

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

For NPS use only

National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form

received

date entered

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*  
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic Dubuque County Jail

and or common

2. Location

street & number 36 East 8th Street

not for publication

city, town Dubuque

vicinity of Congressional District: Second

state Iowa

code IA

county Dubuque

code 061

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> educational
<input type="checkbox"/> site	<b>Public Acquisition</b>	<b>Accessible</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> government
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military
			<input type="checkbox"/> museum
			<input type="checkbox"/> park
			<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
			<input type="checkbox"/> religious
			<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
			<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
			<input type="checkbox"/> other:

4. Owner of Property

name Dubuque County (Contact: Donna Smith, Chairman, County Board of Supervisors)

street & number 720 Central Avenue

city, town Dubuque

vicinity of

state Iowa

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Dubuque County Courthouse

street & number 720 Central Avenue

city, town Dubuque

state Iowa

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

Historic American Buildings Survey; Iowa Windshield Survey; Dubuque Historic Sites Field  
title Survey; National Register of Historic Places **has this property been determined eligible?**  yes  no

date 1967, 1977; 1974; 1973, 1972  federal  state  county  local

Library of Congress; State Historical Society of Iowa;

depository for survey records National Park Service

city, town Washington; Des Moines; Washington

District of Columbia; Iowa  
state District of Columbia

## 7. Description

**Condition**

excellent  
 good  
 fair

deteriorated  
 ruins  
 unexposed

**Check one**

unaltered  
 altered

**Check one**

original site  
 moved date \_\_\_\_\_

**Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance**

Since its construction in 1857-58, the Egyptian Revival Dubuque County Jail has been a major landmark in this important Mississippi River town in northeastern Iowa. Situated south of Dubuque's principal downtown business district and located a few feet north of the Dubuque County Courthouse, this two-story pile, constructed of locally quarried limestone, consists of a square-shaped main block, originally used as a sheriff's residence and offices, and a connected, rectangular-shaped rear wing, originally used as the jail proper. This building is one of only a handful of known extant edifices designed in the Egyptian Revival mode. As such, it exhibits the overall massiveness and monumental effect, battered walls, bundled shaft or lotus-like columns, gorge and roll cornice along the roofline, rope-like cornice moldings, sun disk symbols, and cavetto cornice window and door hoods that are characteristic of the style. Except for an appropriate small rear addition in 1874 and changes in landscaping, there have been few major changes, and the building possesses a high degree of integrity.

The Dubuque County Jail is an L-shaped, two-story edifice that consists of two enclosed masses. The northernmost mass, the old sheriff's and jailer's offices and residence, is square in plan, measuring approximately 46 by 46 feet. The second mass, the jail or lockup, is rectangular, however, and measures approximately 36 by 54 feet, and is joined to the first mass by its north wall which forms part of the south wall of the latter. The predominant structural material used in the construction of this edifice is blue limestone, which was quarried from the Mississippi River bluffs at Dunleith (present day East Dubuque) directly across the river from Dubuque.

The walls of this edifice are 2-1/2 feet thick and consist of large, square-cut, rock-faced ashlar blocks that are regularly coursed and feature narrow mortar joints. These load bearing walls rest on stone foundations over a partially raised full basement, which features a curved brick tunnel vault that supports the large open space on the jail's first floor. Windows and doors throughout are set in rectangular shaped cast iron surrounds. As might be expected, doors and windows in the jail section have cast iron bars while those in the office-residence

# 8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> social/
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> humanitarian
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)

**Specific dates** 1858-present **Builder/Architect** Architect: John F. Rague; Builder: David

Armstrong

**Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)**

The Dubuque County Jail possesses national significance on both architectural and historical grounds. This massive stone edifice is an outstanding example of Egyptian Revival architecture, perhaps the rarest of American architectural styles, and, according to distinguished architectural historian G.E. Kidder Smith, "is one of the few Niolithic-inspired structures to survive from the romantic flings of the last century."<sup>1</sup> Its completion in 1858 drew down the curtain on the first and perhaps most significant phase of the Egyptian Revival movement, making the building, say Marcus Whiffen and Frederick Koeper, "the last building of any importance in which Egyptian forms were employed," until the brief revival in the 1920 s inspired by the discovery of King Tutankhamen's tomb.<sup>2</sup>

The Dubuque County Jail is also important because it is one of only a handful of extant buildings designed by John F. Rague, a talented 19th century midwestern architect whose skills ranked with those of his more famed eastern contemporaries and who produced a number of masterpieces, including the Old Illinois and Iowa State Capitols (both NHL's), and the Langworthy House in Dubuque, an outstanding example of the octagon mode. The Dubuque County Jail was his only known foray into the Egyptian Revival style, and clearly, it is one of his most original works. By clearly differentiating between the residential portion and the jail proper in his plan and design, Rague broke with tradition and produced an honest edifice which enabled the passerby to discern that form followed function.

<sup>1</sup> G.E. Kidder Smith, The Architecture of the United States, Volume 3: The Plains States and Far West (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1981), 315.

<sup>2</sup> Marcus Whiffen and Frederick Koeper, American Architecture, 1607-1967 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), 178

# 9. Major Bibliographical References

See Continuation Sheets

# 10. Geographical Data

Acreege of nominated property Less than one acre

Quadrangle name Dubuque North; Dubuque South

Quadrangle scale 7.5'; 7.5'

### UTM References

A 

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6	9	1	8	9	0
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4	7	0	7	8	4	0
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Zone Easting Northing

B 

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Zone Easting Northing

C 

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D 

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H 

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### Verbal boundary description and justification

The boundary of the inventoried property coincides with the boundaries of lots 284 and 285, Original Town of Dubuque.

### List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state code county code

state code county code

# 11. Form Prepared By

name/title Ralph J. Christian and Howard Iber, Architectural Historians

organization State Historical Society of Iowa  
Office of Historic Preservation

date January 20, 1987

street & number East 12th and Grand Avenue

telephone 515/281-8697

city or town Des Moines

state Iowa

# 12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national  state  local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature

title date

For NPS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

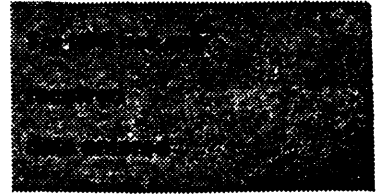
date

Keeper of the National Register

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration

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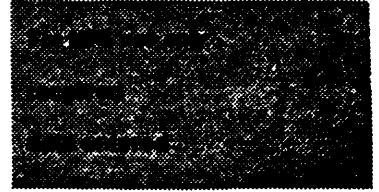
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section are wood with panelled doors and six-over-six sash windows predominating. The building is capped with a low-pitched, hipped roof, sheathed in tin, and pierced by interior end brick chimneys that feature pilastered caps.

The decorative treatment of the exterior is drawn largely from the Egyptian Revival and to a limited degree from the Greek Revival. The rough texture, narrow mortar joints, large stone blocks, and battered effect provided by the corner pilasters provide the jail with a sense of the feeling and monumentality of ancient Egyptian architecture. This sense of "Egyptianess" is carried still further by the cavetto cornice window and door hoods, some of which feature sun disk symbols with lion's faces, a distyle in antis entrance portico with bundled shaft or lotus-like cast iron columns, and the deep cavetto or gorge and roll cornice with rope-like moldings along the roofline. The influence of the Greek Revival can be discerned in the use of engaged corner pilasters, the platform-like front portico and the distyle in antis arrangement, and the use of a rectangular transom over two engaged piers and flanked by sidelights at the front entry door.

On the inside, the northernmost section of the building follows a center hall plan. A wide north to south corridor runs from the front entry to a doorway that opens into the jail portion. On the east side, the hall is flanked by what was the private dining room of the sheriff and his family, a stair hall leading to the second floor, and the old kitchen area where food was prepared for the sheriff, his employees and family, and the jail population. On the west side of the hall is a large room, which originally was a parlor that often served as a visiting area for prisoners, a small, private office for the sheriff, and a larger office space, presumably utilized by the deputies, jailer, and any other employees. The second floor, which originally was intended as a private residence for the sheriff and set up so he could easily supervise and observe the prisoners from a barred door, contains five rooms, the four larger of which were bedrooms. The small room, which is located directly over the sheriff's private office, likely served as an office annex. Throughout this wing of the building, despite such modifications as dropped ceilings and wood panelling, a remarkable amount of what appears to be original fabric has survived, including rather elaborate wooden architrave door and window trim, wainscoting, and pressed tin ceilings and wall coverings.

The interior of the jail proper presents a sharp contrast with the other section with its rock faced walls, flanked on the east

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side by twenty-four cells arranged in three tiers, and on the west side by a large open space which served as an area for congregate meals and for indoor exercise and recreation. Eight additional cells were located in the basement, and this section, popularly known as the "Dungeon," was used for the most dangerous and notorious prisoners. Each cell was of stone construction, measured 4'4" by 10', featured stone slab flooring, and had a cast iron, barred door. The two upper tiers of cells on the main floor were served by continuous north and south metal catwalks.

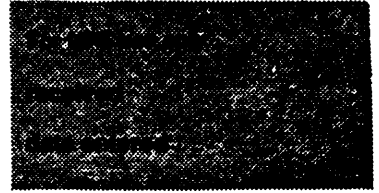
In 1874, an addition, described as measuring 10' by 14' by 18' by 46', was constructed at the rear of the jail proper to house juveniles and women prisoners. T. Crawford and William Coates were credited with designing this addition. It appears that they simply followed John F. Rague's original plans and design because there is little discernible difference, either in terms of style or construction, between the two portions of the building. Constructed at a cost of \$5600, this section contained three tiers of cells as well with two on each level. After serving its purpose for a number of years, women and juvenile prisoners were relocated to another facility, the addition replaced the "Dungeon" as the principal lockup for the more unmanageable male prisoners.

For the most part, alterations to the building itself over the years, both internal and external, have been of a relatively minor nature and have had little impact on its overall character and integrity. Some of the sun disks on window and door hoods have fallen off as their bolts rusted, but these could easily be replicated and put back in place. The most noticeable changes to the building have been in terms of its landscaping and surrounding environment. Early descriptions mention a board fence around the facility and late 19th century photographs show what appears to be a rather intricate cast iron fence. None of this fencing material is extant today. The outdoor court or exercise yard, surrounded by a ten foot high stone wall and connected to the west side of the jail, originally extended almost to the edge of the street. Today, it appears to be approximately half that size. The most dramatic environmental change occurred between 1891 and 1893 with the construction of a new county courthouse that replaced one similar in scale to the jail. This new edifice, standing 3 1/2-stories tall and featuring a 190 foot high tower and highly ornate exterior finish, presents a sharp contrast with the jail and in fact dwarfs it.

Presently, the northernmost portion of the building is utilized

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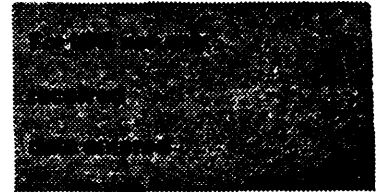
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by the county, primarily for probation offices, while the southernmost section is under lease to the Dubuque Art Association and serves as its "Old Jail Gallery." Some changes have been made to accomodate these new uses. In the section occupied by the county, alterations have been confined largely to dropped ceilings and panelling, all of which are easily reversible, and the replacement of the front door with one that meets fire codes. In the portion occupied by the Art Center, the catwalks to the two upper tiers of cells have been removed for safety reasons, and one cell door has been removed and placed outside to serve as logo for the gallery sign.

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Finally, the Dubuque County Jail is significant because it is one of the few remaining standing symbols of the antebellum penal reform movement in the United States that made American jails and prisons international models in terms of design, planning, and organization. The Egyptian Revival was the preferred style for these reformers, says Richard Carrott, because it "symbolized for them, values beyond mere man-manipulated ones—those of the incorruptible righteousness of law and order," and "while ancient Egyptian structures eternally guarded hope for men in the next world, Egyptian Revival buildings temporarily guarded men for hope in this world."<sup>3</sup>

Before the construction of John F. Rague's Egyptian Revival masterpiece in 1857-58, at least three jails were used to house city and county lawbreakers. Dubuque's first jail, a stone structure erected shortly after the city's founding in 1833 and affectionately referred to as the "Calaboose," was so insecure that the new, two-story, hewed log courthouse was converted to jail purposes shortly after its completion in 1836. Within two years, it had proved inadequate, and one newspaper described it as "almost useless and but a mockery of what it should be; it schools villains in the art of making escapes and makes them more hardened, impudent and ready to commit crime."<sup>4</sup> By late 1841, the proponents of improved jail conditions had managed to persuade their fellow citizens to support construction of an additional building. Early in 1842, William Smith was appointed superintendent of construction for a new stone building, which was completed in 1843.

In the early 1850s Dubuque County and the city proper underwent a period of explosive population growth which put great stress on governmental services and facilities, especially the jail. In 1852 the issue of a special tax for a new jail was placed before the voters but defeated, and a proposal by the county that the city assist in the construction of a new facility was rejected by the Dubuque City Council. In 1855 Stephen Hempstead made a new jail, poorhouse, and hospital issues in his successful race for county judge, and in April 1856, the voters approved a bond issue for the construction of these facilities. Although economics and sheer need were important factors in the success of the bond issue, the general reform spirit of the era played a major role

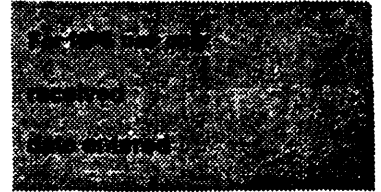
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Richard G. Carrott, The Egyptian Revival: Its Sources, Monuments and Meaning, 1808-1858 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 120.

4

Iowa News, August 1838, cited in Weston A. and K.C. Goodspeed, History of Dubuque County, Iowa (Chicago: Goodspeed Historical Association, 1911), 395.



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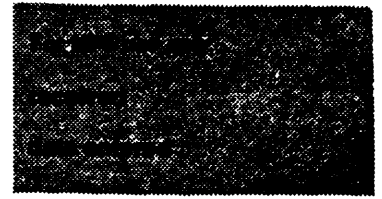
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as well. Support for a new jail received major impetus in January 1856 when a report appeared in the Dubuque Daily Republican, which claimed that the jail was being kept so cold at night that at least one prisoner had awakened with frozen feet. Although this particular story proved to be an exaggeration, it was determined that the prisoners were not being provided sufficient fuel for warmth. In a series of editorial comments and letters from concerned citizens, the jail was depicted as a "miserable hole," "a disgrace to the county," and a facility in which "all offenders of the law are huddled together like so many hogs."<sup>5</sup>

Shortly after the passage of the bond issue, John F. Rague received the commission to design the new jail. Rague, who had moved to Dubuque in 1854, was an established and politically well connected architect with numerous designs to his credit, including the capitol buildings of Illinois and Iowa. Born in New Jersey in 1799, the son of a French surgeon who had served with Lafayette, he grew up in New York City and received training as an architect in the office of Minard Lafever, a significant figure in early 19th century architectural circles. After practicing architecture for a time in New York City, Rague moved to Springfield, Illinois in the early 1830's. In Springfield Rague did more than design buildings, becoming a leader in the city's governmental, commercial, and civic affairs, and directing a church choir whose members included Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas. These contacts paid off for him in 1837 when he received the commission to design a new state capitol building, and was subsequently hired to superintend its construction. Two years later, he won the design competition for the Iowa Territorial Capitol Building in Iowa City. Although he had been hired to supervise construction of the Iowa Capitol, Rague resigned his position nine days after the building's cornerstone was laid on July 4, 1840, probably because of financial uncertainties. In 1844 Rague moved to Milwaukee where he carried on an extensive practice in that city and the state of Wisconsin until his removal to Dubuque in 1854.

The Dubuque County Jail is believed to be Rague's first and only design executed in the Egyptian Revival style. Prior to this commission, his major works, like the capitols of Illinois and Iowa, had been in the Greek Revival mode. Unfortunately, there is virtually no documentation on how the decision to design the jail in this style was reached. None of Rague's correspondence on the subject has ever surfaced, and the county records do not speak to the issue. Based on the data at hand, especially the silence concerning design in the Minutes of the Dubuque County Court, it appears that Rague's radical departure in style for the jail met with general public approval. The appropriateness of

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this style for a major public building in a municipality seeking to become the principal city on the "American Nile" probably did not pass unnoticed. Additionally, the cause of jail reform and improvement was extremely popular in Dubuque, and as Carrott has noted, the Egyptian Revival style for many was "the architecture symbolic of enlightened prison discipline."<sup>6</sup>

As to influences on Rague, it should be noted that architects versed in the Greek Revival frequently utilized Egyptian motifs in their work, and, as Whiffen and Koeper have noted, "the frequency with which Egyptian and Greek forms were combined, if nothing else, shows that architects regarded Egyptian as a kind of proto-Greek."<sup>7</sup> It is highly unlikely that Rague had ever viewed a completed Egyptian Revival Building since most major examples were in the east and had been erected after his departure from that region. His mentor Lafever worked in the style, but most likely Rague's acquaintance with it came either from architectural books and journals, or the popular magazines of the day, which often contained plans and engraved views of major examples. Available evidence indicates that the single most important influence on Rague was John Haviland's New York Halls of Justice, better known as "The Tombs." Erected between 1835 and 1838 in New York City, this Egyptian Revival building was considered a model jail facility by many reformers, and its plan and design had received wide circulation in both architectural and popular publications for a number of years.

Although influenced by Haviland's work, Rague's Dubuque County Jail is by no means a scaled down or miniature version of "The Tombs." At first glance, the two buildings appear to have little in common except for what might be regarded as the generic characteristics of the Egyptian Revival. Rague appears to have copied very little exterior detailing from the "Tombs," instead choosing his own decorative vocabulary, and except for what Carrott has described as "the generalized handling of the column capitals, the deemphasized winged orbs and the strongly accented lintels," the ornamentation and decorative detailing of the two buildings have little in common.<sup>8</sup>

The greatest influence Haviland's "Tombs" had on Rague, however, was in terms of general approach to jail planning, layout, and

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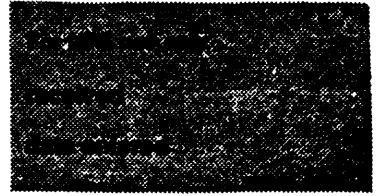
6  
Carrott, The Egyptian Revival, 121.

7  
Whiffen and Koeper, American Architecture, 178.

8  
Carrott, The Egyptian Revival, 120.

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interior arrangement. Functionalism was one of the hallmarks of the "Tombs," and Rague employed it in a number of ways. Like Haviland, he used form, massing, and detailing to differentiate the functions of different portions of the building. Thus, the sheriff's office and residence portion and the jail proper, although connected, are distinct and easily identifiable. By following this approach, Rague broke with the tradition of jails resembling residences, thus designing an honest building which enabled passerby to more closely discern that form followed function. Like Haviland, he also used stone and wrought and cast iron almost exclusively to make the facility as fireproof as possible. In addition, the jail proper resembled its New York City counterpart with its separate cells for each prisoner; an open center gallery between cell blocks that allowed light to enter and air to circulate, and also provided an indoor exercise area and an easy vantage point for prisoner supervision; a separate and segregated section for the most desperate and hardened prisoners; and a large, walled outdoor court or exercise area.

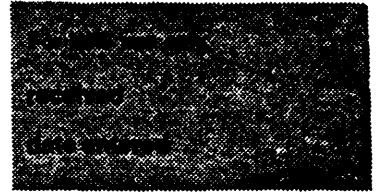
Like many 19th century architects, Rague did not confine his activities to merely designing buildings, but attempted to participate in their construction as well. Rague submitted a bid to construct the jail, but, unfortunately, local contractor David Armstrong's bid of \$36,011 was selected. Rague, however, did manage to obtain for himself the post of supervising architect. Construction on the new jail started February 1, 1857, and appears to have moved rather smoothly in spite of the financial exigencies occasioned by the panic of that year that forced the county to sell \$9,000 of the bonds issued to finance construction at seventy cents on the dollar. This money problem is the likely reason why wood was used for cell doors when the jail was completed, a deficiency the county moved to correct a few months after the facility opened.

By the end of 1857, the Dubuque County Jail was, for the most part finished. On January 8, 1858, a gala ball was held in the facility to celebrate its completion. In February Sheriff Hayden and Jailer Saddles marched the 13 prisoners in their charge from the old jail to the new, and the citizens of Dubuque at last had the model jail, which the reform minded among them had advocated for so many years. Except for periodic interior remodeling and a small rear addition constructed in 1874 in keeping with the original architectural design, the Dubuque County Jail underwent little significant physical change over the years.

This building served its original purpose from 1858 until 1971, some 113 years, when it was closed due to being declared substandard by the State of Iowa. For some time, there was concern the structure might be demolished, but local support

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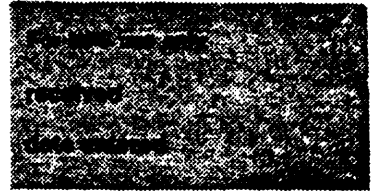
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materialized for converting the building into a cultural center. In 1975 the Dubuque Art Association leased the jail portion of the building from the county for \$1 per year. Their efforts have focused on an adaptive reuse plan which emphasizes restoration of the most significant architectural features of the building, but at the same time is committed to rehabilitating it as a local art gallery. The residential and office portion of the building was remodeled by the county for use as probation offices. Currently, plans are under consideration for the Art Association to lease and restore/rehabilitate this portion of the building as well. Because of the covenants imposed in the lease and Historic Preservation Fund Grant agreements, this work will have to be reviewed and approved by the Office of Historic Preservation, State Historical Society of Iowa, which will review any proposed changes in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Restoration and Rehabilitation.

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Dubuque Daily Globe Journal, November 21, 1898.

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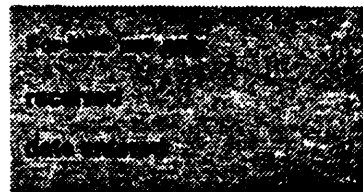
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