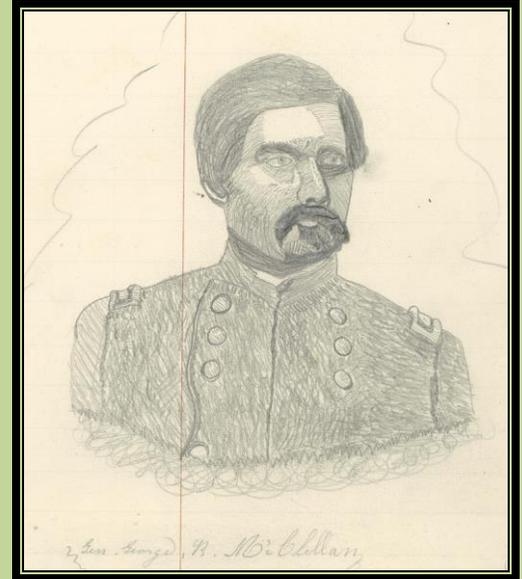


Albany County Jail and Penitentiary records, 1825-1976



Photo of Penitentiary, ca. 1930s



Sketch of Civil War Major General McClellan
from Admission volume.

Repository:
Albany County Hall of Records (ACHOR)
Office of the Albany County Clerk
95 Tivoli Street
Albany, NY 12207
<http://www.albanycounty.com/achor/>

Creator: Albany Penitentiary (presently Albany County Correctional Facility)

Title: Albany County Jail and Penitentiary Records

Inclusive Dates: 1825-1976

Summary: This group of records consists of admission and discharge registers and financial ledgers for the Albany Penitentiary (Albany County Correctional Facility) during the 19th and early part of the 20th century. These records reflect routine record-keeping duties required for both the Albany County Sheriff and Prison Superintendent. Daily activities such as the receiving and discharging of inmates, deployment of inmates in workhouses and earnings and expenditures for each department in the facility are documented. Volumes are available on microfilm.

Quantity: 36.9 cubic feet

Date: 1/30/2013

Arrangement: Chronological; indexes are alphabetical by surname.

Administrative History:

Numerous locations have been used to house criminals throughout Albany's history. Written accounts place the location of the first gaol (jail) as early as 1673 in the basement of the Stadt Huys (State House or City Hall) built and later rebuilt on what is now Broadway and Hudson Avenue. This jail was utilized until the early part of the nineteenth century when growing demand necessitated the construction of several jails located on Eagle and State Streets and Maiden Lane and used until about 1832. The next jail was constructed on Eagle and Howard Street around 1834 and used until 1852 when it became a hospital. A jail on the north side of Maiden Lane was used from 1852 until 1904 when the occupants were moved to the Albany Penitentiary located in the area of Myrtle Avenue and Lark Street. In 1931, the penitentiary (presently known as the Albany County Correctional Facility) was built on Albany Shaker Road near the Albany County Airport. The correctional facility, managed by the superintendent who is appointed by the Albany County Sheriff, is under the jurisdiction of the Albany County Sheriff.

Early jails in Albany were small, cramped and filled to capacity. The majority of crimes committed were petty such as vagrancy, assault, intoxication and minor thefts. Early accounts describe these jails as demoralizing due to the overcrowding, unregulated association of prisoners regardless of offense or age, and poor conditions within the jails. If the purpose of incarceration was to separate the criminals from society, it was ineffective in preventing recidivism: new inmates entering the system were forced to associate with other criminals under harsh conditions that failed to address the root causes of their crimes. The situation grew dire as the jail population increased and by the late 1830s, the jail had become the largest expenditure for Albany County.

In May of 1843, with new members of the County Board of Supervisors, it was resolved that a sub-committee of five people examine and report on jail overpopulation. The committee concluded that whereas the general population had not doubled in the twenty-eight years prior, the jail population quadrupled in half that time span due to a massive increase in petty crime, vagrancy and pauperism. The board applied to the state legislature and a new law was enacted (Chapter 152 of the Laws of 1844) requiring a new County Jail and Penitentiary be built and sustained by the hard labor of the inmates. The law also required the appointment of three commissioners who would oversee construction and prescribe the institution's method of discipline. Further stipulated, to avoid becoming a burden to the state, the penitentiary must become self-sustaining from the sale of goods manufactured within and any punishment dealt should fit the crime.

Chapter 183 of the Laws of 1847 of New York State amended that all persons who shall be sentenced to confinement at hard labor or to solitary confinement (except in cases of convictions for felony) by any justice of the peace, police justice, or other magistrate in said city or county of Albany, shall be sentenced to the penitentiary. This extended to those convicted of disorderly conduct and vagrancy and at the discretion of the court, people under the age of 16 convicted of a felony. All such persons would be sent to the Albany Penitentiary rather than the county jail and the vast majority of these sentences would be less than a year, many less than six months.

In total, this facility needed to affect "moral reformation" and use religious and moral instruction as a path to reform. This idea would be seen with various models employed in the mid-1800s as a greater movement towards prison reform designed to rehabilitate and not just separate prisoners. New York developed the "Auburn system" (AKA New York model) in the 1820s where prisoners were confined to separate cells and prohibited from talking when eating and working together in groups and Pennsylvania developed their own model where solitary confinement, labor and exclusion from the world was stressed. The Auburn system was believed to be the more humane and practical method

among the commissioners and it was chosen as the system best suited for reformation as well as control of the prisoners.

Of additional importance, lest all the planning be ruined by poor leadership, was the selection of a new Superintendent. Amos Pilsbury, a second generation prison warden was selected as the first Albany County Penitentiary Superintendent. At the Connecticut State prison in Wethersfield, known for its efficient use of the Auburn system, Amos succeeded his father as warden of that prison. As fate would have it, Amos left Connecticut at about the time the Albany commissioners were involved in their search. The County Board of Supervisors and Albany City Mayor were ultimately responsible for any final decisions about the prison (until 1885 when responsibility was transferred to the County District Attorney and Treasurer) and there were inspectors tasked with frequently visiting the prison to assess the operation. A Superintendent was needed on premises to exert authority and handle the day-to-day functions.

The Superintendent was required to keep records about various aspects of his facility including information on the inmates admitted and on fiscal affairs. Documentation was required for the following activities and operations: tracking the number of inmates received and discharged; the amount employed in various jobs such as landscaping or in the workhouses; the earnings and expenditures for each department in the facility; quarterly cash accounts where money paid and received was specified and for what purpose; and abstracts of vouchers for expenditures. Annually, at the end of October, the Superintendent was also required to close the penitentiary books and create comprehensive reports of the profits and expenses from that year. Summaries of these reports can be found in the Albany County Board of Supervisor Minutes.

A twelve acre site bounded by Myrtle Avenue, Lark Street, Leonard Place and South Knox Street was located and the County Board of Supervisors and Albany City Mayor resolved on April 13th of 1844 to begin construction of the facility. During the period of construction, the County Sheriff was in charge of marching the prisoners from the county jail to the worksite, ensuring they were fed and preventing their escape. In this way, the “reformatory” experience of hard labor began for many inmates prior to the completion of the penitentiary. Enough work had been done by 1846 that the facility began receiving inmates. Female prisoners were admitted into the northern wing in 1847 and enough of the buildings were completed on November 1st, 1848 that the Albany Penitentiary officially began as an institution.

The penitentiary, complete with chapel, hospital, living quarters for the Superintendent and several work houses, became a great model for the reformatory style of prisons. Attendance at weekly religious services was encouraged and chaplains administered advice, instruction on spiritual matters as well as instruction on reading and writing, and consolation if needed. The chaplains also tried to impress upon the criminals the justice of their punishment and why there were there. Silence was the preeminent feature of this penitentiary and others in the Auburn mode. Inmates were not allowed to converse with each other from the time they woke up, ate breakfast, worked and went to bed. Order and regularity reigned and it was believed that the silence would remove the inmates’ sense of self and create an environment of obedience and order among the inmates and guards and among the inmates themselves.

The Auburn system promised to rehabilitate the prisoners by teaching discipline and respect and also by instilling a work ethic among them. Women prisoners regularly performed laundry services within the penitentiary while male inmates, through labor and trade, learned new skills making chairs, brooms and shoes. By 1876, the output of these commodities was prodigious and through the sale of these goods, the prison became self-sustaining and within only a few years, began depositing surplus funds into the Albany County Treasury.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the Albany County Penitentiary became so well known that other states and, some European countries, sent representatives to study how the prison functioned. Counties across New York State began sending inmates to Albany County and by 1862, federal prisoners from the District of Columbia were transferred to Albany when the United States Arsenal took over the penitentiary there and it closed. This included confederate soldiers from the south and many longstanding prisoners convicted of breaking federal laws. Transfers provided an even greater surplus of funds for the institution as governments paid the penitentiary a boarding fee of \$1.50 per prisoner per week with the added benefit of increasing the penitentiary's steady workforce.

Amos Pilsbury retired in 1870 and his son Louis assumed his position as Superintendent. Though he oversaw the penitentiary in much the same way as his father, further changes in the system were afoot. With the rise in pressures from labor unions and small businesses towards the latter half of century, the state legislature was urged to restrict prison labor and this had drastic effects on penitentiary life. The labor believed to be so vital in reforming the inmates and keeping the penitentiary self-sustaining dissolved and prisoners became idle. Support for the penitentiary further waned when corruption and political influence were found to exist in the system, with one judge remarking in 1886 how he was bribed for each long-term prison sentence made.

In 1904, the County Board of Supervisors was granted authority by the State legislature to close the penitentiary when it was deemed in the county's best interest. The legislature also stipulated that part or all of the penitentiary facility could be used as the county jail and so inmates from the county Jail on Maiden Lane were transferred to the facility and kept separate from the penitentiary inmates. Further stipulated, the County Sheriff (or someone appointed by him) would act as custodian of the entire facility. On September 8, 1931, the new facility constructed on Albany Shaker Road in Colonie officially became known as the Albany County Jail (presently the Albany County Correctional Facility) and it was on this day that the reign of the old Albany Penitentiary ended.

Admission Registers 1825-1976 (Bulk: 1870-1935) 140 volumes, 34 cubic feet

These volumes, dated 1825-1976, are variously titled Jailer's Dockets, Jailer's Blotters, Record of Commitments and Register and Record of Prisoners; all contain admission records for individuals entering the county jail from 1825, as well as for those entering the penitentiary which was well under construction by 1846. With slight variations, each volume contains the following information: date of admission, name, age, where born, hair, eyes, height, weight, color, occupation, habits of life (temperate or intemperate), social relations (married or single), education, religion, health, sentence, number of prior commitments and amount of money in possession. After 1847, female prisoners were admitted and occupied the northern wing of the penitentiary and federal prisoners were often boarded as a cost benefit to the county, but spine and cover titles do not always indicate that this information is present. Volumes are arranged chronologically and there are a few indexes organized alphabetically by inmate surname.

There are a few volumes in this series that contain additional information not found in the other admission records. There are four Bertillon Ledgers (1901-1923) that have a section labeled "anthropometric data" which lists each prisoner's measurements. As part of the Bertillon system used to identify and track criminals prior to fingerprinting, these measurements include: the length of limbs, size of ears and width of the forehead. Other volumes, variously titled Running Count, Receiving Book, Discharge Book, Day Book, give the name of the convict, date of admission or discharge as well as a count of daily inmates. In addition, there are a number of volumes entitled Board Books which record expenses incurred in the transfer of prisoners to Albany and boarding costs for county, state and federal prisoners.

Financial Ledgers, 1877-1957 (Bulk: 1900-1930) **21 volumes, 2.91 cubic feet**

These volumes, dated 1877-1957, contain information about sources of revenue and daily expenses for the facility during this period. Arrangement is mostly chronological with some volumes arranged alphabetically and containing indices. Many of the volumes include information about provisions or services sold to the prison from various vendors e.g. food, clothing and bedding as well as the operating expenses for heat, fuel, electric and telephone services. Payrolls are tracked as are the revenues generated from the production of goods (e.g. chairs). The tracking of all these variables occurred daily, weekly or monthly depending on the purpose or need.

Volumes are variously titled "Journal" or "Ledger" which reveal little of the actual contents inside. The finding aid to this series provides in-depth descriptive information about the contents of each volume. There are a few ledgers that contain additional information not found in the other financial records, such as a Supply Disposition book which lists various goods purchased by the inmates and an Inmate Money Book which records money received on behalf of the named inmate. Many of these volumes are in poor to very poor condition and exhibit signs of red rot, broken spines and loose and brittle pages.

Finding Aid. Volume lists are available.

Related Records

Bertillon Criminal ID cards (1892-1917) consist of approximately 13,708 photographic identification cards and accompanying glass plate negatives. Each 5.7 x 6.4 inch card consists of black and white photographs of the subject with detailed body measurements and information pertaining to the alleged crime and personal history. These are indexed by name in the ACHOR inventory system and paper copies of these lists are available in the ACHOR search room.

Use of Records

Access Restrictions. Microfilm available. Original volumes are extremely fragile and require permission of the archivist for handling.

Administrative Information

Preferred Citation. [Identification of Item], From the Archival Collection of the Albany County Hall of Records, 95 Tivoli Street, Albany, N.Y.

Custodial History. These volumes are the result of the record-keeping functions for both the Albany County Jail and Penitentiary. The majority of volumes were transferred by the Albany County Sheriff's Department, which became the overarching agency when the jail and penitentiary merged in the early 1900s. The agency subsequently became known as the Albany County Jail and Penitentiary, or Albany County Jail and then later, the Albany County Correctional Facility.

Access Terms

Corporate Name(s):

Albany County (N.Y.)
Albany County Hall of Records
Albany Penitentiary (Albany County, N.Y.)

Geographic Name(s):

New York (State)
Albany (N.Y.)
Albany County (N.Y.)

Subject(s):

Criminal Records
Correctional institutions --New York (State)
Correctional institutions -- United States -- History
Women prisoners
Jails
Prison administration
Criminals
Prisons

Function(s):

Tracking inmates
Monitoring expenses