

## Restoring Lambertville's Old Jail

We were thrilled to learn this November that the Hunterdon County Commissioners approved the Cultural and Heritage Commission and the Parks and Open Space Advisory Committee's recommendation to award the Lambertville Historical Society an \$87,988.41 historic preservation grant to complete the restoration of Lambertville's Jail.

We are tremendously grateful for their support! This award is the third from the County for this project and brings the total to \$212,182.

These grants do not require matching funds from the City of Lambertville, which owns the Jail. We should note that the City of Lambertville in 2018 replaced the slate roof, fascias, soffits and trim at a cost of \$68,740.79.

The first phase of the restoration, focused on the Jail's exterior, was completed in 2021. The second and third phases, which will entail significant structural repair of the floors, ceilings, and walls, will begin soon, and should be completed in 2024. The timeline depends largely on the receipt of funds, which can trail an award announcement by a year or more. This project has been approved by the State of New Jersey's Historic Preservation Office, members of which have visited the building.



Built around 1840, the two-story stone and concrete landmark has been closed to the public for more than 55 years and has been used for storage by Public Works and the Fire Department. Due to water damage and ageing, the interior is not safe. It is the only free-standing old jail in Hunterdon County (typically, jails were in courthouse basements).

When restored, it will be one of the few accessible buildings of its kind in New Jersey. Through its history, there were three main uses:

**Jail.** The archives of *The Beacon* offer many articles about the administration of the local justice system and the transgressions that led to incarceration. Some residents still recall working at the Jail or interacting with its temporary residents. There remains one cell, which will be preserved.

**Lodging for the poor.** In her book, “*In the Beacon Light: Lambertville NJ 1850-1900*,” Sharon Bisaha wrote, “Throughout the 1860s, paupers and tramps were lodged in the city jail... In February of 1870, ninety-one paupers were lodged in the city jail, an average of about three a night.” This practice continued for more than a century. Reacting to a Lambertville Historical Society blog post about the Jail, a graduate of South Hunterdon Regional High School wrote on her Facebook page, “My family stayed there one night in 1965.”

**Fire Department office.** In the mid 1900’s, the second floor of the building housed an emergency alert system that integrated call boxes stationed around town with equipment that activated the powerful siren at the top of the tower next to the Jail.

The goal is to make the Jail an attractive, flexible venue that can accommodate a variety of historical, cultural, educational and recreational activities for the City. It will enhance the enjoyment of our already picturesque Mary E. Sheridan Park. The floorplan upstairs will be open; downstairs there will be the cell, a bathroom, and open space.

The Jail was closed in 1966 because of the tragic death of a young man who some of our residents remember fondly to this day. We therefore proceed mindfully and respectfully with this restoration, looking to other communities that have repurposed comparable properties. For example, Doylestown’s Michener Art Museum emerged from the Bucks County Prison, transforming “a place of fear and despair...into a welcoming center of culture and beauty.” The Lambertville Jail project is much more modest, but our intentions are similar, and we look forward to the eventual reopening and subsequent use.