Misery and Authority: The Dualities of Gothic Penitential Architecture

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Hanging amongst a number of paintings in the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art is a curious portrait of the architect John Haviland by the Philadelphia painter John Neagle (fig. 1). Art historians consider this one of Neagle’s best works.¹ Painted in 1828, the portrait shows Haviland seated at his worktable, his right hand resting on James Stuart’s architectural bible, Athens, as he cradles a drafting compass in his fingers. To the left of Haviland is a radially designed sketch; above that, a colored drawing of what appears to be a medieval castle. One can make out a gatehouse and a few towers, but no other details can really tell us what this structure is. Upon further investigation, some might be surprised to learn that the “castle” in Haviland’s portrait is not a castle at all. It is, in fact, Haviland’s most renowned design, Pennsylvania’s Eastern State Penitentiary.²

The design of Eastern State Penitentiary established Haviland as one of the leading American architects during the first half of the nineteenth century and, arguably, one of the greatest prison architects in the world.³ Much has been written about Haviland’s design. Most studies tend to focus on the groundbreaking and modern penological policy enacted within its walls: solitary confinement.⁴ Indeed, Haviland’s penitentiary was the first institution to implement total isolation, day and night, for the duration of the inmate’s sentence. Social theorists from all over the world came to investigate and marvel at the

²Eastern State Penitentiary has also been called “Cherry Hill” due to its location near a cherry orchard. For the sake of clarity, I will simply refer to the institution as Eastern State Penitentiary.
⁴There were two competing penitential systems that deployed the use of solitary confinement: the “Auburn system” and the “Pennsylvania system.” Eastern State Penitentiary employed the Pennsylvania system. I will explore the differences of these two systems later.
most modern and progressive penological institution of the nineteenth century. However, I am not as much interested with what occurred within its walls, but more with the actual walls themselves.

The Gothic façade of Eastern State Penitentiary seems to be an odd design choice for one of the most modern and progressive institutions of the nineteenth-century world. If Haviland’s penitentiary was modern and progressive, why make it look as though it is from the Middle Ages? Why a medieval castle? The use of a medieval style in Haviland’s penitentiary is suggestive of how people imagined the Middle Ages to be. Haviland’s architectural design was not a passive reflection of the nascent Gothic revival of early nineteenth-century America; it was deliberate. This essay will argue that Haviland’s Gothic architectural design was a conscious effort to evoke both misery and authority. The Gothic aesthetic worked to instill fear for the institution and the castellated façade legitimized the authority of the state. In the process of exploring the medievalism of Haviland’s penitentiary, I will also suggest the temporal duality of Eastern State Penitentiary as modern and medieval. It was modern in that the penitentiary represented the humanitarian progress of nineteenth-century prison reformers. It was medieval because of its very appearance, signifying that Eastern State Penitentiary would be completely removed from the society around it. The blending of modernity and medievalism truly made Haviland’s penitentiary a world apart.

In the process of examining the medievalism of Haviland’s penitential architecture, some necessary steps must be taken in order to understand why the medieval style was chosen. I will begin with a brief biography of John Haviland, focusing on his architectural influences before he was commissioned to design Eastern State Penitentiary. The American prison reform movement of the early nineteenth century will also be examined, as it was from this progressive ideological climate that Eastern State Penitentiary emerged. I will then detail the Gothic design of Haviland’s penitentiary, noting, not only its structural function but also, illuminating its striking similarities to prisons in the Middle Ages. The Gothic design of penitentiaries permeated the country. This will be made salient by highlighting the numerous penitentiaries designed in the castellated style in America and how this influence of design implicitly influenced imagined perceptions of the Middle Ages.

The Architect

John Haviland was born on December 15, 1792 in Somerset, England. In his early years, Haviland would have seen the Gothic style of his church and been impressed by the castle in Taunton, which was only a few miles away. Very little is known of Haviland during his childhood, but he was certainly noticed for his artistic abilities and his aptitude for math, as he was sent by his

family to London to study under the renowned architect James Elmes. From 1811 to 1815, Haviland worked under the guidance of Elmes and became well versed in the Romantic Classicism of Greek and Roman architecture. In 1815, Haviland’s Russian uncle, Admiral Count Mordwinoff, offered him a post in the Russian Imperial Corps of Engineers, which Haviland accepted.

In St. Petersburg, Haviland became acquainted with Sir George von Sonntag—an American serving as an admiral and general in the Czar’s military—and the United States Minister to Russia, John Quincy Adams. There was little opportunity for Haviland in Russia. After making connections in Philadelphia through von Sonntag, Haviland left St. Petersburg for New England in 1816. Haviland immediately opened a school of architectural drawing and began receiving commissions for public buildings and private residences. By 1818, Haviland had published his first book, The Builders Assistant, won commissions to build two churches, and submitted a design for a new prison located on the outskirts of Philadelphia. Haviland’s design was chosen over two other submissions and on May 22, 1823, the cornerstone of Eastern State Penitentiary was laid.

This landmark occasion would be the pivotal moment for prison reformers’ efforts to make the United States into a more humanitarian and progressive nation. Haviland’s interest in prison design arguably stems from his mentor James Elmes and from the writings of English prison reformer John Howard. In 1817, Elmes published a short twenty-eight-page pamphlet entitled “Hints for Improvement of Prisons,” which revealed, not only his interest in prison reforms but also, detailed what a prison should look like. Referring to the Newgate prison in London, Elmes stated that “without a doubt...the whole external aspect [should be] made as gloomy and melancholy as possible.” The other half of Haviland’s penitential interest stems from the writings of eighteenth-century English prison reformer, John Howard. Howard wrote extensively on the conditions of prisons and made a number of suggestions on how to improve them. Haviland “loved to dwell upon the discoveries and designs of the great Englishmen [Howard].” The considerable influence of Elmes and Howard must have influenced Haviland’s vision of how a prison should function and the importance of prison design.

The Modern

The planning of Eastern State Penitentiary was the end result of nearly fifty years of penal reforms. Before the American Revolution, public displays of

7 Gilchrist, “John Haviland before 1816,” 137.
8 Johnston, “Pioneers in Criminology V. John Haviland (1792-1852),” 511.
punishment were regularly exhibited. Hangings, whippings, or placing the condemned in the stocks achieved the dual goal of legitimizing the authority of the state and acting as a deterrent for crime. According to Michele Foucault, "The aim was to make an example, not only by making people aware that the slightest offense was likely to be punished, but by arousing feelings of terror by the spectacle of power letting its anger fall upon the guilty person." Following the Revolution, a surge of republican spirit swept through the minds of reform-minded Philadelphians as they worked to overturn traditional forms of punishment. In 1786 Pennsylvania halted the use of the public whipping post, eliminated the death penalty for robbery and burglary, and experimented with using public penal labor. By 1790 the state had replaced public labor with imprisonment; and in 1794 legislators restricted capital punishment to first-degree murder. Other states soon followed suit. In 1796 New York, New Jersey, and Virginia reduced their lists of capital crimes; by 1820, nearly all had abolished the death sentence in cases except those of first-degree murder, or at least limited it to only the most severe crimes. This was done to display both the morality that the new nation had inherited from the Enlightenment and to separate America from "those cruel and vindictive penalties which are in use in the European countries." American penal reformers believed that by purging the new nation of anything resembling British law, crime would be drastically curtailed.

As the states enacted these legal reforms, the question arose as to what kind of punishment should be implemented if public discipline was no longer acceptable. Incarceration, Philadelphians concluded, would be the new method of punishment. Rather than hang or whip an offender, the state would place the criminal in prison. Proponents of incarceration believed that individual character was "fundamentally unstable, that criminality—spread through example and communication—constituted a veritable contagion." In their view, the public observance of executions and other forms of physical punishment chanced the possibility of morally corrupting society. Moreover, the public might even sympathize with the condemned individual, calling into question the legitimacy of the state. The prison would remedy the corruptive potential of public displays of punishment by literally walling-off offenders from the rest of society. Enthusiasm for this new, humane form of punishment swept through

17 Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 67.

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New England in the first years of the nineteenth century as the construction of a number of prisons took place. The enthusiasm, however, was fleeting.

By the 1820s the faith in legal reform and prisons began to erode. The statutory changes had no real impact on the number of crimes committed. The shortcomings of the nascent prisons became clear as disorder, riots, and frequent escapes commonly occurred. Prisoners lived together in large rooms and were able to freely talk with one another. Escape plots and ways of committing crimes more effectively reverberated within the prison walls. Critics declared these early prisons "colleges of vice." Noticing the failures of this style of punishment, reformers sought to create a more effective system of punishment. Reformers conducted interviews with inmates in the hopes of uncovering the roots of criminal behavior. They connected criminal behavior with the loosening of traditional structures—the family and the church in particular—as the source of many crimes. Thus, reformers proposed to create and reinforce structure through the implementation of solitary confinement and forced labor on all inmates in what would be known as "penitential punishment." Penitential punishment promised a new, more humane and modern way of dealing with criminals. Spiritual engagement replaced coercive violence and criminal behavior would be contained rather than expanded in these new institutions.

Pennsylvania was not the only state to impose a penitential system of discipline. Auburn Prison in New York offered its own brand of solitary confinement, known simply as the "Auburn system." The Auburn system only implemented solitary confinement at night. During the day inmates would labor and eat together in absolute silence, only to return to their individual cells. The "Pennsylvania system," on the other hand, took a more radical approach. Proponents of the Pennsylvania system, such as Richard Vaux, Samuel Gridley Howe, and Dorothea Dix, believed that only through absolute isolation would the inmate be free of moral contamination. Upon entering the penitentiary, hoods would be placed over the heads of inmates to ensure they would not see or be seen by others (fig. 2). Inmates would eat, sleep, pray, and labor in a white seven-by-
twelve-foot cell for the duration of their sentence. The spiritual and moral ascension of inmates was to come from the only literature allowed in the cell—the Bible. They introduced labor after a period of time to highlight the value of industrious behavior. Visitors from Great Britain, France, Prussia, Russia, Belgium, and several other countries came to investigate the penitentiary.

The Medieval

On October 25, 1829, Eastern State Penitentiary received its first inmate after seven years of construction. Contemporaries hailed it as the “most extensive building in the United States.” Viewed from the entrance, the oppressive and powerful nature of the façade is striking (fig. 3). Large grey blocks of square-shaped granite compose the front of the building, which stretches some two-hundred feet in length with two fifty-foot-tall, square towers projecting at each end. Near the base of the towers are three long, narrow and pointed mullioned windows, which “contribute in a high degree to their picturesque effect.” Each tower is accented with three narrow embrasures. The tops of the square towers are crowned with jutting embattled parapets, supported by pointed arches resting on corbels (fig. 4). The curtain wall between the towers is forty-one-feet high with six lofty, narrow and pointed windows on its face. The top of the wall is fashioned with an embattled parapet and the gatehouse is centered between enormous solid buttresses, which terminate in pinnacles. The gate itself is a broad, pointed archway with a massive iron portcullis. It is further fortified by “double oaken gates, studded with projecting iron rivets,” creating “the most imposing” entryway in the United States at the time of its construction.

25 Johnston, 518.
26 Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons, Acting Committee, Annual report of the Acting Committee of the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons (Philadelphia: Published by the Order of the Society, 1833), 10.
28 Ibid., 136.
29 Ibid., 136.

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behind the entryway is an eighty-foot-tall, octagonal bell tower that, like the square towers, has an embattled parapet. In all, the Gothic façade of Eastern State Penitentiary gives one the impression that this solid and fortified institution would keep its inmates within the walls, removed from society with no chance of escape.

Passing though the gateway into the interior of the penitentiary, the presence of the medieval again emerges. Haviland, aware of the intention to spiritually reform the inmates, designed the inside of the penitentiary to resemble a "forced monastery." The lofty ceilings, tall, arched windows and thirty-foot, barrel-vaulted hallways accentuated the spiritual nature of the penitentiary (fig. 5). Moreover, the vaulted sky-lit cells provided circulation and, symbolically, ensured that the only light to descend on the inmate would be from heaven (fig. 6). Other Gothic features accent the depths of the penitentiary. One particularly beautiful intersection features an exposed, wooden, ribbed vault amongst the naked stone and white walls. The spiritual purity of the penitentiary is heightened by an overpowering whiteness, which colors the floors, ceilings, and cells (fig. 7). On their 1831 tour of American penitentiaries, Frenchmen Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont were struck by the purity and perfection of the interior as they admired the "perfect isolation" that secured inmates "from all fatal contamination."

Both the interior and exterior have respective functions in their designs, though medievalism is revealed in each. Eastern State Penitentiary’s oppressive Gothic façade—accentuated by the rural landscape—affected both incoming convicts and the surrounding community. This harrowing structure would have dominated the barren skyline. Once inside this medieval-looking structure, the inmates truly entered a different world. The interior conveyed the spiritual and moral uplift reformers believed the penitentiary could achieve.

31 Ibid., 11.
32 Beaumont and Tocqueville, On the Penitentiary, 58.
Here, I find it fitting to draw some parallels between Eastern State Penitentiary and the Middle Ages. Haviland blended monastic life and medieval castles in his penitentiary and these parallels should help make salient the prevalence of the medieval within the modern. The efforts of pious, nineteenth-century prison reformers to spiritually elevate the prisoners share many characteristics with the monasticism of medieval Europe. Haviland's explicit decision to design the interior to resemble a "forced monastery" deserves elaboration. The reformers believed that inmates would leave their known world, entering a place which "compels him to commune with his own heart," through solitude and labor. The removal of one's self from the secular world to a more spiritual world, or fuga mundi, is a major aspect of monastic life.

Discipline, obedience, religious learning and humility delineated the structure of monastic life. Ritual and regularity were highly emphasized. Of all the Christian clergy, only members of the monastic order lived their lives in continual prayer and penitence. Nineteenth-century prison reformers reimagined the monastery as they espoused the need for prisoners to reflect on their crime through solitude (penitence and discipline), labor (humility), respect for rules (obedience), religious learning and repetition (ritual). By naming the new disciplinary system a "penitentiary," prison reformers evoked a spiritual and medieval image through language.

The shift in rhetoric, from prison to penitentiary, resonates with the concept of monasticism. The root word of "penitentiary" is "penitent," and through penitence, according to reformers, a criminal's sin would be absolved. As we have seen, penitence was central to those within the monastery. Sometime around the 1780s, the use of the word "penitentiary" to describe a disciplinary system emerged in Philadelphia newspapers. Prison reformers in Philadelphia believed that through solitary confinement, "painful reflection" would produce repentance. Prisons of the past were ineffective and lacked spiritual engagement. Instead, "penitentiary houses might be formed," where offenders would "be confined for a given time in separate cells, and supplied with work, according to their habits and education."

Tocqueville and Beaumont noted this shift from prison to penitentiary: "[the] jailor of a prison, vulgar people only could be found; the most distinguished persons offered

33 Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons, Annual report of the Acting Committee of the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons, 9.
34 Lester K. Little, "Monasticism and Western Society: From Marginality to the Establishment and Back," Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome 47 (2002): 83; Fuga mundi literally translates to "flight from this world."
35 Ibid., 88.
36 Pennsylvania Packet, May 13, 1786.
themselves to administer a penitentiary where a moral direction exists.”37 This shift in language, from “prison” to “penitentiary” underscores the perceived differences between a prison and a penitentiary. The prison was brutish and only promoted vice, whereas the penitentiary was spiritual and uplifted the fallen.

To be sure, monasteries also used imprisonment as a disciplinary measure. Because monks and nuns removed themselves from society, they effectively cut themselves out of the jurisdiction of secular law. Those who offered themselves to the monastery placed themselves under the rule of St. Benedict. In instances where a monk or nun required disciplinary action, the Rule of Benedict called for the use of murus.38 Monastic imprisonment was something distinct compared to the imprisonment of the secular world; offenders were isolated, set to labor, and made sure to engage in penance.39 Other disciplinary measures were used in conjunction with monastic imprisonment, such as a restricted diet and beating with rods. Harsher forms of punishment occurred, but were not endorsed. In the twelfth century, Peter the Venerable of Cluny, one of the most influential abbots of his day, disapprovingly recounted the instance of a monk placed in a subterranean chamber for life.40 Beyond the realm of the monastic order, imprisonment, however rare, found a place within the massive fortifications of the Middle Ages.

The castellated façade of Eastern State Penitentiary echoes the proto-prisons of medieval England and France. Prisons during the Middle Ages were often situated within the walls of castles and fortifications. Following the Norman conquest of England in 1066, William I and his successors sought to impose their authority and power through the construction of the Tower of London.41 The Tower varied in function: as a military stronghold, the occasional residence of the king, for storing valuables and jewels, and as a prison. Early prisoners of the Tower were high-profile individuals, usually enemies of the king. By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, imprisonment in the Tower became more common.42 Castles on the Continent also designated areas within the fortress for prisoners. In France, the Bastille, the Châtelet, and the fortress at Loches, near Tours, all served as fortifications as well as prisons.43 As fortresses, the architecture of these structures featured massive sheer-faced, stone walls, projecting towers, curtain walls, embattled parapets, embrasures, and portcullises to keep attackers out. These towering structures overpowered the skyline, symbolizing the authority of powerful kings and the strength of the state.

37 Beaumont and Tocqueville, 63.
39 Ibid., 380; Imprisonment for the secular world was something of an anomaly. Normally, prisons were used as a holding cell for those awaiting death.
40 Morris and Rothman, 29.
41 R. Allen Brown, Allen Brown’s English Castles (Rochester NY: Boydell Press, 2004), 5-9; The exact date of construction is unknown, but historians seem to agree that the construction of White Tower was completed in 1100 CE.
42 Morris and Rothman, 34, 52.
43 Ibid., 39-41.
Misery and Authority

The Gothic design of Haviland's penitentiary captivated those within its presence as well as those within its walls. Tocqueville and Beaumont were impressed with the penitentiary's "appearance of a fortified castle of the Middle Ages."44 One observer noted, "this penitentiary is the only edifice in this country to convey to our citizens the external appearance of those magnificent and picturesque castles of the Middle Ages."45 A lithograph from 1833 highlights the picturesque quality of the penitentiary (fig. 8). The foreground of the image shows two farmers observing their grazing cattle and a primitive wooden fence running alongside a creek. In the background looms the castle-like façade of Eastern State Penitentiary. Behind the penitentiary is a foreboding dark cloud, clashing with the otherwise peaceful scene. While this "magnificent and picturesque" depiction of Haviland's penitentiary represents one of many functions of the design, melancholy and authoritative projections were central.

The aesthetic of the penitentiary psychologically punished arriving inmates. There are two characteristics of this psychological punishment: the knowledge of solitary confinement and the structure itself. Eastern State Penitentiary gained notoriety through public dissemination of its system of absolute solitude. One writer observed, "great terror is known to have been impressed upon the minds of the convict community by this institution."46 According to the building commission, the exterior of Eastern State Penitentiary was meant to "strike terror into the minds of offenders" with its deep shadows and massy features.47 Richard Vaux, a Philadelphian prison reformer, noted, "the design and execution impart a grave, severe, and awful character to the external aspect of this building."48 The architectural evocation of the Middle Ages provided the dreadful visual element necessary for a disciplinary institution. However, the façade of Haviland's penitentiary, like the Middle Ages, is subject to various identities. Misery was certainly an important aspect that the building commissioners wanted to convey; the assertion of power was another.

44Beaumont and Tocqueville, 104.
45 Smith, 3.
47 Ibid., 142.

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Through its castellated appearance, Eastern State Penitentiary emanated the authority and power of the state. As noted earlier, public punishment in the early-eighteenth century established state authority and power by punishing the body of the condemned. With the removal of public punishment in the 1780s and 1790s, the state needed to find another outlet to declare its authority in a less violent and more humane fashion. This was possible through the architecture of Haviland's penitentiary. The penitentiary became the pride of the nation, displayed through the castellated design.\footnote{Rothman, The Discovery of the Asylum, 79.} Castles in the Middle Ages represented individual, powerful lords.\footnote{Paul Frankl, Gothic Architecture, revised ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 281.} The auxiliary role of the prison within the medieval castle became the central role of Haviland's penitential castle. Castles in England and on the Continent, no longer used for militaristic purposes by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, functioned more as status symbols. "The talismanic quality of the castle," architectural historian Maurice Howard writes, "no longer pretending to real defense but promoting the shadow of that earlier power for the sake of status, remained significant."\footnote{Michael Hall ed., Gothic Architecture and its Meanings, 1550-1830 (Reading, UK: Spire Books Ltd., 2002), 64.} The English-born Haviland, exposed to these medieval fortresses in his youth, must have understood the symbolism of castles. The castellated design of Eastern State Penitentiary cemented the modern state's authoritative status with its oppressive walls and projecting towers. This sense of strength and power is further symbolized spatially. The effect that the penitentiary "produces on the imagination of every passing spectator, is peculiarly impressive, solemn, and instructive."\footnote{Smith, 3.}

Both misery and authority flowed from the walls of Haviland’s penitentiary. This was no coincidence. The building commission of the penitentiary went on record stating that "the exterior of a solitary prison should exhibit as much as possible great strength and convey to the mind a cheerless blank indicative of the misery which awaits the unhappy being who enters within its walls."\footnote{Johnston, "Pioneers in Criminology V. John Haviland (1792-1852)," 515.} The penitentiary, then, should send a message to the world: deviant behavior will be disciplined, liberty and freedom will be stripped away, and only misery awaits. With this in mind, Haviland constructed a Gothic castle. So what then, did the medieval mean to prison reformers? Why was a Gothic aesthetic chosen over, say, a classically-styled structure? The decision to construct Eastern State Penitentiary in the Gothic style increases in its curiosity when we examine Haviland's other projects. Many, if not all, of Haviland’s designs were heavily Greek in style. St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church, the Pennsylvania Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, and the Franklin Institute are just a few examples of Haviland’s Greek forms.\footnote{Matthew Baigell, "John Haviland in Philadelphia, 1818-1826," Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians 25, no. 3 (1966): 202-3.} Construction began on all of these structures around the same time as that of Eastern State Penitentiary, and
yet none of them resemble the Gothic façade of the penitentiary. Certainly, the Gothic aroused feelings of mystery, melancholy, and terror, the exact characteristics the building commission wanted. By design, the Middle Ages, too, becomes a time of hazy despair. However, we must not undermine the multiplicity of the Middle Ages by this single characterization. In the case of Haviland’s penitentiary, the Middle Ages also conjures a sense of authority. The castellated design of the penitentiary summons up a time of great kings and powerful lords. The overpowering walls and jutting towers cast an authoritative shadow over the common spectator and incoming prisoners. All of these emotive responses are elicited by the same building, much like the medieval period’s ability to embody romance, fear, or mystery. It is not a period of any single meaning but one of multiple, even contradictory, meanings. The façade of Haviland’s penitentiary, then, becomes the Middle Ages.

The Medieval Legacy

The legacy of Haviland’s penitentiary can be seen across the world. Many prisons emulated the radial design of the interior and the practices of solitary confinement. It is remarkable, though, how many penitentiaries constructed in nineteenth-century America exhibited a castellated design. Constructed in 1836, Missouri State Penitentiary’s façade is overwhelming (fig. 9). Colloquially known as “the Walls,” the main structure of Missouri State Penitentiary is composed of square-shaped limestone and the face of the building stands around fifty feet tall. The top of the building has an embattled parapet that stretches along the entire length of the structure. The main portal is placed between two sixty-foot-tall, cylindrical towers, both of which exhibit embattled parapets and pointed windows. Dwarfed by the massive towers, the entrance is accented by a broad pointed arch.

Joliet Prison in Illinois is another example of a castellated nineteenth-century prison (fig. 10). Completed in 1858, Joliet Prison features two embattled towers, accented with lofty and narrow windows, on each side of the main structure. The entrance is guarded by a taller set of narrow, projecting turrets. The small curtain wall between these turrets is fashioned with a blind arcade and a crow-stepped gable. One contemporary observer noted the temporal rupture when viewing the medieval-looking structure in the nineteenth century:


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The exterior of the prison impresses the visitor, and at first sight suggests one of these castles of the olden time, those romantic structures that withstood the ancient archers and warring elements for ages. The battlemented walls, upon which blue-coated men with Winchester rifles under their arms patrolling the platforms that surround the rugged but ornamental towers help to make up the romantic picture which is finally dispelled when the eyes rest upon the iron-barred windows, proclaiming that it is a prison.\footnote{56 S. W. Wetmore, Behind the Bars at Joliet: A Peep at a Prison, Its History and Its Mysteries (Joliet: J. O. Gorman and Company, 1892), 21.}

Here the observer is struck by the picturesque quality of the prison, imagining the structure as a medieval castle fulfilling its militaristic intent. The “blue-coated men with Winchester rifles” of the modern world challenge this romantic image of a medieval castle.\footnote{57 Joliet Prison further disrupts temporalities with its minor appearance in the movie, Blues Brothers.}

In Iowa, Anamosa State Penitentiary’s castellated Gothic architecture is visually arresting. Established in 1872, Anamosa’s façade, especially its administration building, is embellished with a remarkable amount of Gothic features. The administration building is composed of square stones, accented with embattled parapets, stringcourses of pointed arches, and corbelling supports on the corner turrets. Each corner turret is decorated with blind arcades, crowned with crenellations. A heavy tower projects from the top of the administration building, adorned with crenellations, corbelling, corner turrets, and narrow windows, embellished with more crenellations (fig. 11). The remainder of the façade is punctuated with projecting turrets, buttresses, embattled parapets, and lofty and slender arched windows. Of all the penitentiaries I have discussed in this essay, Anamosa, in my opinion, is the most elaborate and enchanting. Its majestic façade almost veils its disciplinary nature.

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{joliet_prison.jpg}
\caption{Joliet Prison, Illinois. Photograph courtesy of the Joliet Visitors Bureau.}
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\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{anamosa_state_penitentiary.jpg}
\caption{Anamosa State Penitentiary administration building. Photograph courtesy of Anamosa State Penitentiary Museum.}
\end{figure}
The final penitentiary I will highlight is West Virginia Penitentiary. Completed in 1876, the penitentiary exhibits a heavy, fortified appearance through its large, grey square-shaped stones (fig. 12). Columns and pointed arches support the aisle to the door of the main building. Two projecting turrets dominate the main building. The turrets are crowned with very narrow and stretched crenellations, contributing to the vertical emphasis so prominent in Gothic design. Strung between the two turrets are an arcade and two smaller, flat-topped towers; between the towers is a gable, topped with a cylindrical finial. The surrounding wall is topped with crenellations and the face is modestly decorated with buttresses and relatively broad, but tall windows.

This is by no means a definitive list of the penitentiaries constructed in the Gothic style during the nineteenth century. These particular institutions were chosen for their notable aesthetics and to show how the castellated architecture thrived throughout the nineteenth century. The lasting presence of the medieval design certainly says something about what the Middle Ages represented. Like Haviland’s penitentiary, these institutions promoted the moral and spiritual restoration of the fallen individual. The prominence of the Gothic style suggests reformers believed the Middle Ages to be a more spiritual period. Indeed, the vertical element of Gothic style emphasized the vertical gaze to the heavens. The designs of these penitentiaries are given a hard, authoritative edge by mirroring the castles of the Middle Ages. The castellated façade of these penitentiaries and prisons underscore a prevailing image of power and protection; those within the walls will not get out.

**Imagining the Penitentiary**

In 1842, Charles Dickens toured Haviland’s penitentiary and noted the “immense amount of torture and agony” inflicted upon the inmates. Dickens described the other-worldliness of the institution as a “curtain dropped between him and the living world...[the inmate] is a man buried alive; to be dug out in the slow round of years; and in the mean time dead to everything but torturing anxieties and horrible despair.”

58 Through Dickens’s observation we are confronted with the horrible realities of the penitentiary. Initially imagined as a humanitarian triumph, the reality fell well short of its intent. Indeed, the penitential system as a whole would wane from the 1840s through the remainder of the nineteenth century. Slowly, the faith in reform eroded as overcrowding,


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lack of funding, disorder, and brutality characterized nearly every penitentiary in the United States. Over time, even Eastern State Penitentiary, famed for isolating each individual in his cell, received so many inmates that separation was not possible.\footnote{59}{Morris and Rothman, 124-5.}

The penitentiary is an institution laden with conflicting and curious dualities. Its roots are found in the humanitarian reform movements that peppered antebellum New England.\footnote{60}{For a survey of reform movements in antebellum America see Ronald G. Walters, American Reformers, 1815-1860, 2nd ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997).} Prison reformers imagined a disciplinary system that would replace the inhumane punishments of the past. They envisaged a future where criminals could be morally and spiritually reborn through separation, obedience, and labor. The penitential system was a progressive step into modernity in the minds of prison reformers. In taking a step into the welcoming waters of modernity, however, prison reformers left one foot in the sands of the Middle Ages. This temporal confusion emanates from the Gothic façade and through the monastic system operating within the walls. Those entering the gates of Eastern State Penitentiary were indeed entering another world—a spiritually-reformative and medieval world. Foucault wrote that “[Eastern State Penitentiary] was life annihilated and begun again.”\footnote{61}{Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 239.} Haviland’s penitentiary projected the message that those who entered the penitentiary would not return the same. The decision to erect the penitentiary in a Gothic form reflects this spiritual and bodily separation from the rest of the world.

In investigating the medieval façade of Eastern State Penitentiary, as well as the aforementioned penitentiaries, we encounter another set of dualities: the misery within the walls and the authority that erects them. Architectural historian, Paul Frankl, argues that the form of a castle “was made to symbolize threats, arrogance, and the instillation of fear.”\footnote{62}{Frankl., 280.} The visual recreation of the medieval provoked a number of responses from nineteenth-century observers. They noted the “awful character,” the “great terror,” and the “misery” radiating from the walls of Eastern State Penitentiary. The castellated façade of the penitentiaries also exuded the power and authority of the state. As the legitimacy of public displays of capital and corporal punishment eroded, the state resorted to the architecture of the penitentiary, both in reality and in the imagination, to impose its authority over society. While these observations are directed toward the façade of Haviland’s design, these observations are evoked by the visualization of the Middle Ages through design. Rooted in the obscurity of the medieval, no other architectural style could better suit the temporal and functional multiplicity of the penitential system than the Gothic.

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\footnote{61}{Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 239.}
\footnote{62}{Frankl., 280.}
Sam Wanless is an Americanist in the graduate program at SFSU. "Nonetheless, he could not imagine himself spending his life driving stakes into the ground, erecting fences, dividing up the land. He thought of himself not as something heavy that left tracks behind it, but if anything a speck upon the surface of an earth too deeply asleep to notice the scratch of ant-feet, the rasp of butterfly teeth, the trembling of dust." — South African author, J.M. Coetzee