



County of Lancaster
Pennsylvania

History of the Lancaster County Prison



In the year 1729, the first Lancaster County magistrates met at John Posthlewait s Tavern which was located in Conestoga Township. It was the first meeting on June 9, 1729 that the magistrates ordered the erection of a County Jail. This action was confirmed by the Court of Quarter Session in August of the next year. It was decided that the building should be erected by County Sheriff Robert Barber and that it should be called the Common Gaol of the County of Lancaster. This building was finished and awaiting inspection by November 4, 1729. The strong log house was located on Sheriff Barber s land at Wrights Ferry, which is now Columbia.

It is believed that this Common Gaol was the only place of incarceration until the summer of 1775. In the summer of 1774, construction was started on a new jail. This jail was located in the City of Lancaster at the northwest corner of West King, then known as High Street, and North Prince Street. The new jail, a solid construction of stone, was completed in June of 1775.

It was not until after this prison had been in use for more than a half a century that agitation began over the question of building a new one to take its place. A committee was appointed in 1827 to study the feasibility of a new jail but submitted an adverse report to the Court. Again in 1831 the grand jury reported the insufficiency of the jail. It was submitted to the County Convention held at the Court House in the same year. A committee was again appointed and reported ...it is inexpedient and unnecessary to erect a new County Jail at the present time , and RESOLVED, That it be recommended to the commissioners to make such repairs to the present jail and yard as may be necessary for the security and better accommodation of the prisoners, having due regards in such repairs to a judicious economy. The repairs consisted of raising the jail wall four feet along West King street and were completed during the summer of 1831.

On January 27, 1849, the Commissioners, fully concurring with the Grand Jury, decided to erect a new county prison upon such site as they shall deem best . On January 30, 1849, the Commissioners approved a plan for a new prison furnished by John Haviland of the City of Philadelphia. The Commissioners selected the ground near the Reservoir at the east end of East King Street, then also known as the Philadelphia Turnpike, in the City of Lancaster.

Land was purchased from John Duchman fronting on East Orange Street at the rate of \$300.00 per acre. Also purchased was about one half a town lot from Jacob Druckemiller for \$130.00. Soon afterwards the City of Lancaster deeded a piece of ground to the County on East King Street for the consideration of \$500.00.

On February 5, 1849 a contract was signed with John Haviland for \$102,000.00 to erect and furnish all materials and labor for a building comprising a criminal prison and accommodations for the keeper and his assistants on the ground selected by the Commission . Haviland was to complete the building within two years and six months.

The stone used was a red (or Cocalico) sandstone quarried from the William and Joseph Konigsmacher Quarry near Ephrata.

The front of the prison is 200 feet in length, castellated Norman in style and composed of four towers. There are two large circular towers in the center and one octagonal tower at each extreme. Between the circular towers is a curtain wall pierced by a gateway. Behind these towers are two others of square form. From the center of this group rises a polygonal tower which serves as an air-shaft. The extreme height of this 110 feet, while that of the circular and square towers is 50 feet. The wing walls are 22 feet. The area enclosed by the prison walls is in the form of an irregular hexagon with the extreme length from east to west being 500 feet and the depth from north to south 300 feet.

The radiating blocks introduced by Mr. Haviland, when completed were capable of containing 160 prisoners. There were 80 cells in two stories of 40 cells each. The cells on the ground floor had exercising areas attached 33 feet in length with a open iron railing at the end.

The prison contained its own gas works for the manufacture of the gas consumed in the institution. Each cell was equipped with a steel grate type door and also wood door which could be closed for isolation and punishment. The walls were approximately 18 inches thick.

The design of the prison is almost an exact model of an 18th century castle in Lancashire, England, with an arched gateway, a large grating of iron bars that was lowered by chains in front of the main entrance.

The cost of the structure including gas works and fixtures totaled \$110,000.00 upon completion. On September 12, 1851, the first prisoners were moved into the new prison. Final settlement with the contractor was made on September 15th of the same year.

The old prison property at King and Prince Streets was sold to P.H. Ehrman and C. Hager for \$8,400.

The 110 foot tower was dismantled around 1886. The iron picket fence around the front of the prison was removed in the late 1920's. Criminals were hanged at the prison until 1912. In 1972 the first extensive modernization project took place since construction in 1851.

