

The Frameworks - the Construction of Mount Eden Prison

“For the evils of one exist in all and the whole system requires modification and the present wooden sheds doing duty as prisons cannot too soon be supplanted by properly constructed buildings.”

- *New Zealand Herald*, 18 June 1864

Situated between a major modern highway and the ancient slopes of Mangawhau, Mount Eden Prison has become a stable fixture in Auckland’s landscape. For over 150 years, Mount Eden Prison has housed some of Aotearoa New Zealand’s most infamous criminals, seen daring escapes, hangings, riots and strikes. Mount Eden Prison continues to fascinate for its secrecy, intrigue, and enduring nature in Tāmaki Makaurau’s history. But unknown to most, is its close ties to prison reform and the rich history this prison can tell us about the movement to improve the treatment of those deemed to be least worthy of society’s care.

Hidden behind unforgiving conditions, hard labour, and punitive measures, is a history filled with a desire for change and reform motivated by humanistic and compassionate ideals. Prison reform is not a modern phenomenon. The history of penal reform is greatly intertwined with the history of prisons. The early attempts at penal reform can be traced back to the establishment of the prison at the core of the criminal justice system.¹ Early movements in penal reform can be placed into three key groups, that often intermingled, whilst still retaining different ideologies. The first group were Evangelical Christians, who saw prisons as morally corrupting, and were interested in instilling order.² The second group were Utilitarians, who objected to the inconsistencies of punishment, and that prisons should make an example of lawbreakers.³ The third group was the reformatory penologists, who argued that offenders were morally diseased, and that prisons should seek to cure them.⁴

Mount Eden Prison holds a deep history of individuals and organisations of various ideological standpoints who worked to change it for the better. These articles will be exploring Mount Eden Prison’s ties with prison reform, and how penal reform has evolved

¹ J. M Moore, “Penal reform: a history of failure”, *Criminal Justice Matters* 77, 1 (2009): 12

² Ibid, 12.

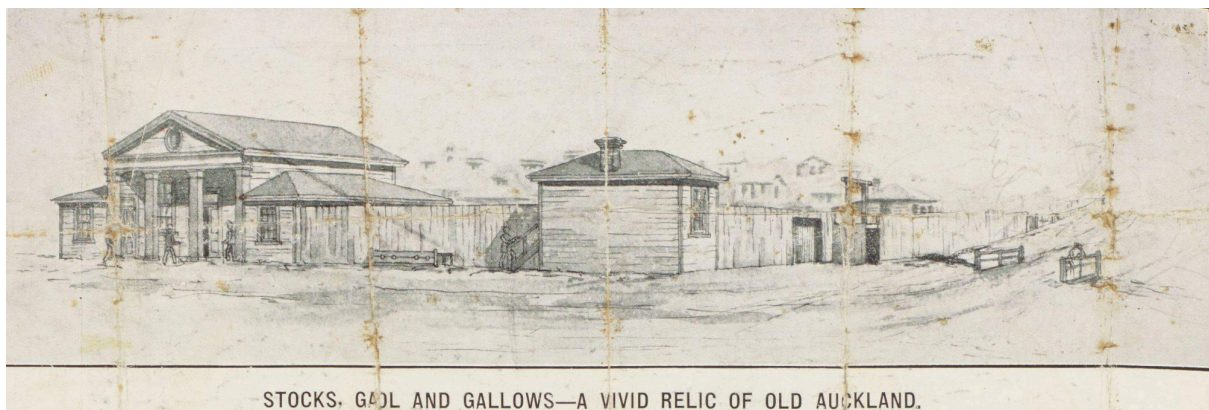
³ Ibid, 12.

⁴ Ibid, 13.

with the prison and has reflected wider social changes. This first article will outline the early beginnings of Mount Eden Prison and its establishment as a prison. Throughout history, Mount Eden Prison has been given various names. For the sake of clarity, these articles will refer to it as Mount Eden Prison.

The Beginning of Prison in Auckland

The first prison in Auckland was constructed on the corner of Queen Street and Victoria Street in 1841.⁵ This was to become known as the Auckland Goal. As a British colony, New Zealand adopted the British justice and penal system.⁶ Due to this, the conditions and running of Auckland Goal was reflective of harsh British penal ideals. Like many prisons throughout New Zealand, a lack of funds meant that overcrowding was a serious problem. Men, women, children, and those deemed mentally ‘insane’ were housed together, with little thought given to safety and sanitation.⁷



Bartley, Edward. “Stocks, goal and gallows - a vivid relic of old Auckland.” A drawing of the Auckland Goal, showing the corner of Queen Street and Victoria Street, the courthouse, guardroom, and gallows c. 1850. *Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections*, NZG-19101207-0032b-01.

In 1853 the *Taranaki Herald* described the conditions at the Auckland Goal as “a rotten and ruinous hovel, overrun with rats, and only fit to be used as a place of torture.”⁸ Similarly, the *Auckland Examiner* reported in 1857 that the current “Auckland prison discipline is such that

⁵ Mark Derby, *Rock College: An Unofficial History of Mount Eden Prison*, (Auckland: Massey University Press, 2020), 17.

⁶ Ralph Harris, *People in cages: The Solution that Failed*, (Auckland: Crimanon Sub Committee of the Sanatorium Haven Society, 1977), 11.

⁷ *Ibid*, 11.

⁸ “Auckland”, *Taranaki Herald*, 9 February, 1853.

neither educated or uneducated should be subject to.”⁹ Flooding, cramped cells, and inadequate ventilation were permanent features of the Auckland Goal.¹⁰

The Secondary Punishment Act of 1854, implemented by the Auckland Provincial Government, stated that every individual “kept in penal servitude, shall during the term of his servitude, be kept to hard labour.”¹¹ The Act complicated the situation at the Auckland Goal, as sending inmates to hard labour was proving challenging because of the location of the Goal. As the Act highlighted the inadequacies of the Auckland Goal, authorities turned to constructing a more suitable prison. Whilst authorities felt pressure from the Auckland Provincial Government, newspapers had been reporting on the failings of the Auckland Goal. In 1853 the *Taranaki Herald*, further pressured the Government to act, “we trust our humane and benevolent Chief Justice will perceive the propriety of some effort on his part to relieve the unfortunate confines from punishment.”¹² The public nature of these failings in combination with the Secondary Punishment Act, left authorities scrambling to fund a new prison.

From Goal to Stockade

As the conditions worsened at the Auckland Goal and Auckland’s population increased, the Auckland Provincial Council sought out a new site for a prison. In 1855 architect William Mason suggested the slopes of Maungawhau as a potential place for a new stockade.¹³ The Auckland Provincial Council intended for this stockade to house hard labour inmates. As such, the close proximity to the stone quarry was favourable.

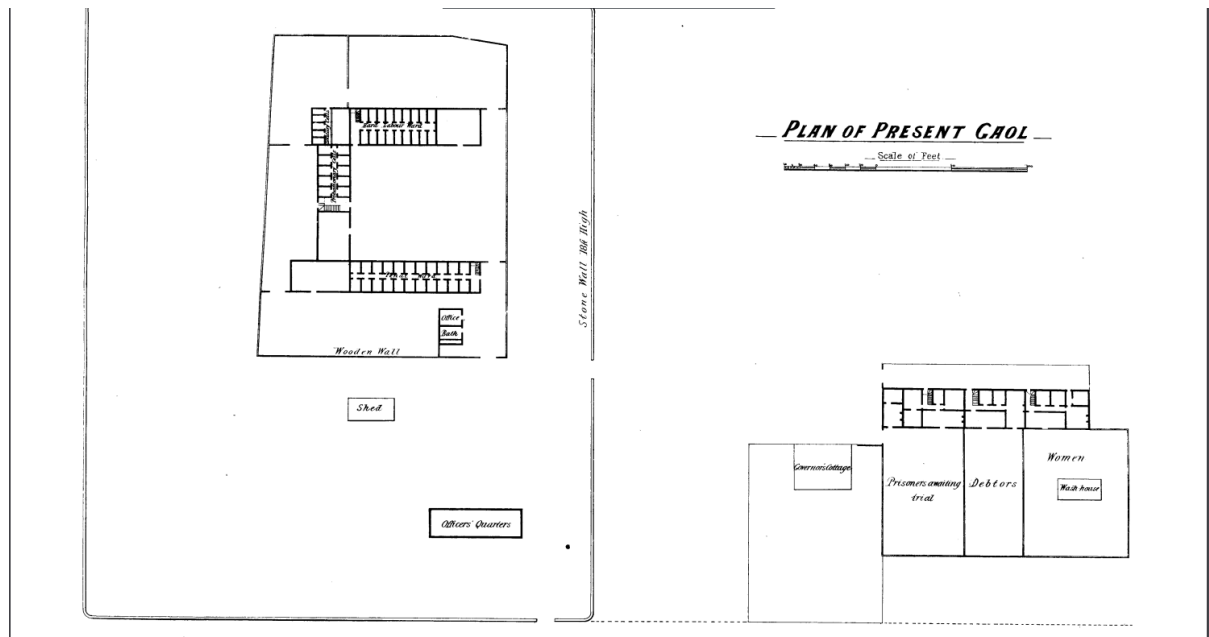
⁹ “Answers to correspondents”, *Auckland Examiner*, 3 September, 1857.

¹⁰ “Horrible state of the Auckland Goal”, *Daily Southern Cross*, 21 January, 1853.

¹¹ “Convict regulations of the province of Auckland”, *New Zealander*, 10 September, 1856.

¹² “Auckland”, 1853.

¹³ Derby, *Rock College*, 41 .



Plan of the stockade as constructed in the 1850s. Report on the Auckland Goal commissioners and correspondence thereon, *AJHR H-30*, 1877, Papers Past.

In 1855, construction began on the stockade funded by the Auckland Provincial Government. This stockade was a crude building that consisted of one long two-storey building, which was encased by a wooden fence.¹⁴ Like the Auckland Goal, this building was constructed entirely of wood, and was divided into twelve individual cells.¹⁵ In 1858, another building was built parallel to the first building, and was intended to house inmates from the Auckland Goal.¹⁶ This new building consisted of six cells, which were intended to accommodate ten prisoners each.¹⁷ Both male and female inmates were intended to be housed at the new stockade. Inmates that were convicted and sentenced, were to be housed with remand prisoners, and prisoners of various ages were cramped into the cells.

On 30 July 1856, the stockade at Mount Eden opened as a prison.¹⁸ In September 1856 the first inmates from the Auckland Goal were transferred to Mount Eden Prison, with thirteen of them being hard labour men. Located near Khyber Pass Road, Mount Eden Prison was described as “a mere collection of wooden barns” and continued to exhibit the same

¹⁴ Simon Bickler et al., *Doing time at the Mount: archeological investigations at Mt Eden Prison*, (Auckland: Clough and Associates, 2011), 11.

¹⁵ Derby, *Rock College*, 43.

¹⁶ Bickler et al., *Doing time at the Mount*, 11.

¹⁷ “Proposed improvements at the Mount Eden stockade,” *Daily Southern Cross*, 25 August, 1864.

¹⁸ Bickler et al., *Doing time at the Mount*, 11.

conditions as the Auckland Goal.¹⁹ Living conditions were cramped with twenty-four cells arranged on two floors, with the cells badly lit and ventilated.²⁰ Sanitation was also poorly managed with only one bath for the whole prison.²¹ Within the prison, inmates were put to work at the stone quarry and they also completed daily chores such as cooking and cleaning.²²



Winkelmann, Henry. Photograph of the old stockade enclosure of Mount Eden prison in 1876. *Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections*, 1-W0236.

In the 1860s, there was a call for further improvements to the stockade. Newspaper articles published criticised the current conditions and put forward a series of improvements that could be made to the stockade. These improvements included plans to erect a large building on the east side, intending to connect the two buildings.²³ It was intended for this new building to contain an entrance-hall, officers' mess room, cookhouse, prisoners' mess room, officers' sleeping quarters, a hospital, and storage room.²⁴ In 1871, a large basalt wall was constructed around the prison.²⁵

¹⁹ "Dunedin, Wednesday, January 7", *Otago Daily Times*, 7 January, 1863

²⁰ "The stockade at Mount Eden", *New Zealander*, 27 August, 1856.

²¹ "Report of the Auckland goal commissioners and correspondence thereon," *AJHR H-30*, 1877.

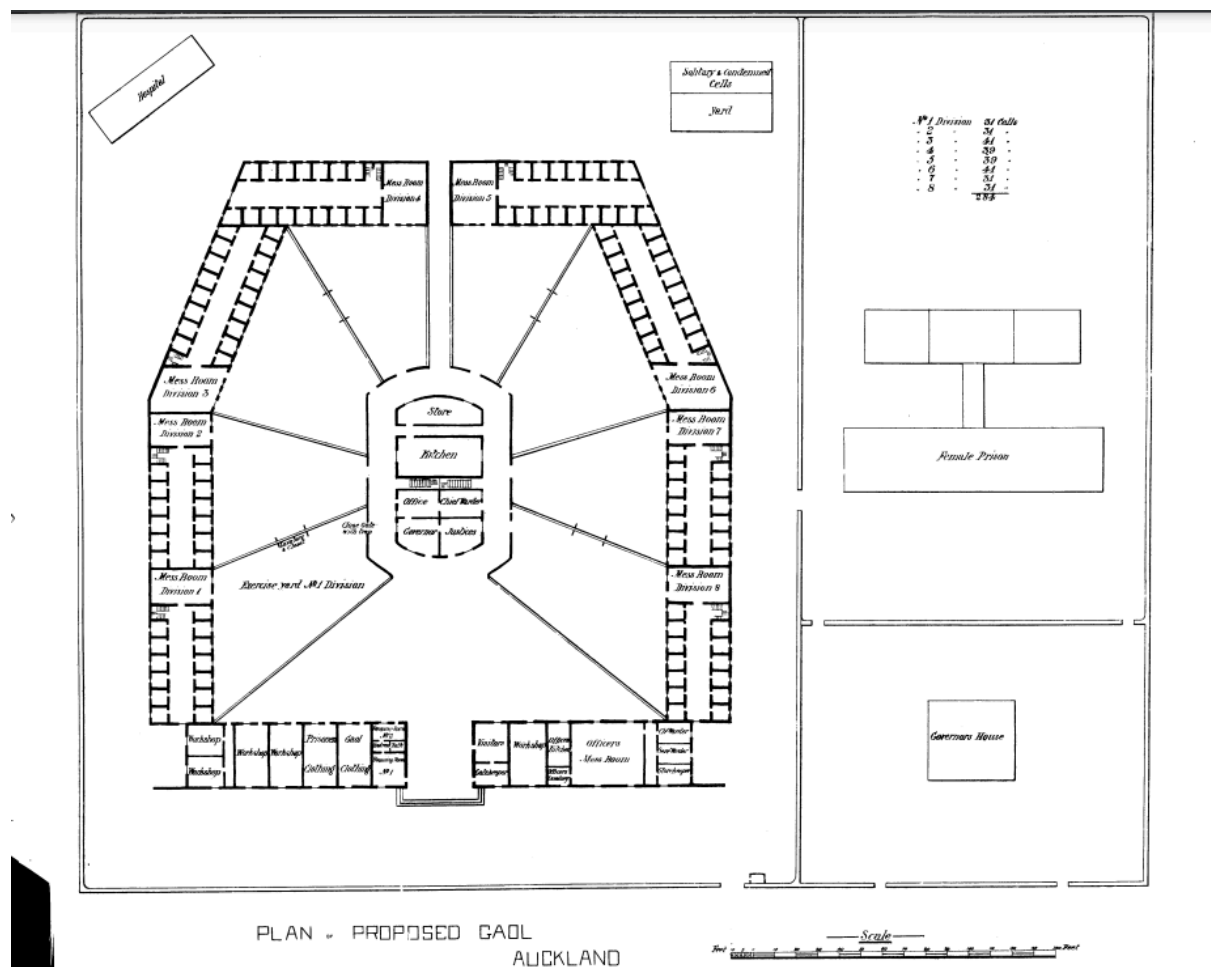
²² "The Stockade at Mount Eden", 1856.

²³ "Proposed improvements at the Mount Eden goal," 1864.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Bickler et al., *Doing time at the Mount*, 12.

In 1877, the Auckland Goal Commissioners conducted a report on the Mount Eden Prison where they concluded that the current buildings were not fit for purpose and recommended a series of upgrades. These recommendations included building a chapel, cultivating a garden, improving hospital conditions, providing better lavatories, and upgrading the women's wing of the prison.²⁶ The motivation behind the improvement of conditions did not always have the experiences of the inmates at heart. For many the dire conditions at the stockade was seen as a security threat, as Mount Eden prison was supposed to house the most dangerous in Auckland and security was weak. The overcrowding meant that the ratio of wardens to inmates was a safety risk, and the buildings themselves were not hard to escape from. By upgrading the buildings and adding extra, it was thought that inmates would be housed more securely.



Proposed upgrades of the Mount Eden prison. Report on the Auckland Goal commissioners and correspondence thereon, *AJHR H-30*, 1877, Papers Past.

²⁶ "Report of the Auckland Goal Commissioners and Correspondence Theron," 1877.

The Mount Eden Prison was only finished in 1917. By then Mount Eden had gained a reputation as a hard and unforgiving prison, with strict punishments and a hierarchy amongst inmates.²⁷ In 1905 the *Observer* noted that the Prison “has become a dumping ground for the worst offenders.”²⁸ Riots became commonplace as tensions between inmates and wardens escalated, and assault cases against wardens and other inmates featured heavily in newspapers. In 1905 five inmates were brought before the Auckland courthouse, for their rioting and abuse of wardens. One of the inmates, Thomas Lindsay, claimed that his actions were “owing to the injustice that had been meted out to them, and in the hopes of getting an inquiry into the conduct of the institution.”²⁹ Each inmate took to the stand to recount the abuses suffered at Mount Eden Prison, which included not being given water or food, not receiving adequate healthcare, and being kept in solitary confinement.³⁰ These experiences were not unique and highlight the brutality of the Prison.

In amongst this bleakness remained individuals dedicated to making Mount Eden Prison a more tolerable place. Their work has continued a legacy of prison reform in New Zealand and will be the focus of this series of articles. Mapping out the story of penal reform in Mount Eden Prison gives us greater insight into how our prisons have changed over the years in New Zealand. The story now moves to the early attempts at reforming, and how this set a precedent of reform in Mount Eden.

²⁷ Derby, *Rock College*, 100.

²⁸ “Ructions at Mount Eden: The Goal Birds Sing,” *Observer*, 25 March, 1905.

²⁹ “The Mount Eden Gaol Case,” *Auckland Star*, 22 March, 1905.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

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