

# Old Jail Has Colorful Past

The News and Courier

Do You Know  
Your Charleston?

By ROBERT P. STOCKTON

Charleston's newest museum has been opened in the old Charleston Jail on Magazine Street.

Under the direction of Emmett Robinson, Dock Street Theatre director, portions of the jail have been reconstructed to their 19th century appearance.

In addition to recreated cells housing life-sized figures of famous individuals connected with the jail's history, the Victorian family quarters of the jailer have been restored.

The basic structure of the old jail dates from c. 1800 although it has been expanded and remodeled several times.

It is but one of a series of Charleston jails. In the early period of the city's history there was no permanent jail structure, although several acts were passed authorizing one. Instead it was necessary to rent a building for housing prisoners.

The Times of Charleston, on Sept. 11, 1811, reported that a severe tornado had raked across the city on the previous day destroying, among other structures, "The Double Tenement, known by the name of the Old Gaol, the front blown out..."

According to the newspaper, this structure stood on King Street near Queen.

The facility which preceded the Magazine Street structure, however, was built after the Revolution just to the east of the present structure. When the present structure opened, the older building was used as the Work House for runaway slaves.

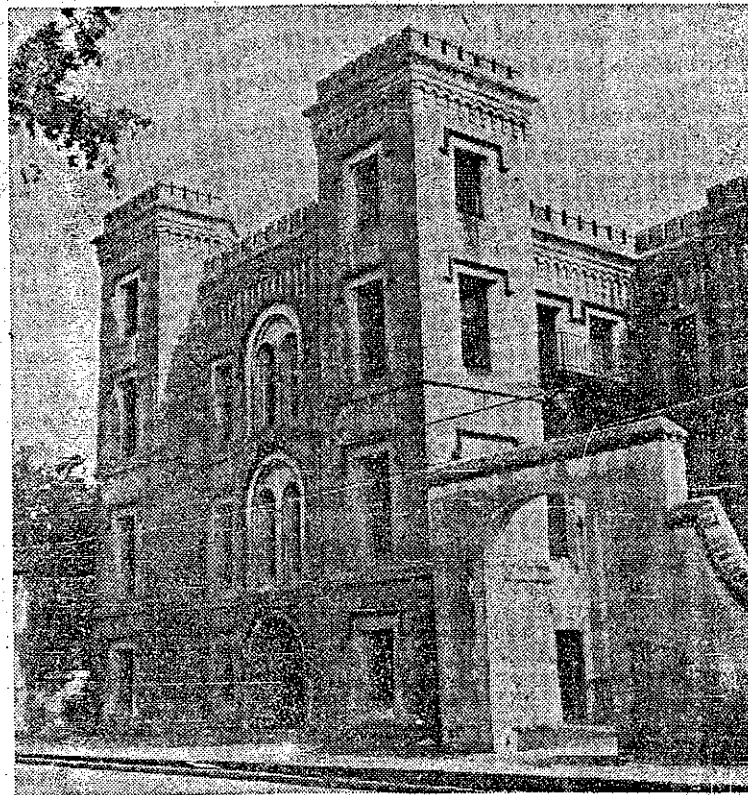
When built, the Magazine Street building served as the Charleston District Jail. The Charleston District included the present Charleston and Berkeley counties.

Robert Mills, a native of Charleston and America's first native professional architect, in 1820 became a commissioner of public works for South Carolina.

In March, 1822, he advertised for estimates for remodeling the Charleston District Jail. In his "Statistics," published in 1826, he reported:

"There has lately been added to it a four story wing building, devoted exclusively to the confinement of criminals. It is divided into solitary cells, one for each criminal, and the whole made fireproof."

(See Page 6-B, Column 1)



Old Charleston Jail

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Mills' octagonal wing remains, though it was reduced to three stories after the earthquake of Aug. 31, 1886, severely damaged the top floor and the wing's central tower, which was also removed.

The jail's present facade dates from about 1855-56, when architects Louis J. Barbot and John H. Seyle remodeled it in the then popular "Italian" style.

Many famous criminals have been housed in the old jail, the most notorious of which was perhaps Lavinia Fisher, who with her husband, John Fisher, and others, was hanged in 1820 for a series of murders and robberies on Charleston Neck.

The hangings took place, not in the jail vicinity, but on the Charleston Lines, the War of 1812 fortifications which gave Line Street its name, and which were still standing at the time.

John Blake White, in his account of the Fishers' execution, relates that the hangman had to be kept jailed for several days before each hanging, to insure that he was sober enough to do his job. After his work, he was rewarded with liberal amounts of his favorite liquid.

Following the aborted slave revolt of Denmark Vesey in 1822, four white men were imprisoned in the jail for "a misdemeanor, in inciting slaves to insurrection." Blacks involved were imprisoned in the Work House nearby, where the trials took place.

One result of the Vesey Plot was the Negro Seaman's Law, which required the sheriff to arrest any free black man brought into the port, and keep him in the jail for the duration of his ship's stay.

21 Magazine

PICK. Pick is a crab-picking first model is being tested in Va., inside a white cinder- building. For about three quick Pick has been receive- of cooked blue crabs (the crawl around the Caroli-

has always longed for something better.

There are other crab-processing machines around. Blue Channel processors in Port Royal, S.C., has a mechanized operation. A spokesman says Blue Channel crushes crabs in a

Crab processors and marine scientists have looked a long time for the machine that will make crab feasting easy by getting those good, shell-free chunks of crabmeat out of all those maddening chambers and crevices.

he got ed once on a scallop shucker); and partner Clayton Brooks wants everybody to shut up. Brooks' caution may be reasonable for both business and ecological considerations. Other crab packers wor-

machine with trepidation. Some of them think that an over-fast, over-mechanized processing business could wipe out some varieties of crabs.

But for better or worse, the news

here and I said 'Dick, I w to invent us a crab-picking machine.' Three days later he called me back and said, 'I've got the principle.'

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# Jail's Octagonal Wing Miscredited To Mills

By ROBERT P. STOCKTON

Possibly the biggest shock to local architectural history is the recent discovery that Robert Mills did not design the Old Charleston Jail's octagonal wing.

Architectural historians have assumed for decades that Mills designed the present rear wing of the building, and it is credited to him in several major texts.

Since the Charleston-born Mills was the first professionally trained native architect in the United States and the designer of the Washington Monument in Washington, D.C., and other important structures in several parts of the country, attribution of the wing to him increased its architectural importance.

New evidence provides a better case for attributing the wing to a later team of Charleston architects, Louis J. Barbot and John H. Seyle, who remodeled and added to the jail in 1855. It is at Magazine and Franklin streets.

Mills did, in fact, design a wing for the jail — at that time the Charleston District Jail — about 1820, when he was employed by the state as commissioner of public works.

Shortly thereafter, Mills published his book, "Statistics of South Carolina," in which he described the jail, which had been built in 1802, and his improvement of it.

"There has been lately added to it," he said, "a four-story wing building, devoted exclusively to the confinement of criminals. It is divided into solitary cells, one for each criminal, and the whole made fireproof."

That was the extent of available description of Mills' wing. But, because the present wing originally had four floors, and because Mills designed several Gothic style buildings and structures with striking geometric shapes and motifs, it was assumed that the present wing was his design.

Recent examination, however, of the jail's depiction on a survey map, published in 1852, reveals that the octagonal wing did not exist at that time.

The map, surveyed by Robert Allen, is in the S.C. Historical Society collection. It shows, precisely-measured, a

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rectangular wing extending from the southeast corner, rear, of the main building.

It now appears that Mills' wing was demolished in 1855, when the jail was

remodeled, and that the octagonal wing was built at that time.

The remodeling of the jail by Barbot and Seyle included the addition of the present front portion of the building (also absent from the 1852 map), with a facade in the Romanesque Revival style of the 1850s.

Unfortunately, Barbot and Seyle's plans and specifications for the remodeling, which are mentioned in an advertisement for bids in the Charleston

Evening News, Dec. 6, 1855, have not survived.

However, an illustration in Harper's Weekly, Feb. 18, 1865, shows the octagonal wing on the rear of the jail, four stories tall, with a crenelated parapet similar to the present one.

The illustration also shows, rising above the main roofline, a central tower of two stories, octagonal in shape and crenelated.

The tower survived until 1886. A photograph in the Gibbes Art Gallery

collection, taken after the earthquake of that year, shows it in ruins.

When the earthquake damage was repaired, the tower and the fourth floor of the wing were removed.

The jail remained in use until 1939, when Charleston County sold it to the Housing Authority of Charleston which used it for storage until recently.

The building currently houses a museum of penal history, operated as a tourist attraction.

## Morning Coffee

By Dave Doubrava

I haven't said much about the blue law controversy, primarily because I couldn't find the right words to express myself. But thanks to George M. Somens, a teacher at East Cooper Private School, I now have them — and they're his. Mr. Somens writes, in part, — and I totally agree — that:

"The laws of society reflect the customs and mores of the times in which that society lives. As long as the customs and moral codes remain, enforcement of the laws is no problem. But times change. People change. What was yesterday's abomination may well be today's norm. Thus, it is incumbent on society to keep its body of laws in tune with the times. When we fail to do this, then we have problems of enforcement."

"The law itself comes into disrepute. We make a mockery of the law and put those charged with its enforcement into an untenable position. Either they try to enforce the unenforceable and become objects of ridicule, or they ignore the violations and encourage general contempt for the law on the part of the citizenry and the enforcement authority is corrupted by its failure."

"So it is today with our blue laws. They are the product of a much more pious and homogeneous society here in South Carolina and in many other states where they exist. The strict keeping of the Sabbath represented the consensus of the majority. In the times when these laws were enacted, the rights of minorities were seldom a matter of concern. The First Amend-

ment rights as well as many other rights would need some 200 years of testing in the courts to become truly the law of the land."

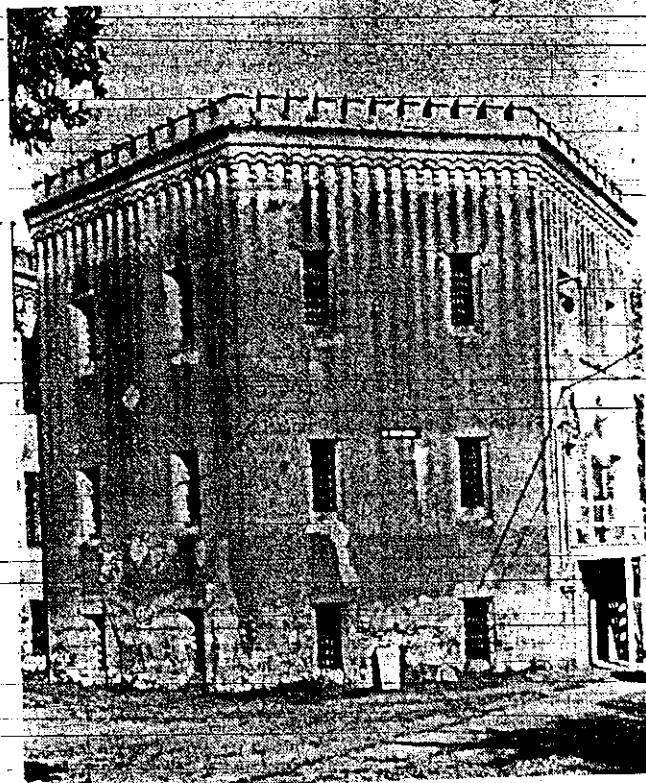
"That we are a pluralistic society nationally today is well known. That we can no longer tyrannize minorities is an accomplished fact. That our lifestyle is no longer the simple agrarian way of life should be obvious to all. And, that we no longer can tolerate laws and ordinances that are out of step with the times and are patently unconstitutional logically follows."

"If we are genuinely concerned with maintaining law and order and a respect for duly constituted authority, then we have an obligation to ourselves and our society to strip the barnacles that hinder and slow our progress. To permit obsolete and archaic laws to remain on the books is only going to create division in our society and breed further civil disobedience. It is time for reforms. Oh, let us reform it altogether."

Thank you, Mr. Somens, you've said it better than I could have.

He goes on to note that before he made his own feelings known to one of his classes which is studying the issue, he had them write "letters to the editor" expressing their thoughts on blue laws. Virtually all the eighth graders favored changing or abolishing blue laws. Their "letters" were excellently written and well thought-out, I might add.

Those are some sharp kids! I agree with them and their teacher.



(Staff Photo by Tom Spain)

Jail's Old Wing

Kay Lewis  
Port Director  
ps Her Feet  
The Ground

ELEANOR FLAGLER  
overnmental Affairs

Charleston airport director  
s O. "Neely" Thompson died  
plane crash Oct. 10, airport  
es soon began to wonder who  
place him.

we heard Mrs. (Kay) Lewis  
ance, everybody up here was  
said R. H. Smith, a city police-  
o's worked the airport beat for  
years.

nce she was appointed acting  
Nov. 1, Smith said, "she's done  
erful job."  
seems to be the consensus from  
street to Aviation Avenue. Peo-  
work with her call her efficient,  
ed and well able to get things

ew mention the fact that she's a

rs. Lewis, 39, is probably one of  
women airport directors in the

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21 Magazine St.  
Jan. 23, 1978

2-B—The News & Courier, Charleston, S.C., Monday, April 15, 1985

# Charleston Jail Has Housed

By LISA DENNIS  
Post-Courier Reporter

In its day, the Old Charleston Jail, at Franklin and Magazine streets, was an impenetrable fortress.

Its dark exterior, boarded-up windows and perimeter wall are still foreboding, but rather than housing prisoners as it did until the 1930s, the jail is preserved for its historical significance and used primarily for storage.

The basic structure of the jail dates from the early 1800s, although it has been expanded and remodeled several times. When built, it served as the jail house for Charleston district, which included the present Charleston and Berkeley counties.

Until the mid-1970s, it was believed that Charleston architect Robert Mills had designed the octagonal wing at the southeast corner at the rear of the building. Architects had assumed for decades that he designed the wing and attribution of the wing to Mills, America's first native professional architect, increased its architectural value.

New evidence, however, provided a better case for crediting the wing to a later team of Charleston architects, Louis J. Barbot and John H. Seyle, who remodeled and added to the jail in 1856.

Mills did, in fact, design a wing for the jail about 1820, when he was employed by the state as a commissioner of public works. Shortly thereafter, Mills published his book "Statistics of S.C." in which he described the jail, which had been built in 1802, and his improvement of it:

"There has lately been added to it a four story wing building, devoted exclusively to the confinement of criminals. It is divided into solitary cells, one for each criminal, and the whole made fireproof."

Because the existing wing originally had four floors and because Mills designed several Gothic style buildings and structures with striking geometric shapes and motifs, it was assumed that the present wing was his design.

However, examination of the jail's depiction on a survey map, published in 1852, reveals that the octagonal wing did not exist at that time. The map, which is in the S.C. Historical Society Collection, shows a rectangular wing where the octagonal one stands.

It appears that Mills' wing was demolished in 1855, when the jail was remodeled and that the octagonal wing was built at that time.

The remodeling of the jail by Barbot and Seyle included the addition of the present front portion of the building (also absent from the 1852 map), with a facade in the Italian or Romanesque Revival style of the 1850s.

Barbot and Seyle's plans and specifications for the remodeling have not survived, but an illustration in Harper's Weekly, Feb. 18, 1865, shows the octagonal wing on the rear of the jail, four stories tall, with a crenelated parapet similar to the present one. The illustration also shows, rising above the main roof line, a central tower of two stories, octagonal in shape and crenelated.

The tower survived until 1886. A photograph in the Gibbes Art Gallery collection, taken after the earthquake of that year, shows it in ruins. When the damage was repaired, the tower and the fourth floor of the wing were removed.

Many famous criminals have been housed in the jail, the most notorious of which were perhaps Lavinia and John Fisher, who in 1819 were apprehended and convicted of

## Do You Know Your Charleston?

multiple highway robberies and murders on the outskirts of Charleston. Both stayed at the jail until hanged in 1820.

The hangings took place, not in the jail vicinity, but on the Charleston Lines, the War of 1812 fortifications that gave Line Street its name and were still standing at the time.

Also jailed was the hangman of Charleston, according to accounts of the Fishers' execution. A habitual drunkard, the hangman had to be confined several days before a hanging so he could sober up. His reward was all he could drink if the job were well done.

Following an aborted slave revolt led by Denmark Vesey, four white men were imprisoned in the jail for "a misdemeanor, in inciting slaves to insurrection." Blacks involved were incarcerated in a work house nearby, where the trials took place.

As a result of the Vesey Plot, the Negro Seaman's Law was adopted, which required the sheriff to arrest any free black man brought into port and keep him in the jail for the duration of his ship's stay.

The jail, having stood for more than half a century before the Civil War, was used during that period as a prison for Union troops captured during the assault on Charleston harbor. Cells were occupied by as many as 20 prisoners with still more guarded in the yard.

Reportedly, prisoners' quarters were not pleasant, harboring disease, filth, insects and repulsive odors. And in many cases, those 6-by-8-foot cells became the extent of the prisoners' world.

Originally the jail's walls, floors and ceilings were made from oak with the exception of the outside wall of masonry coated with plaster whitewash. Much of the woodwork has been replaced by concrete and steel, but the layout of the building has been restored to the design of the original construction.

The jail remained in use until 1939, when Charleston County sold it to the Housing Authority of Charleston.

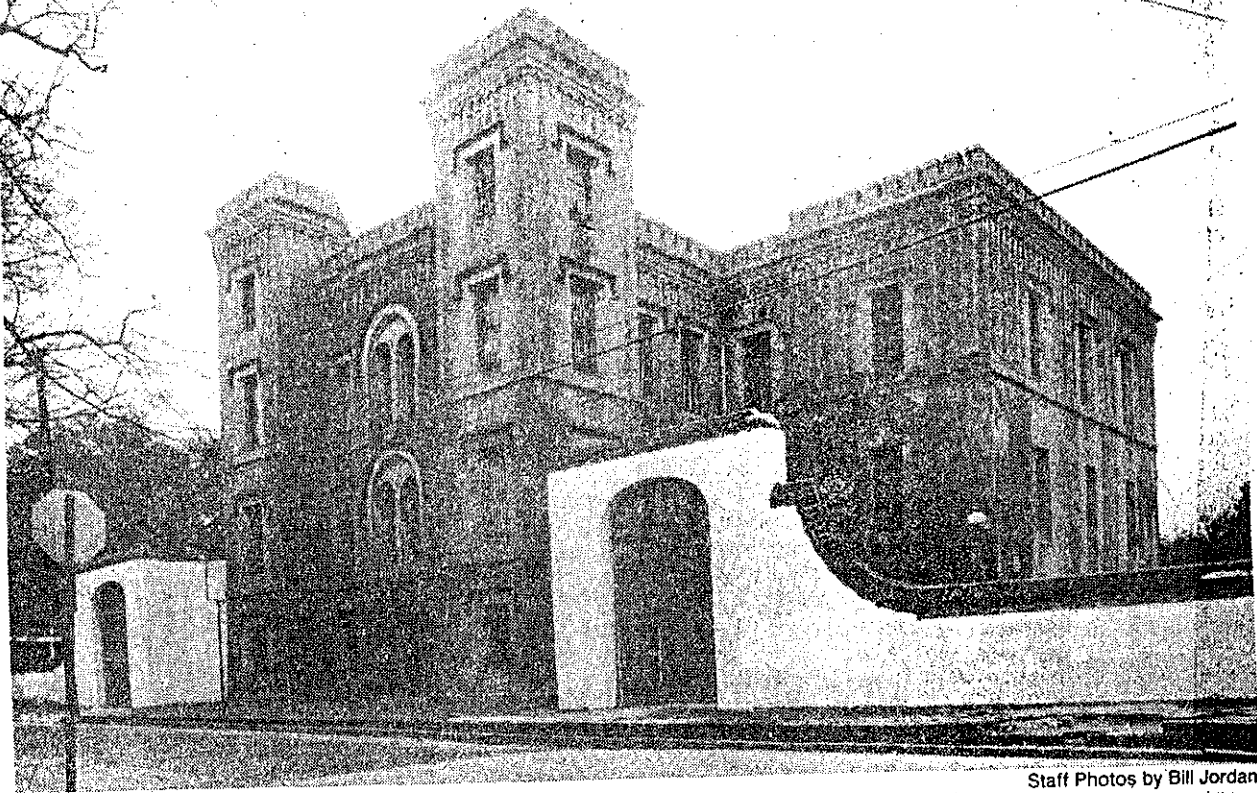
In the mid-1970s a museum of penal history was opened at the jail. With C. Harrington Bissell as president and Emmett Robinson as artistic director, portions of the jail were remodeled to resemble their 19th century appearance. Mannequins from the Exchange Building Dungeon Museum enhanced the setting's authenticity.

This venture, however, folded a few years later and the mannequins were returned to the Exchange Building.

The building — still owned by the Charleston Housing Authority — is used primarily for offices and storage, and at Halloween the city's Department of Recreation turns the jail into a haunted house. Just last week, however, the building was dusted with manmade snow and for a scene in the television movie "North and South" being filmed here for ABC.

The second and third floors are leased to Spoleto USA, which uses the space for storage and workshop areas. And the bottom floor serves as a substation for a city police team and animal control division.

# Troops, Famous Criminals



Staff Photos by Bill Jordan

Jail has been remodeled several times over the years.

