



JASON ONERHEIM/MNHS

Stillwater prison souvenir spoon

SOUVENIR SPOONS are a common collectible found at many tourist shops. The Minnesota Historical Society recently acquired a souvenir spoon from the early 1900s commemorating a peculiar destination: the state prison at Stillwater. Made of sterling silver, the spoon is engraved with an image of the prison facade and the text “STATE PRISON / STILLWATER, MINN.” The engraved image is based on a photograph of the facility that circulated as a print and a postcard during the early 1900s. Opened in 1853 as the Minnesota Territorial Prison, when Minnesota became a state in 1858, it became the first state prison. By 1914, a new maximum-security prison a few miles south at Bayport replaced the original facility.

Souvenir spoons became popular in the United States in the late 1800s as wealthy Americans returned from trips abroad with spoons engraved with the names of sites and cities they had visited. By the 1890s, this European fad had taken hold in the United States. The collecting craze was aided by a silver market collapse in 1893; the reduced cost of silver made it more accessible to more people. The period between 1895 and 1925 has become known as the golden age of souvenir spoons.

Souvenir spoons commemorated all manner of sites and events, with some of the most popular being historic landmarks and world’s fairs and expositions. The diverse range of subjects is represented in the MNHS collection of well over 100 souvenir spoons. The souvenir spoon craze was no stranger to grim subjects like a prison; one spoon in the collection depicts the 1862 hanging of 38 Dakota men in Mankato. (A spoon with the same engraved image was the subject of an episode of PBS’s *History Detectives*.)

The Stillwater State Prison spoon was made by the Paye & Baker Manufacturing Company, founded in 1901. Initially located in Providence, Rhode Island, the company relocated to North Attleboro, Massachusetts, in 1903. The firm manufactured many types of silver goods, such as flatware, jewelry, and hatpins. Flatware was available in a number of patterns, many of which were floral or art nouveau designs. The state prison spoon was engraved on Paye & Baker’s Wild Rose pattern. The company ceased manufacture of flatware in the 1920s but continued operation until the 1960s.

While some souvenir spoons were created from cast designs that integrated a site or event into the design, any spoon could be engraved to become a memento. The state prison engraving likely was completed in Minnesota due to the local significance of the site. The same state prison engraved design was reused on spoons cast in other patterns by other manufacturers.

Floris Lafontant, former MNHS curatorial assistant intern, is now a collections technician at the Weisman Art Museum.



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