

New Amsterdam Prison



Image: New Amsterdam Prison, 2019
Obrey James

Historical Overview

Established

New Amsterdam Prison

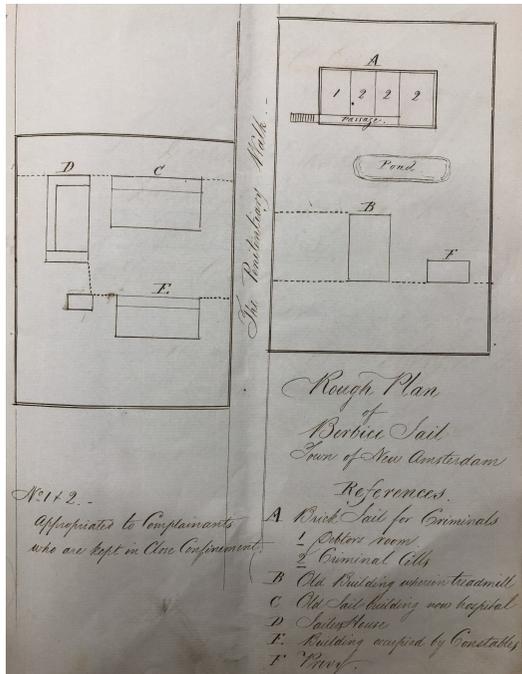


Image: Plan of New Amsterdam Prison, 1841
TNA, CO 111/189

1.

Located on Penitentiary Walk in the county of Berbice, New Amsterdam prison was established during the period of Dutch colonisation.

2.

New Amsterdam prison was classified as a common jail for the confinement of male and female prisoners. All female prisoners in the colony were confined in New Amsterdam after 1933.

3.

In 1830 the upper apartment consisted of four cells for the confinement of free persons. The lower level was used for the confinement of enslaved males. The prison was capable of holding 54 prisoners combined.

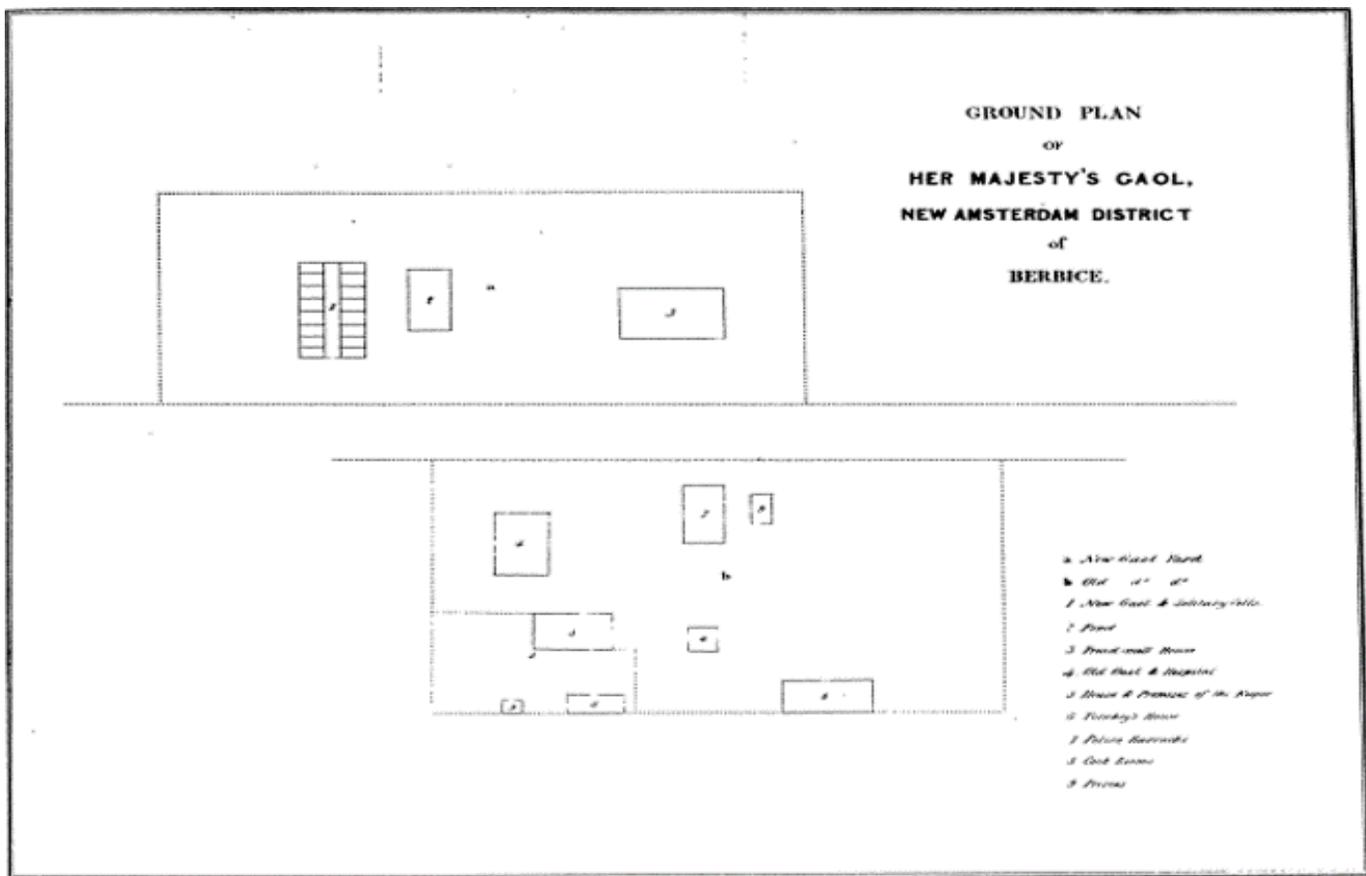


Image: Plan of New Amsterdam Gaol, 1838
HCPP, C. 154-1

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).



Due to the increased pressure on the system, New Amsterdam prison was extended in 1834 to include four large wards and 16 solitary cells. This provided accommodation for 100 prisoners.

Image: New Amsterdam Prison, 2019
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An ordinance 'regulating the rights, duties, and relations of employers and servants' in 1848 added further pressure on the system as many indentured servants opted for a prison sentence rather than forfeit their wages for perceived instances of 'misconduct' and 'ill-behaviour'.

Changes to the Prison System

After a period of relative stability during the 1840s, yearly admissions to the prison system increased rapidly during the 1850s to 4313, 2.9% of the general population. This 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, CO 116/238

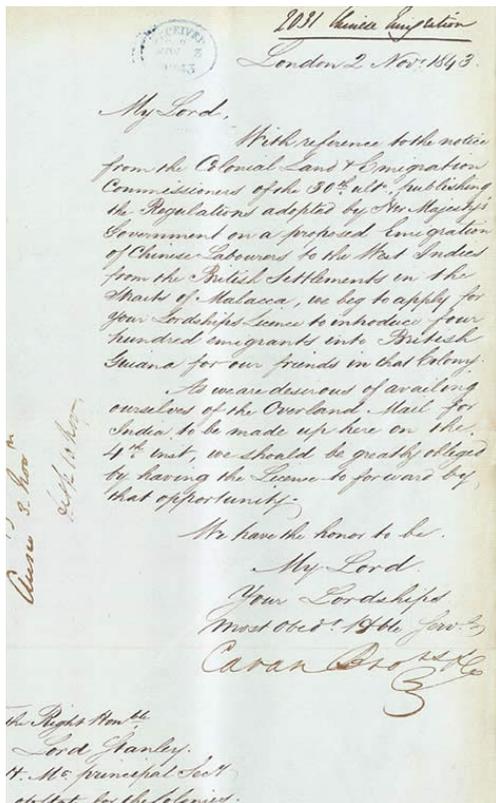


Image: Request from British Guiana for 300 Chinese labourers, 1843. TNA, CO 318/160

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.

Despite the colony's increasing prison population, the capacity of New Amsterdam jail was reduced from 100 to 76 due to the reallocation of space for female prisoners in 1868.

Penal Labour

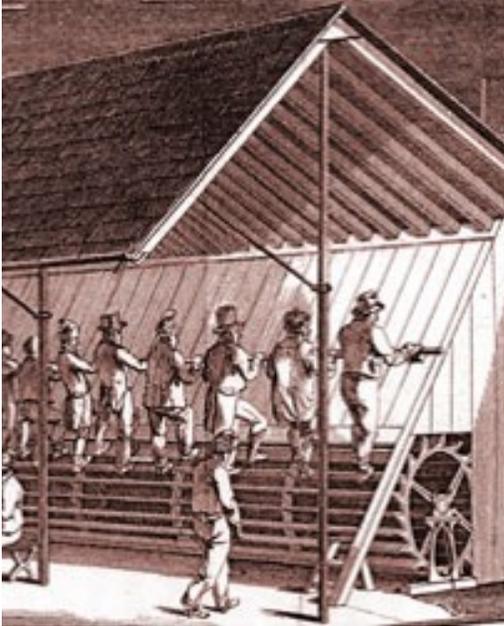


Image: View of the tread-mill, Brixton, Surrey 1821
London Metropolitan Archives, PR. L1:BRI

Punitive Labour

1.

1826-1833: Those sentenced to hard labour were required to complete 6 x 15 minute sessions on the treadmill per day. 1833 - 1838 treadmill used for male prisoners only. Use of the treadmill ceased at New Amsterdam prison in 1838.

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.

1867-1880: Male prisoners sentenced to hard labour were required to work at shot drill for 8 hours a day during their probation period.

The use of unproductive labour ceased at New Amsterdam prison in 1880

Productive Labour

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

1.

Male prisoners at New Amsterdam were employed in agricultural works, breaking stones, weeding, repairing roads, and maintaining public buildings. Artisans were employed at their respective trades.

2.

Hours of Labour: 11 hours a day.
6.00am to 11.00am & 12.00pm to 6.00pm.

3.

Female prisoners were employed in domestic duties within the prison. Their tasks consisted of laundry work, cleaning, and cooking. The limited space given to female prisoners hindered attempts for them to do more.

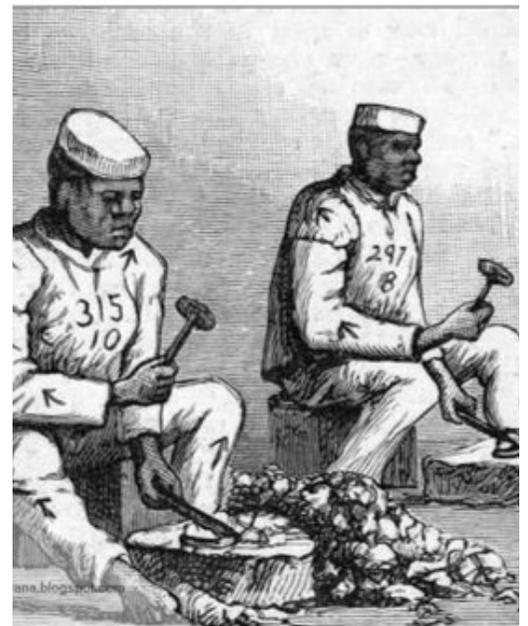


Image: Prisoners breaking stones in British Guiana
The Illustrated London News, 12.5.1888

Internal Discipline

The rationing of food and solitary confinement was frequently relied on to maintain internal discipline. The use of restraints (iron fetters) was permitted only in the case of extreme violence. It was also the practice to cut female prisoners' hair as a punishment in New Amsterdam prison until 1872.

1.

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.

2.

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

3.

Punishment



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

Punishment for Breaches against the Labour Laws

In addition to being imprisoned many labourers faced further punishment in prison as part of their sentence

Punishment was dependent on the offence committed. On arrival in the prison, male prisoners were often punished with the whip for petty theft, gross insubordination and absconding from their employers.

1.

Male and female prisoners could also be confined in the stocks for impertinence, idleness, absconding from their employment and going about without passes.

2.

Male and female prisoners were placed in solitary confinement for causing disturbances, riots or other misdemeanours.

3.

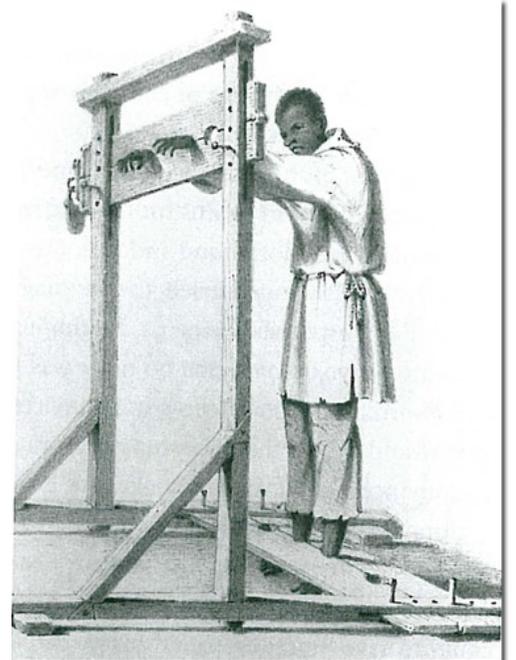
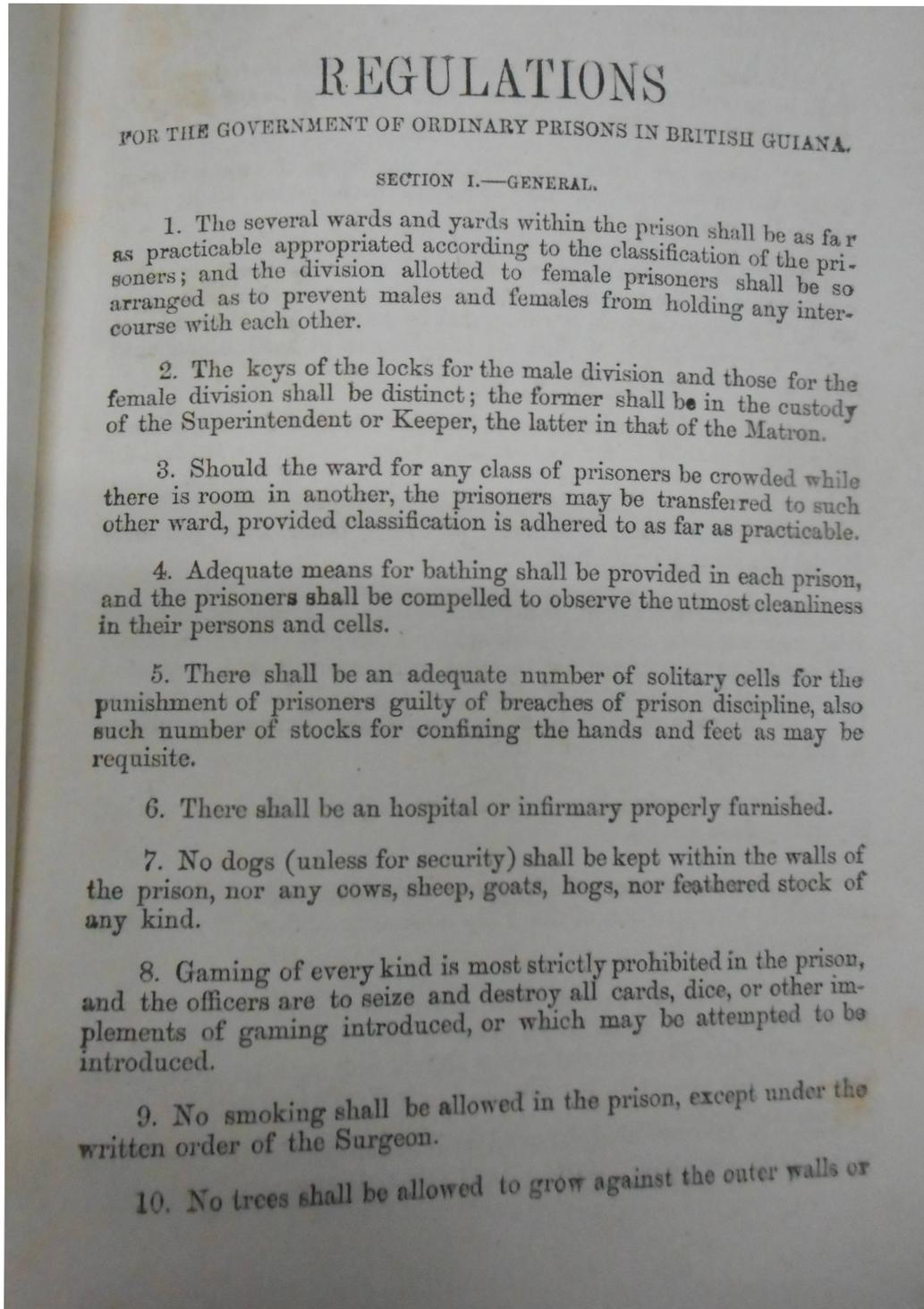


Image: Stocks for hands and feet with bed and hand stocks, National Library of Jamaica Digital Collection

Rules and Regulations



Regulations issued in 1870 for 'ordinary prisons' attempted to standardise the treatment of prisoners in the colony and alleviate the problems caused by a lack of definition regarding the duties of prison officers.

TNA CO 111/384

Rehabilitation



Image: Prison Garden, 2019
Obrey James

Vocational Labour

1.

In addition to works of a public nature, male prisoners at New Amsterdam 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 recognised that labour schemes also functioned as a means of rehabilitation for inmates. Unfortunately, the facilities to implement this policy were limited. This meant that the majority of prisoners were released without the skills required to achieve a better life.

3.

As a result, by 1953 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.

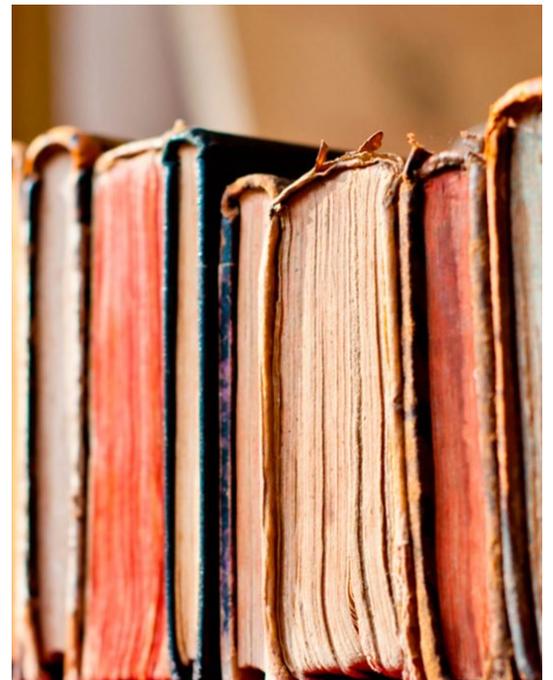
Few provisions were made for the education of prisoners in New Amsterdam prison. The justification for this was the short length of their sentences.

2.

Following the closure of Mazaruni penal settlement (between the years 1930-1939) educational opportunities were introduced to the county prisons 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. Female prisoners were instructed in domestic science and child welfare.



Prison Capacity

By 1880, the accommodation at New Amsterdam prison consisted of 60 cells, three associated wards and two hospital wards. Throughout the early twentieth century few structural changes were made at the prison.

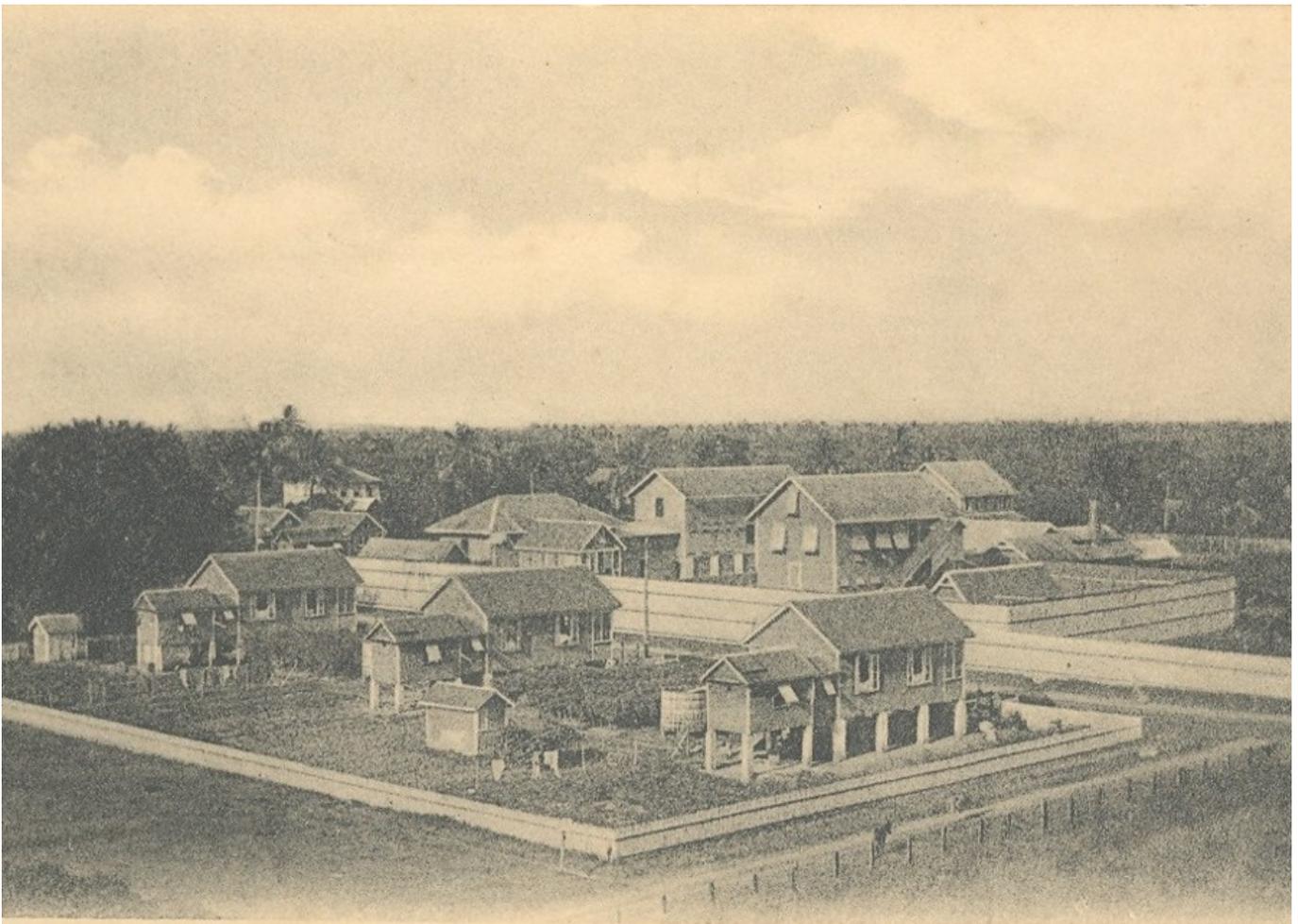


Image: New Amsterdam Prison, 1940
National Trust of Guyana

Throughout the British colonial period New Amsterdam's prison population frequently exceeded its maximum capacity, with two or three prisoners often being placed in cells designed for one.

TNA, Blue Books, British Guiana, CO 116

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



Image: New Amsterdam Prison, 2019, Obrey James

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 prisons infrastructure. Part of these funds have been allocated to preparatory work for the reconstruction of New Amsterdam Prison.

Ministry of Public Security, Guyana, 2017

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

The British Academy funded this research. This project was a collaboration between the University of Leicester and the University of Guyana, in partnership with the Guyana Prison Service.



Image: Mazaruni Prison, 2018
Obrey James

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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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