

# ***PRISON MUSEUM POST***

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

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## **OFF TO A GOOD START**

We are off to a good start this year. We continue to attract visitors from all over the country and beyond. Our gift shop is well stocked with unique and reasonably priced items which advertise our great site in fun ways. Sales are pretty good. Our audio tour is well received. Our Facebook page is lively and we are encouraged by our Facebook Friends' questions and comments. We have a volunteer who gives tours almost every Thursday.

We urge our members to help promote the Jail. Tell your friends and neighbors that groups which are looking for a fun, inexpensive and informative activity should consider a tour of the Old Jail. Here we are on the right giving a tour to a group of cub scouts. Dads got a separate tour for grown-ups.



If you know anyone who might be interested in giving tours, even if just occasionally, please have him or her send us an email at [pma1811@verizon.net](mailto:pma1811@verizon.net). It's actually fun, and you meet a lot of really nice people from all over the place.

## **BUILDING THE "WORKHOUSE AND JAIL" (or PRISON?)**

We hope that you enjoy this month's issue, which includes an essay by PMA Vice-President David Kimball. Dave researched the Minutes of the Burlington County Board of Freeholders between 1806 and 1811 and found out that things haven't changed much when it comes to government building projects - it took five years to build the Jail and cost more than twice the original estimate. But in the end, it was well worth the money and time: the Jail had been used for over 150 years when it closed in 1965, and was thereafter designated a National Historic Landmark.



In 1795, the county seat was moved from Burlington City to Mt. Holly. The Court House was built along with two small office buildings on either side. (All still in use today.) The County Jail, however, initially remained in Burlington City. Criminal defendants had to be transported between Burlington City and Mt. Holly by horse and buggy. (There were no televised court appearances in those days.)

In 1806, the Board of Freeholders decided it was time to build a county jail in Mt. Holly. While today the Board consists of five freeholders, in 1806 there were 24 - two from each of the 12 towns which existed in the county at that time.

The Board appointed committee after committee to build the Jail. Now we all know what they say about committees: A committee is a cul-de-sac down which ideas are lured and then quietly strangled. A camel is a horse designed by a committee. A committee is a group of the unwilling, appointed by the unfit, to do the unnecessary. A committee can make a decision that is dumber than any of its members. To get something done, a committee should consist of no more than three people, two of whom are absent.

Seriously, though, the last comment is the most appropriate for our story. As with most committees down through the ages, one or two people take the lead and do most of the work. In this case that person was John Bispham. Bispham, a Quaker, was born in Mt. Holly in 1759. He and his wife Margaret (nee' Budd) had ten children. He inherited a large tract of land in Mt. Holly but also purchased much land in the Pines. He operated a few large farms and two saw mills using timber from his land. He employed many men, who, according to John Woolman's journals, held him in high regard. He died at age 55 in 1813, just a few years after the Jail was built.



The Freeholders selected Robert Mills, our nation's first native-born and native-trained architect, to design the Jail. Born in South Carolina, Mills moved in 1802 to Philadelphia, where he became a student of the famed architect Benjamin Latrobe. Only in his mid-twenties when he designed our Jail, he went on to design the Washington Monument, the Treasury Building, the US Patent Office and many other famous buildings still in use today. One of the reasons his buildings still stand is that most of them are fireproof. Ours was the first fireproof building in our country. Mills died in 1855 at age 74. Here he is on the left with his wife, Eliza.

Mills was a Quaker. Quakers in those days were interested in prison reform. He designed the Jail with the idea that inmates should be reformed through religious instruction, education and vocational training. He submitted his plans for the jail with an essay outlining his ideas about prison reform. The plans and the essay can be found on our website: [www.prisonmuseum.net](http://www.prisonmuseum.net).

Mills' plans refer to our Jail as a "prison". Nowhere in the Freeholders' minutes, however, is that term used. Rather, the building is referred to as a "Workhouse and Jail". Although there is no question that the Freeholders wanted the inmates to work to produce income to defray the cost of their confinement, we don't have much information about whether or not there was actually any significant work done by any inmates. We believe that in the days when debtors were confined, they may have worked making items such as baskets and brooms. But we imagine there were a multitude of problems with the manufacture of items by inmates. Jail personnel would have had to purchase, account for and monitor the inmates' use of materials and tools. Many of the inmates who suffered from alcohol abuse and other physical and mental issues might not have been capable of working. Also, the County would not have wanted to manufacture items in competition with private companies whose owners and employees were taxpayers who voted.

Here are some other things you will want to know before you read the essay:

- The term "carry up" is an old-fashioned way of saying "build". In the minutes of the March, 1809 meeting, the Freeholders directed the building committee to "carry up" the walls during that season. This meant that they wanted the committee to *build* the walls (and to leave the interior to be built the next season).
- A "frontispiece" is the decoration around or on top of the entrance to a building.
- "Gaol" means Jail.
- A "perch" of stone is a measurement of stone in cubic feet. The measurement varies from place to place but generally means 22 cubic feet of stone or 500 bricks.
- Lime was used to make the mortar to hold the bricks and stones together. It is measured in bushels. Again, the amount per bushel varies but it is usually 70 or 80 pounds.

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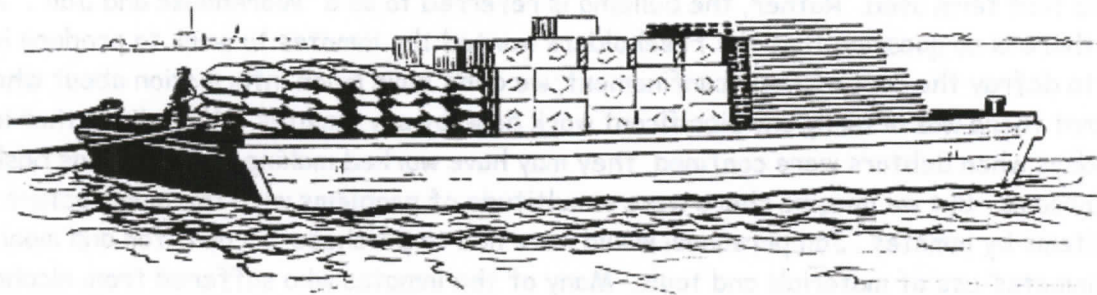
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Please help us preserve and promote the Prison Museum by joining the PMA. Our annual dues are only \$15(individual)/\$25 (family). Membership benefits include a quarterly newsletter, event updates, 10% off gift shop purchases, and free admission to the museum. Go on the website for an application.



- "Withs" are straps used to hold building materials together. It's a Biblical term - Delilah had Samson bound up in "withs". Judges 16:9.
- "Freightage" is the cost to convey building materials by boat or barge and "wharfage" is the cost to unload them from the boat or barge at the wharf. Most



of the stone used in our Jail came from quarries in Pennsylvania. It was shipped by barge and/or boat down the Delaware and then the Rancocas to the wharf in Mt. Holly.

- Freeholders rarely met as a Board and were not paid, but those who were appointed to committees (or "commissions") to oversee building projects were awarded a "commission", which was a percentage of the costs. (Can you imagine what that would amount to today?!)
- Mills' original plans called for a wall enclosing just a small portion of the outside of the yard behind the building. This wall would have enclosed just the area which is paved with brick. The current wall, which surrounds the large rear Exercise Yard area, was the idea of the Freeholders.
- Everybody complains that "buildings aren't built like they used to be". But you will notice that the Freeholders had to replace the windows in the courthouse in 1809. At that point, the building was only 14 years old.

## **THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE HISTORIC BURLINGTON COUNTY PRISON**

**By David A. Kimball, Vice-President, Prison Museum Association**

In 1806, the Burlington County Board of Chosen Freeholders appointed two of its twenty-four members to buy a lot in Mount Holly for a new "Workhouse and Jail". This committee of two was the "Lot Purchase Commission". Another two were appointed to a "Material Purchase Commission" to buy building materials. Freeholder John Bispham of Mt. Holly was appointed to both committees.

A year later, on August 10, 1807, Bispham reported that the Lot Purchase Commission bought the lot adjoining the Court House but that the Material Purchase Commission had done nothing. The order appointing them was rescinded.

The Board thereupon resolved "that it is expedient to erect a Workhouse or Jail...on the lot lately purchased," and appointed two more committees. They appointed a five-man committee to "draft or procure to be drafted a plan of the said Workhouse and Jail and also to make an estimate of the probable expense". They appointed a two-man committee to "procure stone, brick, plank and such other materials as they may deem proper for erecting said Workhouse and Jail" and appropriated \$1,000 for the purpose.

By February of the next year (1808), the materials committee had procured "sundry materials" and was continued. The plans committee "had progressed therein" and was also continued. Meeting again on May 11, the Board heard the materials committee again report progress, authorized it to buy 2000 perch of stone and appropriated another \$2,500. However, the plans committee reported that no progress had been made as one member had died and another had declined to serve.

Over a year elapsed before, on February 13, 1809, the Board met again and the plans committee presented the Mills plans with a description of exterior and cell dimensions and interior finishes, and a cost estimate of \$10,000.

The Mills plans agreed with the present building layout except that the large debtors' dayroom on the top floor was shown as two debtors' cells, the present gift shop was made up of two rooms (where the Jailkeeper and his family lived), and the stairs were rounded rather than straight up and down with a landing between the floors. The major changes were in the interior details. Mills' original plans included heart pine and oak floors, brick-paved passageways, sheet iron-lined cell doors and oak plank-lined dungeon walls. All of this was omitted, probably to avoid another \$10,000 cost overrun. The 2000 perch of stone ordered at the last Board meeting had been purchased, unloaded at a rented wharf, and partly hauled to the building site at a cost of \$3,530.43,



which was \$30.34 more than the materials committee had been allowed. The Board promptly allowed them another \$500.

A month later, in March of 1809, the Freeholder Board met again, and, plans in hand, visited the construction site. They resolved "that it is expedient to commence immediately the building of the ... Workhouse and Jail". They also named a five-man commission to oversee the work and ordered "that they only carry up the wall and enclose the same this season". The Commissioners were allowed to change the thickness of the walls, but the front of the jail was to be in a direct line with the front of the Court House and the same distance from the Surrogate's offices (the two small offices on either side of the Old Courthouse) as the Surrogate's offices are from the Court House.

Meeting again on May 10, 1809, the Board rejected a bill from Mills for \$300, and appointed Freeholder Charles Ellis to confer with the architect. Ellis was to offer Mills a figure not to exceed \$150, and if Mills agreed, to pay him. At the same meeting, they levied \$12,000 in taxes for the ensuing year for the county budget, and in addition authorized the Building Commission to borrow \$5,500. They also authorized the Commission to rent out the various rooms in the Court House and to repair the Court House cupola and windows.

The Freeholder Board next met nearly a year later, on February 12, 1810. Ellis reported that Mills had settled for \$150. He went on to report, however, that the jail was incomplete, the appropriation for it had been spent and more money would be needed. The Board continued the Building Commission. The Court House cupola apparently still had not been repaired, because the minutes reflect that the Board again authorized the Commission to repair it. Meeting again the next day, the Board ordered the Commissioners "to proceed to contract for finishing and completing" the jail. They also ordered a wall to be built around the rear yard of the Jail, specified its dimensions, and appropriated another \$8,000 for the wall and the completion of the building.

At the next Freeholder Board meeting almost a year later, the Commissioners reported that the jail ... "is nearly complete and as soon as the (plaster on the) walls dry it will be ready for the reception of prisoners". \$21,629.72 had been spent, and the Commissioners had received \$17,500. The Board continued the Commission and asked it for an accounting at the next Board meeting. A three-man commission was named to sell the old jail in Burlington City (the lot, the building and its contents). Another five-man committee was appointed to "draft Rules and Regulations for the Government of the Jail and Workhouse" and to present the draft to the Board at the next meeting. While the marble frontispiece with the word "PRISON" in large letters had been

installed, the word had never appeared in the Freeholder's Minutes, which always referred only to a "Workhouse and Jail".

Two months later the Rules Committee reported a list of seventeen rules. The Board was to elect "three suitable persons as Inspectors of the Jail and Workhouse who in conjunction with the High Sheriff ... shall have the particular care and oversight of the same" and were to make "such additional Rules and Regulations for the same" as needed.

The draft went on, exemplifying the Quaker dichotomy: socially progressive, economically conservative. Two inspectors were to visit the jail each month, inspect its condition, and listen to and act on any prisoner's complaints. Males and females were to work, eat and be housed separately and "Shall have no intercourse or communications". Runaway servants were to be lodged and employed separately. Inmates were to be encouraged to be neat and clean, and the keeper was to keep the building swept and whitewashed.

The Board expected all inmates "to be kept and employed as is directed by the Act of the Legislature of New Jersey entitled 'An Act for Establishing Workhouses in the Several Counties of this State' passed the 20<sup>th</sup> February 1799". The inspectors were to purchase the necessary tools and materials for the inmates' use in this employment. The keeper was to account for the tools, materials, and products sold, and make sure the inmates worked.

Even more difficult, the Keeper was to prevent "all tippling, gambling, and other evils and hurtful practices."

The Board approved the Rules and appointed the first three inspectors (who gradually became a buildings and grounds committee for all County property) and the jail was off and running. Even then, a year after the jail opened, the Board "Resolved that the present Gaol Commissioners be authorized to stop up the north stairs door on the second floor heading into the kitchen and to sink a well in the front yard."

Finally, on February 8, 1813, the construction commission accounts were audited and approved. A listing of 102 separate items was followed by a "Recapitulation of the different Materials, Labour, Etc.":



Lumber	\$ 1,267.00
4425 Perch Stone exclusive of Stone steps and 425 bushels of lime	7,872.80
209,000 brick	1,313.90
Marble	220.06
Copper	25.95
Lead and Leadwork	150.20
Iron, Iron Kettles, Smithwork, etc.	2,190.96
Nails	124.28
Blocks and rope	64.24
Mason Work	7,221.07
Measuring Masonwork	54.00
Carpenters work	914.70
Glass, painting, and glazing	171.42
Common labor	40.57
Freight and Wharfage	77.02
Interest on Money borrowed	823.57
Withs, ladders, poles sundries	127.74
Pump and well	30.49
Carting Stone, etc.	<u>1,510.79</u>
TOTAL	\$24,206.13

The Building Commissioners were then allowed a fee of \$726.05 (2.99% of the sums expended). This in addition to the \$24,206.13 in costs totaled \$24,932.18, which came out to about a dollar a piece for every county inhabitant (24,979 in 1812).

A quick inspection of the list of 102 bills paid indicate that Lewis Wormwag supplied almost all the stone and Joseph Stokes most of the brick. Jeremiah Henkle provided 4500 paving bricks, James Faquire provided the marble door step and the plaque over the door, and Daniel Thomas was the mason. Bispham, John Scott, Isaac Case and others provided lumber, and Samuel Reed, Samuel Bennett and William Rogers did much of the carpenter work. Bennett also provided 144 liters of sash. Fittingly, the next to last payment was to George Hancock for \$12 for a lock for the "Front door of Gaol".

It is clear that John Bispham, a Freeholder from Northampton and a resident of Mount Holly, was the key figure in getting the jail built. He bought the lot, bought the building materials, kept the accounts and seems to have supervised the work. His apparently near daily presence on site was especially important since the Board of Chosen Freeholders met only nine times in the years 1808-1811, and only three times met for two days instead of just one day.



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