

*A visitor to the Chittenden County Courthouse on Burlington's Main Street will pass by two poster boards denoting important events in our courthouse's history. As the Assistant Judge, these events piqued my curiosity, and so I began to research some of the stories in depth. As a result, in conjunction with the Burlington Free Press, I am happy to present the third installment of "The Chittenden County Courthouse Chronicles."*

### **Chittenden County Jails**



By Connie Cain Ramsey

#### **The last jailhouse in Chittenden County.**

Until 1969 all Vermont counties were responsible for their own prison systems. In Chittenden County in the shire town of Burlington, many will remember a stately, elegant Main Street Victorian mansion... with a jail attached. This memorable house was built in 1888, the jail was added to it in 1907 and stood until 1972.

Chittenden County's last jailhouse has a rich history, but first, a brief look at its predecessors.

#### **Chittenden County's first jail ~ complete with whipping post.**

In 1792, the first Chittenden County Sheriff, Noah Chittenden, (brother of the governor) built the first county jail at the northeast corner of Courthouse Square (City Hall Park today). This sturdy log structure, complete with an outdoor whipping post to publicly punish convicted criminals, lasted until 1808, when a new stone jail with a frame house for the Sheriff was built.

#### **Petticoat wires and the "school of contamination."**

By the late 1880's, the county jail had become seriously deteriorated. The jail housed prisoners of both sexes, and cracks in the concrete soon led to a form of communication using petticoat wires to pass notes between prisoners. A local newspaper, learning of this clandestine communication, labeled the jailhouse – the "school of contamination."

It was clear something needed to change and so a new jailhouse was mandated.

#### **Putting the "house" in jailhouse, 220 Main.**

To me, Chittenden County's most memorable jail was the one located at Burlington's 220 Main Street. The house was a beautiful 1888 Victorian mansion, the jail was added on in 1907. The jailhouse stood as a Burlington landmark until 1972.

I remember passing by it when I went downtown as a child. Sometimes the prisoners would yell "Hey kid, come over here!" If I was alone I would run away. But if I was with my friends we would go over and engage in conversation with them. I remember the prisoners playfully saying things like "I'm gonna get you kid" and us answering "Ha, ha! You can't, you're in jail!"

The first Sheriff to reside in the Main Street home was Edward Horton, but the most famous was

Earle “Buzz” McLaughlin, whose white mane and stout belly made him an iconic Burlington figure. Buzz moved his wife Theresa and family of three children (Tommy, Mary and Kevin) into the jailhouse in 1955, and Theresa would bare eight more children while residing at 220 Main (Timmy, Sheila, Judy, Colleen, James, Jane, Johnny and Louise). The jailhouse was run by Buzz and the McLaughlin family until 1969, when the Vermont State Department of Corrections took over the responsibilities of the jail from the County.

From 1955 to 1969 running the jail was a family affair for the McLaughlins, with Theresa and her children preparing meals for the inmates. Maximum security inmates were served in their cells while the others dined at a picnic table in a common area that was served through a pantry door. After dinner, the family would clean up, and Buzz would order the inmates back to their cells. A large lever was pulled, locking the jail cells and securely separating the inmates from the family that was just a partition away.

**“Is that mice in the walls or...?”**

Current Chittenden County Sheriff Kevin McLaughlin, Buzz's son, remembers his days growing up at 220 Main.

“My brother Tommy and I slept upstairs in two converted jail cells. At one point we began to hear scratching in the wall. We thought it was mice, but it turned out to be a classic attempt to break out of jail by digging through the cell wall.”

Little did the inmates know they were breaking through an interior wall and into the bedrooms of two strapping, young McLaughlin boys. The attempt was foiled as it proved too coincidental that the scratching occurred only when siren from the neighboring fire station sounded.

The downtown location made it easy for friends and family of the inmates to parley with them by standing outside the cell block walls. Some even sneaked alcohol to their friends, feeding them through long straws that were extended from hand held liquor bottles to the cell windows above.

Prisoner transport was easy, no vehicle needed, Buzz would simply shackle inmates together and walk them en masse across the street to the courthouse.

The yard around the jailhouse was also the family's playground, complete with a swing set. The yard was often filled with playing children who irritated the inmates with their boisterous behavior. Their noises evidently drowned out the small black and white TV that was the inmates’ sole entertainment, and so the inmates would shout down at the kids to “keep it down.”

The swing set was often the subject of a Burlington tourist's photo op. A swing set outside of a jail was a curiosity too odd to pass up.

On rainy days the kids would camp out in their parents’ corner bedroom, calling the Main Street pay phone as a prank, to confuse walkers as they strolled by it.

### **Changing of the guard.**

In 1969 the McLaughlin family moved out of the building as the Chittenden County Jail System yielded to the newly formed State of Vermont Department of Corrections. They watched in disbelief as a staff of fourteen officers and support people filed into their house to do the same work the McLaughlin family had done single-handily for 14 years.

By 1972 the inmates were moved out of the jail and were housed elsewhere by the Vermont Department of Corrections.

220 Main, the last county jailhouse, like so many other historic Burlington buildings, sadly fell to the wrecking ball in 1972, the land it was on now serves as a parking lot at the corner of Main and South Winooski Avenue.

But Kevin has nothing but fond memories of his years living at the jailhouse. And it certainly inspired him to follow in his father's footsteps and become our current Chittenden County Sheriff. 27 years and counting.

*Bob Boyd and Jack Ramsey contributed to this chronicle.*

*If you have any questions about this chronicle, or you would like a tour of Chittenden County Courthouse please contact me at 651-1720 or [Connie.Ramsey@state.vt.us](mailto:Connie.Ramsey@state.vt.us)*



*photo by Kevin McLaughlin*

*220 Main Street as it looked in 1972. Notice the partial view of the still-standing Mid-Town Motel, and the now-gone pay phone that Kevin and his siblings used to call to prank passers-by.*

*The swing set was located by the yellow cars.*



*Special Collections, University of Vermont Libraries*

*1859 photograph of Burlington's Courthouse Square, now known as City Hall Park. The view is looking north from Main Street toward College Street. Along the right hand side of the photograph are, from right to left: part of the 1854 Town Hall, the 1828 County Courthouse, and Strong's Block, where the county jail and sheriff's office were originally located.*





*photo provided by Kevin McLaughlin*

*1980 photo of past Sheriff Eale “Buzz” McLaughlin, Judge William Webster, and present Sheriff Kevin McLaughlin.*

Sources:

*Courthouse Posterboards (various, including Special Collections, University of Vermont Libraries and Vermont Judicial Historical Society)*

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