

Lancaster Jail

In 1785, when the post-Revolutionary government of South Carolina was formed, the state legislature instructed each county to build a jail and to set up a whipping post and stock.

In York County, the April 1876 session of court ordered the building of a courthouse and a "gaol," the old English spelling for jail. "The gaol to be 24 feet in length & 16 in width, one store of 8 feet high of square logs double built, divided into two rooms."

Chester County built its first of a series of seven jails at various locations in the early 1790s on Church Street. The second jail was built on a hill in 1798 and lasted until 1819, when a log structure was built.

Lancaster County didn't get around to building a jail until 1800. The location was back of the courthouse where the present county office building stands, but it is not known whether the jail was built of wood or brick.

Of all the early jails, only one is really noteworthy. The is Lancaster's second jail, the building still standing, which was designed by the great architect, Robert Mills.

The historical marker for the jail says on its reverse side: "Robert Mills of Charleston, South Carolina, Civil and Military Engineer of his state, was America's first native born, professionally trained architect. He is best known as the designer of the Washington Monument."

At the time that Robert Mills drew the plans for Lancaster's jail, he was engineer of the Board of Public Works of South Carolina. In a commissioned book of the S.C. Tricentennial Commission, published on S.C. architecture, 1670-1970, there is this description: "In the Lancaster jail, Mills achieved a sense of sturdy strength and simple form with very limited architectural means. On the ground floor three blind arches with their architraves accented contain a rounded arched entrance door flanked by square headed windows with lintels. Very bold quoins are joined at the floor lines in string courses. The wide chimney breaking through the roofline distinctly transforms was might have been a pediment into a gable end."

Willis W. Alsobrook was the original contractor of the Lancaster jail. The total cost of construction was \$8,000.

The interior of the jail, which remained unaltered for more than a century and a half except for the addition of electricity and water, was two floors. The downstairs had a hall running the length of the building with three rooms on each side. Only two downstairs rooms had bars. By tradition, the rooms were known as debtor's prison rooms. The doors had 3-foot hinges on double plank.

On the landing of the stairs that gave access to the second floor, there was built a heavy door with a large lock opened by a key. At the head of the stairs was another heavy door with an even larger lock - approximately 4 by 5 inches across.

The second floor was one huge room with a passageway running around the outside. On the interior were placed four cells with heavy iron bars. At the bottom of the door was a smaller one designed for the passing of food into the cell. For maximum security, one cell had a second cell inside it. Cots, secured by heavy chains, swung from the walls. In the days before electricity the cells must have been terribly dark as little light came to them from the outside windows.

Union soldiers attempted to burn the Lancaster jail at the end of the Civil War. They soaked turpentine in cotton balls, set them afire and threw them on the roof. The jail was saved by arriving Confederates.

On Dec. 27, 1979, a fire broke out in the ancient building. Eleven prisoners died of smoke suffocation. Shocked, county officials determined to build a new law enforcement center with modern facilities. The old Lancaster jail, which was a designated National Historic Landmark, was insured for only half the cost of renovation, but there was no thought of demolishing it.

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