

Oxford County Jail

The historic county jail, now the Oxford County Board of Health, is a beautiful Italianate Romanesque style building with Tuscan Gothic details. The architects were Messrs Clarke and Murray, of Hamilton, Ontario, after winning a design contest set up in 1853. Mr. Clarke was Mayor of Hamilton in 1868. The building was completed in 1854, and it was the fifth county jail built by the province.

There were several permanent resident officers at all times. There was a Gaoler or Governor, a Turnkey and a Matron. The Gaoler was in charge at the jail, responsible to the Sheriff of Oxford County. The Turnkey was to keep guard in front of the cells of the most dangerous criminals. The Matron was to make sure that no male prisoner was to enter the female departments, or anywhere that a female might be working, without her presence.

The prisoners were allowed religious services in 1856, and many clergymen elected to hold services in the jail. A library was also erected for the prisoners in 1856, consisting of 227 donated books.

In 1864, prisoner's meals cost much more than what it did on the regular market. The result was to have the prisoners grow their own food in the courtyard of the jail. The prisoners did not wear the standard garb set by the province; instead, they wore what was made by local merchants, to help boost the local economy.

The Oxford County Jail (or Gaol) holds many stories within its walls. There have been five hangings. The first was Thomas Cook, a blind man, who killed his wife. His death mask was carved in stone in 1862, to the right of the front entrance door.

Mr. J. Reginald Birchall was hanged for the murder of F. C. Benwell. When the two men that Birchall had brought over from England as apprentices pressured him to see the area they would be working, he brought one of them, Benwell, to Blenheim Swamp, near Eastwood, and returned alone. Perry, the other gentleman, turned Birchall over to the authorities when the death of Benwell was published in the newspaper. Birchall was hanged for the crime on November 14, 1890, although the evidence was circumstantial. He was buried just inside the east wall of the jail, and remains there still.

Norman Garfield, was hanged for killing Ben Johnson in an attempted candy store robbery. Garfield vowed that he would not hang, and hours before his execution he swallowed a quantity of ground glass. However, doctors revived him and he was hanged on June 2, 1921.

Elizabeth Tilford was the only female to be hanged at the Oxford County Gaol. She was convicted of murdering her third husband with arsenic. It is believed that she tried to kill her second husband as well, with what is known as "salts of lemon". She was hanged on December 17, 1935.

Velibor Rajik was hanged for murdering Mrs. Ernest Boyd, whom he had been boarding with. They had become intimate, and she was debating leaving her family and leaving with him. He was opposed to the idea, and stabbed her to death. He was hanged on November 16, 1954. It was the last hanging in Oxford County.

The building was restored in 19