the cellhouse stands another building, in which are located the bathroom, storeroom, laundry and the institution tailor shop. A wide street running east and west cuts the yard in two. On the south side of this street are the administration building, the cellhouse and the laundry; while on the north side are situated the factories, warehouses, etc. The hospital building and greenhouses are at the west end of the yard, in the center [67] of a small park, surrounded by shade trees, and during the summer months by flowering shrubs. Numerous flower beds border the street on both sides, and from May to October the yard has the appearance of a well-kept park. There are two gates opening from the street into the prison inclosure. One is for delivery wagons, while the other is a railroad gate, through which freight cars are switched to the twine and hemp warehouses. The warden's house is outside the walls, on a height commanding a view of the prison yard and buildings.

In former years the labor of the convicts was leased under contract to the Minnesota Thresher Company and others; but in 1895 the legislature passed a bill prohibiting contract labor in any state institution, and since then the prisoners have been employed in the manufacture of shoes, under what is known as the "piece-price" system, and in the manufacture of binding twine on "state account." This twine is sold to Minnesota farmers at little more than actual cost of manufacture; and as the price charged is from 2 to 2½ cents per pound below the price charged by outside jobbers and manufacturers to dealers, and is just as good as any twine made by outside concerns, it is in great demand, the entire output being usually disposed of before the 1st of May. The plant has grown gradually, until now it has a capacity of ten million pounds per

annum. The shoe factory is operated by R. H. and David Bronson, of Stillwater, and A. E. Macartney, of St. Paul.

The twine factory is what is known to the trade as a "three system plant." That is, it contains three complete sets of each of the machines necessary to convert the fiber into twine ready for shipment. The transformation is effected by a system of combing and drawings. From the moment the rush-plaited cover is removed and the bale is opened, until the long strands of fiber reach the spinning machines to be twisted into cord, the material is constantly undergoing combing. The binder twine fiber is unloaded from the cars inside the prison yard. It is weighed and stored in the warehouses until it is used. Adjoining the fiber warehouse is the opening room, in which the bales are opened and spread out, the kinks shaken out of the long strands by hand and the fiber put through a machine called a "breaker." The breaker subjects it to the first course of breaking, and in order to toughen the material and make it more pliable distributes a limited amount of oil through it. After passing through the first breaker it is sent to the second, where it is again cleaned and straightened. Then it is removed from the opening room to the next shop, where it is passed through first a coarse and then a fine "spreader." Like the breaker, the spreader is merely a steel comb on a belt. After leaving the spreaders the fiber is in long, straight and fairly [68] clean strands, and one would think that it might at once be twisted into cord. But the combing is not through yet, for in the next room it is sent through first a coarse and then a fine "draw frame," and then it is given what is technically known as a "third working" in a still finer one. These draw frames not only comb the fiber, but they also regulate the sliver; that is, they determine how many strands of hemp will go to make up the finished twine. Then the fiber is run through

a "finisher," an almost human machine, which regulates more precisely than the draw frames the size of the sliver, and then it is ready for the spinning rooms. As it comes out of the spinner it is wrapped on huge spools, which are piled on small carts and distributed among the men operating the balling machines. These latter wrap the twine into five-pound balls, tagged and ready for baling. In the baling shop the twine is weighed, tested as to its tensile strength, length and evenness and packed in fifty-pound bales, which are sent to the twine warehouses and stored there, roof high, until the harvesting commences. The output of the twine factory up to 1902 was little more than five million pounds. In 1904 it exceeded ten million pounds—its maximum capacity. About two hundred and ten prisoners are regularly employed in the twine factory the year around. Over two hundred and twenty-five inmates are employed in the shoe factory. The company pays a stated price for every piece of work turned out, and the per diem earnings of the prisoners are larger than in any other prison in the country. The volume of business of these two industries amounts annually to about \$1,700,000. Of this total, returns from the twine factory, operated on "state account," amount to \$1,000,000; while the shoe company, operated on the piece-price system, does a business of about \$700,000. Convict labor is also employed in the tailor shop, where all the clothing worn by inmates is manufactured; in the repair shop of the state, in the laundry, the kitchens, dining rooms and cellhouse; in the warehouses, greenhouses, park and hospital, and, in fact, in every department of the institution. According to modern ideas, a prison is not merely a place in which law-breakers are punished indefinitely, but rather a place in which to confine them until such a time as they can be set at liberty without endangering public safety. In other words, a prison should be a place in which an opportunity is given them to



reform. With this object in view, what is known as the "grade and merit system," with parole, has become a dominating feature of this institution, by means of which the prisoner can, to a large extent, work out his own salvation. Upon his own conduct depends not only his standing in prison, but the diminution of his sentence under the provisions of the parole and good time law. Writing, visiting and smoking privileges are manifested by [69] small tickets, which are given the prisoners upon his entrance to the institution, and which must be produced when he desires to make use of them. The loss of their tickets, through a violation of the rules, entails the loss of the privileges they represent. The grade system, is an incentive to good conduct, is powerfully seconded by the parole law, under the provisions of which any prisoner never having served a previous term in a penal institution may be paroled by the board of control at the expiration of one-half of the full term for which he was sentenced, provided he has preserved a good record in prison and has been in the first grade for six months or more. Since 1894, when the grading and parole system was inaugurated, 668 inmates have been released on parole, of whom about 12 per cent violated their agreement and have been returned to prison. The good time law is a still further incentive toward good behavior, as it is within the power of the board of control to refuse to grant any good time to an unruly prisoner. There is in connection with the prison a night school in operation eight months in the year, and the better educated prisoners are privileged to join a branch of the Chautauqua Society, which is located within the walls of the institution. The "Prison Mirror," a weekly paper owned and edited by inmates, is published at the institution. This paper was established in 1886.

A library of about six thousand volumes is a feature of the institution and is at the exclusive service of the inmates. In addition the state subscribes for all the best magazines, which are circulated among the inmates. A brass band and orchestra have recently been organized among the inmates, under the direction of an experienced musical director.

Good air, pure water, wholesome food and absolute cleanliness keep sickness at a minimum, and there has been no epidemic in the past and the mortality list has been very small. The cell-house is scrubbed and whitewashed daily, and great care is exercised to keep it free from germs. The hospital is a modern building, well lighted and ventilated, with a physician always in attendance. The institution is more than self-supporting. It is on a paying basis, and in 1904 showed a net profit of \$86,000. The twine plant was established in 1891, at which time an appropriation of \$150,000, as a revolving fund, was provided by the legislature, and at intervals since that time \$120,000 for machinery, making a total of \$270,000. No other appropriation has ever been asked for or made. The \$20,000 realized from the sale of old twine machinery has since been returned to the state treasurer, as a partial offset against the \$270,000, leaving the total appropriation \$250,000 made by the state. This represents the total liabilities. The assets of the institution in 1894 were \$781,634.26, [70] leaving a net profit to the state of \$531,634.26. And the net profit to the state in 1907 of the twine business was \$159,155.39.

Up to 1904 the number of inmates paroled was 668; in 1907 this had been increased to 910.

In the report of prison affairs to the board of control in 1904 the capacity of the twine plant was 10,000,000 pounds annually; this in 1907 was reported at 13,600,000 pounds. This, of course, requires more workmen, and the number has increased from 200 persons in 1904, to 225 in 1907. In 1904 the number of employes in the shoe factory was 225; now, by the 1907 report, increased to 250. The volume of business of the two concerns was reported in 1904 at \$1,700,000; in 1907, \$2,250,000. The prison population, July 31, 1907, is reported at 685.

Following are the wardens who have served since the prison was built: Territorial—F. B. Delano, March, 1853; F. O. J. Smith, March 4, 1858. State—H. N. Setzer, August 4, 1858; John S. Proctor, January 1, 1860; Joshua L. Taylor, of Taylors Falls, February 16, 1868; A. B. Webber, March 16, 1870; Henry A. Jackman, October 10, 1870; J. A. Reed, August 3, 1874; H. G. Stordock, February 3, 1887; Albert Garvin, January 2, 1891; Henry Wolfer, June 7, 1892; General Charles McC. Reeve, December 1, 1899; Henry Wolfer, March 5, 1901. Mr. Wolfer has held the important position since June, 1892, with the exception of the fifteen months when the duties and responsibilities were with General C. McC. Reeve. No reflection or disparagement is intended in connection with the many able and highly competent men who have during the more than half a century past stood at the head of this institution, in saying that Warden Wolfer has proved himself a most admirable manager of the complex affairs, and is considered one of the most efficient wardens in the country. One of the reforms brought about during the past years is the reduction of the cost of maintaining the inmates of the prison and the increase of the earnings. For instance, in 1879 the cost to the state for each prisoner was \$206.84, and his earnings only \$98.85,

showing a deficit of \$107.99; yet in 1904 the cost was reduced to \$179.82, while his earnings were \$321.34, an excess of \$141.52. In 1906 the cost of keeping each prisoner was \$176.10, his earnings amounting to \$446.98, an excess of \$279.88. The output of twine at the prison for the season of 1908 was the largest ever known, being 14,524 pounds. The amount realized was \$1,260,543.86. During the season of 1907 the amount of twine manufactured was 13,054,855 pounds.

The new state prison at Oak Park was opened for business in November, 1908. The manufacture of binder twine was the first industry, the output of which, according to the estimate of experts, will be about 4,000,000 pounds the first year, making the [71] total output of the old and the new prisons more than 18,000,000 pounds. The warehouse for the storage of fiber and twine is 90 by 120 feet in size, and one story in height, with an arched roof, affording an immense storage space. The binder twine building has a ground area of 86 by 120 feet, and three stories high. The twine factory is located on the first floor.

The factory is operated by prisoners with a certain number of citizens in charge of the work, under the general direction of the warden. There is work for nearly one hundred prisoners when the arrangements are fully completed. These buildings are to be surrounded by a stockade of plank fifteen feet in height. The new prison when completed will be a model one in every particular. ■

---

**Related article: “Minnesota State Prison (1888)” (MLHP, 2010).**

< = >