

First County Jail
Built of Logs, in Year 1839
Had "Dungeon and Debtor's Room"

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Now that the county will soon let a contract for the erection of a new, modern, county jail, in accordance with the expressed will of the voters of the county in making provisions for the necessary funds, it might be of interest to our readers to know something about the first jail erected in Miller County. Some time ago we tried to tell you of the first courthouse, erected prior to the earliest memory of our oldest inhabitants, which served the people for nearly twenty years. Now we find that at approximately the same time the first courthouse was being erected, steps were taken to erect a place for the malefactors who transgressed the law. As now, so it was then, there were those who had to be restrained of their liberty at times, so at the November term, 1838, the county court, consisting of Judges John Francis, John T. Davis and Wilson Coats, made and entered of record the following order:

"Now at this day it is ordered by the court that Hardin M. Williams be appointed superintendent of the building of a jail in the town of Tuscumbia, and that he be duly notified of his appointment. And it is further ordered by the court that the sum of five hundred dollars be appropriated for the building of said jail."

No time was lost by superintendent Williams, for at an adjourned term of the court held on December 19, 1838, he submitted a plan for the jail, as shown by the following entry in the county court record:

“Now at this day comes Hardin M. Williams, superintendent of the building of a jail in the town of Tuscumbia and after being duly qualified as the law directs, makes the following report, to wit: The superintendent of the building of a jail at Tuscumbia, Miller County, Missouri, have the honor to report the following: A plan of a jail to be built at Tuscumbia, Miller County, Missouri to wit: Figure 1 represents a stone wall 19 feet square, 4 feet thick, in a ditch 3 feet deep raised to the surface. Figure 2 represents a side view of the first tier of timbers composing the lower floor, which is of good oak timber 12 inches square, 18 feet long. Figure 3 represents the second tier of said floor which are 12 inches square, 14 feet long and laid in like manner to the first, also of good oak timber. Figure 4 represents two exterior walls to be raised 18 ½ feet above the stone wall of good oak timber 12 inches square, 18 feet long, notched so as to approach in one half inch of each other Figure 6 represents two interior walls to be raised of timber 12 inches square, 14 feet long, of good oak timber leaving a space of 12 inches between the two walls on which is to be laid at the height of 7 ½ feet from the lower floor the first tier of the floor above the dungeon which will be of timber 12 inches square of good oak, the second of which is to be of like size and laid across in like manner as the first floor on top of which the wall will be continued to the height of 7 feet where the first tier of the third floor will

be laid which will be 8 inches square, 18 feet long of good oak timber, so as to reach to the out side of the exterior wall on which will be laid the second tier in like manner as the other floors.

“The roof to be raised square of good materials and put up in a good workmanlike manner. The space between the two walls to be filled with upright timber 6 by 10 inches square, 18 ½ feet long, set in edgewise to the front. Three windows in the dungeon 10 inches square, well grated to give light and air with a door cut through the floor above the dungeon to pass into the same, with two good and substantial trap doors, shutter well made with good and sufficient locks and hinges, the one opening down and the other up, and on door in the upper room with a good shutter in each wall with good and sufficient locks and hinges: with two in the debtors’ room 12 inches square, well grated with a stair step to run up on the outside of the house to the door above in a strong and substantial manner and sufficiently wide to pass, with a square at the door sufficiently wide for convenience. The probable cost of the above building would be about five hundred dollars.

Respectfully submitted:
Hardin M. Williams”

And it was further ordered that the said superintendent advertise immediately for receiving proposals for building of the same until the first day of March, 1839, and that said undertaker be allowed until February, A.D. 1840 for the completion of said jail. And it is further ordered that one

third of the money be paid unto the under taker as soon as all the timber and materials are put on the lot ready for raising, one third after raising said building to the eave, and the other third when the building is finished and received. And it was further ordered that said jail be built on lot No. 12 and Block No. 10 as laid down on the plat of said town of Tuscumbia.

On May 6, 1839, the superintendent reported “that in pursuance of an order of said court at an adjourned term in said town on Monday, the 17th day of December, A.D. 1838, the said superintendent did proceed to advertise as directed by said order at three public places in said county, also caused to be published in the Jeffersonian Republican (Jefferson City newspaper, as there was no newspaper here at that early date), a copy of said advertisement, and he would further report that he was unable to obtain a contract within the bounds of the appropriation.”

However, on June 3 1839 said superintendent reported “That in pursuance of an order of said court made at their May term, 1839, he did proceed to advertise as directed by said order and that on the first day of June he did proceed to let to the lowest bidder at public auction in the town of Tuscumbia the said building and nine hundred and seventy five dollars being the lowest and best bid, therefore the said bidder, John T. Davis, was considered the undertaker, whereupon the said John T. Davis entered into bond as the law directs.”

It appears that the said Davis was a member of the court at the time, and he was also the successful bidder for the erection of the new courthouse, as set out in a recent issue of the Autogram, the bid offered by him for the erection of the courthouse being \$199.00, both contracts being finally let on the same day.

On March 10, 1840, H.M. Williams, the superintendent, reported on the progress of the jail, stating that there was then on the lot, timbers of the following dimensions: 39 pieces 12 inches square, 14 feet long, and 2 pieces 12 by 18 inches square, 14 feet long, and in the woods ready for hauling, timbers of the following description: 88 pieces 12 inches square, 18 feet long, 31 pieces 12 inches square, 18 feet long, 4 pieces 12 by 18 inches square, 14 feet long, 32 pieces 6 by 6 inches square, 19 feet long, 72 pieces filling timber, 6 by 10 inches square, 17 feet long, with some progress in singles. All of which was respectively submitted by the commissioner for the information of the court.

On May 5, 1840 said commissioner makes an additional report to the court as follows: "That since the last term of the court there has been prepared timber of the following description: 49 pieces 12 inches square, 18 feet long, 2 pieces 12 by 18 inches square, 18 feet long, 2 pieces 6 by 12 inches square, 18 feet long, 2 pieces 6 by 12 inches square, 18 feet long, 7 pieces 8 by 1, 19 feet long, 43 pieces 6 by 10 inches square, 17 feet long, which added to timber heretofore reported, will complete said building up to the square, likewise there are other parts of the work in

progress, to wit: The digging out of the foundation with part of the rock on the lot for laying the foundation, likewise the majority of the shingles made and on the ground, and all of which was respectfully submitted by the commissioner.”

On August 12, 1840, the work had so far progressed that the commissioner was able to make the following report: “That said building is now raised to the eve as per contract, with the materials all, or nearly so, on the ground, ready for completion.” On November 4, 1840, he reports that “the jail is now covered according to contract,” and on May 5, 1841, he makes a final report “That in obedience to the order of your honorable body the said jail is now completed in accordance to said order.”

Thus closed the record of the construction of the first jail in Miller County. We are impressed with the fact that our forefathers intended to erect a jail that would restrain and hold the prisoners, with a “dungeon” and “debtor’s room” and other safeguards. This jail was erected on lot 12 in block 10 being the present site of the George P. Swanson residence in Tuscumbia. The lot was sold by the county in 1889. As erected, the jail was one block north of the courthouse erected at the same time. The outline of the foundation of the county’s first jail may now be determined in the southeast corner of Mr. Swanson’s yard.