1996

A Parlor in the Penitentiary: Prisons and Reading in Victorian America

Jennifer D. Luff

College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd

Part of the American Studies Commons, and the Criminology Commons

Recommended Citation

https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-whg6-bd18

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
A PARLOR IN THE PENITENTIARY:
PRISONS AND READING IN VICTORIAN AMERICA

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the American Studies Program
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Jennifer D. Luff
1996
APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Jennifer D. Luff

Approved April, 1996

Robert A. Gross

Kenneth M. Price

Carol Sheriff
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1. THE CHAUTAUQUA LITERARY AND SOCIAL REFORM CIRCLE</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2. INCARCERATION AND THE WORD</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3. THE RISE AND FALL OF NEBRASKA'S MODERATE PRISON REFORM MOVEMENT</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPILOGUE</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank Professor Robert A. Gross for his unstinting support and stringent criticism; I cannot imagine a better adviser than Bob. Professors Carol Sheriff and Kenneth M. Price graciously agreed to serve as readers on short notice, and their rigorous critiques proved invaluable. Responsibility for all weaknesses and inelegancies remaining in this work is solely mine. The American Studies Program provided funding for a research trip to the Chautauqua Institute, where Alfreda Irwin and June Miller-Spann at the Smith Memorial Library kindly shared resources and expertise. Professor Michael Hardt of Duke University supplied information about his prison reading classes, and the interlibrary loan staff at Swem Library doggedly tracked down hard-to-find documents. I am also grateful to my loving family and friends who cheered me on, and to John Dougan, Wendy Gonaver, and James Spady, who discussed these ideas in excruciating detail and read numerous drafts of this work.
A PARLOR IN THE PENITENTIARY:
PRISONS AND READING IN VICTORIAN AMERICA

ABSTRACT

In this study I examine a reading circle that met in the Nebraska State Penitentiary from 1889 to 1894. Middle-class women and men met with prisoners to follow the reading course of the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle (CLSC), a national program founded to produce moral reform through literary study. I trace the creation of the reading circle through surveying nineteenth century literary history and prison history; the circle's decline points to the political complexities of Victorian middle-class reform projects.

The CLSC involved thousands of Victorian Americans in a highly structured reading program that incorporated liberal Protestant ideology into a middlebrow curriculum. CLSC leaders aspired to effect widespread social reform by redistributing cultural capital among people from diverse economic classes, and by disseminating moral lessons among members. Despite CLSC leaders' hopes of attracting lower-class families, middle-class women formed the bulk of CLSC participants. Many of these women also participated in the contemporary women's study club movement; I hypothesize that female CLSC graduates made up a large percentage of women's study club members.

Nineteenth-century prison regimes likewise viewed books as agents of moral reform. From the first modern prisons in the 1820s, which required inmates to read Bibles, to later prisons which relied on secular books to rehabilitate inmates, reading featured prominently in the prison. The Nebraska State Penitentiary resembled early Northeastern prisons in most aspects, but mimicked Southern postbellum prisons by leasing out management of the Penitentiary to private contractors. In general, though, prisons across the country and through the century exhibited a dual focus on reforming convicts and generating profits for states.

Lincoln CLSC members' faith that books could reform inmates thus corresponded with longstanding conceptions of the salutary effects of prison reading. Soon after beginning the Penitentiary reading group, however, Lincoln CLSC members shifted their focus to aiding Penitentiary convicts materially; Lincoln members perceived their relationship to convicts as familial, and saw their material and moral support as a rehabilitative strategy. Horrific conditions in the Penitentiary tainted this relationship, especially after a guard murdered an inmate, occasioning a scandal and a legislative investigation. Because a Lincoln member also worked in the Penitentiary and was indirectly involved in the scandal, Lincoln members were forced to recognize their own complicity with the Penitentiary regime, and the moral impetus for their project dissolved. Lincoln members quickly abandoned the Penitentiary inmates and retreated back to their middle-class community. Ultimately, the Penitentiary reading group indicates the shortcomings of Victorian middle-class reform projects that focused on personal moral transformation rather than larger social inequities.
A PARLOR IN THE PENITENTIARY:

PRISONS AND READING IN VICTORIAN AMERICA
INTRODUCTION

From 1889 through 1894, the Nebraska State Penitentiary hosted the Look Forward Circle, a remarkable reading group of prison inmates and middle-class men and women from Lincoln, Nebraska. Using the curriculum of the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle (CLSC), a hugely popular national study program, the Look Forward Circle met every other Sunday to read together. The Lincoln members of the Look Forward Circle hoped to reform inmates by acquainting them with Victorian literary culture. More importantly, they believed that making friendly acquaintances of the inmates would transform convicts into upstanding Christian citizens. By sharing books and affection with prisoners, middle-class Lincoln men and women tried to establish a parlor within the Nebraska State Penitentiary.

Prisoners living in the repressive Penitentiary needed a lot more than kindness and culture. Look Forward Circle meetings interrupted a prison routine of drudgery and violence. While Lincoln members helped some prisoners by getting them jobs and giving them clothes after release from the Penitentiary, the Circle could not ameliorate the crushing horrors of prison life. Convicts likely questioned the Lincoln members’ motives even as they accepted their help, especially since a Penitentiary staffer helped set up the Circle. To convicts, the parlor still had prison bars over the windows.

Group reading constituted the fundamental rationale for the Look Forward Circle, functioning as the Circle’s nominal purpose and primary activity. Lincoln members viewed group reading as a way to refine convicts’ moral sensibilities; convicts seem to have used the Circle to gain multiple advantages, material as well as cultural. In time, group reading could not sustain the Circle as hierarchical power relations strained and severed ties between prisoners and the Lincoln literati. The idealistic Lincoln readers were forced to acknowledge
that their familial parlor could not transcend the brutal Penitentiary; group reading reinscribed, rather than razed, the unequal statuses of convict readers and Lincoln readers.

The story of the Look Forward Circle can be situated within two apparently disparate scholarly fields: the history of the book and the history of the prison. As Cathy Davidson notes in Reading in America, "the sociology of reading communities" comprises an important subfield of the history of the book; the sociology of the CLSC, considering the group's huge membership and innovative structure, surely warrants consideration. Many studies of reading communities focus on small networks of friends and acquaintances, assembled by common interests, which select their own texts and define their own rules, structures, and norms. The Look Forward Circle represents a different sort of reading community, one structured by power relations and using a prefabricated book list. Understanding the conditions under which the Circle operated requires a survey of nineteenth-century prison history, since the particular problems encountered by the Circle grew directly out of the nature of the Penitentiary. In this study, I will examine the intersection of Victorian literary culture and prison reform in Nebraska by surveying the creation and philosophy of the CLSC in the context of late-nineteenth century cultural history, reviewing the history of the U.S. prison and the functions of reading within the prison; and, finally, exploring the circumstances and consequences of the "Look Forward Circle."

---


2 See, for example, Barbara Sicherman, "Sense and Sensibility: A Case of Women's Reading in Late-Victorian America," which explores a family reading circle, in Davidson, Reading in America, pp. 201-25; and Janice Radway, Reading the Romance (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), which studies the responses of a women's reading group based at a bookstore.
CHAPTER ONE:
CHAUTAUQUA'S LITERARY AND SOCIAL REFORM CIRCLE

A small group of middle-class people gathered in Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1888 to study ancient Greek history and literature. Simultaneously, they joined a national reading group involving over 100,000 Victorian men and women between 1878 and 1889. The Lincoln readers and their national colleagues enrolled in the CLSC, at once an adult education movement that predated and shaped university extension courses, a popular pastime for leisured middle-class Victorians, and a Gilded Age expression of liberal Protestantism.¹ But the CLSC also represented a project for moral reform contrived “to induce the people of our country to spend their leisure moments in reading a more useful and substantial kind of literature.”² CLSC readers joined a prefabricated reading community explicitly launched to order and correct the reading habits of the nation. By prescribing particular texts, recommending critical methods for reading them, and directing the organization and procedures for conducting local reading circles, national CLSC leaders hoped to effect transformation in its members; the founder of the CLSC expected the reading program to "mak[e] men, women, and children everywhere more affectionate and sympathetic as

members of a family; more conscientious and reverent as worshippers together of the true
God; more intelligent and thoughtful as students in a universe of ideas; and more industrious,
economical, just and generous, as members of society in a work-a-day world.” This utopian
vision imagined the Victorian parlor as the locus of wider social reform.

The CLSC grew out of the Chautauqua Assembly, founded by John Heyl Vincent, a
Methodist minister active in the Sunday school movement, and Lewis Miller, a farm-
equipment magnate, in 1874. The two men grew up in rural Pennsylvania and Ohio,
respectively, and neither spent much time in formal schools, although both began their careers
as country-school teachers. Miller taught Sunday school at his Methodist church in Akron,
where he met Vincent in 1868. When Miller proposed that they convert a camp-meeting site
in upstate New York into an annual Sunday school teacher’s institute, Vincent readily agreed.
Both men quailed at dramatic evangelism, preferring restrained worship and theological
debate. Thousands of avid Protestants poured into Chautauqua for the first Assembly in
1874, drawn by advertisements in the Sunday-School Journal, to hear a program of lectures
on pedagogy, Biblical history and geography, and classroom management. Vincent doubted
that such crowds would continue returning annually for “discussion of the same old practical
questions” of Sunday school administration, and having invested their own money in the
venture, both men dreamed of big profits. Shrewd industrialist Miller noted that
Chautauqua’s location on the shore of Lake Erie was easily accessible to large numbers of


4 The following discussion of Chautauqua’s origins is drawn from Theodore Morrison, Chautauqua:
30-47; Joseph E. Gould, The Chautauqua Movement: An Episode in the Continuing American Revolution
(New York: State University of New York, pp. 3-8.
people, but luring their middle-class audience back—especially when Philadelphia's Centennial Exhibition beckoned in 1876—posed a challenge.\(^5\) Miller and Vincent added a Scientific Congress in 1876, featuring demonstrations of electricity and chemistry, and held a Temperance Convention, headlined by Frances Willard, and the crowds returned. To hold the interest—and attract the dollars—of a broad audience, Vincent and Miller added more lectures and educational classes each year. While Sunday school meetings remained on the program, the "financial support" provided by fee-paying vacationing Victorians drove Chautauqua's rapid secularization.\(^6\) Enrollment in the summer courses gradually increased, and by the end of the century the Assembly's season lasted sixty days and included lectures by eminent figures like Ulysses S. Grant and William James. Anthony Comstock, author of the eponymous 1873 federal law banning the distribution of pornography through the mails, visited in 1877; he warned the audience about "obscene and corrupting publications and their dissemination among the young.\(^7\)

By the following season, Vincent had devised a plan to "counteract the influence of our popular pernicious literature.\(^8\) In August 1878, Vincent announced to the assembled Chautauqua participants his creation of the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle, a program that would counter the destructive reading habits of the nation. A four-year cycle of study in history, natural sciences, English and American literature and criticism, and

---


\(^7\) Ibid., p. 45.

\(^8\) Vincent, *The Chautauqua Movement*, p. 35.
theology, the CLSC would “develop higher and nobler tastes; increase mental power; exalt home-life, giving authority and home-help in public-school studies, and organizing home into reading circles.”9 CLSC members would meet in groups to discuss the ideas and facts they learned in their independent reading, and thus obtain a “college outlook.” Having never attended college himself, Vincent believed fervently that academic education did not require a university classroom, since “all true education is self-education.”10 Rigorous, disciplined independent study combined with group discussion could yield benefits far beyond a college diploma, “promoting good fellowship and fraternity, inspiring help to the home, the Church, and the State.”11 The CLSC mimicked college culture by organizing members into classes by year of enrollment and issuing diplomas to readers completing the course. These academic trappings endowed the CLSC with an air of intellectual legitimacy. Moral authority mattered as much as collegiate prestige, though; the CLSC boasted that eminent Christian leaders approved all texts used in the course. A panel of CLSC counselors, composed of liberal theologians like Lyman Abbott and Edward Everett Hale, assisted Vincent in selecting the books for each year. Thus the CLSC offered members a chance for morally sanctioned self-education.

The course for the first year was ambitious, including two textbooks written by Vincent himself, *English History* and *Greek History*, two books on English history and

---

9 Ibid., p. 35.


literature, and three on Greek history and culture.\textsuperscript{12} Two surveys of astronomy, a brief course in human physiology, and two theological books filled out the syllabus. Roman, American, and Asiatic history and literature formed the curriculum in subsequent years, while Christian texts were assigned less frequently. Fiction was first added to the book list in 1881 with \textit{The Hall in the Grove}, Isabella Macdonald Alden's novel about four girls visiting the Chautauqua Assembly, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's \textit{Evangeline} and Nathaniel Hawthorne's \textit{Biographical Stories} were approved in 1882 and 1883, respectively. Guidance in the philosophy and practice of self-culture could be found in Lyman Abbott's \textit{Hints for Home Reading}, a collection of essays published in \textit{The Christian Union}. CLSC counselor Edward Everett Hale contributed \textit{The History of the United States}, and Vincent wrote several more texts as well, including \textit{Outlines of General History}, \textit{Roman History}, and \textit{Christian Evidences}. Given the large readership of CLSC texts, it seems likely that Vincent, Hale, and Abbott profited personally from sales of these books, since "publishers and authors maneuvered for CLSC adoptions of their works."\textsuperscript{13} Apparently they found a pleasant convergence in self-interest and philanthropy; their Christian credentials positioned them both to authorize and to gain from selecting their own texts. The \textit{Chautauquan}, a monthly magazine published under the auspices of the Chautauqua Assembly, likewise developed into a profitable venture serving CLSC members. Begun in 1880, supplemental required readings were published in the magazine edited by Theodore Flood and his young assistant Ida Tarbell. Containing news about the summer assemblies and local CLSCs, general-interest articles, and

\textsuperscript{12} "CLSC Book List," collection of the Smith Memorial Library, Chautauqua Institute, Chautauqua, New York.

\textsuperscript{13} Morrison, \textit{Chautauqua}, p. 61.
opinion pieces, *The Chautauquan* functioned as a tool for interpreting and clarifying CLSC principles to a scattered membership.

Inspired by the doctrines of the new Social Gospel, Vincent hoped to conscript the home as a training ground for his “missionaries of culture.”14 By the late nineteenth century, labor unrest and urban blight had roused Protestant leaders to argue for a “Christianization” of progressive social reform. Liberal theologians like Walter Rauschenbaush and Washington Gladden took an environmentalist view of social problems like poverty and crime, and they called Protestants to augment their prayers for the needy with material aid. The Social Gospel challenged distinctions between the sacred and the secular, seeing God's immanence in all aspects of life and in all people; therefore, Christians working for social justice worked for Christ.15 Vincent subscribed energetically to these ideas, holding that “the call of Christ's church was better government, a more just social order, wiser education, and a Christian civilization here on earth.”16 “Culture,” in Vincent's view, could generate social change. "Culture" entailed white middle-class Protestant values like traditional family structures, an industrial capitalist work ethic, and liberal education. As God could be found in good books as well as the Good Book, inculcating the CLSC membership with culture represented Vincent's own version of the Social Gospel.

In accord with his universalist precepts, Vincent envisioned a broad membership; “all

---


16 Quoted in Eckman, "Regeneration through Culture," p. 19.
are alike welcome to its fellowship," the CLSC announced in its pamphlets.17 As will be demonstrated later, actual membership in the CLSC tended to fit a far more circumscribed demographic profile, but the CLSC leaders wanted especially to recruit "the poorest and meanest of people," those whose cultural deficiencies were most dire. In Vincent's thinking, these "poorest and meanest" people needed the CLSC course most desperately, as they were least able to repel the continuous predations of insidious "influences" in popular culture. College graduates and captains of industry, too, required help in sifting through the growing number of texts available to them. United in Chautauqua circles, indigent and affluent, parents and children, men and women would meet on a common cultural ground where all barriers fell away. The CLSC would "take people on all sides of their natures, and cultivate them symmetrically," therefore equalizing social relations.18 Group reading was crucial to the CLSC's ideology of reading; members pursued the course not merely as an end in itself, but to realize personal and social transformation by developing affectional ties with each other based on their shared intellectual pursuits.

This "relational reform" program hinged on a carefully designed curriculum. The CLSC's ideology of reading held that the unregulated literary marketplace jumbled moral and immoral books haphazardly together, and unsuspecting Victorian readers unwittingly consumed both profane and pure texts. By screening out the profane, the CLSC offered participants a pure literary diet.19 Book selection criteria in Chautauqua's ideology of reading can be found in the rhetoric of Chautauqua leaders, the pages of The Chautauquan,

18 Vincent, The Chautauqua Movement, p. 73.
19 Ibid., p. 85.
and the assigned CLSC texts like Abbott's *Hints for Home Reading*. Echoing Jacksonian assertions of an "age of reading," this ideology argued that an abundance of periodicals, books, and novels enabled Americans to indulge their baser desires by savoring "worthless" literature and bypassing "positive additions to knowledge." The assumption that reading was integral to the lives of most Americans pervades CLSC writings. In *Hints for Home Reading*, M.F. Sweetser commented, "There was never a people so addicted to reading as our own, even amid the electric rush of western life," and *The Chautauquan* concurred; "This is preeminently a reading age." Notably, Chautauqua writers rarely discussed the problem of illiteracy or of failure to read at all, seeing their mission as ensuring that people read the right books, not encouraging them to read in the first place. The proliferation of printed matter in Victorian America offered readers a wide array of texts; as Joan Shelley Rubin points out, the last quarter of the nineteenth century saw a booming market of cheap fiction reprints, which accounted for a large proportion of the tripling in book titles produced by American publishers between 1880 and 1900. Almost eleven thousand magazines and newspapers were published in the United States between 1885 and 1905. Periodicals, while imparting useful information about current events, could distract readers from literary and philosophical works with enduring value. The *Chautauquan* editors, commenting on this avalanche of ephemeral literature, wrote that "every intelligent observer is aware that a large share of the publications

---


21 According to Louise Stevenson, "By 1860 almost all native-born American whites could read: more than 93 percent of men and 91 percent of women. Literacy rates were highest in the northeastern states, slightly lower in the western states, and lowest in the southern states." *The Victorian Homefront*, p. 30.

of the day are absolutely worthless,” particularly those that included serialized fiction.\textsuperscript{23} Clearly, a great proportion of the reading public found such literature not worthless, but attractive, as evidenced by library circulation patterns. A report by the Boston Public Library alarmed editor Sweetser. He remarked, “more than half of the volumes circulated by this great library, with all its safeguards and in one of the most enlightened communities of America, are vapid even if not vicious, and unimproving, if not absolutely harmful.”\textsuperscript{24} Although a “system of library legislation” had been considered, cultural arbiters like Noah Porter pointed out that even in a good library “intelligent young men” may be inadequately prepared to assess “how or what to choose for their immediate needs and desires.”\textsuperscript{25} Porter, a Yale professor, published \textit{Books and Reading, or, What Shall I Read and How Shall I Read It?} in 1872 to guide young and unschooled readers in developing self-culture. He foresaw dire consequences in careless reading, remarking that “it is an employment that may leave behind the most powerful impress for good; or which may reduce the soul to utter barrenness and even scathe it as with devouring fire.”\textsuperscript{26} Chautauqua writers were no less apocalyptic in their warnings. In Lyman Abbott’s vivid formulation, “The bird that eats carrion becomes coarse-fleshed; the man who reads carrion becomes coarse-minded.”\textsuperscript{27}

In accord with the sentiments of many cultural commentators of the day,


\textsuperscript{24} Sweetser, “Hints for Home Reading,” \textit{The Christian Union}, vol. XX, no. 23, (December 3, 1879), p. 466.


\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., p. 9.

\textsuperscript{27} Letter from Lyman Abbott to John H. Vincent, 8-17-1889, read to the assembly at the CLSC Recognition Day ceremony, from WSB Scrapbook, vol. II, Smith Memorial Library, Chautauqua, New York.
Chautauqua's reading ideology classified books within a normative scheme constituting two categories, which can be termed tonic reading and toxic reading. Tonic texts invigorated the mind, molded and strengthened moral faculties, and elevated the spirits of the reader. Conversely, toxic texts stunted intellectual development, blunted moral senses, and bred dissatisfaction and restlessness. While tonic reading effected self-culture, toxic reading engendered self-debasement. Many reading advisers used metaphors of consumption, referring to texts as "intellectual food" or "poison," and the act of reading as "eating;" a contemporary advice book suggested that "some [books] are to be tasted, some swallowed, and some digested." To extend their metaphor, books were medicines in unlabeled bottles, potentially hazardous or healing, and the advisers' work was to mark each text with a warning or a dosage.

Although the CLSC took as its motto "We study the Word and the Works of God," the Bible never appeared on CLSC reading lists. CLSC leaders assumed that their Protestant audience needed no coaxing to read the Bible, instead assigning theological books like *The Character of Jesus*. Since familiarity with the Scriptures formed the tacit basis of the CLSC curriculum, leaders saw no reason to prescribe the most tonic Book of all. "Christians with cultivated tastes" needed texts that cohered with liberal Protestant values; books like *Biblical Biology* offered an alternative to Darwinian science. Likewise, Greek history both trained members in Biblical geography and offered cultural cachet. Like the Christian leaders who argued that "religion needed art if it was to continue to attract followers in the future,"

---


Chautauqua's Christian advisers attempted to combine religion and literary culture.\textsuperscript{30} The CLSC represented an attempt to regularize reading by selecting "moral" books for its members, much as Harvard President Charles Eliot would promise readers that his "Five-Foot Shelf" book collection could furnish them with a liberal education.\textsuperscript{31}

Chautauqua's advisers singled out two sorts of texts for their harshest attacks—pornography and fiction. "Most injurious and damning" were "cheap publications easily within the reach of the young; and illustrated publications whose pictures have been stamped upon the very souls of the land."\textsuperscript{32} As Anthony Comstock reminded his listeners in his 1877 speech to the Chautauqua Assembly, pornography had proliferated in the years after the Civil War. Sexually explicit novels, story papers, and photographs circulated widely in the 1870s and 1880s, and Free-Lovers like Angela and Ezra Heywood scandalized and titillated Victorian Americans with their frankly erotic publications.\textsuperscript{33} Comstock was not alone in his crusade to criminalize and eradicate pornography. The Women's Christian Temperance Union founded a Department for the Suppression of Impure Literature in 1883, and local chapters of Comstock's Society for the Suppression of Vice were organized across the country.\textsuperscript{34}

Although the Comstock Act had banned obscene and explicit literature and photographs from


\textsuperscript{32} "Editor's Outlook," \textit{The Chautuaquan}, January 1881, p. 187.


\textsuperscript{34} D'Emilio and Freedman, \textit{Intimate Matters}, pp. 159-60.
the mails, CLSC advisers well knew that such materials were still available in the anarchic literary marketplace. They definitively labeled pornography as toxic for youth, but they rarely commented on adult pornography users; whether they believed (presumably male) adults impervious to either pornography’s appeal or its deleterious effects is unclear.

Children were susceptible to polluting literary influences even within the home, according to the CLSC. Fiction came under fierce attack as a genre that corrupted the reader’s intellectual capacity to appreciate more valuable work: “the constant reading of fiction is deleterious in the extreme, as it not only gives the individual addicted to it false and distorted views of life, but it is also sure to render the mind unfit for the consideration of all serious and weighty subjects,” cautioned The Chautauquan\(^5\). Women, of course, comprised a high proportion of fiction readers, and they were frequently named as principal offenders. John H. Vincent, in his inaugural speech, singled out women as not only fiction addicts, but inadequate mothers:

> You see mothers going home on a Saturday evening with cheap ten cent papers and novels with which they propose to while away the hours of the coming Sabbath. They have a thirst for something; no one directs or corrects it. They follow their own tastes and desires; and the children are brought up in the atmosphere of that home, reading the same books and suffering the same mental deterioration.\(^6\)

This critique seems to be directed particularly at working women, and resembles the comments of Unitarian minister Johnathan Baxter Harrison in his 1880 report on a New

\(^{35}\) “Editor’s Outlook,” The Chautauquan, march 1883, p. 359.

\(^{36}\) Vincent, The Chautauqua Movement, p. 85.
England textile factory. Harrison wrote that young women workers read “vapid, silly, turgid and incoherent” story papers desultorily, as an “opiate for the mind” to while away their free time.\(^{37}\) By guiding the reading of women, then, Chautauqua advisers hoped to interrupt the transmission of a appetite for toxic literature from mothers to children.

Consternation about women’s fiction reading was not unique to Victorian America. Cathy Davidson has found a chorus of complaints as early as the 1790s about the popularity of the novel from elite critics ranging from Jonathan Edwards to Thomas Jefferson; their critiques were largely aimed at female readers, whose energies were diverted from household duties and, more importantly, child rearing, by tantalizing stories of vice and scandal.\(^{38}\) Over the next decades, fiction lost some of its stigma, and avenues of self-education became more organized and widespread, but cultural leaders continued to inveigh against “immoral” literature. By the Jacksonian era, the lure of the novel seduced even stalwart opponents, and fiction of “high character” gained respectability and champions like Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story and Brown University President Francis Wayland in a New England “age of reading.” Judicious reading, according to public intellectuals, reinvigorated moral sensibilities blunted by the vagaries of the industrial market. Further, the social flux of the early Industrial Revolution offered distinct advantages to men who demonstrated genteel cultural discernment. Familiarity with the novels of Sir Walter Scott or the life of Julius Caesar could


be instrumental to forming useful acquaintances and achieving wealth and social rank; lyceums, literary societies, and libraries were important agencies for achieving “self-culture” and savoring its perquisites.39

Women occupied a limited corner of this communications environment. The ideology of separate spheres created a highly delimited space for female intellectualism, in which “literacy was required of all women, not just the upper class, and morality became a transcendent responsibility.”40 As mothers and wives, women could supervise their families’ moral education, direct their children’s reading, and in the process school themselves. In this context, the chastity of texts, rather than their intellectual rigor, occupied women's literary advisers like Sarah Josepha Hale. As editor of The Ladies’ Magazine and Godey’s Lady’s Book, Hale “urged women to select their [reading] materials with ‘judgement and good taste and discretion.’ Only those works that performed the task of ‘ennobling and purifying the human soul’ were recommended, and the reader was warned to banish anything ‘unworthy [of] a mind of delicacy, good taste, and moral sentiment.’”41 While Hale championed women’s reading in the essays and engravings she published, she constrained her imagined woman reader in a narrowly defined vision of women’s roles, in which educating her children and conversing with her husband are primary motives for the graceful reading women figured in Godey’s lithographs. The continuing popularity of fiction by writers like E.D.E.N


40 Ibid., p. 163.

Southworth and Fanny Fern aroused the concern of many magazine editors, such as a male writer for the *Southern Literary Messenger* who “felt it especially imperative ‘to impress upon the minds of young women the necessity of reading...romances, novels, and tales with great caution,’ since only through guided reading would a women ‘be fitted for the sphere in which she should revolve.’”

Certainly, many women simply ignored the officious advice of these editors. The Seneca Falls Convention, the proliferation of female-run social reform organizations, the founding of women’s academies and schools, and the burgeoning ranks of female writers and editors in the antebellum period and post-Civil War years point to a female reading population that had ventured beyond its circumscribed curriculum. Still, few women's literary advisors recommended Mary Wollstonecraft.

By the time that Chautauqua leaders began devising their own reading program, women were eager to attain the self-culture that men had successfully wielded to gain power and stature. John H. Vincent felt that these elite men needed to rub elbows not only with the culturally disadvantaged, but with the materially disadvantaged. Surveying the remarkable success of the CLSC in its first years, Vincent commented with satisfaction:

This Circle represents all classes of society...The Chautauqua literature fulfills a much-needed ministry towards people who occupy the so-called highest positions in society. One of its best ministries is this: It brings these people into contact with the plain, practical, hardworking, every day, ordinarily intelligent people, who need the influence from that realm, and who have the most wholesome influence to exercise.

---

In fact, the Circle consisted mainly of middle-class readers, and never involved a significant number of "every day" laborers. As Charles Kniker's analysis of CLSC membership data has shown, "the Circle appealed mainly to those who were or who became the prestigious, professional, wealthy, and powerful in their communities. The ranks of the Circle contained teachers and farmers, it is true, but few factory workers and unskilled laborers." Circle members tended to be young Protestants. In 1884, three-quarters were between the ages of 20 and 40, and while a few Jewish and Catholic groups existed, most readers were Methodists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, or Baptists. These "nice people," as John Vincent called them, predominated in the CLSC not merely because of the content of the curriculum, but also because the CLSC advertised and recruited members primarily through Protestant publications and conferences. In later years, the CLSC also ran advertisements in middlebrow magazines like *McClure's Monthly* and *Harper's Bazaar*, which were directed toward middle-class readerships.

It should be noted that the CLSC did not appear to make any effort to reach out to black Americans or to immigrant populations, although they do not appear to have discouraged these groups from joining, at least on the national level. The surveys that the CLSC administration required members to complete did not request information on race or ethnicity; thus, no data on rates of black Americans' or immigrants' participation in the CLSC

---


45 All data on CLSC member demographics is taken from Charles Kniker, "The Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle", pp. 55-108. Kniker's research constitutes the most systematic and detailed analysis of the CLSC available.
are available. Anecdotal evidence shows, however, that members were overwhelmingly white (for example, photographs of CLSC members taken at national meetings show rows of white faces). Vincent and the CLSC Counsellors evinced common racial views for white liberal evangelicals; they believed that education, Christian conversion, and inculcation of "Anglo-Saxon" white cultural values could "uplift" blacks and immigrants, but asserted that these measures could not mitigate the inherent racialized deficiencies of blacks and non-"Anglo-Saxon" immigrants. These views are reflected in Chautauquan articles on "Negro Women in the South" and "How the Saxons Lived." After 1900, the CLSC's white supremacist rhetoric became significantly more strident and nativist.

Other than whiteness, the most obvious characteristic of the CLSC membership is a significant plurality of women. Of the 8,246 people who enrolled in the first CLSC class, 62.5% were female, and women comprised 75% of graduates completing the reading cycle. This overrepresentation of women would become more sharply pronounced over time; in the period 1882-1893, approximately 75% of all participants were female, and their proportion rose to 82.5% of all graduates. Multiple reasons appear to account for the feminization of the CLSC. Middle-class women were less likely to work outside the home, and more likely to have enough leisure time to devote to the readings. As Kniker notes, CLSC members

---


49 Kniker, "The Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle," pp. 396-97. This trend continued in the early twentieth century - in the period 1902-1914, the proportion of female graduates rose to 88.5%.
were those who had missed the opportunity for college," and few women had such an opportunity in the first place. And the Christian imprimatur that the CLSC Counsellors lent the curriculum attested to the moral probity of the readings. CLSC ideology provided a relatively friendly climate for middle-class women. From the beginning, its leaders and publications showed support for greater social equality for women. An early editorial in the Chautauquan advocated coeducational colleges and universities, remarking that "as to differences of intellect, they are neither so constitutional nor 'unconstitutional' as to disqualify [women]" from higher education." The CLSC responded to the interests of women members by adding a special section, the "Women's Council Table" to the Chautauquan after 1890. Articles on fashion and childrearing ran alongside biographical sketches of Margaret Fuller and accounts of female missionaries in Africa. While the magazine's editors reserved their particular praise for nurturing mothers and women "moral reformers," they published pieces that promoted expanding women's labor opportunities and political involvement as well.

The feminization of the CLSC aroused concern among its administrators, who rarely mentioned in their advertisements or acknowledged in their literature that women made up its chief constituency. Indeed, by 1890 Emily Huntington Miller, the Dean of the Women's Department at Northwestern University, pleaded with her listeners at the summer Assembly: "One other thing I wish to say is occasioned by the constantly increasing number of women in our classes and the corresponding decrease of men. In your circles do not leave out the

---

50 Ibid., p. 89.

51 "Editor's Outlook," The Chautauquan, January 1883, p. 235.
fathers, brothers, and sons in your home. They need this reading just as much as the women do in their lives."\textsuperscript{52} Having aspired to "promote, in all possible ways, the glorious brotherhood of honesty, sympathy, and culture,"\textsuperscript{53} the CLSC was dismayed to find that a sisterhood had enrolled instead. Kate Kimball, the CLSC administrator, downplayed the prevalence of women in the Circle in her retrospective "Twenty five years of Chautauqua Circle Work," writing that "while many of the circles were composed entirely of women...more than fifty percent included both men and women."\textsuperscript{54} Later in the same piece, describing the influence of the Circle, Kimball remarked that "about fifteen years after the organization of the CLSC the present woman's club movement began to develop, and its influence for good upon the country at large is felt in every way."\textsuperscript{55}

Actually, the women's study club movement began about ten years before the organization of the CLSC, and the relationship between these two movements is worth tracing. Scattered groups of women had been meeting to read together as early as 1635, when Anne Hutchinson invited women in the Massachusetts Bay colony to gather in her home to discuss theology, but the Victorian women's study club movement dated formally from 1868, when journalist Jane Croly Cunningham and her friends founded Sorosis in New York City.\textsuperscript{56} The charter of Sorosis cited the purpose of the group as “to promote agreeable and

\textsuperscript{52} Chautauqua Assembly Herald clipping, WSB Scrapbook, volume II, p. 110, Smith Memorial Library, Chautauqua, New York.

\textsuperscript{53} Vincent, The Chautauqua Movement, quoted in Arthur Bestor, Chautauqua, p. 54.

\textsuperscript{54} "Twenty-five years of Chautauqua Circle Work," The Chautauquan, July 1903, p. 389.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., p. 892.

useful relations among women of literary and artistic tastes,” thus reflecting the middle-class values of its founders. Sorosis set aside half of each meeting for presentations by members of papers on literary and artistic topics, and club members convened an Association for the Advancement of Women in 1873, which lobbied for increased educational and labor opportunities for women. Over the next twenty-two years, women's study clubs sprang up across the country, ranging from “The Pioneer Reading Club” in Grand Forks, North Dakota, in which fifteen “thoughtful women, most of them absorbed in domestic cares,” gathered “for the purpose of reading for general improvement,” to “The Conversational Club” in Cleveland, Ohio, which devoted itself to comprehensive historical inquiry, including “America from prehistoric times,” “The South American Republics, the British Colonies in North America, and to the development and history of States.” The study programs of clubs were diverse, although most pursued courses of reading in Greek and Roman civilization, American and British history and literature, and fine arts, like music and art history. Study club membership proved far less diverse; their members were “predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant,” and solidly middle class. In other words, women's study clubs involved the


57 Quoted in Martin, The Sound of Our Own Voices, p. 49.

58 Croly, History of the Women’s Study Club Movement in America, p. 323, 979.

same demographic population as the CLSC, largely followed a similar study program to the CLSC, and began to proliferate contemporaneously with the CLSC.

As the experiences of the Lincoln, Nebraska, CLSC will indicate, the relationship between the CLSC and the women's study club movement was more than coincidental. In 1888, the year that the Lincoln group began meeting, only one study club, the “Renaissance Club,” existed in the city, according to Croly’s *History of the Women’s Club Movement*, and members were, with one exception, all wives of attorneys.60 During the first months of the Lincoln CLSC’s prison group, a chapter of Sorosis started up in Lincoln. The chair, William Jennings Bryan’s wife, proposed “Henry George and the Flat Tax” as the first discussion topic. The women of the Lincoln CLSC, for their part, had already enrolled in a coeducational study group that promised them moral uplift and intellectual opportunity. When they visited the Nebraska State Penitentiary every other Sunday with their copies of Chautauqua books like *From Chaucer to Tennyson* and *Walks and Talks in the Geological Field*, the Lincoln CLSC hoped to give prisoners a chance, in the words of female Circle member, to take “a step toward something better” as well.61


61 Letter from C.E. Welch to Kate Kimball, October 7, 1890, microfilm reel 1146, Smith Memorial Library, Chautauqua, New York.
CHAPTER TWO:  
INCARCERATION AND THE WORD

In December 1884, wardens and chaplains from Northern prisons met in Chicago to discuss their common concerns and to share ideas on prison management. Chaplain P.W. Howe, from Lincoln, Nebraska, was silent during most of the discussions, but when the group turned to “Libraries and Reading Matter for Prisoners,” he spoke up assertively. Howe told the group that

Convicts as a rule have been in the habit of reading a loose class of literature . . . I have found that a large portion of the criminals come from the lower ranks of society, and that their reading has had great influence in leading them to crime. We ought, therefore, to have the best kind of reading in our penitentiaries for these men.¹

Chaplain Howe echoed the designers of the first modern U.S. prisons when he suggested that reforming inmates' reading could reform inmates. Unlike his 1820s counterparts, though, Howe and his colleagues believed that prisoners needed culture as well as Christ. While early prison libraries stocked only Bibles, prison reformers advocated the addition of popular titles and periodicals by the time the Lincoln CLSC began meeting.

The shift of prison book culture from the sacred to the secular followed a larger shift in penal regimes over the course of the nineteenth century. The manifest failure of the prison to engender remorse and rehabilitation eroded the zeal of early penal theorists. Commentators directly linked this failure to the almost insuperable difficulty of managing the prison according to plan. Overcrowding, crooked wardens and abusive guards, recalcitrant

inmates, and escalating costs undermined the humane and Christian ideals that the prison was supposed to embody. A flurry of prison reform organizations, less concerned with converting convicts than with refinement of administrative policies and rehabilitation programs, worked to reengineer the prison in the 1870s and 1880s. These organizations, borrowing from the ideas of antebellum women prison reformers, advocated the expansion of prisoner education programs and reading materials. The Nebraska State Penitentiary evinced problems far more severe than a shortage of books, however, and horrific conditions there shocked even seasoned prison reformers.

Squalid, violent, and repressive from its erection in 1877, the Nebraska State Penitentiary was, by all accounts, a miserable place to serve out a prison sentence. As a newly admitted frontier state, Nebraska might be expected to run a tough, bare-bones prison for lawless cowboys and bandits. Yet Nebraska's institution copied almost exactly the Auburn penal regime developed by abolitionists and Boston Brahmins. In one crucial way, however, Nebraska differed from other Northern and Western prisons. Nebraska leased its entire

---

2 Although David Rothman's influential work *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971) situates the birth of the modern carceral institution in the United States as a response by Jacksonian thinkers to social disorder, recent studies have pointed out that in fact, the prison was a European creation which first gained currency in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania in the 1780s. See Adam Jay Hirsch, *The Rise of the Penitentiary: Prisons and Punishment in Early America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), Michael Ignatieff, *A Just Measure of Pain: The Penitentiary in the Industrial Revolution, 1750-1850* (New York, 1978), Edward Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th Century American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), and Michael Meranze, "Public Punishments, Reformatory Incarceration, and Authority in Philadelphia, 1750-1835" (Ph.D. dissertation, Berkeley, 1987). The refinement of penal strategies into the Pennsylvania and Auburn systems, however, occurred in 1823 and 1825, respectively, and while use of the prison had been largely confined to the industrialized Northeast, other states built their own prisons throughout the Jacksonian period. The visit of Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave Auguste de Beaumont to the United States to view and report back to France on the modern American penitentiary, and the subsequent publication of their book, *On the Penitentiary System in the United States* (1831; reprinted Carbondale, Illinois, 1964) is exemplary of the prominence of the penitentiary in public debate. While it is clear that the modern penitentiary did not spring fully formed from the minds of early American reformers, it is also clear that the penitentiary was a focus of controversy for intellectuals, politicians, and public policy thinkers throughout the Jacksonian period.
prison out to businessmen who managed the institution in exchange for convict labor, much like postbellum Southern prisons. Nebraska's mostly white prisoners comprised a chain gang within the penitentiary walls, in the same labor arrangement as the black chain gangs that worked in Southern coal mines and sawmills. How Nebraska managed to synthesize these apparently disparate systems requires a review of nineteenth-century prison history. Northeastern prison planners in the 1820s mapped out a system of punishment that accommodated both humanitarian ideals and repressive exploitation; Nebraska's prison merely carried out their ideas to a logical extreme.

American reformers first experimented with the prison in the 1770s and 1780s as an alternative to penal methods in use throughout the colonial period. The corporal punishments—like hanging, whipping, and branding—and pecuniary sanctions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries depended on community structures that no longer obtained in the early republic. Public humiliation reverberated more strongly in the small, stable towns and villages of the colonies, and tortures and executions frequently ratified violence and created centers of lawlessness around the scaffold, rather than deterring potential offenders. Criminality presented a subversive challenge to the tenuous social contract in the years after the Revolution; the older methods of punishment seemed outdated, prompting innovative penal strategies. Simply removing the criminal from the public sphere proved a compelling solution for bourgeois reformers. Early penitentiaries in Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, and Virginia tried to follow the prescriptions of European theorists like Cesare Beccaria and

---


Jeremy Bentham, who recommended a three-pronged penal strategy of labor, moral indoctrination, and solitude. Few observers considered these institutions successful, however; Philadelphia's Walnut Street Jail was "an Augean stable of filth and iniquity," and in Virginia, prisoners planned "conspiracy against the keeper and the guards" and "repeated schemes of escape." Other state prisons built before the 1820s exhibited similar problems.

Benjamin Rush, a prominent physician and abolitionist, and Philadelphia Quakers led the reorganization of Pennsylvania prisons in the 1820s. The Pennsylvania Society for the Improvement of Public Prisons, organized in the 1770s, had been dissatisfied with the disorder and brutality of the Walnut Street Jail. The Society convinced the Pennsylvania legislature to build a new prison based on Quaker ideas of spiritual rebirth. Their penal regime, eventually called the Pennsylvania system, isolated prisoners in individual cells to reflect on their sins in silence. Remorse and loneliness would eventually drive prisoners to beg for spiritual guidance, the Society theorized. At that point, a prison chaplain would offer a Bible and religious tracts, and the warden would provide materials for labor that the prisoner could perform alone in his cell. Thus the inmate found Jesus in the depths of his despair, and transformed from a criminal to a Christian by the time of his release. The Eastern State Penitentiary, completed in 1829, enacted the Society's system.

In 1825, New York prison planners came up with a scheme with broader appeal. The Auburn penitentiary also isolated prisoners at night in individual cells with only Bibles for

---

company. During the day, however, inmates worked together in prison workshops. Most attractive to state legislators, private businesses contracted for the labor of convicts, thus generating revenue for the state and making the prison profitable, at least in theory. Auburn convicts netted New York over $25,000 between 1828 and 1833 from weaving, stonecutting, and coopering contracts.⁶ As the Committee on State Prisons reflected in 1831: "A few years since, even in our own country, the idea of realizing from the labor of those, who had, by offending against the laws, been cut off from society, a sufficient amount to sustain the expense of their confinement, was regarded as a dream of the speculative visionary."⁷ Auburn made this dream a reality. Quaker prison planners railed against the Auburn system, arguing that even silent inmate congregation disrupted introspection and rehabilitation, but their pleas largely fell on deaf ears.⁸ Revenue took priority over rehabilitation as virtually every Northern state, and several Southern states, built or reorganized their prisons after 1825 in accord with the Auburn plan.

The profit motive intrinsic to the Auburn plan does not contradict the real idealism that planners invested in their visions of the prison. Many of the men (early prison planners were almost universally male) who pushed for adoption of Auburn-style prisons led Northeastern evangelical and social reform movements, such as Arthur Tappan, the wealthy New York abolitionist, Lyman Beecher, a prominent Congregationalist minister and social reformer; and Nathaniel Willis, Boston publisher of religious newspapers. Others wielded

---


political and intellectual influence, like Francis Wayland, Brown University president. The Boston Prison Discipline Society, which counted these men as members, declared that its object, "THE IMPROVEMENT OF PUBLIC PRISONS," was "approved by the Savior of the world;" to "oppose or neglect" this duty was sinful. Prison planners viewed convict labor as not merely a clever financing scheme, but also a moral imperative. Especially in the industrializing North, labor itself carried high normative value, and prison planners believed that regular productive occupation ennobled and improved convict laborers. Convicts could gain skills in trades like stonecutting or blacksmithing in prison workshops. Prison work prevented the vice of "idleness," the source of crime according to many contemporaries. Idle time equaled wasted time, and in the industrializing North, lost revenue as well. In the "Age of Benevolence," prison planners hoped that convicts would be reborn as Christians while being transformed into industrious laborers. The spirit of business-class reform, replete with republican ideology and religious fervor, infuses the Boston Prison Discipline Society's assertion that in prisons where "labor has been systematically introduced, and industriously prosecuted. . . a vast amount of moral evil has been prevented. . . labor is not only a means

---


of support, but an auxiliary of virtue."\textsuperscript{13} Auburn advocates found a happy felicity, not a contradiction, in the blending of moral reformation and profitable industry.

Nowhere is their idealism--and its repressive underpinnings--more evident than in the question of prison reading. When they finished their shifts, prisoners returned to their cells and to long hours of solitude. Prison planners imagined that loneliness and boredom would drive inmates to open the Bible and hungrily ingest the word of God.\textsuperscript{14} Prison architecture reflected the importance of solitary reading; the Boston Prison Discipline Society advised that prison cells should be constructed to admit enough light "to enable [inmates] to read the Scriptures."\textsuperscript{15} The scattered evidence on early prison libraries reveals that inmate reading matter was restricted exclusively to the Bible and religious tracts; novels and newspapers could not effect the spiritual rebirth that was supposed to occur in the cell.\textsuperscript{16} Prison chaplains

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Fourth Annual Report of the Boston Prison Discipline Society (1829), p. 61. On republicanism and prison labor, see Hirsch, Rise of the Penitentiary, pp. 50-54, 55, 75-76; Ayers, Vengeance and Justice, pp. 40-46. There is a curious incompatibility between republican ideology and compulsory labor, even for inmates. Hirsch hypothesizes that Edmund Morgan's formulation of the paradox of slavery and republican ideology in Virginia can be applied to the prison: "in northern colonies, the firm establishment of liberty made Americans less suspicious of, and eased the way for, a special form of slavery." Hirsch, p. 76. The question of free labor agitation against convict labor is beyond the scope of this thesis. On worker resistance to prison industry, see Hirsch, pp. 100-101; Blake McKelvey, American Prisons: A History of Good Intentions (Montclair, NJ: Patterson Smith, 1977), pp. 50-51, 116-131; Alex Lichtenstein, Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South (London: Verso, 1996).
  
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Prison planners' conception of the way inmates would read the Bible echoes what Robert Darnton has described as the Protestant antecedents to "Rousseauistic reading" in eighteenth century France: "Rousseauistic reading would explode the conventions established at the height of the classical period by Boileau. It would revolutionize the relation between reader and text, and open the way to romanticism. At the same time, it would revive a way of reading that seems to have prevailed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: reading to absorb the unmediated Word of God." Darnton, The Great Cat Massacre, and Other Episodes in French Cultural History (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), p. 232.
  
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Reports of the Boston Prison Discipline Society, vol. 1 (1826), p. 8.
  
\end{itemize}
worked alongside guards and wardens as official moral advisers and Bible tutors. Chaplains sometimes discovered that their charges could not read, and consequently added literacy instruction to their other duties. For Rev. Gerrish Barrett, chaplain at New York's Sing Sing prison, the Bible doubled as a reading primer, and he was moved by hearing an inmate read aloud the 88th Psalm: "It never seemed half so impressive before . . . As he spake about stretching out his hands, and daily calling upon the Lord . . . I could not but hope and pray that he might be describing his own practice." Prisoners did not always respond so satisfactorily to the strict literary diet: as one former Boston prisoner fumed in his memoir, the "prohibition of all books, letters, and papers for the use of convicts, save the bible and temperance almanacs, is absolutely hellish, abominable, damnable." Inmates may have longed for more diverse reading matter in part because insistence on silence profoundly limited communication in the prison. Talking to other prisoners in the workshop or through cell doors, making eye contact with visitors, or even smiling warranted punishment. And the punishments meted out warranted obedience.

Prison discipline involved a complex web of rules intended to manage prisoners' labor and reformation. Prison regimes regulated inmates' self-expression, relations with each other and with guards, and physical movements. Borrowing heavily from disciplinary dressage developed by military theorists, wardens managed inmates by managing their bodies, from

---


dressing convicts in stripes to requiring them to march in lockstep. Likewise, preventing prisoners from talking to each other figured centrally in all prison programs; separate cells and rules of silence were intended to eliminate opportunities for inmates to communicate. Penal theorists viewed prisoner interaction as a polluting influence, whereby the introspection required for contrition was disrupted, and the seasoned criminal instructed the novice, giving rise to “schools of fell and hideous depravity.” Prisoners who violated these rules achieved the unique status of outlaws among criminals—and in punishing those whom they were already punishing, prison administrators kept alive the physical tortures that the prison was supposed to replace. Prison planners and workers debated the merits of various corporal punishments, from the ball and chain, to whipping, to the iron gag (an apparatus worn over the head which held the tongue securely), to scalding or freezing showers. Pennsylvania’s Eastern State Penitentiary deprived prisoners of food for up to three days; Vermont’s Windsor Prison bound inmates in an “iron jacket;” New York’s Auburn prison used “the crucifix.” Popular and uncontroversial was the “dark cell,” a smaller than usual cell with little light, where inmates were bound and fed bread and water—and thus deprived of the opportunity to read the Bible.

When it came to chastising prisoners who were supposed to be repentant, not recalcitrant, a genuine breakdown of reformers’ idealism is apparent. After touring Northern

---

20 On dressage, see Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 135-141.


prisons in 1845, Dorothea Dix tried to explain how a “shower bath” was more humane than a whipping. Her discomfort is apparent: she wrote that the bath “is a mode of discipline which may be, and which has been abused, but so has and may be every other form of punishment.” Later in the same paragraph, she conceded that “so various are the tempers and characters of convicts, that there can properly be no one prescribed form of correction.”

Prison planners had expected that hardened inmates would soften and bend under the penal schema of Christian indoctrination, forced labor, and rigorous discipline. Wardens' constant reliance on corporal compulsion to subdue truculent prisoners exposed the violence undergirding penal theories, blurring their humane veneer.

One of the earliest signs that prisons operated very differently from reformers' plans appeared in the experiences of female convicts. The small number of female convicts, and the widespread belief that women were singularly indisposed to commit crimes, allowed most public officials to worry little about the predicament of female prisoners. Low rates of female incarceration can be explained in part by women's limited sphere; as historian Estelle Freedman has pointed out, “imprisonment developed simultaneously with the growth of 'republicanism,' the extension of political liberties and economic rights to men. The punishment for abusing these privileges was the denial of political and economic liberties through imprisonment. Women, however, had fewer liberties to abuse.”

Most female prisoners had been convicted of public-order infractions like prostitution, public indecency, or adultery—crimes that violated the circumscribed boundaries of home and hearth.

---


Theoretically, prison rules prohibited contact between female and male prisoners, and guards were expected to maintain this separation. Yet, in 1826 in New York's Auburn prison, a female convict became pregnant while incarcerated; she was beaten to death by a guard after giving birth to her child. Virtually every other state reported pregnancies of female convicts.\textsuperscript{26}

While New York, Massachusetts, and Indiana all built separate women's prisons by the end of the nineteenth century, most states simply clustered female prisoners in small cellblocks and assigned them tasks like darning socks and washing clothes.

In the antebellum period, women joined the prison reform movement to aid women prisoners. Baltimore's warden reported that a Mrs. Rachel Perijo took charge of female convicts in 1822, after evidence of "vile abuses" emerged. Mrs. Perijo taught them "useful arts," like knitting, sewing, and spinning, and with her daughter, also taught them to "read in the spelling book."\textsuperscript{27} Other women reformers founded a female auxiliary to the Prison Association of New York in 1845. Abby Hopper Gibbons, daughter of abolitionist and prison reformer Isaac Hopper, joined forces with other upper-class New York women like authors Caroline Kirkland and Catherine Sedgwick; they resolved to open an "asylum," or halfway house, for women released from prison. The group declared their solidarity with women prisoners by calling them "sisters" and extending a "helping hand."\textsuperscript{28} The halfway house aided over 3,000 women prisoners between 1845 and 1864, benefitting from the publicity Margaret Fuller, a prominent Transcendentalist and intellectual, gave them in her \textit{New-York Tribune} column. Fuller herself visited women prisoners in New York's Sing Sing prison, and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{26} Ibid., p. 16.
\item \textsuperscript{27} \textit{Third Annual Report of the Boston Prison Discipline Society} (1828), pp. 213-14.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Freedman, \textit{Their Sisters' Keepers}, pp. 29-35.
\end{itemize}
in a letter to them offered literary reformation: "I wrote to some of the ladies of Boston on your account, and they will send you books which may, I hope, encourage the taste for reading which it gave me pleasure to hear that so many of you show. Should you acquire a habit of making good books your companions they will form your minds to a love of better pleasures than you have hitherto possessed." Like their male counterparts, most women prison reformers believed that Bible reading and Christian conversion were key to reformation, but they seem to have ascribed rehabilitative qualities to secular books earlier than men. Perhaps women reformers' faith in literature's redemptive power stemmed from their own reading experiences; the "solid social realism" of early American novels offered women readers a critique, albeit covert and limited, of male patriarchy, and an imaginary arena for exploring greater autonomy and agency within women's sphere.

Certainly Eliza Farnham, the women's matron at Sing Sing prison, trusted wholeheartedly in literary reading as a rehabilitative strategy. Between 1845 and 1848, Farnham inaugurated a radical new reading program in the prison; a Fourierist and phrenologist, Farnham considered the existing prison library, comprising seventy-five copies of Richard Baxter's *The Unconverted Sinner*, to be wholly inadequate. With the help of her assistant Georgianna Bruce, a former resident of the Transcendentalists' Brook Farm community and an acquaintance of Fuller, Farnham acquired novels by Dickens and by E.D.E.N. Southworth, periodicals, and travelogues. She held that the "utility of well-adapted

---

29 *The Letters of Margaret Fuller*, III, p. 238.


books to ignorant and immoral persons is beyond dispute. If there be any way to turn a man from evil deeds, it is to give him new thoughts.” An erstwhile Quaker turned atheist, Farnham saw moral lessons in literature, and while few other reformers, male or female, ignored the Bible so fully, more prison reformers would share her conviction in the value of secular reading by the 1870s. Along with reading reform, Farnham abolished rules of silence and refused to whip prisoners, and combined with her “infidel” interests in phrenology and socialism, her views infuriated both staff and managers of the Sing Sing prison. Chaplain Luckey resented the incursion of “immoral” books onto his library shelves, and prison managers chastised her for examining convicts' skulls. Farnham resigned in 1848, ending the broadest antebellum experiment with secular prison reading.

Women reformers brought new perspectives to prisoner rehabilitation. The Auburn and Pennsylvania systems relied on structural components of the penal regime to change convicts into converted Christian laborers; prison architecture, rules, and labor systems constituted rehabilitative agents along with the Bible. By contrast, women reformers conceived of their relations with women convicts as a rehabilitative agency. Calling convicts “sisters” expressed women reformers' conviction that gender leveled differences between them and the “fallen women” in the prison. Sororal affection would domesticate the female inmate, making her amenable to “lessons of self-control” and “instill into her ideas of purity and industry.” The limits of this female relational reform became apparent in all-women's prisons built after the Civil War, where administrators soon found themselves recreating many

---

32 Quoted in Sullivan, "The Big House is Also a Home," pp. 15-16.

33 Freedmen, Their Sisters' Keepers, p. 32.
of the repressive conditions of men's prisons. When the Lincoln CLSC visited inmates in Nebraska, sharing Fuller and Farnham's faith in books' redemptive powers, they too would find that power relations complicated relational reform.

While scandalous conditions for women prisoners had drawn women reformers to the prison, conditions were equally terrible for male convicts. At virtually every institution, visiting reformers discovered shocking conditions, often almost immediately upon the opening of the gates. Allegations of graft and egregious abuse of inmates by brutal guards and wardens surfaced at Auburn as early as 1828, where the warden was fired for "appoint[ing] men of loose and irregular lives" as guards and for "committ[ing] petty speculations, and abus[ing] his convicts."34 Pennsylvania's legislature investigated charges of extreme cruelty and immorality at Eastern State Penitentiary in 1835; the investigative committee could not agree whether the iron gag and cold showers in fact constituted cruelty.35 The New Jersey prison physician suggested in 1843 that the shower-bath punishment be revised, as "in many cases, the offender, at the termination of his punishment had more the appearance of a person suffering from consumption, than from the correction for a breach of discipline."36 Inmates devised various tactics to communicate with each other, from wall tapping to whistling; in Virginia, a prisoner was whipped for whispering through the drain pipes.37 Constant influxes of new prisoners caused crowding and rendered inmate separation impossible; more and more prisons housed two or three inmates in one tiny cell. Not only did this practice controvert a

35 O. Lewis, Development of American Prisons and Prison Customs, p. 221.
37 Keve, History of Corrections in Virginia, p. 58.
central tenet of penal theory, but it subjected convicts to sharing cells with dimensions, on average, of eight feet by four feet. By the 1850s, only prison workshops seemed to be functioning as planned. While the proceeds from convict labor only defrayed prison expenses, rarely generating enough income to cover operating costs, states liked the idea that convict laborers were earning their keep.

In response to the almost continuous stream of scandals and investigations, prison planners insisted that administrative failures, not structural deficiencies in their penal theories, were to blame; or they suggested minor changes in prison regimes, like expanding educational programs or providing more aid to convicts upon their release. As Foucault has commented: "Prison 'reform' is virtually contemporary with the prison itself: it constitutes, as it were, its programme. . . . The prison has always formed part of an active field in which projects, improvements, experiments, theoretical statements, personal evidence and investigations have proliferated."  

Prison reformers' abiding interest in "improving" the prison served primarily to legitimate its existence; debates about the prison hinged on refinement and improvement of incarceration technologies, but did not question the idea of incarceration itself.

Women prison reformers, initially drawn to the plight of female convicts, argued for a reorganization of prison programs for both males and females. Yet women reformers, like their male counterparts, did not question the premises of the prison itself.  

Following a tour of New York City's penitentiary on Blackwell's Island in March 1845, Margaret Fuller excoriated the failures of the prison administration, but clearly endorsed the prison itself as

---

38 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 234-35.

39 One notable exception to this pattern is Fanny Fern, who did actually challenge the idea of incarceration as a rehabilitative strategy. See Jennifer Luff, "Discipline versus Punishment: The Prison Journalism of Margaret Fuller and Fanny Fern," unpublished ms.
an institution. She offers her criticisms to suggest improvements, commenting, "There is no reason why New York should not become a model for other States in these things. There is wealth enough, intelligence, and good desire enough, and surely, need enough." Similarly, Dorothea Dix, who toured Northern prisons in 1845, remarked that "the best system ever devised by human wisdom, if badly administered, may become the fruitful source of almost incredible miseries and corruption. . . the good system, ignorantly or viciously administered, becomes as great an evil to the prisoner and to society, as the very worst system ever devised or tolerated." Abolitionist and writer Lydia Maria Child championed the work of Eliza Farnham and suggested that "a practical adaptation of our civil institutions to Christian principles would prove an immense saving of money to the State;" Child apparently viewed Farnham's secular program as embodying Christian values of loving gentleness and forgiveness. Women reformers were no more immune than men to what Foucault called the "self-evident character that prison punishment very soon assumed. . . It seemed to have no alternative, as if carried along by the very movement of history." South of the Mason-Dixon line, prison construction proceeded more slowly than in the North; even so, by 1861, only the Carolinas and Florida had not built Auburn-style penitentiaries. Just as republican ideology smoothed the transition from public punishment to prisons in the North, Southern republicanism complicated that transition. While Northern

40 Dix, Remarks on Prisons and Prison Discipline, p. 7.


42 Foucault, Discipline and Punish, p. 232.

43 This discussion of antebellum Southern prisons is drawn from Ayers, Vengeance and Justice, pp. 34-72. Rothman's Discovery of the Asylum and most other prison histories neglect the particularities of antebellum Southern prison development.
republicanism looked to the state to guarantee individual freedom, Southern republicanism suspected the incursion of the state in local community structures. Since free white men dominated Southern political discourse to a greater extent than in the North, they saw no need for a powerful state to ensure their liberty. Instead, they feared that a powerful state would undermine that liberty. Despite the regional particularity of Southern conceptions of republicanism, most Southern states decided to build penitentiaries for the same reasons that Northern states did: to remove criminals from the public sphere, to prevent potentially disruptive public punishments of whites, and to reform criminals. As in the North, the suspension of citizenship constituted the most acute imaginable punishment in the South, perhaps more so because slavery provided an immediate illustration of non-citizenship's hazards. Southern governments never viewed slaves as potential prisoners, as slaveholders wielded total disciplinary control over them. Thus for the white and free black convicts subject to incarceration, the penitentiary functioned in the antebellum South much as it did in the North. The Southern legislators, newspaper editors, and governors who championed the prison used the same sorts of arguments as Northern prison advocates, adding the idea that the prison represented a "civilized" solution to the problem of crime. Virginia prison advocates likely responded to the presence of the penitentiary in Europe as well as the North when they hailed the prison as "one of the distinct lines of separation between a barbarous and an enlightened age."\(^\text{44}\)

Auburn-style prisons promised financial incentives to Southern governors, their most consistent proponents, and once built, Southern prisons followed almost identical trajectories

\(^{44}\) Quoted in Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, p. 55.
of high-minded reform rhetoric and violent, profit-driven practice. Chaplains made the rounds of cells with Bibles; inmates marched silently to prison workshops; and wardens punished disobedient inmates with whips, cold showers, and solitary confinement; as historian Edward Ayers writes, "in virtually every facet of their antebellum history the penitentiaries of North and South were far more similar than different."\textsuperscript{45} In their administration of convict labor, though, Southern states differed from most Northern prisons. Five states—Alabama, Louisiana, Missouri, Texas, and Kentucky—experimented with convict leasing. In contrast to the contract labor system, in which states sold the labor of convicts in prison workshops to private businesses, the lease system allowed entrepreneurs to rent the entire prison out. Prison lessees took over financial responsibility for managing the penitentiary, from feeding to guarding inmates, in exchange for free rein over convict workers. Southern states retained varying degrees of control over prison operations; in Alabama, prison wardens and guards worked directly for the state, while in Kentucky and Missouri lessees hired and supervised all prison staff.\textsuperscript{46}

Convict leasing was a logical extension of the ideas shaping the Auburn prison system. The Boston Prison Discipline Society and other early prison planners offered a clearly articulated, universal blueprint for achieving prisoner rehabilitation and state profit. By following this blueprint, a private citizen could implement the Auburn system just as easily as the state. Further, in the Auburn system private businesses already purchased the labor of convicts. Why not allow employers to simply take over the prison, maximizing profits for

\textsuperscript{45} Ayers, \textit{Vengeance and Justice}, p. 70.

employers and relieving the state of the financial burdens of managing convict labors? This argument gained strength from the agitation of citizens who challenged the appropriateness of the state's involvement in the marketplace; that is, why should the state spend tax dollars to support its own industry at the expense of private business? Such arguments held greater sway in the South, where anti-government sentiment was strong. The Boston Prison Discipline Society and some skeptical Southern citizens questioned whether prison lessees would pursue any form of convict reformation in their hunger for profit. Conditions in these leased prisons seemed to confirm such suspicions. Visiting the Kentucky penitentiary in 1843, the Society's representative found "no chapel, nor Sabbath school, nor library, nor chaplain. . . no expense is incurred in attempts to enlighten and reform the inmates." In Missouri, inmates in the prison leather workshop murdered their overseer and escaped in 1841; repeated prison breaks enraged Missouri citizens, and they angrily called for an end to the lease system, to no avail. A later prison reformer summarized well the hazards of the lease system: "the lessee, seeing nothing but a money transaction in his lease, speculates on the food and clothing as he does upon the labor: if he loses on the clothing, he indemnifies himself on the food." It appears, though, that conditions in antebellum leased prisons differed from those using contract labor only in degree. Whether they worked for the state or for a private

---

47 Again, free-labor agitation against prison industry is beyond the scope of this thesis, but in the South as in the North, labor organizations helped shape state decisions about convict labor. See Ayers, Vengeance and Justice, pp. 34-72; Lichtenstein, Twice the Work of Free Labor, passim.


contractor, convicts experienced severe privation. Only after the Civil War did the full ramifications of the lease system become apparent.

In the years after the Civil War, the tenor and leadership of the prison reform movement changed significantly. After the massive Union mobilization of war relief efforts, most notably the United States Sanitary Commission, many Northern women refused to fade back into the background of social reform organizations. As women's suffrage groups battled for the franchise, other women asserted authority in municipal aid societies, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the settlement house movement, and a host of other large and small organizations. Benevolent and reform organizations burgeoned with women affluent enough to tend to people and problems outside their families and neighborhoods. Postbellum prison reform groups, while led by men, found within their midst increasing numbers of women with their own ideas about penal strategies. Particularly within the National Conference of Charities and Correction, women expanded their purview from female convicts to the entire prisoner population.51

Founded in 1874, the National Conference of Charities and Correction (NCCC) was an early professional organization for social workers. Newly organized state charity boards sent delegates to the NCCC's annual meetings, where they met and shared ideas with representatives from various sorts of public welfare institutions like insane asylums and almshouses.52 Prison wardens and staff attended meetings occasionally, but prison staff more


52 Freedman, Their Sisters' Keepers, p. 39.
frequently joined the National Prison Association (NPA), a group which coalesced in 1870 under the leadership of Enoch Cobb Wines. Under the aegis of the New York Prison Association, Wines had published a compendious survey of American and European prisons in 1867; his book criticized shabby prison construction, poorly trained guards, and "cruel and degrading" corporal punishments. Certainly Wines' critique was not new; observers and reformers had decried these very problems since the 1830s. Borrowing ideas from the wardens and chaplains he met during his research and from penal experiments in Australia and Ireland, Wines suggested that prisoners should work for their freedom by demonstrating remorse and good behavior. Rather than confine prisoners for an inflexible sentence determined by a criminal court judge, inmates would be sentenced for a range of years and released early or later depending on their behavior. This new "reformatory" system abandoned rules of silence and prisoner separation in favor of expanded basic and "moral" education. Inmates would still work at hard labor, although prison industries offering marketable skills to inmates should be secured. Despite its different constituencies, the NCCC wholeheartedly embraced Wines' ideas.

Few states actually converted their prisons to reformatories before 1900. To do so required a heavy financial investment; existing prison architecture could hardly accommodate the inmates crowded inside, let alone new classrooms, and legislators recoiled at spending extra tax dollars on teachers and moral instructors. State sentencing laws also needed to be rewritten to permit indeterminate sentencing, and most judges scoffed at the notion of

---


relinquishing their sentencing authority to prison chaplains and wardens. And in the nineteenth century, public commentators sometimes attacked excessive concern for the well-being of convicts. Charles Dudley Warner wrote a scathing article 1885 article in the North American Review: "The rosewater treatment has no effect on this [criminal] class, as a rule. Holidays, occasional fine dinners, concerts, lectures, flowers--we are going ridiculously far in this direction."\(^5\) New York's Elmira Reformatory, supervised by warden Zebulon Brockway, provided an equivocal exemplar of the reformatory scheme. Brockway lectured and published widely on the merits of the Elmira system, but an 1894 investigation revealed that he resorted to vicious whippings at a rate incongruous with his humanitarian pose.

In practice, the rhetoric of the new generation of prison reformers largely served to ratify penal policies already in use. States abandoned their stated intentions to maintain prisoner separation and double, triple, or quadruple-celled prisoners without compunction.\(^5\) Expanded prisoner libraries and education programs did gain wide support.\(^5\) In his travels, Wines discovered that most state prisons had added secular books to their shelves by the late 1860s. Prisons acquired new books haphazardly, often as donations, and their collections seem to have consisted mostly of fiction. The Illinois State Penitentiary proclaimed that its four thousand books constituted the largest prison library in 1877. Fiction made up the preponderance of Illinois's collection, with titles by E.D.E.N. Southworth and other women novelists leading the list. In an era when moralists warned against the invidious effects of


\(^5\) Rotman, "The Failure of Reform," p. 175; McKelvey, p. 138-39.

\(^5\) The following discussion of prison libraries is drawn from Sullivan, "The Big House is Also a Home," pp. 19-26.
"loose reading," the consequences of such books for convicts seemed particularly dire. The New York Prison Association issued a guide to suitable books for prison librarians in 1876, ranking Charles Dickens, Walter Scott, and Anthony Trollope as "most useful." Reformers' conceptions of proper inmate reading bear a striking resemblance to contemporary reading advisers' recommendations for the general public. Prison workers and reformers, inhabiting the same popular culture as the men and women joining Chautauqua's reading circles, seem to have absorbed the same ideas about the influence of reading. Thus, a prison superintendent could tell his colleagues in 1884, "If newspapers can form our ideas for good, why should they not have the same effect on convicts? I would certainly admit to prisons all the reading matter that I consider good for myself and family."58 Prisoners needed hearty "mental food," according to a penal theorist in 1895; such sustenance could be found in secular reading as well as the Bible, for convicts and the general reading public alike.59

Meanwhile, Southern prisons had evolved into virtual plantations. South and North Carolina both hastily erected prisons to confine freedmen and women who were arrested and convicted under "Black Codes," laws designed expressly to target blacks. Georgia, Florida, Tennessee, Mississippi, the Carolinas--one after another, Southern states converted to the lease system. A tiny minority in Southern prisons before the War, blacks now comprised an overwhelming majority. Ninety-one percent of Georgia inmates in 1878 and sixty-seven percent of Tennessee inmates in 1879 were black. Southern states entirely abandoned any


pretense of convict "reform," remanding inmates over to lessees for hard labor in coal mines and on plantations and railroads. The abuses of the postbellum lease system far eclipsed any pre-war prison scandals. Forty-one out of every thousand leased convicts died in prison in the South, compared to Northern mortality rates of 15 deaths per thousand.\(^{60}\)

Clearly, the origins of the postbellum Southern lease system lay in the theories of Northeastern prison planners. The South merely reworked policies that derived from Auburn-style prisons, and that had been in place prior to the Civil War, to create their close approximation of slavery. Some white Southerners like Julia Latimer Felton and George Washington Cable, both wealthy literati, lobbied against the convict lease system. Northern citizens who traveled in the South reported the shocking conditions there, as did a writer for the *Christian Union* in 1879: "Any person possessed with a particle of humanity needs only to walk up a street undergoing repair in order to be filled with shame and intolerable disgust and anger at the present chain-gang law. . . nothing in slavery ever equaled the infamy and the wrongs of this most iniquitous law."\(^{61}\) Prison reformers reacted more sympathetically. The National Conference of Charities and Correction met in Nashville in 1894, and leader Frederick H. Wines (the son of National Prison Association founder Enoch Cobb Wines) spoke approvingly of the convict lease system. He told conference participants "It is utterly impossible for us who live in the North, with our local civilization and customs and ideas growing out of local conditions, to bring our institutions and methods down here, and make

---


them fit your people. . . the presence of the negro [in the South] makes it difficult to deal with prisoners and paupers in a satisfactory manner.” Wines declined to criticize the South's peculiar new institution of convict labor.

Only seven years earlier, the NCCC convened in Lincoln, Nebraska. By 1887, the Nebraska State Penitentiary had been operating for ten years, and from the beginning, Nebraska leased out the prison and all its inmates to Nebraska businessmen. While the warden, chaplain, and physician worked for the state, the prison lessee hired and supervised the guards, provided food and clothing, and operated various industries on the prison grounds, from a barrel-making workshop to a brickyard. NCCC members may have read the description of Nebraska's prison in E.C. Wines's 1880 book, *State of Prisons and of Child Saving Institutions in the Civilized World*, which reported that Nebraska prison administrators “give prominence to the reformatory element in punishment. It is made a primary aim of the State-prison to educate the head and heart, to reform and elevate the prisoners.”

After touring the penitentiary, conference attendees ate “a bountiful lunch” and settled down to talk. Nebraska Governor John Thayer told the group that he knew that convict leasing was unpopular, but he carefully supervised the penitentiary, even visiting sometimes to pray with convicts: “I go down occasionally to worship with [inmates], so that they may feel and know that those in authority are interested in their welfare; and some of the convicts


have told me that they were sure they had a friend in the governor." He may have sounded defensive to his listeners, as some of them found the prison atmosphere bleak. A Pennsylvania delegate reported that the convicts "look very dejected. . . their cells small, poorly lighted, and ventilated." Wines attributed the miserable environment to the convict lease system, and he hoped to "awaken the deliberate, earnest thought of the people in this State" about the "moral right" of the convict lease system. Wines expostulated:

I have visited nearly every prison in the United States, and many in Europe, and I give you my word that I have never,--I speak as a matter of conscientious obligation,--I have never been in a prison where I was so filled with the sense of gloom and depression on the part of the prisoners as in this prison at Lincoln. . . I did not see a smile upon one single face, from the lessee, through the warden and the guards, down to the convicts. . . Is there a duty on the part of the citizens of Nebraska to the prisoners confined in this prison, which remains unfulfilled?

P.W. Howe, the Nebraska prison chaplain who had spoken firmly about the benefits of secular books in prison, attended this meeting. So did Mrs. A.M. Davis, the wife of a carpet manufacturer, who would join the Lincoln CLSC a year later. Perhaps Mrs. Davis remembered Wines's words about the gloomy convicts in the Nebraska State Penitentiary in 1889, when her friends in the CLSC brought up the idea of taking their reading circle into the prison.

64 Proceedings of the Fourteenth National Conference of Charities and Correction, p. 278.


Wines's attack on Nebraska's convict leasing, however, seems to have made little impression on the governor. Nebraska would continue to lease out the prison until 1895, after an inmate died for failing to follow the directions of the lessee's overseers; the Lincoln CLSC would be intimately involved in the events surrounding his death. When the Lincoln CLSC brought their books to the Nebraska State Penitentiary to help convicts "take a step toward something better," they seem not to have known how bad things really were.
Upon admission to statehood in 1867, Nebraska's legislators designated Lancaster, a tiny village of only thirty inhabitants, as the state capital. Plots of land sold quickly in the city, renamed Lincoln, and the legislators reconvened in 1869 in their new Capitol building. Planning for the future of the state, the second Nebraska Congress authorized funds for two key institutions, the University of Nebraska and a temporary prison. By 1871, classes began at the University, while it would be another four years until the Nebraska State Penitentiary accepted its first inmates.¹

Over the next twenty years the city's population swelled to forty thousand, and the village metamorphosed into a modern city with streetlights, telephone wires, and an opera house. The University figured prominently in the social and cultural life of Lincoln's small but powerful elite, who celebrated its opening with “appropriate literary exercises.”² The Penitentiary, located three miles out of town, operated more invisibly to improve life in the city. In sharing Chautauqua's “college outlook” with Nebraska prisoners, members of the CLSC bridged the distance between the two buildings, both for themselves and for prisoners. Excluded by the all-male University, the women of the CLSC became teachers in the prison; prisoners became students as well as inmates. Through their reading circle, both prisoners and upper-class urbanites entered social institutions otherwise off-limits.


Quickly, relations between the prison readers and the Lincoln readers changed from pedagogical to familial. Prisoners reacted to the friendly overtures of the Sunday visitors with far more alacrity than to the *Chautauquan*, and stirred by the inmates' despair, the CLSC offered nurture plus self-culture. Conditions in the violent and repressive Penitentiary warped the parlor relationships of the CLSC, though, and scandal exposed the unpleasant complicity of Lincoln reformers with the penal regime. In the end, Lincoln Chautauquans severed their ties to the prisoners and retreated back into the safety of their homes in the city.

Railroads brought settlers both to Lincoln and Nebraska. Organized as a territory under the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act to open land for a Northern transcontinental railroad, Nebraska joined the Union in 1867 as workers laid the final miles of track across the state. Around fifty thousand people, most of them native-born whites, lived in Nebraska in 1867; by 1880, four hundred thousand settlers joined them, and the state's residents doubled again to more than one million by 1890. Nebraska's new citizenry included a large contingent of immigrants (some attracted by the short-lived Nebraska Immigration Bureau) besides railroad workers who remained after completing their work. German and Scandinavian immigrants predominated among foreign-born inhabitants, trailed by other Western Europeans and a small bloc of Russians and Poles. Almost half the native-born population reported immigrant parents.³ Black citizens made up less than one percent of total Nebraskans in 1880, and clustered in Lincoln and Omaha.⁴ Most of the men and women pouring into Nebraska filed homestead claims and began farming grains and livestock; Nebraska farmers produced 10

---


⁴ Federal Writers Project, *Nebraska*, p. 103.
percent of the nation's corn by 1890. Other settlers moved to the cities springing up along railroad tracks. Lincoln's population burgeoned after the Burlington and Missouri Railroad completed a line to the town in 1870.5

A professional elite managed the retail and wholesale industries based in Lincoln. The capital city's banks, stockyards, and meat-packing plants serviced farmers and speculators.6 As bankers, merchants, and government workers in Lincoln got rich, they pushed for city improvements from a sewer system to a public park and fussed when citizens pastured cows on the University campus.7 In Lincoln's first few decades, social stratification into a small upper class eager to enjoy the perquisites of the "tastes and education of an eastern environment" and a large lower class whose labor made elite leisure possible became pronounced.8

Looking back on Lincoln in the 1880s and 1890s, Annie Miller remembered a "goodly number of cultivated people . . . accustomed to the pleasures of intellectual intercourse in their eastern homes" who joined various literary and cultural groups. The first chancellor of the University and his wife found an "earnest and cordial welcome" from "Our Literary Club," organized by a young Episcopal minister. The group assuaged its longing for Eastern sophistication by reading Washington Irving's Knickerbocker History of New York. The Shakespeare Club gave plays from 1879 until 1886, when they "exhausted the club possibilities of Shakespeare;" the glee club sang every Fourth of July in the city pavilion.

5 Olson, History of Nebraska, p. 197; Creigh, Nebraska, p. 83.
6 Federal Writers Project, Nebraska, p. 182.
7 Olson, History of Nebraska, pp. 202, 256-57.
8 Creigh, Nebraska, pp. 120-21; Miller, "The Social Life of Pioneer Lincoln," p. 47.
Studying the “history, literature, art, and architecture of Egypt” occupied the sixteen women of the Lotos club. Literary culture offered a consoling intellectual link to the lives and communities upper-class transplants had left behind.

While Lincoln intelligentsia strove to equal the refinement and culture of Eastern cities, the prison warden pronounced the Nebraska State Penitentiary to be on par “with any other institution of the kind in the United States.” Whether Easterners would accept either claim of parity seems unlikely. Convicts finished building the permanent Penitentiary in 1875 under the supervision of lessee W.B. Stout, who won the construction contract in 1870. Nebraska's legislature paid Stout $307,954 to erect the four-hundred cell structure, and Stout rented convict laborers at forty-two cents per day. The state hired and supervised prison guards and managed the temporary prison during these years. Severe drought, the Panic of 1873, and a locust plague depleted state coffers, and the legislature assembled in 1877 determined to economize. A Senate committee appointed “to inquire into the propriety of establishing a manufactory at the penitentiary” considered a prison factory to be quite proper, and the legislature immediately negotiated a new contract with Stout. Nebraska agreed to pay Stout an average per diem of sixty cents for each convict, to “feed, clothe, and house” inmates “equal to . . . other penitentiaries in the United States,” and gave Stout full authority over the “grounds, yards, shops, and outbuildings” of the prison; he would hire guards and

9 Biennial Report of the Warden of the Nebraska State Penitentiary for the years 1879 and 1880 (Lincoln, Neb.: State Printers, 1881), p. 56.


11 Olson, History of Nebraska, pp. 159-183.
staff and could “exercise the exclusive right to assign convicts to trades and occupations.”\textsuperscript{12}

Whether state legislators knew about the abusive, racialized convict lease systems in place throughout the South is unclear. It does appear that Northern public discourse took up the problem of the Southern lease system in the mid-1880s, with the publication of George Washington Cable's stinging indictment \textit{The Silent South}.\textsuperscript{13} Regardless, legislators may have reasoned that a lessee could manage the prison at least as humanely as the state itself. In 1875, while the state still held the reins of prison discipline and management, the legislature heard testimony that the warden “treated the said prisoners with inhuman cruelty . . . inflicted upon them excessive and unreasonable punishment . . . compelled them to eat unwholesome food.”\textsuperscript{14} Guards punished prisoners by hanging them from manacles with their “hands above their head, and [their] toes just touching the floor,” for days at a time without food or water. The legislators recommended a “thorough and complete reformation in the treatment of the convicts,” and that “the voice of humanity and reason be heard and heeded in the prison discipline.”\textsuperscript{15} Following the pattern of prisons elsewhere, reform efforts arose coevally with the founding of the prison itself.

Stout took over the Nebraska State Penitentiary on a six-year contract in 1877, and the Nebraska legislature found his management satisfactory enough to extend his contract for

\textsuperscript{12} Quoted in Boom, “History of Nebraska Penal Institutions,” pp. 60-61.

\textsuperscript{13} George Washington Cable, \textit{The Silent South} (1883; reprint, New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1907). See Ayers, \textit{Vengeance and Justice}, pp. 185-222 passim, on both local and Northern opposition to the Southern lease system.


\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 87.
another six years when it expired. The prison warden, chaplain, and physician worked for the state, and Stout supervised all other employees. Stout paid guards between twenty and thirty dollars per month, a wage that, according to Chaplain P.W. Howe, attracted "a class of men that is low down, lower down than many of the convicts in the prison." 16 The guards' wages included room and board, but they had to live in the Penitentiary, and get special permission to leave the grounds when off-duty. Guards may have felt like prisoners themselves, obliged to live with privations like "a very unpleasant and unhealthy stench" coming from the continually stopped-up sewers, and leaks in the roof causing water to course down the walls.17

Inmates' lives followed the rhythms of the postbellum Auburn system, working together under rules of silence during the day, and spending evenings alone with their cellmates. Wearing striped uniforms, they trooped to the prison workshops for ten- to twelve-hour workdays. Stout subleased some prisoners to other businesses and ran some workshops himself. For example, in 1882, thirty-four convicts worked in the stone shop, ten in the brickyard, twenty in the harness shop, and twenty-three made brooms. Eleven prisoners ran the steam laundry, and fifty-three convicts farmed (apparently on the prison grounds); the Aetna Cornice and Iron Shop and the Western Manufacturing Company employed forty-five men.18 Stout seems to have taken little interest in the new penal theories being discussed by the National Prison Association and the National Conference of Charities and Correction. Nebraska did adopt one key component of the new prison reform platform,

16 Quoted in Boom, "History of Nebraska Penal Institutions," p. 51n.


early release for good behavior, but how that system worked is unknown.\textsuperscript{19}

As in antebellum Northern prisons, Chaplain Howe assumed responsibility for “reforming” inmates, and the expanded educational programs of other contemporary prisons did not exist in Nebraska. Howe’s remarks to his colleagues in 1884 on the value of “the best kind of reading” for convicts show his desire to offer uplifting literature to his spiritual charges, but the prison library was “in very poor condition.”\textsuperscript{20} Either the legislature or Stout would have to purchase new books, and neither seemed inclined to do so. When Howe told other prison workers that he was perfectly comfortable permitting inmates to read the same periodicals he “would admit into my family,” he may have been speaking out of expediency—the Illinois prison chaplain had recently donated one hundred “different magazines” to the prison library.\textsuperscript{21} Howe commented ruefully that “convicts have come to me and said, ‘Why don’t you bring us new magazines, instead of old ones?’ I have told them that I was not able to buy them . . . these men want good looking books, and not volumes that are tattered and frayed.”\textsuperscript{22}

Five years later, the Lincoln CLSC brought a new magazine, the \textit{Chautauquan}, and new sets of the Chautauqua books to the Penitentiary. The men and women in the Lincoln CLSC had all completed the four-year cycle of Chautauqua readings and earned their

\textsuperscript{19} In his report, Warden C.J. Nobes commented that “Most of the prisoners are making their good time,” but he does not explain how prisoners’ behavior was evaluated or “good time” computed. \textit{Biennial Report of the Warden}, p. 56.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid, p. 50.


\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Conference of Officers of Prisons and Reformatories}, p. 155-56.
graduation certificates—in fact, five of the participating women were alumnae of the 1878 CLSC class. Phoebe Elliott, a teacher and a member of the Lincoln Board of Education, encouraged graduates of various Lincoln CLSC circles to convene in a special “postgraduate” class, which would follow the same format as the regular CLSC but study one topic in more depth. She convinced twenty-two alumni, mostly women, to join up. Two of the female members, teacher Ellen Rollins and doctor Margaret Sabin, held professional jobs like Elliott. Other women were married to prominent local men, like Mrs. C.L. Hall, wife of a district court judge; Mrs. T.E. Calvert, wife of the Burlington railroad's general superintendent and Mrs. A.M. Davis, wife of a carpet manufacturer. Elliott chaired the first meeting in September 1888, and the group decided to study ancient Greek history and literature. Members quickly set to work researching papers to present at the next meeting in October. At the October meeting, members listened to a geography lesson by Mr. T.C. Stevens, the Lincoln Assistant Superintendent for Public Instruction. Then a dizzying panel of papers began. Mrs. Aitken, wife of a tailor, spoke on “Dorian migrations and its [sic] effects upon Greece;” Mrs. Calvert and Mrs. Davis discussed the “History of Sparta” and the “History of Athens,” respectively. “Gossip about Greece,” dished by grocer's wife Mrs. Johnson, preceded Elliott's talk on “Solon--The Athenian.” Women presented each of the nine papers given that evening, and over the life of the circle, women members continued to dominate discussion. Only six husbands (and no single men) actually joined the circle.23 The National Conference of Charities and Correction had visited Lincoln the previous year, and readings in the Chautauquan may have stimulated members’ desire to reach out to people less

23 The following discussion of the Lincoln CLSC is drawn from Eckman, “Regeneration through Culture,” pp. 152-55, 168-69.
fortunate than they. A column in October 1886 described the "peculiar and interesting" work of a minister in Colorado, who had been invited to conduct services at the Colorado State Penitentiary. Finding the warden a "splendid man" and "the boys . . . far from being stupid, ignorant or vicious," he suddenly thought to establish a CLSC in the prison. The Chautauquan editors heartily approved, writing that "Our method of organizing reading and study is peculiarly adapted to the wants of this class of persons and their interest in it will contribute powerfully to their intellectual and moral elevation . . . We hope that the experiment will be tried everywhere in prisons."24 Although the sentiments of CLSC leaders previously suggested a less generous spirit toward convicts--an 1885 column proposed that Alaska would make a fine penal colony as "it is useless to reform criminals in prison"--Chautauquan editors showed a marked new interest in reforming criminals in prison after 1886.25 Beyond a general concern for convicts' welfare, leaders may have realized that prisons contained a large new constituency for the CLSC, considering that enrollment rates began dropping off sharply beginning in 1886.26 In her "Annual Report of the CLSC," national secretary Kate Kimball described the founding of CLSC groups in prisons from Concord, Massachusetts, to Seattle, Washington, commenting with approbation that despite the "peculiar conditions" of prison groups, "good work has nevertheless been accomplished."27 By 1891, CLSCs met in ten different state prisons, with varying degrees of

24 "Editor's Outlook," Chautauquan, October 1886, p. 52.


longevity. Other than the Nebraska CLSC, the most vital groups seem to have been in the Massachusetts State Reformatory at Concord and the Minnesota State Prison in Stillwater.

In March 1889 the *Chautauquan* published a long article by Zebulon Brockway, warden of the Elmira Reformatory, which argued that prison regimes should include “careful education in school” and “train [the convict] in practical ethics, thoroughly testing his appreciation of common morality in his daily life; teaching him also . . . how to love and trust the Almighty Father of us all.”

Two Lincoln women, Mrs. M.D. Welch and Mrs. T.E. Calvert, attended the national CLSC conference, held in Chautauqua, New York, in August 1889. The Lincoln CLSC had been plugging away at their Greek studies, taking a break in March to visit the chemical laboratory at the University of Nebraska where a violin and coronet duo serenaded them, and holding picnics at Mr. and Mrs. Johnson’s farmhouse. At the conference, Chautauqua founder John H. Vincent described the CLSC prison groups already underway, and he asked his listeners, “Now who of these Chautauquans present, when you go to your homes, will look into this matter and see if it is not practicable to do something?” Mrs. Welch and Mrs. Davis stepped forward and volunteered.

Perhaps refined entertainments and civilized discussions with their peers proved unfulfilling to the upper-class women of the CLSC. In *Twenty Years at Hull-House*, Jane Addams wrote that as a young college graduate, she and her wealthy contemporaries struggled against

---


30 Ibid., p. 179.
the assumption that the sheltered, educated girl has nothing to do with the bitter poverty and social maladjustment which is all about her, and which, after all, cannot be concealed, for it breaks through poetry and literature in a burning tide which overwhelms her. . . . gibing her with a sense of her own uselessness.\textsuperscript{31}

Addams inveighed against the rarefied air of highbrow culture that lulled her into a soporific stupor, oblivious to the social blight pressing up against library doors and museum windows. Unlike their vigorous, altruistic mothers and grandmothers, Addams and her elite friends had been "lumbering our minds with literature that only served to cloud the really vital situation spread before our eyes."\textsuperscript{32} Addams founded Hull-House not merely to aid the poor, but also to help elite young women like herself "restore a balance of activity along traditional lines and learn of life from life itself;" and "in the very first weeks of our residence" at Hull-House, Addams and her friends started "a reading party in George Eliot's 'Romola.'"\textsuperscript{33} Like the settlement-house workers, the women of the Lincoln CLSC had immersed themselves in books while inmates at the Nebraska State Penitentiary labored in miserable drudgery. Vincent's appeal seems to have awakened Mrs. Welch and Mrs. Davis to a "really vital situation" right in Lincoln. When they returned home and presented this new reading project to their friends in the CLSC, the other members of the group agreed immediately to move their meetings to the Penitentiary. Two of the six married couples in the CLSC appear to have been most active in the Penitentiary work—T.H. and S.E. Leavitt, and M.D. and C.E.

\textsuperscript{31} Jane Addams, \textit{Twenty Years at Hull-House, with Autobiographical Notes} (New York: Macmillan, 1938), p. 73.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., p. 70.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., pp. 85, 101.
Welch. Leavitt, an accountant for the Burlington railroad, and his wife served as contacts with Kate Kimball, writing frequently to her about the progress of their efforts. Although the Leavitts wrote most frequently, other Lincoln members took turns going out to the Penitentiary and leading meetings. For example, Phoebe Elliott put questions to the Circle in May 1890. Mrs. Calvert and Miss Scott conducted “one of the most interesting and encouraging” classes “we have ever had” in December 1890; S.E. Leavitt “went down the last Sunday in December [1891] and conducted the Class, “ and she and Mrs. Welch planned to visit on a weekday in September 1891 to tutor inmates who “wished for help in their papers.”34 Mr. Welch, however, had a more intimate link with the Penitentiary. He worked there as the secretary of the Western Manufacturing Company, overseeing inmate laborers in the barrel-making workshop. So the Lincoln CLSC entered the prison gates with an inside connection; presumably Mr. Welch told his friends something of the situation in the Penitentiary, and his influence may have been instrumental in gaining the “unqualified favor and assistance of the Warden and Chaplain.”35 Mr. Welch supported the reading project by donating five hundred new books to the prison library in the first few months of the CLSC group, and Mrs. Welch attended meetings there regularly.

Despite the skepticism of Warden Dan Hopkins and Chaplain P.W. Howe, who warned the Lincoln group that “it was of no use to attempt anything of the kind, as it would amount to nothing,” the Chautauquans attended Sunday services in September 1889 to invite prisoners “disposed to undertake the course of reading, to remain for a few moments after the

34 *Daily Nebraska State Journal*, May 20, 1890; letter from T.H. Leavitt to Kate Kimball, December 11, 1890; letters from S.E. Leavitt to Kate Kimball, January 12, 1892 and September 18, 1891; all in ibid.

35 Letter from T.H. Leavitt to Kate Kimball, December 1889, CLSC Prison File.
others have retired.” Forty-eight remained for a brief orientation. The Chautauquans told them that “our object in coming was simply and solely to help them help themselves, so far as the strict rules, regulations, and discipline . . . would permit.” S.E. Leavitt christened the group the “Look Forward Circle” the following year, and the Look Forward Circle met on alternate Sundays for an hour until 1895. Thus Lincoln professional men and leisured ladies got to know thieves and murderers.

While even basic information about the individual prisoner members of Look Forward Circle is unknown, some clues can be found in the warden's 1880 statistical report. The Nebraska State Penitentiary housed young men, three-fifths of them in their twenties, and almost all under the age of forty. Most were born in the United States, almost half in Midwest states like Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. Another fifth came from Europe, declaring Germany, Ireland, and Scandinavia as their home countries in roughly similar proportions to the general population of Nebraska. Black convicts comprised a mere two percent of all inmates. Seventy percent were single, and the same number professed to be temperate. Only six percent could neither read nor write, and ninety percent could do both. A quarter of inmates claimed membership in Protestant churches and a few more in Catholic churches, but over half maintained no religious affiliation. A little less than half of convicts described themselves as farmers or laborers; more notably, skilled artisans and several professionals also filled Penitentiary cells. Two bakers and five cooks, four locomotive engineers and five

36 In their correspondence to Kate Kimball and other reports on the Look Forward Circle, the Lincoln Chautauquans rarely mentioned prisoners by name; further, Chautauqua Institute transcribers expunged the few prisoner names appearing in letters when preparing documents for microfilming. Prisoner demographic information is drawn from the 1880 warden's report because it is the sole such document available to this writer. Although the Look Forward Circle began ten years later, when the prison population had grown by a third, the statistical profile likely did not change much. For example, three women inmates in prison in 1880 comprised 1.5% of the 196 prisoners; by 1893, six women inmates comprised 1.8% of the 317 prisoners.
railroaders, three stonecutters, four painters, nine carpenters, seven shoemakers; a draftsman, four clerks, a bookkeeper, a civil engineer, a hotel keeper, a merchant, a preacher and lawyer, and a printer: prisoners reported an impressive spectrum of occupations in their lives before coming to the Penitentiary. A few worked in fields quickly becoming obsolete, like the sailmaker and the spinner, while opportunities for the gambler remained open.37

To summarize from the above, typical Penitentiary inmates the Chautauquans might have met would have been young, literate, native-born skilled workers, probably unmarried and non-religious men who denied any affinity for the bottle. These convicts sound like fine American men, just the sort who would thrive in the Nebraska prairies. How did they wind up in prison? Most of them stole. Fully two-thirds had been convicted of property crimes, like burglary, grand larceny, and robbery. A large complement of horse thieves rubbed elbows with con men who obtained money under false pretenses or passed forged paper. Virtually everyone else did time for violent crimes, including murder, manslaughter, rape, poisoning, and assault.38 In the Look Forward Circle, then, accountant Leavitt might have met an embezzling bookkeeper; Mrs. Calvert, wife of a Burlington railroad executive, could have talked with thieving railroad workers; grocer's wife Mrs. Johnson may have found common ground with a fraudulent merchant.39 Perhaps the Lincoln literati discovered that

37 All data derived from Biennial Report of the Warden... pp. 64-81.

38 Ibid., p. 78. The demographic profile of Nebraska State Penitentiary inmates accords in several significant aspects with national prisoner demographics. In his 1885 analysis of 1880 census data, American Prisons in the Tenth Census (microfiche series, 19th Century Legal Treatises), F. H. Wines found that fifty-nine percent of all U.S. prisoners had been convicted of property crimes, and twenty percent of violent crimes. Of the 53,169 inmates listed in the census, eighty-eight percent were native-born. Two notable differences in the Nebraska prison population are the small numbers of black prisoners and women prisoners. Black prisoners comprised thirty-one percent, and women ten percent, of all U.S. prisoners. See Wines, pp. 6-15.

39 All of these Nebraska Chautauquans appear at least once in descriptions of Look Forward Circle meetings.
Penitentiary convicts resembled them in startling ways.

At the outset, the Lincoln Chautauquans conceived of group reading in itself as a reformatory agency. As the CLSC's ideology of reading held that simply sharing cultural capital would equalize group readers' social relations and enable relational reform, Lincoln Chautauquans began their work expecting that convicts could be uplifted by studying the Chautauqua curriculum and mingling with them. The CLSC program for 1889 focused on Roman history, and the Look Forward Circle began with a Latin textbook, a survey of Roman history, and a book on political economy. William Jennings Bryan, a young Democratic politician who would win a Nebraska seat in Congress the following year, attended a Circle meeting at the Penitentiary in January 1890. Bryan appears to have delivered a stock lecture on Roman history, without altering it to fit his unusual audience. In fulsome oratory Bryan raced through a summary of the rise and fall of Rome, touching on the Appian Way, important Roman poets and writers, family organization, and leaders from Caligula to Caesar. After Bryan sat down, S.E. Leavitt led the prisoners in responsive Bible reading from Proverbs, including the lines “Add to your faith virtue, and to virtue knowledge. Happy is the man that finds wisdom.” A Mrs. Sewell then moderated discussion, asking questions of the convicts on Roman history; “answers were prompt and accurate, showing that good use had been made of the reading matter furnished.” Here all the elements of a standard CLSC meeting appear—presentation of papers, religious worship, and members spelling each other on their reading. National CLSC leaders likewise seemed to believe that the CLSC program could be transferred intact to a prison. Since moral uplift and spiritual regeneration derived

---

from faithful application to the reading course, and the "nice people" of the CLSC would provide intellectual and Christian guidance, prisoners certainly should derive the same benefits as readers in middle-class parlors.

T.H. Leavitt reported to Kate Kimball in December 1889 that "the good effect of this work is already plain to be seen in many little matters . . . there is every reason to hope for some tangible and lasting good to some of these men."41 By January, he revised his estimate of its success: "The kind and degree of encouragement which this quiet work is developing is remarkable; indeed it astonishes all who take part in it." A hint of this astonishing encouragement's source appears later in the letter. Leavitt wrote that a convict had been released from the Penitentiary in late December, and the man soon visited Leavitt in his office. They

spent a couple of hours in very free conversation of the past, present, and future. Says that, hard and severe as is prison life, it was just . . . and that in view of the Chautauqua influences exerted upon him, he is thankful he was sent there. One of our brother Chautauquans conversant with his case arranged for suitable clothing and secured good employment for him, and to-day he is at work and we confidently expect to continue to hear good things of him. He is disposed to continue his readings and I hope to secure a set of books for him.42

A reorientation of the Look Forward Circle's mission is figured in Leavitt's letter: over the life

---

41 T.H. Leavitt to Kate Kimball, December 1889, ibid. Reading Leavitt's letters frustrates—he coyly intimates fascinating information but frequently does not elaborate. In his December 1889 letter he writes that "some of [the good effect of the CLSC] would be interesting to narrate, but my time will not now permit," and his January 1890 letter says "There are numerous incidents of which I would like to make some mention to you if time would permit, but it won't."

42 T.H. Leavitt to Kate Kimball, January 5, 1890, ibid.
of the group, Lincoln members invested more and more of their energy in providing material aid, not just literary comradeship, to the Penitentiary inmates. Gradually, the Lincoln Chautauquans began to view the CLSC readings as almost peripheral to the moral reform they believed that the Look Forward Circle effected. Instead, their parental relationship to convicts—involving empathy, affection, and most crucially, material assistance—assumed primacy.

This change is conspicuous in the letters and reports Kimball received from Nebraska. T.H. Leavitt laid out the new agenda of the Lincoln members in an 1892 report: "The two most noticeable results appear to be first, that the subjects discussed have been, almost in every case, practically new to the readers. . . Second, and of perhaps more importance than all others, is the influence of the example of those who manifest an interest in the convicts welfare, and who continue in spite of rebuffs and misplaced confidences, to work for the advancement of the people of 'Darkest America.'" Relational reform depended on tangible support, not just shared culture. The Circle's discussions must have extended well beyond assigned books like the 1890 CLSC text *From Chaucer to Tennyson*. Undoubtedly, Lincoln members helped convicts get jobs only because the Lincoln members got to know the convicts—Leavitt's accounts of meeting with released prisoners indicate familiar relationships built long before prisoners were released. In their comments about the convicts, Lincoln Chautauquans sound like worried parents. Leavitt shows fatherly concern for a convict departing for a job on "a R.R. now building, which I secured for him only this week, and he has to travel some 500 miles to reach it, but rough and wild as it is I am sure he will like it and I am confident will make his mark, do well, and be in the line of promotion." Mrs. C.E. Welch described empathetically the bravery she saw in convicts who risked the scorn of
“hardened men” to “step out” and join the Circle: “Anyone unacquainted with criminal life can scarcely realize the courage needed to do this.” The CLSC program became less a purpose than a pretext for the Look Forward Circle’s get-togethers.

Not all convicts qualified for the largesse of the Lincoln members, though. Convicts had to demonstrate both commitment to the curriculum and intellectual ability. Sensitive Mrs. Welch revealed a sense of superiority to the courageous convicts who joined the Circle when she noted that a prison official described them as “a fine lot of men;” Mrs. Welch added, “Of course, that is comparatively speaking.” Following the CLSC course may have become a pretext, but it remained important, allowing Lincoln members to observe the character of convicts in a structured setting. By July 1892, the Circle included “all sorts - white and black, intelligent and dull, desperate and harmless, educated and ignorant.” Lincoln members wanted to “eliminate” the convicts who attended faithfully but who “cannot even read the books,” and keep only “such as would be studious, read some, and be at least partially prepared for the class exercise.” The warden denied their request, arguing “who knows the good effect of even some one thing that they may hear?” Another inmate’s dedication despite his “limited abilities” earned Leavitt’s respect. Participation in the Circle was an index of the moral character of the convict. And once that character was proven, it generated a social commitment on the part of the Lincoln Chautauquans to assist in the inmate’s further development, within and without the penitentiary. Likely, convicts demonstrating piety and remorse won the affection of Lincoln Chautauquans.

43 “Report of the “Look Forward Circle, Lancaster, Nebraska, July 1, 1892;” letter from T.H. Leavitt to Kate Kimball, July 1892; letter from C.E. Welch to Kate Kimball, October 7, 1890, all ibid.

44 Letter from C.E. Welch to Kate Kimball, October 7, 1890; letter from T.H. Leavitt to Kate Kimball, July 14, 1892; letter from T.H. Leavitt to Kate Kimball, October 20, 1892, all ibid.
Penitentiary inmates had good reason to compete for spots in the Look Forward Circle. Conditions in the prison remained miserable, and Sunday Circle meetings offered freedoms otherwise unknown. W.B. Stout no longer held the Penitentiary lease—rather, Stout himself was incarcerated in the Nebraska State Penitentiary in 1887, apparently for graft.45 A new lessee, C.W. Mosher, took over the lease on the same terms as Stout, and the daily routines of labor and silence wore on. Forbidden to speak or to make eye contact with visitors, subject to the violence of guards, and working under the close eye of prison workshop supervisors like Look Forward Circle member M.D. Welch, inmates probably relished the chance to spend an hour talking with the solicitous Lincoln Chautauquans. The dismal environment denounced by the NCCC during their 1887 visit did not improve under lessee Mosher. Nebraska correspondent A.W. Clarke updated the NCCC in 1893 on developments in the Penitentiary:

The building is in a fearful condition. . . the walls are black with smoke and from water that has run down from the roof. The wards occupied by prisoners are gloomy, and as unhomelike as can well be imagined. . . the floor is rough; and there are great cracks between the boards in which the dust and dirt of years have accumulated . . the surroundings there are such that the moral effect is anything but uplifting...the only thing prominent there is the contract labor system. Every prisoner is required to work in the shop or factory where it is possible for him to make the largest returns to the contractor. When the hard day's labor is ended, he is required to spend the rest of the

45 Boom, “History of Nebraska Penal Institutions,” p. 62. Boom does not describe what crime Stout committed, noting only that “‘Boss’ Stout, as he was commonly called, was the ‘Tweed’ of Nebraska for almost two decades, until the law caught up with him.”
time amid the uncivilized surroundings of the miserable building. Small wonder, then, that even illiterate convicts attended Look Forward Circle meetings.

Discovering how inmates perceived the readings and attentions of the Circle is virtually impossible. Only in the letters and reports of Lincoln members do prisoner voices appear, when Lincoln members quote inmate letters or statements. To accept these highly mediated quotes as reflective of convicts' sentiments is inherently problematic on multiple levels. Lincoln writers obviously selected inmate quotes out of larger documents, using them to support claims of the Circle's value. Nowhere do Lincoln members present unflattering or even equivocal statements from prisoners about the Circle. Further, inmate communication carried particular political freight. The warden exercised the right to read all incoming and outgoing mail, so convicts unquestionably wrote with awareness of his powerful eye. Writing to the privileged Lincoln visitors whose favor could guarantee a job on release or summon needed goods, prisoners similarly must have carefully edited their words. Power relations in the penitentiary prohibit a straight reading of the paeans to the Look Forward Circle quoted copiously by Lincoln Chautauquans.

Not surprisingly, convicts express gratitude and describe moral epiphanies in the accounts of the Lincoln members of the Look Forward Circle. Leavitt reported that after a Circle meeting, he overheard one convict tell another, “Well, I don't know much about the Chautauqua as yet, but if there is anything that makes me believe in Christianity and in trying to lead an honest life, it is the fact that Mr. ---- and his fellow workers are. . .trying to help us.” Like the Lincoln Chautauquans, the inmates credit the “kind members” of the Circle for

their redemption. One wrote feelingly: "Whatever I am or am to be, I owe to Chautauqua; the kindly influence which led me to feel that there were those who cared for me, that helped me help myself, that stimulated me to read to a purpose, and encouraged me to hope and to try to be a man again." Compassion and nurture from Lincoln members effected their moral transformation, according to these convicts.

A few emphasized moral lessons immanent in the CLSC course as the key to their rehabilitation. Charles E. B. wrote several such letters to a counterpart CLSC circle in the Minnesota State Penitentiary, which were published in the Minnesota inmates' newspaper. Charles told his peers that "the reading I did last year in the Chautauqua books did me more good than all the preaching I heard in the past ten years . . . I advise the boys to take hold of it, for it is sound sense they are reading--not a dime novel or something that is going to make them want to be a bad man with long hair and a big gun, but it will open up an new object in life for them." Charles's invocation of the pernicious dime novel is reminiscent of CLSC advisers' toxic texts, and his conversion to wholesome reading would cheer CLSC founder John Vincent.

In his long report on "Chautauqua Work in Prisons," prepared at the request of Kate Kimball for the 1893 World's Fair, Leavitt included several "expressions of bitterness." Convicts indicted the criminal justice system that incarcerated them while white-collar


48 A comparative study of the Nebraska and Minnesota prison CLSCs, while beyond the scope of this thesis, might yield valuable insights into the dynamics of prison reading. The Minnesota group appears to have been led almost entirely by inmates, with only one outside visitor participating. Somehow the Minnesota convicts managed to publish their own weekly newspaper, the Prison Mirror, its header lists subscription rates of $1 per year and profits went to the prison library. See ibid.

criminals went free: "The robber of thousands walks the street with head erect, and the vulgar
thief of a few dollars is sent to prison for a long term of years to teach him that honesty (?)
[sic] is the best policy." Sanctimonious citizens who denied Christian charity to needy
inmates also came under attack: "[Prisoners] are as grateful for the word of kindness, and as
ready to meet halfway, every sincere effort for their reform . . . as are many of those who say
"God, I thank thee I am not as other men are." One inmate launched a critique of the
Penitentiary system itself, writing "Punishment can never reform so long as it is accomplished
with degradation. Degradation strengthens evil propensities, prevents repentance, and
renders reform impossible." This inmate tempered his reproach by going on to denounce the
lack of assistance for released convicts, but he managed to get in a shot at the prison as well.

By 1893, Leavitt himself felt disillusioned by the failures of the Penitentiary. The
Look Forward Circle's inmate membership increased steadily from its 1889 enrollment of
forty-eight men to an 1892 high of sixty-eight. Circle readers had moved from Roman history
the first year to English history and literature in 1890, American history and literature in 1891,
and took up the study of ancient Greece in 1892. Mrs. Leavitt remarked to Kimball in July
1892 that "the work has not been as satisfactory as last year." A diphtheria quarantine shut
the Circle down for a month, and a new warden, J.P. Mallon, took over, obliging the Lincoln
members to earn his "favor" for the Circle. After four years of meeting every other Sunday,
perhaps Lincoln members' energy began to flag. When a guard murdered an inmate in
December 1892, the work apparently became even less satisfying--especially since Look
Forward Circle member M.D. Welch indirectly collaborated in the murder.

The murder attracted the attention of the Nebraska legislature, which appointed a joint
Congressional committee to investigate. Beginning in late January 1893, the committee
interviewed prison workers and inmates at the Penitentiary about the circumstances of the murder; their published *Report* contains transcripts of those interviews and reveals much about conditions at the prison.\(^5\)

The essential story of the murder, according to the transcripts, is as follows. An inmate named Powell worked as a cooperator, making barrels, in the Western Manufacturing Company prison workshop. Powell worked between 8 and 12 hours a day, and he was required to make 12 barrels on each shift. He was a “healthy, able-bodied man...five feet seven or eight, and probably weighed 170 or 180 pounds,” and although he apparently had not coopered before his imprisonment, Powell “done good work” initially, according to his supervisor M.D. Welch.\(^5\)

After several months, however, Powell “got slack”; he failed to “pound the hoops down tight,” and despite repeated admonishments from his foreman, he would not “do his work properly.” In the workshop, Welch supervised inmates’ labor, not learning; Welch seems to have dropped all thoughts of relational reform in his capacity as overseer. Welch told the foreman to report Powell to Henry Wagner, the prison’s deputy warden. Wagner took Powell to the “dark cell,” a room four and a half by seven feet (about the size of a twin bed), with three one-inch airholes drilled in the top of the door. Wagner handcuffed Powell’s wrists behind his back, looped a rope around his neck, and tied the other end of the rope to Powell’s handcuffs so that his arms were raised up. After leaving Powell in this position for three days, unbinding him to eat his meal rations of bread and water, warden Mallon and two guards visited him. Accounts of what

\(^{50}\) *Report of the Joint Committee Appointed by the Nebraska State Legislature to Investigate the Charges of Cruelty and Mode of Punishment Inflicted Upon Convicts in the Nebraska State Penitentiary, with all the Testimony Taken in the Investigation* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1893). Unless otherwise noted, all discussion of the murder is drawn from this document.

\(^{51}\) Ibid., pp. 168. Powell’s first name is unknown; deponents referred to him as “convict Powell,” “that man Powell,” and “Powell, number 20 something.”
happened next diverge. Mallon and the guards asserted that “anxious for the man to square himself,” they tried to coax Powell into promising he would pound his barrel hoops tighter. Powell, still “sulky,” “didn’t appear to care whether he got out or not.”

About an hour later, a guard returned to Powell’s cell and found him hanging. Mallon and the guards claimed that Powell had freed himself from the rope, looped it through the airholes, and hung himself from the cell door. Almost every other deponent, from inmates to chaplain Howe to Welch, said that during their visit, Mallon and the guards twisted the rope binding Powell’s cuffed wrists to his neck, and that the cruelly tight rope choked Powell to death. As Welch put it, “How can a man with his arms tied behind him, with one end of the rope tied to his shackles and the rope passed around his neck . . . how was that man in that condition with his arms paralyzed” able to hang himself?

The committee agreed, finding that “the death of convict Powell was from [sic] the direct and proximate result of the cruel and inhuman punishment inflicted upon him.”

Investigators found a welter of problems in the Penitentiary, and they believed that the convict lease system caused most of them. The committee began interviewing Penitentiary staff and inmates on January 23, 1893. On the same day, Lincoln's Capital National Bank failed. C.W. Mosher, Penitentiary lessee, also served as president of the bank. Eventually Mosher, like his predecessor Stout, served time in prison for his malfeasance. Mosher and

---

52 Ibid., pp. 46-47, 162.
53 Ibid., p. 169-70.
54 Ibid., p. 6.
55 Unlike Stout, Mosher was incarcerated in the Federal penitentiary in Sioux City, Iowa. Again, the charges on which Mosher was convicted are unknown. See Boom, “History of Nebraska Penal Institutions,” p. 64; Olson, History of Nebraska, pp. 254-55.
the lease system assumed villainous proportions in the hearings. Committee members heard repeated assertions that guards abused prisoners most often for labor-related offenses. Convicts testified that failure to work hard or fast enough frequently led to vicious punishment. Inmate Thomas White stated that after being thrown in the dark cell for "not using the adze at my end" in the harness shop, a guard "struck me on the temple and knocked me down." A female inmate served a stint in the dark cell for refusing "to sew clothing," guards hogtied another male convict who coopered too slowly, beating him with a billy club while bound. Prison staff kicked inmates, struck them with fists and clubs, and gagged inmates who screamed too loudly in the dark cell. The committee's antipathy toward convict leasing emerged when they asked former warden Dan Hopkins "whether or not the majority of the punishments are inflicted because of the existence of the prison contract system." When Hopkins replied "I think the contract system is the cause of a great deal of the punishment," and Warden Mallon agreed, arguing that convicts "get the impression that instead of paying a debt to the state he is paying it to Charley Mosher," the committee found its scapegoat. Convict leasing, not wardens, guards, or the Penitentiary per se, killed Powell.

Poor administration of the prison seemed evident from convict complaints about fetid cells and rotten food. Prisoners reported that they ate spoiled food in hot cells next to reeking slop buckets. Bathing only weekly in the summer and biweekly in the winter exacerbated the Penitentiary's stench. Certainly these problems could be fixed by better management, and

---

56 Ibid., p. 90.

57 Ibid., p. 20-22.

58 Ibid., pp. 157, 164.
inhumane punishments could be abolished. In their report to the Nebraska Congress, the committee recommended that wardens supervise guards more closely and inspect foods more carefully, that convicts be permitted to bathe more frequently; that young inmates be segregated from "older and hardened criminals," and that a night school be established in the prison for "ignorant convicts." Most importantly, the committee advocated that the "convict contract labor system should be done away with at the earliest possible moment." Like prison reformers elsewhere, the Nebraska legislature hoped that administrative tweaking would rectify the problem of the Penitentiary. Investigators reserved special praise for the Look Forward Circle. Nebraska Attorney General John Allen testified to the "great work of the Chautauqua Circle," echoing the Lincoln members when he continued "I do not refer entirely to the benefit that the prisoners have gained by being members of the Circle, but the interest that parties outside have taken in the convicts that come out by securing positions for them." Concurring, the legislators closed their report "commend[ing] the work of the Lincoln Chautauqua Association as shown in the mental and moral improvement noticeable in a number of prisoners."

The Lincoln Chautauquans soon abandoned the Penitentiary and the Look Forward Circle. In the aftermath of Powell's death and the investigation, "which disclosed the fact that radical changes in the management of the prison and the care and discipline of the prisoners

59 Ibid., pp. 7-8.
60 Ibid., p. 8. As in other states, free-labor agitation played a large role in turning public sentiment against the convict lease system; again, that issue is beyond the scope of this thesis. See Boom, "History of Nebraska Penal Institutions," p. 66; McKelvey, American Prisons, p. 223.
61 Ibid., p. 118.
62 Ibid., p. 9.
were imperatively needed," Lincoln members formed the Nebraska Prison Reform Association.63 Leavitt told Kate Kimball in April 1893 that they had introduced two bills in the Nebraska legislature, one to “provide for some educational opportunities in our Penitentiary, and for an appropriation to meet [the Look Forward Circle] expenses,” and the other “provid[ed] for important improvement in prison matters,” but neither passed despite Leavitt's personal appearance in the Congress to “urge its merits.” Leavitt mentioned nothing of the scandal or of Welch's involvement in it, writing circumspectly, “There are a good many interesting things constantly transpiring in connection with our prison class. Don't know that I can report any thing very special just now, but possibly I may send some facts or incidents some day.”64 Leavitt submitted a brief report to the National Conference of Charities and Correction in 1894 requesting recognition as a “force for . . wise efforts for charities, corrections, and reformation,” but the Nebraska Prison Association apparently withered quickly--no further evidence of its efforts has surfaced.65 By the summer of 1895, Kimball wrote to Leavitt asking about the status of the Look Forward Circle. Leavitt confessed that in late 1893, he “was rather desirous of being relieved from the responsibilities involved in providing for and managing the class,” and another man named W.E. Hardy took over the Circle. Hardy maintained the group for a while, but by mid-1894, Hardy “seemed to loose [sic] his interest in the work, and allowed it to go without attention until it faded out and has apparently ceased to be, much to the regret of members of the circle.” Clearly, though,  

64 Letter from T.H. Leavitt to Kate Kimball, April 20, 1893, CLSC Prison File.
65 See Eckman, “Regeneration through Culture,” 194-95
Lincoln members lost interest as well, since they certainly could have resumed control of the group. Leavitt added that “during the last year there has been a very unsettled state of affairs at our prison . . . which have been in no wise favorable to the welfare of educational or reformatory efforts, and the officers, while tolerating us, have never taken any personal interest in any of these things.”

Penitentiary officers had never been involved in the Look Forward Circle, and conditions in the prison appear to have been just as terrible at the beginning of the Circle's work as in 1893.

Perhaps the death of Powell painfully underscored Lincoln members' complicity with the Penitentiary regime. Leavitt had written in 1892 that “convicts appreciate and are influenced by any one whom they believe to be sincere, and they are quick to detect an interested motive, to a much greater extent than is generally known.” After Welch reported Powell's sloppy coopering to the warden and set off the chain of events causing Powell's death, did the Circle's sincerity seem suspect to prisoners? Warden Mallon had testified to the investigative committee that “if the prison contract was knocked out, the Western Manufacturing Company would probably cease to exist.” Thus the reform identified by the Legislature as most crucial likely threatened Welch's job.

Of course, the investigation that shamed the Lincoln Chautauquans likely elated prisoners. The panel of state legislators obviously held the political authority to actually

66 Letter from T.H. Leavitt to Kate Kimball, July 30, 1895, CLSC Prison File.

67 “Report of the 'Look Forward Circle,' Lancaster, Nebraska, July 1, 1892,“, CLSC Prison File.

68 Report of the Joint Committee Appointed by the Nebraska State Legislature to Investigate the Charges of Cruelty...p. 166.
change prison conditions, and convicts could reasonably assume that their testimony would shape the overhaul of the Penitentiary that the committee seemed to be considering. Convicts enthusiastically recounted minute details of their travails, despite Penitentiary staff's threats; one inmate told legislators that the cell keeper promised “I will break your heart if I get you down in the hole.” Nevertheless, the convict reported that the breakfast meal “was something horrible,” his underclothing too thin and his socks “cheap,” and his certainty that the guards had killed Powell. Notably, not a single inmate mentioned the Look Forward Circle or the kindnesses of the Lincoln Chautauquans to the investigators. Nor did they refer to the presence or absence of books and magazines more generally, although one convict offered that he did not mind sharing a cell, since two inmates got two candles and he “like[d] to have a little more light so we can read and study.” Indeed, this prisoner implied that his cellmate “knowed enough to help” him improve his literacy, indicating that prisoners' literary culture existed independently of the Lincoln Chautauquans. Prisoners probably used the the Look Forward Circle on their own terms, tolerating its moral lessons in part to get material aid. Welch's involvement with the Circle may well have compromised the Lincoln Chautauquans' moral authority all along.

From the first meeting of the Look Forward Circle, Lincoln members professed their plan to work within the Penitentiary rules, not disrupt them. Visiting every other Sunday and talking civilly with prisoners, they may have been able to overlook the beatings and privations convicts suffered, as did Chaplain Howe: he told the investigative committee that “I purposely

---

69 Ibid, pp. 91-95.

70 Ibid., p. 82.
avoid knowing anything about the punishments if I can; I have enough care and anxiety with
the boys, and with all the load I carry I don't want to carry any of the responsibility of the
warden or of the men."71 Once the investigative committee publicly exposed and condemned
the dire horrors of the Penitentiary, however, Lincoln members could no longer claim
ignorance. Maybe culture and kind words and jobs no longer seemed like enough, and active,
strenuous resistance against the cruel logic of the Penitentiary seemed like too much. Lincoln
Chautauquans had maintained energetically that close supportive relationships between them
and convicts constituted the heart of the Look Forward Circle. Scandal bared the
fundamental inadequacy of these relationships and punctured the Chautauquans' zeal; they
failed to protest abuse of their convict charges, and through Welch, collectively colluded in
that abuse. The Circle's strength proved its undoing. Lincoln Chautauquans fled from their
convict charges precisely because the Circle relied on relational reform.

All this is speculation, as neither the Lincoln members nor the prison members of the
Look Forward Circle left any detailed explanation of the Circle's collapse. Convicts likely
gave up the CLSC course; the Chautauqua Institute heard nothing from them. Lincoln
Chautauquans also seem to have given up their group when they moved back out of the
Penitentiary. Women members of the Lincoln CLSC might have joined the Women's Club
of Lincoln instead. Founded in November 1894 by former Chautauquan Phoebe Elliott and
two other prominent Lincoln women, the Women's Club sought to “stimulate intellectual and
moral development, to promote good fellowship among its members, and to strengthen by
organization their individual efforts for humanity.” In the club description submitted to the

---

71 Ibid., p. 13.
General Federation of Women's Clubs, no mention is made of social outreach work—the club's two hundred sixty-five charter members staffed committees on "current events, literature, science, civics, domestic economy, art, parliamentary practice, and physical culture." 72

Indeed, it appears that many women Chautauquans moved into all-women clubs after completing the CLSC course. Croly's *History of the Women's Club Movement in America*, a directory of member clubs in 1895, lists numerous groups that trace their founding to a CLSC. For example, the Garnet Seal Club of Montpelier, Vermont, reported that "more than half of the members are Chautauqua graduates, and all have been connected at some time with the Chautauqua work." 73 A cursory examination of Croly's catalogue also indicates that most of the clubs listed began in the late 1880s and early 1890s. Chautauqua leaders noticed a rapid decline in membership beginning in the mid-1880s, considering that women constituted three-quarters of CLSC participants, the contemporaneous proliferation of women's clubs and disappearance of CLSC groups seems more than coincidental. The Women's Club of Mendon, Michigan, began in 1889 when the founders "completed the Chautauqua course of reading and study, and decided to take up an independent line of work, and form a club organization on more diversified lines." 74 Such motives may have animated many women who left the coeducational CLSC with its rigid curriculum. The CLSC offered women a study course modeled after a college curriculum, boasting the approval of respected Christian leaders, and permitting whole families to join. Perhaps after pursuing the CLSC, middle-class women felt more comfortable claiming their right to spend time on educating themselves, and their


73 Ibid., p. 1127.

74 Ibid., p. 706.
husbands felt more comfortable permitting them to do it.

Meanwhile, Nebraska legislators abolished the convict lease system in 1895, converting to contract labor and managing the prison workshops themselves "for the greatest practical profit to the state."\(^{75}\) Prison conditions remained "wretched," and the dilapidated Penitentiary burned down in 1901.\(^{76}\) Letters of the Lincoln Chautauquans provide some information about the lives of convicts after they left the Penitentiary and the Look Forward Circle. T.H. Leavitt told Kimball in 1892 that "without exception they are doing well. One is now a member of our Capital City Circle; another, a colored man, is kept close at work in a stable in the city, but has bought the full set of books and will pursue this reading as best he can." Some ex-prisoners simply vanished: "for some of these [convicts] we have been able to be helpful in securing employment or sending them to their friends or homes while some have made tracks for the saloon first thing, and others we have lost sight of entirely." The Look Forward Circle appears to have materially aided these individual prisoners, giving them vital help in surviving the treacherous walk through the prison gates and into an unfriendly world.

Ultimately, though, the Circle demonstrated the hazardous politics of attempting relational reform within an unjust system. Try as they might to make a space for a parlor within the Penitentiary, the prison's repressive violence saturated and polluted the Lincoln Chautauquans' earnest efforts. John H. Vincent wrote that he hoped that the Chautauqua program would "educate the people, and all the people,—the poorest and meanest of them,—

\(^{75}\) Quoted in Boom, "History of Nebraska Penal Institutions," p. 66.

until in lordly way, worthy of royal blood, they refuse to be trodden upon or ordered about
by the impertinent and arrogant pretenders of modern society." 77 The experiences of the
Look Forward Circle indicate the limitations of Vincent's vision. Instead of enacting his
dream, the Circle ratified philosopher Michel Foucault's assessment of the power networks
of panopticism: "From the outset, the prison was caught up in a series of accompanying
mechanisms, whose purpose was apparently to correct it, but which seem to form part of its
very functioning, so closely have they been bound up with its existence throughout its long
history." 78 Ineluctably drawn into the penal regime, the Lincoln Chautauquans found
themselves treading on the poorest and meanest; their books and love could not prevent it.


78 Foucault, Discipline and Punish, p. 234.
EPILOGUE

The idea of rehabilitating prisoners with books neither emerged nor died with the Look Forward Circle. Common to virtually all such projects is the skewing of historical records toward reformers' accounts; the dearth of prisoners' perceptions complicate efforts to discover how inmates engaged with the texts they read. The Lincoln Chautauquans seem to have assumed that prisoners interpreted their books as instructed—that under their benevolent surveillance, prison readers absorbed moral lessons wholesale. Other studies yield clues that reading furnished an arena of resistance for inmates. Larry Sullivan argues that memoirs of early twentieth-century prisoners reveal the subversive functions of prison reading; inmates inoculated themselves from the rehabilitative strategies of their keepers by reading Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. By mentally resisting the pervasive control of prison regimes, convicts could bear their inability to physically resist.¹

Surely the largest prison reading enterprise occurred in California, where prison librarian Herman Spector set up a Great Books reading group in the 1950s.² Terming his project “bibliotherapy,” Spector led group discussions at San Quentin on moral insights in books like The Iliad and encouraged inmates to write as well, echoing Victorian reading advisers by calling his library a “hospital for the mind.”³ Spector’s project fitted neatly into twentieth-century “treatment” models of prison discipline; he personally censored all inmate manuscripts and forwarded information on inmate participants to the California Parole Board.

¹ Sullivan, “The Big House is Also a Home,” pp. 34-37.
³ Quoted in ibid., p. 26.
Yet he fostered a radical literary culture that spun out of control. By the 1960s, convicts secretly exchanged Mao's *Little Red Book* and developed Marxist critiques of the prison. Convicts created their own community of reading and of meaning, teaching each other to interpret political texts. One prisoner explained, "We started with simple things like Ho Chi Minh. And if you didn't know a word you ask your homeboy, your comrade, and say 'Hey, man! What is this word, what does it mean?'" Berkeley student activists and New Left militants celebrated convict literati as archetypal outlaws like the Hell's Angels, advocating the immediate release of prisoners everywhere. Convicts planned to overthrow the prison with the aid of their radical friends on the outside; writers like George Jackson, Eldridge Cleaver, and Caryl Chessman assumed roles in the leadership of leftist politics. These schemes collapsed under the inmates' and leftist radicals' profound misapprehension of each other—Black Power ideology divided white leftists from black inmates, and when prison riots erupted, radical chic lost its glamor. In California, books became revolutionary, not reformative, agents.

Duke University students and faculty began studying with prisoners at a North Carolina Federal penitentiary in 1994. Like their California predecessors, Duke readers share subversive books like *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and Marx's *Capital* with inmates; Foucault would probably be amused to know that they also read *Discipline and Punish*. Convicts construct their own meanings from the readings, as evidenced by one inmate's comments:

... the ideology function of prison and its repressive state can be manipulated ... as

---

much can be gotten out of prison, as can be gotten out of education. As a matter of fact, now this may sound ludicrous, but I wouldn’t trade my prison time for any type of formal education in the world.⁵

Perhaps the dynamics of the Duke project will make a fascinating case study of prison reading in the wake of postmodernism.⁶

In the end, we don't really know how the Lincoln inmates interpreted the CLSC books. The accounts of later prison readers underscore the likelihood that prisoners exercised autonomy, both as readers and as Circle members, that was invisible to the Lincoln Chautauquans. The voices of the middle-class Lincoln Chautauquans sound loudest and longest in the story of the Look Forward Circle, as in the history of the book more generally; reformers' moral prescriptions outnumber readers' responses in archival sources and library shelves. Despite the tremendous power imbalance shaping the Lincoln Chautauquans’ efforts at relational reform, Penitentiary inmates apparently figured out how to make the affectional culture of the CLSC work for them. When the first ex-convict visited T.H. Leavitt in his Lincoln office, he walked away with “suitable clothing and good employment;” whether he wanted the CLSC books Leavitt promised him, he got tangible help. Like other prison readers, the Penitentiary inmates seem to have derived a measure of power from their reading community. By convincing the Lincoln Chautauquans that the CLSC books elevated them spiritually, convicts could finagle the Lincoln Chautauquans into supporting them materially.

---


⁶ See also private electronic mail communication from Michael Hardt to Jennifer Luff, December 8, 1995, in the author’s possession, describing the Duke project. I am grateful to Professor Hardt for sharing this information with me.
In refashioning the Look Forward Circle's mission from relational reform through reading into economic aid based in a reading group, the Penitentiary inmates may have created their own small sphere of resistance.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Manuscripts


Periodicals

_The Chautauquan_, 1880-1903.

_The Chautauqua Assembly Herald_, 1885-1895.

Government Documents


Nebraska. Congress, Twenty-third Legislative Session. _Report of the Joint Committee Appointed by the Nebraska State Legislature to Investigate the Charges of Cruelty and Mode of Punishment Inflicted Upon Convicts in the Nebraska State Penitentiary, with all the Testimony Taken in the Investigation_. Lincoln, Nebraska: State Printers, 1893.

Conference Proceedings


Electronic Sources

Hardt, Michael [hardt@acpub.duke.edu] "Re: prisoner seminars." Private electronic mail to Jennifer Luff [jdluff@mail.wm.edu], December 8, 1995.


Books


**Articles and Chapters**


Theses and Dissertations


Journal of Prison Discipline and Philanthropy, January 1888, p. 54

Chautauqua Assembly Herald, June 30, 1889, p. 1.

Maude Thomas Jenkins, "The History of the Black Women's Club Movement in
VITA

Jennifer D. Luff

Born in Cleveland, Ohio, May 18, 1970. Graduated from Chagrin Falls High School in Chagrin Falls, Ohio, June 1988. B.A., Ohio State University, 1992. From 1992 to 1994, employed as a social worker and as a county planner. From 1994 to 1995, employed as a public policy specialist for the State of Ohio’s Office of Criminal Justice Services; responsibilities included managing a public information clearinghouse and a project to combat violence against women. In August 1995 entered the College of William and Mary as a graduate research assistant in the American Studies Program.