

PRISON MUSEUM POST

*The Official Newsletter of the Historic Burlington County Prison Museum Association
Incorporated in 1966*

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COUNTY COMPLETES JAIL RENOVATIONS OPEN HOUSE - SATURDAY, DECEMBER 9

The PMA wishes to thank and commend the Burlington County Board of Commissioners for a job distinctly well done. The renovations are superb. We also wish to thank the New Jersey Historic Trust for their grant of \$526,500 toward the cost of the project and for their enthusiastic interest in the site. The contractors did a splendid job: Netta Architects (renovation design), general contractor John O'Hara Company, Watts Restoration (masonry) and Jablonski Building Conservation (graffiti preservation). The total cost of the project? It appears herein - Can You Find It?



We were delighted to see the workmen become increasingly invested personally in the project as they learned about the Jail's history and realized that they were now part of that history. (Although we did get reprimanded by the general contractor for telling the painters certain stories about the Jail which resulted in the reluctance of some to go into the basement.)

The above photo shows the impressive new cedar shake roof and the newly pointed outside walls. Notice also the new patio, which extends to the back gate, making it easier for people in wheelchairs and walkers to get from the parking lot to the elevator. Whitewash has been applied to the lower part of the building, as it was in the 1800s and into the 1900s. Less visible in the photo, but of immeasurable importance, are the beautiful new gutters and downspouts, which if properly maintained should alleviate the water problems that have plagued the building for decades.

The PMA will celebrate the renovations with an Open House on Saturday, December 9. The Museum will be open for free from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Volunteers will be on hand to show visitors the new renovations and answer questions about the Jail's history. Visitors can do some Christmas shopping in our nifty little gift shop and chat with members of New Jersey Paranormal, who will be on site for a meet and greet between 1 p.m. and 4 p.m. Shannon, the palm reader who wowed the crowd two years ago, will also be back. She will read the palms of the first 15 people who reserve, at a charge of \$15. Reservations will be taken at noon and are expected to sell out immediately. Personal tours will not be given, but those who wish to take the audio tour may do so for \$3. The audio tour is now available in Spanish; more about that in our next issue.

THANKS TO MARY PAT ROBBIE

The PMA also wishes to thank Mary Pat Robbie, Burlington County's Director of the Department of Resource Conservation and Parks, who oversaw the renovation project for the Commissioners. We are not going to say how many years of experience Mary Pat has in County government administration and project management, and with the Prison Museum in particular. Suffice it to say many. The success of this and many other projects with which she has been involved through the years has been the result of her expertise and stewardship. We also thank her and the Commissioners for including us in the discussion.

WHY A PRISON MUSEUM?

Various media outlets covered the renovation. Some of the reporters' questions were revealing. One asked, "Why preserve a *jail*?" The inescapable implication of the question is that jails are bad, and bad things shouldn't be studied or discussed. This type of quick, superficial "TikTok" analysis is often the rule, not the exception, today. Those of us who pursued careers requiring communications skills were told years ago by our professors that the average attention span was about 20 minutes. Today, in the age of TikTok, it's more like 20 seconds. But at the risk of losing your attention, we'll try to answer the reporter's question.

At the interview, the reporter was given the quick stock answer: The Jail, a National Historic Landmark, is important because it was designed by Robert Mills (pictured on the right), the first native born and native trained architect, who was keen on prison reform. Ours was the first Jail in the western hemisphere to be designed and built with the idea of rehabilitating inmates.



Mills was influenced by the Quakers and also probably by John Howard, an early English prison reformer. Upon his appointment as Sheriff of Bedfordshire in 1771, Howard was shocked at prison conditions. He resolved to promote humane living conditions, single-celling, ventilation, corrective punishment and separation of prisoners according to crime for their safety and to prevent hardened criminals (e.g., murderers) from influencing misdemeanants (e.g., drunk and disorderly). He also proposed meaningful employment of prisoners, mainly so that they could pay for their upkeep in jail. (Those who were jailed at that time in England were charged "jailers' fees".)

Mills took it a step further. His jail would not only be heated with fireplaces and well-ventilated, it would also be fireproof and built to last. (Most of his many buildings -- the Treasury Building, the Post Office, the Washington Monument, the Patent Office -- are all still in use after **200 years**. This alone is significant enough to warrant the preservation of the building.) Moreover, there would be a conscious effort to actually *rehabilitate* the inmates. This would be accomplished by educating, training and employing them, not just so that imprisoned debtors could pay off their debts and be freed, but so that those imprisoned for criminal acts would be put on a virtuous path and not reoffend. Mills delivered his architectural plans along with a treatise outlining his ideas regarding rehabilitation. The Freeholders accepted these ideas whole hog, and referred to the building as a "Work House and Jail". They fully expected to implement Mills' plans ... until they realized they couldn't.

The fact of the matter is that while inmates were treated relatively humanely in our Jail, none were ever educated, vocationally trained or meaningfully employed (although prison labor was later used, as discussed herein). The reasons are obvious if you take a moment to think about it. The average stay in the jail was never more than 30 days. There wasn't enough time for anybody to learn a trade. Furthermore, there was no money to pay people to teach or train the inmates. A review of the Freeholder minutes and newspaper reports show that there wasn't enough money to pay for an adequate number of guards (thus all the escapes), let alone teachers, work supervisors and materials needed for manufacturing of items. Even if items could have been manufactured, this would have created competition for taxpayers who made the same products. Finally, like today, many of the inmates suffered from mental illness and substance abuse, making them unlikely candidates for rehabilitation.

The fact that Mills' ideas about rehabilitation were better on paper than in reality doesn't detract from the fact that he had the idea and actually executed same in his design. That the rehabilitation idea failed and why is just as important to know as everything else about the history of the jail.

WINDOW INTO OUR PAST

The Museum provides a window through which we can really understand the past, not just of Burlington County, but of the United States. In researching topics related to the Jail's history, we come across newspaper articles, books, Freeholder minutes, court opinions, letters and other sources that reveal how the life of common people has changed - and how it has remained the same -- over the last 200 years. A review of *The Prison Post* over the last 20 years shows the infinite items of interest that come from a study of the Jail: the trial of a Japanese pirate in 1862 which resulted in a venue case still sited today, Walt Whitman commenting on a case in 1887, a man sleeping with his wife's corpse for ten days, a questionable case of treason, the incarceration of a sitting Supreme Court justice, the role of politics in the management of the jail throughout its entire history, the daring escapes, the love stories, family intrigues, criminal investigations by Ellis Parker....we could go on, but you get the point.



During the recent renovation, we went through the window and down the rabbit hole once again when the issue of the Exercise Wall came up.

The original plan was to re-stucco the wall. When the contractors removed the old

stucco, it was obvious that the wall looked fantastic without it. A suggestion was made that the wall should simply be pointed. The question was asked - is the stucco even original to the building anyway? Off we went through old Freeholder minutes to try to find out.

COUNTY GOVERNMENT THROUGH THE CENTURIES

We were surprised to learn how much time the Freeholders actually spent on the Jail. Few services were provided by County government in the 19th century; most people took care of themselves and their families. Almost all of the County's time was taken up by the construction and maintenance of roads, bridges and buildings, principally the Court House (which also housed County government), the Almshouse (or Poor House) in Pemberton (which later became Buttonwood) and the Jail.

The minutes show that the Jail was often a thorny issue. Today we chuckle at the Freeholders' apparent penuriousness - how could they possibly have been so cheap so as to maintain a jail with fireplaces into the 20th century? In reviewing the

minutes, however, a different picture emerges. The typical 19th century Burlington Countian worked from dawn to dusk at a physically exhausting job, like farming or mining, and made just enough to get by. He didn't appreciate being taxed to house and feed petty thieves and vagrants in the "County Hotel". The resulting pressure on the Freeholders is palpable from the minutes.

In 1852, Freeholder Samuel Dobbins of Mt. Holly (who later served as a U.S. Congressman) addressed the Board. The Jail, then 40 years old, was in need of repair. Also, it was apparent that it was no longer a good idea for the Sheriff and Keeper (Warden) to live in the Jail (if it ever was a good idea). Dobbins proposed that work houses be built, presumably so that prisoners could pay for their keep and defray the cost of the repairs. He also proposed that residences be built for the Sheriff and the Keeper. A Freeholder named Black immediately tabled the idea of building a Sheriff's house and later nixed the idea of making any "radical repairs" to the building. The Board finally settled on "repairing the lower floor" and "dashing" the Exercise Yard wall. Technically, "dash" means "to put pebbles in stucco". We believe that it probably meant stucco itself, and that the wall was stuccoed at that time, because it was the general time that stucco started being used widely in this country. We doubt that the wall was stuccoed when built in 1811.

Here are the excerpts from the minutes:

1851 Mr. Samuel Dobbins presented the following resolution...Whereas the members of this Board have examined the Prison and find the same greatly in need of repair, (it is) therefore Resolved that the Inspectors of the Prison ...are hereby directed to have said Prison put in necessary repair...to procure estimates of the cost of erecting additional buildings to the Prison calculated for the establishment of Work Houses...and report to the next meeting of the Board.

On the motion of Mr. Black (it is) ordered that the Resolution offered by Mr. Dobbins relative to the erection of a dwelling place for the Sheriff and Keeper...be laid on the table.

August 11, 1852. Mr. Black reported that in the opinion of the committee it was inexpedient at this time to make any radical alteration in the Prison...

Resolved that the Inspectors of the Prison be authorized to repair the lower floor of the Prison and dash the wall around the Prison Yard – in the manner which to them shall seem best for present convenience and to draw upon the Director for any sum not exceeding \$600 for defraying the expenses thereof.

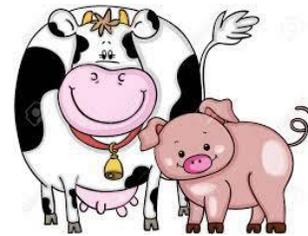
February 11, 1853. The Inspectors respectfully report that they have finished the work entrusted to them and cordially invite the Board to

view and inspect the same. They have in accordance with said Resolution drawn on the Director for the sum of \$600 and have expended the sum of \$570.64, leaving a balance of \$29.36. [current renovation - 2.9 million]

The "Prison Inspectors" were three men, two of whom were Freeholders and one of whom was someone selected by the Board. This is the way the Freeholders assigned work among its members. There was a "Keeper of the Courthouse", a "Liberating Committee" (whose job presumably was to act as a type of parole board, freeing people from the jail), a "Draw Bridge Committee" a "Small Bridge Committee", etc. Our favorite is the "Insane Committee", presumably in charge of the asylum in Pemberton.

The Prison Inspectors were also apparently in charge of the yard in front of the Court House, as is indicated from this 1851 excerpt from the Minutes:

On motion Resolved that the Inspectors of the Prison be requested to cause the Court House lot to be planted with ornamental and shade trees and erect suitable protection for same and that they be required to keep all horses, cows, sheep and swine out of said lot except it be at the annual exhibition of the Burlington County Agricultural Society and further that the Resident Inspector use all proper means to prevent as far as possible the use of said lot by the boys of the town as a playground.



While work houses were never built, prison labor was used from time to time. In the late 1920s it was used for bridge repair, as described in a book entitled *A Sketch of Burlington County 1677-1927*. Some excerpts from the book:

If Burlington County's 3000 bridges and culverts were placed end to end they would total more than 30 miles in length...The annual expenditure for bridge repairs and minor reconstruction exceeds \$75,000. This low cost would be impossible were it not for the many economies effected by the director of the bridge department...Freeholder Curwen Fisher is Director of Bridges. He has been most ably assisted in his work by the County Engineer, H.B. Smith and his assistant, F.L. Branin. Freeholder Fisher, with the cooperation of Sheriff A. Engle Haines, has effected further economy...by the use of prison labor. From 6 to 12 men have been steadily employed throughout the year under the direction of a foreman. Most of the steel bridges have been thoroughly painted, and the same force is now engaged in painting the guard rails throughout the county, when not busy on emergency repair jobs. The insignificant sum of 50 cents per day is paid these men. The results are to be further estimated in renewed manhood and a new start in life. This use of short-

term prisoners was first started in Burlington County and has since been adopted in a number of other counties in the State.



HAPPY HOLIDAYS MEETING DATES FOR NEXT YEAR

This will be the last newsletter of 2023. We wish all of our readers a happy holiday season and are encouraged to keep in touch. Board meetings are held quarterly. The 2024 meetings will be held at 7 p.m. on the following

Wednesdays: February 21, May 22, August 21 and November 13. All members are invited and encouraged to attend meetings.

THE MYSTERIOUS CASE OF MARGARET GLASS

The Freeholder minutes for February 12, 1827 show that the Board directed that "Margaret Glass, a prisoner in the Gaol, be discharged". This is not an uncommon entry; they often freed people, especially debtors and others they didn't know what to do with. This piqued our interest, so we investigated further. The *Republican Compiler*, a Gettysburg, Pennsylvania newspaper, reported in its May 3, 1826 issue that on Wednesday, April 12, 1826,

A woman considerably advanced in years named Glass died in Lumberton near this city in consequence of blows inflicted upon her by her own daughter. They kept a disorderly house and on Saturday night last the daughter, named Margaret, commenced beating her mother with a rod of iron which endangered her life and in the interim, in conversing with other persons, threatened her mother with death which threat she put into execution Tuesday when she again beat her with the iron rod to such a degree, that she soon after died. The girl is full grown and was supposed to be intoxicated at the times when these acts were committed. She is now in prison.

A "disorderly house" is a house in which people gathered to commit some sort of crime or public nuisance, which could range from gambling to prostitution to production of moonshine.

The interesting aspect of this story isn't the homicidal act or even the fact that the girl was released 14 months later - we assume that the prosecutor never tried her, perhaps because she was incompetent to stand trial or for some other

reason that it would make her conviction unlikely. What makes this story interesting is that several newspapers erroneously reported in May of 1826 that she died in prison. Which leads us to another thing we learn from researching topics relating to the Jail: never believe anything you see in the media, unless you check it out in other sources. The *United States Gazette*, a Philadelphia paper, had some fun with the papers that got the story wrong:

Margaret Glass (a tenant of Burlington County Jail, whose death was reported to us by at least a dozen respectable persons), the Mount Holly Mirror informs us, is still alive. Who first raised the report, we know not, but it is extremely cruel to put even a criminal to death, *by report*, before the time. (*May 16, 1826 issue*)

**Historic Burlington County
Prison Museum Association (“PMA”)**
Mt. Holly, NJ 08060
PMA Office Fax: 609-261-5252
PMA Phone: 609-288-6372
Museum/Gift Shop Phone: 609-265-5476
Email: info@pma1811.net
Website: www.prisonmuseum.net

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Janet L. Sozio, Esq.

Please help us preserve and promote the museum by joining the PMA. Annual dues are \$15(individual)/\$25 (family). Membership benefits include a quarterly newsletter, event updates and free admission to the museum. See website for application.

MODEL JURORS

Most people dread getting called for jury duty. There was a time, however, when it was apparently more fun than a barrel of monkeys. We leave you with this ditty from the *Mount Holly Mirror* in June of 1851 about jurors sitting on an assault case:

When they found that it was difficult for them to agree on a verdict, and there being every prospect of a long sitting, they sent for and obtained a quantity of provisions and liquor, which they feasted upon to their great satisfaction. Some of them got quite lively, procured a violin, and had a regular Jersey dance. They so far stepped beyond the bounds of prudence that the judge told them they were a disgrace to the county. At one time they stood eleven to one, and the solitary juror declared to his opponents that they were eleven of the most obstinate men he ever had anything to do with.

Destroy not the ancient landmarks which the fathers have set. Proverbs 22:28

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