



Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador  
Building Report: H.M. Penitentiary, 85 Forest Road, St. John's



H.M. Penitentiary, main façade circa 1900. © Archives and Manuscripts Division, Memorial University photo 2.04.008

<b>Researcher:</b>	<b>Deborah O’Rielly</b>
<b>Date:</b>	<b>March 13, 2008</b>
<b>City:</b>	<b>St. John’s, Newfoundland and Labrador</b>
<b>Address:</b>	<b>85 Forest Road</b>
<b>Building Name:</b>	<b>H.M. Penitentiary, St. John’s</b>
<b><u>Building Information</u></b>	
<b>Date of Construction:</b>	<b>1852-1859</b>
<b>Additions:</b>	<b>1941 New Fence Enclosure; 1944 East Wing; 1945 West Wing; 1950 Female Facility; 1979 Phase II; 1982 Phase III</b>
<b>Architect/ Design:</b>	<b>Centre Block – R.D. Hill, Birmingham, England; Other – Dove, Whitten, and Associates; Government of Newfoundland Department of Public Works</b>
<b>Engineering:</b>	<b>Government of Newfoundland Department of Public Works (C.H. Conroy, Chief Engineer); Bishop and Forbes (1978) Ltd.</b>
<b>Builders:</b>	<b>Government of Newfoundland; inmate labour</b>
<b>Name of Original Owner:</b>	<b>Government of Newfoundland</b>
<b>Building Use:</b>	<b>Penal Institution/ Correctional Facility</b>



H.M. Penitentiary, view from Quidi Vidi Lake, looking south, date unknown (late 20<sup>th</sup> century)  
© Canadiancorrections.com

## History

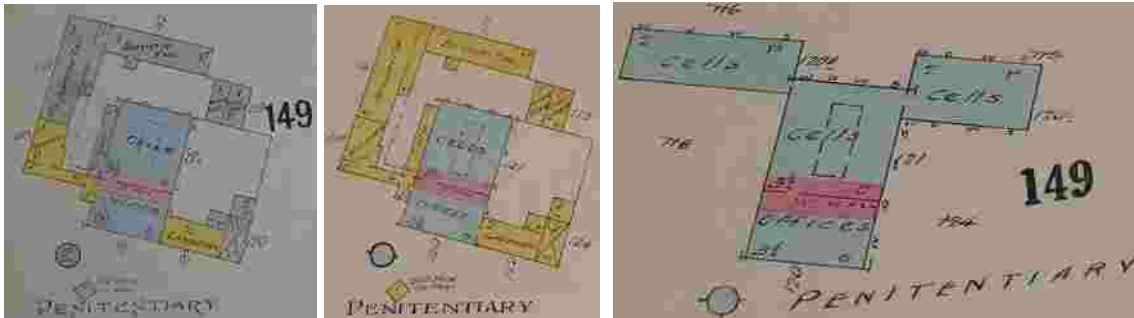
**Early Justice: Banishment** - The first British application of banishment by statute was introduced during the reign of Elizabeth I (1558-1603). In an attempt to provide sufficient colonists for the population of the Americas an Act of Parliament (18 Car. II c. 3 S.2) authorized the deportation of criminals to America in 1678. An Act of Banishment was passed in Newfoundland on June 12, 1834 (4 Wm. IV. C.5) and most offences in Newfoundland were dealt this punishment until the establishment of permanent prisons. Before 1750 there was little need for detention facilities for those who committed such major crimes as murder. Such offences were not tried locally, so the criminal was usually sent to England to stand trial.

**Early Newfoundland Penal Institutions** - As permanent settlements grew and a justice system was established, several local courthouses and jails were built at the larger, more prosperous centres throughout the island. It was during the early 1700s that the first court house and prison was erected in St. John's. Newfoundland's first governor was Captain Henry Osborne, and his arrival in 1729 signalled the end of the rule of the fishing admirals.

Governor Osborne created six districts between Bonavista and Placentia. A tax was imposed for the building of a prison at St. John's and a court house and prison were completed by September 1730. In 1750, Governor Francis William Drake was given power to establish courts and to try all offences except treason. In 1792 the first Supreme Court was established.

The growth of local courts meant an expanding need for prisons. The first prison and courthouse at St. John's was a combined, wooden building erected on Duckworth Street on the order of Gov. Henry Osborne and was ready by 1730. By 1825 Governor Sir Thomas Cochrane called for a new prison, as the old one was overburdened and unable to be renovated or improved. A new, stone court house and prison were erected, but it was overburdened and unfit from the beginning.

The Great Fire of 1846 destroyed the Court House and jail and prisoners were transferred to the old barracks on Signal Hill. It was the first separate prison in St. John's. The Signal Hill Prison was originally constructed as a soldier's barracks but was converted to a prison in 1846 after it was declared unfit for use as a military billet and after the old court house jail was destroyed by fire. The Signal Hill Prison lacked ventilation, windows or any sanitation and the stone structure was failing. Plans for the construction of a new jailhouse were made by the government in 1851 but were delayed by the newly-formed Responsible Government in 1855.



H.M. Penitentiary

© Insurance Plan of the City of St. John's 1914, Charles Goad and Company, 1925 & 1946 Underwriter's Survey Bureau Limited, respectively

The Government of Newfoundland partially completed the building as it was originally planned (T-shaped). Surplus brick and stone, which had been imported from England for the penitentiary's construction, were sold to the Roman Catholic Episcopal Corporation for the construction of St. Bon's College (extant).

## The Early Building

**H.M. Penitentiary** was built on the outskirts of St. John's in a forested area near the shores of Quidi Vidi Lake. An architect from Birmingham, England, R. D. Hill, designed the plans for the new prison in 1852. The plans were elaborate and the structure was to be both spacious and modern – a maximum security prison that would be capable of accommodating forty-four males, six females and six debtors – all in separate cells. The building, as designed by Mr. Hill, was to be constructed of stone and to consist of three stories, an attic and a basement. It was to be T-shaped and the main building was to be 120 feet by 48 feet with two connecting wings.

The plans called for a total of sixty-two cells. In addition, provision was made for two day rooms for debtors, two work rooms for male convicts, a laundry and work room for female convicts, wash rooms, an apparatus room, a scullery, a kitchen, a larder and store room. Provision was also made for a superintendent's office, a penitentiary commission's room, a visitor's room, a doctor's surgery and officer's room and a chapel. Also to be included in the female section of the prison was a parlour and a bedroom for the matron.

However, the construction of the building, as designed by the English architect, never did materialize and when the basement was completed to ground level in 1852 work came to a halt. With the coming of Responsible Government in 1850 there was a cry for economy and it wasn't until 1944 that the additional wings were added to form the original T-shape.

A Government committee was appointed 12 months after the temporary stoppage of work in 1852 to study progress and made recommendations as to whether the original plans should proceed. As a result of the investigation the committee suggested that the original plans be altered and the government provide a building of smaller size. During this time inmates were held in the badly decayed and structurally unsound Signal Hill Jail. Work resumed in 1858 and the penitentiary, still unfinished, was first occupied on August 29, 1859.

H.M. Penitentiary Centre Block, the original stone building, was constructed with three corridors of thirty five cells. Each barred cell, measuring 3 by 2 by 2.75 metres (10 by 7 by 9 ft) housed two prisoners in a living and sleeping area, which lacked plumbing, central heating, and ventilation. Cells were lit by daylight from the barred windows. The cells were equipped with two bed stocks made of plank which measured 2 by 1 metres (6 by 3 ft.), along with a bucket which was used as a toilet, and a jug and basin. Mugs and spoons were furnished to prisoners with meals.

The cells were positioned along the exterior walls of the building and cells in the whole male portion of the prison faced inward upon a central hall. Outside of the cells was a narrow corridor with an open well. Female cells were located along the south wall facing towards the windows, with each cell having an individual swinging door fastened with a padlock and hasp. Some original padlocks were not

replaced until 1945 following the escape of ten prisoners through the main gate over a five month period.

The penitentiary had attached, wooden or concrete service buildings, such as a laundry, kitchen, wood and coal sheds and a broom factory. Each floor was heated by a single radiator resulting in little or no heat to most cells. Due to the lack of central heat the hardwood floor was in a constant state of dampness and was rotting. The flooring was replaced in November 1966 when, after several years of unsuccessfully petitioning the Federal government for restoration funds, the Provincial government undertook an experiment.

The warders refurbished two cells and installed plumbing fixtures, applied cement plaster to the walls and ceilings (for fireproofing) and removed the wooden floors and replaced with poured concrete. In 1967 Superintendent Case recommended to the Department of Justice that the remaining three cells in that block be renovated, mainly by inmate labour. The department took advantage of the fact that they had men on the site constructing new guard towers and their services were utilized when they were not busy working elsewhere on Penitentiary grounds.

## Additions

### East Annex



East Annex, April 2008  
© Deborah O'Rielly/ HFNL



Cells, East Annex, April 2008  
© Deborah O'Rielly/ HFNL

The East Annex was built in 1944. Constructed of concrete, it is two stories high, has a flat roof and three over three, wooden windows on two sides, covered in wire mesh and bars. It is known as East Wing Bottom – the main floor; and East Wing Top – on the second floor. The East Wing Bottom has 18 tiny cells with original bars, and access to the gym is through here. The East Wing Top has eight cells. A small barber shop is located in this wing, and once had four chairs. This area has been renovated over time and the barber shop is much smaller; the rest of the area is now the prison library. The East Annex is attached to the Centre Block on its east side.

### West Annex



West Annex, April 2008, © Deborah O'Rielly/ HFNL

The West Annex (west wing) was constructed in 1945. It is two stories high with a mid-pitch roof and a main door accessing the outside yard. Constructed of concrete, this building holds twenty three cells on the second floor of the same type as in the East Wing Bottom. The main floor contains the prison kitchen, Guard Room or Control Room, Captain's Office and Assistant Superintendent's Office. The basement contains showers for the prisoners, the prison laundry and the prison maintenance shop.

### Women's Wing



Old Women's Department and Original Iron stairs. April 2008, © Deborah O'Rielly/ HFNL

The Women's Wing, also known as the "Old Female Department" is a three storey building connected to the southeast corner of the Centre Block. It is built of concrete blocks and has two over two wooden windows on two sides. It is presently being used as the Correctional Officers lounge on the first floor and program rooms on the second and third floors. Original iron rails and stairs are still in this building.

**Changes** - Following these and other additions, changes came rapidly. By 1981 the whole prison had been substantially renovated and modernized. A new building was constructed to accommodate 96 cells arranged in a living unit fashion. New living, kitchen and recreation areas were now available and the original cellblock (Centre Block) was no longer used to house inmates.



Main facade, Centre Block, April 2008  
© Deborah O'Rielly/ HFNL



East facade, Centre Block, April 2008  
© Deborah O'Rielly/ HFNL





Centre Block, north facade  
© Deborah O'Rielly, HFNL 2008



view east facade; east block can be seen at the far right of the photo.

## H. M. Penitentiary in 2008

By 2008, little remains of the original centre block, other than the exterior shell of massive English stone, roof trusses and the basement dungeon. The interior was gutted in the early-mid 1990s; the floor/ceiling between the second and third storeys was removed almost entirely. That space has been completely closed. The main floor is used for offices and classrooms and acts as a pass-through between the west and east annexes. While all original window and door openings are still visible, they have been substantially reduced in size, and in some cases, completely closed off.

H. M. Penitentiary was built in a modified Neo-Classical style of architecture. This style is expressed in a plain, masculine form. It is an ideal style for a 19<sup>th</sup> century penitentiary, meant to be controlled, stark, severe, forbidding and devoid of any decorative details. Elements of this style can clearly be seen on the building: massive size, monumental proportions and symmetry are key to this style. Large, arched windows and prominent gable ends are significant elements of H.M. Penitentiary. A tall double chimney once very prominent has been reduced to much smaller proportions and original stone eaves brackets remain on the building.

### Dungeon



Dungeon/ basement showing a gap in the stone work where shackles once held inmates in solitary confinement April 2008, © Deborah O'Rielly/ HFNL



Dungeon showing arched doorways with cells on both side. Note original exposed brick which is decaying, April 2008 © Deborah O'Rielly/ HFNL

Located in the basement is the former dungeon, now a furnace and building works area. The floor to ceiling height is quite low as a poured concrete floor has been built up over time. A separate room has been built to accommodate the furnace. Within this room's ceiling is the original trap door through which the Warden would send a prisoner down to the dungeon via a set of ladder-like stairs.

### Roof/ Attic



Attic, Centre Block, April 2008, © Deborah O'Rielly/ HFNL

The roof of the Centre Block was completely re-sheathed in 2006; originally it had slate shingles. During this process measures were taken to conserve the original wooden roof truss structure, while reinforcing them with structural steel angle and plates. Original window arches are still visible from the interior.

### Gallows



Ring of stones marks the site of the original gallows. Prisoners were taken from this east side, where a door once was, and is now marked by a bricked-in opening, top left. April 2008, © Deborah O'Rielly/ HFNL

There were an estimated five hangings which occurred on Penitentiary grounds at a gallows site now marked by a ring of stones. These prisoners were buried on Penitentiary grounds until the addition of buildings on the site required their exhumation and transfer to various City cemeteries.

### Conclusion

At the time of this report, in 2008, the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador has initiated plans to build a modern correctional facility elsewhere in the province. The fate of the Forest Road penitentiary site is uncertain. While all facilities on the site hold certain significant historical values, the Centre Block holds the most. As one of the oldest buildings in the City of St. John's, H. M. Penitentiary Centre Block is also one of the oldest stone structures in the province, and is certainly one of the oldest, stand-alone stone prisons in Newfoundland and Labrador. It is valued for its superb stone materials, construction techniques and architectural style. It has held countless inmates in its 150 year history; employed hundreds of people and is a social icon, representing law and order, and is a great contribution to the cultural landscape of the area.

**Other** elements of this site which hold great heritage value are the huge quantity of historic record books stored in the gymnasium basement. Some of these record books date to the nineteenth century and list the names and punishments of inmates, as well as various other related information.

These books serve as a record of law and order in Newfoundland and show the changes in penal policy from Colonial to post-Confederation times.

They are presently at great danger, as time and inappropriate storage is beginning to break down the records, particularly the earliest ones. Measures should be taken to conserve them in a proper archival environment.



## Sources:

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Journals of the House of Assembly 1851, pp. Appendix 176-77, 182-83 and pp 132-34

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Site Visits, April 2008