

Among Quaintest Ancient Ruins Are Some of Our County Jails

By ROBERT A. McLEAN

A \$50,000 set of architect's blueprints for a new Essex County Jail, drafted in 1954, is dusted off annually when the county commission asks the Legislature for a centralized house of correction.



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Worcester County Jail was termed "antique" back in 1939, when it was 120 years old. The occasion was the suffocation deaths of three inmates during a fire when keys were unavailable to open their subterranean, solitary-confinement cells.

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Middlesex County's 110-year-old jail at East Cambridge was scheduled to be razed in 1953 to make room for a courthouse parking lot. The county budget at the time lacked funds for the demolition, and the plan was dropped.

The Bristol County jail at New Bedford, built three years before the Civil War, was middle-aged when Lizzie Borden sat out her trial and subsequent acquittal in the hatchet murders of her parents in 1893.

The centralized Essex County jail, which would be constructed in Middleton at a cost estimated at \$2 to \$2.5 million, would replace the antiquated Salem and Lawrence county jails. Both were built 30 years before the Battle of Bull Run and, their critics say, have changed but little since.

A special Governor's Council on Jails and Houses of Correction recommended last week the abandonment of the Lawrence, Salem, New Bedford, Worcester and Cambridge jails, along with Suffolk County's Deer Island. The report is the latest in a long series of surveys of Massachusetts' penal institutions, all of which come up with about the same story.

Bay State county houses of correction, with some exceptions, have striking similarities, chiefly that they are old, with archaic fixtures, and many are located in the heart of populous communities.

Almost everyone agrees that our elderly county jails need replacement, but disagreement comes on which government shall administer the new institutions—the state or the counties.

The Massachusetts Sheriffs Assn., perennial proponents of improved penology practices,

charge certain legislators with hamstringing their plans in that direction. They feel that their jails can be run most economically as county institutions, and they see the move to abandon county jails as part of a campaign to abolish county government.

They are unhappy also with the governor's committee report.

"The committee wasn't fair to us in any way," Norfolk County Sheriff Charles W. Hedges said. He charged that committee members spent about 90 minutes inspecting the county jail at Dedham.

"The committee seemed to have made up its mind even before it got here," he asserted.

Sen. Leslie B. Cutler of Needham will file a bill for Hedges this week for a \$2 million house of correction to replace the 130-year-old Dedham jail. The new jail would be on open land, away from densely populated Dedham and with space for outdoor recreational fields and a farm.

Despite its age, and the fact that modern plumbing has been installed in cells only within the last five years, Dedham is among the better penal institutions in its reformation and rehabilitation programs. This is due to the efforts of Hedges and his predecessor, Peter F. McCormack of Brookline, aided greatly by a dedicated group of 450 men and women, members of the Norfolk County Sheriff's Associates, Inc.

Plymouth County Sheriff Adnah H. Harlow characterized the commission's report "non-objective and a rehash of things that have been a matter of controversy."

Harlow operates one of the state's newer county jails, a 53-year-old institution complete with a 280-acre dairy and produce farm in the Chiltonville section southwest of Plymouth center. Solitary confinement was banned in 1955,

and Harlow administers on the theory that an inmate is confined as punishment, not for punishment.

Middlesex County Sheriff Howard Fitzpatrick and his commissioners have been in a quandary for some time over the antiquated East Cambridge House of Correction, adjacent to the Superior Court and used in part for lodging prisoners awaiting trial.

If the old jail is abandoned, and facilities are lacking for confinement in the court buildings, prisoners will be shuttling back and forth from Billerica, where the more modern county jail is located.

Equally frustrating is the Essex County situation, where Sheriff Earl E. Welles admitted that the Lawrence house of correction, called the worst in the state by the commission, should be closed.

County Comm. C. F. Nelson Pratt suggested earlier this year that the Lawrence jail be shut down and its inmates transferred to the Salem house of correction.

Sheriff Welles is among the strongest supporters of the centralized county jail proposal, but he feels that the architect's plans in hand could not be carried out, even for \$2.5 million. The commissioners voted last week to submit again a petition to the Legislature for a new county jail.

They asked for the same thing last year and were turned down. They've asked almost every year since 1954, and before that, too. The bill seldom gets out of committee on Beacon Hill.

In 1959 a 25-member Essex County citizens committee surveyed the two county jails, made strong recommendations for closing both Lawrence and Salem and advocated construction of the new jail on part of the extensive county farm tract in Middleton.

The commission also urged training programs for corrections officers, more social workers and establishment of a reformation and rehabilitation program for inmates.

In summation, the Essex County report struck a note which many penologists and others interested in improved corrections systems must feel. "Looking into the Essex County jail system is nothing new," it said. "It has been done by many individuals and groups. The recommendations are generally the same."