

Building the County Jail

One of the very necessary adjuncts to the courthouse, and the county government, was the jail. As an institution it served a dual purpose in pioneer times, and still does in most Iowa counties, being both a residence for the sheriff and a place for the confinement of prisoners. Such an arrangement not only simplified the task of boarding the prisoners, but of guarding them as well.

A hundred years ago the jail was simply a "lock-up", consisting of a separate room with a barred door and windows in one corner of the dwelling occupied by the sheriff, or, perhaps, only a one-room log cabin near the sheriff's house. Penalties usually took the form of fines instead of confinement of prisoners at public expense. The rude jails were used chiefly for custody of persons awaiting trial.

The pioneers of Henry County were unusually law-abiding. The only criminal case at the first term of district court in April, 1837, appears to have been the result of a brawl or series of fights, but only one combatant was convicted. Due to the illness of Judge Irvin, the fall term of court was not held in Henry County. In April, 1838,

William S. Talley was tried for arson, but acquitted. Though there seemed to be little need for a jail, a petition for the construction of one in Mount Pleasant was presented to the county commissioners. At their meeting on July 3, 1838, they laid the request on the table until their October session.

Meanwhile, no serious public offenses appear to have been committed. At the October meeting, after some discussion, the commissioners appointed John H. Randolph, William S. Viney (the county treasurer), and B. F. Wallace on a committee "to ascertain the Probable amount it will Take to Build A Temporary Jail and Report to the next Term of this Board and also the kind or maner of the Building."

Evidently this committee failed in their assigned duty, for at the January meeting in 1839, the county commissioners appointed John H. Randolph, John B. Lash, J. B. Teas and Bushrod Adkins "to Report on tomorrow the probable amount it will Take to Build a Tempory Jail & the plan of said Jail."

This time chairman Randolph succeeded in getting some action on the subject. Perhaps he was the leader from the beginning. At any rate the plans reported the following day by these gentlemen proved satisfactory, for the board ordered

“that John H. Randolph and John B. Lash are authorized and Empowered to Let to the Lowest Bidder the furnishing of Eighty Six Logs, Sixteen feet Long & Ten Inches square well Hude to Be of oak Timber, & six hundred feet of oak plank fourteen feet Long & two Inches thick and also twenty five hundred shingles & four hundred & fifty feet of Sheeting & Eighteen Rafters Ten feet Long all the above to Be delivered in Mount Pleasant By the first of April next, and Be it further ordered that the said Randolph & Lash is hereby Required to advertise Ten days previous to the day of Letting the Same in four Publick plaíses in the County by setting up written notices and that the person or persons under Taken such contract Shall Be Required to give Bond & Security for the faithful performance of Said Contract and that the Said Materials Shall Be paid for out of any money in the County Treasure not otherwise appropriated.”

The committee must have discharged its duty by the time the commissioners met in March, because the board prepared to let a contract on April 2, 1839, “to the Lowest Bider for the erection of a Jail of the following dementions to wit: the Said Jail to Be of Hude Timber Ten Inches Square 16 feet Long of oak Timber to be duff-tailed at the Corners and to be Layed Down Clause

[close] — the Body of Said Jail to Be Twelve Logs High, the flower & Loft to Be of the same Kind of Timber & to Be covered with Clab board all of the Said Work to Be done in a maner to Be approved of by the Commissioners. The Said Job to Be Completed By the first Monday in August next — the Contractor to Give Bond with approved security."

The records do not reveal whether Randolph furnished the materials for the jail, but he got the contract to build it. Maybe there were not many bidders. The work progressed according to schedule during the spring and summer. At a special meeting of the county commissioners on August 3, 1839, "John H. Randolph and W. Cheney came forward to deliver up the Jail which they had Contracted to build & the board being of opinion that the Same is done according to Contract it is Ordered that it be received & the Bond given therefore Canceled." John H. Randolph was then allowed the "sum of two hundred & forty three dollars," as his "compensation in full for building a Jail in Mount Pleasant & that the agent be required to pay the Same out of any money in his hands not otherwise appropriated." Thomas Leas was paid "the Sum of Seven dollars, out of the fund for the erection of Public Buildings for putting in grates & sawing down the cor-

ners of the Jail". Three weeks after the jail was accepted, Randolph narrowly escaped occupying his own calaboose. He was fined five dollars for assault and battery.

In 1841 the county paid Wm. L. Dash & Sons "13.06 $\frac{1}{4}$ c for nails for jail", and at the same time the commissioners "contracted with Dan'l Bates to lay the floor of the Jail & line the walls & make two doors, as per agreement on file". No further reference to the old log jail appears in the early records of Henry County.

According to the specifications the jail was a simple, square cabin well built of heavy logs and finished with clapboard siding. Some say that a second story of frame construction was added later. It appears to have stood east of the alley in about the center of the block immediately south of the public square, probably at the rear of lot 6 in block 8. This was a convenient location so far as the new courthouse, then under construction, was concerned. While the log jail was intended to be temporary, it served the county well for several years, until a more pretentious two-story jail of stone and brick was erected on the south side of the same block, near the alley on lot 8. This second jail was used for many years, and is yet remembered by some of the older citizens of the community.

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