

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

### IDAHO TERRITORIAL PRISON

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Idaho officials had a tough time keeping prisoners penned up in the 1860's. For ten years the territory had to resort to temporary housing for its convicts: the county jails at Lewiston and at Idaho City were designated the territorial prison locations until 1872, when permanent facilities were completed. In the meantime, prison buildings were inadequate to say the least. They were usually made of rough logs overlaid with heavy planking. The cells were cramped and dirty. Ventilation, heat, and illumination were almost entirely lacking (on real cold days the inmates at Idaho City were permitted to crowd around a pot-bellied stove in the prison corridor). The grand jury at Lewiston gave a hint in 1864 of conditions at the North Idaho branch of the prison: "...the building rented for the County Jail [is] totally unfit for the purpose for which the same was intended nor does it appear to this Grand Jury that it has ever been a safe or proper place wherein to confine offenders against the law...." [Lewiston District Court Records] However, North Idaho had less population and consequently fewer convictions in their courts than did the bustling area to the south. Only a handful of territorial prisoners passed through the Lewiston jail.

Idaho City's building wasn't much better. It had twelve cells, each with just enough room to hold a bunk and not much more. Comfort and sanitation were next to impossible under the most favorable conditions; when the jail was overcrowded the result was chaos. Added to the problem was the lack of guards: most of the time only one man kept watch over the inmates. It didn't take long for the prisoners to count up their odds and decide that with a little luck they could soon see the green grass on the other side of the rickety board wall surrounding the building.

A glance at a few statistics may be helpful in understanding the difficulties facing prison officials at Idaho City. The number of criminals passing through the prison gate during the five year period 1865-70 totaled 106. Seventeen of these escaped and were never recaptured. Total expenses for the period amounted to \$83,099.32—a rather extravagant figure, considering that Congress during the same period appropriated only \$132,000 to each territory for operating expenses (not including prison maintenance, which the territories themselves had to pay). Of the 106 total, twenty-six inmates were discharged or pardoned, leaving an average of ten convicts a year under the care of only two jailors, who evidently took turns standing guard at twelve hour intervals. Almost never were the two jailors on duty at the same time. Such conditions were bound to bring waves of protest from officials and the public alike. Something had to be done to cut costs and insure prison security. It took years of bitter argument before the unfortunate obstacles to progress—sectionalism, penny-pinching, misunderstanding, and plain old obstinacy—were removed. But eventually a new site was chosen in 1870, construction began, and two years later the doors of the permanent and imposing territorial penitentiary at Boise were at last opened for business.

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