

History of the San Marcos Calaboose/USO Club to 1946

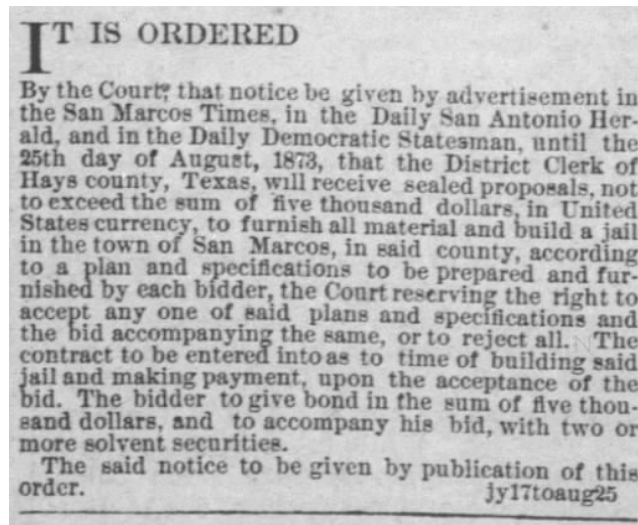
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The historic San Marcos Calaboose/USO Club is located on a portion of Lot 14 (Block 16) within the boundaries of the original Town of San Marcos. Hays County purchased Lots 14 and 15 on August 26, 1873 for \$287.50 "for the use and benefit of said Hays County, to erect a jail upon..."² Just a day earlier, on August 25, the County approved plans for a jail³ after advertising throughout the summer through two rounds of bidding for "sealed proposals to furnish material and build a Jail."⁴ The cost was not to exceed \$5,000.⁵



Daily Democratic Statesman (Austin), 15 June 1873



Daily Democratic Statesman (Austin), 17 July 1873

¹ I am grateful for the research insights and contributions of Lila Knight and J. Marie Bassett, two of Hays County's most dedicated local historians.

² John W. Herndon to Hays County, Hays County Deed Book, H:584.

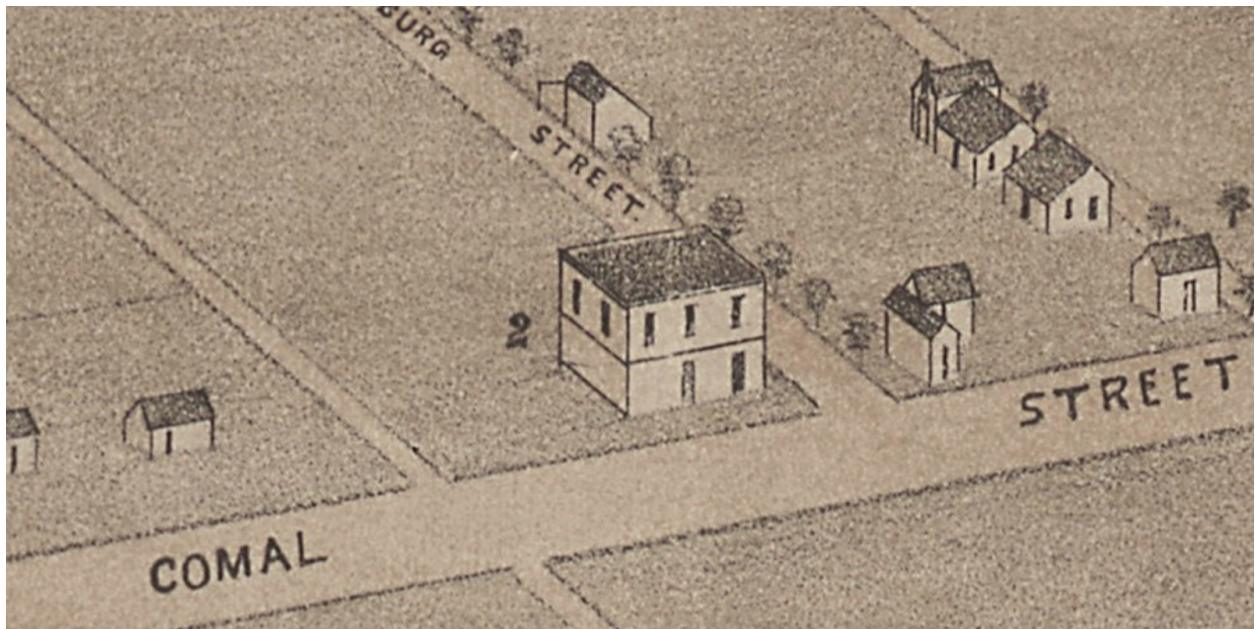
³ Carl H. Deal, III, "Old jail is future home of Jack C. Hays Law Enforcement Museum," *Celebrate San Marcos 150!*, 1 March 2001, p. 21B. This publication by *The Daily Record & The Free Press* (San Marcos, Texas), is available online at sanmarcostx.gov.

⁴ "Sealed Proposals," *Daily Democratic Statesman* (Austin, Texas), 15 June 1873, p. 2.

⁵ "It is Ordered," *Daily Democratic Statesman* (Austin, Texas), 17 July 1873, p. 2.

Construction and Appearance of the 1873 Hays County Jail

While it is not known who designed or built the original jail, it is known that the jail was in operation as early as June 11, 1874 when it was reported that fifteen of the seventeen men imprisoned there escaped after they "captured the jailor, took away his arms and fastened him up in one of the cells..."⁶ Thirteen of them were recaptured within a few hours; the prisoners were both white and black.



Detail of the 1881 *Bird's Eye View* showing the two-story 1873 jail at the corner of Comal and Fredericksburg.

The original 1873 jail was a two-story structure constructed of stone. While no photograph is known to exist, the building is depicted on the 1881 *Bird's Eye View of San Marcos in Hays Co. Texas*. This rendering depicts two doors facing Comal (MLK) Street to the south on the ground floor. On the second story, three windows on the south facade face Comal with two additional windows on the west facade.⁷ That this original structure was built of stone is confirmed by the highly detailed Sanborn fire insurance maps of San Marcos, which will be discussed later.

Construction of a New County Jail in 1884

By 1884, the condition of the jail was very poor and plans were made for its replacement. The description published by the editor of the *San Marcos Free Press* on March 13, 1884 speaks for itself:

⁶ Untitled article, *Daily Democratic Statesman* (Austin, Texas), 16 June 1874, p. 3. One of the fugitives was recaptured and put back in jail on August 13, while the other remained at large for some additional time. (see *Daily Democratic Statesman* (Austin, Texas), 16 August 1874, p. 1)

⁷ Augustus Koch, *Bird's Eye View of San Marcos in Hays Co. Texas*, 1881. Private collection, digital image form the Amon Carter Museum (Fort Worth, Texas), www.birdseyeviews.org.

*In the construction of the old jail, we remember well it was said there was to be a sort of windmill connected with it to circulate the air through the cells. The windmill part, however, was at last overlooked. A thing better designed for a place of torture, pure and simple, could scarcely have been conceived than it has been from the beginning to the present time. Yet we hear it said that it is still to be used as a sort of supplement to the new jail when completed. Against this in the name of the humane people of the county, we utter our solemn protest. Rather let it be razed to the ground as the French republicans of 1789 did the Bastille. We wonder the lightings of heaven have so long spared the infernal thing.*⁸

Hays County approved the issuance of bonds for a new jail on February 14, 1884.⁹ The new jail, constructed on Lot 15 adjacent to the old 1873 jail, was also a two-story structure constructed of stone. It was designed and built by the San Marcos firm of Northcraft & Donalson and the county accepted the new jail and approved final payment in September 1884.¹⁰

San Marcos Had an Earlier Calaboose

It should be noted that while Hays County now owned two stone jails, San Marcos had a separate, small, wooden municipal jail on the property, known as the calaboose. Evidence of the existence of the earlier San Marcos calaboose can be found in reports of town council minutes such as that of May 6, 1884 when the town council approved a payment of \$8.60 to William Giesen for "hardware and blankets for [the] calaboose."¹¹ Or in the news that "Peter Maxfield, better known as 'uncle Peter,' died on Monday evening. The use of strong drink was his besetting sin, and it no doubt brought him to an untimely end, friendless, in the calaboose."¹²

San Marcos Buys the Old 1873 County Jail For Use as a City Jail

Now that the old jail -- the "foul and damnable hole"¹³ -- was vacant and unused, on May 21, 1885 it was reported that "a proposition has been made to the [San Marcos] town council to purchase the old jail and grounds attached, valued at \$1200, on ten years time."¹⁴ On June 2, 1885, Hays County Judge Kone attended the San Marcos town council meeting:

[on] behalf of the County Commissioners court, submitted a proposition to sell the city the old jail and grounds -- 60 varas by 55 feet. The town proposed to give the county the town lot lying near the Presbyterian church, purchased several years since

⁸ Untitled article, *San Marcos Free Press*, 13 March 1884, p. 2.

⁹ Deal, see note 3.

¹⁰ "Commissioners' Court Proceedings," *San Marcos Free Press*, 4 September 1884, p. 3.

¹¹ "Town Council," *San Marcos Free Press*, 8 May 1884, p. 3.

¹² "Personal," *San Marcos Free Press*, 30 October 1884, p. 3.

¹³ "The Jail Question," *San Marcos Free Press*, 14 February 1884, p. 3.

¹⁴ Untitled article, *San Marcos Free Press*, 21 May 1885, p. 3.

for the fire company and \$500 and also give the county the wooden calaboose now on the jail grounds, valued at about \$125 for a cook house, for the jail property."¹⁵

The deal was done on 21 August 1885 when the city of San Marcos purchased the old jail site from Hays County for \$1,000.¹⁶ The following month, the newspaper reported that at the new 1884 county jail, which was housing both white and black prisoners: "a neat wire fence encloses the jail and yard, and the old town calaboose has been moved near the jail for use as a cook-house, the County Commissioners having made provision for these needed improvements."¹⁷

Kyle Builds a Calaboose Using a Jail Cell from the 1873 County Jail

As an aside, at this same time, the Town of Kyle petitioned the county for support to construct a calaboose of its own,¹⁸ making use of an old jail cell that the county had donated the year before from the original 1873 jail.¹⁹ The Kyle Calaboose was completed in 1885,²⁰ and the structure, after having served as Kyle's municipal jail until the 1920s and as a tourist attraction at Aquarena Springs from 1961 to the mid 1990s, has been relocated behind the 1884 Hays County Jail where it awaits restoration.

The 1873 County Jail in Use as the San Marcos City Jail

Returning to the original 1873 Hays County jail, which had become the property of the town of San Marcos, the newspaper reported on November 5, 1885 that it contained twelve prisoners: "...three Mexicans, five negroes and four white men. Their offenses are chiefly theft of stock."²¹

The city's jail was being referred to as a "calaboose" when, on August 21, 1886, it was reported that "a Mexican and negro were put in the *calaboose*;"²² on February 2, 1887, when city council met and approved a \$3 payment to Thomas B. Lee for repairing the *calaboose*;²³ and on May 31, 1891 when "City Marshal J. M. Turner ... [chastised] the blacks severely and locked them up in the *calaboose*."²⁴

¹⁵ "The 'City,'" *San Marcos Free Press*, 11 June 1885, p. 3.

¹⁶ Hays County to the City of San Marcos, Hays County Deed Book T:472.

¹⁷ *San Marcos Cresset*, 22 Sept 1885, p. 3.

¹⁸ *San Marcos Cresset*, 29 Sept 1885, p. 3.

¹⁹ "Commissioners' Court Proceedings," *San Marcos Free Press*, 4 September 1884, p. 3.

²⁰ "Our Kyle Reminder," *San Marcos Cresset*, 22 Dec 1885, p. 3.

²¹ *San Marcos Free Press*, 5 November 1885, p.3. In the following issue, the paper noted "We knew the old jail building had been sold by the county to the town, but for the moment forgot the fact in a reference to it in our last."

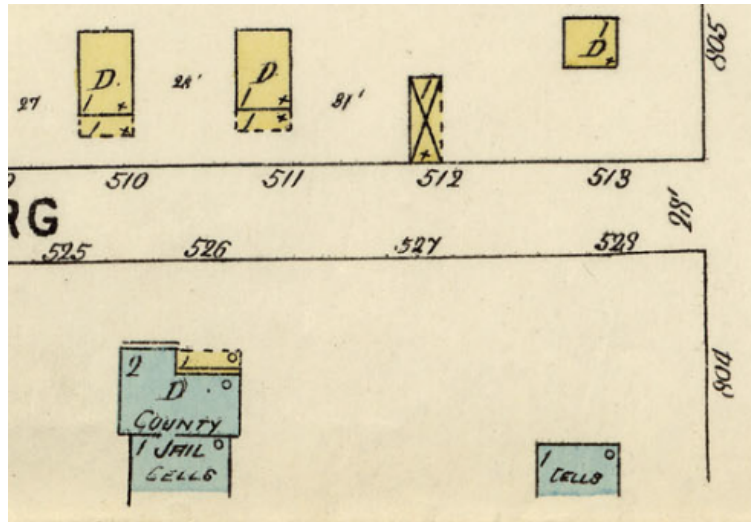
²² "A Bloody Combat," *Austin Daily Statesman*, 26 August 1886, p. 1.

²³ "Council Proceedings," *San Marcos Free Press*, 17 February 1887, p. 3.

²⁴ *The Hays County Times and Farmers' Journal*, 5 June 1891, p. 5.

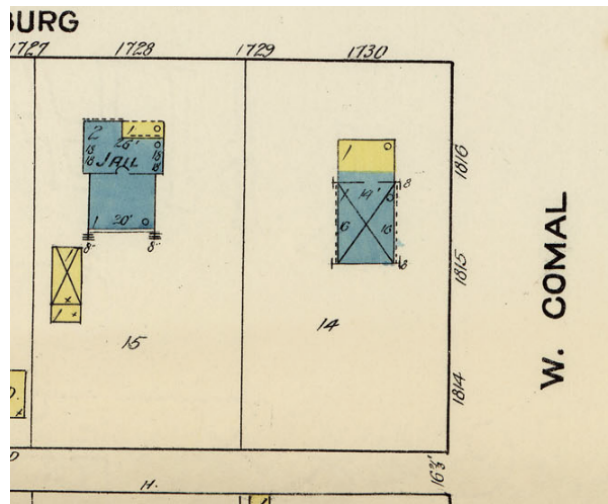
Earliest Depiction of the 1873 County Jail/City Jail on the Fire Insurance Maps

The June 1896 Sanborn fire insurance map is the first map to depict both the 1873 and 1884 jails. Interestingly, and likely because of its poor condition, the second story of the old 1873 jail had been removed. Note how far back the 1873 jail is from Fredericksburg Street.



June 1896 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Sheet 1.

Depictions of the jail on later Sanborn maps in March 1902 and August 1906 are unchanged from the 1896 map. It should be noted that buildings colored blue were stone; red buildings were brick and yellow were constructed of wood. The 1873 jail, as it stood until at least March 1912, was stone. The March 1912 Sanborn map also shows the structure with an X through it, meaning that it was being used as stables. It featured a 16' wall height on the north and south facades and a 14' tall opening on the east facade leading to a one story, wood-frame extension on the east facade. Both the wood and stone sections of the structure have a tin roof.

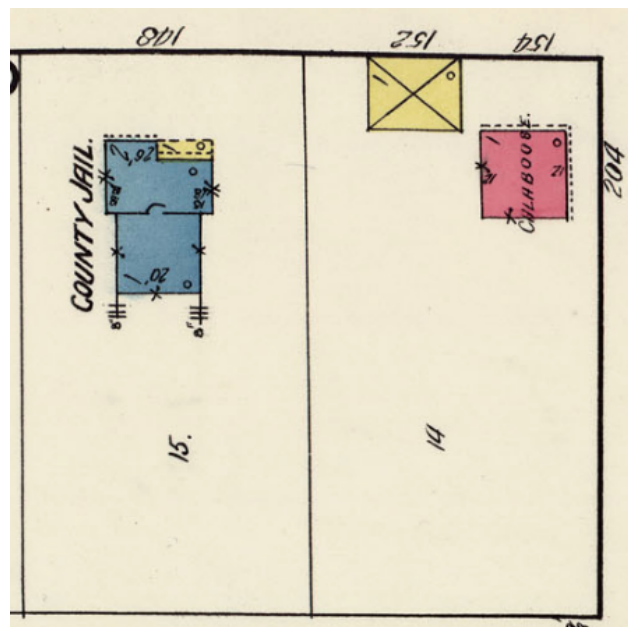


March 1912 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Sheet 1.

The last documented reference to the old 1873 jail being used by the city of San Marcos for incarceration is in a census of prisoners compiled in 1910, noting that the "San Marcos City Prison" had 10 inmates: 7 male, 3 female; 5 white foreign born, 5 colored."²⁵

A New Brick Calaboose for San Marcos

The lack of digitized newspapers from 1912 to 1922, and lack of access to City Council minutes for the period for the purposes of this report, make it unclear precisely when the 1873 jail was demolished. But by 1919, the site was again in use as a calaboose, as the newspaper reported threats of the City Marshal to place boys in the *calaboose* who are being a nuisance with slingshots.²⁶ The 1922 Sanborn map makes it clear that a *new* one story structure, constructed of brick, had been constructed on Lot 14 but closer to Fredericksburg Street than the old jail had been.



January 1922 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Sheet 5.

The site location, material, and scale of the new San Marcos Calaboose on the 1922 Sanborn map is consistent with the eastern half of the present-day Calaboose Museum. An examination of the existing calaboose reveals a brick structure with machine-made brick built on poured concrete foundation covered by a wood-framed hipped roof with open rafter tails, all of which are consistent with a date of construction between 1912 and 1922. Newspaper references also continue to indicate that this small jail was the city jail, and no contemporary references have been located suggesting that the jail was used exclusively for

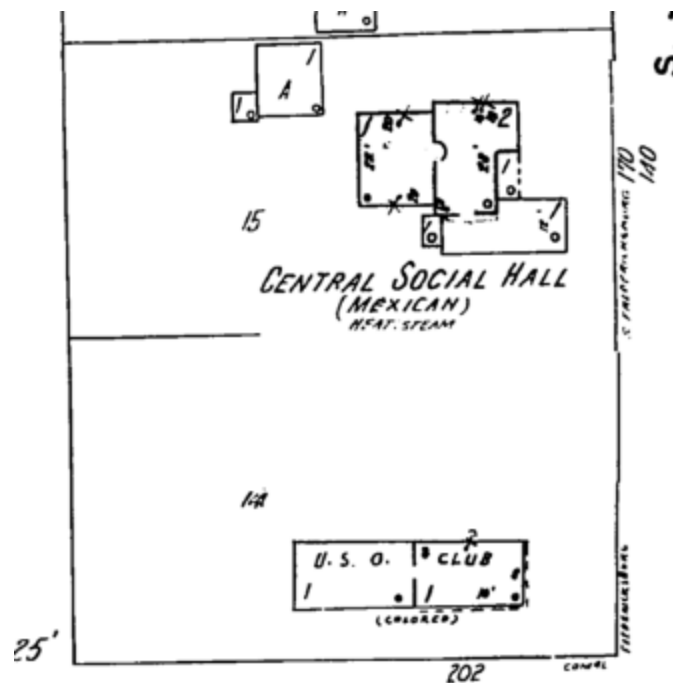
²⁵ *Financial Statistics of Cities Having a Population of Over 30,000: 1912*, Bulletin 118, US Dept of Commerce, p98

²⁶ "City Marshal to Take Boy to Calaboose," *San Marcos Times*, 13 January 1919.

African-Americans, although in practice, it is clear that the incarceration levels of African-Americans and Mexicans were disproportionately higher than for those of other ethnicities.

By 1932, the city calaboose was apparently not in use (or otherwise infrequently used) for at "a combined meeting of the United Charities directors and representatives of the Chamber of Commerce a resolution was passed asking the city officials to open the doors of the *old city calaboose* so that transient men might sleep there as the depots where they were formerly allowed to sleep have been closed to them."²⁷

In 1943, the old city jail was renovated as a "Colored USO." In November of that year, it was reported that "renovations have started on the old city jail building on Comal street and when completed early in December."²⁸ The first event held in the old calaboose, now in use as a USO clubhouse for African-Americans, was a "gala Christmas Eve party for SMAAF [San Marcos Army Air Forces] troops."²⁹ The August 1944 Sanborn fire insurance map reflects the changes to the building that were made during its 1943 renovation, which included the construction of a one-story addition to the west which sits on what would have been the original foundations of the 1873 jail.



August 1944 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Sheet 7.

²⁷ "Red Cross Aids United Charities," *San Marcos Record*, 18 March 1932, p. 10.

²⁸ "Negro USO Club Will Be Located in Old City Jail," *San Marcos Record*, 5 November 1943, p. 4.

²⁹ "Colored USO Plans XMas Party," *Asterope* (San Marcos), 18 December 1943, p. 5.

Seventy five years ago today, on January 7, 1946, City Council approved petition to sponsor a "colored recreation program" to include operation of a "recreation center on Comal street in the building which was used as the colored USO club during the war."³⁰

It is fitting on this evening, then, that the historic San Marcos Calaboose, built on the site of the original 1873 Hays County Jail, should be landmarked in recognition of this history.



San Marcos Calaboose/USO Club. The eastern (brick) portion was constructed between 1912 and 1922; the western (wood frame) portion was constructed in 1943. The building sits on the site of the original 1873 Hays County jail, which was a two-story limestone building.



The Calaboose is constructed of machine-cut bricks on a poured concrete foundation, typical of construction between 1912 and 1922.

³⁰ "Colored Recreation Center Approved by City Council," *San Marcos Record*, 11 January 1946, p. 1.