

Records of the Department of Corrections, 1827 – 1960 State Archives Record Group No. 017

Agency History

By Public Act 68-152 (effective July 1, 1968), the General Assembly established the Department of Corrections. Prior to that year, the state's major correctional facilities at Somers, Enfield, Niantic, and the earlier ones at Newgate and Wethersfield, existed as independent state agencies, administered by a board of directors appointed by the governor. The new department brought together all youth and adult correctional institutions and parole into a single agency. Connecticut was the first state to consolidate these services.

The 1968 act also provided for "community correctional centers" to replace the old sheriffs' jails that had existed under the county government system, and after 1960, under a State Jail Administrator.

Early History of the Wethersfield State Prison

In 1824, the General Assembly appointed a committee to investigate the conditions at Newgate State Prison in Granby.¹ The General Assembly requested the investigation due to growing public concerns over the conditions at Newgate. Not only had there been several successful escapes in recent years, but also the prison was becoming very costly to maintain. Another strong force behind the creation of the committee was the growing prison reform movement in the United States. As one author noted, there was a growing awareness of the "fundamental contradiction in the very concept of a penitentiary." Reformers believed it was difficult, if not impossible, to reform prisoners when they were housed in large community rooms, as at Newgate. The new theory held that prisoners should be separated as much as possible in individual cells to prevent the exchange of criminal knowledge.

The committee's report confirmed that the "wall around prison is insecure, and inadequate to prevent the escape of the Prisoners, in case of insurrection. . . . As it respects the lodging of the prisoners, the Committee observes with regret, that it is neither so comfortable or cleanly, as propriety would require. . . . The cells are partially below the surface of the ground and are crowded with the berths of the prisoners."² The committee recommended abandonment of Newgate Prison and construction of a new State Prison at Wethersfield.

The Wethersfield State Prison opened in September 1827 with the transfer of eighty-one prisoners from Newgate. Modeled after the state of the art Auburn State Prison in New York, Wethersfield provided solitary confinement for the prisoners and facilities for various workshops. The new prison was considered "by all as a penitentiary of the *first order*. Its location, its construction, its management and discipline have won the admiration of every State in the Union. It has proved to the world, that criminal punishment can be made a safeguard to society, a reward to the honesty and industry of a people, and also a benefit to the moral and physical condition of the criminals."³ During its first years of operation, Wethersfield met everyone's expectations and even turned a profit by using prison labor to manufacture various goods. Over the years, the prison operated a shoe shop, nail shop, coopers shop, carpenters shop and smith shop. Prisoners made chair frames and seats, Britannia spoons, whips, rifles and pistols, spectacles, wagon frames, carpenters' rules, and table cutlery.

¹ Newgate, an abandoned copper mine, was first used by the Colony of Connecticut as a permanent prison in 1773. See Richard H. Phelps, *Newgate of Connecticut, its origin and Early History*. Camden: Picton Press, 1996:26.

² *Minutes of the Testimony taken before John Q. Wilson, Joseph Eaton, and Morris Woodruff, Committee from the General Assembly, to inquire into the condition of Connecticut State Prison*. Hartford: DS Porters' Print, 1834: 2-3.

³ Phelps: 19.

In spite of early economic success, the prison came under investigation for mismanagement in the summer of 1829, when illness swept through the prison killing five inmates. The prison physician, Dr. Woodward, believed "that this disease was brought on by "insufficiency of food or poverty of diet."⁴ As a result of the investigation, ill prisoners were no longer cared for by the warden's family but were now under the direct supervision of the prison physician. As the prison population grew and society's view of how prisoners should be treated changed, Wethersfield State Prison wardens were forced to revise policies and procedures.

Prison Demographics

The prison population changed radically over Wethersfield's 126-year history. In the beginning, Wethersfield housed both adult and juvenile offenders, in one case a boy only eleven years old.⁵ By the mid-nineteenth century however, reformers believed that juveniles should be protected from exposure to older, more corrupt prisoners. As a result, the General Assembly established the State Reform School for Boys in Meriden in 1854 for offenders under the age of sixteen. The School focused on reforming its juvenile inmates, hoping to prevent the boys from becoming career criminals. Reform School wardens deemed some boys incorrigible however, and transferred them to the State Prison at Wethersfield. For records relating the State Reform School for Boys, see Records of the Department of Children and Families (RG 178).

Until 1870, no state institution for young female offenders existed. In that year, the state established the Industrial School for Girls at Long Lane (Middletown). The Industrial School was created to house "girls between the ages of eight and fifteen who had been convicted of petty offenses or who came under the classes of neglected and stubborn children of truants."⁶ Once again, if young female offenders first sent to the Industrial School were deemed incorrigible, the warden transferred them to the State Prison at Wethersfield.

While juvenile offenders were given separate facilities in the nineteenth century, adult women prisoners remained housed with the men at the Wethersfield State Prison well into the twentieth-century. During their incarceration, women adhered to the same discipline as men and worked in various shops and in support positions such as the prisoner laundry. At the end of the nineteenth century, reformers demanded a separate reformatory for women and, in 1918, a new State Farm for Women opened in East Lyme. The new facility only accommodated twenty-three inmates however, and was quickly filled. In 1928, a new hospital for the care of inmate mothers and babies opened.⁷ In June 1930, all women prisoners from the Wethersfield State Prison were transferred to the newly built Niantic Correctional Institution which served both as a reformatory and penitentiary.

Twentieth Century

Wethersfield State Prison operated according to the "Old System" of penology that focused on manual labor with strict enforcement of silence rules. Prisoners were housed in separate cells and ate their meals alone. They mixed with other prisoners only during work hours in the prison shops. Prisoners were required to do productive work because prison labor was seen as an integral part of the industrial revolution.

The turn of the century saw a gradual relaxation of the Old System. In 1900, the lockstep was discontinued and prisoners were no longer required to wear the striped prison uniform. A prison school was started and a prison magazine, the *Monthly Record*,⁸ was begun. The Wethersfield Prison expanded in the early 20th century with the addition of 468 cells. In 1917, a new mess hall (where prisoners could interact

⁴ *Minutes of the Testimony*: 4.

⁵ Norris Galpin Osborn. *History of Connecticut*, volume 5. New York: States History Co., 1925: 411.

⁶ Osborn: 413.

⁷ *Biennial Report of the Board of Directors of the Connecticut State Farm for Women*. Hartford: State Publication, 1930.

⁸ Complete set of the *Monthly Record* is available at the State Library, government documents section.

with one another) and the introduction of prisoner recreation time further eroded the Old System. Prisoners spent time out of doors in a large yard added in 1922. Under the guidance of Warden Ralph Walker, the last vestiges of the Old System disappeared. Walker relaxed the strict discipline of silence and encouraged inmates to "do something for themselves on their own - to engage in a hobby or craft."⁹

By the prison's 125th anniversary in 1952, dramatic changes in penology were evident, "Men can go into the yard every afternoon. They can go to school. Each man has a radio in his cell and can listen to anything he wants."¹⁰ But in spite of the modernization of prison policies and the addition of more cells, Wethersfield's time as the State Prison of Connecticut was coming to an end.

The penitentiary felt the pinch of the growing prison population. Some of the pressure was assuaged with the 1930 purchase of a 1600-acre tract in Enfield known as the Shaker Farm. In 1931, Osborn Prison Farm opened as a minimum security prison for men. A new minimum security prison opened on the same site in 1960.

Wethersfield State Prison had grown as much as was possible on the land available. In 1955, Warden George A. Cummings noted that "enlargement of the Wethersfield prison is almost impossible and definitely impractical. The facilities are over-taxed, and the need for a new prison was recognized back in 1917. You could spend \$5 million in improvements in this prison without showing noticeable results."¹¹ The public and politicians called for a new maximum security prison to replace the prison at Wethersfield.

The General Assembly soon approved funds for the construction of a new penal complex at Somers. The new maximum security prison at Somers housed 965 inmates and featured two gymnasiums, two chapels, library, dining hall, and a modern educational building. In 1963, all prisoners from Wethersfield were transferred to the new State Prison at Somers and two years later the Wethersfield State Prison was demolished. All that remains on the site is a marker noting the location of the prisoner cemetery.

The end of the twentieth century has seen a dramatic growth in the prison population. According to one study in 1972, Connecticut has 59.3 inmates per 100,000 residents and, by 1992, it had grown to 268 inmates per 100,000 residents.¹² The Department of Corrections was faced with the difficult task of managing this tremendous growth. In 1999, Connecticut had a total incarcerated population of 16,776 with an additional 1,702 inmates under community custody. According to a 1999 report, the Department of Corrections has a staff of around 6,300 who maintain twenty facilities throughout the state at a cost of \$414,224,643.

⁹ Fred Rothermel, "The "Old Lady of Wethersfield" Looks Back," *Hartford Courant Magazine*, November 16, 1952 p. 8-9.

¹⁰ Ibid: 9.

¹¹ Ed Dorsey, "First Prison Deep in Mine Shaft," *Hartford Courant*, February 19, 1955

¹² Joseph Dillon Davey, *The Politics of Prison Expansion*, Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998.

Scope and Content

The State Archives has few records relating to the Connecticut State Prison at Wethersfield. The records that are available were transferred to the State Archives and are divided into two separate collections, Wethersfield Prison Records and Inmate Files. The Wethersfield Prison Records consist of six series; Correspondence (1827-1906; 1941), Financial Records (1828-1832), Prisoners' Discharges (1828-1832), Promissory Notes (1827-1903), and Warrants of Commitment (1800-1903).

The most complete Wethersfield State Prison series is the warrants of commitment. Each contains the name of the prisoner, and any known aliases, crime, sentence, court, and date of incarceration. A database has been created to allow patrons to search for individual names. A hard copy print out is located at the end of this guide. The warrants provide an excellent starting off point for additional research into pertinent court records (see Records of the Judicial Department RG 003).

The second collection of records from the Department of Corrections is Inmate Files, 1884 --1963 which includes records from all existing state correctional facilities. The files are arranged by inmate number. The Inmate Files contain a summary of the case, criminal history of the inmate, family and medical history of the inmate, correspondence relating to the inmate, including some letters written by the inmate that were not approved for mailing. Some files also include fingerprints and photographs. This collection is a rich source of genealogical information, as well as an important collection of records documenting prison life in 20th century Connecticut. A database has been created to allow patrons to search for individual names, a hard copy print out is located at the end of this guide. Some restrictions exist due to the medical information in the files. Please see Restriction Note for details.

Provenance

The records of the Wethersfield State Prison, most likely from the warden's office, came to the Connecticut State Library from the Prison in 1960. Many records dating back to the 1790s disappeared during transfers between Newgate and Wethersfield Prisons. While some materials occasionally surface at manuscript dealers, it is presumed that most of the remaining files have been destroyed.

The inmate files were transferred to the Connecticut State Library in 1983. Annually, the Department of Corrections removed any inmate file that was no longer active (due to final parole, release from prison, or death of the prisoner) and organized them by date and inmate number. While this system was logical for the records creators, it makes retrieval of inmate files very difficult. As a result, the State Archives has reorganized the files by inmate number. [~~This is an on-going processing project. At this time, the collection is not open.~~]

Restrictions

Due to the sensitive nature of medical records contained in some of the Inmate Files, a member of the State Archives staff must review each file before a researcher can see it. Thus, same day retrieval is not possible for the Inmate Files. [~~This collection is temporarily closed for processing.~~]

Related Records

For additional materials relating to prisons see, Records of the Governor (RG 005), Records of the General Assembly (RG 002), Records of the Judicial Department (RG 003), and the Classified Archives (RG 001). The State Library also contains government documents created by the State Prison at Wethersfield and the Department of Corrections.

Container List

Series 1: Wethersfield Prison Records

- Correspondence, 1827-1889** Box 1
Arranged chronologically. Includes letters of introduction, orders for various products produced by inmates, notices of conviction, prison transfer documents, list of convicts discharged, and incoming correspondence.
- Correspondence (Prisoners), 1835-1906, 1941** Box 1
Correspondence relating to specific prisoners, arranged alphabetically by name of prisoner. Includes family requests to see prisoners, sightings of escaped prisoners, notice of divorce, ex-prisoners asking for letters of recommendation from warden and/or other incoming correspondence.
- Correspondence (Warden S. E. Chamberlain's), 1885-1886** Box 1 & 2
Personal correspondence of Warden Chamberlain, arranged chronologically. Includes information on Massachusetts property owned by Chamberlain, the National Association of Ex-Union Prisoners of War, and other correspondence relating to Chamberlain's Civil War service.
- Financial Records, 1828-1832** Box 3
Arranged by document type, then chronologically. Includes quarterly cash account books, expense account books, provision account books, cash books and an inventory of prison hospital equipment.
- Prisoners' Discharges, 1828-1916** Box 4
Arranged chronologically. Contains copies of official discharges issued by the General Assembly.
- Promissory Notes, 1827-1903**
Arranged chronologically. Money owed by prisoners to the State of Connecticut for various fines and legal fees.
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| 1827-1843 | Box 4 |
| 1843-1879 | Box 5 |
| 1880-1891 | Box 6 |
| 1892-1903 | Box 7 |
- Warrants of Commitment, 1800-1903**
Arranged chronologically. Commitment papers for individual prisoners. Includes name of prisoner, court, crime, and sentence. Warrants from 1885 and 1886 also includes a brief physical sketch of prisoner. A database containing this information is available. Hard copy print out of all warrants (alphabetically by last name) is attached. See appendix 1.
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|----------------------------|--------|
| 1800-1838 | Box 8 |
| 1839-1849 | Box 9 |
| 1850-1855 | Box 10 |
| 1856-1860 | Box 11 |
| 1861-1866 | Box 12 |
| 1867-1869 | Box 13 |
| 1870-1873 | Box 14 |
| 1874-1875 | Box 15 |
| 1876-1877 | Box 16 |
| 1878-February, 1879 | Box 17 |
| March, 1879-September 1880 | Box 18 |
| October 1880-1881 | Box 19 |



Warrants of Commitment, 1800-1903

1882-September 1883	Box 20
October, 1883-September 1884	Box 21
October 1884-1885	Box 22
1886	Box 23
1887	Box 24
1888-February 1889	Box 25
March 1889-March 1890	Box 26
April 1890-September 1891	Box 27
October 1891-1894; 1903	Box 28

Architectural Drawings, 1870

Design for remodeling and enlarging the State Prison at Wethersfield by architectural firm Bryant and Rodgers, May 1870. Includes four plans and handwritten report. 3 c.f. See oversized collection.

Series II: Inmate Files, 1884 - 1951

Inmate Files contain a summary of the case, criminal history of the inmate, family and medical history of the inmate, correspondence relating to the inmate, including some letters written by the inmate that were not approved for mailing. Some files also include the fingerprints and photographs. 161 c.f. ~~See container list.~~ ~~[This collection closed for processing.]~~ → See next page (e-mail)

For access to Inmate Files patrons should contact the State Archivist Mark Jones.

Part I: Accession 1960-001
Part II: Accession 1983-026

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RG 025 Board of Pardons 1883-1889