

THE HISTORY OF
THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA JAIL

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The material presented in this paper is intended only to provide the reader with a brief history of the development of a Washington Institution about which the average person has little information, The District Jail. The subject matter deals with the growth of the Jail from a log building, built in 1778, to a large and modern penal institution. It is sincerely hoped that the reader has never in the past and will never in the future become so interested in this establishment that he make a lasting visit.

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One of the most interesting and perhaps one of the least well known institutions in the District of Columbia is the Jail. Formerly known as the Washington Asylum and Jail, it has passed through many stages before coming to its present one.

In 1788, the Federal Government provided a log building on the north side of C street, between John Marshal Place and 6th St. This was used for a dozen years, both by the District and by Prince Georges County, Md. It was replaced around 1800 by a three room brick building, which operated under the authority of the old Levy Court. The records are vague and fail to show whether this one continued to function as a jail after the construction in Judiciary Square of the first circuit court Jail of Washington county. This was in 1802. Eventually it became too small and in March, 1839, Congress appropriated \$31,000 for a new jail of three stories, erected at 4th and G Sts., N.W. This one was designed by Robert Mills, who also designed the Washington Monument and the Treasury. The Jail was painted blue, and acquired the name, "The Blue Jug." This served the expanding capital for many years, all through the Civil War, and for several years after.

During the War years there were several military Prisons also; the Old Capitol Prison on the present site of the Supreme Court Building, Forrest Hall Prison in Georgetown, and Carroll Prison on the present Library of Congress site.

The "Blue Jug" was judged obsolete several years after the war and plans were started for a bigger and better jail. In 1872 Congress appropriated \$300,000 for the construction of the Jail at 19th and C Sts., Southeast, where it still stands. Three years later \$140,057 was set aside for completion and perfection of the structure. This Jail was originally intended to house 300 prisoners. Its cells were 5' x 8' x 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ ' and were to be occupied by one prisoner. As the Jail population grew, 48 more cells were added at a cost of \$12,000 and several prisoners were put in the same cell even after this addition had been made.

The Jail that seemed modern in 1872 seems impossible to us today. There was no running water in the cells, and there were no proper plumbing facilities. The prisoners were fed from tin cans shoved through the bars of their cell doors. Gradually improvements were made and in 1910 at a cost of \$37,000, modern plumbing was installed and changes were made in the Women's Department.

Up to this time the jail had been in charge of a warden, but in 1911, the office of Warden was abolished and that of superintendent replaced it, the Superintendent to be appointed by the Commissioners of the District of Columbia.

The Jail was designated, a short while after the Civil War, as the official execution place of the District. Capital punishment was by hanging until 1926, when an electric chair was installed. Death is still by that means. One of the extremely undersirable features up to the present year was the fact that electrocutions took place in the mess hall. Now, with the advent of the remodeling of the jail, they will be held in the Administration Building. This building is only one of the additions, other wings having been added, and the inside almost completely remodeled, although the old outside walls still stand. Modern maximum security cell blocks, new medical quarters, dormitories, and a women's department, have been built.

The Jail's population is made up of men and women awaiting trial, witnesses, persons held for immigration authorities or for police of other jurisdictions, short term prisoners, and those awaiting transfer to other institutions, and also for those awaiting execution. 85% of the jail commitments are misdemeanants. About 64% of the prisoners committed to the jail were charged with intoxication. Eventually this situation may be changed by the establishment of an institution for inebriates.

The total admissions for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1941, was 18,556. The daily average population was 507. 465 were male and 51 female. The daily average cost per prisoner was 92.8¢, of which 19.4¢ or 21% was spent for food, the rest going for salaries and general maintainance costs.

Several years ago an Inmate Advisory Council was established by means of which a council of prisoners considers problems of the prisoners and recommends what action it considers should be taken. Another forward looking feature is the placing of social service internes in the jail.

The purpose of a progressive penal institution is to protect society by teaching prisoners to be useful citizens instead of repeaters,* and toward this end the staff of the District Jail is continually working.

Bibliography:

*The Prison Problem in the District of Columbia
a survey by "The Prison Industries Reorganization Administration."

Statistics and other records of the District of Columbia Jail.