

HISTORIC CONTEXT OF THE PRISON

Progressive Era

Progressive Era. In 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt appointed a special Penal Commission to investigate deplorable conditions of the District of Columbia's jail and workhouse in Washington. As a result of this investigation, the Commission recommended a complete change in the philosophy and treatment of prisoners in the District of Columbia. Congress acted upon this recommendation, and a 1,155 acre tract north of the Occoquan River was purchased in 1910 through condemnation proceedings.

Where other prisons redefined their practices, fewer incorporated progressive ideals into their architecture (William & Mary Center, 1996). The Classically inspired, symmetrical dormitory complexes at the center of the Workhouse and the Reformatory make allusions through their architecture to order and tradition. Dormitories were constructed instead of cellblocks, and no walls or watch towers surrounded the sites. The open-air design was in keeping with the progressive's interest in providing access to nature, light, and clean air.

Prison Agriculture and Industry

The Workhouse (Occoquan Facility) was an agricultural work camp, and its many farming structures served as the setting for prison labor and production. During the early years of the prison, inmates worked the land and also produced bricks for on-site buildings at the prison kilns and stone for on site roads. Over the years, other industries were attempted, such as re-treading tires, making manhole covers, and knitting sweaters. The prison was intended to be self-sufficient, and while this may never have been achieved, the extensive agricultural operations, including cultivated fields; pasture land; a Poultry Farm; Hog Ranch; Slaughterhouse; Dairy; Blacksmith Shop; Sawmill; and feed, hay, and storage barns hint at the extent to which the prison was capable of feeding itself.

Farming was a part of prison operations from its earliest days until the closure of the Dairy in September of 1998. Prisoners provided the labor that tilled the fields, ran the dairy, poultry ranch, slaughterhouse, and harvested the crops, along with other farming activities. Historic aerial photos document the evolution of agriculture at the prison. An April 1937 photo shows rows of orchard trees extending from the intersection of Furnace and Lorton Roads eastward to the property line of the prison. To the north and west of these orchards were several plowed fields. Similar agricultural fields extended to the northwest of the Penitentiary (Maximum Facility) as far as the northern property boundary, near the intersection of Hoes and Silverbrook Roads. Fields also extended east of the Penitentiary across Silverbrook Road.

As of December, 1953, the orchard area had decreased, but virtually the entirety of the area between the Occoquan Workhouse and the Reformatory was under cultivation. Except for the narrow fingers of stream valleys and a wooded area to the west of the reformatory, the entirety of the property between Furnace and Silverbrook Roads was in agricultural use.

A similar pattern persists in April 1960 photos, although again the orchard area had decreased markedly. The 1960 photo set also shows the southern portion of the Lorton property, in the vicinity of the Youth Correctional Facility. The buildings of the hog ranch are clearly shown, as are the cultivated fields south of the ranch between the Youth Center and the Occoquan River.

By 1972, virtually the entirety of the property north of Furnace Road and south of Silverbrook was under cultivation. The only areas not in agricultural use of some kind were the narrow stream valleys. The areas east of Silverbrook Road, under cultivation since at least 1937, remained in agricultural use. South of the X-shaped intersection of Furnace and Lorton Roads, the new dairy (c. 1962) was built and the surrounding fields appeared to be in use as pastureland. The orchards that had previously occupied the area near the Lorton/Furnace intersection had by now completely disappeared as farming activities at the prison continued to evolve.

In September 1998, the prisoner-operated Dairy ceased operations, the last of the prison farm operations. Until that time, pastureland and corn and hay crops were still used at the prison to support the Dairy operation. Buildings associated with the agricultural activities at the prison, such as a former poultry incubator house, livestock barns, feed barns, a corn crib, former creamery, former smokehouse, and former slaughterhouse still remained on the property. The formerly cultivated fields were now largely grasslands, periodically mowed and rolled up into hay bales, while other areas devolved into scrub brush. While the character of some areas of former farmland had been altered by the insertion of modern buildings, such as the Range and Facilities Management, other areas were intact, but for the cessation of cultivation, and did not contain any out-of-period structures.

Women's Suffrage

As a result of the pickets and violence of the women's suffrage movement in the Washington D.C. area, approximately 168 women, most from the National Women's Party, were detained at the Medium Security facility west of Ox Road from June to December 1917. The frame buildings that housed these workers were demolished by 1980, and the later brick replacement buildings on this site were demolished in 1998.

Lorton Reformatory

In 1916 the Lorton Reformatory (in area of the Central Facility) opened as a facility for more serious offenders. The overall planning of the present brick complex, constructed in the 1920s, was by D.C. Municipal Architect Snowden Ashford, who placed the dormitories and administrative functions around a central courtyard. The Colonial Revival style then in vogue served as the stylistic idiom for the construction. "Like the workhouse, the reformatory was 'prison without walls', but industrial and trade instruction played a far greater role in the inmates' lives". (William & Mary Center, 1996) These brick buildings were built by the prisoners themselves, using brick manufactured at the on-site kiln complex located on the banks of the Occoquan River. Only one kiln and two other small structures remain from this kiln complex today, the rest were demolished circa 1983.

Prison Staff Residences

Near the Reformatory lies William Lindsay's circa 1790 estate known as Laurel Hill. This house, altered over the years, served as a residence for the reformatory superintendent. It is today abandoned and in poor condition. Other houses at the prison are of frame construction and appear to pre-date the construction of the prison. The prison also constructed houses for the use of prison employees. These structures, are made of brick in keeping with the predominant use of brick at the Complex.

The information provided in the Historic Context of the prison was extracted from the Historic Structures Determination of Eligibility Report, Lorton Correctional Complex prepared for the GSA by Greenhorne & O'Mara, Inc. as part of the requirements of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. Much of the information included was provided by Irma Clifton of the Lorton Heritage Society.



Courtyard at the Central Facility



Gymnasium and tower at the Occoquan Facility



Dormitory at the Central Facility



Tower and wall surrounding the Maximum Facility

Laurel Hill - Property Division

As of Property Transfer - July 15, 2002

