

## Town's Tiny Jail was a "Hobo Hostel"

by Frank Connors

Perhaps you didn't know that Bowdoinham was once the proud owner of its own municipal Jail. The trim little brick structure measured some 12 feet square, and was maintained by the town for nearly 75 years.

In 1874, (less than ten years after the notorious robbery of the Bowdoinham National Village Bank) Bowdoinham appropriated and spent \$48.21 to "buy a lot and furnish a lock-up," and \$318.53 to build that structure. We can only assume it was finished and put into service that same year.

Built of local brick on the very edge of what was then Bridge Street, the structure stood directly opposite where the Bowdoinham Country Store is today. The building's interior was divided into two equal-sized holding cells across the back, each with two bunks, and the "office," across the front might have been four feet deep, holding two chairs and a woodstove. A Lewiston Journal newspaper tour of what it called, "Bowdoinham's infamous cooler" offered more detail. "The cells are separated from the front room by heavy planked doors, both are double barred locked. In the tiny front room is space for a stove and a man to sit and tend it, but, when the fire blazes up briskly, the jailor usually breaks for open air. There is just about room enough for the stove and the man, but squeezing a fire in besides certainly overcrowds these narrow quarters." The reporter offered no opinion of how much heat may have leaked into the two holding cells, and made no note of the fact that the only window in the building, barred and shuttered, was off this office.

The same article cast a little doubt on what may have been the actual size of the building. "I didn't have a tape measure with me," the reporter confessed, but he added, "size considered, there is no bit of punitive architecture in Maine which has done the business of this little, seven by nine lock-up!

The Journal reporter continued. "This is the same jail that held the murderer Bessey and the abductor Bickford, but last year (the jail) made a tramp's record which could only be beaten by a very few towns, Like it or not, Bowdoinham is on the Maine Central Railroad main line from Boston and Portland, through to Augusta and East, (the lock-up was maybe 50 yards from the tracks) so it is included in the itinerary of most every hobo riding the iron road. These tramps have found that old Bowdoinham does not work them, but offers them a feed, with lodging, and sends them along, unbothered. This has given the place a famous reputation among those knights of the road, and many of them had rather sight the little brick lock-up, with its plate of beans and bread, than many of the grand, Fifth Avenue hotels."

"In the past year," this undated news-clipping reports, "between 400 and 500 tramps have been lodged overnight in this tiny Jail! One night, no less than 31 hobos were cared for, but

how they were stored away in that tiny little box is a problem only a sardine packer might solve."

The reporter explained, "the town has perhaps adopted this plan for economic and practical reasons. Sagadahoc County (founded in 1854) has no county jail, so all prisoners "sent up" have to be transported and boarded in Androscoggin County (Auburn) at a rate of \$1.75 a week, plus transportation costs.

We don't know of any records that itemize Jail costs and usage, but old town reports offer fleeting glimpses. In 1877, Selectman and store owner Samuel Donnell was paid \$6.75 for supplies and labor to "work on the lock-up." In 1878, Bibber and Denham's store was paid \$28.75 for "putting up provisions" for tramps. A 1900 report says the town paid \$1.63 for "wood for the lock-up." by 1902, G.H. McKay ("Green") had, "care of the lock-up" in his list of paid services to the Town. He was never a constable, but received \$5 a year to watch the door, sweep the floor, do whatever was needed to keep the lock-up habitable. McKay was also the Town's lamplighter, mill night-watchman, and repaired boots from the "cottage" where he tended the Main and Center street crossings for the Maine Central.

A 1934 town report offered a public "thank you" to Clara N. Fogg of the local Christian Women's Association. "The village jail has undergone a thorough purification, and has been newly furnished with mattress and pillow coverings, made wholly from material donated by townspeople."

We also found this in the Lewiston Journal of Aug 15, 1903. "Ulysses Shepherd, a well-known character about Bowdoinham, was taken seriously ill last Saturday night, and for a time, his illness affected his brain. It was decided best to put him where he could do no one any injury, and he was placed in the village lock-up until his condition could improve.

"On another occasion," the Lewiston Journal report continued, "a particularly savage sort of fellow was locked up and, late in the evening, a couple of constables were walking by and one suggested to the other that they look in and see how the chap was behaving. As they neared the door, they heard a racket in the upper part of the building. Slipping around the rear, one of them was just in time to see the prisoner leap down from the roof. The deputies were on the spot to recapture him when he struck the ground. More investigations showed that the prisoner, who was very strong, had torn open the plaster in the ceiling of his cell, squeezed through the narrow opening and then lifted the roof bodily from the brick walls, and jumped to the ground, anticipating freedom. But for the accidental arrival of the guards, he would have made good his escape. As it was, the adventure cost him sixty extra days in Auburn."

In 1946, the land and lock-up was sold to a neighbor, Leroy Temple, for \$20. He took the building down and used the brick as fill in a ditch that often filled with "high water." Bowdoinham was out of jail business. When I was a kid, I remember a small portable sawmill operating on that site.

Frank Connors grew up in Bowdoinham, served as town manager, a Selectman, and other committees. In 1970, he helped organize the Bowdoinham Historical Society, An amateur historian with a "knack" for writing and storytelling, he's promised an "occasional" article about Bowdoinham history for our Bowdoinham News. He and his wife Jane now live in Brunswick.