

Hancock County Jail & Hanging Tree

By Jerry Long



Picture from Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 26 October 1969, p.1C:

Caption – Solid Security for lawbreakers is the Hancock County Jail, built in 1854 with two-foot-thick stone walls in the lower right section. It has a large cell with three-inch iron walls, a “bullpen” made of sheet steel for “difficult” prisoners and can hold up to 75 prisoners. County Jailer William Perry, a former electrician, and his wife gaze over the courthouse square from the lofty porch of their jailhouse home. He has been jailer since 1965 and is unopposed for re-election.



Louisville Daily Courier, Louisville, KY, 1 April 1854, p2:

“A new jail is being built in Hawesville, Hancock county, to cost \$2,950.”



Hancock Clarion, Hawesville, KY, Saturday, 27 October 1900:

Some Local History.

The Hancock county jail, at Hawesville, was built in 1854 and is one of the oldest buildings in our neighbor county. It is said that Gen. Morgan, the "raider," spent one night during the civil war in this historic building as the guest of the sheriff. It was just after he had issued his famous proclamation at Lexington in August 1862. We were so informed while there Saturday. – Tell City Journal.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 19 February 1972, p1B:

***Jail in Hancock County
Is over 100 Years Old***

HAWESVILLE, Ky.-The jail in Hancock County is a two story white stone and brick building located across the street from the Hawesville courthouse. The building, one of the oldest in the county, was built in 1844 [sic – should be 1854].

County Judge Joe Pell says that the jail gets some four to five hundred prisoners a year, though most of them are temporary inmates.

The county jailer, William Perry and his wife Elizabeth, live on the second floor of the building. The jail itself is on the first floor.

Perry also acts as custodian of the jail and his wife cooks for the prisoners and washes the jail linen in addition to acting as a matron.

The county pays the Perrys three dollars a day per prisoner to run the jail. The jail's bills are sent once a month to the fiscal court which handles the other expenses such as laundry, food and incidental costs that may come up.

The jail portion of the building itself consists of an area with a cell and one bed. This cell walls are lined with beds. A shower area is between this cell and there is a dormitory-type room which has enough space for five beds. Each area has a separate entrance.

There has never been an escape at the jail, says Judge Pell, possibly because the walls are built of two foot thick stone blocks. Windows can be blocked by steel plates on sturdy hinges.

LeRoy Porter, state jail consultant, describes the jail as having good plumbing, good heat and sufficient light in his annual inspection report.

The report adds that the housekeeping is excellent with the jail area being clean and neat. The jail, in spite of its age, according to Porter's report, is quite secure. The only sour note in the report is that locking devices throughout the jail are padlocks.

The jail is ancient and according to the Kentucky Commission on Law Enforcement and Crime Prevention ought to be replaced by a newer facility.

The commission says that "Kentucky's jails are on the whole outdated and unfit for use." Their report adds that, "fully 69 percent of the state's 170 local jails are inadequate, according to the state probation and parole officers.

Judge Pell says that he'd like to get a new jail built in Hawesville, and a new courthouse, too. Unfortunately, one of the county's blessings has turned into a curse. Employment is high in Hancock County and federal matching money is not made plentiful except in areas where unemployment is high.

The government, he says, won't give Hancock County a grant to build until the unemployment figures rise to a level of about six percent.



The Jail is 118 years old in Hancock County and the state recommends that it be replaced with a new facility. County Judge Joe Pell has been trying to get a federal grant to aid in building new government facilities, including a new jail, but hasn't been able to because the county's unemployment rate is too low.



Hancock 29: Pictorial Heritage of Hancock County, Kentucky, Robert A. Powell, editor, Kentucky Heritage Artist, Lexington, KY, Kentucky Images, 1978, page 26:



Old Hancock County Jail

Artist - Gary Akers

Original Painting sponsored by Gibson and Son Funeral Home

The old Hancock County Jail was built with slave labor around 1854. It was made from hand hewn stone which averaged 16 x 18 x 36 inches in size.

There were two cells, one of which held a "bull pen" or cell within a cell. This is where younger prisoners or female prisoners were kept.

An office and a utility room were also on the first level. The upstairs housed a four-room apartment for the jailer. The dirt floors on the main level were only replaced

by concrete floors in recent years.

The jailer's wife was responsible for feeding the prisoners, and records indicate the largest number to be held at one time was 12 persons.

With the building of the new Hancock County Administration Building came an ultra modern jail. All cells are underground.

The picturesque old jail pictured here was torn down in September 1977 to make way for the parking lot to the new County Administrative Office building.



Hancock Clarion, Hawesville, KY, 19 April 1990:

The cornerstone from the old jail has found a new home. When the jail was torn down as part of the 1977 old courthouse restoration and new administration building project the cornerstone was moved to the yard of the County Annex Building. Recently Judge/Executive Danny Boling and the Fiscal Court have cooperated with the Hancock County Museum and moved it to the museum where it sits on the south exterior of the building.

To add an historic note Al Basinger donated some large sandstone blocks from the old Immaculate Conception Church which was built in the 1870's and torn down in the 1970's. The cornerstone rests on some of these blocks and others surround it and the new Kentucky Historical Society Highway Marker recently installed to commemorate the saving of the 1901 L&N Depot building. Mr. Basinger not only donated the blocks he delivered them as well.

The cornerstone is about 76" long, 20" deep, and 24" across. Handhewn letters reads "Erected by JS & CCH 1854".



Built For Punishment – one of last photos of the old Hancock County Jail. The building was erected in 1854 and was razed to make way for a parking lot to serve the administration building, constructed in 1977.



Solid Service – Two former Hancock County jailers, Jim Morris, left, and Bill Perry, take a seat on the cornerstone from the old jail. Mr. Moths was Jailer from 1954 to 1966 and Mr. Perry was Jailer from 1966 to 1978, and was the first officer in charge of the new jail. The ring of hewn stones came from the old Immaculate Church, built in the 1850s.



Hancock Clarion, Hawesville, KY, 16 May 2013, p.13:



When the annex to the Hancock County Courthouse was built in 1977 the jail was torn down and a new jail was located in the annex. Hancock County now has no jail; prisoners are transported to the Breckinridge County facility. In the old jail prisoners were housed in the lower part of the building and the jailer and his family resided in the upper part. On the door to the

cellblock someone had written “Welcome come in stranger.” The cornerstone with the year of construction, 1854, is on display at the Hancock County Museum in Hawesville.

In an 1853 issue of the newspaper, “The Pick and Plow”, there was a small ad on the front page that read: “Attention! The undersigned commissioners appointed by Hancock County court to contract for the erection of a New Jail, will proceed to let out same to lowest bidder at the December Term of said court. Plan & Specifications, etc. can be seen at G.W. Williams Law Office. The jail is to be completed by the 7th _ (not readable)



Cornerstone of Hancock County Jail built in 1854 and torn down in 1977 on display at the Hancock County Museum in Hawesville, KY



Drawing of a lynching

Hancock Clarion, Hawesville, KY, Thursday, 19 April 1956:

Gone – But Not Forgotten - - -
Lynch- Tree In Courthouse Yard Removed

The accompanying picture portrays an old landmark in Hawesville that is being removed, and with its removal we are reminded of a strange incident connected with this aged tree. It was from an overhanging limb of this old tree that Hawesville had its first and only lynching in the years that are gone. We thought it would be of interest to recall some of the incidents of this

hanging that we have gathered from some of our older citizens who remember it recall the events of that day nearly sixty years ago.

Raymond Bushrod, a negro. of the county was the victim of that lynching, and from the recounting of the tales that we have heard it was a hectic day on that Sunday. September 26, 1897. Many of the stories told at this later day is largely remembrances of some of those who, as boys, recall the event and the thrills that they had at the time

It was on a Saturday, as recounted by one of our older citizens, that the sheriff (thought to have been Tom Kelly), searched for the negro and found him hiding beneath the station platform at what is now Adair. The victim was brought to Hawesville and secreted out during the night in the cemetery and on Sunday morning was placed in jail, No one seems to be sure who the jailer was at that time but some think it was Tom Patterson.

On Sunday morning people began congregating in Hawesville and soon an angry mob was in the making. It was reported that the State Militia had been called for and was to arrive on the train that day. Watchers were posted on the hill at 'Lovers' Leap' and other locations to watch and see if the militia was to arrive.

Fearing the arrival of the militia the mob soon got our of control and rushed the jail and took the Negro from his cell, but not before some confusion. When the cell door was broken open the Negro was hidden behind the door and it was thought that he had escaped and a wide search began. It was soon learned that he had not escaped and was taken from the jail by the mob The victim was subjected to a great deal of abuse and then a rope was secured and put around his neck and thrown over the limb of the tree that overhung the sidewalk. The lynchers soon hoisted the victim aloft and he was dangling from the end of the rope.

Many of the older citizen, of today recount incidents of that day of the hanging. A well-known retired merchant in Hawesville recalls that he received fourteen whippings that day as his father would find him in the street and would spank him and send him home, but the boy would soon be back in the midst of the throng. Another citizen recalled that he had climbed into the tree before the hanging and when the Negro was brought to the tree to be hanged, this boy hurriedly slid down and hid himself.

Alter nearly three score years it is difficult to get a complete picture of the hanging, but the aged tree is there to give evidence that it was from one of its limb that Raymond Bushrod was hanged. During the years since that day this tree has grown and cast its shadow across the Courthouse grounds and many have been the citizens who have sat in its shade and many have been the stories and conversations that have been carried on in that Courthouse shadow. The aged Hall of Justice was outraged that day in 1897 and for the first and only time Hawesville was the scene of mob violence.

The old tree is being cut down because of its decaying condition that threatens to cause it to fall and perhaps crush the Memorial Soldiers' Monument that graces the corner of the Courthouse grounds.

As the generations come and go, and time goes on, the old tree with its overhanging branches from which the victim of a mob was hanged in the long ago, will be forgotten and the tragedy of that day will fade from the memory of men, and the incident that occured there will be erased to of the be recalled no more.



Hancock Clarion, Hawesville, KY, Thursday, 19 April 1956:

The Editorial Page

Incidents In The Life Of A Tree

Elsewhere in this issue is the story of the cutting down of the aged tree in the Courthouse yard and an incident of the long ago that is attached to this old tree.

In the years that are past many communities like Hawesville, being the seat of government of counties, have experienced incidents in their history that are outstanding events. In the past, lynching was a more common event than now, and some of those lynchings recall that men are sometimes drawn into mob violence, little thinking what the result might be.

It was on a Sunday September day in 1897 that such an event came to Hawesville. With the passing of nearly three score years much of the stigma of that day has been removed from the minds of our people. We would forget the incident and desire that it had never happened, but the cutting down of the aged tree from which the victim of that lynching hung has brought it to mind and as a last remembrance we expect the incident to be forgotten.

In the life of old trees there is always a history that could be recorded if the tree could recount them. This giant tree in the Hawesville Courthouse yard could recount many stories of interest if it could speak. The lynching that took place from its limb in the in the long ago was but one of the events that could be recalled by this tree. Many have been the boys and girls who have played around its base, hiding their eyes and counting to the traditional one hundred as their companions scampered away to hide and to be found. Youngsters of the long ago now grown old in years have sat in the shade of this aged tree as they listened to the stories of their elders.

Perhaps under the shadow of this tree then but a youngster itself, men gathered in the sixties to march away to the South or to the North to battle for a cause that they thought just, many of them never to return. And as the years went by others were gathered there to march away to fight for the freedom of our country and of the world in 1917-18, and again in the 1940's.

In its shadow now rests a white marble monument erected by our people in remembrance of those boys who went from our homes to fight for freedom and many of them rest beyond the seas in fields where poppies grow and in tropical isles in the far Pacific. What stories this old tree could recite if it could talk. And now it is being removed and its own history ended.

In the twilight of evening in the past as lovers sat in the shadows of this great old tree and whispered their sweet nothings the old tree shielded them from the passing throng and from its shadows homes have been builded and families reared, and generations have come and gone.

Politicians have spoken from platforms under its branches and loud have been the huzzahs that have rung from the throats of those who listened. Perhaps in the years gone by. A. O. Stanley stood under this tree and spoke in his inimitable manner, and Dave Kincheloe, with his golden voice pleasing rhetoric gave forth his orations that are to be remembered by many today. Ed Morrow also spoke the shadow of this great old tree and in his matchless manner recounted the principles of the Republican party as had Stanley and Kincheloe those of the Democratic. Others of great or lesser note have orated in the shade of this tree that is now being removed from the earth.

Within the walls of the aged Courthouse, bathed in the shade of this old tree, nameless courts have been held and judges sat on the bench to dispense justice and to bring accord among men. To our remembrance comes the names of Judges Owen, Birkhead, Wilson, Stack and Neal, and now Judge Bratcher is the presiding judge. Within its walls haves gathered judges to try men for crimes and to bring in sentences that have taken men from their homes to spend years behind

prison walls. If the old tree could speak or the Courthouse walls reecho the events that have occurred, a varied history of mankind would be spoken.

We are living in a new day — just as every generation is a new day — and the events of the past grow dim in memory and fade away as our penile grown from youths to old age, pass from this mortal scene below. The aged landmarks stand as remembrances of the history that has been recorded, and as time goes on even these landmarks grow old and are removed and new ones take their places. Ever down the ages when men live and die, history is being made, and we recall the events that occur when fresh in mind, and then they grew dim in memory and pass away with our passing.

We might repeat the words of the poet and say: “Woodman spare that tree, but perhaps it is best that it should go and the events that are recorded by its history be forgotten and a new life by engendered and a new outlook brought into being as the world moves on.

