

Georgetown Prison



Image: Georgetown Prison, 2019
Professor Martin Halliwell, University of Leicester

Historical Overview

Established

Georgetown Jail: Camp Street



Image: Plan of Georgetown Jail, 1837
TNA, CO 111/150/367

1. Located on Camp Street, Georgetown prison is one of the oldest operating prisons in Guyana. It was initially built during the period of Dutch colonisation.
2. Georgetown was a common jail for the confinement of prisoners of both sexes until 1933 when it was converted into a male only prison.
3. In 1830 the prison had 28 wards and was capable of holding 280 prisoners combined. By 1838 the prison's capacity had increased to 350 with the addition of a brick building.

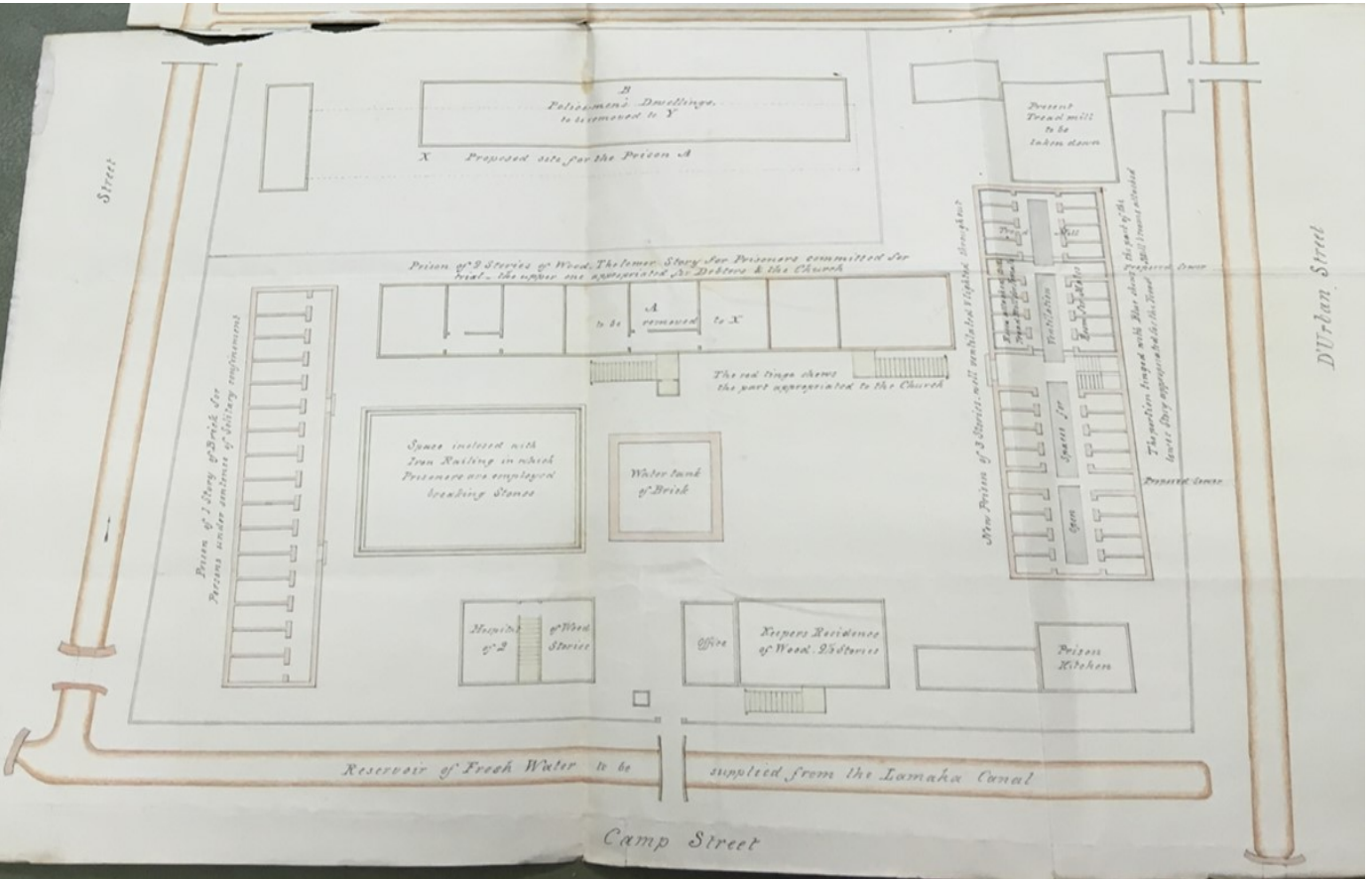


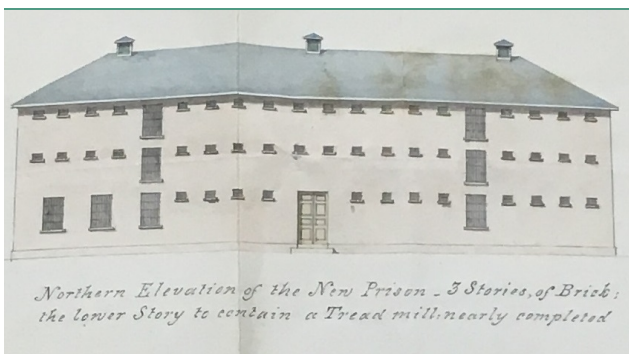
Image: Plan of Georgetown Jail, 1837
TNA, CO 111/150/367

Changes to the Prison System

The use of imprisonment in British Guiana was limited until the abolition of slavery in 1833. During this decade the prison population increased from an annual incarceration rate of 0.1% of the total population in 1831 to 1.9% in 1840.

Statistics: TNA, CO 116/176-209

Three district prisons were established to meet the state's increased use of prison sentences after emancipation. These were located in Wakenaam (1837), Mahaica (1837) and Capoey (1838).



From this point Georgetown prison was commonly used as a reception and allocation centre for the other prisons in the colony.

Image: Plan of Georgetown Jail, 1837
TNA, CO 111/150/367

The establishment of a penal settlement at Mazaruni in 1842 brought some relief from the overcrowding at Georgetown prison as those sentenced to imprisonment with hard labour for any period exceeding 2 months were sent to the settlement.

Changes to the Prison System

After a period of relative stability during the 1840s, yearly admissions increased rapidly during the 1850s to 4313, 2.9% of the general population. The total continued to rise throughout the 1860s, until its colonial-era peak in 1869 with 6383 committals, 4.3% of the general population. This increase can be attributed to the colonial state's desire to use prisons to punish breaches of labour laws by indentured immigrants.

TNA, CO 111/383/25, CO 116/238

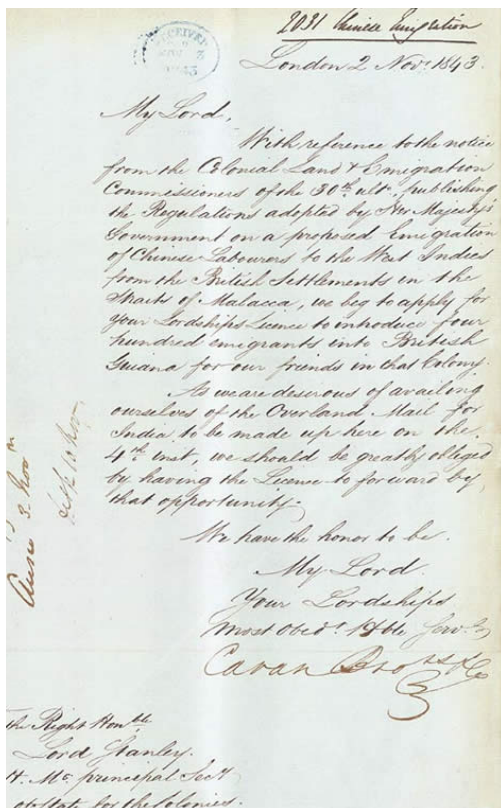


Image: Request from British Guiana for 300 Chinese labourers, 1843. TNA, CO 318/160

During the second half of the nineteenth century, 13,533 Chinese and 239,000 Indian immigrants were introduced as labourers to the colony.

Auguier, Gordon, Hall, Reckord 1960

The British established separate institutions specifically for their penal confinement, in Fellowship (1868) and Suddie (1875). They also re-opened the previously closed district prison at Mahaica in 1868 for the same purpose.

In 1870 Georgetown prison was extended to include 227 separate cells and 4 wards. Accommodation now included a female prison, containing 30 separate cells, a debtors ward, male and female hospitals, and houses for the keeper and 1st turnkey.

Penal Labour

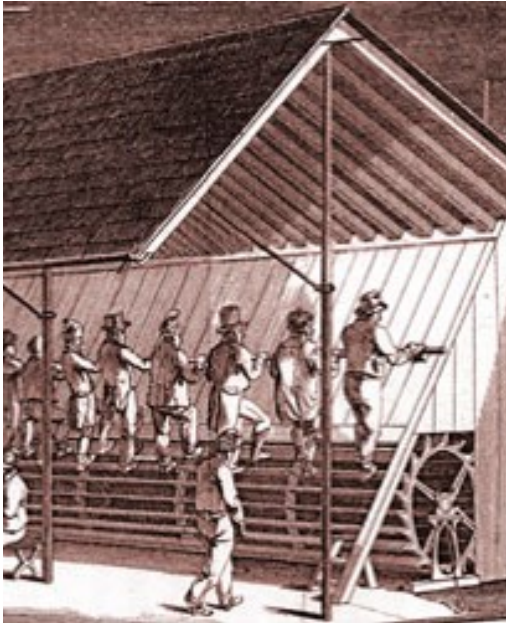


Image: View of the tread-mill, Brixton, Surrey 1821
London Metropolitan Archives, PR. L1:BRI

Punitive Labour

1.

1826-1842: Those sentenced to hard labour in Georgetown prison were required to complete 6 x 15 minute sessions on the treadmill per day. 1842-1857 treadmill used for military prisoners only.

2.

1865: Under the 1865 Prison Act men (aged 16 years and over) sentenced to hard labour were required to serve a 3 month probationary period, 3 weeks for those summarily convicted by a magistrate, within the prison.

3.

1867-1888: Male prisoners sentenced to hard labour were required to work at shot drill for 8 hours a day during their probation period.

4.

1881-1888: 16 cranks used for refractory prisoners. Prisoners were required to complete 10,000 revolutions per day.

The use of unproductive labour ceased at Georgetown prison in 1888

Productive Labour

For the remainder of their sentences prisoners were required to labour on public works

1.

Male prisoners were required to work in association on the sea defences, stone breaking, quarrying and tending to the requirements of the prison.

2.

Hours of Labour: 10 hours a day.
6.00am to 11.00am & 1.00pm to 6.00pm.

3.

Female prisoners were required to clean the wards, cells and yards of their own division and to wash and mend the clothing of prisoners generally.

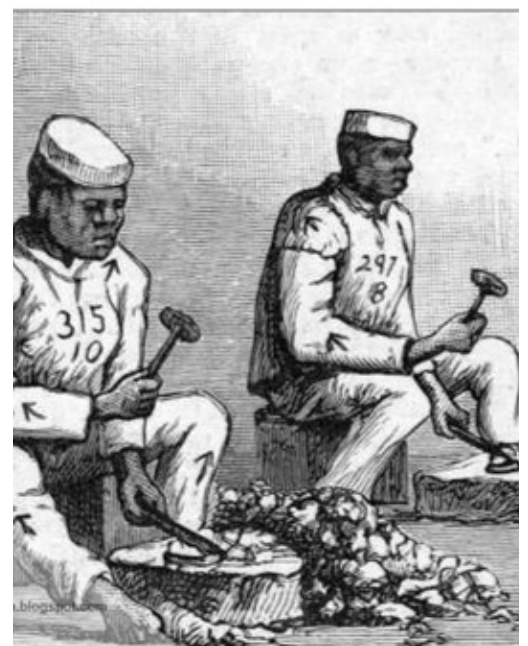


Image: Prisoners breaking stones in British Guiana
The Illustrated London News, 12.5.1888

Tread-Mill Regulations 1826

Tread = Mill,

Erected in the Colony-Jail of Demerary and Essequibo, as a Means of Correctional Punishment.

ARTICLE I.—The Tread-Mill shall be under the superintendant direction of His Honor the First Fiscal ; who will take care that these Regulations be strictly attended to.

ARTICLE II.—The Mill being calculated for six or seven persons at one time, a quick and slow motion shall be employed : the quick motion to be $3\frac{1}{2}$ revolutions of the wheel in a minute, and the slow motion $2\frac{1}{2}$ revolutions in a minute—the slow motion, however, to be employed in all cases except where the character and ability of the offenders require the quick motion.

NOTE.—This exception has reference chiefly to boys and active youths, on whom the slow motion may have little or no effect.

ARTICLE III.—The Prisoners to be worked 1, 2, 3, or 4 spells of 15 minutes each, with intervals of 30 minutes between the spells in the morning, a like number of spells of the same duration, with equal intervals, in the evening, and also a like number of spells of 12 minutes each, with intervals of 25 minutes, at noon—one hour being allowed for breakfast, and one hour for dinner.

ARTICLE IV.—The Cipier or his assistant, shall attend during the whole time the Mill is working ; and he shall be obliged to keep a Book or Register, which shall be called the *Mill Book*, in which shall be entered the names of all prisoners ordered to be worked on the Mill—the authority under which they are worked—together with the dates on which they commenced working—and on which they are discharged—the number of spells they are ordered to be worked daily—and also the remarks which the Jail Surgeon may think fit to make respecting any of the prisoners—and lastly, any extraordinary occurrences that may take place.

ARTICLE V.—Proper dresses shall be provided for women who may be ordered to work on the Mill ; and blankets or warm clothing to prevent the culprits from taking cold, on coming off the Mill.

ARTICLE VI.—All Runaway Slaves, as well as Slaves guilty of misdemeanors, that may be brought into Jail, shall be worked on the Mill daily, at the discretion of the respective Fiscals.

The treadmill from Georgetown was sent to Mazaruni penal settlement in 1857 after it had fallen out of use.

Rehabilitation



Image: Prison Garden, 2018
Obrey James

Vocational Labour

1.

In addition to works of a public nature, male prisoners at Georgetown prison were employed in trades, such as shoemaking, tailoring and carpentry, manufacturing a variety of items that were used by the inmates and sold to the public.

2.

By the 1930s, the authorities recognized that labour schemes also functioned as a means of rehabilitation for inmates. Unfortunately, the facilities to implement this policy at Georgetown were limited.

3.

As a result, vocational pursuits and trades were taught by officers in receipt of skilled allowances, to inmates with short sentences. This included but was not limited to farming (both arable and livestock), masonry, cooking and plumbing.

Education

1.

Few provisions were made for the education of prisoners in Georgetown prison. The justification for this was the length of their sentences, which did not allow for any systematic teaching.

2.

Following the closure of Mazaruni penal settlement (between the years 1930-1939) educational opportunities were introduced to Georgetown on a more regular basis.

3.

By 1933 prisoners were tested on admission to ascertain their educational ability. Simple educational facilities were also provided five days per week from 5.15 to 6.00pm.



Internal Discipline

1.

To maintain discipline the stoppage or rationing of food and solitary confinement were believed to be the most effective forms of punishment.

2.

The use of restraints (iron fetters) was permitted only in the case of extreme violence.

3.

In 1830 regulations authorised the use of coercive measures to enforce labour. This led to numerous cases of abuse as prison guards often resorted to the use of cart whips and cat o' nine tails.

4.

Following this abuse a proclamation stipulating the size of whip to be used was issued in 1833. Whipping, flogging and the rationing of food continued to be used throughout the colonial period.

Punishment



Image: Whipping-frame & cat o' nine tails, Wormwood Scrubs Prison, London, 1895. TNA, Copy 1/420

Overcrowding

1.

Overcrowding at Georgetown prison reached an unprecedented level in 1874 as the average number of prisoners exceeded its maximum capacity of 500. In response to this issue Fellowship jail was converted into a prison for females in 1884.

2.

The closure of Fellowship prison in 1892, Suddie prison in 1914, and Mazaruni penal settlement in 1930 further exacerbated the problems of overcrowding in Georgetown prison.

3.

Despite numerous alterations to its structure and protocols Georgetown prison consistently failed to conform to contemporary prison standards prior to Guyana achieving its independence in 1966.

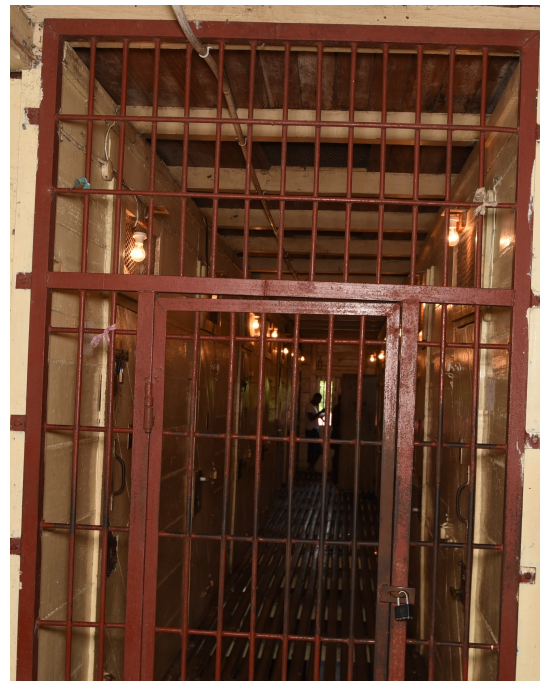


Image: New Amsterdam Prison, 2019
Obrey James

Need for Change

Overcrowding in Guyana's jails in the post independence period has been a serious issue with occupancy levels currently at almost 129%.

World Prison Brief Data, 2019

Poor conditions and lengthy remand periods were the background to prisoner unrest in March 2016, when 17 prisoners died in a fire started by inmates.



Just over a year later, in July 2017, prisoners orchestrated a fire in which all but one block of the prison buildings burnt down. Four inmates escaped, and one officer died.

Image: Georgetown Prison, 2017
Department of Public Information, Guyana

The Future of Georgetown Prison



Image: Georgetown Prison, 2019
Professor Martin Halliwell, University of Leicester

Following a comprehensive examination of the security sector in 2017 approximately \$1.5 billion was awarded to Guyana's Prison Service to address the expansion and rehabilitation of the prison infrastructure. Work to construct a new prison at Camp Street began in 2018.

Ministry of Public Security, Guyana, 2017

History and Security Sector Reform: Crime and Punishment in British Colonial Guyana 1814-1966

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Image: Mazaruni Prison, 2018
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If you have any further questions please do not hesitate to get in touch with a member of the team.

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