

## History of Santa Cruz County Jails

*By Craig R. Wilson*

The first reference to a jail in Santa Cruz was on Mission Hill where Emmett and School Streets are presently situated.<sup>1</sup> The building was a large two-and-a-half-story adobe structure<sup>2</sup> that served as the "julgado, city hall and jail" after 1834.<sup>3</sup> In 1848, William Blackburn, the first alcalde under American rule and later the first county judge,<sup>4</sup> purchased the building and operated it as the Eagle Hotel.<sup>5</sup> The building was demolished around 1880.<sup>6</sup>



*1. Mission Hill, circa 1830. Courtesy of Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley*

In 1847, Felipe Gomez was arrested at the Mission in 1847 for the murder of his wife and was held at the "the nearby adobe jail"<sup>7</sup> until he was executed by firing squad three days later, following a brief trial over which Blackburn presided. In 1851, vigilantes removed Mariano Hernandez from the juzgado, where he was detained for a minor crime, and hung him.<sup>8</sup>

The first County Jail was located at the east end of High Street,<sup>9</sup> on a lot fronting Mission Plaza<sup>10</sup> that was previously the Mission graveyard.<sup>11</sup> In 1854<sup>12</sup> John B. Perry and William Nickerson<sup>13</sup> built a wooden structure of timbers a foot thick lined all around with sheet iron 3/8" thick attached to the timbers with 6" spikes spaced at every four inches.<sup>14</sup> Prisoners were held without exercise, and food was procured from a hotel for one dollar per day, per inmate.<sup>15</sup> There were three prisoners held at the jail on November 15, 1856. They were left unattended at night and escapes were common.<sup>16</sup>

On about June 6, 1863 Juan Buelna, twenty-two years old, was hung in the "enclosure near the Plaza" for the murder of his cousin over a love triangle. Buelna did not die immediately, "his stifled breathing could be heard afterwards; he struggled faintly for a couple of minutes" before his death.<sup>17</sup> Father Casanova attended the execution.

On about June 13, 1865 the jail caught fire. Its only prisoner, Pedro Lorenzana, sounded the alarm at 3:00 a.m. and was rescued, but the building was damaged beyond repair. The cause of the fire "was evidently the work of an incendiary."<sup>18</sup> The building was torn down during the late 19th century.<sup>19</sup>

In 1864<sup>20</sup> the Mission Hill jail referred to as "Hihn's Jail"<sup>21</sup> or sarcastically, "The Little Stone Jug"<sup>22</sup> was built on the same lot as the former jail<sup>23</sup> and was sited 43 feet from the southeast<sup>24</sup> corner of Holy Cross Church,<sup>25</sup> where today a parking lot is located.<sup>26</sup> The jail was constructed of granite blocks 30 in. long, 12 in. thick, 16 in. wide and measured 25 feet 8 in. by 16 ft. 8 in., with an interior hall 5 feet wide running through it and having



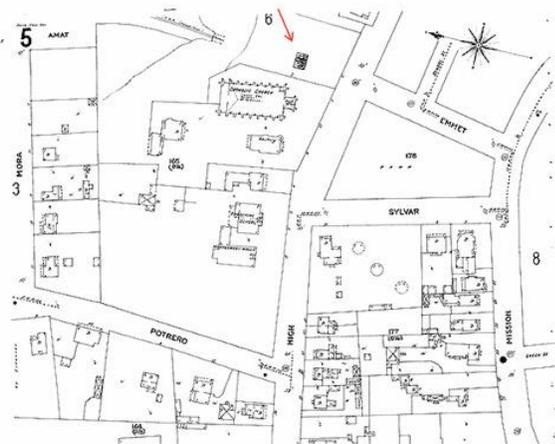
2. Mission Hill Jail, 1864. Courtesy of McHenry Library Special Collections, UC Santa Cruz

four cells that were 6 ft. 6 in. by 8 ft., 8 ft. high.<sup>27</sup> The County Board of Supervisors awarded the contract to the lowest bidder, Frederick Clinkerfuss, for \$3600,<sup>28</sup> who abandoned the job before it was completed, causing the county to finish the project.<sup>29</sup> In 1870 Supervisor Elihu Anthony inspected its new doors and locks and declared it to be "...one of the best in the State, being secure against the most determined attacks of desperadoes, from either the outside or the inside."<sup>30</sup> Before the new equipment was installed prisoners charged with serious crimes were held at the Santa Clara jail at "heavy expense."

In 1877, two prisoners were lynched from the jail. On Saturday, May 28, Henry DeForrest was robbed and murdered, leading to the arrest of Francisco Arias and Jose Chamala. On Tuesday night "men were gathering in clusters about the jail, particularly back in the old Mission orchard but they made no demonstration and all was quiet." On Wednesday night a mob of 150 were denied entrance by jailer Sylvar but they broke down the gate and forced Under Sheriff Hunt to deliver the prisoners to them. Following a mock trial and alleged confessions, Arias and Chamala were hung from the upper San Lorenzo Bridge (Water Street Bridge<sup>31</sup>). Their bodies were found hanging there the next morning.<sup>32</sup> The local paper's description of these events leaves many unanswered questions and should be viewed with skepticism.

On New Years Day, 1879, nineteen prisoners were confined, including six Chinese men arrested for "catching small fishes in the Soquel Creek."<sup>33</sup>

On November 28, 1887 Deputy Alzina gave a tour of the jail to a Daily Surf reporter. The jail held eight prisoners who "seemed to enjoy the generous supply of good wholesome food provided, and all declare themselves as well satisfied as the circumstances will admit." The cells were reportedly warm and comfortable and a fire burned in the hallway stove. Vegetables were grown in the yard around the jail and it looked "really home-like."<sup>34</sup> Just over a year later, with ten prisoners detained therein, the same newspaper described the jail as a "...terrible dungeon...tomb-like...dismal, dreary, dark." According to the paper, the County Grand Jury condemned the jail every year for the past ten years and found it "unfit place for the habitation of life."<sup>35</sup> The 1866 Grand Jury report described the jail as "unfit and insufficient for the purposes of a jail; that the health and life of the victim is jeopardized by confinement therein."<sup>36</sup>



3. 1905 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map

The jail was no longer used after 1889.<sup>37</sup> On January 3, 1906 the County Board of Supervisors resolved to offer the "old county jail property on Mission Hill" with or without the property and ran and posted a notice in the Santa Cruz Morning Sentinel.<sup>38</sup> On February 10, 1906 G.H. Hammer's bid of \$200.00 for the jail was the highest, while a \$1700.00 bid for the lot was deemed too low and it was readvertised for sale.<sup>39</sup> On April 2, 1906 all bids for the property were considered to be too low, so the County retained the lot.<sup>40</sup> In 1906<sup>41</sup> the building was demolished and its granite sold. In 2006, eight granite blocks from the jail were discovered buried in a lot on North Pacific Avenue and Bulkhead Street during a construction project. The lot was the former site of Santa Cruz Marble and Granite Works, a maker of tombstones.<sup>42</sup>

On October 23, 1890<sup>43</sup> a jail designed by J.M. Curtis<sup>44</sup> and built by A.J. Meany<sup>45</sup> at a cost of \$30,000 dollars<sup>46</sup> opened at 104 Front Street. Meany was an ex-Sheriff of Merced County and a state senator.<sup>47</sup> The jail was two



4. Mission Hill Jail, 1889. Jail at Southeast Corner of Holy Cross Church

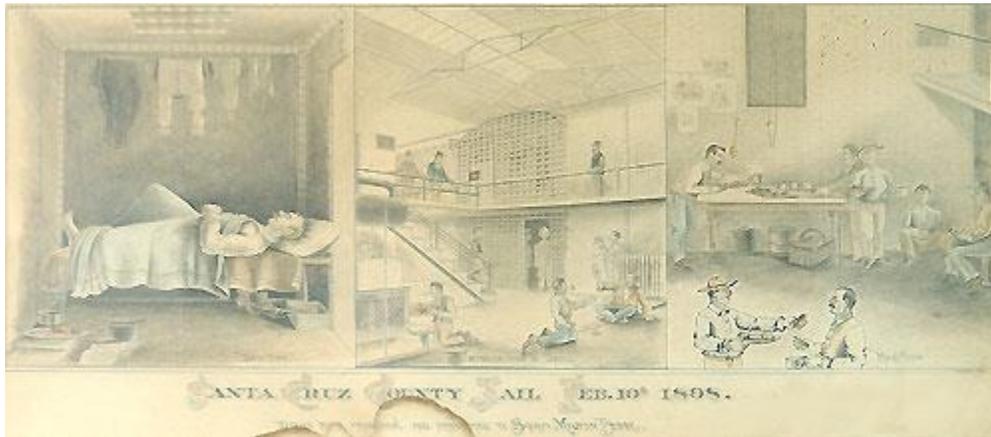
stories, constructed of brick and iron, with an ornamental tower made of redwood and tin.<sup>48</sup> Inside there were 18 cells: two cell rooms with six cells each, four upstairs, and two in the basement,<sup>49</sup> with a capacity to hold 24 inmates.<sup>50</sup> Records indicate the average daily inmate population was 14 prisoners in 1906 and there were 259 prisoners booked that year.<sup>51</sup>



5. Front Street Jail, 1890. Courtesy of McHenry Library Special Collections, UC Santa Cruz

In 1929, Sacramento expressed concern over jail conditions throughout the state, leading to the passage of the Jones Bill that gave the Department of Social Welfare authority to "regulate sanitary, safety, and housing conditions in Santa Cruz" and in extreme cases to close jails.<sup>52</sup>

By mid-1931 the jail was 100% over its capacity with 52 prisoners, almost half of whom slept on the floor.<sup>53</sup> Although the jail population declined over the next few years, by 1934<sup>54</sup> it was again well over its capacity and there were several jail escapes too.



6. *Cartoon of the Front Street Jail Drawn by an Inmate, circa 1898*

Jailhouse informants are often helpful. In 1929 two men, Daniel Tucker and Glen Randall, both of whom were serving short terms for property crimes, escaped from the County Jail by prying open the corrugated iron door in the main hall and making their way down the hall and out through the court. The police arrested them for auto theft soon thereafter but did not know they were escapees, the suspects having given false names, and they were locked up in the nearby city jail. It was there the men schemed to kill the officer who would bring them breakfast the next morning and to steal his gun. Fortunately, a prisoner in an adjoining cell overheard them and warned the officers, foiling the plan.<sup>55</sup>

Bootlegging was common during the 1930s and many people were corrupted by its influence. In 1929, Deputy Enoch Alzina, the son of the County's first Sheriff in 1850, Francisco Alzina,<sup>56</sup> quit his job of 35 years over a scandal concerning missing alcohol stills. Under Sheriff J.R. Devitt and Deputy Sheriff Amos Beauregard discovered two stills were missing from the County Jail's basement when they prepared to destroy them, along with gallons of "booze" seized during raids. During the investigation a witness alleged that he bought the stills from jail trustees for \$3 while Alzina was present. Alzina claimed he was ordered to clean up the basement and gave the job to trustees to complete. According to Alzina, a junk dealer arrived and removed everything in the room, the contents of which Alzina knew nothing. In addition to his duties as jailer, he was the bailiff, unofficial interpreter, and janitor.<sup>57</sup> Alzina retained his job as courthouse janitor.

Jail escapes were common. In 1929 Michael Sherling, a 24 year old "dope addict" serving time for attempting to steal shoes, was moved from the jail to the County Hospital for medical care. A nurse later discovered him missing and found that Sherling stole another patient's clothing when he escaped. Sherling apparently had a problem with shoes because he later was seen barefoot on Emeline Street asking for a pair of shoes.<sup>58</sup>

The jailer lived "atop the county jail building." One night in 1934 Deputy Sheriff J.D. Kenney, looked out his window toward the smaller city jail, where he saw figures trying to remove its transom. Kenney called the city police. When Radio Patrolman George Bertolucci arrived he swung the front doors only to find three young men dressed in Civilian Conservation Corps uniforms. It turned out the men were visiting friends in the jail and were accidentally locked in the building when the jail officer was called away on other business and forgot about them.<sup>59</sup>

Zoe Sorensen was the first woman sentenced to state prison from Santa Cruz County. On August 7, 1934 Judge Ernest Weyand sentenced Sorensen, who had a past record for grand larceny, to one to five years for passing fictitious checks.<sup>60</sup>

In 1933 there were 35 prisoners held in the jail, including "six Filipinos, Chinese, one Japanese, one colored and the rest Caucasian, representing many nationalities."<sup>61</sup>

In 1934 state narcotics officers working in Watsonville arrested Charles Sing, a ninety-year old Chinese man, for possession of narcotics.<sup>62</sup>

In 1935 Yutaka Nakamura, a twenty-five year old Japanese man, following his prison sentence of one to fifteen years for auto theft, tried to "dash out his brains" by butting his head against the wall as he was led from the courtroom back to the jail, but was subdued by his police escort.<sup>63</sup>

It was at about this time the County Board of Supervisors considered build a whipping post to punish "certain drunkards who are causing the county continual expense,"<sup>64</sup> but upon consideration abandoned the idea.

By mid-1935 the County looked to the Works Progress Administration for financial assistance to build a larger jail.<sup>65</sup> In 1936 plans for the construction of a larger jail were finalized. During January 1937 forty prisoners were moved in a furniture van to the Sisson Building at 351 Pacific Avenue where they were temporarily held until the new jail was ready.<sup>66</sup> The jail was demolished in 1937.<sup>67</sup>



7. Front Street Jail, 1936.  
Courtesy of Covello and  
Covello

In 1936<sup>68</sup> the Works Progress Administration<sup>69</sup> provided funds for the construction of jail designed by Albert Roller<sup>70</sup> at 705 Front Street,<sup>71</sup> at a cost of \$190,000<sup>72</sup> and built to hold 68 men and 8 women.<sup>73</sup> As completion of construction neared the jail population was "dropping away so fast the sheriff and aides are fearful there will not be enough left to make a creditable showing by the time the building is accepted" causing the Sheriff to consider staging a round-up in the "jungles," private bingo parties, or drafting prominent citizens to stand in for prospective prisoners to make for a grand opening.<sup>74</sup> The jail opened on December 13, 1937 with thirty-eight inmates.<sup>75</sup> The Sheriff need not have worried about the population; by 1939 it was over its capacity, holding 82 prisoners.<sup>76</sup>

In 1955 a Sheriff's Sergeant was in charge of the jail and was "personally responsible for anything and everything that is connected with the County Jail."<sup>77</sup>

He was required to keep records of inmate meals, sanitation of the jail, and the personal hygiene of prisoners. The department also employed three matrons who were on duty 24 hours a day and were responsible for "all activities involving a female suspect" according to state law.<sup>78</sup> During the 1955 flood a jail work crew assisted cleaning up the city. Santa Cruz also used inmate work crews to clean parks and maintain trails at DeLaveaga Park. That same year 1,173 adult prisoners were booked into the jail, including 101 female prisoners, and 14 inebriates. Meals cost an average of .25 each.<sup>79</sup>

In December 1972 a class action lawsuit was filed on behalf of inmates over problems concerning overcrowding, inmate classification, medical care, inmate discipline, adequacy of the law library, and inmate visitation policies. In *Sandoval v. Noren* the court wrote the jail "demands replacement, not repair."<sup>80</sup> During September 1974 the State Fire Marshall ordered the Sheriff to vacate the basement, first, and second floors claiming that the offices posed a fire threat to the third floor. In 1976 the average daily inmate population was

nearly 100. U.S. District Judge Robert F. Peckham set a maximum limit on the number of inmates that could be held at the jail. The Sheriff entered into an agreement with the San Francisco County Sheriff to house Santa Cruz inmates at its San Bruno Facility to avoid exceeding the population cap. In November, 1976 the Court of Appeals ordered the Board of Supervisors to authorize construction of a new jail or allow voters to decide the matter.<sup>81</sup> The Board voted to build a new jail on Water Street and on October 27, 1978 the plaintiffs were awarded \$1,394.87 in damages.



8. Santa Cruz County Jail Inmates, circa 1975



9. Santa Cruz County Jail Inmates, circa 1975

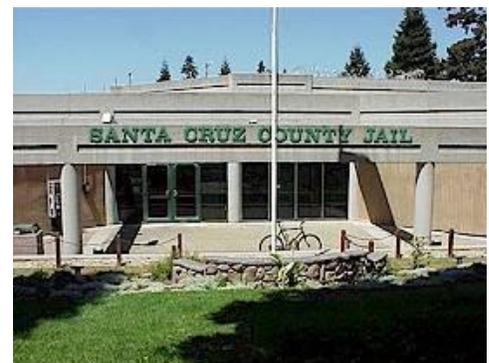
The jail was abandoned in the mid-1980s. In 1993 the building was completely remodeled and today is connected to the Museum of Art & History.<sup>82</sup>

Notorious prisoners held at the jail included John Frazier, Ronald Huffman, Edmund Kemper, Herbert Mullin, and Huey Newton.

The jail located at 259 Water Street opened in 1981.<sup>83</sup> It was designed by Kaplan, McLaughlin, and Diaz, and built by Carl Swenson Co. Inc. The construction manager was John Nutt. The jail is constructed of reinforced concrete, contains 70,000 square feet, and cost \$14.5 million dollars (primary contributors were County [8.8m], Federal LEAA funds [4m], and State SB90 funds [120K]).

The facility was built in two phases. Phase I opened on May 1, 1981 with 47,000 square feet at a cost of \$8.5 million dollars. Two housing units, North and South, contain eight housing modules with a capacity to hold 92 inmates. A kitchen, infirmary, booking area, administrative offices, and attached courtroom were included.

Phase II opened during April 1986, adding 23,000 square feet at a cost of \$6 million dollars. One housing unit, West, contains seven housing modules with a capacity to hold 138 inmates. Mental Health Services and a laundry facility were added to the facility as well. Notorious prisoners held in the jail included David Carpenter and Royal Hayes.



10. Sheriff's Office at the Water Street Jail, 1981

In addition to the Main Jail, the Sheriff currently operates the Rountree Minimum Security Facility, historically referred to as the Jail Farm, the Rountree Medium Security Facility, the Blaine Street Women's Minimum Security Facility, and the Sheriff's Work Release Program.

This jail is currently the Main Jail and is rated by the Corrections Standard Authority to hold 311 inmates. During 2004 the average daily inmate population was 399, prompting the Sheriff to form a Jail Overcrowding Task Force during August of that year. During 2005 the population was 386.



11. Water Street Jail, After the Completion of Phase I, Pending Phase II Construction, 1983 (?)



12. West Housing Jail Cell at the Water Street Jail

## Footnotes

1. Edna Kimbro, "Construction Chronology of the Site of Holy Cross Church." (Santa Cruz), Diagram of Mission Santa Cruz in the late 1840's with Street Pattern Superimposed.
2. Leon Rowland, *Santa Cruz: The Early Years*. (1980),137.
3. Rowland, 17.
4. Robert Bosso, et. al. *A Legal History of Santa Cruz County*. (Santa Cruz: Museum of Art & History, 2006), 3.
5. Rowland, 137.
6. Ibid., 17.
7. Henry Torchiana, *Story of the Mission Santa Cruz*. (San Francisco: Paul Elder & Company, 1933).

8. Rowland, 189.
9. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "Old Santa Cruz," Ernest Otto, January 1, 1956.
10. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "The County Jail," May 14, 1864.
11. Mission Santa Cruz Surveyor Map by G. Black September 1854; and Phyllis Patten, *Santa Cruz Mission: La Exaltacion de la Santa Cruz*. (Santa Cruz: Big Trees Press, 1974), 16.
12. Edna Kimbro, "Construction Chronology of the Site of Holy Cross Church." (Santa Cruz), 8.
13. *Pacific Sentinel*, "County Prisoners," November 15, 1856.
14. Margaret Koch, *Santa Cruz County: Parade of the Past*. (Santa Cruz: Western Tanager Press, 1973), 99.
15. *Pacific Sentinel*, "County Prisoners," November 15, 1856.
16. Ibid.
17. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "The Execution," October 3, 1863.
18. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, June 17, 1865.
19. Kimbro, 8.
20. Ibid.
21. Monthly Report of the Grand Jury of Santa Cruz County, September 1866.
22. *The Daily Surf*, "Our Jail Birds," September, 21, 1888.
23. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "The County Jail," May 14, 1864.
24. *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map*, 1905, page 5. "Old Jail not used."
25. Portion of Holy Cross Church, located at 126 High Street and built in 1889, is clearly visible in a late 19th century photo of jail. The comparison between the photo and present church was matched by author on 10/19/06.
26. Kimbro, 8.
27. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "The County Jail," May 14, 1864.
28. Ibid.
29. Koch, 99.
30. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "County Buildings," November 5, 1870.
31. Rowland, 190.
32. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "Murder, Arrest, Strangulation," May 5, 1877.
33. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "County Jail," January 4, 1879.
34. *The Daily Surf*, "The County Bastile," November 29, 1887.

35. *The Daily Surf*, "Hotel De Sheriff," December 17, 1888.
36. Monthly Report of the Grand Jury of Santa Cruz County, September 1866.
37. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "Old Time Jail Buildings are Shown in Photo," April 14, 1937.
38. Record of Board of Supervisors, Santa Cruz County, Volume 10, 264.
39. *Ibid*, 271.
40. *Ibid*, 283.
41. Kimbro, 8.
42. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, Shanna McCord, "Lone Tombstone tells story of Santa Cruz," January 18, 2006.
43. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "Santa Cruz Yesterdays," April 19, 1953.
44. *Ibid*.
45. Koch, 100.
46. *Ibid*.
47. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "Santa Cruz Co. Jail Relic of 'Gay Nineties,'" September 20, 1931.
48. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "Santa Cruz Yesterdays," April 19, 1953.
49. State Board of Charities and Corrections, *Second Biennial Report 1904-06*, p. 102, and *Fifth Biennial Report 1910-12*, p. 133.
50. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "Forty-Nine Prisoners Packed into the County Jail of 24 Man Capacity," June 30, 1931.
51. *Ibid.*, 102.
52. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "County Jails Must Be Kept Sanitary," March 28, 1929.
53. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "County Jail Now Has 52 Inmates; 20 Sleep On Floor," July 31, 1931.
54. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "County Jail is Overcrowded As 47 One the Roll," July 19, 1934.
55. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "Jail Escapes Plotted for Another Break," November 17, 1929.
56. Santa Cruz Public Libraries, "Historical List of Santa Cruz County Sheriffs."
57. Records contained in Record of Board of Supervisors, Santa Cruz County, Volume 10 on January 5, 2006 reference E. Alzina's job as courthouse janitor.
58. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "Prionser Under Hospital Care, Makes Escape," June 2, 1929.
59. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "3 Forgotten Men Bring Police Squad on Run to Put an End to 'Jail Break,'" March 6, 1934.
60. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "Zoe Sorensen is Given Term at Tehachapi," August 8, 1934.
61. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "May Races Represented in the County Jail," January 20, 1933.

62. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "Aged Chinaman Locked in Jail," May 17, 1934.
63. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "Jap Prisoner Tried to Butt Head on Wall," August 24, 1935.
64. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "Whipping Post May Be Installed in the County to Punish Drunkards," September, 8, 1935.
65. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "County Seeks SRA Aid for Jail, Bridges," July 7, 1935.
66. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "40 Prisoners Get a Ride in Furniture Van," January 21, 1937.
67. Susan Lehmann, *Fully Developed Context Statement for the City of Santa Cruz*. (City of Santa Cruz Planning and Development Department, 2000), 45-47.
68. Lehmann, 45-47.
69. John Chase, *The Sidewalk Companion to Santa Cruz Architecture*. (Santa Cruz: Museum of Art & History, 2005), 183.
70. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "Contract Will Be Awarded on January Fifth," December 16, 1936.
71. Chase, 183.
72. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "Contract Will Be Awarded on January Fifth," December 16, 1936.
73. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "New Co. Jail Completed and Ready for Use," September 21, 1937.
74. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "Jail Officials Worried; Population Falling Off," December 5, 1937.
75. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "Breakfast in New County Jail Today," December 13, 1937.
76. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "County Jail May Get Penthouse," March 7, 1939.
77. *Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office Statistical Report*, (1955), 3.
78. *Ibid.*, 4.
79. *Ibid.*, 14.
80. Sandoval V. Noren, Civil Action No. C-72-2213-RFP/SJ, 10/27/78.
81. Office of the Sheriff-Coroner Santa Cruz County (*Annual Report*, 1981), 7.
82. Chase, 183.
83. All information concerning 259 Water Street Jail based on Sheriff's Office internal documents and author's personal knowledge.

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