

This document contains the full text of the four letters to the editor of the *Mountain Echo* newspaper in London, Kentucky, penned by Miss Florence Campbell, a teacher at Sue Bennett Memorial School, in 1901 advocating the building of a new jail in London. Following Miss Campbell's letters are articles explaining what happened after the letters were published in the newspaper. Although Miss Campbell's crusade is not mentioned in the news articles, both Laurel County historian Russell Dyche and Kentucky historian Dr. Thomas D. Clark mention Miss Campbell's letter-writing campaign in their books about Laurel County history.

[*Editor's Note: Please remember that in 1904, women were not allowed to vote. Miss Campbell's remarks, then, are addressed to the men of Laurel County when she speaks of voting, thus her reference to her hope that the voters will "manfully meet their responsibility."*]

OUR JAIL.
London, Ky., Jan. 5, 1904

To the Editor *Mountain Echo*.

Dear Sir: — I wish to draw the attention of the citizens of London and of Laurel county to the conditions of our county jail.

Most of us know that this jail was condemned by the Circuit Court four years ago, as unfit for use, both because it is an unsafe place for criminals—as several have escaped at different times—and also because of the unsanitary condition of the buildings.

Very few of the citizens of Laurel county have ever seen the inside of this jail. As to the sanitary arrangements and condition, I know that the place is unfit for human beings. I wish that more of the people would go and see for themselves the state of that place of confinement. In the visits we make there, to hold religious services, we have opportunities to know the unwholesomeness of the place.

God gave His blessed sunlight to shine on the good and on the evil, but inside that brick jail I believe I may only once saw one ray of sunshine. Most of the time it is so dark that it is almost impossible to read when we go in there out of the light. It is really a dungeon, and is endangering the health and even lives of those kept there, for no one can be healthy without sunshine.

Then the floor is so damp that often the feet are wet after being in there, and it is cold and chilly. Even in the hottest part of the summer we need wraps while in there. That might not be so bad, but when there is such an unwholesome odor, as there always is, it is not at all pleasant. It is unclean, unhealthy, dark, damp and cold.

Men are put in there to await their trials. They may be innocent, for our law does not condemn a man untried. But grant he is even the deepest-dyed criminal, has the law any right to jeopardize his life? No. I have seen the strength sapped out of strong young men placed in that dungeon. I have seen their faces grow paler and paler, their forms grow weaker and weaker and muscles more flabby, denied the sunshine and air which is God's free gift. They have no room for any kind of exercise. They sleep in the iron cage, which is also dark and filthy, and infested with all sorts of vermin. Round the cage is a narrow walk, where two persons could barely pass one another. There is a stove on one side, while the other side is very cold.

Can you imagine anyone thinking pure thoughts, having kindly feelings towards any one, improving their mental, moral or spiritual manhood under such conditions?

It is nothing but a wonderful miracle when men come out of the Laurel county jail any better than when they went in. It is not because of the jail if they are better, but in spite of it. I hope to

write you my ideas about what a jail should be, and what it should do, if you will grant me space in future issues of your valuable paper.

At present I wish to put the picture of this loathsome dungeon before the minds of your readers, and O hope you will think about it, for we are responsible to God for things we can make better when we do not do so.

Citizens of Laurel county, one of the most law-abiding counties of old Kentucky, let me ask you if you are satisfied to have such a blot of your fair name, as this jail?

I feel sure that you but need to be shown the horrible picture of a more horrible reality, in order to determine that this thing shall no longer be so. Manhood and womanhood revolts against such inhumanity, and I am sure it is because you have not known the horror of this thing, or it could not have stood here so long.

In my next [letter] I shall try to point out other truths to you. I am with you in your desire to improve our institutions and to uplift humanity. Respectfully,

FLORENCE M. CAMPBELL

THE COUNTY JAIL.

London, Ky., Jan. 12, 1904.

To the editor *Mountain Echo*:

Sir—Continuing the subject on which I wrote to you last week, I wish to draw the attention of our people this week to the utter absence of any provision in the jail for inmates who may be sick.

Last October, just after circuit court, a man was placed in the jail to await the next session of that court. He was a murderer, and I do not for a moment wish to lessen the enormity of his crime, but to use his case as an example of the insufficiency of our jail accommodation. He had previously been dismissed from the penitentiary as a consumptive. As he could not get any one to go on his bond in the recent charge against him, he was placed in that dark, damp jail with many other men, as there was no other place to keep him. Anyone who knows the nature of consumption [tuberculosis], understands that darkness is a condition under which germs rapidly increase. It was so in this case of which I am speaking. He grew worse quickly. His seat was always beside the stove, for he could hardly lie down, and I suppose preferred to be near the heat. I would not be surprised if that building is not reeking with microbes, for his cough was very bad and he expectorated constantly. Yet, men were with him all the time day and night, and some of them are there yet. This is jeopardizing the lives of those other men, and in trying to rigidly keep the law for Charles Washington, the law was broken with regard to all those other prisoners, by exposing them to a disease that is more surely fatal than smallpox or typhoid fever.

I reported the case of Charles Washington to the chairman of the Board of Health, when I saw him in such suffering. It seems to me that anyone with a spark of humanity in them would not treat a sick dog as badly as he was treated. He had no medical attention until the very end, as he was not a case for which the town was responsible, I suppose. I appealed to the County Judge, that for the sake of the other men incarcerated with that awful disease, as well as for the sick man, something should be done. He told me that bond would have to be given for him, and he could not secure it. I suggested that for humanity's sake he should be taken out and cared for, as he had but a short time to live. He told me that if he died they would bury him, and that no power on earth could take him out of the jail. In conversations with others who knew the law, I learned that every prisoner in the jail was kept in with such a case, who could show that thereby his health

was jeopardized, had a right to bring suit for damages against the county of Laurel, even to the extent of \$10,000.

I found I could not get the ear of our county officials, who said they were powerless, and I placed the case before the Circuit Judge, with whom I have been in correspondence about this jail, and not till he advised it was this poor wretch taken out and placed in the court house, one of the prisoners volunteering to care for him. He was moved from the jail to the court house on Christmas Eve, Thursday, December 24, 1903, and died on the Monday night following, living only four days after his removal.

Think of these things, fellow citizens, and judge whether it be right to allow this building to stand there, a menace to men's lives.

We need a new jail. Such a dungeon as we have here is a relic of the past, and we are too enlightened in this twentieth century to be guiltless before God, if we let it stay here any longer. Why can we not have a modern building, such as those in many other places? There is nothing to prevent it, except the votes of the people of Laurel county. I cannot help but think that the voters have been ignorant of these facts, or they would, four years ago, have voted the tax and had a new building with sanitary arrangements and other necessary improvements.

I hope to tell you more on this subject in further letters, and hope that you will think of these facts I have brought before you. Respectfully,

FLORENCE CAMPBELL

[January 22, 1904 issue of the *Mountain Echo*, London, Ky.]

OUR COUNTY JAIL

On Sunday afternoon last, a small company went to the jail to hold the usual services with the prisoners. The day was damp and rather dark. As we stepped inside the jailer's office, the odor from the jail met us, and we knew that it would be worse than usual in the inner jail.

We held the first service in the outer or wooden jail, where the men were waiting for us to come. When we were there the Sunday before, one of the men was seeking Christ in the pardon of his sins, while others asked for prayer that they might be saved. We were rejoiced to find that the one who was seeking Christ had found him during the week, and he could testify that Christ has redeemed him.

We then went to the brick jail to hold the services. As the day was rather gloomy outside, it was almost impossible to see to read either bible or hymn book, inside.

The air was very foul, and though we were not very long in that place, one young man who went to help us in the services became sick on account of the foulness of the atmosphere, and one of the ladies was almost faint. We were there for less than one hour and such effects as these were produced. What, do you think, can help being the result upon those who have to stay there day and night for weeks and months? O, it is a disgrace to Laurel county to allow such a place to be in her midst.

A young man went into that jail last October, strong, with the hue of health in his face, and the vigor of life in his frame. He has been confined to that place ever since, not leaving for any purpose. His face is pale, his hands clammy, his form is often drooped and weak. He has not had a ray of sunshine for four long months, not a breath of real pure air in that length of time. Sickness has taken hold of him. He tries to take exercise by walking back and forward in those narrow passages, and has so little strength that the exertion is too much, and he sometimes becomes cramped when he lies down to rest.

If you place a healthy plant in the dark, you know what becomes of it—the color is lost and it withers away and dies. Can you expect anything better as a result of the course of treatment to which Laurel county is subjecting her prisoners?

Laurel county will be held responsible in the day of judgment for the fact that these men are being killed by inches inside the walls of her dungeon, indeed, to anyone who has to stay for a long time, it almost amounts to a death sentence. The young man of whom I have been speaking was exposed to the contagion of consumption [tuberculosis] while Charles Washington was confined there, and no special effort has been [several words unreadable] of that dreadful disease.

I hope most sincerely and pray most earnestly, that the time shall come very soon, when the people of our county shall vote the money for the new jail that must be built here. Other counties have good, healthy jails, why not Laurel?

Perry county has recently built a new jail at Hazard, where it is light and fresh, and there is room for the prisoners to take exercise. They have a dining room and other rooms, and are free to pass from room to room. Estill county has a comparatively new jail, with modern arrangements for the health of the prisoners.

Laurel has waited too long to do her duty, and should arouse herself and attend to the needs that cry out for attention.

“Sick and in prison, and ye visited Me not.

“Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to Me.”

“To him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.”

Respectfully,

FLORENCE CAMPBELL

Mountain Echo, London, Ky.

January 29, 1904 issue

THE COUNTY JAIL

In [unreadable] recently on the subject of imprisonment, the ideo of the present day with regard to it, seems to be that reform should have a prominent place. As we know that we can do nothing of much good with the old jail we now have here, why not turn our thoughts to the new jail which, it is sincerely hoped, we shall see here before very long.

It is impossible, as I have been endeavoring to show in former letters, to accomplish in any but very limited ways, the real objects of the jail in the present building.

What an expense and what endless trouble it would cause the county also, if any of the men condemned to imprisonment here should refuse to be placed in this jail, as I am told they might do, as this building had been condemned as unsafe and unsanitary. If they should happen to do so, the expense of the county would be far greater than the cost of building a new jail.

The building that is needed should include, besides the place of confinement, a room for sick prisoners, one to contain a bath tub, and a room where they could read and write at certain times in the week, and where religious services could be held. These rooms, as well as the cells, should be light, dry, warm and well ventilated. The sanitary arrangements should be properly attended to, and iron cots used, so that the place might be kept clean.

I am well aware that the majority of people will think that all this is too good for prisoners, that anything will do for them, no matter how filthy or how dark, damp and miserable it may be. I do not wish to suggest any of the luxuries of life for the new jail, but the bare necessities for

cleanliness and health, and every one has a right to do that. No State has a right to jeopardize the lives of its citizens, even if those citizens have broken its laws.

Among the improvements that are going on so extensively all over the country, those in the jails are among the most prominent, and everywhere we read and hear of the uplift to those who are in the jails and penitentiaries, on account of those improvements, and because those who are interested in the work are urging the reform of the prisoners, as the greatest hope for them after they leave the jails.

The reform must begin in their surroundings, and it is truly to be hoped that as our people in Laurel county know of the need, they will manfully meet their responsibility.

Most respectfully,
FLORENCE CAMPBELL

Mountain Echo, London, Ky.
June 8, 1905 issue

NEW JAIL

Laurel County is to have a new jail. the Fiscal Court met Tuesday and levied a tax of 25 cents on each \$100 worth of taxable property and 50 cents poll [tax] to be used toward the building of the new jail. By this method the county can build a jail and pay for it in two years and no one will be hurt very badly. No bonds will have to be issued. The members of the Fiscal Court and The County Judge are to be complimented for this act in the right direction. If the court will place this matter in the hands of three good commissioners and let them go to work at once we will have a new jail and a good one within a year. By taking this matter up as the court has, the county will save several thousand dollars. No bonds will be issued and there will be no interest to pay, and there will be no large debt against the county. We admire a court which has some push about it and the nerve to back up its judgment. No one will say that we have not needed a new jail, and needed it badly, for many years. The county has paid out many hundreds of dollars for repairs on the old jail in the last ten years, besides spending much for guards and transportation of prisoners from this to other county jails for safe keeping. In our judgment there has been half enough spent in these ten years because of the insufficiency of the old jail to have built a good new jail. With a new jail here we would not only keep all our prisoners here but would get prisoners from other counties where they have no safe jails. There are many other good reasons why we should have a new jail, but it will be readily seen from those cited that we need and should have a new jail at once.

From Russell Dyche's *History of Laurel County* (1954):

Page 42:

Laurel County was building a new jail as The Mountain Echo became into being in neighboring Knox. In the issue of Oct. 24, 1873, it was noted that the foundation was being laid. The Dec. 12 issue advised us that a Mr. Cornelison, who was making good progress on the jail, had been wise in his selection of experienced helpers, listing among them the following: [*list of names omitted here by blogger*]

Having a new jail, Laurel countians turned their attention toward a new court house, and in Oct. 1881 a 15 cent tax was levied to build it. But before this could be accomplished the burning of the jail built in 1874 at a cost of \$3,500, at midnight, May 1, 1883, had complicated their task. An additional loss was the iron cage which had cost \$1,200 20 years before. Jailer and Mrs. J. R. Hardin had been aroused by cries of the prisoners, who later confessed that they had set the fire. Jailer Hardin handcuffed the prisoners before releasing them.

New Court House Is Delayed

County Judge W. R. Jones called a special session of the Court of Claims, and, after much oratory pro and con by citizens attending, voted to borrow and expend on the jail the 15 cents previously appropriated for a court house and levied a 50 cent poll tax. In August a contract was let to John W. Mullins to construct a jail and jailer's residence for \$5,850. Later the magistrates authorized Judge Jones to issue bonds for the jail, and the building was accepted the following month. The total cost was \$6,000.

U. S. District Court Requires Large Jail

The establishment of the U. S. District Court here in 1901 pointed up the need of still another new jail to take care of its prisoners, but the voters defeated the project in November of that year. Submitted again two years later the question received a favorable vote of 480 to 431. In January Miss Florence Campbell of Sue Bennett Memorial School espoused the cause and contributed several articles urging a new jail. Finally, in June 1905 the Fiscal Court levied a 25 cents property and 50 cents poll tax for a new jail and on Jan. 16, 1908 we printed a picture of the new jail, on Broad and Fourth street, constructed in 1907 at a cost of \$30,000. E. A. Chilton was the contractor.

In April the old jail at Main and Sublimity and the old clerk's offices on the opposite Main street corner, the last of the early buildings, were removed.

From A History of Laurel County by Thomas D. Clark (1989), page 332:

“...the new building...was ready for occupancy in 1908.”