

Truckee's Slammer: The Town's Jail, 1875-1964

By Corri Jimenez

In the 1870s, racial tension was escalating in Truckee that created a period of lawlessness and disorder. Violence, such as gunfights, drunken disputes, and all manners of disorderly conduct, were becoming increasingly common along the town's streets. As a holding cell, Truckee's Constable Teeter was using his basement to detain lawbreakers, such as Chinese who were facing charges or needed protection from vigilantism.

In a January 6, 1874 article, the *Truckee Republican* reported two needs for a town jail. For one, Truckee residents claimed sending a criminal to the nearest jail in Nevada City cost the residents \$50.00 per person, the equivalent of \$1,101 today. Second, the community believed placing a jail in plain sight of the criminal behavior on Jibboom and Spring Streets would discourage bad behavior. The argument was a "suitable jail here, while it would serve as a convenience, would also exercise a wholesome influence upon evil doers, and, to a certain extent, prevent the perpetration of crime." In December, the *Truckee Republican* reported, "Truckee furnishes more jail prisoners than any other place in the county—frequently more than all the rest of the county combined" and urged that crimes with 60 to 90-day terms would be cheaper, reducing the cost of transportation to Nevada City, if there was a local jail.

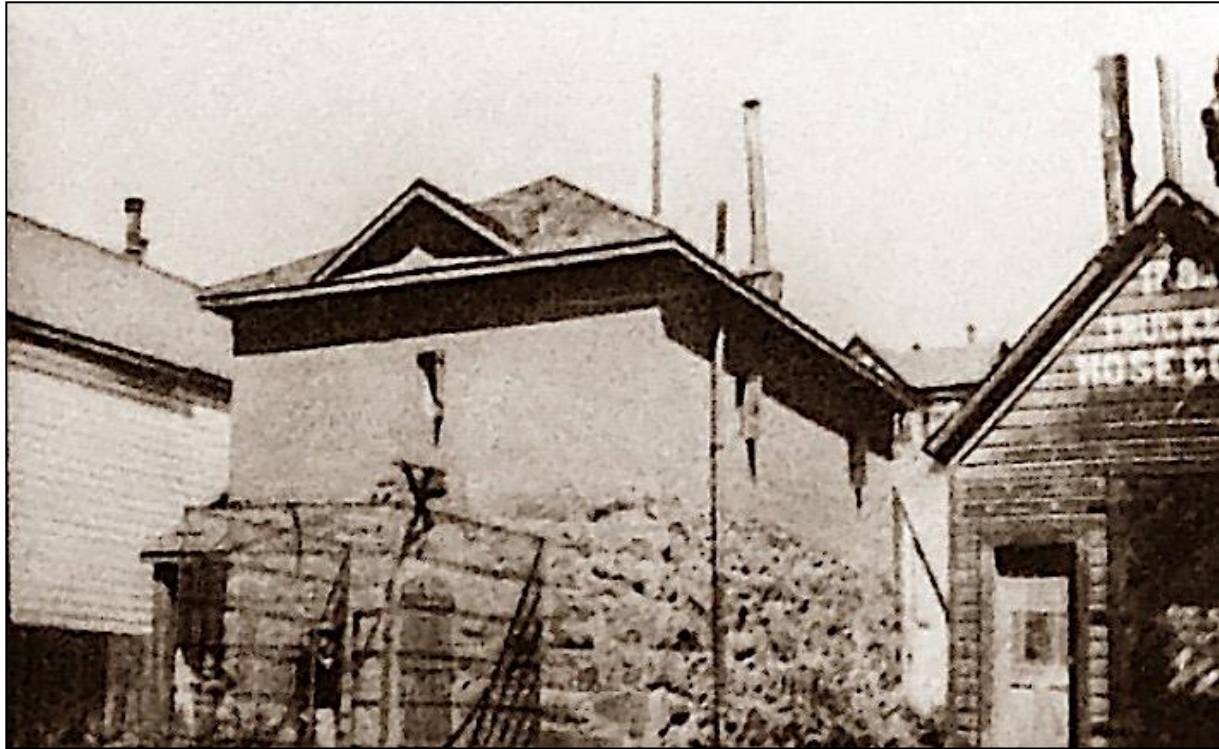
By June 1875, nineteen citizens of Truckee began the process to fund a local jail and spent \$675 purchasing lots formerly occupied by Chinese residents. The final cost to build the jail came to \$1,235.00, which in today's dollars is equivalent to \$27,216.91. The Nevada County Board of Supervisors decided to build the branch jail in June of 1875, and would be "made out of stone" on a 24-foot-wide lot, adjacent to the Eureka Hose Company No. 1 Firehouse. The jail's construction was awarded to "Mr. Stewart" in August. The jail was built with 30-inch thick stonewalls and had a large room as the entrance and two 7x9 feet wide cells for inmates. It officially opened on September 21, 1875 with its first resident, William Hart, who was arrested for brutally abusing a woman and grand larceny on October 2, 1875.

Jailer Henry Harrison Greeley saw the jail's first escape in 1879. Michael McCarthy, an 18-year old "San Francisco hoodlum," was incarcerated for burglary in the stone building and "some confederate on the outside passed him a heavy bar of iron through the stove pipe." He "succeeded in opening the iron door of the jail" and by the morning, he was gone. In 1889, the *Truckee Republican* recounted, "there will be no fun in going to jail" and those who "disturb the peace, sell whisky to Indians, and commit crimes" will have to work off their fines. Nevada County Supervisors created the following order:

...Hereafter when any prisoners are confined in the county jail under judgment of conviction of misdemeanor, the Supervisors shall work them, with ball and chain attached to their persons, upon the public grounds, buildings, roads and highways as may be deemed advisable, under the direction of some responsible person.

In July 1901, the little jail saw a record number of four escapes and Truckee residents were deeply concerned. A second story for the jail progressed quickly, which included steel shutters over the windows in making it impregnable. The jail improvements, completed by September, would be used for incarceration on the first floor and a hospital on the second for the infirmed. Sadly, these improvements didn't keep the inmates in and under the watchful eyes of Constables George Sharkey and August Schlumpf in 1907, W.E. LeClair and Charles Beard, charged for

robbery, “succeeded in cutting and removing enough mortar and stone to gain their liberty.” New quarter-inch steel cells for the “cooler” were underway in June of 1908, and each cell contained sanitary cots that could be removed and cleaned as necessary. During this time, the jail received its most notorious guests that included the infamous George “Baby Face” Nelson, George “Machine Gun Kelly” Barnes, and Juanita ‘Ma’ Spinelli.



Caption: Truckee Jail, c1908-East corner with front showing original southeast elevation. Truckee Hose Company building adjacent (Truckee Donner Historical Society).

The little jail out serviced its use by 1964 after almost 90 years of use in holding the drunk and criminally minded. The Truckee City Council proposed the jail be turned into a library in 1970, however the proposal was dropped as unfeasible. In 1974, the jail was presented as a town museum and Morris Smith undertook renovations that included relocating the stairway to its original place. The Truckee-Donner Historical Society opened to the public as a museum on July 4, 1976, educating visitors as well as residents on the town’s rich history.

In 2014, the author led a team of UNR historic preservation students to document the little jail. The project is still underway but will be Truckee’s first Historic American Building Survey in the Library of Congress’ American Memory Collection when finished.

Sidebar:

- Visit Truckee’s Old Jail this summer to get a firsthand experience of life in a real Old West prison. Open Truckee Thursdays 5-9 pm starting in mid-June and weekends from 10-4 starting Memorial Day weekend and ending on Labor Day. Located at 10142 Jibboom Street, Old Town Truckee.

- For more information and a list of summer activities going on in Truckee to celebrate the sesquicentennial of the Transcontinental Railroad go to <https://goldspike.org> or the Facebook page: Donner Summit-Truckee Golden Spike Celebration.

About the author:

Corri Jimenez is an architectural historian and historic preservation professional working in the Tahoe area. The following *Truckee Republican* articles were reviewed: “A Jail Wanted,” January 6, 1874; “A Posthumous Appeal,” December 5, 1874; Unknown, June 1875; “The Jail,” August 11, 1875; “Our Branch Jail,” July 21, 1875; “The Lot for the Jail,” July 23, 1875; “All Ready,” September 21, 1875; “Another Back Street Row,” October 2, 1875; “Out in the Cold World,” July 23, 1879; “Truckee Items,” August 1, 1889; “Two Prisoners Escape From Truckee Jail—With iron bar cut loose from cell door, they cracked cement pried out stones and made good their escape early in the evening;” “Work on Cooler about Done – The new Steel Cells Are Up to the Times, and Will Hold All Comers Safely,” June 13, 1908; and Majorie Hammers’ “Restoration of the Old Truckee Jail,” Truckee, California, 1976.