

CHARLES STREET JAIL COMPLEX
(Suffolk County Jail)
215 Charles Street
Boston
Suffolk County
Massachusetts

HABS No. MA-1259

HABS
MASS
13-BOST,
143-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
Northeast Region
U.S. Custom House
200 Chestnut Street
Philadelphia, PA 19106

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

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Location: 215 Charles Street (northeast corner of
Charles and Cambridge Streets)
Boston, Suffolk County, Massachusetts

USGS Boston South Quadrangle, Universal
Transverse Mercator Coordinates:
19.329520.4691820

Present Owner: The Massachusetts General Hospital

Present Use: Vacant

Significance: "The Suffolk County Jail has major
national architectural significance as the
prime institutional example of the Boston
Granite Style of the mid-19th century.
The design was executed by one of the
foremost exponents of the style, Gridley
J. F. Bryant."¹ In addition, it
significantly advanced the "Auburn Plan"
philosophy for prison design. The jail
became the prototype design which would
greatly influence prison design throughout
the United States and abroad.

¹Report of the Boston Landmark Commission on the Potential Designation of
the Suffolk County Jail as a Landmark, published in 1978, revised May 21,
1985.

PART I. NARRATIVE

A. Physical Character of the Site:

The Charles Street Jail Complex is an urban jail occupying 2.9 acres facing the Charles River Basin. The site is dominated by the large granite cruciform jail building. Large windows accentuate the rough granite walls. The hip-shaped roofs of the four wings terminate at a raised rotunda. The jail is surrounded by red-brick accessory structures constructed from 1901 to 1938.

Across Charles Street and Storow Drive to the west is open park land and a view of Cambridge across the Charles River. North of the jail is a major complex of buildings comprising the Massachusetts General Hospital and facilities of the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary. Both of these institutions predate the jail but the area is dominated by buildings built since 1950. To the east is a contemporary four-story parking garage owned by Massachusetts General Hospital. To the south is a narrow strip of buildings facing Cambridge Street which were generally built in the first half of this century.

B. Historical Context of the Site:

The Charles Street Jail Complex occupies a site which has a long and varied history. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the old stone county prison was on Court Street in the center of Boston, the later Charles Street Jail site was a mudflat of a Charles River inlet. This cove was between West Hill, a promontory southwest of Cambridge Street, and Barton's Point at the end of Leverett Street, the site of early ropewalks and a copper works. By 1769, Grove Street had been laid out south of Cambridge Street. During the Revolution, Henry Pelham's map of 1775-6 shows the provincial Pest House for smallpox victims. This was located opposite the future jail site on the southwest corner of Grove and Cambridge Streets; a battery defended the embarkation place at the end of Cambridge Street.²

²Drake, Old Landmarks and Historic Personages of Boston, (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1872/1906), Reprint (Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle Co. 1975) pp. 369-74; also Maps of Boston: Bonner 1922: Price 1769; Pelham 1775;

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The opening in 1793 of the West Boston Bridge to Cambridge at the end of Cambridge Street spurred residential development in the area of Barton's Point. In 1899, a new public Almshouse, designed by Thomas Daives and Charles Bulfinch, was built on Leverett Street. By 1810 the Parkman Market, a three-story brick structure with a cupola, was located on the northeast corner of Grove Street opposite the future jail site. Other public institutions, the brick Massachusetts Medical College (1816 by Jacob Guild) at the end of North Grove Street, and the granite Massachusetts General Hospital (1818-22 by Bulfinch) flanked the site to the north.

In 1822 the old stone jail on Court Street, designed by Governor Bernard ca.1767 to replace an earlier stone "gaol," was abandoned and the inmates were relocated to the new Suffolk County Jail on Leverett Street in 1823. The Leverett Street Jail included both debtor and criminal prisons as well as a courthouse grouped around a courtyard. It was planned by Charles Bulfinch in 1817, although apparently executed by Thomas Sumner. The Leverett Street Jail was very secure due to its stone-slab floors and hewn-block walls anchored by cannon balls which interlocked the stone courses. However, by the 1840's the prison was made obsolete by a "wholly failed" heating system. Complaints led to its demolition after the commission in 1848 of the new Suffolk County Jail on Charles Street by noted Boston Architect, Gridley Bryant.³

At the time of construction in 1848, the Charles Street Jail site comprised almost the entire block bounded by Cambridge Street on the south, Fruit Street on the north, North Grove Street on the east, and Charles Street on the west. As shown on the 1864 plan, the building fronted on Charles Street with the city wharf overlooking the Charles River to the west. One of two adjacent lots on Fruit Street included a "City Stable Lot." A small structure labelled "House of Reception" stood on

Carleton 1800; Hale 1814; Boynton 1844; McIntyre 1852; Plan of 1864; Atlas 1895; 1928.

Also Maycock, Susan, "Survey of Architectural History in Cambridge:"East Cambridge, Cambridge Historical Commission 1965.

³Kirken, Harold, The Architecture of Charles Bulfinch (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2nd printing, 11978) pp. 144-6, 375, 311-317, 380-381.

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the west side of North Grove Street at the rear of the prison. The lot on the Cambridge side of the jail was vacant.

The 1895 Atlas plan shows the lots on the south (Cambridge Street) side had been built up with numerous small-scale residential and commercial structures separated from the jail by a small alley, grandly named "Cambridge St. Ave." The east (Grove Street) side lots were similarly developed with the "City Morgue" occupying the old "House of Reception" and the "City Stable" occupied by the Boston Health Department on the corner of Fruit Street and North Grove. The Fruit Street side of the jail was otherwise vacant.

The 1938 Atlas plan shows that the Massachusetts Charitable Eye & Ear Infirmary had been built to the north of the expanded jail across Fruit Street. The Metropolitan District Commission's Charles River Esplanade and Leverett Circle, part of the Charles River Basin planned ca. 1920, cropped the south and west corner of the site along Cambridge and former Charles Streets. Massachusetts General Hospital had built its ambulance garage on the site previously occupied by the former City Stables and Health Department at the corner of Fruit and North Grove Streets. The 1980's obsolescence of the jail and continued expansion needs of Massachusetts General Hospital led to the latter's purchase of the site in 1991.

C. Specific History of the Site:

In his inaugural address in 1843 Boston Mayor Martin Brimmer proposed a new prison to replace the communal Leverett Street Jail built in 1822. The Charles Street Jail, also known as the Suffolk County Jail, was built by the City of Boston. Suffolk County is comprised of the City of Boston and the adjacent, smaller communities of Chelsea, Winthrop and Everett. The City of Boston assumes administrative functions that are normally performed on a county level elsewhere. Because of this unique arrangement, the mayor of Boston was the pivotal figure in the planning of this county facility. During the next five years debate ensued over location and funding for a new jail. Gridley G. F. Bryant was engaged in 1845 to design a new jail to be located on city-owned land in South Boston.

In 1848 architect Gridley Bryant and penologist Louis Dwight recommended a site in Boston proper which faced the Charles

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River Basin. Bryant was the most successful architect in Boston at that time and the leading proponent of Boston's Granite Style of architecture. Louis Dwight was a prominent prison reformer and the first full-time penologist in the nation who was not employed by a penal institution.

Contracts were awarded and driving of piles was started in 1848 during the administration of Mayor Josiah Quincy, Jr. In 1849, newly elected Mayor John Prescott Bigelow proposed that the project be abandoned. When this proposal was rejected he implemented some unspecified changes to reduce construction costs. The project was completed and the Charles Street Jail was occupied in 1851.

The site has been dominated by the main jail building with a series of small accessory structures which comprise the complex. The site is flat. The jail yard appears to have been a basically unadorned open space used for prisoner exercise and as a security zone with later use for parking.

By 1888 the strip of land to the east bordering North Grove Street was still owned by the City of Boston but no longer used by the jail. In its place a strip of land to the north bordering Fruit Street was purchased. See 1888 site plan.

D. Physical Description of the Site:

The cruciform jail was basically centered on the site. The 14' x 22' office and 14' x 66' "lockups" adjoined the west brick security wall just south of the main entrance gate. A 24' x 60' barn occupied the southeast corner of the site. These structures have all been replaced.

The jail itself has had two major additions. In 1901 the north wing was expanded to provide a separated area for women. In 1920 the west wing was expanded to provide hospital, auditorium and administration areas.

The following information defines the development and changes to accessory structures:

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- 1876 A new brick stable and work shop was completed. This was the long narrow building which is on the 1902 site plan. This building was replaced prior to 1928.
- 1878 "A brick building has been erected adjoining the main building since the committee's last visit in which are located the steam boilers and kitchen."⁴
- 1901-2 A two-story brick receiving and office building was erected in conjunction with the north wing addition. This building adjoins the north wing to the west and makes up part of the wall adjoining Fruit Street. This included a secure area for receiving women prisoners, shower/locker facilities and offices to support the women's section of the jail.
- 1901-2 The 1878 kitchen/boiler building was enlarged and extended to the north to accommodate a laundry.
- Circa 1928 The Sheriff's house, a two-story Georgian brick house, was erected on Charles Street as a residence for the Sheriff.
- Circa 1928 A two-story brick barn with hipped roof was erected with a small adjoining "oil shed." The 1928 site plan shows this construction replacing the southern section of the 1876 stable/workshop.
- Circa 1928 A small greenhouse can be seen to the south of the east wing.

⁴City of Boston, City Document No. 106. December 1, 1878, p.3.

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- Circa 1931 A two-story brick structure for solitary confinement was erected along Charles Street and connected to the jail by an underground tunnel.
- Prior to 1938 A boiler plant was erected on the northeast corner of the site replacing the remaining section of the 1876 stable/workshop.
- Since 1939 The greenhouse, barn and oil sheds have been removed. Other than temporary structures, which have been erected and removed, no significant site changes have taken place.

PART II. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Original Architectural Drawings

The Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities has a copy of Bryant's 1848 proposed floor plans, site plan and rendering. Only minor changes took place between these plans and actual construction. No contract drawings have been found. All drawings from Bryant's office were destroyed in the 1930's.

B. Early Views

Early views have been located at the Bostonian Society and the Boston Athenaeum.

C. Interviews

Interviews took place with Erin Keaney of the Suffolk County Sheriff's Department.

D. Bibliography

1. Primary and Unpublished Sources:

Boston Inspectional Services Department, 1010
Massachusetts Avenue, Boston, MA.
Charles Street Jail Building Jacket.

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Boston Landmarks Commission, Suffolk County Jail, May 21, 1985.

Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Acts. 1900, pp. 432-433.

Graham Gund Architects, Inc., Massachusetts General Hospital, Feasibility Study and Master Plan, April 1989.

MacKay, Robert B., The Charles Street Jail: Hegemony of a Design, Boston University, 1980 Doctoral Thesis.

Massachusetts General Hospital, Photographic Department Files.

National Register of Historic Places, Inventory-Nomination Form, Suffolk County Jail, (Charles Street Jail), December 1979.

Reidy, Maurice A., "Charles Street Jail, Boston, Massachusetts, Report on Structural Condition of Building above Rotunda," undated (includes sketch dated 12/17/47).

Twenty-Nineth Report of the Board of Managers of the Prison Discipline Society of Boston, 1854, "Obituary Notice of Rev. Louis Dwight," 27.

2. Secondary and Published Sources:

Boston Herald, August 31, 1920.

City of Boston, City Document No. 24, July, 1845.

City of Boston, City Document No. 10, February, 1848.

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City of Boston, City Document No. 61, Final Report of Committee on the Erection of the New Jail, November 10, 1851.

City of Boston, City Document No. 1, 1851.

City of Boston, City Document No. 21, 1851.

City of Boston, City Document No. 3, 1852.

Prison Discipline Society, Twenty-Fourth Report, 1849.

The Builder. London: May 5, 1849, pp. 208-209.

Withey, Henry I. and Withey, Elsie R. Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased). Los Angeles: Henessey & Ingalls, Inc., 1976.

Whitehill, Walter Muir: Boston: A Topographic History. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1968.

E. Likely Sources Not Yet Investigated:

Sources which might yield further information on the history of Charles Street Jail structures include: Boston Globe and Boston Herald archives for articles and photographs relating to the jail complex; periodic investigation at the Suffolk County Sheriff's Department to see if additional information has been cataloged or made available for research.

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

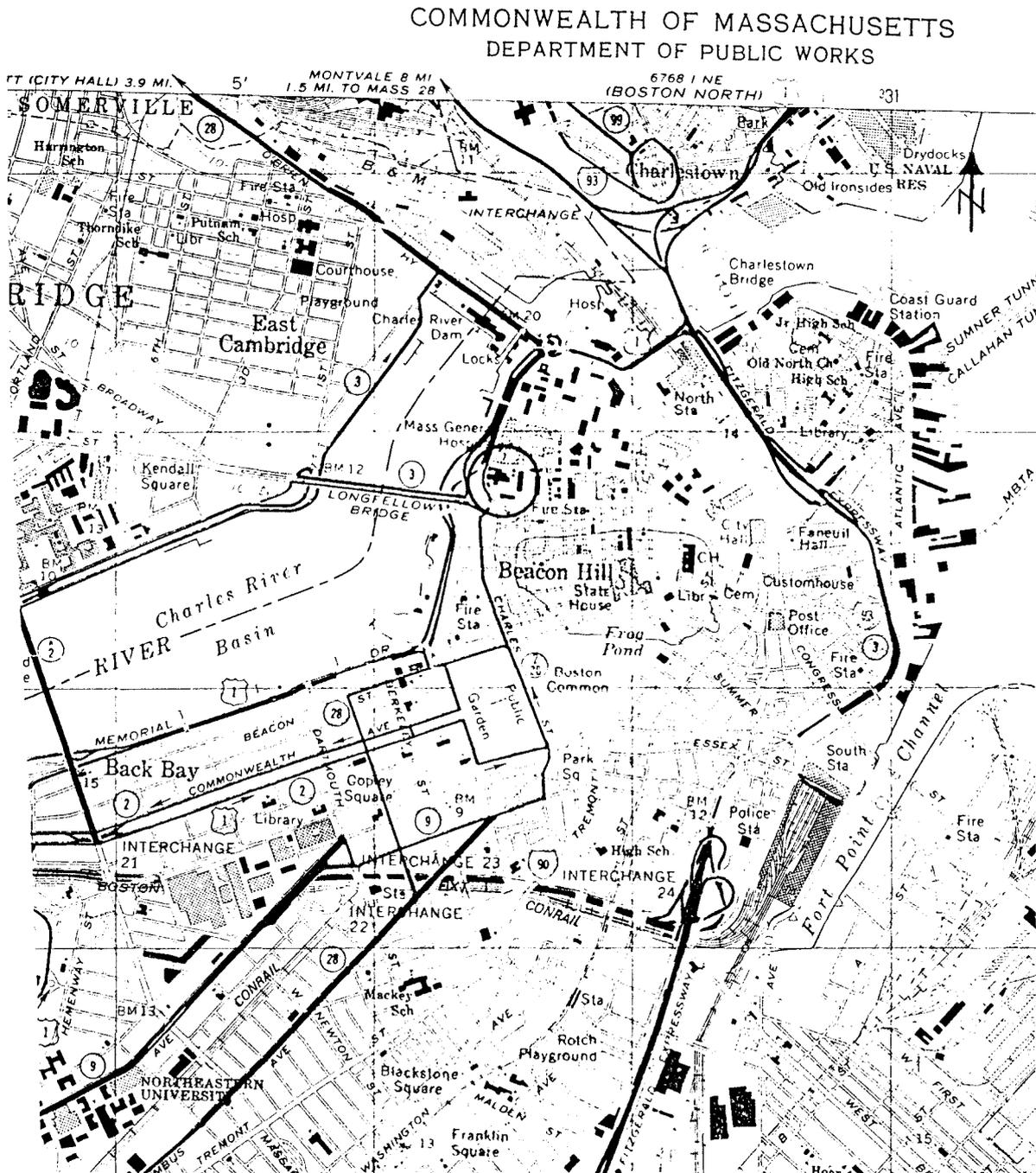
This documentation was undertaken by Wendall C. Kalsow, Paul J. McGinley and Frederic C. Detwiller of McGinley Hart & Associates during 1991 and 1992 as a voluntary mitigation measure prior to the renovation and adaptive use of the jail by the Massachusetts General Hospital. The documentation is undertaken in accordance with discussions with the

Massachusetts Historical Commission relative to the proposed renovation and adaptive use of the property.

PART IV. ARTICLES/GRAPHICS (XEROXES ON ARCHIVAL BOND)

- Figure 1 Locus Plan.
- Figure 2 The Hale Map of 1814.
- Figure 3 The Boynton Map of 1844.
- Figure 4 McIntyre Map of 1852.
- Figure 5 November 1, 1849, Site Plan, Alex Wadworth, Surveyor. Copy by Gridley J. F. Bryant, Architect. Printed in City Document No. 61. November, 1851.
- Figure 6 September 5, 1864, Site Plan, Signed by N. Heeny Leräfts(?), City Engineer. (Courtesy City of Boston, DPW files, Boston City Hall.)
- Figure 7 1888 Site Plan, Index to City Proper Deeds Book. 62 to 181 inclusive. (Courtesy City of Boston, DPW files, Boston City Hall.)
- Figure 8 1895 Site Plan, Atlas of City of Boston/Graphic Index Wadsworth Plans, G. W. Bromley Co. (Courtesy City of Boston, DPW files, Boston City Hall.)
- Figure 9 1902 Site Plan, Atlas of the City of Boston, Boston Proper and Back Bay, George W. and Walter S. Bromley. Published by G. W. Bromley Co., 1902.

Figure 1 Locus Plan



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Figure 2 The Hale Map of 1814

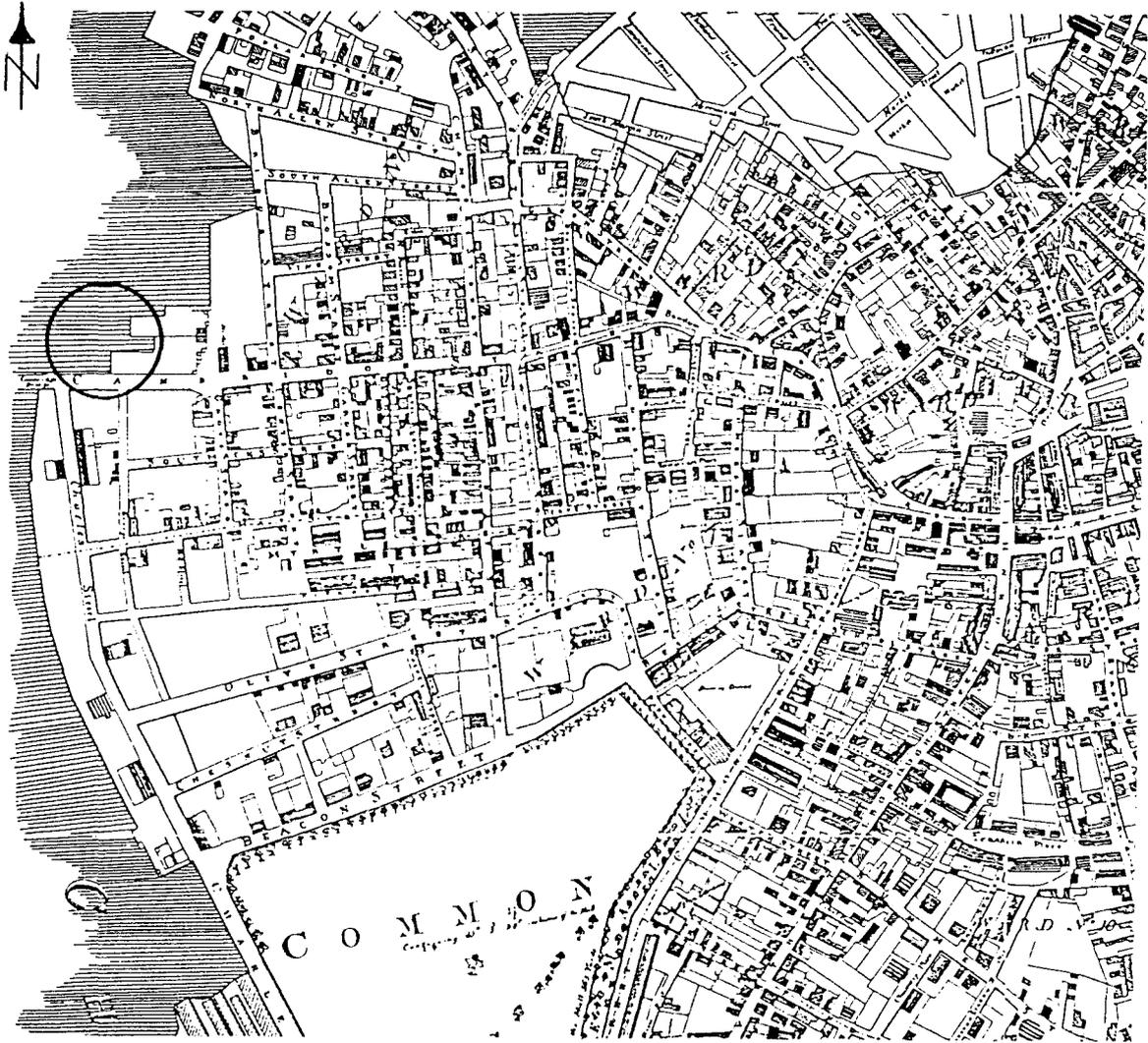


Figure 3 The Boynton Map of 1844

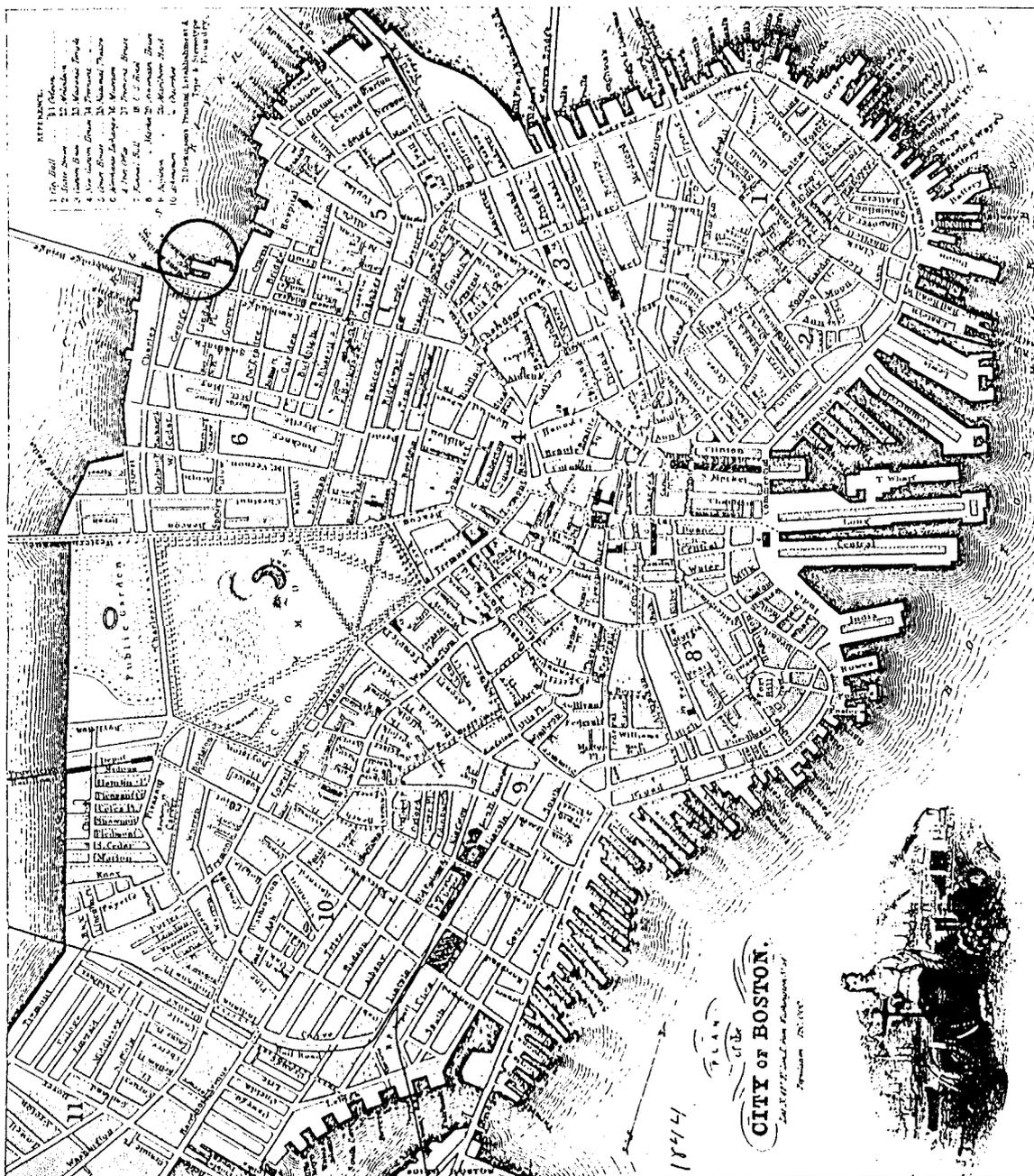


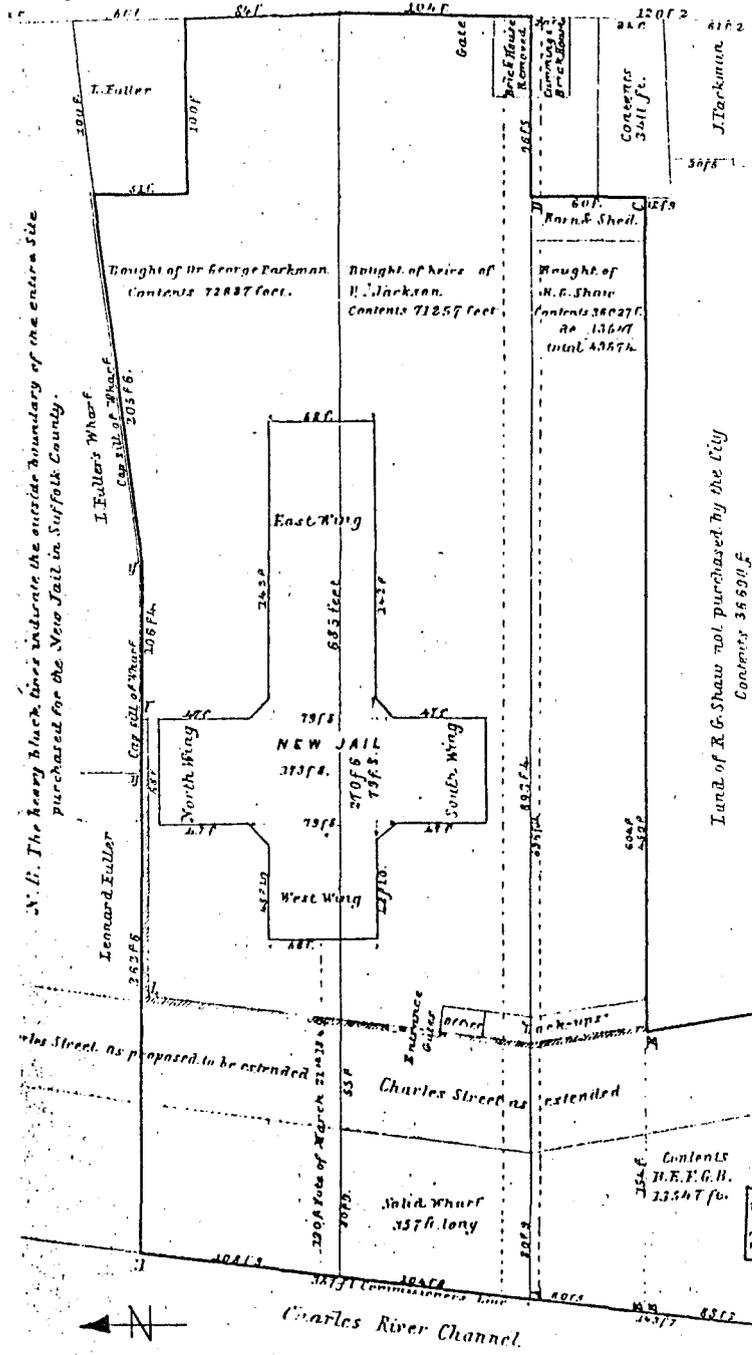
Figure 4 McIntyre Map of 1852



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Figure 5 November 1, 1849, Site Plan



Scale 100 ft. as 1 inch

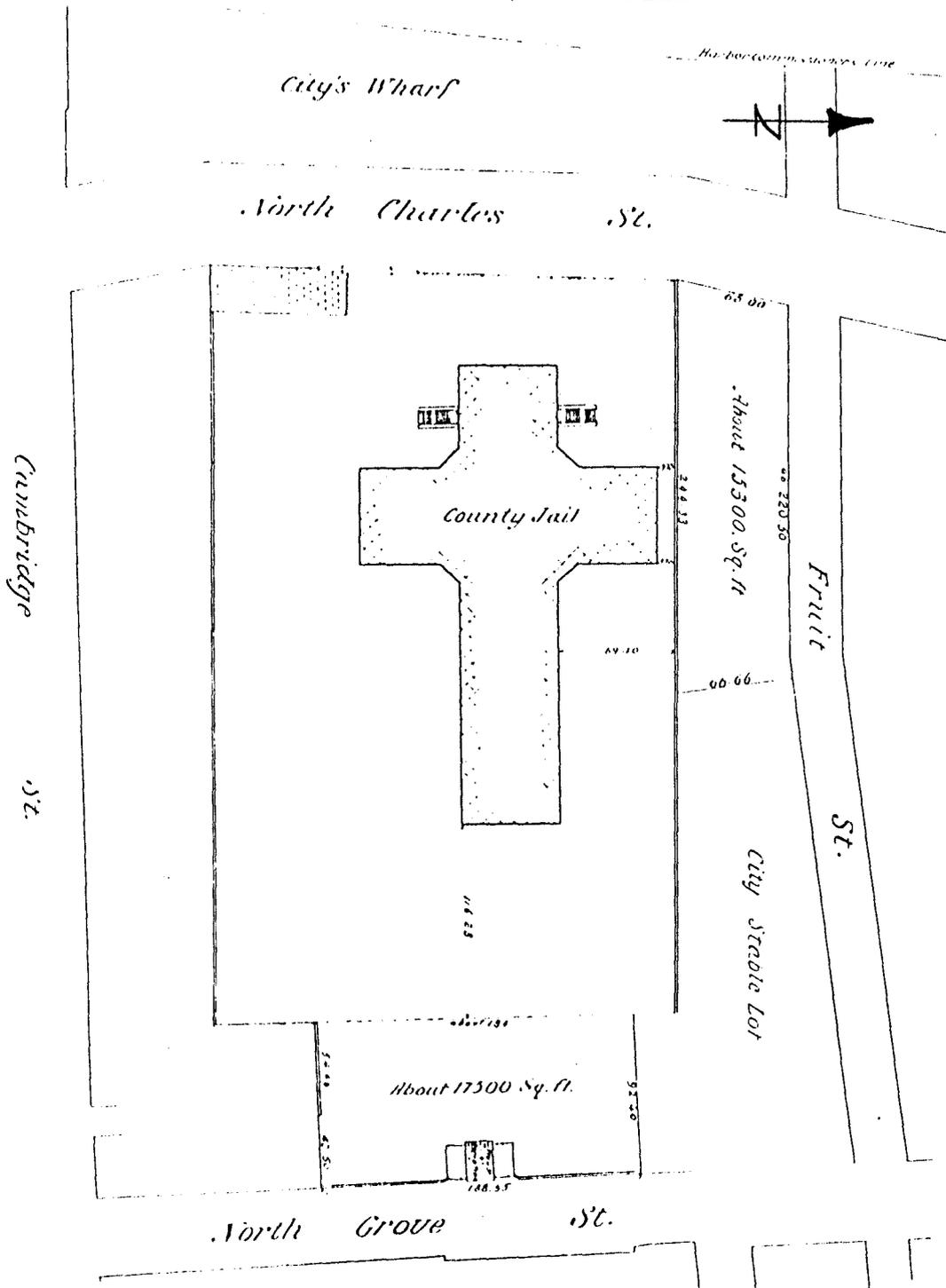
ALEX. WADSWORTH, Surveyor
 Boston, Nov. 1st 1849.

Copy by GRIDLEY J. F. BRYANT, Architect.

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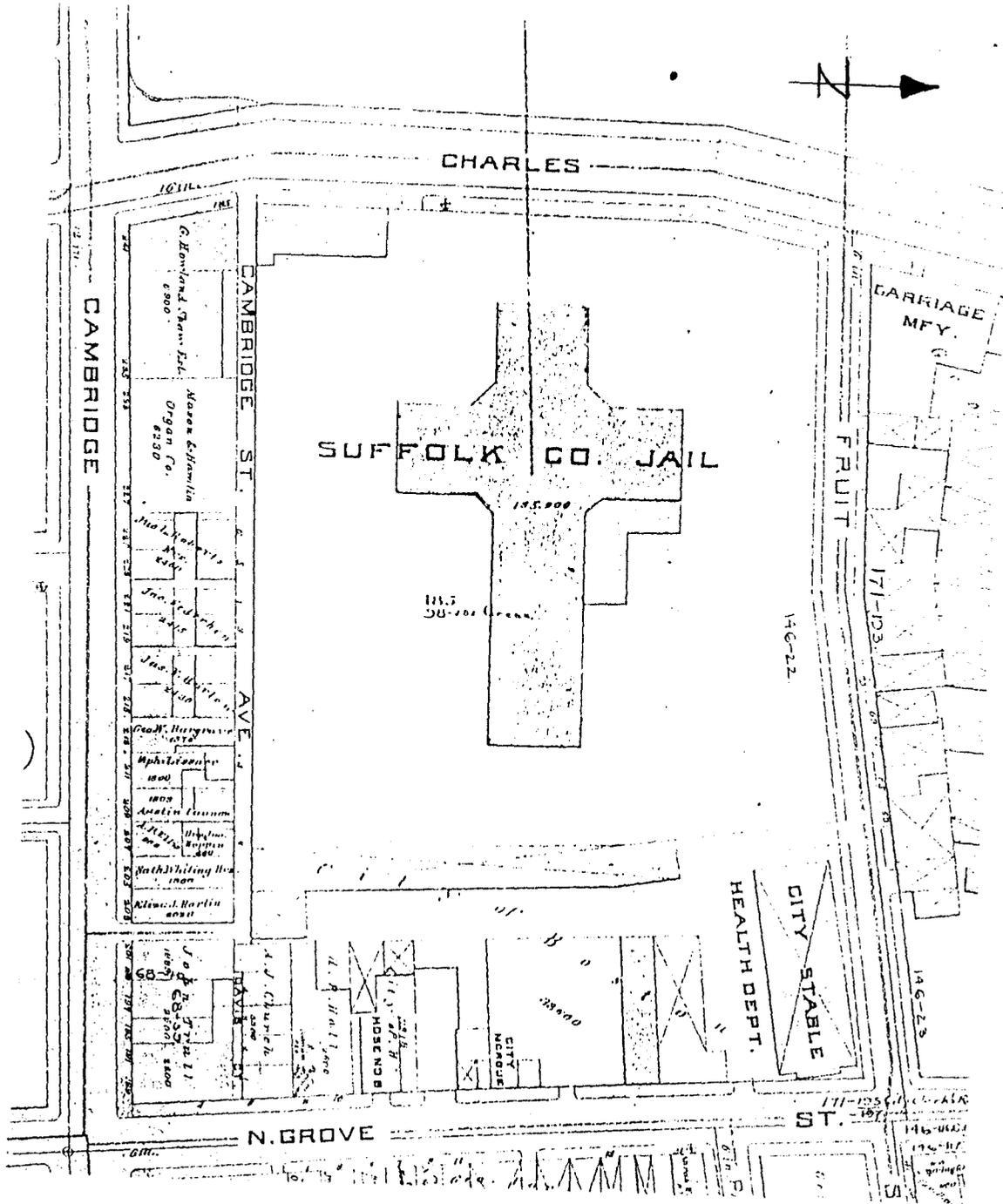
Figure 6 September 5, 1864, Site Plan



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Figure 7 1888 Site Plan



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Figure 9 1902 Site Plan

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