

Cells and Crankhouses: Mental Illness at the Kansas State Penitentiary through 1940

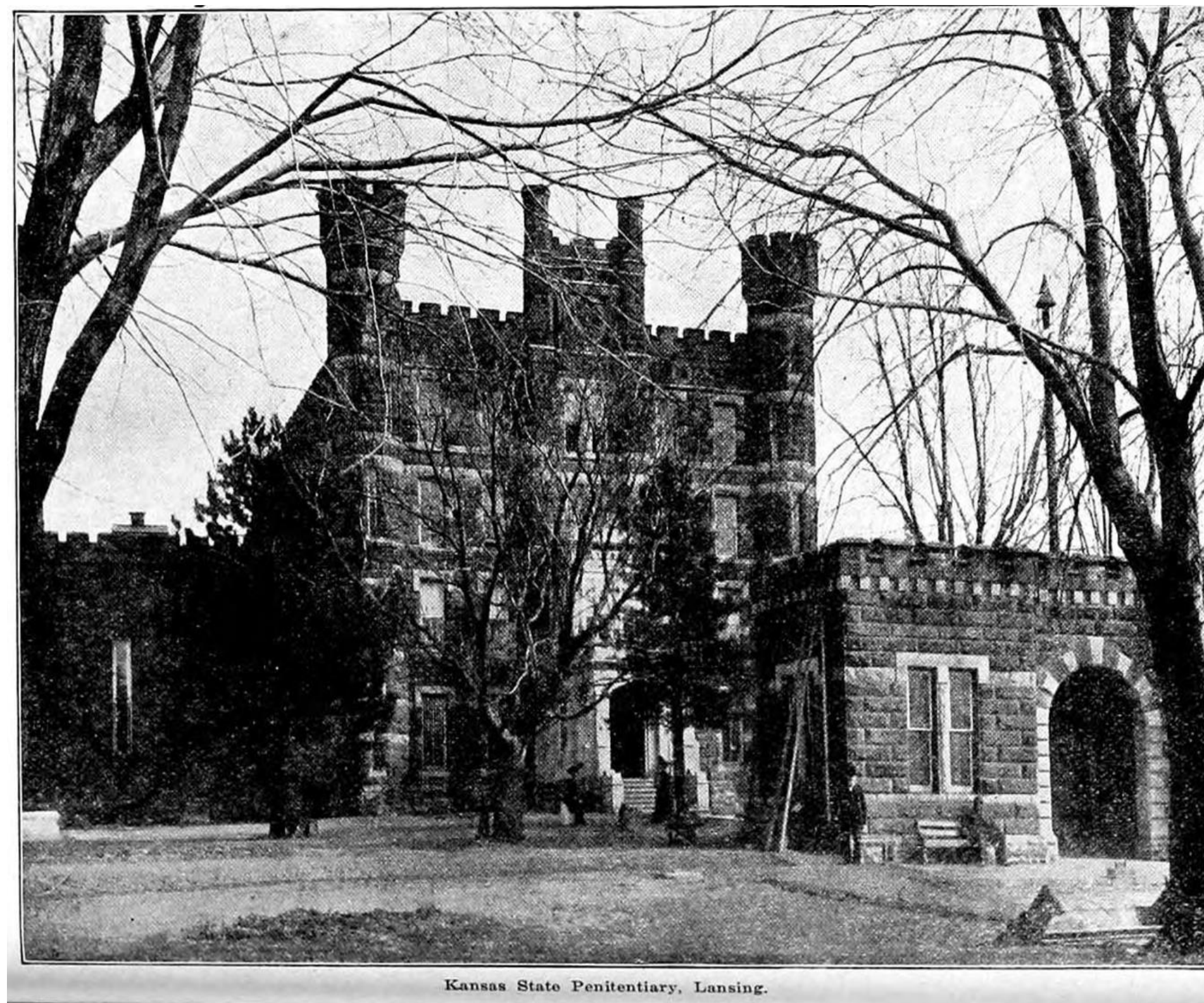
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Introduction:

Due to overcrowding at state insane asylums and political attitudes on mental illness, the Kansas State Penitentiary was required to inhumanely incarcerate severely mentally ill people for a period spanning 66 years.



Penitentiary entrance, 1904. Image is in the public domain.

Materials & Methods:

27 annual and biennial reports of the penitentiary were reviewed for information on the number, condition, and treatment of persons with mental illness at the penitentiary from the 1860's through 1940.

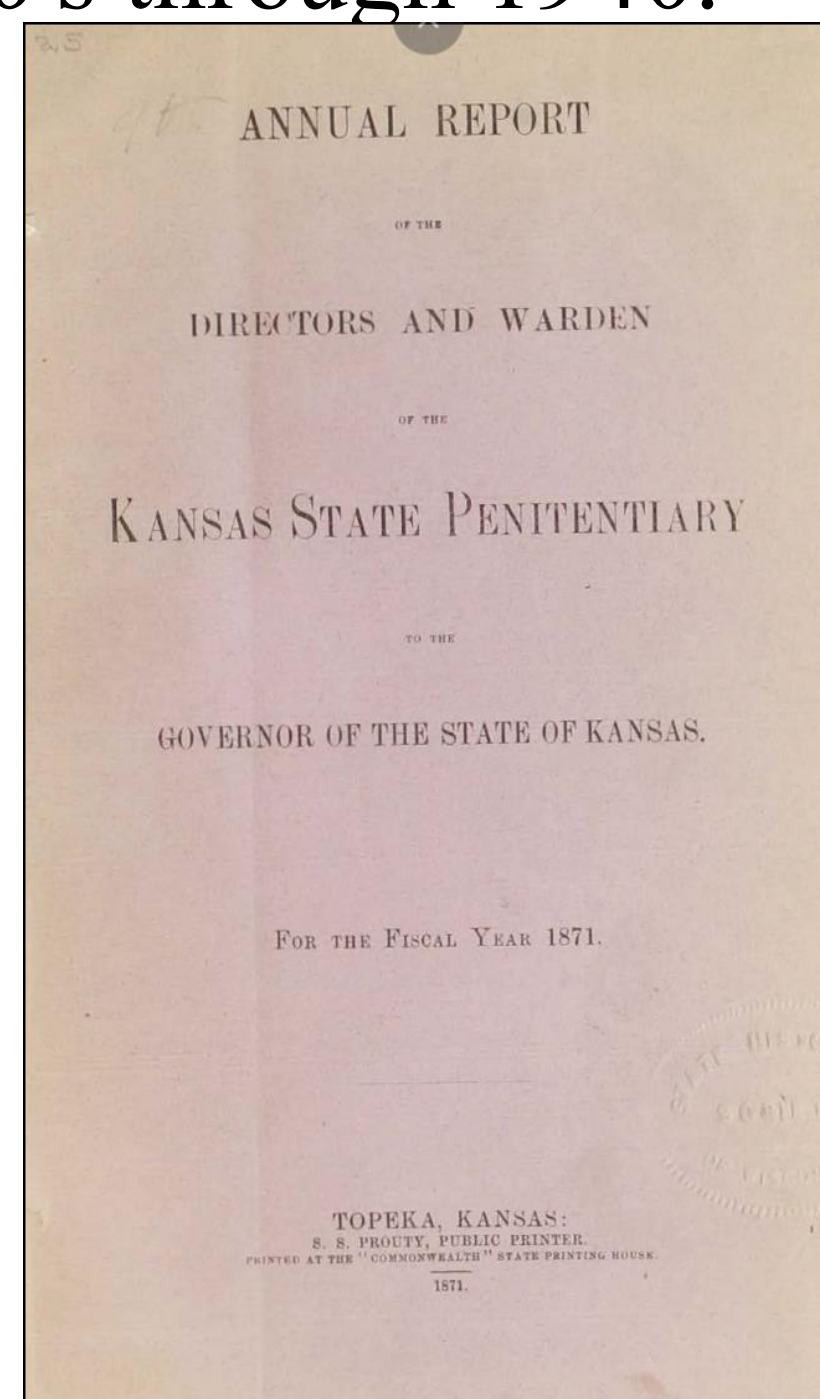


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Timeline and report excerpts:

- **1875:** Penitentiary compelled to house insane prisoners in cells due to overcrowding at state insane asylum
 - 1876: *"How long, think you, would that three or four hundred men remain quiet with a howling maniac among them to disturb their rest, night after night?"*
 - 1886: *"We have no adequate means of caring for them, only to lock them into cells, where they grow worse instead of better"*
- **1880's:** a prisoner sent to the insane asylum murders two asylum patients
- **1890:** 34-cell insane asylum opens on penitentiary grounds, constructed and staffed by prison laborers
- **1894:** Penitentiary insane asylum already overcrowded with 37 prisoners
- **1910:** Asylum described as vermin-infested, overcrowded at 250% capacity, and with prisoners locked in their cells 24 hours a day
- **1912:** Kansas State Legislature mandates prison operate a "State Asylum for the Dangerously Insane" but provides no funding.
 - 2-3 patients are housed in each 8' x 10' cell
 - *"In its present crowded condition it is a menace to the health of its occupants."*
- **1914:** The number of insane prisoners reaches 100
- **1916:** Asylum moved to former women's quarters (image right)
- **1920:** As many as four insane prisoners housed in each cell
- **1926:** *"More room is a necessity. This institution is overcrowded to a point where proper sanitation is impossible"*
- **1928:** *"It seems to me that it is not in harmony with the great humane policy of the state of Kansas to confine a mentally irresponsible charge on an acre of ground for a lifetime. These men must be looked upon as mentally ill citizens in need of treatment, rather than criminals who are to be punished."*
- **1938-1940:** State Asylum for the Dangerously Insane closes, all insane prisoners transferred to Larned State Hospital

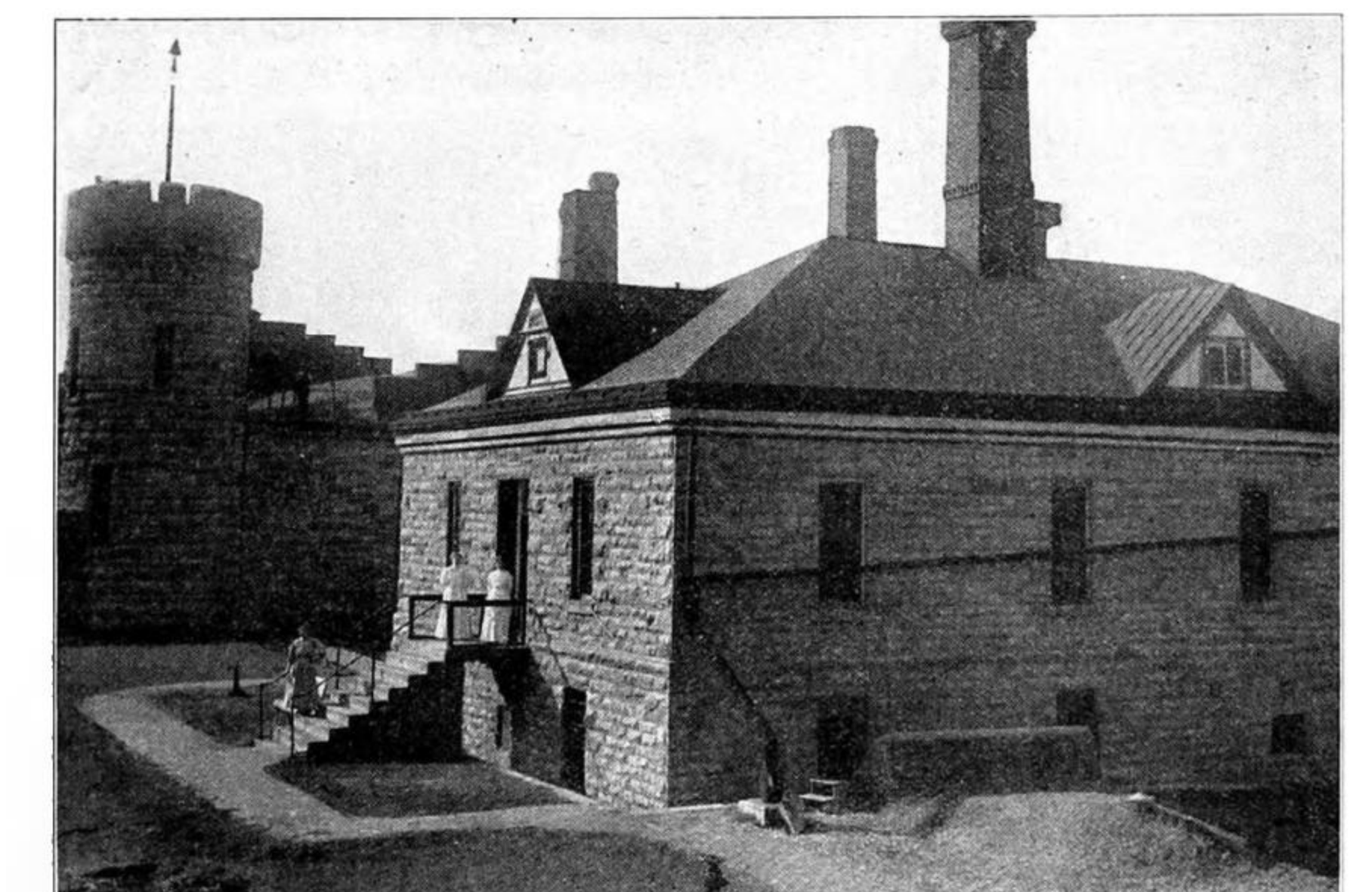
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Conclusion:

For two thirds of a century, convicted Kansans with severe psychiatric illness were confined to prison cells with poor sanitation, inadequate care, and high mortality rates. These conditions continued despite prison wardens' and physicians' multiple efforts to care for them and advocate their government for improvements. As prison systems today continue to struggle with high prevalences of mental illness and low resources, the neglectful acts of the past are worth remembering and avoiding.

Sources:

Kansas Government Information Online Library



Female Ward.

Photograph from the 1914 report of the female ward building into which the Asylum for the Dangerously Insane was relocated. Of the structure, Dr. Faulkner, the prison physician wrote: "inadequate and incongruous... a building constructed primarily for the detention of the most vicious class of criminals, after the fashion of a building prisons a generation back... The lower tier of cells are some four feet in the ground. Only the upper tier of cells ever receive a ray of sunlight... with small windows near the top, through which no man can look without the aid of a ladder... In the lower tier the maniacal, with their shouting cursing, and other nerve-racking noises are kept. In this big cell house the rumpus made by the unruly penetrates every part, with the smooth walls and vaulted roof for a sounding board..."

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