

Records of the Charleston House of Correction, 1868–1885

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Introduction

The Institution

In the spring of 1856, the City Council of Charleston, South Carolina, established a House of Correction in the building formerly used as the city's Poor House on the west side of Mazyck (now Logan) Street, between Queen and Magazine Streets. Its purpose was to provide short-term incarceration for persons detained by the city police for the commission of petty offenses--persons who otherwise would be subject to harsher confinement in the District Jail. The bulk of the inmates were inebriates, brawlers, and "strolling beggars" drawn from the full spectrum of Charleston's urban population.¹ After being detained by the police and held at the city's Guard House overnight, the prisoners attended the morning session of Mayor's Court for a brief examination. The mayor ordered felons and violent offenders to be bound over to the District (later County) Jail to await trial at the Court of General Sessions. Those guilty of lesser offenses, however, were committed to serve short sentences at the House of Correction. Although allied to the city's law enforcement efforts, the House of Correction was not under the immediate control of the Police Department. From its inception, it was an independent institution controlled by a board of commissioners and subject to the same rules as the city's Alms House (known as the Poor House prior to 1856).

The House of Correction continued to operate during the American Civil War (1861–65), but its doors closed when U.S. forces occupied Charleston in mid-February 1865. In the aftermath of the war, the institution's building on the west

side of Mazyck Street was appropriated for use as a municipal hospital. In March 1868, the military-appointed mayor of Charleston reopened the House of Correction in the west wing of the city's old Workhouse on the south side of Magazine Street, next door to the Charleston District Jail.² At the same time, the supervision of the institution was placed under the control of the city's Police Department.

In December 1871, Charleston City Council ratified an ordinance to transfer governance of the House of Correction from the Police Department to the Commissioners of Public Lands. This board of commissioners also supervised the city's Public Cemetery (the "potter's field") and the Ashley River Asylum, an "Old Folks Home" for "colored" citizens, located at the west end of Mount Street (now Sumter Street) "on a most eligible point on Ashley River, embracing a farm of fifteen acres."³ Here the new House of Correction received "vagrants and offenders of City Ordinances" who were required to labor during their terms of incarceration. The prisoners cultivated vegetables on the City Farm and maintained the grounds of the Public Cemetery.⁴

² *Charleston Daily News*, 7 March 1868 (Saturday).

³ See City Council proceedings of 23 July 1872, published in *Charleston Daily News*, 24 July 1872; and *Charleston Daily News*, 9 August 1872; *City of Charleston Year Book, 1880*. 58.

⁴ The title of the law is given in *Charleston Daily Courier*, 29 November 1871, as an ordinance "to Create a Board of Commissioners to Supervise and Control the Public Lands, Now Known as Potter's Field." The text (without the title) is given in Edmund W. M. Mackey, comp., *The Ordinances of the City of Charleston, Revised and Codified, and the Acts of the General Assembly Relating Thereto* (Charleston, S.C.: News and Courier Job Presses, 1875), 110. Note that this source incorrectly gives the date of ratification as 12 December 1870 rather than 1871.

¹ See "An Ordinance relating to the Alms House and Bettering House," ratified on 9 May 1856, and "An Ordinance in amendment of an Ordinance relating to the Alms House and Bettering House," ratified on 8 July 1856, in John R. Horsey, comp., *Ordinances of the City of Charleston from the 14th September 1854, to the 1st December 1859* (Charleston, S.C.: Walker, Evans & Co., 1859), 28–29, 33–34.

The number of prisoners sent to the House of Correction steadily declined over the last several years of its operation, during which time the demographics of its inmates also changed. Between 1881 and 1885, the institution received no white men or women, and only eight “colored” males. “Colored” females formed the remainder of the inmates.⁵ In 1885 only five women were admitted; the last was discharged on 6 July of that year. No offenders were admitted to the House of Correction in 1886, and the institution was discontinued.⁶ The site of the former Ashley River Asylum, including the House of Correction, is now occupied by the Citadel’s Holliday Alumni Center and Joseph P. Riley Jr. Park.

The Records

Although the House of Correction opened in mid-1856 and operated continuously through early 1865, no records of the institution’s activities during these years survive. The extant records of the House of Correction consist of one leather-bound manuscript ledger containing 4,004 entries dating from 3 March 1868 through 6 July 1885. Within this seventeen-year span of records, however, the contents of the extant ledger are not complete. Besides occasional chronological gaps during which no prisoners were sent to the House of Correction (such as 24 August 1874 through 8 January 1875, and 21 November 1882 through 5 March 1883), there is one significant chasm in the record. Following the entry dated 30 December 1876, the next succeeding entry bears the date 19 February 1880. During this break of thirty-seven months, the police department’s monthly reports to City Council demonstrate that offenders continued to be sent to the House of Correction on a regular basis.⁷ The extant ledger exhibits no signs of missing

⁵ See *Charleston Year Book*, 1881, 178; *Year Book*, 1882, 185; *Year Book*, 1883, 154; *Year Book*, 1884, 145; *Year Book*, 1885, 143.

⁶ *Charleston Year Book*, 1886, 106.

⁷ For example, the City Council proceedings of 27 March (printed in *Charleston News and Courier*, 28 March 1877) includes report from the commissioners of public lands, who say that five people were sent to the House of Correction during the month of February.

pages, so we may conclude that the names of the inmates were recorded in another, now-lost journal during the period in question.

Readers of this material will observe that the extant records provide valuable information about the persons committed to the House of Correction, but the records do not disclose the nature of their offenses. During the period in question, however, Charleston’s daily newspapers frequently provided summaries of the proceedings of the Mayor’s Court. In many (but certainly not all) cases, the name of the offender and a synopsis of his or her crime can be found in the newspapers published the day after their appearance in Mayor’s Court.

The surviving ledger of records from the House of Correction was among the historic municipal records transferred by the City of Charleston to the Charleston County Public Library in 2002.

The Transcription

The task of transcribing the contents of the extant House of Correction ledger was initiated and supervised by Nicholas Butler, archivist at the Charleston County Public Library, and executed by College of Charleston student Gillian Coté in the spring of 2010. Following the completion of Ms. Coté’s work, the transcription was proofread, edited, and prepared for publication by Dr. Butler.

It is important for readers of this material to understand that the data included in the original ledger itself represents an imperfect transcription of information transmitted orally by the inmates to a scribe or clerk. Several variables affected the spelling of the data contained in the records, including each inmate’s accent, the use of colloquial pronunciations, and the clerk’s ability to interpret and render the information accurately. Much of the information was transcribed phonetically, therefore, and thus the ledger includes a significant number of misspellings.

To facilitate the use of this data, the editor has corrected a number of the spelling errors. All misspelled place names, for example, have been corrected (“Waterburra” changed to “Walterboro”; “Chilly” to “Chile”) to avoid unnecessary confusion. The original spelling of personal names is retained on our transcription, however, because in many cases it is impossible to determine the authentic spelling of the intended name. Between the inmate’s pronunciation of his or her name and the clerk’s imperfect knowledge of the proper spelling thereof, there is a great potential for error. Rather than imposing our subjective idea of the proper spelling of the name, therefore, we have elected to reproduce the name as it appears in the original ledger, to the best of our interpretive ability.

A comparison of a sample of the names in the ledger to those printed in the contemporary newspaper reports of the daily proceedings of Mayor’s Court clearly demonstrates that the clerk at the House of Correction spelled the inmates’ names phonetically. For example, the clerk used the spelling Burley in place of Burleigh, Sike for Psyche, Faro for Pharaoh, and Girl for Gurl. A further comparison of a sampling of the names in the ledger and newspaper reports demonstrates that the names transcribed by the clerk may not have been phonetically accurate. For example, Annie Brook (20 June 1870) is mentioned in the newspaper as Annie Burke; William Garvey (13 December 1870) is identified as William Jarvey; Peter Finn (7 February 1876) appears in the newspaper as Patrick Finn.⁸ In such instances, of course, it is possible that the clerk of the House of Correction recorded the name accurately and the newspaper reporter heard the name incorrectly in Mayor’s Court. Since we cannot always be certain of the intended or proper spelling of such names, however, we have endeavored to transcribe the personal names as accurately as possible, without subjective alterations.

In addition to the abovementioned spelling issues, the data contained in the extant ledger exhibit several other shortcomings occasioned by the clerk(s) who recorded the information. For example, the entries made between 24 January and 17 March 1876 include only the inmates’ names. On a few occasions, the clerk also copied

an inmate’s data into the wrong row or column. For example, the data transcribed next to the name Pinkie Dantzman on 2 October 1882 does not match that which she provided during her other visits to the House of Correction, suggesting the clerk inserted another person’s data under Dantzman’s name. Furthermore, multiple rows of data entered under the column “How long in Charleston” in July and September 1871 exhibit confusion between weeks and years. In such cases, we have inserted editorial notation “[sic]” to flag the clerk’s errors.

The personal names in the ledger appear in their normal order; that is, first name preceding the surname. In order to facilitate alphabetical sorting in the transcription, however, we have arranged the names in surname-first order.

From the beginning of the extant ledger in March 1868 through March 1870, each entry indicates whether the inmate is African American (“Col.” for “colored”) or Caucasian (“Wht.” for “white”). Such racial notations continue to appear occasionally through the remainder of 1870, but disappear afterward. In the transcription of these entries, we have added parentheses in order to clearly differentiate the subject’s name from the indication of his or her skin color.

The clerk recording data about each inmate into the ledger made liberal use of the word “ditto” or pairs of empty quotation marks in adjacent rows to indicate the repetition of a word or number. In order to avoid confusion over this shorthand in our transcription, we have replaced the word “ditto” and the empty quotation marks with the word(s) or number intended to be repeated.

In order to avoid confusion, the abbreviations included in the original ledger have been spelled out. For example, “Sept.” is expanded to “September,” “C.H.” is rendered as “Court House,” and “T.O.” becomes “Turn Out.” Some other abbreviations merit further explanation, however. Throughout the ledger, dates in the column labeled “When Discharged” are frequently followed by the notation “Capt.,” “C.,” “Order C.,” or “O.C.,” indicating that the prisoner had been released on the orders of the Captain of the city police. Similar abbreviations include “O. D.” for “Officer of the Day,” and “Lieut’s Ord.” for “Lieutenant’s Orders.”

⁸ See *Charleston Daily News*, 21 June 1870 and 14 December 1870; *Charleston News and Courier*, 8 February 1876.

House of Correction.				House of Correction.			
Date.	Names of Prisoners.	Age.	Place of Nativity.	Last Residence.	How long in Charleston.	Occupation.	When Discharged, and Remarks.
April 24	Gaphney Gaedwa	21	Charleston SC	Charleston SC	24 years	Washer	May 24 By 10 days
"	Rochard Simms	22	Andreas CH SC	Andreas CH SC	6 years	Servant	May 25 By 30 days
"	James Wallace	12	Charleston SC	Charleston SC	12 years	Vagrant	April 29 By 5 days
"	James Small	15	Charleston SC	Charleston	15 years	Vagrant	May 6 By 10 days
"	Catherine Rutledge	16	Charleston SC	Columbia SC	6 years	Servant	May 6 By 10 days
"	Stephen Williams	30	Walterboro SC	Walterboro SC	7 years	Servant	May 6 By 10 days
"	Edward Spring	20	Charleston SC	Charleston SC	20 years	Servant	May 8 By 20 days
"	William H. Gads	15	Charleston SC	Vaganta	7 years	Servant	May 1 By 5 days
"	Richard Giffins	28	Ireland	Ireland	15 years	Servant	May 1 Sent to Hospital
"	Henry Bonow	11	Mount Pleasant	Mount Pleasant	5 years	Servant	May 3 By 5 days
"	Joseph Brown	10	Charleston SC	Charleston SC	10 years	Servant	May 3 By 5 days
"	Thomas Mahony	21	South Carolina	South Carolina	21 years	Servant	May 4 By 10 days
"	George H. Clark	28	Charleston SC	Charleston SC	28 years	Servant	May 4 By 5 days
"	James Richardson	19	Columbia SC	Charleston SC	4 months	Servant	May 4 By 5 days
"	Calish Shepherd	15	Charleston SC	Charleston SC	2 1/2 years	Fisherman	May 5 By 5 days
"	Jeffery Holmes	14	Columbia SC	Columbia SC	3 years	Fisherman	May 5 By 5 days
May 1	Ellen Mitchell	20	Charleston SC	Charleston SC	20 years	Vagrant	May 11 By 10 days
"	James Campbell	15	Folly Island SC	Folly Island	10 years	Servant	May 11 By 3 days
"	Frank Brandt	40	Bremen Germany	Bremen Germany	4 1/2 months	Servant	May 11 By 5 days
"	Susan Robinson	30	Reafoot Island	Savannah Ga	19 years	Washer	May 11 By 10 days
"	Elyahut Mc Bride	36	Liverpool Eng	New York	15 years	Washer	May 11 By 10 days
"	Henry Frost	15	Columbia SC	Columbia SC	5 years	Chimney Sweep	May 11 By 5 days
"	James Bryant	15	Charleston SC	Charleston SC	15 years	Chimney Sweep	May 11 By 5 days
"	James Brown	18	St John SC	St John SC	5 years	Chimney Sweep	May 11 By 5 days
"	Joseph Burde	14	Charleston SC	Charleston SC	14 years	Vagrant	May 11 By 5 days
"	Elisha Richardson	15	Charleston SC	Charleston SC	15 years	Servant	May 11 By 10 days
"	Samuel Taylor	19	Charleston SC	Charleston SC	19 years	Drayman	May 22 By 20 days
"	Sally Washington	20	Columbia SC	Charleston SC	2 years	Chamber Maid	May 22 By 10 days
"	Charles Campbell	35	Ireland	Ireland	10 years	Soldier	May 22 By 10 days
"	Patrick Tracy	25	Ireland	Washington	4 months	Soldier	May 15 By 10 days
"	George Marshall	20	New York City	New York	6 weeks	Soldier	May 20 By 5 days
"	John Campbell	30	Ireland	New Jersey	1 week	Servant	June 6 By 60 days
"	Susan Hudson	20	Walterboro SC	Walterboro SC	20 years	Servant	June 6 Sent to Hospital
"	Edward Mc Bride	22	Ireland	Liverpool	1 week	Sailor	May 26 By 7 days

Figure 1: A sample page from the extant ledger of the Charleston House of Correction, showing entries made between 24 April and 19 May 1869.