

The Boston Preservation Alliance Letter

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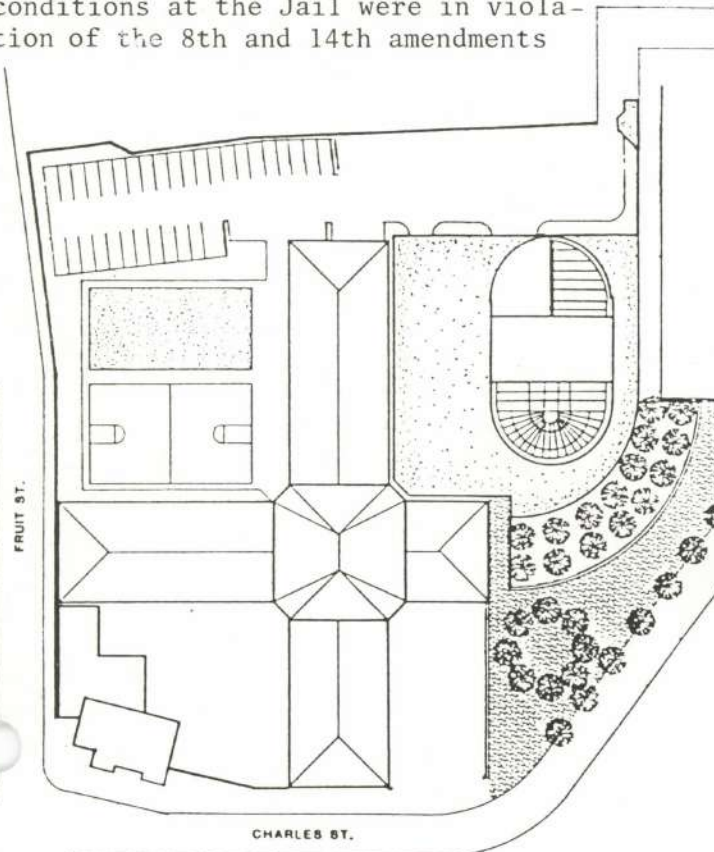
TWO DOLLARS

Charles Street Jail

by H. Parker James, preservationist

The future of the Charles Street Jail has reappeared as a hot issue on the City's agenda. The Jail has the distinction of being the oldest public building in America which still serves its original purpose. It is an early work of Gridley J.F. Bryant, and its design was extremely influential in Victorian prison design. Bryant's other works include Mercantile Wharf and Old City Hall. At present, there are no plans to destroy the Jail, however, the issue now being debated is whether a disfiguring addition should be built adjacent to it.

The problem stems from a 1973 class action suit, which was brought against Suffolk County by the inmates at the Charles Street Jail. The plaintiffs successfully argued that the overcrowded and unsanitary conditions at the Jail were in violation of the 8th and 14th amendments



to the Constitution. Federal Judge W. Arthur Garrity, Jr. ruled that conditions there were worse than at the Deer Island House of Correction. The inmate population of the Charles Street Jail is comprised almost entirely of pre-trial detainees, who might subsequently be found innocent. The court ruled that their comparatively poorer treatment was contrary to constitutional guarantees.

Judge Garrity originally ordered that the Jail be closed in 1977, but later delayed that date, citing renovations and improvements. In 1979, the Judge, Mayor Kevin

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Trial held on Alliance's International Place Suit

On November 26, 1984, the Alliance was in Suffolk Superior Court to prosecute its suit against the Massachusetts Secretary of Environmental Affairs, James S. Hoyte, and International Place developers, the Chiofaro Company and Fort Hill Square Associates. The Alliance, represented by Thomas B. Bracken of the Boston law firm Bracken & Baram, argued that the project must receive full environmental review, not just a sewerage review as proposed by the developers.

At the conclusion of the trial, Judge J. Harold Flannery took the matter under advisement. His final decision will have a significant impact on the future of state environmental review for the BRA's projects in the downtown area.

CALENDAR

The Paul Revere House

Evening Holiday Tours

Dec. 4, 6, 11 & 13 from 5:30 to 7:30pm
Step back in time at the Paul Revere House and experience the sights, sounds, tastes and fragrances of holiday observances in 17th and 18th century Boston. These evening festivities, complete with period music and refreshment, will greatly enrich your own yuletide celebration. Come and make merry with one of America's most beloved patriots.

Adults \$2.50, Sen. Cit./College students \$2.00 and \$1.00 for children under 17 yrs.
Call: 523-2338

December 28th, at 11:00 am, the Old North Church will celebrate Revere's anniversary with a special service. (Open to the public.) Also on the 28th, from 12:30-2:30 pm, the Paul Revere House will host a public birthday party with historic skits and refreshments.

Victorian Society in American, N.E. Chap. Gibson House, 137 Beacon St.

Dec. 9, from 2:00 to 5:00 pm
Join in decorating the Gibson House with Christmas greens, stringing popcorn and cranberries, singing carols and trimming the Victorian Christmas tree in the Music Room. Please bring a suitable ornament for the tree. Samples of your favorite goodies also welcome, and wassail will be brewing throughout the afternoon. Because of space limitations reservations are requested. Please call 267-6338.

The Bostonian Society - Old State House

Dec. 6, 4:00 to 7:00 p.m.
From Toby pitchers to books of Boston, The Bostonian Society Gift Shop has something for everyone on your holiday shopping list. Join us for an evening of holiday shopping, music and refreshments. 10% Discount to all who attend.

The Boston Preservation Alliance

Dec. 13, 5:00 to 7:30 pm
Holiday Party at the Old State House at 206 Washington Street. Champagne and hors d'oeuvres. \$15.00 per person. Call 367-2458 for reservations.

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White, the City Council, and the Suffolk County Sheriff signed a consent decree, stating that the city had 87 weeks to break ground for a 309 bed jail. To plan for any other size facility would be considered contempt of court.

By 1980, the population of pretrial detainees in the City had risen above the 309 mark, and has never fallen back. That put the City in the peculiar position of being under court order to build an inadequately sized jail. A further complication is the \$28 million in capital grants, which had been promised by the Commonwealth to the City on the condition that it build a 435 bed facility. These funds are tied to the size of the prison, not to its location.

The city has considered several alternate sites for the new Suffolk County Jail, but none has proved politically expedient. Among those seriously considered were Deer

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Editor's Note

In the November issue of the Alliance Letter an article appeared entitled "99 Summer Street". The author of this article was Joan Goody of the firm Goody, Clancy & Associates, Architects which was inadvertently omitted in the credit.

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Island, New Chardon Street in Government Center, and Southhampton Street near the old City incinerator in the South End. On Nov. 8th the City Council killed a motion which would have reopened relocation hearings.

The City's Public Facilities Department has commissioned penal specialist architects (Hale, Obath & Kassabaum) in conjunction with the Boston firm, Stull Associates, to plan a 17-story, 309 bed jail plan. It will have a nearly oval ground plan, a shape inspired by the need for single point observation, making the jail cheaper to staff. Sporting its red brick facade with granite detailing, the jail will look rather like a gentrified World War I battlement. Two parts of the old Gridley Bryant building would continue to be used: the south wing, which would serve as a recreation area, and the chapel.

At the Public Safety Committee hearing on Nov. 7th, Councilman Robert Travaglini of East Boston asked why it would not be fiscally more responsible to build a smaller facility, while continuing to utilize the old jail building as penal space. Peter Scarpigato of the Public Facilities Department stated that plans already exist for such a scheme. They were drawn up in the late 1970's, and call for a medium-rise dormitory tower behind the old jail, and for full renovation and utilization of the Bryant building as a prison facility. Travaglini criticized the shortsightedness of the City government's current plan, which would sever the connection of the South Wing and the Chapel to the rest of the building. The City would then declare the unused portions of the building surplus property, and would attempt to dispose of it on the public market. The money would be used to offset the cost of the new facility.

A plan which includes full use of the old jail building would be an agreeable compromise. The consent decree would be satisfied, and new construction would be limited to a smaller, less intrusive tower. The City would be spared the embarrassment of trying to sell to developers an historic building, a part of which is being used as a jail. Best of all, the Charles Street Jail would continue its useful life, serving the task for which it was designed. It would remain the oldest public building in America which is still serving its original function.



The Charles Street Jail. Photo courtesy of the Bostonian Society

Boston is under the gun on this issue. The 1979 consent decree stated that construction should commence in 87 weeks; the City is already technically in contempt of court. There is no more time for infighting and political foot dragging by our City Council.

The issue again gained crisis proportions early in November, when a State Court ordered Sheriff Kearney to take in more prisoners. To heed this order, Kearney could have had to raise the population of the Charles Street Jail above the federally mandated 266. That would be a federal offense. Since then, the State Court has introduced an emergency bail reduction scheme to lower the population of pre-trial detainees, but the crisis remains.

The City must devise a well-reasoned solution to this problem, and quickly. Otherwise, we will soon face a court order to commence construction on a building that is a quick-fix to a sensitive and complicated problem. ■

Yankee Intern Program

Thousands of people tramp through Boston's Old Granary Burial Ground, one of the city's most historic sites, each year, and while that activity means tourism dollars for the community, it also takes its toll on this fragile site; grass is sparse, sidewalks overgrown and precious grave markers are damaged or missing. The Bostonian Society decided