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TERRITORIAL PENITENTIARY CONSTRUCTION (Advertiser Column By Judith Austin)

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Boise's Fourth of July celebrations have been varied but rather traditional. However, the observances of a hundred years ago--July 4, 1870--included what must surely have been a unique form of Independence Day ceremony: the laying of the cornerstone for the first building at the Idaho Penitentiary.

The building which originally served as a territorial prison was the expanded jail in Idaho City. But in April of 1870 construction began at a site east of Boise described by a local newspaper editor as "on a delightful eminence near the foothills, commanding an excellent view of the city"; it not only had plenty of water, including a hot-water spring, but also was near the quarry that would provide stonework for building foundations.

The cornerstone-laying ceremony took place at six o'clock on the evening of the fourth, and its major event was the placing of a lead box in the cornerstone. Two days earlier, a notice had been run in the papers requesting donations of memorabilia by citizens. They had compiled, and the contents of the box included lists of officers and jewels of local Masonic lodges and other fraternal organizations; lists of local, county, territorial, and national officers; samples of money, both coin and paper; newspapers of recent date from all over the northwest; and coins, currency, and trinkets contributed by a number of distinguished citizens and businesses.

About a month after these ceremonies, another local editor paid a visit to the penitentiary site and described the new structure in considerable detail. It was, of course, a "cell

block," with three tiers of cells surrounded by an eight-foot-wide hallway. The hallway was open to the ceiling; upper cells were reached by means of an iron gallery. The forty-two cells were intended to hold thirty-nine inmates and three "bath and retiring rooms." The building was roughly seventy by forty feet and was topped by a tin mansard roof. This first structure was intended as one wing of a three-part building, with a center section to contain offices, dining hall, and other central rooms. The editor hoped that the other cell-block wing would not be needed for a long time to come.

However, financial problems prevented further construction for nearly twenty years. Indeed, they prevented the actual use of the new penitentiary until March of 1872, when an agreement was finally worked out between the territory and the federal government about who would run the penitentiary and pay for the care of its inmates.

A photograph in the Idaho Historical Library's collection was taken about 1895 from a hillside southwest of the penitentiary. The mustached gentleman in the foreground is the warden, John P. Campbell. The entrance gate, with tower, still stands but is now painted white. The building immediately to the right--which looks as if it might be attached to the tower but is not--is now [1970] the community center at the prison. And the building next to the right, which presently serves as the penitentiary chapel and no longer has the Mansard roof, is the structure whose cornerstone was laid on July 4, 1870. It was the first major government building constructed in the territory, and it has watched over enormous growth and change in the penitentiary and in Idaho as a whole.

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