

# GLIMPSES into Bullitt County History: Jail before the old Stone Jail

BY CHARLES HARTLEY  
LOCAL HISTORIAN

Most folks reading this column are familiar with the Old Stone Jail located behind the Courthouse in Shepherdsville, but did you know that it was the third official Bullitt County Jail?

Before there was even a courthouse, the members of the County Court selected a part of Adam Shepherd's storehouse down by the river to house prisoners until they could get a real jail built. But the first official jail was located on the northwest corner of what is today the intersection of Buckman Street and Joe B. Hall Avenue.

The early plan was to put a courthouse in the middle of that intersection, along with the jail on one corner and later a clerk's office on the opposite corner, today where the old Bullitt County Bank building sits.

In late December 1797, John Essary reported to the Court that he had completed the first story of the new jail. They inspected it, liked what they saw, and declared it be received as the public jail of Bullitt County.

Then Henry Crist built the first courthouse around 1804, and the Court made arrangements to build a brick office for the County Clerk in 1811.

This first jail served its purpose for a quarter century before beginning to show its age. By the 1830's it was requiring significant repairs, and more and more discussions turned to replacing it.

In September 1838, the Court appointed Charles

Douglass, Philip Willson and Guy Phelps to view the jail and report whether or not it would be practicable to repair the lower prisoner room of the jail to make it safe. It appears that the Court had already hired Philip E. Wilson to make some repairs for they paid him \$125 in November for making repairs.

The Court made one last effort to shore up the old jail, appointing Joseph Murray and Thomas Riley in April 1839 as a committee to let to the lowest bidder the repairing of the lower room of the jail following the report of Phelps and his fellow commissioners.

I find no indication that more work was done on the old jail; perhaps no one bid on the project, but in January 1840, the Court appointed John Graham as a commissioner to "examine in person the jails of Shelby, Spencer, Nelson, Marion and Hardin jails and report to the court the different plans of said jails, the materials with which they are severally built, the number of rooms, and costs of each, and collect all such other and further information as will enable him to report the same to the next February Term of this Court."

On the same day, Frederic Travis was appointed County Jailer following the resignation of William B. Holsclaw who had served only a short time after replacing Joseph Murray who had himself resigned the previous July. Travis would be Jailer throughout the construction of a new jail.

Meanwhile, they

needed legislative permission to sell the old jail and lot, and build a new jail. This they obtained on February 5, 1840 in an Act authorizing them to sell the old lot and buy a lot on which to build a new jail.

Monday, February 10, 1840 was a busy Court Day. Graham returned with his report, recommending that they build a jail similar to the one he saw in Hardin County. They approved his report, and voted to pay him \$30 for his trip expenses. (This would be about \$1150.00 in 2026 money; still not a great deal of money for the time he must have spent visiting all these places on horse-back.)

It's interest to note that they skimped a bit on materials, calling for 9 inches square black locust timbers instead of 12 inch square oak timbers called for in the Hardin County plan. It also reminds us that Bullitt was not a wealthy county in those days.

The Court next appointed William R. Thompson, John Graham and Thomas Shain to advertise in The Louisville Journal and Public Advertiser that they would be taking bids on the new jail's construction at their next meeting.

They then chose Noah C. Summers, Thomas Shain and William R. Thompson to select a lot to build the new jail on and make a report to the court.

The old jail was obviously unsuitable for housing prisoners, for they also obtained from the legislature an Act granting them permission to

make arrangements with a neighboring county to house any prisoners found guilty of a felony; indicating that the current jail would be unlikely to secure such criminals.

As they looked for a new site for the jail, they decided to purchase the two lots on the east side of Main Street and south of Third Street. Numbered as 9 and 10 on James Shank's Shepherdsville plat, together they would give the County's government a full acre of ground to provide space for additional constructions down the road.

Lot No. 9, the front lot facing Main Street, was the home of John Chaddic. Here he also had a blacksmith shop. However, financial difficulties had forced the sale of his mortgage to Humphrey Simmons, and the two of them were willing to see the county buy the ground, especially since Chaddic was to have the use of his dwelling house and his well for five years, and was at liberty to remove the blacksmith shop at any time by or before the completion of the roof of the new jail.

Noah Summers, Bullitt County Clerk, owned the other lot, likely as an investment, and was also willing to sell. He had a stable on the lot, and the county agreed to pay to have it moved to another lot he owned.

Perhaps the members of the Court were forward looking, for these two lots have remained the site of County Government to this day with the current courthouse there.

In March 1840, the commissioners William R.

Thompson, Richard P. Simmons and J. D. S. Peacock reported that Charles G. Douglass had been the low bidder, offering to build the jail for \$3100, but was not able to post the necessary bond, so the job was rebid with Sydney S. Alexander getting the job at a bid of \$3200, as he was able to post a sufficient bond of \$6400 with John Anderson and Woodford McDowell his bond security.

The court appointed Rufus K. Summers, Austin Hall, Guy Phelps and Abraham Field as commissioners to superintend the building of the jail; and in June, they fixed the location for the new jail at 30 feet back from Main Street and 25 feet from the alley on the south side of the lot, which would have put it today somewhere between the Adam Shepherd Historical Marker in the front yard of the current Courthouse and the southwest corner of that building.

In August, the Court put Deputy Sheriff James Combs in charge of advertising and selling the old jail and lot, and Robert F. Samuels bought it in September for \$280. However, Samuels had second thoughts and wished to back out of the deal a year later. The Court allowed this, and ordered County Attorney David B. Abernathy to either sell it to someone or rent it out. In November 1841, Jailer Frederic Travis offered to buy it for \$227, but the Court rejected that offer, and he finally agreed to pay the full \$280. He then sold it to Wilford Lee for \$500, making a tidy profit. Keep in mind that this lot was still a good location,

standing as it did on what was then the Courthouse Square.

Returning to the new jail, Alexander worked all summer and into the fall, and by November 1840 the commissioners in charge of superintending his work were ready to inspect it and approve its construction. On November 12, they reported to the Court that it was finished and that Alexander had fulfilled his contract. The Court authorized Noah C. Summers, W. R. Thompson and John Graham to borrow \$1000 in the county's name to pay Alexander his balance due.

In February, the Court authorized the Jailer to enclose the lot with a good plank fence. He agreed, and left it to "two disinterested persons" to decide what his efforts were worth. In August, he came to Court and asked that Samuel A. McKay, Rufus K. Summers and Charles G. Douglass be appointed to judge his work and assess its value. I find no mention of the price they agreed upon.

Frederic Travis, as Jailer, continued to make improvements on the jail, adding a porch and a kitchen to it by the fall of 1842. Other men would serve as jailers down through the years, but we know this jail remained until at least 1886 when we see it on a fire insurance map drawn for the town then. It would be replaced in 1891 with the Old Stone Jail still located behind the Courthouse today, having served its purpose for a half century.



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Waiver of inspections will be used at auction. Sold in "AS IS" condition. 10% buyer's premium will be added to the final bid to determine the sale price.

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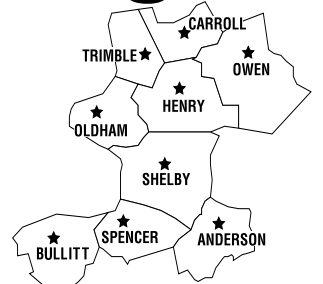
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