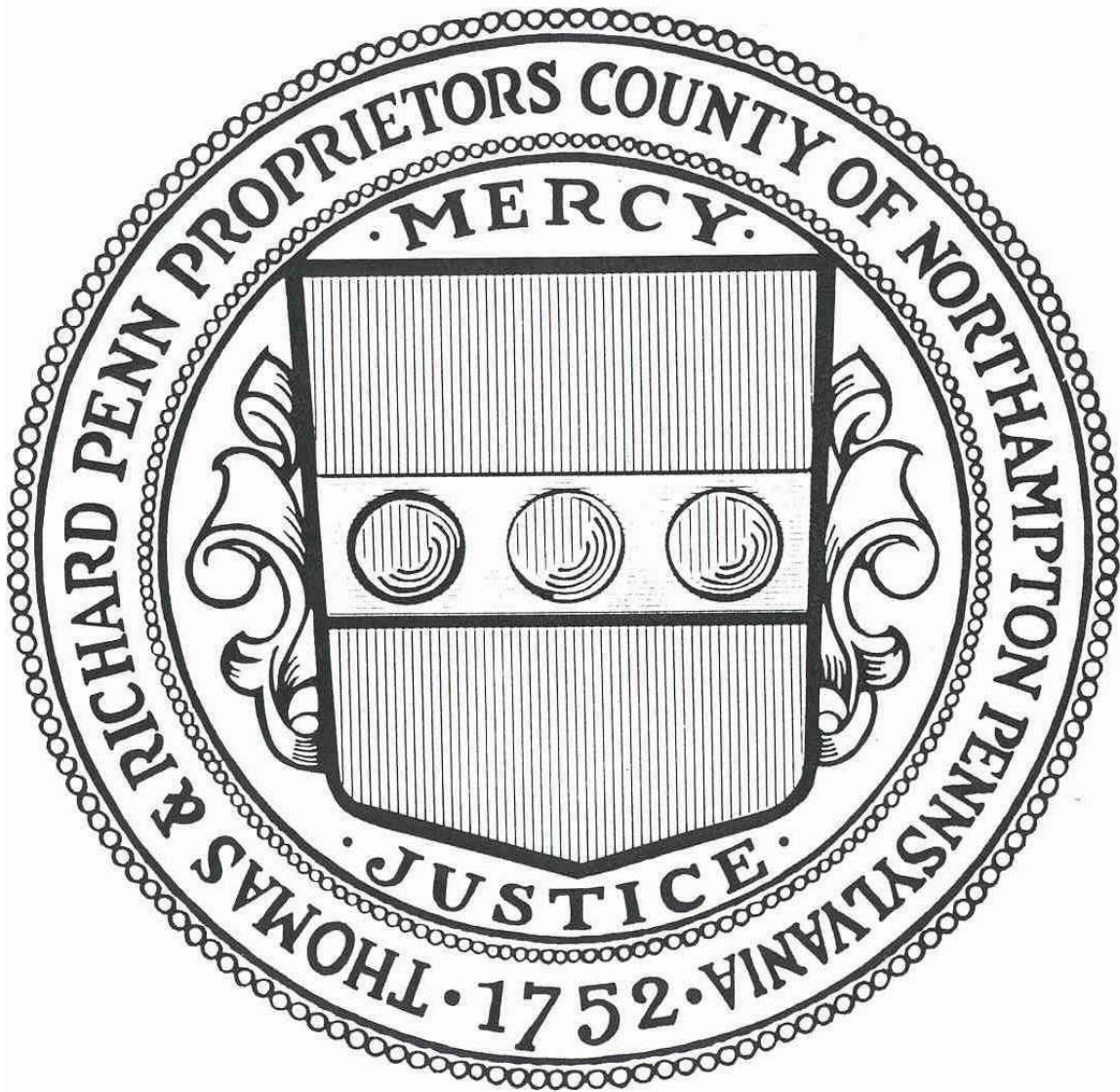


*Northampton County
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Historical



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Historical Review of Northampton County Prison

Prior to 1750 fear of the law in the area we now know as Northampton County was almost non-existent. The county seat for the area was Doylestown. Travel in those days was by horseback or by horse and buggy. This meant that getting to Doylestown was a major trip and a great inconvenience. Therefore, if the law was broken, the victim would may times take his losses rather than travel all the way to Doylestown to get justice. This brought about the establishment of a new county, Northampton County, and a new county seat located in Easton. Now law and order would be more readily available.

Court, in those days, would be held in either the home of a prominent citizen or at a local hotel. The need for a jail became an immediate necessity.

The first building that would be built with county money was to be a jail and it was to be located on the southeast corner of the "Easton Square". The building would have to serve a twofold purpose. It was to be a place to confine prisoners and also to serve as a safe place for the townspeople to go and defend themselves when the savage Indians attacked. When these Indians went on a rampage, they would burn the cabins and homes of the local settlers. The new county jail was constructed with massive stone walls so it would provide an ideal fortress in which the townspeople would be safe from the rampaging Indians. The total cost of this first jail as \$1,066.87, a lot of money in those days.

After the revolutionary war was over, a war over land titles erupted. The two

groups involved in this mini-war were the Pennsylvania mites and the Yankees. Twenty of the Yankees were captured and held in the old jail in 1784. The Yankees, a group of wild characters from Connecticut, were kept in the prison for several months and were getting extremely restless. One afternoon two of the men, handcuffed together, were escorted out of the prison to get some water. The bread arrived this day at the same time and as the gate was opened to let them carry the bread in, the two prisoners jumped the jail keeper and overpowered him. They took the key and let the others out. The keeper's wife had no other key to lock the gate while this was happening. By the time the badly beaten keeper was able to sound the alarm and alert the neighbors, the Yankees were long gone. This was the most exciting event in the area at the time and certainly the most exciting thing in the entire 100 year history of the old jail.

1851 – Time for a New Jail

In the 1850's the old jail, now approaching 100 years of age, was in need of replacement. The whipping post, pillory and old building made way for a new jail located east of it on Sitgreaves Street. This jail, which lasted only 20 years, was built behind the sheriff's office, just like in the old west. It contained 27 good sized cells and was surrounded by a 15 foot high wall.

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1871 – A Modern and Convenient Jail

The courthouse in Easton was built on its present site in 1861. The jail built in 1851 was now considered as too small and a great inconvenience.

Transferring prisoners from court to jail and back was very risky business, so in 1868 approval was given to start construction of a new jail adjacent to the courthouse. This jail was completed in 1871 at a total cost of \$200,000. The new building was a massive stone structure set atop a hill and was thought by many to look more like a middle ages castle than a prison.

Execution

In the year 1884 the first public execution was held in the new jail. The inmate executed had been imprisoned for the murder of his wife. She had been in the poorhouse because he did not support her.

He devised a plan to win her back and told her that he had a place and some furniture and he wanted her to see it. He gave her a new dress at the poorhouse and asked her to go with him. As she was getting ready he was seen sharpening his pocket knife on some stones and his boot. The couple then left the poorhouse on a cold March morning to start their journey. Smiling and hand in hand, they departed, apparently to live happily ever after. Once in Freemansburg, he proposed a short cut down a lonely lane. Here he threw her down and tied her up; then he took his pocket knife out and slashed her throat. He then panicked and ran from the scene. Unfortunately for the man, she lived three weeks before she died and testified to his evil deed. He was convicted and executed in April, 1884.

An Italian immigrant who killed a fellow worker with a hatchet to his sleeping head was also sentenced to be executed that same year. He, however, escaped public execution by attempting to hang himself in his cell with a rope fabricated from carpet yarn gotten in the prison carpet department. The rope broke and he fell down, but the rope was then so tight around his neck that he died of strangulation.

The last public execution was held on February 24, 1908. This execution was by hanging.

The “NEW JAIL”

The jail had become so crowded after 1903 that a new addition was proposed and completed in 1909. This addition, known as the “New Jail” was constructed by the Van Dorn Company of Cincinnati, Ohio, and cost the taxpayers \$110,000.00. Soon after, a wall was erected to provide an outside recreation yard to the prison. State Law made this recreation yard mandatory.

The “New Jail” contained many modern conveniences. An up-to-date hospital was needed for the 150 or so inmates of that time. It was fully equipped and emergency operations could actually be performed in this hospital.

To meet the health standards, all inmates were allowed to bathe once a day. A laundry room was provided and was operated by the prisoners under prison supervision. The courthouse and juvenile laundry was also done in this facility.

The “new jail” also contained boiler rooms that provided heat for the jail and to the here-to-fore unheated courthouse.

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The inmates were paid a small sum to fire the boilers and to handle the coal and ash. The money for this pay came from the revenue generated in the prison's carpet department.

At this time in history, the inmates in the county prison were serving terms ranging from 3 months to life. To provide "physical and mental diversion", the prisoners were given jobs within the prison. The chief work done at the prison then was in the carpet department. Other jobs included: carpentry, plumbing, electricians, hospital orderlies, laundry men, boiler room workers, barber shop and kitchen workers.

From 1950 to 1955 over \$100,000.00 was earned for the county by the carpet department alone. The carpentry shop made stretchers for the County Civil Defense Unit during World War II. They also made and repaired furniture and cabinets for the prison offices.

A library was also provided that housed over 1200 books for use by the prison population. Generous citizens and local libraries donated these books.

The next major addition did not occur until 1993 when the county invested \$7.5 million to have 225 beds added to the facility. That addition included two new modified podular/direct supervision housing units in the main facility and the new reconstruction of a free standing Community Corrections Center.

Currently, the county is planning a \$22.8 million addition that will increase the facility's capacity by slightly over 250 beds. This addition will be designed in the podular/direct supervision style of architecture that has been proven to be an effective inmate management tool since its introduction in the late 1970's.

In 2004 County Council approved a \$22.8 million expansion to the prison. After several delays, the prison was completed in June, 2006. The facility consists of three towers which will house 243 beds for a total capacity of 819. The new housing units are modeled after the direct supervision modality of inmate behavioral management.

Commissary

In the early years the prison commissary was handled entirely by one of the prison inmates. He ordered his supplies from a grocer and confectioner who were permitted to come to the prison and deal directly with the inmate in charge of the store. In later years, orders were bought wholesale and sold to inmates at prevailing prices. The profits were then used to buy items such as a water fountain, radios, sporting equipment and even a television, for use by the general prison population that numbered 117 in 1954.

Acknowledgment

This completes my brief history of the Northampton County Prison. The information was taken from "Story of the Northampton County Prison" which was compiled by the late Fred P. Laub, a member of the prison board, 1939-1944, 1948-1953. This book was printed in 1952 to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the prison. I wish to thank Roger Bulava for making this information available to me.

HISTORY OF NORTHAMPTON COUNTY PRISON

- 1752 Prior to this year, the seat of justice was in Doylestown, Bucks County, Pennsylvania. The difficulty associated with travel and inconvenience often had individuals relinquishing their legal rights rather than taking a two day journey and be subjected to the expense associated with same. These conditions brought about the establishment of a new county and thus Northampton County was created.
- 1753 The first building constructed with county money was the jail located in Easton's Centre Square. The new county jail was constructed of massive stone walls at a cost of \$1,066.87.
- 1851 The original 100 year old jail was in need of replacement and a new facility was located on Sitgreaves street behind the sheriff's office. This construction included 27 cells surrounded by a 15 foot high wall.
- 1861 The courthouse was constructed on its present site.
- 1871 Problems associated with transportation, security and the need for additional cell space brought about the construction of our present facility at a cost of \$200,000.00.
- 1884 The first public execution was held in the new jail. The inmate executed had been in prison for the murder of his wife. This execution and those to follow helped to define the adjacent neighborhood as "Gallows Hill".
- 1908 The last public execution was held at the institution.
- 1909 As a result of crowded conditions which persisted from 1903, an addition which included inmate housing, an infirmary, laundry, recreation yard and extended prison wall was completed for \$110,000.00.
- 1954 During this year the prison population was 117 with many of the inmates institutionally employed as boiler room workers, laundrymen and carpet weavers. Through the years 1950 to 1955 Northampton County earned in excess of \$100,000.00 for the manufacture of rag rugs.
- 1969 The Prison Commission authorized the construction of the gymnasium permitting recreation to be held during inclement weather.
- 1972 "C" Tier was converted to house work release inmates.

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History – Continued

- 1975 Both “A” and “C” Tiers were renovated at a cost of \$250,000.00 converting maximum security cells to dormitory type rooms.
- 1984 The growth of the prison population and the number of inmates participating in the work release required the work release program to be moved to the Archives Building and both “A” and “C” Tiers to be converted to medium security cells. These housing alterations, in conjunction with Labor and Industry requiring all manually operated cells be accessed electronically, cost \$1.2 million.
- 1986 The creation of a 19 bed intake area, the renovation of the female quarters and the establishment of an administrative wing that included the correctional officers’ locker room at a cost of \$1.3 million.
- 1991 Northampton County Prison commenced construction on the addition of the work release building enabling 144 individuals to participate in the program. The addition and the potential expansion for a third floor in this building is at a cost of approximately \$1.2 million.
- 1991 Construction commenced in the northeast courtyard of the main prison which includes 118 medium security beds, a new dining facility, laundry, storage and medical area at approximately \$6 million. This segment of construction was completed in 1993.
- 2004 County Council approved a \$22.8 million expansion to the prison. After several delays, the prison was completed in June, 2006. The facility consists of three towers which will house 243 beds for a total capacity of 819. The new housing units are modeled after the direct supervision modality of inmate behavioral management.