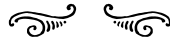


Behind Bars: Carlinville's Cannonball Jail



Located in Macoupin County, along historic Route 66 in Illinois, is the quaint midwestern town of Carlinville. With a history steeped in coal mining, Carlinville is a town where community thrives. At the center of the historic downtown district lies the brick-paved Carlinville Historic Square, a community hub surrounded by historic buildings, antique stores, and cafes. A large cedar gazebo at the center stands on the site of a courthouse where Abraham Lincoln once practiced law. But Carlinville's architectural heritage extends beyond its town square. One of Carlinville's most famous landmarks, right across from the prominent Million Dollar Courthouse, is the Cannonball Jail, an architectural marvel for the time.

Following a few unfortunate turn of events with past jails for the large county, it was decided a new construction method was needed. "Previous jails were too small, and one or more burned down. That's why this one was made of stone," said Mary Tinder, Member of the Macoupin County Cannonball Jail Ambassador Team. "Macoupin is a large county, and we needed more space for prisoners. 864 square miles is a lot for one sheriff to handle."

Designed by Elijah E. Myers — a prominent 19th Century architect who designed capitol buildings in three U.S. states (Michigan, Texas, and Colorado) as well as Carlinville's controversial Macoupin County Courthouse — the three-story structure features a striking Gothic Revival design, resembling a medieval castle more than a small town jail. Meyers tended to draw inspiration from Victorian Classic and Neo-Classical styles, evident in the jail's iron railings and ornamental details. Inside, the ceilings are low, and cells narrow. The contract price for the jail was \$14,000 (\$300,000 today, when adjusted for inflation).

By 1869, the jail was available for the county's use. It was built with the intended capacity to hold seventeen prisoners, but at times it would hold twice that number, which could lead to cramped conditions and non-existent privacy for the inmates. It operated as a jail and apartment complex, with the sheriff living on the second and third floors with his family. It was also often customary for the sheriff's wife



to cook and do the prisoners' laundry. While Carlinville was a modestly populated community — the number was estimated to be between two and three thousand people — it's always been a predominately farming and coal mining town, so these weren't exactly hardened criminals taking up the space. "There were drifters, hobos from trains.... Some were jailed for drunkenness, stealing chickens, mostly theft and rowdy behavior," said Andrea Duncan, fellow Ambassador Team Member. "Because of bootlegging, it probably kept law enforcement on their toes during the times of Prohibition."

The jail earned its nickname for having surplus Civil War-

era cannonballs embedded between 20 inches of solid stone walls, intended to prevent prisoners from escaping. The thought was that nobody could chip their way out through a cannonball, and in the jail's history, only one group ever did. Five men managed to escape by loosening the bars of their cell but were quickly caught on the town's main street. Its secure design helped it remain operational for over a century.

In 1988, after 119 years of service, the jail locked the doors and threw away the proverbial key. Its visual aesthetic made it a popular tourist attraction, but it eventually became closed to the public due to old age and environmental issues, making it a potential hazard. That didn't stop visitors from regularly stopping by and getting pictures of the jail's exterior, so after several decades, the ball was set in motion to restore the building. Funded through a grant received in 2022 by the Great Rivers & Routes Tourism Bureau, the jail officially became the Macoupin County Visitors Center and opened its doors again in August 2023.

The restoration effort did the trick to catch the eye of Route 66 fanatics, because in 2023 the Ambassador Team recorded visitors coming in from at least 38 states and 19 countries, with Tinder proclaiming, "The old girl was retired, but we are so glad we have her back and open for show. Not prisoners. Just looking at this beautiful old building humbles me, knowing I have the privilege of unlocking its door for visitors every day."