

DESIGNS

for a

PRISON

for

BURLINGTON COUNTY,
STATE of NEW JERSEY;

comprising

A Debtors' Goal, and Work-house for Felons:

by

Robert Mills, Architect.

Philadelphia May 1808

The building Committee of Burlington County Prison

Gentlemen!

In submitting the Designs which accompany this, for your building, I would beg leave to include a general view of the principles on which prisons should be instituted.

First, As regards Strength and Permanency:
When we speak of a building for the Confinement or safe keeping of persons, we naturally associate the Idea of durability and strength; Therefore it would scarcely seem necessary to observe that one of the first Considerations in constructing it should be to insure these; However as the Ideas entertained on the Subject generally, are not founded in truth; (as instanced in the Maps of Buildings of this description, where except in the Iron bars and gates, no difference is to be observed, distinct from a common house) I would endeavor to correct the Error.

Where so much Carelessness and malicious Wickedness exist, as are to be found in a prison, and where the safe keeping of the prisoners is of so great importance, every practicable method should certainly be adopted to prevent the bad effects of the former and to insure the reality of the latter. Therefore there should be as little combustible materials used in its construction as possible: Every room should be vaulted or arched with brick, as well as all the passages of communication, these latter should also be paved with Brick. The Steps of the Stairs should be of Stone, so that in case of fire originating in one part of the building, it cannot extend its ravages to other parts; Humanity as well as Interest plead in favor of this, when we refer to the many melancholy Instances on record of persons confined, perishing in the flames from

inattention or being forgotten during the Confusion produced by an Event of this distressing Nature, and the having effected their Freedom, still prevented from escaping in safety by the destruction of the Stairs : Wherein the public Interest is concerned is too obvious to be noticed here.

Second, On the plan or convenient arrangement of the Prison.

As regards this I would refer you to the following designs, these according to the Limits allowed being founded upon principles which in theory and practice are known to be just; A description of the building will serve to illustrate them.

The Front presents but few openings, for prisoners should have as little communications with the Street or public highway as possible. – We enter the building (after ascending a flight of Steps) through a strong doorway, into the Vestibule or Waiting hall; Before us is the keepers office which looks into the Court, the Debtors common Hall, and the Cells or Sleeping rooms of the felon prisoners. On our right is a passage communicating with the keepers Apartment; On our left another leading to the Stairs & West wing into the Court. Descending a flight of Stone Steps we land in the office Story. The passage on our left leads to the Work Shops in the Wings and to the prison Kitchen; that opposite to us leads to the felon prisoners refectory

(or eating room), passing through this we enter the Keepers kitchen, further on we come into another passage which communicates with other work shops &c Opposite us we ascend another flight of Steps corresponding to those in the other wing, which land us in a passage communicating with the East Wing and Court. In going through these we enter an open Arcade which communicates with the Court on one side and the prisoners Cells on the other. The Wing on the opposite side corresponds with this. Returning and ascending another flight of Steps we land opposite a passage which leads to the Debtors apartments, on the left is another which leads to a Range of sleeping Rooms which may be allotted to Women prisoners. There is a passage and range of cells on the opposite Wings which correspond to this. We again ascend another flight of narrow steps which bring us to the solitary cells or dungeons. These merely occupy the Angle of the Wings, and are distinguished by that portion which rises above the rest in the exterior view of the building.

In passing through the different parts of this building we discover

First. That all the apartments are vaulted and the floors of those paved with Brick that are not used as sitting or Sleeping rooms.

Second. That the Cells or Dungeons for the refractory

are secured with a lining of Oak plank rendered impenetrable by being filled with scupper Nails.

Third. That the sleeping rooms are of such dimensions as befit them for the accommodation of Only One person.

Fourth. That the Window and doors are of a size just sufficient for the purposes intended, the former raised so high above the heads of the prisoners as to prevent them looking out, which size is in favor of security & Economy.

Fifth. That the apartments of the debtors are more spacious admitting of the accommodation of several in one room and possessed of superior privileges to those for the common felons.

Sixth. That a complete distinction or separation is made between the Debtors and common Felons.

Seventh. That the situation of the keeper's apartments gives him an opportunity of overlooking the most material parts of the building.

Eighth. That the passage of communication being general, one Watch may suffice to guard the whole building. And,

Ninth. That there is a free circulation of air through all the apartments. –

On the top of the building is a Belfry for the reception of a Bell not only to serve as a time regulator to the prison but also as an Alarm Bell in case of insurrection of the prisoners, Fire, &c.

Thirdly. On the Internal Order or physical and moral Government of the prison. That means should be provided to enable the prisoner to maintain themselves by labor, even tho a stipulated sum is provided by law to this effect, is a principle that needs no comment to prove the propriety of, and the rules of the prison should compel them to work, if they voluntarily were not inclined to it. There also should be no discrimination or respect of persons; Industry should be taught from experience (as it really is) to be one of the first Virtues. It is a melancholy sight in surveying most if not all of our debtors goals, to behold so many persons compelled as it were to spend their time in Idleness, Nay not only this, but to be exposed to the snares and temptations of Vice in a variety of Shapes. For as it will be admitted, Sometimes, unfortunate merit may be here confined, so on the contrary there will be men of no principle or virtuous habits; and shall we be so ungenerous nay I may say inhuman as to increase his misfortune by exposing him to the vile company and converse of such? No! if we cannot better his situation let us not initiate him into, or teach him vices which are the ruin of humanity! How many are there that would willingly labor to gain a pittance to support themselves or their families. It is cruel to deny them the opportunity. Let means be instituted to enable them to carry this virtuous resolution into Effect, and let the

Idler the disgracer of his fellow creatures be compelled to benefit himself and to get a habit of those virtues the neglect of which has brought him to his present wretched State; The miseries of a prison are Great enough without adding to them; It is sufficient for an industrious unfortunate man to be confined there by a merciless Creditor without depriving him of his virtuous habits and thus entail for ever after misery and distress upon him and his helpless Family. Since it is a fact, that our habits are our morals, we should certainly on the principles of sound policy as well as humanity endeavor to form these, such as will prove congenial to the dictates of virtue, and this may in a great measure be effected by removing as far as lies in our power the sources of contamination. The Inscription that ought to be found on a prison should be this effect "Justice which while it punishes would endeavor to reform The Offender". And on examining the internal government we should see such methodz adopted as tend to realize this sentiment.

Indulgences of no nature derogatory to Virtue should receive the countenance of this. Institution: every species of gaming, ill timed recreation or amusement, drinking strong liquors and idleness should be prohibited and there is no more effectual way to do this than to employ the body in some labor. Labor is so necessary an appendage that where it is not attached, a

prison becomes indubitably a source of Vice and misery to the unfortunate being therein confined; for however industrious he might have been before he entered, the habit of idleness will grow so powerful on him that he will never afterwards regain his former habits of industry so as to be of much service to himself or to society. Need I enlarge? I think not; so every reflecting mind cannot but be sensible of the truth of these remarks I shall therefore proceed to consider.

Fourthly, of the classification of the prisoners That every description of prisoners should not be permitted to associate together no one considers the effect of example will attempt to deny. The prisoners therefore should be classed or separated according to their moral character--It would be inhuman and unjust to expose the Infant in Vice to the shocking influence of the Veteran in wickedness. This separation should be as much attended to during the day as at night.

Fifthly: Cleanliness

Cleanliness is a virtue too amiable and too beneficial in its affects (both in a moral and physical point of view) to pass unnoticed in any department or situation of life, but particularly in a prison where such a mass of people are collected who from long habits and a natural Indolence of disposition joined to their situation are so inclined to negligence. A bath therefore should be

constructed for the free use of the prisoners, and all should be constrained to use it at least once a week. There should also be constructed an oven for the express purpose of purifying the clothes of such persons as at their entrance are suspected of filthiness or infection.

Whitewashing the walls of the rooms with lime intermixed with a little marine salt at least twice in the year should not be neglected, (The use of the salt is to lessen the attraction of the lime for the mephitic air generated and breathed thro' the human beings) Those rooms which accommodate large collections of persons should have ventilators or small apertures near the ceiling to pass out the respired air- The windows of the cells should not be furnished with sashes but each should have a movable blind which may at the option of the prisoner be opened or shut as suits his conveniency, sashes glazed would confine the rooms too much for either comfort or health; How necessary a constant admission of fresh air is, may be imagined from this fact, that a man consumes a gallon of atmospheric air in a minute or a hogshead in an hour, that is, when this air passes thro' the lungs or respiratory organs, it is so surcharged with carbonic acid gas or fixed air (so destructive to animal life) as seriously to injure if not totally destroy life provided it is not purified or intermixed with atmospheric air or with its essential

part, oxygen gas.

Every cell should be provided with an Iron Bedstead circumscribed with Boards and a bed of clean straw or the leaf of the ___ confined in a coarse Osnaburg bag, the straw renewed as often as convenient but at least twice a year. What other conveniences are necessary benevolence and the nature of the climate will pint out--"However sanguinary the wish of an angry creditor may be when he arrests and imprisons his debtor, there is no doubt but that every one who listens to his Reason when his passions are moderated, must know and will own that his prisoner has a claim to human treatment; nor can we consistently with any good principle either of morals or government refuse the same to persons accused of even the most atrocious crime.

Each room should be furnished with some instructive book (particularly the New Testament) Silence and solitude command the exercise of the reflect faculties in man and where these are in operation from day to day we may anticipate the most favorably results particularly with such a book to peruse as the one above mentioned. The privilege should also be granted the unlettered prisoners of being taught to read and write this should be considered as a favor and granted where a disposition to reform shows itself. When there are no women (I speak in connection with the Debtors Goal)

the men prisoners should take it by turns every morning to clean out every room, to open the doors & windows and air their bedding.

Sixthly. Dungeons.

It is customary to place the Dungeons or solitary Cells under ground. If the Object in confining the wretched Criminal here is to destroy his health & make him miserable, a more proper situation could not be chosen to affect it.

That it is an unsafe place, Experience has fully proved, and the justly celebrate Howard in noticing the obvious “I have found that escapes have been most commonly effected by undermining Cells and Dungeons”

Certainly prisoners have the best opportunity of accomplishing their purpose in these secret situations which the mind abhors to visit, as the confinement is so close as to create nausea; The most conspicuous and elevated situation should therefore be chosen for these solitary cells, and very justly, as here there is no possibility of laboring much in secret, or without continual dread of discovery as they are surrounded with Eyes & so easy of access that the keeper (except willfully) cannot neglect to visit them daily. Under these Impressions I have placed the dungeons in the most elevated part of the outer angles of the building. The walls are proposed to be lined with Oak plank and filled with scupper nails which render the difficulty of

escape greater than through a five feet wall.

The Utility of an Infirmary in a prison scarce need be noticed.

If to the Debtors prison or Work house should be affixed, it would be proper to appropriate Three or Four of the upper Rooms of the West Wing for this apartment with Two or Three Ventilators.

Encouragement should be given to the religious visits of Gospel Ministries The Debtors common hall may be appropriate for the meeting of the prisoners to receive their instructions.

I shall not enlarge further, but come to a conclusion after soliciting your indulgence for having intruded my Sentiments so far. Trusting that they will not be considered uninteresting, I subscribe myself with sentiments of respect.

Gentlemen!

Your most Obedient humble

Servant

Robert Mills,

Architect

Poplar Grove Farm, near
Burlington, 4 June 1808