



NHL Executive Summary



Name of Property: Pottawattamie County Jail and Sheriff's Residence
City, State: Council Bluffs, Iowa
Period of Significance: 1885-1889
NHL Criteria: 4
NHL Theme: III. Expressing Cultural Values
5. Architecture, Landscape Architecture, and Urban Design
VI. Expanding Science and Technology

Previous Recognition: 1972 National Register of Historic Places
Historic American Buildings Survey, HABS No. IA-88

National Historic Context: Architecture, Science and Technology

NHL Significance:

- The Pottawattamie County Jail, referred to as the Squirrel Cage Jail, is the only remaining three-tiered "Lazy Susan" type jail in the United States.
- Constructed in 1885, its distinctive architecture and design combine a sheriff's



residence with a unique form of incarceration that was developed as an economic alternative for the county jail system during the late 19th century.

- The unusual design of the jail exemplifies the use of technology to address philosophical, economic, and social change in rural America.
- The Squirrel Cage Jail remained in operation from 1885 to 1969. Because of new fire codes and safety concerns, the rotary cage was made inoperable in 1960.

Integrity:

- The Pottawattamie County Jail and Sheriff’s Residence retains a high degree of historic integrity for the period of national significance, 1885 to 1889, and reflects the historic function, technology and aesthetics as originally planned in 1882.
- The jail retains the original layout, configuration, and appearance of its interior rooms, and the historic character and arrangement of the Sheriff’s Residence is virtually intact from the period of significance.
- The historic property retains the form, massing, key exterior and interior materials, style, and overall craftsmanship to convey the original appearance and intent of the architects and engineers of this property. It also maintains much of the original feeling and association in the interior spaces as graffiti can be found throughout on the jail walls.
- The skill and workmanship required to manufacture the rotary portion of the jail, including cells, roller bearing, hand crank, gears, shafts, and the outer, surrounding cage are reflected in these components and are representative of the era in which the facility was constructed. While the rotary portion was fixed in place in 1960 and some of the gears in the turning mechanism were removed, it is possible to restore the functionality of the rotary mechanism if resources become available.

Owner of Property: City of Council Bluffs, Iowa

Acreage of Property: 0.13 acre

Origins of Nomination: A study of the Rotary Jail property type was initiated by the NPS Midwest Regional Office. The resulting document, “Rotary Jails in the United States, 1882-1969: Assessment of Significance and National Historic Landmark Recommendations,” provides the larger historic context for this nomination.

Potential for Positive Public Response or Reflection on NHL Program: National recognition of a primarily rural/small community property type will bring attention to a resource that is generally unknown and under-represented. The nomination is supported by the city of Council Bluffs, Iowa, the Historical Society of Pottawattamie County, and the State Historical Society of Iowa.

Potential for Negative Public Response or Reflection on NHL Program: None known



Public Comments Favoring Designation (received as of August 21, 2023):

- Chris Kramer, Director, Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs and State Historic Preservation Office
- Mariel Wagner, President, Historical Society of Pottawattamie County
- J.W. LeMaster, Vice President, Historical Society of Pottawattamie County
- Kat Slaughter, Museums Director, Historical Society of Pottawattamie County
- Lynn Porter, Chairperson, Council Bluffs Historic Preservation Commission

Landmarks Committee Comments:

- Statement that the architect for the Pottawattamie Jail is the same person who designed the Buchanan County Courthouse in Missouri is not correct.
- Replace information about prison reform in Indiana with information about prisons in Iowa.
- Perhaps mention the 1890s (beyond the period of significance) attempted lynching of a Black man who was placed in the Pottawattamie Jail for better protection.
- Mention in the nomination that three squirrel cage jails discussed in the NHL nominations were associated with new Eckel and Mann courthouse projects or at least constructed at or about the same time.

Landmarks Committee Recommendation:

The Committee recommends that the National Park System Advisory Board recommend to the Secretary of the Interior the designation of the Pottawattamie County Jail and Sheriff's Residence in Council Bluffs, Iowa, as a National Historic Landmark, with any additions and corrections as noted by the Committee being made prior to the nomination being forwarded to the Secretary of the Interior for action.

Advisory Board Recommendation: The National Park System Advisory Board recommends to the Secretary of the Interior the designation of the Pottawattamie County Jail and Sheriff's Residence in Council Bluffs, Iowa, as a National Historic Landmark.