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 1854, is dusted off annually when the county committee investigates for a centralized house of correction.

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

Middlesex County's 110-year-old jail at East Cambridge was scheduled to be razed in 1854, but public opposition and a courthouse parking lot were among the factors that delayed the plan.

The Bristol County Jail at New Bedford, built 35 years before the Civil War, was middle-aged when Lizzie Borden cut out her trial and returned to 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 $3 million, would replace the antiquated Salem and Lawrence county jails. Both were 39 years old before the Battle of Bull Run and, on their critics say, have changed 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 exception, have sterile, utilitarian cells, chiefly that they are old, with archaic fixtures, and are located in the heart of populous communities.

Almost everyone agrees that our county jail is due for replacement, but disagreement comes on which government shall administer the new. It is said the city, the county or the state or the counties.

The Massachusetts Sheriffs Association, perennial proponents of improved penology practices, charge certain legislators with hamstringing their plans in that direction. They feel that their plans can be run as 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. VanRiper said the committee members spent about 90 minutes inspecting the county jail at Dedham. "I couldn't help but have made up my 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 loan to enable him to replace the 130-year-old Dedham jail. The new jail would be 100 feet wide, away from normal Dedham traffic, 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 Ad- nah H. Harlow characterized the commission's report as objective and a rehash of things that have been a matter of controversy.

New Bedford, one of the state's newer county jails, a 53-year-old institution completed with a 280-acre dairy and produce farm, is located in the town's southeastern section of Plymouth center. Solitary confinement was banned in 1955, and Harlow administers the theory that an inmate is confined as punishment, not for reform.

Middlesex County Sheriff Howard Fitzpatrick and his colleagues have been in a quandary for some time over the antiquated East Cambridge House of Correction, adjacent to the State Court, and used not only for lodging prisoners awaiting trial.

If the old jail is abandoned, and facilities are lacking for confinement in the court buildings, prisoners will be housed at the cost to Billerica, where the modern county jail is located.

Equally frustrating is the Essex County situation, where Sheriff Earl E. Welles admitted the "lack of any council of correction, called the board in the state by the commission, should be closed.

Con. 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 plan 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 jail.

They asked for the same thing last year and were turned down. They've asked almost every year, this year, 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 a 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 rehabilitation program for inmates.

The Middlesex County Report struck a note which many penologists and others interested in improved corrections programs publish with glee. "Looking into the Essex County jail system is nothing short of piquant. "It has been done by many individuals and groups. The recommendations are generally the same."