

'Tombs' Began as 'Halls of Justice'

What served as one of the city's principal prisons for more than a century was originally named "The Halls of Justice," but the commonly-used term for the structure was "The Tombs." Even DOC's first official reports in 1896 called it the Tombs.

The massive edifice of granite was built between 1835 and 1840, and took up the square bounded by Centre, Elm, Franklin and Leonard streets. Its design had been inspired by an ancient mausoleum that a traveler to Egypt, John I. Stevens of Hoboken, N.J., illustrated and wrote about in his book "Stevens' Travels."

More than 20 years before construction, the Common Council had argued over where to build the jail all agreed was needed to replace former pre-American Revolutionary jails the British had erected. Finally chosen was the site of the former Collect Pond where there had been a small sheet of water separated from the river by a strip of marshland. The Collect once supplied the city with drinking water. John Fitch used it for early steamboat experiments. In the Collect, there had been a small island, the site of a British gallows. Filling in the marshland had been a jobs project designed to give work to the poor.

Halls of Justice excavation workers encountered the pond and put down hemlock logs as a platform on which to build. Five months after it opened the building began to sink, warping the cells and causing cracks in the foundation through which little trickles of water streamed, forming pools upon the stone flooring. Masons and carpenters were forever on call, mending, patching, shoring up the structure. The low site's dampness contributed to the building being condemned by Grand Juries as unhealthy and unfit for its purposes. Originally designed for about 200 inmates, more than double that were being housed in it by the 1880s. Two smaller prisons of yellow brick were built in 1885 to relieve overcrowding.

Constructed in a kind of rectan-



The Halls of Justice aka "The Tombs."

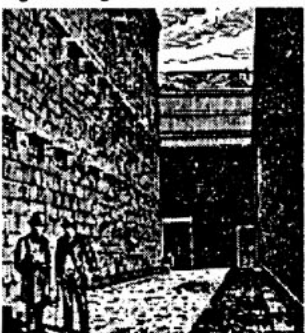
gular shape, 253 feet long by 200 feet deep, it appeared from the street only one story in height, the long windows showing just a few feet above the ground and extending nearly to the cornice. The main entrance, on Centre street, was reached by a broad flight of dark stone steps that led to a big and forbidding portico, supported by four huge Egyptian-like columns. The other three sides featured projecting entrances and columns.

Passing through and beyond the ominous entrance, visitors would find themselves in a large courtyard, at the center of which stood a second prison. This male prison, 142 feet long by 45 feet deep and containing 150 cells, was entirely separated from the prison for females but was connected with the outer building by a bridge.

The span was called "the Bridge of Sighs" because condemned prisoners passed over it on the way to their deaths.

Usually, Tombs hangings were done in private, witnessed only by the officers and such persons as they saw fit to admit. The gallows were set up in the courtyard near the Bridge of Sighs and taken down immediately afterwards. Before the state began employing the electric chair at Ossining and Auburn prisons, some 50 convicted murderers had been hanged by the Tombs gallows.

The male prison contained a high-ceilinged but narrow hall



Tombs gallows yard.



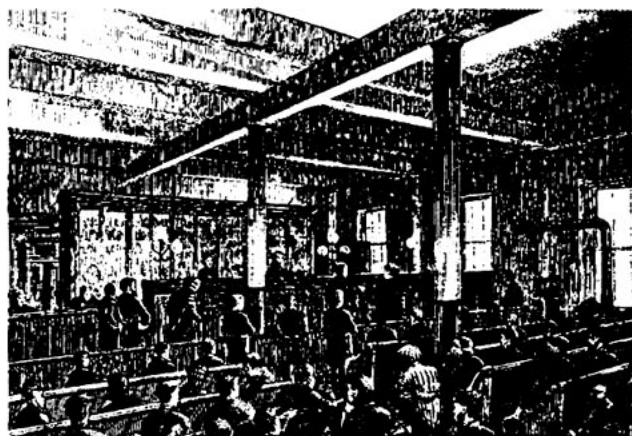
The Women's Prison was serviced by the Sisters of Charity.

with four tiers of cells. The bottom tier opened upon the main floor and each of the three above it opened upon its own iron gallery, one above the other. Two officers -- in those days, called Keepers -- were posted on duty in each gallery to guard the prisoners.

The cells, intended for two inmates, often held three. Each tier had its particular purposes. Some ground-floor cells housed convicts under sentence. The second tier was devoted to those charged with murder, arson, and similar serious crimes. The third tier accommodated prisoners charged with burglary, grand larceny, and the like. The fourth tier was assigned to those charged with light offences. The ground floor cells were the largest, while fourth tier cells were the smallest.

The woman's prison, occupying the Leonard street side of the Tombs, contained 50 cells under supervision of a chief matron. The Franklin street side of the buildings had been a police station-house but in the 1880s was converted into a single large room known as "the Bummers' Hall." There were confined tramps, vagrants, public drunks and disorderly persons. Many would have been arrested the previous afternoon and evening. These were kept until the morning after their arrest. Then they were brought before the courts. Those sentenced to confinement for 10 days or less remained there.

The Centre street side contained the offices and residence of the Warden, the Police Court, and the Court of Special Sessions. Over the Centre street entrance were six comfortable cells. These cells looked out upon the street and usually held big-time white collar and high society types. The Police Court opened early every morning. By 10 A.M. the case calendar was usually completed. The Court of Special Sessions held forth in the large Egyptian hall on the right of the Centre street entrance. There were tried the cases too important to be settled by the Tombs Police



Tombs Police Court.

denominations as follows: Sunday and Tuesday mornings, Catholics; Sunday and Tuesday afternoons, Episcopalians; Monday, Methodists, and remaining days for other denominations.

A Warden, two Deputy Wardens, and a Matron supervised Keepers guarding the prisoners. Kitchen work, cleaning chores and light repair jobs were done by about 30 boy prisoners. Besides the plain basic food provided by the prison, inmates were permitted to have provisions purchased for them outside and to receive them from their family or friends. Changes of clothing also were supplied by their families. Where families were too poor to make such provision, or where there were no families, the prison furnished the necessary clothing at city expense. Prisoners were allowed visits from family and friends. These were permitted to provide books and other reading matter. Inmates were required to exercise themselves by walking for an hour every day around the gallery of the tier on which their cells were located. They were allowed to smoke and to occupy themselves as they pleased during the day in their cells. But they were constantly kept locked in their cells, except when out for exercise. As a safeguard against fire, no lights were allowed in the cells at night.

The Tombs was mainly a prison for detention where persons accused of crimes were confined until trial and sentence, if any. About 50,000 prisoners were annually confined in it. As soon as they were sentenced, the convicts were sent to the institutions where they immediately started serving their terms, except those sentenced to be hanged. These remained at the Tombs for execution.

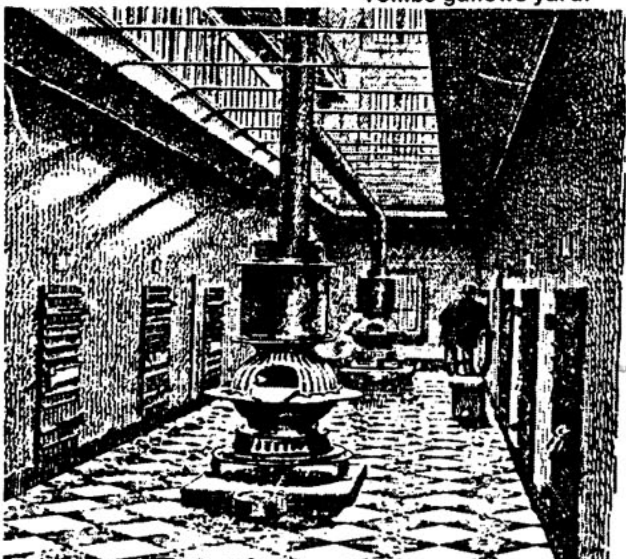
In 1902 a massive, gray building replaced the Tombs but its chateau-like appearance could not displace in common parlance the name of the original structure whose architectural style had been based on a steel engraving of an Egyptian tomb. Seven decades later that replacement was itself replaced by the present Manhattan Detention Complex but still "The Tombs" name persists.



Female inmates' tiers.

Courts. Two judges constituted the Special Sessions Court, but its sessions were often presided over by a single judge. Prisoners were defended there by counsel, and allowed to introduce witnesses in their own behalf. The Court had jurisdiction over all misdemeanors. There was no jury trial in this Court, so the accused had the choice of a trial here before the judge, or a trial in the Court of General Sessions before a jury. The defendant's decision had to be made in writing, and could not be retracted once made. Capital cases, burglaries, and other more serious charges were sent to the higher courts for trial.

The Boys' Prison was also located in the Centre street side. The Women's and Boys' Prisons were serviced by the Sisters of Charity seeking to minister to the inmates' spiritual wants. One room of the prison was fitted up as a chapel and religious services regularly held in it. The week was divided among various religious



Death Row in the Tombs.



Some Tombs granite came from old Bridewell in City Hall Park, a pre-Revolutionary prison torn down in 1838.