

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

For NPS use only

**National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form**

received

date entered

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*  
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

**1. Name**

historic Burlington County Prison

and or common Burlington County Prison Museum

**2. Location**

street & number High Street \_\_\_\_\_ not for publication

city, town Mt. Holly \_\_\_\_\_ vicinity of

state New Jersey code \_\_\_\_\_ county Burlington code

**3. Classification**

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use	
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> museum
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial	<input type="checkbox"/> park
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational	<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
<input type="checkbox"/> site	<b>Public Acquisition</b>	<b>Accessible</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment	<input type="checkbox"/> religious
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government	<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> other:

**4. Owner of Property**

name County of Burlington

street & number 49 Rancocas Road

city, town Mt. Holly \_\_\_\_\_ vicinity of state New Jersey

**5. Location of Legal Description**

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Burlington County Courthouse

street & number

city, town Burlington \_\_\_\_\_ state New Jersey

**6. Representation in Existing Surveys**

title Historic American Buildings Survey has this property been determined eligible?  yes  no

date 1937 \_\_\_\_\_ federal \_\_\_\_\_ state \_\_\_\_\_ county \_\_\_\_\_ local

depository for survey records Library of Congress

city, town Washington \_\_\_\_\_ state DC

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## 7. Description

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**Condition** excellent good fair deteriorated ruins unexposed**Check one** unaltered altered**Check one** original site moved date \_\_\_\_\_

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**Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance**

The Burlington County Prison has changed little since it was built in 1810-1811. It is a simple building with a central block and symmetrical wings with an enclosed exercise yard. The prison rises three stories and is built of plain regular ashlar stone walls with a molded stone water table. The roof is hipped with a box cornice. There is a reinforced board-and-batten front door with a peep-hole and large box lock, as well as iron barred interior doors with iron strap hinges and box locks. The windows are inset, arched, and barred on the lower level. The interior passages were paved with brick; the rooms are floored with oak or heart pine. The dungeon is lined with oak planks and there are inside chimneys constructed of brick.

The building program is completely documented in the minutes of the Burlington County Board of Chosen Freeholders, Burlington County, New Jersey. The original presentation drawings by the architect, Robert Mills, and a brief, prepared by Mills, explaining what a county jail should be (see document attached) are today housed at the Mount Holly Library.

On May 13, 1807, two commissioners were appointed to purchase a lot in Mt. Holly next to the Court House and \$2,000 was appropriated for that purpose. A plan was drawn up and materials purchased and on February 13, 1809 the following report was made to the Freeholders and included the following recommendations:

The building is to be 80 feet on front by 20 feet deep with two wings or flanks of 20 feet each to be built of stone. Basement or office story to consist of a kitchen, washing room, felons eating room, ten factory or work shops, two to be 15 feet 9 inches by 6 feet and two others 13 feet 2 inches by 9 feet 3 inches, remaining six shops 8 feet by 6 feet. This lower story is partly below the surface of the grounds and part above. Principal story is to contain keepers office, sitting and lodging rooms, debtors common hall and 8 cells.

Second story: 4 debtors rooms and 8 cells together with dungeon which is placed directly over the keepers office.

All rooms to be vaulted from the basement or office story to the roof.

All rooms and ceilings of keepers rooms and debtors common hall to be finished with 3 coats of plastering and all rest of rooms to have walls and ceilings rough plastered and whitewashed.

Windows of hall and debtors chambers to be secured with iron bars.

Doors to be made of oak planks lined with sheet iron and hung in iron frame.

Dungeon to be lined with oak planks.

## 8. Significance

Period	National Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400–1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500–1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600–1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700–1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> humanitarian
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800–1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input type="checkbox"/> 1900–	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)

**Specific dates** 1810

**Builder/Architect** Benjamin Henry Latrobe

### Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

The Burlington County Prison was the oldest prison in continuous use in America until it became a museum (1811–1966) a few years ago. The heavy stone walls were also an early attempt at fireproofing a building. This modest county prison was designed and constructed after plans embodying the most modern correctional methods prevalent in the early years of the 19th century. America's first engineers and architects were among those who formulated the social philosophies that required a new prison building form that was heated, well ventilated, and fireproof. Plans for these structure included work and storage areas, as well as cells, and were designed to provide supervision and control of prisoners. This reform movement was best exemplified by the Old Walnut Street prison (now demolished) in Philadelphia. Latrobe had come to this city to see this earliest vaulted "fireproof" structure in the colonies. In addition to Latrobe's prison at Richmond, Joseph Mangin, a French emigre architect, designed the New York prison, Newgate. Following both Mangin and Latrobe, both European trained, was the second generation or "American" group of prison architects John Haviland, William Strickland, and Robert Mills.

Prison reform began to gain serious support in late eighteenth century in England. John Howard, sheriff of Bedford wrote on reform in his Prison and Lazarettos and in 1773 he visited prisons in England and abroad. His reports became the basis for modern penology.

Among the changes Howard advocated were single cells, ventilated spaces, meaningful employment, corrective punishment and the separation of prisoners according to the seriousness of their crimes. In the young United States, these new concepts were taken into account just as the governmental levels of state and county authority were being initiated. So it was that in the early nineteenth century the United States pioneered in the development of modern correctional methods. From the days of the new Republic to the time of the Civil War, America's achievements in prison systems and prison architecture were striking enough to attract European officials to the United States to study the new nation's methods.<sup>2</sup>

Burlington's 1809 prison was the prototype of this new reform architecture.

The German-trained, English born architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe (1764–1820) came to Philadelphia in 1798 to work on a number of projects. His father-in-law was Isaac Hazlehurst, an English merchant with interests in both Philadelphia and Charleston. Hazlehurst's summer estate was at Mount Holly, New Jersey where Latrobe and his young wife resided. Having already made a contribution to prison architecture with his Richmond jail, it was logical that his apprentices, William Strickland and Robert Mills and John Haviland who was an acquaintance should have carried on the new reform aesthetic.

Robert Mills was working with Latrobe in 1807–1808 and while Latrobe was engaged on projects in Washington, DC, Mills supervised the construction of the Pennsylvania Bank in Philadelphia. In 1809 Robert Mills was deeply engaged in a proposed project for a South Carolina penitentiary -- a commission which would have established him as an architect of the first rank in his home state. This project is well documented in letters from Robert Mills to his wife-to-be, Eliza Barnwell Smith and are on deposit today at the South Carolina Historical Society. Although the South Carolina project never materialized, Mills corresponded often with Latrobe about prison design. Latrobe wrote:

# 9. Major Bibliographical References

See Continuation Sheets

# 10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property less than one acre

Quadrangle name Mount Holly

Quadrangle scale 1:24000

### UTM References

A 18 517950 4427180  
Zone Easting Northing

B           
Zone Easting Northing

C         

D         

E         

F         

G         

H         

### Verbal boundary description and justification

See Addendum

### List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state code county code

state code county code

# 11. Form Prepared By

name/title Carolyn Pitts, Historian

organization History Division, National Park Service date February 1986

street & number 1100 L Street, N.W. Rm. 4209 telephone (202)-3438172

city or town Washington state DC

# 12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national  state  local

As the designated State Historic Preservation 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.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature

title date

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

date

Keeper of the National Register

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration

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Continuation sheet Burlington County Prison Item number 7 Page 2

On March 7, 1809 Caleb Newbold, George Hancock, and John Bispham were appointed as commissioners to superintend the buildings. The building was started in 1809; the commissioners were authorized to start as soon as the season permitted. There are various reports from the committee during 1810, and then on February 11, 1811 the committee reported that the jail was newly finished and as soon as the walls dried the building would be ready for the prisoners; at the same time the committee reported it had expended \$21,679.72. It was not until February 8, 1813 that the committee was able to give the full details on the cost of the building. The total was \$24,201.13.<sup>1</sup>

This was a large sum of money for that time but the prison easily paid for itself. The maintenance was minimal, and the jail served the community for a remarkably long time -- until 1966.

The prison was a typically "rational" composition of the early 19th century. The two projecting end towers contained stairs to the upper levels and bore on the exterior the slightly recessed arched details on the end pavilions. Over the door on the front of the building above the fan-light is a label mold reading "prison" with state and county seals engraved on either side.

Prisoners first arrived in early 1811. The arrangement of the cells was such so that a row of four are open at one end with a passageway the length of the row, the prisoners could move freely from one cell to another but could not leave the cell block and enter the corridor. The end wings of the building and the second and third floors contained the cells for the more dangerous inmates. The debtors lived in "common rooms" as they were not considered dangerous criminals although the laws were extremely harsh, committing debtors to prison for long periods for debts of less than five dollars. The Debtor's Act was finally nullified in New Jersey in 1844.

The maximum security room or "Dungeon" was located on the third floor and iron fixtures still remain that were used to restrict the most violent criminals in ankle chains.

The ground and basement levels contained a wash house for cleaning and fumigating prisoners, and work shops for training inmates in a trade such as carpentry, basketry or harness making. There were also a kitchen and bake room, as well as the "Felon's Eating Room." Completing the complex was the exercise yard and vegetable garden maintained by the inmates as well as the gallows.

The prison was in use between 1811 and 1966 when it became a museum. There have been some stabilizing efforts on the wood and masonry sections of the jail but it stands, largely unchanged, as one of America's earliest prisons.

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Item number

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The two leading objects of a Penitentiary program are these:

1. The punishment by confinement and employment of offenders against the peace of Society.
2. The restoration of these offenders to Society when their period of punishment is expired, as reformed in their sentiments and especially in their habits, as to become useful, or at least not noxious ingredients of the community...

The prisoners near a city will make Nails and Shoes, weave, card, spin, saw marble. They will be tailors, coopers & manufacture cotton in a variety of ways.... When men work together at the same trade...they fatigue themselves more and sleep sounder. This contributes exceedingly to their safe-keeping as well as to their morals. 3

When he returned to Philadelphia in 1808 to set up his own practice, Mills used these ideas in his design for the Burlington County Jail. The building is thoroughly documented: the Freeholder's minutes on May 9, 1799, in which they resolved "that a workhouse be built on a county lot at Mount Holly for the confinement and employment at hard labor of such criminals as may be sentenced to such punishment." It took until 1808 at the Spring meeting, for the preservation of Mill's plans and general specifications to be discussed and even then there had to be revisions, the final designs being accepted in January, 1809. The presentation drawings and the revisions are on file today at the Mt. Holly Public Library. The folio is titled "Designs for a Prison for Burlington County, State of New Jersey comprising a Debtors' Gaol, and Work-house for Felons: by Robert Mills, Architect. Philadelphia: May 1808." (Facsimile pages are attached.)

The stone used in construction was purchased from a dealer named Lewis Wormway [Wernwag], who was a stone dealer and millwright who owned a quarry on the south side of Tacony Creek. The stone was brought up Rancocas Creek to Joseph Bennett's wharf. Costs ran considerably beyond appropriations and Mills and a number of the suppliers were not paid until 1813, sometime after the prison was being used for felons. There was remarkably little upkeep needed. Changes in the jail and its uses came from internal management and county policy rather than obsolescence of the building as prison architecture, (indoor plumbing, bathing facilities, central heating, etc. were ended.) Finally the county responded to overcrowding in 1964 and built a new jail nearby. The "Model Jail of Olden Time" as it is known locally was vacated and preserved as a museum. This Federal period county jail is a rare survivor of the progressive reforms of the early nineteenth century designed by no less a figure than Robert Mills.

In 1808 Mills wrote Thomas Jefferson about his loss of the South Carolina commission for a "Penitentiary house." As soon as that project collapsed, Burlington County accepted his designs for their county jail (1808). It was fitting that he suggested as Latrobe had done on the Richmond jail, that an inscription be placed over the entry:

"Justice Which, While it Punishes, Would Endeavor to Reform the Offender."<sup>4</sup>

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Continuation sheet Burlington County Prison Item number 8 Page 3

This building remains an elegant small scale expression of the Federal style in the spirit of Latrobe and Jefferson.

<sup>1</sup> Schooler, Alice. The Burlington County Courthouse and Burlington County Prison Museum. John Milner Associates. West Chester, Pennsylvania. December 1978. p. 93.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>3</sup> Letter, Benjamin Latrobe to Robert Mills. November 17, 1806. Latrobe papers. Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore.

<sup>4</sup> Giger, G. J. A Model Jail of the Olden Time: Designs for a Debtors Gaol and Work-House for Felons, etc. New York. Russell Sage Foundation, 1928. p. 7.

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