



The first-floor door of the Old Gaol is two planks thick, with heavy hand-wrought iron hinges.

EILEEN POWERS, 2007

Old Gaol

William H. Chadwick was escorted up the exterior stairs to the second floor of the Old Gaol, where he had a first look at his new residence — the west cell.

Dimly lit by natural light filtered through two iron-barred windows in the north and south walls, it featured a fireplace, built-in bunks, and a privy. Despite the austerity of his lodging, Chadwick was relieved that his sentence could be served on Nantucket and not in Boston, where his trial for embezzlement had been held. At least here his family was nearby, and his wife and parents would make the room comfortable for him, supplying a rug for the floor, a bookshelf for his library, a table for writing and for making lightship baskets, and a rocking chair.

In 1885, Chadwick was convicted of embezzling ten thousand dollars from the Pacific National Bank, money that presumably purchased some of the materials for a grand construction project on Squam Head: a three-story house with a large cupola, a massive stable, a

ADDRESS

15R Vestal Street

CONSTRUCTED

circa 1805

DISTANCE FROM

WHALING MUSEUM

.7 miles





Old Gaol and House of Correction, circa 1950

PC-OV-OLDGAOL-1

barn, and other outbuildings that came to be known as “Chadwick’s Folly.” The purpose of the compound was never divulged, but it was thought to be designed for use as a summer hotel, or gentlemen’s club, or perhaps a gambling casino, and that off-island backers funded most of the development. Chadwick’s conviction halted the project and the property was sold at auction.

Chadwick was the sole resident of the Old Gaol, a four-cell stronghold used primarily as a lockup for those awaiting trial on criminal charges. Next door was a “House of Correction,” or workhouse, where debtors, habitual drunkards, juveniles, and less serious malefactors could ply their trades while serving their sentences. As a felon, Chadwick was incarcerated in the more secure facility, although he, like many of the inmates over the years, had considerable freedom. Chadwick was a model prisoner, and after serving three years in his “penthouse cell” had his sentence commuted by President Cleveland in 1888.

Bank robberies and embezzlement were, surprisingly, not uncommon on Nantucket. In 1846, Barker Burnell Jr. was escorted to the second-floor west cell to await trial for embezzlement from the Manufacturers and Mechanics Bank. His term of residence was considerably shorter than Chadwick’s, as Burnell was found not guilty. The

stress of the trial and the public humiliation were too much for him, however, and he and his family moved to Chile.

Men accused of robbing the Nantucket Bank in 1795 had escaped from a jail on High Street, an incident that prompted the town to build the more secure facility. Local housewrights John and Perez Jenkins were contracted to construct a new jail on Vestal Street, near the courthouse then situated at the juncture of Main and Milk Streets. Two stories high, with two cells on each floor, fashioned from heavy oak logs bolted and reinforced with iron, with barred windows and doors two planks thick, the new jail was essentially an iron cage within a log cabin. It was a small fortress, a testament to local concern about keeping criminals securely locked away.

In 1805, the jail was not in a closely built neighborhood as it is today. The keeper's house was nearby on Vestal Street, or Prison Lane as it was known; to the west, open land extended to Quaker Road, or Grave Street. Information



Old Gaol window grate

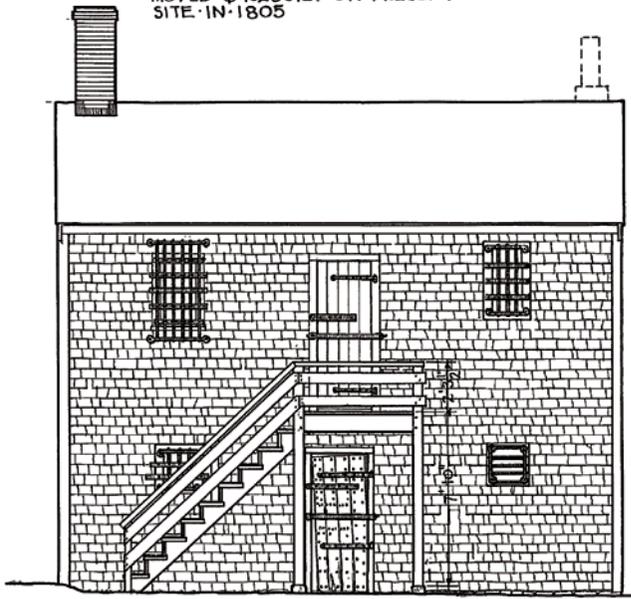
EILEEN POWERS, 2007



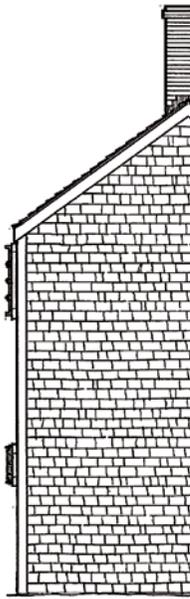
West cell on the second floor, with built-in bunks and privy box

JEFFREY ALLEN, 2011

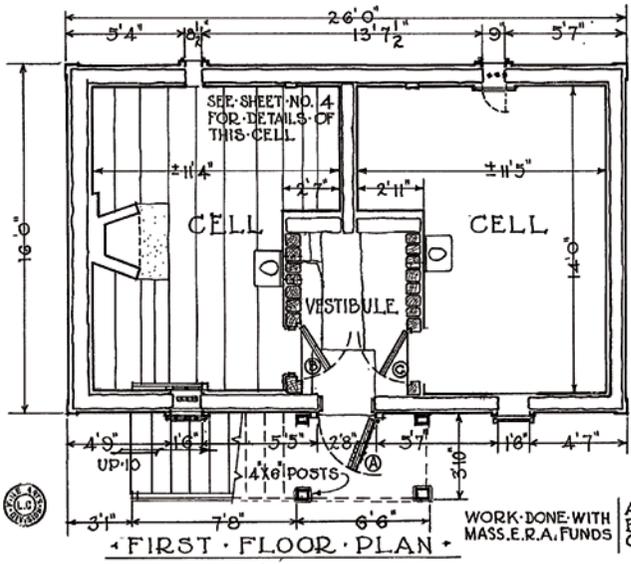
NOTE:-
ORIGINAL JAIL BUILT IN 1711
MOVED & REBUILT ON PRESENT
SITE IN 1805



SOUTH ELEVATION



WEST ELEVATION
(EAST SIDE)



NO.
WALLS - FLOORS -
LOG - CONSTRUCTED
FLOORS OF RANGING
PLANK OVER LOGS
EXTERIOR WALL
SHINGLED
INTERIOR - CELL
COVERED AT 50°
DOORS - TWO - PLANK
TWO - 2" OAK PLANK
CELL - OPENING - FR
WITH STRAP IRON
SASH OF LATER
CHIMNEY & FIRE PLACE
CELL PRIVIES - OF
PLANK - COVERED
FOUNDATION STONE
DOOR - SC

BERNARD BOISCLAIR DEL.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
OFFICE OF NATIONAL PARKS, BUILDINGS, AND RESERVATIONS
BRANCH OF PLANS AND DESIGN

WORK DONE WITH
MASS. E. R. A. FUNDS

A	DOOR	2'7" X 6'5" X 4"
B	"	2'8" X 5'8" X 4"
C	"	2'8" X 5'3" X 4"

BUILT -

NAME OF
OLD GAOL, NANTUCKET

THE HISTORICAL NOTE IN THE UPPER LEFT CORNER IS NO LONGER BELIEVED TO BE ACCURATE.

about inmates of the jail appears in Nantucket County Court records beginning in 1806, when Paul Worrton was taken to jail for failure to pay \$26.30 in damages to Jeremiah Mode for breaking his finger during an altercation. The length of Worrton's sentence is not known. Petty crimes, including thievery, were the most prevalent offenses on Nantucket, in about equal numbers to imprisonment for debt. In 1822, John Evans and James Murphy were committed "to gaol in this town charged with stealing a Pocket Book from Mr. Samuel Dow, while at an auction on Friday. On examination before Josiah Hussey, Esq., Murphy stated that Evans took the Pocket Book from the owner's Pocket and handed it to him, and that they went immediately to their lodgings and divided the money, amounting to 40 dollars." A later report states that Evans and Murphy had a copy of a biography of infamous English highwayman Michael Martin in their possession, proof of the "pernicious effects of such publications as the lives of Martin, Samuel Greene, and others who have ended their existence upon the Gallows." The duo of thieves managed to escape from the jail and sail away from the island; although spotted by a passing sloop, they were not apprehended.

Inspections and Recommendations

The Board of Managers of the Prison Discipline Society (Boston) inspected the Nantucket facility in October 1833, noting four prisoners: two thieves (one a Frenchman, the other a fourteen-year-old boy); one debtor; and a "youth of eighteen" whose crime is not recorded. The inspectors found the jail odoriferous, remarking: "Room No. 1 has a permanent vault (privy), the unpleasant effects of which were apparent on first entering the Prison, before the door of the room was opened. Rooms Nos. 2, 3, and 4, filthy from the same cause. In other respects, not much cause of complaint in regard to cleanliness."

In 1855, the "House of Correction," formerly a part of the Quaise Asylum/Town Farm in Polpis, was moved next to the jail on Vestal Street, and Sheriff Uriah Gardner was paid fifty dollars a year as overseer at the Gaol and the House of Correction. The seven additional rooms were available for debtors, who could ply their trades to pay their bills in what was essentially a workhouse. Unfortunately, in the mid-nineteenth century plenty of Nantucketers ran into financial

difficulty as the whaling industry collapsed and were unable to pay their mortgages and promissory notes. By the 1870s, the population of the island had dwindled to a third of what it had been in the 1840s, and there was little crime. In fact, the jail was empty from 1870 to 1876. When the Legislative Prison Committee visited Nantucket in 1883, it recommended abolishing both the jail and the House of Correction, but enough islanders signed a petition to preserve the increasingly archaic lockup, and the town continued to use it without making any significant alterations to the original structure. The Massachusetts Board of Prison Commissioners reported in 1902:

The buildings here remain as a curiosity in prison architecture. There was one prisoner in custody at the close of the year, the same as last year. During the year the keeper reports that there was one prisoner for one day; one for three days, held to be transported to a prison on the mainland; and one held for fourteen days, awaiting trial. As far as the chair is concerned, there is very little criminal business on Nantucket.



Local dignitaries and representatives from the Massachusetts Commission on Prisons at the Old Gaol, 1893 P7150

Twelve years later, the Commission made the same recommendation as the 1883 Legislative Prison Committee, to discontinue the use of the jail as a penal institution: "It is unfit and unsuited in every way for the confinement of human beings. . . . The authorities should see to it that both the jail and the house of correction are promptly disposed of in such manner that they can never again be used for confining purposes, for they are entirely unsuited in every way to that purpose." And once again, the town ignored the recommendations. Occasionally, a malefactor spent a night or two in one of the cells. During Prohibition (1920–33) the lower east cell was purportedly used to store confiscated liquor and homemade stills and accoutrements. The last prisoner hit the keeper on the head and escaped in 1933, and the building sat empty for more than a decade, until the Town of Nantucket deeded the jail and the adjacent House of Correction to the Nantucket Historical Association in 1946. The NHA noted in its annual report for 1946 that the buildings were falling into disrepair, ". . . and it would have been a matter of only a few years before they would become ruins." Restoration and repair were begun on the Old Gaol, and it opened for public viewing in the summer of 1949. The House of Correction was not part of the exhibit, and was razed in 1954.

In a fenced yard at the end of a narrow path, the Old Gaol is a stark reminder of the less celebratory side of Nantucket life in the nineteenth century. The sturdy building served the community for more than a hundred years, and remains a stronghold after a hundred more. It was restored in the spring of 2014 with community, state, and national grant funding.



Mid-twentieth-century sign, with modern spelling of "gaol"

GEORGE ALLEN SC688-1-32



The Old Gaol in 1935, two years after the last prisoner escaped

FRANK C. BROWN, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION, HABS MA-120-1



The Old Gaol restored

JEFFREY ALLEN, 2014