

Survey and Research Report on the Huntersville Town Jail



1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Huntersville Town Jail is located at 301 Huntersville-Concord Road, Huntersville, N.C.

2. Name and address of the current owner of the property:

**Town of Huntersville
PO Box 664
Huntersville NC 28078**

3. Representative photographs of the property: This report contains representative photographs of the property.

4. A map depicting the location of the property:



5. **Current Tax Parcel Reference and Deed to the property:** The tax parcel number of the property is 01903407. The most recent deed to this property is recorded in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 00601, page 228.
6. **A brief historical sketch of the property:** This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property prepared by Stewart Gray.
7. **A brief architectural description of the property:** This report contains a brief architectural description prepared by Stewart Gray.
8. **Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria for designation set forth in N.C.G.S 160A-400.5.**
 - a. **Special significance in terms of its history, architecture and/or cultural importance:** The Commission judges that the property known as the Huntersville Town Jail possesses special significance in terms of Huntersville and Mecklenburg County. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations:
 - 1) The ca. 1935 Huntersville Town Jail is the oldest surviving municipal building in Huntersville, and reflects the municipal development of the (then) relatively young town.
 - 2) The Huntersville Town Jail is an important historical artifact of the development and expansion of law enforcement in Mecklenburg County during the first half of the 20th century.

3) The Huntersville Town Jail was constructed during the Great Depression, a time of unprecedented public works projects in Mecklenburg County, and in North Carolina in general.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling and/or association: The Commission contends that the architectural description prepared by Stewart Gray demonstrates that the property known as the Huntersville Town Jail meets this criterion.

9. Ad Valorem Tax Appraisal: The Commission is aware that designation would allow the owner to apply for an automatic deferral of 50% of the Ad Valorem taxes on all or any portion of the property which becomes a "historic landmark." The current appraised value of the property is \$41,700. The property is exempt from the payment of Ad Valorem Taxes.

10. Portion of the Property Recommended for Designation. The jail building and the approximately .3 acres of land associated with tax parcel number 01903407.

December, 2013

A Brief History of the Huntersville Town Jail

On October 5, 1925, Huntersville mayor E. P. Page, and councilmen J. H. Walters, J. A. Kerns, C. H. Allen, and T. Neal Kerns signed a deed for the purchase of an approximately one-half acre lot along the Huntersville-Concord Road, to the east of the AT&O Railroad.^[1] The lot sat across the road from the town's one-room brick jail. The site may have initially been purchased to accommodate a new water tower. The lot was centrally located in Huntersville. It lay to the east of the town's busy train depot, and not far from the town's small commercial district clustered close to the rail line along Main Street.



Huntersville Depot ca. 1975

Sometime around 1935, the town constructed a new, small but secure, two-room brick jail which featured a free-standing two-cell iron and steel cellblock. The construction of the new jail reflects the municipal development of the relatively young town of Huntersville. It also reflects the development and expansion of law enforcement in Mecklenburg County which, despite the Great Depression, was experiencing fundamental changes as the county transitioned from an agricultural economy to one based increasingly on manufacturing, trade, and transportation. The construction of the jail also occurred during a time of unprecedented public works projects in Mecklenburg County, and in North Carolina in general.



Local Jails in North Carolina

It appears that inadequate county, city, and town jails had been a continual problem in North Carolina from the late 19th century and into the first quarter of the 20th century. In 1870 the North Carolina Board of Charities wrote:

As a general thing our jails are miserably constructed and there is little or no attention paid to the division and classification of prisoners... another great evil appertaining to the affairs of our prisoners is that the accommodations and approbations provided for

prisoners by the public contemplate scarce anything beyond the bare necessities of life and secure confinement.[2]

It appears that the conditions in local jails did not improve greatly during the following decades. In 1923 Joseph Fishman wrote that North Carolina's local jails were:

An unbelievably filthy institution in which are confined men and women serving sentence for misdemeanors and crimes, and men and women not under sentence who are simply awaiting trial. With few exceptions having no segregation of the un-convicted from the convicted, the well from the diseased, the youngest and most impressionable from the most deranged and hardened. Usually swarming with bed bugs, roaches, lice and other vermin. [3]

With Huntersville's population at just 833 in the 1920 census, it is unlikely that the disturbing conditions described above reflect Huntersville's jail situation in the 1920s and 1930s, but it was far from state of the art. The construction date of Huntersville's first jail is not known, but it is likely that it was constructed in the late 1800s or early 1900s. This earlier jail contained no cells but was instead a single room with a single door that opened to the exterior. "It was just a weedy little place (the jail) with a single door, and two little windows with bars in them." The building had no plumbing or heating.[4] The building was sparse and probably uncomfortable for prisoners and anyone charged with watching the prisoners. But perhaps more importantly, the building was inherently unsecure.

Law Enforcement and Crime

The construction of the Huntersville Town Jail was part a persistent movement toward more substantial and professional law enforcement agencies in Mecklenburg County. The first organized law enforcement entity in Mecklenburg County is as old as the county itself. With the formation of the county in 1763, Moses Alexander became Mecklenburg's first sheriff. The next major step in the county's law enforcement was the establishment of the Charlotte Police Department, which was organized in 1866 and consisted of nine members.[5] The Sheriff's office organized the Rural Police in 1917, but they did not prove effective until 1925, when they became an independent law enforcement agency that reported directly to the County Commission.[6] The Huntersville Police Department dates back to at least 1929. The first police chief mentioned in the town minutes is Lester Cross, who resigned in 1937, but was rehired and served through the 1940s.[7]

According to accounts of the time, crime was a serious and persistent problem in rural Mecklenburg County during the early decades of the 20th century. This circumstance may have been due to limited law enforcement resources spread over a large, rapidly growing and developing county. The illicit production and

sale of alcohol was also a significant factor. The *Mecklenburg Times* reported that in 1925 the newly independent Rural Police made 2,737 arrests and that “Prior to establishment, lawlessness was prevalent in the county” [8]

Much as today, Mecklenburg newspapers of the time were full of articles on crimes. In 1934 the *Mecklenburg Times* reported on juvenile “gangs terrorizing the city and communities in the county with their stealing and vandalism.” The same gangs were accused of “stealing and smashing of property and even mutilating and murdering one or two people”. [9] In 1935 a Mint Hill farmer killed his father, and Statesville Road residents complained about having their chicken coops robbed. At that time, with a force of 20, Rural Police Chief Vic Fesperman could only put 4 to 6 men on patrol at any one time. In October 1935, the County Commission voted to pay for radios in the patrol cars. In March 1936, the Rural Police arrested 36 drunk drivers, confiscated 454 gallons of whiskey, and issued \$3,000 in fines and forfeitures. In April of that year, the State Police opened an office in the County Courthouse. In June, Charlotte allotted \$19,000 to expand the city jail. [10]

In May 1937, the pay office of the cotton mill in Cornelius was robbed by men from Mooresville. In Huntersville in June 1937, a Ford Deluxe was stolen from Auten Motors, and fourteen pair of pants were stolen from Lane’s Store. In December of that year the Huntersville Town Board voted to post a \$10 reward for information concerning break-ins occurring along Main Street. [11] In January 1938, Chief of Police (and the town’s only police officer) J. A. Rape was shot and killed while investigating a break-in on Main Street. [12] The 1920s and 1930s in Mecklenburg County saw crime as a significant problem in the rapidly changing county. The challenging times of the Great Depression may have increased crime, or at least the public’s fear of crime. The Huntersville Town Jail is an important artifact in Mecklenburg County that demonstrates the development of law enforcement during the Great Depression.

Public Construction Projects During the Great Depression

The Huntersville Town Jail was constructed during a period of significant public building projects. In general, construction of new buildings in Mecklenburg County dropped precipitously with the onset of the Great Depression. In December 1933 there was 81% drop in the number of projects from five years earlier; the cost of the projects, the amount of money being put into the local building industry, was down a whopping 96%. Commercial and residential building came to a near standstill. The only sector to show vitality in Depression-era Mecklenburg County was governmental buildings. Some of this building activity was due to the infusion of federal money through the Works Progress Administration (WPA), Public Works Administration (PWA), or other Depression-era agencies. [13]

Just outside of Huntersville, a prison camp for inmates working as road crews or “chain gangs,” was substantially enhanced with the construction of a stone barracks around 1931.^[14] In Charlotte an early project was the 1934 expansion of the Neo-Classical United States Post Office. In 1935 Charlotte Fire Station #7 and the Eastover Elementary School were constructed. The 1936 American Legion Memorial Stadium was perhaps the most prominent of all the New Deal building projects in Mecklenburg County, with over \$120,000 in federal funding. Also in 1936, the WPA funded the construction of the Douglas Airport Hangar. 1937 saw construction of the Ada Jenkins School in Davidson, and the PWA funded Torrence-Lytle School in Huntersville. In 1938 the PWA funded Agricultural buildings on the school campuses in Huntersville, Cornelius and Long Creek.^[15] There is no indication that the Huntersville Town Jail was funded as part of a New Deal program, but it was certainly part of the Depression-era trend of providing federal funds for public buildings and municipal improvements.

The Huntersville Town Jail

It was in an atmosphere of increased crime (as portrayed in the newspapers), the expansion of law enforcement departments and facilities, and notable municipal improvements that Huntersville built a new, larger, and more modern and secure town jail.

The new two-room brick jail may have been built by Ruffus McCay, a brick mason who constructed many of the building around Huntersville in the 1930s.^[16] The jail featured a secure two-cell, steel and iron cell-block that sat free and unattached to any exterior walls. The smaller 5’6”-by-8’ cell featured two iron bunks, and the larger 6’6”-by-8’ contained three bunks. Both cells contained toilets. The smaller cell was equipped with tie-down brackets that could have been used to restrain a prisoner. A single iron bunk is bolted to the exterior of the block, and this may have been for “overflow” use or may have been a place for the jailor to sleep. A third toilet was located adjacent to the block, but outside of the cells. The jail was divided into two rooms by a solid masonry wall with a single central doorway. The back room contained the cell block, and the front room was an office. The office contained the only exterior door, and a flue for a wood, coal, or oil heater that provided heat for the entire building. The building was spartan, but it must have been a substantial improvement over the old jail.

The earliest reference to the jail is found in the 1937 town minutes:

Constable Sims (most likely Mecklenburg County Rural Police) applied for and was granted permission to use one cell of the town jail provided he in no way conflicted with the towns [sic] affairs. Also a fee of one dollar was to be assessed and paid into the town treasure for each prisoner he confined there upon conviction.^[17]

The next mention of the jail in the town minutes is a motion approved in 1940:

Have the town jail equipped w/proper bedding and to mark white and colored cells so as to keep the prisoners separated.[18]

Drunkenness appears to have been the most consistent crime in Huntersville when the Huntersville Town Jail was in use. And most of the first-person accounts of the jail involve incarceration for inebriation. Even though citizens had voted in 1937 to keep the county dry, Mecklenburg had a reputation as the “driest voting, wettest drinking” county in North Carolina.[19] Margaret Barnett, who grew up in Huntersville and whose husband became the town’s Police Chief in 1959, recalls that the town had “lots of liquor houses.”[20] In his book *Law and Society in the South: A History of North Carolina Court Cases*, John Wertheimer writes:

Several factors...complicated the dry’s efforts to enforce prohibition in Mecklenburg County. First, the rural police, whose jurisdiction included Charlotte’s periphery, home to many roadhouses, were utterly ineffective and reputedly in league with the liquor dealers. The county formally investigated the department in the spring of 1937 on charges of “direct and indirect connection with illicit liquor selling.” [21]

In 1939 Mecklenburg County resident George Cornelius Chandler recounts his problems with alcohol, his relationship with Police Chief Lester Cross, and the then relatively new Huntersville Town Jail:

The police just told me the next time I got drunk to stay out of his way. It cost me six dollars and twenty-five cents last time. I worked it out, cutting grass for twenty-five cents an hour for the town. Mr. (Cross) is mighty good about letting me work out my fine. I don’t believe he likes to keep anyone in the lock-up. I was really drunk but they’s lots around here that get that way. There was two white men locked up when I was turned out...The only remedy I can see is to get me a still and go to making whiskey again. That wouldn’t help much for I’d be fool enough to drink up all my profits. [22]

Another first-hand account comes from J. F. Jones, a farmer, who may have been brought to the Huntersville Town Jail by the Rural Police:

I got in a little trouble about liquor awhile back. I’ve always kept some for my own use. The law come one day and found ‘leven jars hid under my corncrib. They took me to town and locked me up. I had a half-pint in my pocket that they didn’t find so I dranked it while I was waiting to get out on bond. [23]

Paul Walters grew up in Huntersville in the 1940s. He remembers Police Chief Cross locking up “drunks” and an AWOL soldier during the Korean War. He recalls that Cross’s wife Bess cooked food for the incarcerated, but that the jail stood empty most of the time. The Jail was the only building owned by the town and was used as a voting site. Walters also remember attending Civil Defense meetings at the jail during World War II. The front office of the jail may have contained a desk and a stove, but Police Chief Cross did not keep an office there; instead Cross and subsequent police officers generally worked out of their patrol cars. [24]

Carl Barnett became the town’s Police Chief in 1959 and served until 1963. But he only used the jail to house prisoners once or twice during his tenure. Instead, Barnett would usually take prisoners to the County Jail in downtown Charlotte. Margaret Barnett recalls that the prisoners would be booked, post bond, and often be back in Huntersville before her husband had returned from Charlotte. Barnett may have been the last law enforcement officer in Huntersville to use the Huntersville Town Jail. After Barnett’s tenure the building was used for storage.[25]

Architectural Description for the Huntersville Jail



The Huntersville Jail faces south on an approximately .3 acre parcel in the Town of Huntersville. The jail is set back from the Huntersville-Concord Road approximately 50'. Much of the lot is enclosed by a tall chain-link fence, and the lot is largely open, with thick hedges along the side and rear property lines. The Huntersville Jail was built around 1935 near what was the commercial center of Huntersville. The jail is located approximately 280' due east of the Atlantic, Tennessee, and Ohio Railroad line (now Norfolk Southern), which bisected the center of the town. When built, the jail set relatively close to the town's train station (demolished) and brick commercial buildings which line the west side of Main Street.

The jail is a one-story brick building with a hipped roof. The jail is approximately 21' wide and 30' deep. The building's walls are solid brick laid in American Bond with five rows of stretchers laid between each row of headers. The walls are two wythe thick, with no differentiated foundation construction.

The front elevation features two symmetrically placed and substantial windows. Now covered with plywood, the original six-over-six double-hung windows are extant, though in poor condition. The window frames feature sloped wooden sills set on top of unusual brick sills composed of a row of headers laid across a row of stretcher-bricks. The brick sills project approximately 2" and exhibit minimal slope. The hipped roof is moderately sloped and features exposed rafter tails, connected by a narrow fascia board. The exposed roof framing and decking are in poor condition and the entire roof is covered with a tarp.



The west elevation's fenestration is limited to the jail's only door, and a window set high in the wall. The five-horizontal-panel door may be original and has retained its original hardware. The door is in poor condition. The door is hung from a wide wooden frame. The three-light swing-in hopper window features the same type of brick sill found on the front elevation.



Above: window (typical)
Right: original door



The rear elevation is blank except for a single three-light swing-in hopper window set high in the wall. The window features the same type of brick sill found on the front and west elevations.



The east elevation features two three-light swing-in hopper windows that feature the same type of brick sills found on the other elevations. The windows are set high in the wall and are roughly equidistant from the front and rear elevations and from each other. Roughly centered between the windows, a brick flue pierces the roof. The flue is flush with the exterior of the wall and rises approximately 7'6" above the roof. The brickwork tapers inward on all four sides of the chimney at the top four brick courses. The roof deck around the flue is in poor condition.



A small concrete slab extends from the front elevation. A water tower once was located toward the rear of the property.

Interior



The interior of the Huntersville Town Jail is divided into two rooms. The front room is lit by the two six-over-six double-hung windows on the façade, and by the frontmost hopper window on the east elevation. A solid masonry wall running from east to west divides the interior of the building. The interior masonry flue is integrated into the interior wall where it joins the east wall, and the flue features a clay thimble. All of the masonry is covered with plaster. The ceiling is also plastered. Portions of the plaster ceiling have deteriorated and fallen. There is no trim separating the plaster walls from the ceiling. The floor in both rooms is concrete. A single five-horizontal-panel door, like the exterior door, is centered on the interior wall. The wooden doorframe is narrower than the masonry wall, and the plaster curves to meet the frame.



The interior doorway leads to a rear room that contains a two-cell, steel and iron cell-block. The cell-block sits free and unattached to the exterior walls, but the steel and iron walls run from the concrete floor to the ceiling. The cell block is composed of one 5'6"-by-8' cell that features two iron bunks, and a larger 6'6"-by-8' cell that contains three bunks. Both cells contained simple toilets. The cells are composed of wall sections of relatively wide steel plate riveted to iron framing members and full wall sections of intersecting iron bars. The ceilings of the cells consist of steel plates riveted to iron framing. The smaller cell is equipped with tie-down brackets that could have been used to restrain a prisoner. The cell doors are riveted iron bars set in a lattice-design. Large strap hinges support the doors and are riveted to the steel plate of the cell walls. The doors were secured with heavy iron hasps, and likely used padlocks. A small section of the iron bars is cut away at the bottom of the door so that plates of food could be passed to the prisoners without opening the cell door.



Front of Cellblock



Rear of Cellblock



Iron bunks in smaller cell.



Rear wall of the larger cell.



Detail of restraint bracket.

A single iron bunk is bolted to the easternmost exterior of the block, and this may have been for “overflow” use or may have been a place for the jailor to sleep. A third toilet was located adjacent to the block, but outside of the cells.

The Huntersville Town Jail has retained a high degree of integrity. It appears that there have no significant changes to the building’s architectural elements. The building’s masonry work, concrete floor, and metal cellblock are in good condition. The building’s roof is in poor condition. Some roof framing and millwork are damaged due to the deteriorated roof.

^[1] Mecklenburg County Deed Book 00601, page 228

^[2] Alan Ashman, *Lock-up: North Carolina Looks at its Local Jails* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1969), 3.

^[3] Alan Ashman, *Lock-up: North Carolina Looks at its Local Jails* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1969), i.

^[4] McCord, Dave. Interview by Stewart Gray. Phone interview. Davidson NC, October 10, 2013

^[5] Legette Blythe, *Hornet's Nest: The Story of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County* (Charlotte: McNally, 1961), by McNally of Charlotte),176.

^[6] Mecklenburg Times, 8-6-1925, 1.

- ^[7] Huntersville town minutes 7-28-37 and 2-3-42.
- ^[8] Mecklenburg Times, 8-6-25, 1.
- ^[9] Mecklenburg Times, 8-16-1934, 1 and 4).
- ^[10] Mecklenburg Times, 7-29-35, 1, 9-26-35, 1, 10-24-35, 1, 4-2-36, 1, 4-9-36, 1, 6-11-36, 1.
- ^[11] Mecklenburg Times, 5-28-37, 1, 6-3-37, 7, 6-17-37, 7.
- ^[12] Huntersville town minutes 12-17-1937.
- ^[13] Architecture During the Great Depression: A Study of Building Trends in Charlotte, North Carolina. <http://landmarkscommission.org/CharlotteArchInGreatDepression.htm>. Accessed December 12, 2013.
- ^[14] Diane C. Althouse, "Research Paper Mecklenburg Prison II Historic Significance," Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, (2005).
- ^[15] Architecture During the Great Depression: A Study of Building Trends in Charlotte, North Carolina. <http://landmarkscommission.org/CharlotteArchInGreatDepression.htm>. Accessed December 12, 2013.
- ^[16] McCord, Dave. Interview by Stewart Gray. Phone interview. Davidson NC, October 10, 2013.
- ^[17] Huntersville town minutes 3-21-1937
- ^[18] Huntersville town minutes 12-11-1940
- ^[19] John Wertheimer, *Law and Society in the South: A History of North Carolina Court Cases*, (University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 115.
- ^[20] Barnette, Margaret. Interview by Stewart Gray. Phone interview. Huntersville NC, October 16, 2013.
- ^[21] John Wertheimer, *Law and Society in the South: A History of North Carolina Court Cases*, (University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 115.
- ^[22] Chandler, George Cornelius. Interview by Mary P Wilson. Huntersville, NC. June 14, 1939.
- ^[23] Jones, JF. Interview by Mary P Wilson. Huntersville, NC. June 5, 1939.
- ^[24] Walters, Paul, Interview by Stewart Gray. Phone interview. Davidson NC, October 16, 2013.
- ^[25] Barnette, Margaret. Interview by Stewart Gray. Phone interview. Huntersville NC, October 16, 2013.