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A History of Old Clarke County Jail

The Old Clarke County Jail building has served many functions, but throughout its time on the corner of North Pope and Meigs Street it has remained an important space for the community. The building's ties to politics and government of Reconstruction Era South as well as its design as a part of a larger governmental building complex make it historically significant. Despite once sharing this property with the Clarke County Courthouse and Jailer's residence, the Old Clarke County Jail is the only building from this complex and still displays its historically significant architecture and materials. Through the Old Clarke County Jail Historical Marker, a significant part of Athens' history that is rarely seen will be exemplified.

Situated near the corner of North Pope and Meigs street, the two-story Clarke County Jail was completed in 1876¹ and was originally part of a complex that consisted of the jail, jailer's quarters and county courthouse. The original jail measured 40x36 feet and was made of brick, "plank,"² and with doors made of oak. Between the years of 1875 and 1901, the jail served the county and held as many as seventeen inmates at a time,³ with male inmates residing on the bottom floor, and women and children inmates residing on the second floor. The jail was considered "one of the best kept jails in Georgia. Prisoners are well fed, have comfortable beds and are required to keep their persons clean."⁴ Captain John W. Wier was elected sheriff of Clarke County at this time and served until 1892. Wier was well-known and popular throughout

¹ *Forest News* "Proposals for Building a New Jail." July 22, 1876. Accessed April 3, 2023. <https://gahistoricnewspapers-files.galileo.usg.edu/lccn/sn85027059/1876-07-22/ed-1/seq-2.pdf>

² *The Northeast Georgian*, "Bids for Building a Court House and Jail, August, 18, 1875. Accessed March 20, 2023. <https://gahistoricnewspapers.galileo.usg.edu/lccn/sn85033989/1875-08-18/ed-1/seq-3/>

³ *Athens Daily Banner* "Number of Prisoners is Unprecedented." August 16, 1899. Accessed April 3, 2023. <https://gahistoricnewspapers-files.galileo.usg.edu/lccn/sn89053947/1899-08-16/ed-1/seq-1.pdf>

⁴ *Savannah Morning News* "Georgia and Florida: Matters of Interest in Both States." February 26, 1883. Accessed March 20, 2023. <https://gahistoricnewspapers.galileo.usg.edu/lccn/sn82015137/1883-02-26/ed-1/seq-1/>

Northeast Georgia and was highly respected. He served as both the sheriff and the custodian of the jail and the county prisoners.⁵

The security in the jail was lacking, and in 1880, the first successful escape attempt by inmates was carried out. Two African American inmates escaped by lifting one of the doors off its hinges and breaking out of the windows. The men made it past a guard dog and were able to scale the outer wall. Throughout the years that followed, many inmates were able to escape from the jail through various methods, such as lifting the cell doors off their hinges,⁶ climbing to the roof⁷ and picking a hole through the wooden walls.⁸ During this time, repairs were needed to give the jail better ventilation, security, and to create fire resistance.

In 1882, Frank Johnson and Enos Echols, both black, were kept in jail after a shoot-out that resulted in the death of Walter Rountree.⁹ While initially kept on the first floor, the two men were moved to the second floor for safety reasons after a lynching attempt. It was found that the two men, Frank Johnson and Enos Echols, did not cause the death of Walter Rountree, but were convicted of assault with intent to commit murder and sentenced to the maximum penalty of ten years of hard labor. Both Johnson and Echols were leased as slave laborers at the Dade Coal Company. In 1891, Johnson was released after two years for good behavior. Echols attempted to lead a revolution after four years of his sentence and was given an additional five years. He served twelve years and was released in 1894.

⁵ *Weekly Banner* "Clarke County Officers." July 5, 1892. Accessed March 20, 2023. <https://gahistoricnewspapers-files.galileo.usg.edu/lccn/sn88054112/1892-07-05/ed-1/seq-1.pdf>

⁶ *Southern Weekly Banner* "Escape from Jail," March 14, 1882. Accessed March 20, 2023. <https://gahistoricnewspapers.galileo.usg.edu/lccn/sn88054104/1882-03-14/ed-1/seq-1/>

⁷ *Southern Weekly Banner* "Escape from Jail," March 14, 1882.

⁸ *Weekly Banner* "Furious Jail Birds Resort to a Fight to Settle Their Differences" October 20, 1891. Accessed March 20, 2023. <https://gahistoricnewspapers-files.galileo.usg.edu/lccn/sn88054112/1891-10-20/ed-1/seq-5.pdf>

⁹ Seawright, John Ryan. *Death in Cobbham: The Shooting of Walter Rountree, 1882*. Historic Cobbham Foundation.

A form of slavery, convict leasing became prevalent in Georgia following the emancipation of the enslaved after the Civil War. The convict leasing system was introduced in 1866 and allowed the state of Georgia to lease prisoners in the State Penitentiary to private organizations for labor.¹⁰ While the Old Clarke County housed only a small number of inmates who were leased for labor, the state penitentiary located in Milledgeville had hundreds of inmates leased. The use of convict leasing in Georgia exponentially increased the success of coal, mining, and rock quarry industries and benefited the state.

Large organizations, such as the company Dade County Coal, based productions of coal and coke on convict leasing practices. Frank Johnson and Enos Echols, two prisoners who were housed in Old Clarke County Jail, were sent to the Dade County Coal mines. Convict leasing ended in 1908 but was replaced by chain gangs. Chain gangs were created with the idea that convicts were repaying debt to society through public labor projects. State governments supported chain gangs because labor was cheap, and revenue increased. Old Clarke County Jail has direct ties to the convict lease system and represents life in the Reconstruction Era for predominantly African American prisoners.

During this time, Old Clarke County jail was considered a well-kept jail due to the work of Sheriff Wier. From the account of Mr. Turner, a guard who carried prisoners to and from different jails, the jail in Clarke County had “plenty of ventilation and was kept in good condition.”¹¹

¹⁰ Todd, William. "Convict Lease System." New Georgia Encyclopedia, last modified Jul 17, 2020. <https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/convict-lease-system/>

¹¹ *Athens Weekly Banner* “A Needed Reform,” December 17, 1889. Accessed May 2, 2023. <https://gahistoricnewspapers-files.galileo.usg.edu/lccn/sn88054117/1889-12-17/ed-1/seq-7.pdf>

Despite the work of Sheriff Wier, by 1901, repairs were so extensive that the original plans of gutting the inside and replacing the wooden interior with steel were re-evaluated.¹² Despite original plans of restoration, the building was in worse condition than originally thought, and the building was intentionally burned to the ground with the fire department supervising to make way for the updated building.

It is unclear whether this fire destroyed just the interior or the entire building, including the outer walls. The newspapers at the time reported that the updated building was to be built on the same plot as the old jail. As soon as the jail's walls were completed or repaired, Panley Manufacturing Company of St. Louis, Missouri began shipping steel cells that were to be placed inside the updated jail. New brick was delivered from a firm in Abbeville, South Carolina¹³ and steel girders for the roof were also used. The goal of these repairs was to ensure that the building was fireproof, thus steel cells and concrete replaced the wooden interior.

Under the supervision of Supt. T.P. Stanley,¹⁴ the updated jail was completed by October of 1901, less than 6 months from start of construction, for a total of \$5,500. Considered one of the most thorough and convenient jails in Georgia, the jail was fireproof and had cells made of steel that could not be cut. In the updated jail, cells were arranged so that male prisoners were separated from younger boys and female prisoners. Although new capacity of the jail was 25-30 prisoners,¹⁵ the jail rarely held over 10 prisoners at a time. More jail cells were added in 1905,

¹² *Athens Daily Banner*, "Old County Jail Consumed by Fire," May 23, 1901. Accessed March 20, 2023. <https://gahistoricnewspapers.galileo.usg.edu/lccn/sn89053947/1901-05-23/ed-1/seq-4/>

¹³ *Weekly Banner* "Work on Jail to Start Again" July 19, 1901. Accessed March 20, 2023. <https://gahistoricnewspapers-files.galileo.usg.edu/lccn/sn88054112/1901-07-19/ed-1/seq-7.pdf>

¹⁴ *Athens Daily Banner* "The Improvements Now Being Made Upon the County Court House and the Jail." March 28, 1901. Accessed March 20, 2023. <https://gahistoricnewspapers-files.galileo.usg.edu/lccn/sn89053947/1901-03-28/ed-1/seq-1.pdf>

¹⁵ *Banks County Journal* "Banks County Journal." October 17, 1901. Accessed April 4, 2023. <https://gahistoricnewspapers-files.galileo.usg.edu/lccn/sn88054073/1901-10-17/ed-1/seq-2.pdf>

along with other improvements to the upper part of the jail. Sheriff Wier died in 1907,¹⁶ and the position was filled by Sheriff Jackson.

The Old Jail and adjacent courthouse served Clarke County until 1913 when a new courthouse and jail complex, which still serves this purpose today, was built on Washington Street. Following completion of Washington Street Jail, the courthouse property was sold to the city for \$30,000 and a wing was added to each side of the courthouse building. In 1915, the courthouse and jail were used as Athens High School and Mell Auditorium was added to the property.¹⁷ Following World War II, the auditorium became a cafeteria to accommodate the new school lunch program, and the jail was used as a “manual training facility”¹⁸ and for miscellaneous other purposes over the next thirty years. In the property’s final years as Athens High School, the former jail building housed the ROTC department.

A new Athens High School building was completed on Milledge Avenue in 1953, and the courthouse and jail property was inherited by the University of Georgia Demonstration School, which was operated by the UGA’s College of Education as a training facility for its student teachers. The lower level of the jail was used as an agricultural classroom for male student members of Future Farmers of America and the upstairs was an industrial shop. The jail served as a classroom until 1956, when all city and county schools were consolidated and these classrooms were moved to Athens High School. After consolidations of the schools, the former courthouse was demolished in 1959, Finley Street was extended through the property to Prince

¹⁶ The Weekly Banner. “Funeral of Sheriff Wier Sunday.” December 20, 1907. Accessed May 2, 2023. <https://gahistoricnewspapers-files.galileo.usg.edu/lccn/sn88054112/1907-12-20/ed-1/seq-6.pdf>

¹⁷ The Athens Banner. “Splendid System of Public Schools for the City of Athens.” October 27, 1916, Image 26. Accessed April 14, 2023. <https://gahistoricnewspapers-files.galileo.usg.edu/lccn/sn88054098/1916-10-27/ed-1/seq-26.pdf>

¹⁸ Athens Historical Society, *Athens Historian*, Volume 20. (Athens, Georgia: Athens Historical Society, 2020) Pg. 6.

Avenue, and Mell Cafetorium was demolished to make way from multiple chain restaurants which are extant today.

From 1959-1995, Old Clarke County Jail was passed through several owners and had several purposes including space for nonprofits like Oconee River Land Trust and Georgia Land Trust Service Center. It was also the office of Allen Company, and a studio for artist Charles Pickney. The jail was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980 and as a local historic landmark in 1991.

The Old Clarke County Jail served an essential function in the county during time of completion, as it was part of the county seat. Criminals and those awaiting trial in the county court occupied the jail. Georgia had few courthouses built following the Civil War and fewer jails, since most jails did not survive over time.¹⁹ Old Clarke County jail represents Reconstruction Era politics and served the county for over three decades as a jail. For this reason, it was nominated in 1980.

Athens Regional Medical Center owned the property until 1995 and considered expanding into the surrounding area, but abandoned the idea when properties in the Cobbham neighborhood were revitalized for residences. Athens Regional Medical Center sold the property to the Historic Cobbham Foundation for \$1 in 1996. The Foundation leased the jail building for 15 years to Tom Reynolds, a Cobbham resident and preservation contractor, beginning in 1997. During this time, the building's interior was completely refurbished but the exterior remained largely intact.

¹⁹ Sheftall, John and Thomas, Kenneth *National Register Nomination Old Clarke County Jail*. May 29, 1980. Accessed March 20, 2023. <https://npgallery.nps.gov/NRHP/GetAsset/e467a415-76f2-4644-84db-5c82dbe349be>

The jail, now named the Billups Phinizy Spalding building in honor of the late UGA historian, champion of historic preservation, and leader of the Historic Cobbham Foundation, is currently used as a rental space and is managed by the Historic Cobbham Foundation.

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