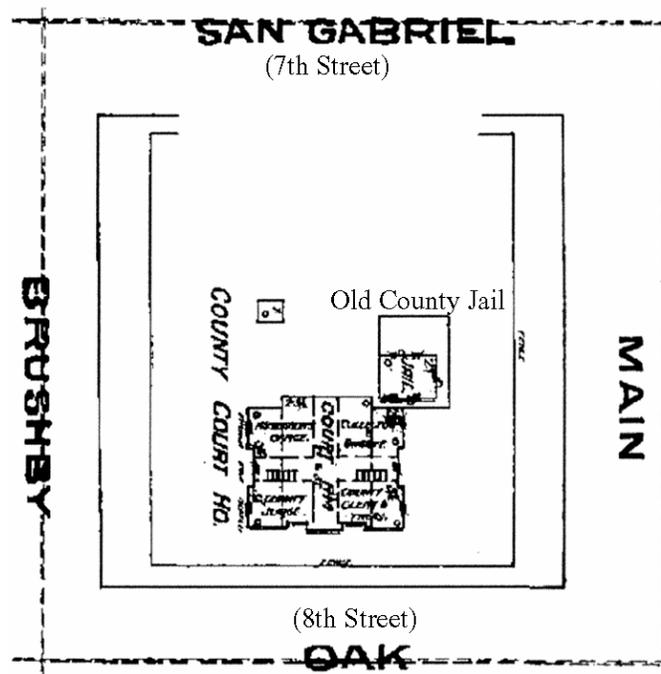


Building a new county jail - 1888

The county's third jail was built adjacent to the county courthouse in 1875 on the northeast corner of the courthouse lawn. The two-story stone jail, measuring twenty-two by thirty feet, had two cells, office, and cook room, with a privy in the corridor. Built at a cost of \$7,000, the building was constructed so that it could be joined to the courthouse at a later date. However, due to the poor structural integrity of the twenty-year-old courthouse, Williamson County Commissioners voted in 1877 to build the fourth, or "Victorian," courthouse at a cost of \$27,400.

The "old" jail was woefully overcrowded from the day its steel doors swung open to accept its first prisoners. And during the next thirteen years, it became known throughout the state for the numerous escapes from it. Finally, in January 1888, the Williamson County Commissioners' Court, led by County Judge W. M. Key, voted to build a new jail.



A Sanborn Insurance map of Georgetown's courthouse square showing the old jail building. (courtesy Georgetown Heritage Society)

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The January 5 issue of the *Williamson County Sun* contained the following article:

The commissioners' court of Williamson county met in special session on Monday, January 2, all the members being present.

Com. Woolsey offered the following resolution: "Whereas, the present county jail on account of its location and size is not of sufficient capacity to accommodate the number of prisoners therein confined and is so constructed that to confine the number of prisoners therein usually confined would be an act of inhumanity on the part of the county, besides endangering the health and life of prisoners, and to remodel and repair the present jail building would be a useless expenditure of public money; therefore be it resolved by the commissioners' court of Williamson county that the court build a new jail and jailer's residence at a cost not to exceed thirty thousand dollars, to be paid for in bonds of the county, with a low rate of interest, so as not to be a burden upon the tax-payers, and that we advertise at once in the *Galveston News* and *Austin Statesman* for plans and specifications be acted upon by February term, 1888, of this court."

In the same issue, J. E. Cooper, *Williamson County Sun* editor, wrote in an editorial, "The court has done what was best and most suitable." He continued as follows:

The grand jury examined the jail and then informed the district court that the jail was in better condition than the grand jurors expected to find it in, but recommended that the commissioners court proceed at once to improve the conditions of the prisoners.

The trouble about this plan, however, was that expert architects had decided that the jail could not be repaired so as to meet the requirements of the right kind of jail. There will be time for rallying from the effects of late short crops before any taxes for the jail will

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be paid, and the taxes for this purpose will not be burdensome any way. Now that it has been decided to build a new jail, let all who opposed such a plan try to be satisfied with the decision of the court, or at least be reconciled to it.

Although Editor Cooper urged the county's citizens to stand behind the Commissioners' Court decision to build a new jail, residents in eastern Williamson County, which was dubbed "Willie County," continued their opposition to the building project. As has been discussed earlier, the construction of the new jail, along with other issues the citizens of eastern Williamson County had with the Commissioners' Court, fueled a movement to divide the county into two separate counties. The "Willie County" movement was the rallying cry of two short-lived county newspapers: *The Headlight and Texan* and *The Citizen*.

In an editorial of February 9, Cooper stated that

last week's issue of the *Citizen* contained a communication in which the writer stated that experts had pronounced the present jail "a good one." On the contrary, every architect who has examined the jail has pronounced it unsuitable, and has also said that it is so constructed that it cannot be changed so as to meet the proper requirements of a jail.

In closing, Cooper reiterated that

this article is prepared simply in the spirit of fair dealing and to allay, not to encourage sectional strife. The Sun still advocates unity of purpose and effort throughout the county.

Regardless of "sectional strife," a site for the new jail was selected and plans were drawn up. In the March 1 issue of the *Williamson County Sun*, it was reported that the new jail would be built on the "south half of the block on which Mr. David Love's wagon yard is situated, on the fourth block north from the court house." The article continued by stating that the lot would be "very easily drained and flushed."

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As was common in 1880s Williamson County, a committee was formed and donations accepted for the purchase of the jail site. The following editorial, listing those Georgetown citizens who provided monetary support toward the construction of the new jail, would be published in the March 15 issue of the Williamson County Sun.

WORTH SOMETHING TO A TOWN

There are generally two classes of men in nearly every town; one is composed of public spirited men whose names are always associated with public enterprises, not only by giving their influence but by going down in their pockets when necessary to help out a cause; the other class is composed of men who do a great deal of talking, but whose names are 'conspicuous for their absence' when a little money is needed. In order to make known to the people some of the men in Georgetown, who show their faith by their works, the Sun gives below the names of those who contributed to the fund to purchase the lot for the county upon which the new jail will be built:

M. E. Steele, Emzy Taylor, Dr. J. E. Walker, D. Love, E. P. Robinson, J. H. Booty, Booty Bros., Jno. Sparks, Slaton & Cleveland, W. L. Mann, Seery, Chapman & Co., Rucker & Montgomery, J. J. Patrick & Co., H. W. Harrell, Dieckmann & Makemson, J. H. Hodges, U. B. Hussey, J. N. Price, J. A. McDougle, R. D. Byrom, C. N. Hill, Jno. Sudduth, I. W. Lane, J. W. Hodges, Penn, Brooks & John, F. W. Carothers, D. S. Chessher, Dr. W. G. Pettus, T. W. Marrs, W. M. Key, Richardson & Co., D. W. T. Jones, Brenecke & Harris, J. T. Olive, S. O. Eidman, R. H. Price, Cooper Sansom, H. Burkhardt, T. P. Hughes, T. B. Norwood, W. B. Newton, W. C. Lott, N. M. Newton, Cooper & Cameron, McLellan Bros., C. A. D. Clamp, Dr. G. W. Foster, W. Y. Penn, Whittle & Harrell, J. H. Leavell, C. M. LeSueur, J. J. Bruce, S. T. Atkins & Co., B. A. Strange, Lee M. Taylor.

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Plans for the new jail, drawn up by Dodson & Dudley of Waco, called for a French Bastille structure. The March 1 issue of the *Williamson County Sun* described the plans in detail.

The residence part of the jail will be two stories high. There will be three rooms and a hall on each floor. Immediately in the rear of the residence, and adjoining it, is the guard room, with double entrance doors, and opening into a room which will contain two of the old jail cells, and an iron stair way leading to the second floor, with two rooms; one room to contain the other two cells, now in the old jail, to be used for misdemeanor cases. The other room will contain two new cells, for females and insane persons.

Immediately in the rear of the guard room, and on the same level, is the main jail room, 18 x 37-1/2 feet in the clear, 17 feet high from floor to ceiling, in which will be placed four new steel cages, each 6-1/2 x 11 feet, with a steel lattice corridor, five feet wide, running the entire length of the front of the four cages. All of the cells and corridors will have closets, sinks, foul air ducts, with water connections for washing, flushing, and all necessary water purposes.

The jail is built of stone, the walls eighteen inches thick. The whole building will be finished at top with stone cornice, and stone castellated work, and be covered with the best quality of felt and tin roof.

In the April 12 edition of the *Williamson County Sun* was the following editorial supporting the construction of the County's new jail.

Those who opposed the building of a new jail can now see the necessity for one. Notwithstanding the fact that the county has been paying a guard to watch the jail to keep the prisoners from getting out, the jail has been broken open and six prisoners made their escape. Where are those gentlemen who said Williamson had one of the safest and best jails in the state? The prisoners sawed

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out of it with a spring taken out of the bottom of an old shoe or boot.

The new jail's construction contract was awarded in late April 1888, as reported in the May 3 issue of the *Williamson County Sun*.

There were six bids submitted to the court, some for the rock and wood work and others for the iron and steel work, ranging from \$20,966 to about \$25,000 for the entire work. The contract was awarded to Messrs. Lovell & Miller, of Brownwood, for the sum first named above, that being the lowest bid for all the work in the construction of the jail.

The court has provided for the issuance of bonds for that amount (\$22,500) bearing six per cent interest and running for fifteen years, interest payable annually on the 10th day of April.

Due to the cramped conditions of the Williamson County Jail and its rapidly deteriorating conditions, non-violent prisoners were often transferred to the county's Poor Farm to work off their fines by building county roads. The following article appeared in the March 15 issue of the *Williamson County Sun*.

Last Monday ten convicts were sent from the jail to the county farm to work out fines and costs at one dollar each per day. They were tried and convicted at this term of the county court. The county superintendent will probably work these convicts most of the time on the public roads.

The need for a new jail had become evident with the escape of six prisoners early on the morning of April 10. The "five white men and one Mexican" made their escape after cutting a hole in the steel ceiling of their cell with a piece of steel taken from the bottom of a shoe or boot. They then entered the corridor, opened a window, and dropped to the ground. A \$25 reward was offered for the capture of the five white men, but no reward was offered for the capture of the Mexican.

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The April 10 escape would be followed by another on June 18, and in November county prisoners would be re-located to Austin's city jail until construction of the new jail was complete.

Completion of construction came in December, and the December 13 issue of the *Williamson County Sun* reported a final test of the new structure before acceptance.

The county judge was authorized to employ an expert in steel and iron work to thoroughly examine and test the new jail cells.



The “new” jail building as it appears today on Georgetown's Main Street.

Final acceptance of the new jail was made on January 10, 1889, two months after Sheriff Olive left office. The January 31, 1889, issue of the *Williamson County Sun* carried a full description of the new jail facility under the following headline:

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Our New Jail

We visited the new jail a few days ago and found it a substantial stone structure, a part of it one story high, and a part two stories. The one story part is light and airy, and has four cells, capable of containing four persons each, and as comfortable as a prison can well be.

The lower part of the two story part seemed to the writer like dark and gloomy dungeons, with poor ventilation.

The north cells up stairs are also dark, (we had to grope our way around as we visited them,) nor do they strike us as being well ventilated. The other two cells – in the upper story – designed for the insane, and for women are well lighted and ventilated. All the cells are so situated as to have plenty of water for drinking, washing and bathing. The rooms will be heated by hot air from a furnace in the basement.

There are in all ten cells, most, if not all, of which are large enough to contain four persons each. It is to be hoped however that the cells designed for women, insane persons, and old men and boys may long remain unoccupied.

The jailor's residence has six rooms, of good size and well finished, and is one of the best houses in town. This is not as yet ready for occupation, but will be in a few weeks.

(Excerpt from *The Noble John Olive*© by Jim Dillard)