Form 10-300
(Rev. 6-72)

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY – NOMINATION FORM

(Type all entries – complete applicable sections)

STATE: Washington
COUNTY: Thurston
FOR NPS USE ONLY
ENTRY DATE: MAY 2 1975

SEE INSTRUCTIONS

1. NAME

COMMON: Seatco Prison Site
AND/OR HISTORIC:

2. LOCATION

STREET AND NUMBER: Hwy 101 WA 507
CITY OR TOWN: Bucoda
CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT: #3 – Honorable Julia B. Hansen
STATE: Washington — CODE: 53
COUNTY: Thurston — CODE: 067

3. CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY (Check One)	OWNERSHIP		STATUS	ACCESSIBLE TO THE PUBLIC
☐ District ☐ Building	☒ Public	Public Acquisition:	☐ Occupied	Yes:
☒ Site ☐ Structure	☐ Private	☐ In Process	☒ Unoccupied	☐ Restricted
☐ Object	☐ Both	☐ Being Considered	☐ Preservation work in progress	☒ Unrestricted
				☐ No

PRESENT USE *(Check One or More as Appropriate)*

☐ Agricultural	☐ Government	☐ Park	☐ Transportation	☐ Comments
☐ Commercial	☐ Industrial	☐ Private Residence	☒ Other *(Specify)*	
☐ Educational	☐ Military	☐ Religious	Vacant	
☐ Entertainment	☐ Museum	☐ Scientific		

4. OWNER OF PROPERTY

OWNER'S NAME: Town of Bucoda
STREET AND NUMBER:
CITY OR TOWN: Bucoda
STATE: Washington — CODE: 53

5. LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE, REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC: Thurston County Courthouse
STREET AND NUMBER:
CITY OR TOWN: Olympia
STATE: Washington — CODE: 53

6. REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE OF SURVEY: None
DATE OF SURVEY: ☐ Federal ☐ State ☐ County ☐ Local
DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS:
STREET AND NUMBER:
CITY OR TOWN:
STATE: — CODE:

RECEIVED JAN 23 1975 NATIONAL REGISTER

STATE: Washington
COUNTY: Thurston
FOR NPS USE ONLY
ENTRY NUMBER
DATE

7. DESCRIPTION

CONDITION	(Check One)					
	☐ Excellent	☐ Good	☐ Fair	☐ Deteriorated	☐ Ruins	☒ Unexposed
	(Check One)		(Check One)			
	☒ Altered	☐ Unaltered	☐ Moved	☒ Original Site		

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL *(if known)* PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The prison itself was not impressive, even by 19th century standards. The total cost of the structure is given at between $3,000 and $4,000. Its dimensions were variously given as 60 by 120 feet and 40 by 150 feet. The latter are generally considered correct as they were given by the prisoner, George France, who had seven years in which to make the measurements.

That the building was built entirely of wood seems appropriate for Western Washington and also considering the fact that the third partner owned and operated a sawmill at the site. Though wood may not seem suitable for a prison in this day and age, Seatco was a formidable structure and there is no record of a prisoner ever escaping from its cell-block.

Construction of the outside walls of the building was simple and effective. Three by twelve inch planks were laid flat and spiked at five inch intervals. The result was a foot-thick wall made impregnable by a lattice-work of iron spikes. Interior walls and floors were of three by six inch planks similarly piked.

The structure consisted of three stories, with the lower floor containing the cell block. The second floor contained quarters for the guards, a dining hall and kitchen, storage rooms, a tailor shop and a shoe shop. The third floor was an unfinished garret used for the shoe and tailor shops when women prisoners were in custody. At such times the feminine felons occupied the second floor rooms ordinarily set aside for the tailors and cobblers.

A key to the security of the building was that the lone entrance was by way of the second floor. A flight of stairs led from the prison yard up to a porch outside the only entrance. Inside, the only entrance to the cell-block below was a single stairway. One historian noted that the storage room for kerosene, paints and other flammable liquids was placed at the top of that stairway.

The number of cells on the lower floor is again a controversial point. George France states there were 32 cells, each eight by ten feet. A close look at existing photos of the building shows 18 narrow slit windows on the side of the building. This would indicate that perhaps the proper number of cells was 36, which also would roughly bear out the eight foot width of the cell. The above layout would leave an area of twenty by 150 feet between the two tiers of cells.

Each cell was designed to hold two prisoners. There were no furnishings in the cells other than straw ticks used for beds, a flour or grain sack stuffed with straw for pillows, and a bucket

SEE INSTRUCTIONS

Continuation Sheet

#7 - Description
Seatco Prison

for sanitary use. The cell block floor was unheated and the glassless barred slit windows made the long winter nights an unpleasant ordeal.

A stockade of heavy planks was built by the first prisoners to occupy the prison, and encircled the prison building. The stockade is visible in a photo of Bucoda taken about 1910. It is said that fir trees were topped and used for guard towers at the perimeter of the prison yard, but none are apparent in the few photos of the facility.

Today there is no visible trace of the structure in the grass and brush covered area near the Skookumchuck River although it is not unusual to come across spikes and nails used in its construction.

8. SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD *(Check One or More as Appropriate)*

☐ Pre-Columbian	☐ 16th Century	☐ 18th Century	☐ 20th Century
☐ 15th Century	☐ 17th Century	☒ 19th Century	

SPECIFIC DATE(S) *(If Applicable and Known)* 1878-1887

AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE *(Check One or More as Appropriate)*

Aboriginal	☐ Education	☐ Political	☐ Urban Planning
☐ Prehistoric	☐ Engineering	☐ Religion/Philosophy	☐ Other *(Specify)*
☐ Historic	☐ Industry		
☐ Agriculture	☐ Invention	☐ Science	
☐ Architecture	☐ Landscape Architecture	☐ Sculpture	
☐ Art		☒ Social/Humanitarian	
☐ Commerce	☐ Literature		
☐ Communications	☐ Military	☐ Theater	
☐ Conservation	☐ Music	☐ Transportation	

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Washington's first prison at Seatco came into being for two basic reasons -- the first because the Territory had no place other than county jails to hold felons and second because the Legislature was unwilling to spend any public funds to provide a penitentiary.

The Territorial government of Washington had expected at one time to fall heir to the U.S. Penitentiary at McNeil Island. Federal prisons in Montana, Idaho, and Oregon had been turned over to the governments of those states or territories. McNeil, however, was retained by the federal authorities and remains today a prison for persons serving time for federal offenses. The government in Washington did offer to care for territorial prisoners at a cost of $1.50 per day, but the offer was turned down by the Legislature.

The holding of prisoners by the various counties was proving far from satisfactory. Some counties did not even have jails, and in the case of those that did, there was dissatisfaction with the handling of prisoners by a few sheriffs who were suspected of lining their own pockets through convict labor. Prisoners were expected to work on county roads or other projects with the proceeds of their labor to help with their maintenance. In actuality, the territory paid one dollar a day for the keep of the prisoners and received very little in return for their work. In one single quarter the Territory paid out $1,837 and received in return $394 for 598 days of labor.

When it became obvious that the federal prison would not be handed over to the Territory, the Legislature solved the problem by entering into an agreement with William Billings, Sheriff of Thurston County, to build a prison at his own expense. The Territory would pay 70 cents per day for the keep of the prisoners and Billings was free to sell or use their labor as he pleased.

Actually, there had been two proposals for a contract prison, with Sheriff Jerry Smith of Pierce County also offering to build a similar facility. When it became obvious that the idea was indeed a profitable one, and that more bidders were likely to appear on the secene, Billings offered Smith a partnership to clear the way

SEE INSTRUCTIONS

9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Driscoll, John J. "Washington Territorial Institutions". A thesis appearing in "McNeil, A History of a Federal Prison", McNeil Island Penitentiary, 1970.

France, George W. "Struggles for Life and Home in the Northwest". I Goldmann, New York, 1890.

U.S. Census, Supplemental Schedule No. 6. "Inhabitants in Prison in Seatco, in the County of Thurston, Territory of Washington", June 1, 1880.

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

LATITUDE AND LONGITUDE COORDINATES DEFINING A RECTANGLE LOCATING THE PROPERTY						OR	LATITUDE AND LONGITUDE COORDINATES DEFINING THE CENTER POINT OF A PROPERTY OF LESS THAN TEN ACRES					
CORNER	LATITUDE			LONGITUDE				LATITUDE			LONGITUDE	
	Degrees	Minutes	Seconds	Degrees	Minutes	Seconds		Degrees	Minutes	Seconds	Degrees	Minutes	Seconds
NW	°	'	"	°	'	"		46°	47'	35"	122°	52'	11"
NE	°	'	"	°	'	"							
SE	°	'	"	°	'	"							
SW	°	'	"	°	'	"							

10/509950
5151760
CD

APPROXIMATE ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY: Less than one

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE:	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
STATE:	CODE	COUNTY:	CODE
STATE:	CODE	COUNTY:	CODE
STATE:	CODE	COUNTY:	CODE

RECEIVED
JAN 23 1975
NATIONAL REGISTER

SEE INSTRUCTIONS

11. FORM PREPARED BY

NAME AND TITLE:
Art Dwelley

ORGANIZATION: South Thurston Co. Historical Society
DATE: October 20, '74

STREET AND NUMBER: Post Office Box D

CITY OR TOWN: Tenino
STATE: Washington
CODE: 53

12. STATE LIAISON OFFICER CERTIFICATION

As the designated State Liaison Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service. The recommended level of significance of this nomination is:

National ☐ State ☑ Local ☐

Name Charles H. Odegaard
Charles H. Odegaard

Title Director - Washington State Parks & Recreation Commission

Date Nov. 26, 1974

NATIONAL REGISTER VERIFICATION

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register.

Director, Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation

Date 5/2/75

ATTEST:

Keeper of The National Register

Date 5.1.75

☆ U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE : 1973-729-147/1442 3-1

for a quick consummation of the deal. The Legislature passed the proposal on November 9, 1877 and granted a six-year contract on January 23, 1878.

In the meantime, Billings and Smith had another problem. Neither had the necessary funds to build the prison. This obstacle was overcome with the adding of a third partner in the contract prison. The third man was Oliver Shead, a lumber mill owner at Seatco in southern Thurston County. Shead would provide the land and the money in return for one-third of the profits of the prison and its labor force.

Under the terms of the agreement between Billings and the Territory, "a strong, substantial, safe and secure building" was to be built and ready for use prior to June 30, 1878. In actuality, the facility went into operation a few weeks after the stated date on July 13, 1878. In its relatively short lifespan of nine years it was to gain much notoriety as "a living hell" and would be the Territory's first and only experiment with a contract prison.

The prison population at Seatco started with 38 prisoners in its first year and grew in numbers as the territory itself became more populous. In its final year, 1887, the building held 93, well over the original designed capacity at two men per cell.

The federal census of 1880 provides a good look at the number of prisoners, the nature of their crimes, and the area of the state in which they were convicted. The census notes that a total of 64 convicts had been held during the previous year, and that 47 were still jailed at the time of the census.

The roll lists 34 native white males, seven colored males, one native colored female, and 21 foreign males held during the year ending May 30, 1880. It also lists one foreign male held upon other grounds, not having been convicted of any crime.

With the exception of horse stealing, the crimes committed were no different than is common today. Larceny was the downfall of 11 convicts, while nine were convicted murderers. Six burglars were trailed in number by five horse thieves and five felons serving time for manslaughter. Three prisoners had drawn sentences for assault with a deadly weapon, two for attempted murder, and one each for forgery and abortion. The latter gentleman was a doctor and quite naturally served as prison physician.

Despite the fact that nine convicts had been convicted of murder, only one man had been given a life sentence. Eleven convicts had drawn sentences of eleven to twenty years, while twelve were serving from five to ten years. Twenty-three prisoners were being held for periods of less than five years.

It is interesting that the third longest sentence was handed down for a manslaughter conviction, while a number of murderers had received lighter sentences. Horse stealing apparently was not looked upon as quite so serious in Washington Territory as it was in other parts of the west, with sentences generally less than five years.

Continuation Sheet

#8 - Significance
Seatco Prison (2)

Of the 47 prisoners on hand at census time, twenty-one had been convicted in Eastern Washington and twenty-six from Western Washington. Walla Walla seemed to be the crime capitol of the Territory with twelve in prison for various offenses. Seattle was a close second with eleven. Olympia, Dayton and Vancouver each contributed four of their citizens, while the balance of the felons came from various other communities around the state.

Four men listed on the prison rolls were apparently Indians and are recorded simply as "Taws, Ellick, Willie and George", with no surname given.

In the fiscal year ending May 31, 1880, prisoners had served a total of 16,126 days of confinement, and had cost the Territory a total of $11,288 for their confinement.

Life at Seatco Prison was quite brutal by modern standards, but probably no worse than other prisons of the day. The worst treatment the prisoners had to endure was the wearing of the infamous "Rinquist cuffs", which were leg irons that ranged in weight from nine to twenty pounds. The cuffs were named for the Steilacoom blacksmith who fashioned them, and were worn 24 hours a day in the first four or five years of the prison's existence.

The permanently attached cuffs made movement of almost any kind not only cumbersome and awkward, but also painful. The continuous rubbing on the legs of the convicts often caused open wounds that would not heal, despite the questionable protection of a leather cuff. According to George France, "the irons broke down many a good man". He stated that even the men confined to their beds with serious illness were kept in irons.

Because of public pressure, use of the permanent irons was ordered halted by the Territorial legislature, but again, according to France, actual implementation of the order took nearly a year to complete.

"When the prisoners came in from work the sight and the clatter of the chains was deafening and damnable", France said. He further told of the difficulty of working while wearing the irons and commented that many injuries were suffered by men hampered by their weight and the resultant lack of mobility.

The prison labor force was used in a variety of ways during the nine years of its existence. The 1880 census shows the majority of the men were used for "Labor on Farm", while six or eight worked in the cooper shop. A few others were assigned to prison duties or in the tailor and shoe shop. A published account by a prison guard, Frank C. Ward, states that most of the men cut wood for railroad engines. Mr. Ward also states that an attempt to use the prisoners in a nearby coal mine was given up when the coal proved to be of poor quality. In the final years of the prison most of the men labored in a sawmill and millwork plant that later became the Seatco Manufacturing Company, and a substantial employer in what was to become Bucoda.

Women prisoners did not work and presumably spent their entire terms in somber reflection. White women were given cells on the second floor

usually occupied by the tailor or shoe shops. An Indian woman, incarcerated with her three children, was not so fortunate, however, being relegated to a shanty in the prison yard. George France stated that there were no women attendants, and hinted darkly that prison guards or officials had taken advantage of this fact. He recalls that one woman prisoner committed suicide by hanging herself in her cell.

Frank Ward states that the prisoners worked an eight or nine hour day, returning, when practical, to the prison for the noon meal.

Convicts were issued only light cotton work clothes and presumably had to rely on friends and relatives for any warmer attire. Fortunately, the cell block area was used only for sleeping. Meals and free time were spent in the second floor hall.

As might be expected, Mr. France had little good to say about prison fare, and claimed that the food often consisted of tainted beef and potatoes "two or three months after their season."

The prisoners protested the food situation several times by going on strike. In each case, the quality would improve for a time and then begin to deteriorate again. Needless to say, with the establishment a strictly profit-oriented business, there was little effort to provide much more than the minimum of nourishment. On the other hand, prisoners that were unable to work were not profitable either. By way of comparison, it is interesting to observe that twenty years later the State Penitentiary at Walla Walla managed to feed and clothe its inhabitants for twenty cents a day less than Seatco.

The harsh prison life caused many escape attempts, and more than a few were successful. The escapes, however, were invariably made from work parties, and no evidence exists of anyone breaking out of the cell block. According to local legends, several prisoners who attempted escape were shot down by guards and are buried in unmarked graves near the prison site. A $75 reward was the common bounty offered for the return of prisoners who managed to elude the guards.

Seatco guards were not noted for their kindness and their treatment of prisoners often bordered on outright brutality. Beatings were common for the smallest offense and a whipping post received good use. Bread and water diets were ordered for minor infractions of the rules. Mr. France tells of one convict who had the temerity to complain of his treatment to a party of visiting legislators. As soon as the visitors had departed, the warden personally pulled nine of the man's teeth with a pair of pliers as an example to what complainers might expect.

Even the negative Mr. France had to admit that life at Seatco had its better moments. He commented that for several years he had worked in the dining room and was free to go fishing between meals and after his work was finished.

France also noted that "For the last several years the big hall in the prison, when all were in, resembled a western saloon except the bar; card

playing, with Faro and other gambling games, checkers, chess, etc.; reading and talking, chewing and smoking and sometimes singing and dancing, with an occasional fight."

A small store was available to buy necessities and tobacco and other commodities. Mr. France complained of high prices and of the pittance allowed prisoners for their labors.

Spiritual guidance was not available in the first years of the prison. Only in the last few years were ministers of various faiths allowed in to conduct Sunday services.

Visiting by friends or relatives apparently was not allowed, as no reference to such visits was found in contemporary accounts. Mail apparently was censored or withheld at times, but did not appear to be limited to any great degree.

Handicrafts of a limited type were apparently allowed. An excellent example of this is a very beautiful doll dresser now owned by the South Thurston County Historical Society. The dresser was purchased from a Seatco prisoner by William Huston, pioneer Tenino hotel operator. Mr. Huston later gave the dresser to Mose Calloway for his daughter, who recently gave it to the historical group. The dresser was made almost entirely of cigar boxes and is an outstanding piece of work.

Despite the reputation of the prison, the three partners in the establishment lacked the reputations one might expect. Billings, Smith and Shead were all respected members of the Territory and of their communities. One might question their business acumen, however, as none became wealthy despite the built-in profitability of the contract prison enterprise.

Best known of the trio was William Billings of Olympia. He was born in Ripton, Vermont and as a young man came around the Horn on a whaling ship. He left the ship in Hawaii in 1848 and lived there a year before joining the California gold rush. He was in California only a short time and then moved to Portland. He came to Olympia in 1851 and lived in that area until his death in 1909. Billings was sheriff of Thurston County in 1860 and 1861, and then left to join the Idaho gold rush. He returned the following year and became Superintendent of the Puyallup Indian reservation for several years. In 1869 he was again elected Thurston County Sheriff and held that position until 1891. Billings had a number of business interests, including a brick yard in Olympia, but none prospered. He farmed the last few years of his life and died nearly penniless.

J. K. "Jerry" Smith was born in Livingston County, New York, in 1826. He was raised on a farm and came west to California in 1851. He mined in Calaveras County for about ten years and then came to Washington Territory in 1860. Smith farmed near Yelm until 1864 and later moved to Pierce County where he was elected sheriff in 1872. In 1877 he went into partnership with Billings and Shead in the prison venture. After the prison closed he became associated with the Seatco Manufacturing Company and spent his life in Bucoda. Late in life he lost both of his legs, and this, according to local legend was due to a curse put on him by a dying inmate.

Continuation Sheet

#8 - Significance
Seatco Prison (5)

Little is known of the early life of Oliver Shead, although he was a comparatively early resident of the Territory. Shead served as a wagonmaster of supply trains during the Indian wars of 1855, and in 1867 purchased the saw mill of Aaron Webster at what is now Bucoda. During the 1870's he was active in promoting the branch line railroad between Olympia and Tenino. In 1884 he platted the Town of Seatco, but the name later was changed to Bucoda. Shead apparently left the area after the close of the prison and died in Ashland, Oregon in April of 1889.

Shead and Smith were both active in the operation of the prison, and according to some sources, both served as Superintendent. There is also some evidence that Smith was warden and Shead was superintendent. The comments in George France's book would suggest that neither were very popular with the inmates.

The only photo of any of the prison staff shows six guards armed with Winchester rifles and two men not carrying visible weapons. It is possible that the two men are Smith and Shead. Guard Frank Ward noted that work parties had one guard for every eight men, so it is unlikely that the guard force ever was more than a dozen men at most. France stated that only one guard was on duty at night when the men were in their cells, and he "slept so much his snoring was a nuisance".

Cooking and other chores were handled by the prison labor force, leaving little need for other personnel.

By the mid-1850's Seatco Prison had gained a considerable reputation for the harsh treatment of prisoners and other alleged incidents. Several newspapers of the day ran "exposes" about the establishment and several legislative committees had been formed to investigate various charges.

In January of 1886, the Territorial Legislature passed an act "to provide for the permanent location and construction of a Territorial Penitentiary at Walla Walla." The act was said to have been bitterly opposed by the prison operators who had rallied a fair amount of political support. Nevertheless the act passed and sealed the fate of Seatco Prison.

Actually, it was almost eighteen months before the final prisoners left the wooden dungeon at Seatco. George France was among the last to leave on May 10, 1887. He noted they were loaded aboard railroad cars for the long trip to Walla Walla and mentions no sorrow at leaving Washington's "hell on earth".

The prison building was sold a few years later, and they say its top floor was used for a time as a skating rink. Some dispute the above story, but it makes for a remarkable contrast in use. The building was pretty well destroyed in the Bucoda mill fire of 1912, and the final remains of the foundation were cleared away in the early 1920's.

Today, there is no trace of Seatco Prison. The grass-covered site bears no marker and only a few old timers can show you the exact spot where it stood. Only a few mementos exist, including a few sets of leg irons, a ball and chain or two, and a handful of hand-made nails uncovered at the site.

Form 10-300a
(July 1969)

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY - NOMINATION FORM

(Continuation Sheet)

STATE	
Washington	
COUNTY	
Thurston	
FOR NPS USE ONLY	
ENTRY NUMBER	DATE
MAY 2 1975	

(Number all entries)

#9 - Bibliographical References
Seatco Prison

Blankenship, George E. (Mrs.). "Tillicum Tales, Early History of Thurston County, Washington", Olympia, Washington.

Newell, Gordon. "Perspective", Washington State Department of Institutions, Vol. 10, No. 1. "State Prisons, A History of Adult Corrections in Washington".

Newell, Gordon. "At Washington's First Prison, Convicts Were Treated As Slaves", The Seattle Times, September 27, 1964.

"History of Bucoda", Tenino Independent, January 2, 1974. An anonymous history written about 1895. Also excerpts and photos from "Southwest Washington", published in 1891. Also photos of guards and drawing of prison from France book.

"Pioneer Tells of Old Bucoda Penitentiary", Thurston County Independent, May 10, 1935. An interview with Frank C. Ward, a former guard at the prison.