

The White Palace of the West

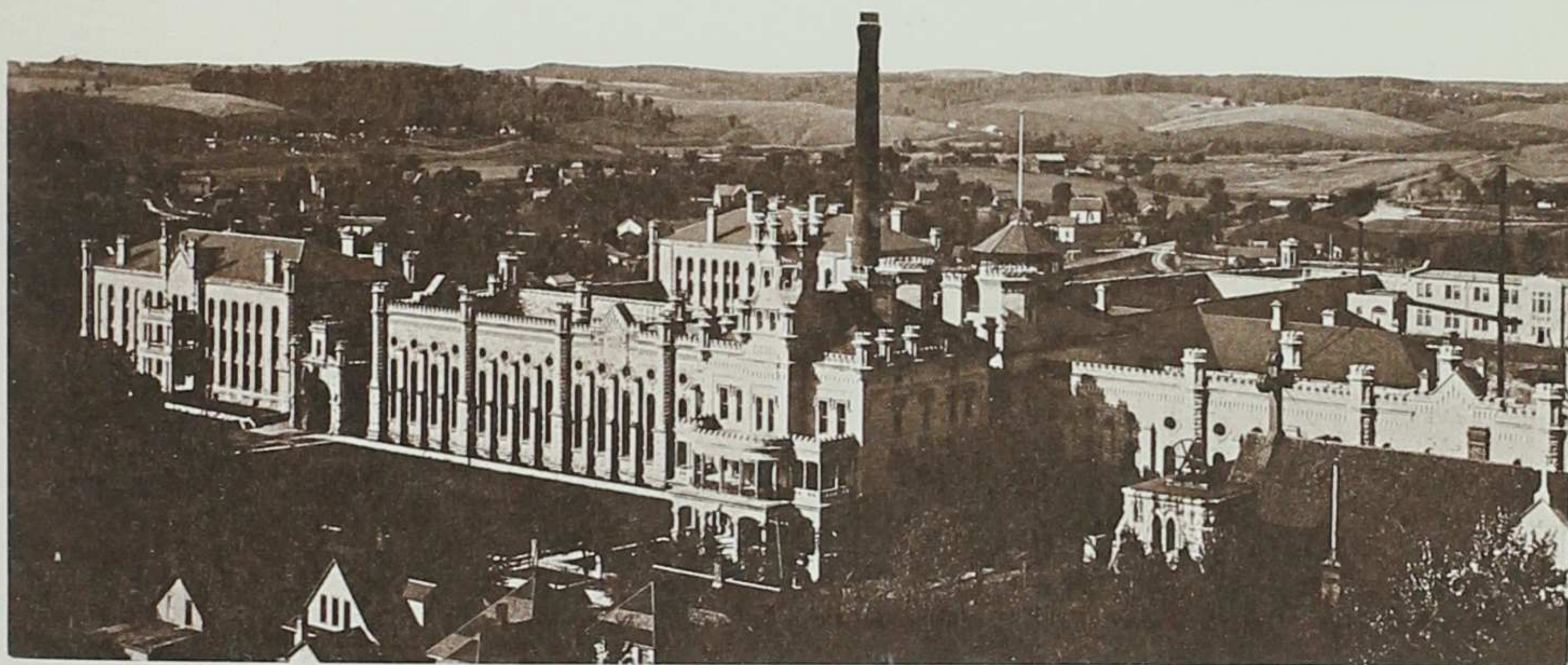
By
Wanita A. Zumbrunnen

“**T**o J. C. Dietz and others: Penitentiary established at Anamosa. Drink at my expense!, C. R. Scott.” This telegram arrived in Anamosa at five o’clock on April 11, 1872, the afternoon before the official announcement by the Fourteenth General Assembly of a bill to build the Anamosa Reformatory or “the white palace of the West,” a turn-of-the-century name derived from the building’s imposing cut-stone interior. The construction of a new correctional facility was first suggested in 1868, when the State Prison Visiting Committee reported that the Fort Madison Prison was no longer large enough to handle Iowa’s needs. Two years later, Governor Samuel Merrill recommended to the General Assembly that a new penitentiary be built in the northern part of the state. McGregor, Charles City, Marshalltown, and Anamosa were considered as possible sites.

The person most responsible for the eventual choice of the prison location was Senator John McKean of Anamosa. A native of Pennsylvania, McKean moved to Jones County in a two-horse wagon at age 19 with his brother, James. They pitched a tent in Scotch Grove township, camped in the woods during the winter, and in the

spring fenced 40 acres of land and built a small frame house made mostly of local material. Later McKean returned to Pennsylvania to complete his education and then read law at Anamosa until he was admitted to practice in 1861. Elected state representative in 1866 and senator in 1870, McKean was known for his “honesty above bribery” and as “an able and influential legislator.”

During the 1870 General Assembly, McKean called attention to the Governor’s recommendation by presenting many petitions signed by citizens of Linn, Jones, and other northeast-Iowa communities for the establishment of a penitentiary near the stone quarries at Anamosa. The *Davenport Gazette*, the *Dubuque Times*, and the *Dubuque Herald* also favored an Anamosa location. The *Oskaloosa Herald* reported Anamosa’s rapid population growth, from 1,000 to 5,000 in five years, and claimed this was a “healthy” factor in locating the institution. And in its February 3, 1870 edition, the *Anamosa Eureka* listed the advantages that Anamosa offered: many quarries; much stone; no heavy freighting required; abundant timber; water power — the Wapsipinicon River; and a railroad — the Dubuque Southwestern. Another inducement was announced in a speech by McKean to the Senate — Anamosa was



"The White Palace" - Anamosa Reformatory (courtesy Division of Historical Museum and Archives).

prepared to donate 160 acres for use as a farm on which to raise food.

McKean devoted much of his address to comparing the Iowa prison system with the financially self-sustaining correctional institution at Joliet, Illinois. Each prisoner at Fort Madison cost the state \$100 per year. The Iowa prison required \$20,000 of tax payers' money yearly to cover the difference between expenditures and receipts derived from the prisoners' labor. The reasons McKean gave for the unprofitable labor were the location of the prison, the type of work the prisoners performed, and the hard contracts under which they worked. He cited Sing-Sing Prison in New York and the prison at Columbus, Ohio as examples of institutions located near stone quarries where prison labor was successfully used to cut down construction costs. He then produced a letter from the state geologist attesting to the excellence of the stone near Anamosa and made a strong case for the need to locate the additional facility near a quarry where prison labor could be used. McKean also mentioned the profits made by commercial stone cutting and by the use of Anamosa stone in the construction of other state buildings. For the lat-

ter, he gave the proposed new capitol as an example.

In spite of McKean's efforts, the Iowa legislators failed to agree on a bill. Not until the 1872 General Assembly, when a second report of the Visiting Committee described the crowded conditions of Fort Madison and the extreme difficulty of enlarging its facilities because of its unfortunate location, did the legislators take action. The Committee, comprised of Senator Samuel McNutt and Representatives Olwen Mill and John Minino, closed its report with a strong recommendation: "We believe that the best interests of the state, in the matter, require that steps be taken during the present session, for the erection of a new prison at some point in the state where there are extensive quarries of good rock. Let such a site be chosen, and the surplus convicts at Fort Madison can be employed in construction of the new building. Let the penitentiary be located on such a site and the state need never be at the mercy of contractors for the prison labor. The establishment thus situated will be not only less expensive to the state, but may be made entirely self-supporting. We most earnestly recommend this subject to the attention of

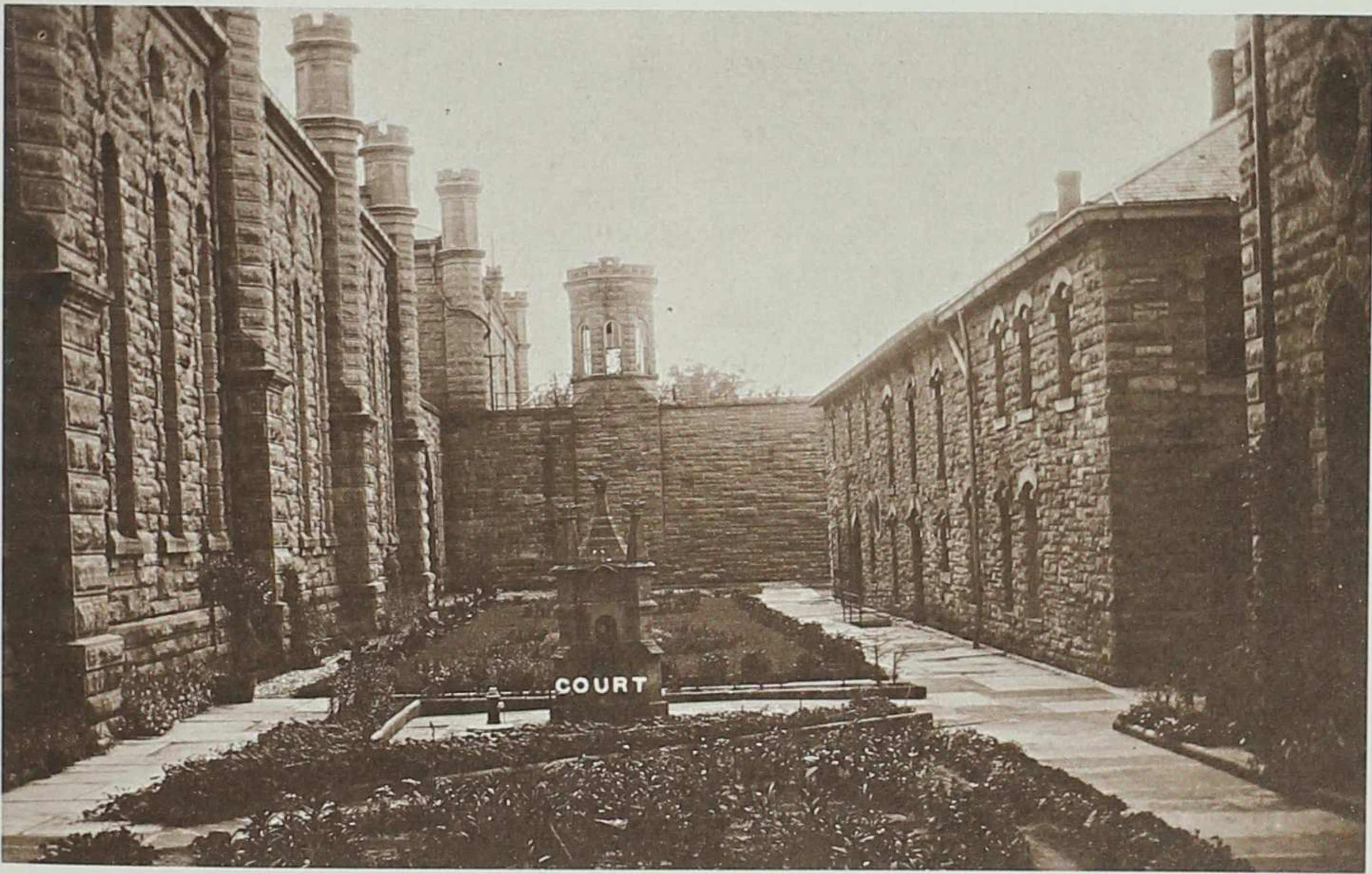
the General Assembly."

On April 12, 1872 the Fourteenth General Assembly approved an act "to permanently locate and provide for the erection and control of an additional penitentiary" at Anamosa. Three commissioners were chosen to select the exact location, receive bids for and purchase "the best and most eligible quarry" of stratified stone near the Dubuque Southwestern Railroad and the Wapsipinicon River. Fifty thousand dollars was appropriated to cover the initial costs, but the purchase price of the quarry was not to exceed \$15,000. Public notice was to be placed in the *Anamosa Eureka* or *Anamosa Journal*. The act also provided that no bid could be accepted until the state had secured a deed for 70 acres of ground, free of expense, on which to locate the buildings.

A comment in the *Eureka* indicated that in Anamosa the outcome of the bill had been in doubt: "Of course there is no little rejoicing among our citizens that the bill, so nearly 'laid out' in burial outfit yesterday, has finally passed." However, in its later comments on the passage of the bill, the *Eureka* reported that "the whole field had pretty much been abandoned to Anamosa for the intervening two years had made known the superior advantages of this point for a building of such character and the bill passed with comparative ease . . . Our members in both houses seconded by the presence and co-operation of B. F. Shaw, C. R. Scott, J. C. Dietz, G. W. Field, H. C. Metcalf and other leading citizens worked well for the measure and we have the result. Thus far we record its history. Eventually it may become as noted a prison as any on the continent . . . Let us hope it will be better conducted than are most and that it will reflect credit and no disgrace on the state."

To plan and implement construction of the new correctional facility, the General Assembly provided for a board of commissioners to which William Ure of Fairfax, F. L. Downing of Oskaloosa, and Martin Heisey of Fort Madison were appointed. Each member received \$5 a day plus expenses. The Board first met at the Savery House in Des Moines on April 23, 1872 and elected Ure president and Downing secretary. Later, on May 7, the Board met at Anamosa where, despite rainy weather, the party was transported across the muddy Buffalo Creek by a couple of smart livery teams to inspect several quarry sites. Then the tired, wet, but congenial group eagerly attacked a banquet provided by Mr. R. N. Fowler at the Fisher House; a banquet not only welcoming the commissioners but also honoring Senators McKean, P. G. Bonewitz, and John Tasker for their efforts in behalf of the penitentiary project.

To learn more about the physical requirements of a penal institution, the Board decided to visit prisons in nine eastern states and Canada. On the tour they thoroughly examined prison grounds, buildings, and other accommodations and asked for information regarding discipline and treatment of prisoners. After returning to Iowa, the Board again met in Anamosa to consider locations for the prison and the quarry. It chose a site it considered to be "well drained" and "healthy" in a basin surrounded by higher land. Choosing a quarry was more difficult — seven quarry owners had offered their property for sale. To aid in the decision, the commissioners consulted David Graham, an authority on the "qualities and capacity of quarries near Anamosa." After careful consideration, he recommended a tract of 61 acres with a Dubuque & Southwest Rail-



Interior court-yard at Anamosa, with a cell house on the left and laundry and machine shops on the right (courtesy Division of Historical Museum and Archives).

road right-of-way through the southern part. The land belonged to Dr. N.G. Sales, and on June 12 the Board voted two-to-one to purchase it. The citizens of Anamosa agreed to donate the land between the tract and the corporate limits of the city if the commissioners would recommend to the 1874 General Assembly a payment of \$2,500 for an additional five acres, a condition the Board accepted.

With the site chosen, the next step was to choose a building plan for the prison complex. The Board examined blueprints submitted by L. W. Foster & Company of Des Moines, selecting the one they "deemed most suitable" for future enlargement (by extension or wings) while still preserving the symmetry of the design and having sufficient capacity to confine and employ 500 prisoners. Maintaining the right to alter the plans if necessary, the

Board paid \$2,500 for the initial drawings, and agreed to pay an additional \$1,200 when the ground and elevation plans were finished. Also the Foster Company was to receive \$10 per day plus expenses for supervising the construction.

The drawings called for a 636-by-933-foot structure of cut stone. In the center of the front was to be the warden's house, 50-by-60 feet and five stories high, the last story to be a tower rising 111 feet above the base. Behind the warden's accommodations would be the guard house and, in the rear, a guard's rotunda. Opening off the rotunda on both sides would be cell-rooms, each 52-by-190 feet and each containing 248 cells. In the rear of the rotunda was located the dining room, and over that the chapel, schoolroom, library, and hospital (an area connected to the center building by an enclosed corridor). All the

rooms were to be well-lighted and fully-ventilated. Surrounding the grounds would be a 22-foot high wall, 6-feet thick at the base and 4-feet thick at the top.

In August 1872 lumber was purchased from Curtis Brothers & Company and the W. G. Young & Company of Clinton to build a high stockade around yard space and temporary buildings at the prison and the quarry. Under the supervision of Heisey, work on a transitory cell building began on September 9 with hired labor. But work progressed slowly until the middle of October when Ed Holt, "master mechanic and builder of the first class," took over. By December 13, the north wing was enclosed and temporary wooden cells installed. At that point, major construction work was suspended until spring because appropriations were exhausted and the weather made construction work difficult. The expenditures so far included 64 iron cell doors purchased at a cost of \$3,000.

In an attempt to deal with the depleted finances, the Board of Commissioners made several recommendations on March 7, 1873. First it resolved to incur no further expense until the meeting of the next General Assembly. Then, to pay for the ongoing cost of employees and guards (the Board was determined to make the prison operable as soon as possible), it recommended the quarrying and selling of stone commercially. On April 7, 1873 work began in the quarries with hired labor.

About a month later, on May 13, 20 men were transferred from Fort Madison to Anamosa. John Barlow, prisoner No. 1, was 5-feet-5¾-inches tall, weighed 130 pounds, had a light complexion, sandy hair, a beard, and dark brown eyes. His other distinguishing features included a thumb missing on his left hand and a tattoo

of a woman dancing with a garland over her head on his right arm. He and the other "convicts" were joined by No. 21, the first man sent directly to Anamosa after receiving a sentence in Jones County. (No. 21's name was not revealed in the 1910 history of the county from which the information is taken, because his name would disgrace his living relatives.)

Twelve of the men were put to work at the quarry, while the rest labored in the prison yard, grading grounds and doing other such work. Only one, the single mechanic in the group, knew how to cut stone. Construction plans were slowed considerably because the prison lacked sufficient staff to teach and assist the prisoners. However, two of a group of convicts who arrived from Muscatine County on September 5 could lay stone. The convicts began to construct the walls that would surround them in the future, and on September 30, started work on the first permanent building. Prisoners No. 7, D. J. Wie, and No. 14, Ed Sheridan, laid the first stone. This large two-story building was later used as dining-room, chapel, library and hospital.

Besides the problem of untrained labor, Heisey, who was elected Acting Warden by the Board, had difficulty supporting each prisoner on the \$8.33 allowance provided by the state. This amount, based on a scale developed at Fort Madison, did not take into consideration the Anamosa institution's lack of bedding, clothes, and provisions, all of which were available at the old prison. Soon there was a \$6,000 debt — a result of building expenses, guard and employees salaries, and the inability to sell enough stone to cover these costs. However, Heisey considered the grading and the stone work done by the prisoners

worth at least \$1,000, so the actual indebtedness was less than \$5,000.

The prison officials also found it difficult to adequately guard the men working at the quarry. On Monday afternoon, June 2, 1873 three prisoners disarmed a guard and escaped. C. C. Hardin (serving seven years for robbery), Charles Hatfield (serving two years for burglary), and Andrew Costa (serving two and a half years for larceny) had been loading flat cars in two groups of six men each, with one man guarding each group, when they jumped the guard, took his gun, and disappeared into the dense undergrowth in a northeasterly direction. The Sheriff, the Constable, and 15 to 20 citizens quickly started in pursuit. That night a heavy rain hindered the search, and although a \$300 reward was offered, nothing was seen or heard of the men until a year later. On July 23, 1874 the prison received word that one of the men, Costa, had been recaptured. A former Fort Madison guard W. Roberts was sitting in his meat market in Moberly, Missouri, reading, when he was interrupted by a man inquiring: "Have you any bologna?" Before he could answer, the man turned, darted out the door, and started off at a brisk walk. Roberts, recognizing the man as a Fort Madison transfer to Anamosa, notified the Marshall. Caught and returned, Costa was sentenced to an additional year.

Two other prison breaks occurred in the first few years of the institution's existence. In August 1873, Morgan Holmes, convict No. 3, escaped, but was soon recaptured by the Sheriff of Buchanan County. (The Sheriff received a reward of \$50.) Two years later, three more prisoners escaped. Carelessly shackled convicts James Tracy and George C. Williams overpowered two guards when they re-

turned from work with a quarry gang of 25 men. Taking the guards' weapons, the two prisoners crossed the river and headed south while other guards fired at their retreating backs. In the confusion another prisoner, David McCarl, managed to slip away also and was not recaptured.

Tracy and Williams' capture at Tampico, Illinois almost ten days later, is an interesting story. Shortly after their escape Tuesday evening, they committed various minor "depredations" in the vicinity of Mechanicsville. The following Sunday, they struck one of their old haunts near Clinton, a "house of ill fame." By Sunday night they reached Prophetstown, broke into a store, and fitted themselves out in "two first rate suits of clothes each." Also at some point they had their hair cut all around (prison regulations required the hair sheared close on one side to discourage escape attempts). Monday night, while in Tampico, they robbed a jewelry store, entered several homes, stole silverware and a wallet. The wallet was found the next morning near a corncrib, minus \$15. Because of rain, the robbers were easily tracked from house to house and, finally, to the railroad tracks.

"Four citizens, probably those robbed, got a hand-car and started in pursuit. Mile after mile they sped on and still the tell-

Note on Sources

The material for this article was provided by reports and documents located in the Division of Historical Museum and Archives in Des Moines, the State Historical Society in Iowa City, and the Masonic Library in Cedar Rapids. Those at the State Archives include: *U.S. Biographical Dictionary — Iowa* (1878), *Des Moines Bulletin — Legislative Supplement*, *Warden Biennial Reports*, and *General Assembly Reports* (13th through 15th). Primary sources at the Historical Society were the Haynes Manuscript — *A History of Iowa Prisons*, and the *Anamosa Eureka* (1870-75). Valuable source material in the Masonic Library included the *Bulletin of Iowa State Institutions, Penitentiary, Anamosa*, Vol. 1, 1873-87, and the "History of the Anamosa Penitentiary" by Judge H. M. Remley. In addition, the 1910 *History of Jones County* found in Mt. Mercy College Library was helpful.



The east cell house at Anamosa (courtesy Division of Historical Museum and Archives).

tale footprints preceded them. Finally, twelve miles southeast of Tampico, the pursuers overtook the two men, passed a short distance, then stopped and ordered them to halt. Refusing, Williams drew a revolver on the man who gave the command and snapped the trigger but failed to discharge the weapon. The citizen reciprocated his good intentions with interest, firing on Williams instantly, the ball striking off, but of course knocking him down. The capturers at once sprung upon the rogues, relieved them of weapons and tied them with ropes." The revolver Williams used was the same one he took from the guard when he escaped. Williams had pulled the trigger on an empty barrel; four charges remained. The \$15 and the silverware was retrieved, including napkin rings, which Williams had managed to slip under the end of a railroad tie.

The men were taken to a jail in Mor-

risson, Illinois, where an interrogation by an attorney elicited quasi-truthful answers from Tracey.

Where have you been working lately?
Near Anamosa, Iowa.

What was the name of the man you worked for?

His name was Martin Heisey.

How long were you in his employ?

Nearly a year.

How much a month did you get?

We never made any definite bargain.

Have you drawn any pay?

Only what clothes I needed.

Did you settle with Mr. Heisey when you left?

No, Heisey was not there at the time.

However, when he learned that he and Williams were the key suspects in a murder near Tipton, Iowa, Tracy became con-

siderably agitated. His attorney, noting his alarm, asked if he hadn't recently escaped from the "hands of justice." Tracy answered yes and gave all the particulars of the escape.

Although Heisey and a deputy left for Tampico immediately after learning of the capture, the Sheriff of Whiteside County declined to turn over Tracy and Williams without requisition papers, which were in transmission. As a result of his refusal, Tracy and Williams managed to break jail by lifting a heavy flagging and digging under a foundation wall. A little over a month later, in the middle of December, Tracy was recaptured and sent to the Joliet prison for a few years. Then he was transferred to Anamosa to serve the 25-month balance of his three-year term. Nothing further was ever heard of Williams.

Considering the lack of security measures, it is surprising that during the first two years as few as seven prisoners escaped. Besides the opportunity provided by the quarry work, the prison compound itself invited escape attempts. The 16-foot board fence was originally two feet taller but, because of high winds, it had to be lowered.

Escape, parole, and serving time were not the only ways out of prison. On December 11, 1873 the first prisoner died at Anamosa. A memorandum in the prison records says: "This evening at half-past five o'clock George Williams, known as No. 5, was taken suddenly sick with paralysis on the left side. The doctor was sent for about nine o'clock. Following another attack on the right side, Williams became speechless and died at half-past ten o'clock . . . He was buried on an elevation facing the rising sun at the prison farm, where is now the prison cemetery. Deceased convicts whose bodies are not

claimed by relatives and those not transferred to medical colleges under the present law are buried in this cemetery side by side in rows and their graves are marked with head and foot stones made by the convicts."

The interest the community of Anamosa took in the prisoners was not limited to escape attempts or death notices. The State did not provide prisoners with secular or religious instruction, but local citizens donated magazines and books and made further efforts to help educate the inmates. On August 6, 1873 the teachers and friends of the prison Sabbath School gave a picnic for the prisoners. "The inmates of the prison were taken out under the shady oaks of the spacious yard and were freed from all restraint, the arms of the guards being put out of sight. A good number of friends, both ladies and gentlemen, were invited and the teachers and those for whom the treat was especially intended, pitched quoits, played croquet, engaged in running, jumping, talking, joking and with the utmost freedom and to their heart's content. About five o'clock, the tables were set under the shade and the men invited to take right hold and make themselves perfectly at home . . . After the supper was concluded cigars were brought forth . . . When the exercises were brought to a close the prisoners warmly shook hands with their friends."

Attendance at the Sunday School was not compulsory, but it was at a sermon delivered by each of the town clergymen in turn so the "striped boys" could listen to the same preaching as the rest of the community. Because most of them were jailed for committing larceny and other lesser crimes, and because none of them seemed to be of the "desperate" sort, it was felt that some of them could become



Anamosa, town and prison, 1946 (courtesy Division of Historical Museum and Archives).

useful “ornaments of society.” The discipline within the institution was considered excellent. Only five cases of insubordination had been reported. One young man, after he had served nine months for robbery and had been offered the “citizen’s suit,” \$5, and transportation home, requested permission to remain until spring so he might finish learning the stone-cutter trade. Anamosa granted his request, and he remained among the detained, dressed in prison garb, earning two dollars a day for himself.

Calling the inmates “our prisoners” the *Eureka*, on July 23, 1874, noted the local reaction to David Nible, age 25 who, after serving a little over a year of a two year sentence, was pardoned by Governor Carpenter: “Mr. Nible has been one of the

willing and trusted men of the institution and has for months past been doing all the teaming for the prison, passing along our streets daily, in the performance of his duties. He would very likely have been released next February on account of good behavior, but his faithfulness has been so marked that we are glad to learn he has been given his freedom.”

At this time the prisoners were housed in the one completed, barely habitable building, designed to become eventually, the engine room. The pine-plank cells sat behind iron doors in four tiers. Each cell contained three bunks, making accommodations for 42 inmates. The south end of the building, used as a kitchen and dining room, provided necessary space for offices and storerooms. The food consisted mostly

of beef, potatoes, bread, beans, mackerel and codfish, varied by vegetables in season from a five-acre garden. On holidays prisoners received extras such as pies, cakes, and cookies. In spite of the limited diet, the harsh working conditions, the long hours and the primitive living conditions, the men were in good general health and had positive attitudes. When the General Assembly failed to make provisions for medical care, the Governor instructed the prison to employ a physician-surgeon.

In March 1874 over \$20,000 was appropriated to meet the cost of operation over a two-year period. Although the amount was

comparatively small, the supporters of the bill felt a decided victory had been gained in the establishment of the penitentiary as a permanent state institution. Six years had passed since the Fort Madison Prison was declared inadequate. Although much more time, labor, and financial support was necessary to complete the physical plant, by 1874 a new penal facility was successfully functioning at Anamosa. Now, over a hundred years later, prisoners and citizens still share the same town, separated by the locally-quarried stone walls of the "white palace." □

CONTRIBUTORS

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