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YORK TO CELEBRATE THE TRICENTENNIAL OF OLD GAOL'S STONE CELL IN 2020

York, Maine—The stone cell of York's Old Gaol Museum will celebrate its 300th year in 2020. The Old Gaol, which is designated as a National Historic Landmark, stands on Gaol Hill in the center of York Village (incorporated 1652). Maine's colonial prison complex was established there in 1656, but the central stone structure is the only part of the building that has been dated scientifically.

As part of a long-term preservation project to restore and reinterpret the structure, Old York Historical Society has undertaken an in-depth study of the building's construction. "Historic court records, along with architectural evidence, including a scientific study of the timbers used to construct the building, suggest that Gaol Hill has been the location of colonial Maine's prison complex since the first Provincial Prison was constructed there in 1656," says Joel Lefever, Executive Director and Chief Curator of Old York Historical Society. "For the past fifty years, it was thought that the prison was moved from a nearby location to Gaol Hill in 1719," continued Lefever, "So, this is an important change in our thinking about the building's development."

DEVELOPMENT OF YORK'S GAOL HILL

Before 1968, York's Old Gaol was thought to date from 1653. At that time, researchers working for the National Parks Service and the Historic American Buildings Survey concluded that the Old Gaol was built starting in 1719. Their opinion was based on a 1719 order by the York County Court that a new stone or brick prison should be built near the town's First Parish Church, and that the original prison building and land be sold. That order never was fully carried out, because the First Parish Church owned Gaol Hill (it still does), and the land could not be sold.

The new stone prison instead was built on Gaol Hill adjacent to the original 1656 wooden Provincial Prison, and a 1707 House of Correction. The 1656 Provincial Prison apparently was torn down between 1719 and 1720, and wood from it likely was reused in the construction of the stone prison that the court had ordered to be finished by June 1720.

A recent evaluation of historic court records, carried out in conjunction with a scientific study of the building timbers (known as dendrochronology) suggest that Gaol Hill has been the site of the prison complex since 1656, when the first Provincial Prison was constructed there. Other prison structures built during the colonial period were a House of Correction (or workhouse) for debtors and minor offenders (1707); a stone prison, which replaced the original wooden prison (1719–1720); and a prison house, or gaoler's residence (1729).

These small freestanding buildings were sited around an open prison yard. In 1737, the prison yard was roofed over and a kitchen built in its place. Later, around 1763, the roofs were torn off of the original buildings and new prison cells were constructed on the second floor, joining the three separate buildings into one. The Old Gaol's distinctive barn-like gambrel roof dates to the 1763 renovations. Two later additions completed the Old Gaol as it stands today—a room on the southwest corner of the first floor, and a debtor cell on the second floor, built in 1799; and a small room and cellar at the south end of the building, built in 1806.

RE-EVALUATING THE HISTORICAL RECORD

OYHS staff and architectural consultant Steven Mallory began re-evaluating the historic documentation for the Old Gaol in 2012. Records from the Maine Provincial Court dating back to the 1630s reveal that the Court ordered Maine's first prison to be built in 1653. Raising tax funds for the project proved difficult, but by 1656 enough funds had been collected to complete the project.

During an excavation of the flooring of the 1719–1720 stone prison, carried out in 1977, the date “1656” was found carved into a wall stud of the structure. More recently, the date “1704” was found carved into a wall plank. These dates suggest that wood salvaged from the earlier prison structure was used in the construction of the stone building.

DENDROCHRONOLOGY OF THE STONE PRISON

In March 2018, William Flynt, Architectural Conservator at Historic Deerfield in Massachusetts, and a leading expert in dendrochronology, took core samples of the planks and beams in the original stone prison cell for evaluation. Dendrochronology, the scientific study of the growth rings in trees, allows scientists to accurately date when a tree was cut down. This is used in the context of historic buildings to date the lumber used in construction. Flynt was able to date an oak timber above the cell door and four ceiling planks to 1719. An oak corner board dates to 1730, which is consistent with the Court's order in 1730 and 1731 to repair planking in the cell. Planks of a hemlock center wall partition date to 1785, indicating that they are a later replacement.

THE 1707 YORK COUNTY HOUSE OF CORRECTION: A NEW DISCOVERY

In 1699, Massachusetts passed an act “for the Suppressing and Punishing of Rogues, Vagabonds, Common Beggars, and other Lewd, Idle and Disorderly Persons; and also for setting the Poor to work.” This provided for the erection of “houses of correction” in every county where such houses had not already been built. Justices of the peace in each county nominated a master for

their houses of correction, and passed orders for the governing of them. Since York County was under the jurisdiction of Massachusetts in 1699, the county was required to comply.

The building of York County's house of correction was delayed until 1707 when Peter Nowell and Francis Raynes were paid £20 out of the county treasury to erect a prison “24 foot long, 16 foot wide, and 7 foot between the floors.” The following year, Thomas Moore was appointed keeper of the prison at York and also master of the house of correction. This was the first time a house of correction master had specifically been named in Maine since 1686, when the Provincial Court ordered that York’s 1656 prison building also serve as its house of correction.

The southeast corner room on the first floor of the Old Gaol appears to be the 1707 House of Correction. Several pieces of physical evidence support this idea. First, it is the only part of the Old Gaol with a seven-foot high ceiling, as specified in the 1707 construction order. Second, refuse from 18th-century manufacturing was found earlier this year in the ceiling and walls of the building. Hundreds of leather trimmings and pieces of worn shoes, as well as flax fibers and hanks, indicate that inmates were forced to repair shoes, process flax, and weave linen cloth to pay their court-ordered fines. Dendrochronology on this part of the Gaol has not been performed, and may prove to be difficult in part because timber reference samples from this area of Maine are sparse, and because the house of correction, once a freestanding building, was heavily altered in the 1730s and 1790s.

FUTURE PLANS FOR THE OLD GAOL

The OYHS review of historic court records, and hundreds of archeological finds, is ongoing. “The history of the Old Gaol continues to reveal itself to us,” says Lefever. “The discovery, earlier this year, of shoe-repairing materials and food refuse above ceilings and under floorboards tells us a lot about the life of prisoners in the Gaol. We have a better picture of how they spent their time, and what they ate.” Among the food refuse were corncocks and lobster shells, indicating that “the traditional New England diet has not changed that much in 300 years,” says Lefever.

“We are thrilled to be able to conclusively date the stone cell of the Gaol to 1719–1720,” says Lefever, “and look forward to celebrating its 300th anniversary in 2020, to coincide with the 200th anniversary of Maine becoming an independent state.” In conjunction with these celebrations, OYHS staff hopes to raise funds to develop new exhibits and interpretation that tell the story of York’s House of Correction, and explain the complex construction phases of the Old Gaol.

OYHS also is seeking funds to restore parts of the building, and to put in a new heating system, replacing an inoperable system installed in 1958. “The Gaol is built on stone ledge, which makes it a cold, damp place, and that wreaks havoc on the building’s fabric. A new system will help us control the humidity levels, and slow the rate of decay,” says Lefever. “A building this old, and this significant to Northern New England and Maine history, deserves to be preserved and enjoyed by the public.”

ABOUT OLD YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Old York is a vital part of the York, Maine community. The organization maintains 16 buildings and 20 properties including the 17-acre Steedman Woods; has 5 full-time and 25 part-time employees; more than 20,000 artifacts and 50,000 archival materials in the library; and serves thousands of people year-round through tours, educational programs, and special events. For more information please visit the website oldyork.org.

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