

Murder suspect held in 1848

By LAURIE AYRES

Behind the Post Office on Simcoe Street in Beaverton stands one of the town's oldest stone structures.

Now named Jail House Sports and operated by Rob Gibson, it was formerly used for storage space by the hardware store in front of it.

In the 1970's the building saw life as an art gallery, run by Christina and Byron Eakin.

What is known of its time when it served as the local lock-up? This, of course, would date back to the years before 1912, when cells were built in the then new Town Hall.

A precise date of construction for the old gaol (an early spelling of jail, as well as one of English origins) has not, to date, been conclusively proven. Municipal records show that public meetings were held in a local school in 1847, and again in 1848. Funds to buy land for a municipal center were agreed upon in 1848, and this building was erected, later to become a hardware store (now Gibson's Pro Hardware).

One local story has a murder suspect placed in the cells overnight in 1848. The suspect had escaped by the next morning.

It is possible that both the municipal center and gaol were built at the same time, with the latter ready to be occupied if the proceedings in the former so indicated. (Law and library services in early days were frequently dispensed on an "occasional basis" from within a

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municipal centre. Infringements upon local laws were often dealt with locally, and library services may have only included the records of early local transactions. It was verified by one McKay descendant that Beaverton's first library was housed within the municipal center adjacent to the gaol).

It is known that John McKay, appointed the first Clerk of Thorah in 1836, and a stone mason by trade, was responsible for the building of the gaol. He was not responsible for the municipal center, but "gave a hand" in its construction.

McKay came from Scotland in 1833, and he ended his term of service to the community in 1857. It seems most likely that it is within the early to middle part of this interval that the gaol was built to meet local and surrounding area needs.

These needs would have started in the 1820's with the establishment of settlements, then expanded with the growth of mills on the river that gave the community the early names of Calder's Mills, then Mill Town (or Milton).

With an increase of settlement came the first store (1830), followed by a post office (which regularized the service by Kenneth Campbell in 1827). The Old Stone Church was built (1840) and the first

school (1842).

By the mid-1850's there were seven taverns, and the "News Packet" was published. By this time there would have been a need for some place in which to keep the "wrong-doer" of whatever deeds.

It seems reasonable to conclude that, by not later than the 1850's, but possibly somewhat earlier, the present gaol structure was built. No records have been found to show if it housed murderers or thieves. It may have provided a place to sleep for those who had imbibed too freely of the alternative to local drinking water provided at the gristmills.

We do have verifiable proof of the original builder, John McKay and his descendants. On April 22, 1990, the namesake and descendant of the first John McKay unveiled a plaque at the front of the old stone gaol in commemoration of the building and its builder. (This was well attended by other McKay relatives, local dignitaries and interested citizens). The plaque is to be found if you go down the laneway between the post office and Gibson's Pro Hardware. It is at the left front corner of the old gaol.

What stories those old stone walls could tell, of only we knew how to listen. Whose hands once hung onto the iron bars that are still to be found there? It looks as though even time won't tell in this instance, and without more concrete proof, all else is only speculation.