

Prison Museum Brochure

WELCOME



The Burlington County Prison Museum is a national historic landmark located in the heart of historic Mount Holly, New Jersey. Designed by Robert Mills, one of America's first native-born and trained architects, the Burlington County Prison was completed in 1811. As one of Mills' first independent architectural designs, the interior vaulted ceilings of poured concrete and brick and stone construction made the building virtually fireproof. Not only is the structure well suited to its purpose and virtually maintenance free, it also incorporates the philosophies of penal reform that were advocated during the period. In short, this structure was a fine example of innovative interior planning, fireproofing, heating and ventilation systems and the growing notion of social responsibility to rehabilitate criminals. In fact, it was so well constructed that it remained in constant use until 1965.

We hope you enjoy your visit. As you tour this museum we remind you that this building was a prison for 154 years...at the time of its closing it was the oldest continually used prison in the United States. No mean feat for any building!



THE ARCHITECT

Robert Mills (1781-1855) was born in Charleston, South Carolina to a well-established Scottish family that settled there in 1770. One of six children, Mills was singled out early to follow a professional career and completed his classical course of study at Charleston College in 1800. His interest in architecture was probably developed and influenced by his architect uncle, Thomas Mills of Dundee, Scotland and his contact with the noted English architect James Hoban, who lived in Charleston during Mills' college years. In fact, Mills began his formal training as a draftsman under Hoban who was then working on the Capitol building in Washington, D.C.

In 1803 Mills drew the attention of President Thomas Jefferson who asked him to assist in the design of Monticello, Jefferson's plantation home in the foothills of Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains. He resided

there for two years during which he developed a very deep friendship with Jefferson. With letters of introduction from Hoban and Jefferson, Robert Mills began practice in 1805 under Benjamin Latrobe, the celebrated English-born architect responsible for, among other projects, the interiors of the U. S. Capitol. Mills continued under Latrobe until 1808 when he struck out on his own in private practice.

During this period (1808-1830) Robert Mills married and moved to Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Charleston and finally settled in Washington, D.C. It was during his tenure in Philadelphia that Mills was awarded the commission to design the Burlington County Prison that was constructed in 1810-11. The building was one of Robert Mills' first designs as an independent architect and is a fine example of his ability to identify and solve some of the most difficult structural, safety, and utilization issues of the day.

In 1836 President Andrew Jackson appointed Mills to the position of Federal Architect and Engineer. During his 16-year tenure he played an essential role in this country's early development including directing the design and construction of the U.S. Treasury Building, U.S. Patent Office, and the U.S. Post Office. He also designed numerous churches, houses, and monuments along the eastern seaboard. Two of the most renowned are the Washington Monument in Baltimore and the National Monument in Washington, D.C. The latter was an engineering accomplishment of international acclaim and the tallest single edifice in the world at the time.



THE HISTORY

Burlington City, founded in 1677, was the first settlement in Burlington County, the capital of the Province of West Jersey and the county seat until 1796. The first jail was located in the basement of the courthouse. This was replaced in 1767 by a separate stone structure that was used until 1811 when the Burlington County Prison in Mount Holly was completed and ready for use. When the county seat was moved to Mount Holly in 1796, the federal-style courthouse was built in the same year. It took another fifteen years, however, to purchase land for the prison site and have plans drawn up and approved by the freeholders. The purchase price of the land was \$2,000 in 1807 and, when finally completed, the new prison's construction cost a grand total of \$24,201.13.

The outside of the building has changed very little. The massive front door, the large hinges and the lock are original. The interior vaulted ceilings of poured concrete, and brick and stone construction is also much as it was when the facility first opened. The interior is whitewashed, as it would have been when first occupied. The cell doors are also original and many were fabricated in place.

As formidable as the prison seems, it was not escape-proof. The walls were scaled and the roof penetrated numerous times in its history. The preferred routes to freedom seem to have been through the roof of the jail and the passageway to the warden's house next door. One notable escape occurred in 1875. A hole was punched through the ceiling of an upper corridor cell to gain access to the roof and the escape of four men was made good by climbing down a woodpile next to the prison yard wall. A fifth accomplice, too large to fit through the hole and incensed at being left behind, reportedly sounded the alarm. Despite a quick response by the warden, it seems that at least some of these escapees were never caught.

Many criminals were destined to spend their last days on earth in the Burlington County Jail. State law mandated that criminals convicted of a capital crime were to be executed in the County in which they were found guilty and Burlington County was no exception. Numerous public hangings were conducted in the prison yard on a gallows erected for each occasion. The last such execution was the double hanging of Rufus Johnson and George Small. The two men were convicted of murdering Florence Allinson of Moorestown, an English-born governess at a refuge for homeless children. Solved within days by the celebrated Burlington County detective Ellis H. Parker, the men were hanged on March 24, 1906, two months after the crime.

Solidly built, this prison was in constant use until November 1965. Originally designed to house approximately 40 prisoners, the Burlington County Prison held over 100 inmates when they were moved to a converted armory that formerly stood behind the jail. Overcrowded conditions required yet another, larger prison which was erected in 1983.



This blackjack was taken from a prisoner by Chief of Detectives, Ellis Parker in the years between 1915 – 1919.

PRISON LIFE

When the prison was originally designed, each “guest” of Burlington County was to have his own cell with a fireplace and a narrow window placed above eye level. The Rules of the Jail directed that prisoners were to be bathed, deloused, and have their clothing fumigated and that each cell should have a bible or prayer book “to improve the soul.” Individual cells, intended for felons or criminals, were arranged in sets of four, opening off a short hall at each end of the building. These “blocks” of cells were to house separate groups, i.e. habitual criminals, first offenders, and women.

The larger rooms on the main hallways were to accommodate the debtors, imprisoned for owing money. These were common rooms, sometimes holding three or four men at a time. During the day debtors were to be allowed to move about the jail, working at various cleaning chores or employed in the basement workshop.

The “dungeon” or maximum-security cell was in the center of the top floor. That location was carefully chosen to prevent escape by digging, to minimize communication with criminals in the cell blocks, and to ensure constant surveillance by guards making rounds. This was the only cell without a fireplace. It is flanked by niches for guards or visitors and has one very high, very small window and an iron ring in the center of the floor to which the prisoner could be chained. As one might expect, tradition states that this cell is haunted. Supposedly, the ghost of Joel Clough, a murderer who spent his last night there, has paid tribute to his last earthly residence and to the vigilance of the prison guards in later years.

Originally, two rooms on the main floor were set aside as living quarters for the “Keeper” and his wife. The Keeper’s wife was expected to supervise the female inmates and the Keeper was to execute the “Rules of the Jail” as devised by the Prison Board composed of members of the freeholders. The Keeper and his family lived in these quarters until the adjacent brick house, connected by a passageway, was constructed on the corner of Grant and High Streets.

In keeping with the intent designed into the structure, the basement level contained a workshop where prisoners were expected to learn some useful trade - how to make brooms, baskets, or shingles. Another, less supervised pastime of the inmates that endured through the ages was prisoner graffiti. Depicting humor, despair and a belated piety, several fine examples of this art have been photo-conserved and are on display throughout the building. The felons' eating room, also in the basement, permitted controlled access to the exercise yard with its twenty-foot wall. Outside, prisoners could tend a small garden of fresh vegetables. In one corner of the yard there was a set of leg stocks to punish unruly inmates, and an area was set aside for the gallows which were dismantled and stored between hangings.

Staple foods, linens, cleaning supplies and craft materials were stored in the basement near the kitchen, baking and washing facilities. Once a day the prisoners were to be served a main meal of meat and vegetables. The other two meals were usually cooked cereals or grains. They had milk and cider to drink, as well as water. Until 1928 the prisoners prepared their own meals. One of the inmates was made chief cook and slept in a basement cell next to the kitchen. Large wash tubs provided for laundry and regular baths for the prisoners.

Museum Hours

The Prison Museum is open Thursday through Saturday from 10AM to 4PM
and on Sunday from 12PM to 4PM.

Cost of Admission

Admission fees are \$4.00 for adults; \$2.00 for children, students, and seniors;
and kids 5 and under are FREE.

We Need Tour Guides!

Being a tour guide is easy, fun and you will meet interesting people.

Please consider joining the Prison Museum Association and/or
serving as a docent/tour guide.

**Prison Museum Association
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Please leave your name, address & phone number.