

Since 1854

By Jim Dills

New life and usefulness is being sought for a historic landmark which is bound up in the history of county and town.

The County Court House, a product of the new County of Halton in 1854, carved from the sturdy limestone of the area, and site of 125 years of colorful history, sits vacant today with perhaps time to brood on the generations it served and the events it sheltered.

In the politically turbulent, pre-Confederation era of 1853-57 the County of Halton, as a separate unit of government emerged, and with it the County Court House and Jail, built in Milton at the direction of Parliament.

The separation of Halton from Wentworth County seems to have been amicable, but the designation of Milton as the County Town and site of the necessary County buildings was more controversial.

It may be safely assumed that John White, MPP, with interests in Milton, was responsible for the designation which had also been aggressively sought by Oakville and Bronte.

Perhaps there is some irony in the fact that now the new regional headquarters, successor to the county buildings, is located close to Bronte.

A letter writer in *The Globe* of April 6, 1854, said: "Now it appears to us, the inhabitants of the County of Halton, that there must be a great deal of chiselling going on in the matter of making Milton the County Town and that our member is accessory to the

same..." The writer's bias was clear by the inclusion of a lengthy article signed "Trafalgar" and dated in 1852, which supported Bronte as the County Town.

Bronte's advantages included its central location on the "seaboard". It had water power and one of the best harbors on Lake Ontario.

"What an absurdity to expect the inhabitants of the seven or eight villages near the front (lake-shore) and all the front of the county—a large majority of the whole county—to go altogether out of the way of other business to transact a little county business at Milton, a village without any of the natural advantages for a flourishing town and which can never be anything but an obscure inland village."

But the designation of Milton was confirmed in an "Act to separate the County of Halton from the

County of Wentworth" approved in June 1853.

When the first Provisional Council for the County met in July 1853, they recognized the need for buildings, meeting as they were then in an Inn in Milton. The by-law to raise funds for the buildings received immediate attention.

Today's Court House, which stands facing across Brown St. to Victoria Park in Milton, was the result of those deliberations.

The *Globe* of March 23, 1854 tells us that after preparation of plans, the council "contracted with Mr. Kenney of Hamilton to build a Court House and Jail for the County of Halton at Milton. . . The work will be executed during the ensuing season."

And the representatives of that first county council knew what they were building.

"The building is to be in the Anglo-Norman style and built of free stone of which there is an abundance in the vicinity. The site selected is a four-acre lot, in the south-west quarter of the town, presented for the purpose by Mr. Foster."

The turbulent political times are reflected in the blatantly political newspapers of the day.

The *Globe* and its owner, George Brown, were strong critics of the local MPP John White and his association with

William Lyon Mackenzie. As 1854 wore on, George K. Chisholm of Oakville became the county political opponent.

John White, offended by an article in *The Globe*, launched a libel suit against George Brown. The suit came to trial at the Hamilton Fall Assizes and lengthy evidence reflected the political battling. The jury was unable to render a decisive verdict but the language and accusations of political knavery were plentiful.

The ardor of the political meetings is best reflected in a report on one from the Hamilton Spectator of July 12, 1854, itself not without bias.

"Despite the heat of the weather and farmers being in the middle of hay harvest, the crowd was so great that every room in Mr. Thompson's Inn (Milton) was crowded. . . Mr. Chisholm spoke for about three hours duration which was listened to with breathless attention except when it was interrupted by cheers." Added to that John White spoke for about two hours.

John White lost that election in 1854 but in 1855 *The Halton Journal* was born in Milton, a strong supporter of Mr. White. Both were objects of continuing criticism by Mr. Chisholm and his home town *Oakville Sentinel*, as well as *The Globe* and *The Spectator*.

By December of 1855, Halton County Council approved the final payment to Michael Kenney for the building of the Court House and Jail.

Tenders were being called by May of 1856, however, for an addition to the Court House and erection of a Registry Office.

The Court House additions seemed to be related to the jail. The Governor of the Jail was soon under public criticism because a prisoner had placed one of the planks being used in construction, from the top of the pump to the top of the fence and scurried up it to freedom across the wall.

The Registry Office, designed by architects Cumberland and Storm of Toronto, was built in 1857 and replaced by the building which now remains to the south of the Court House in 1915.

The jail and yard was the subject of a major expansion in 1877.

The Court House has seen much of the life of the county and town. County Councils met there, court proceedings attracted crowds, Knox Church Milton held its first services there until its sanctuary was built on Martin St., the Milton Mechanics' Institute and Library held lectures there throughout the winter seasons. The first Milton Council held meetings there in 1857, prior to renting space downtown and later building the town hall.

Political meetings of such intensity and rivalry as to make today's seem tranquil, were held there as were victory celebrations and countless meetings of citizens.

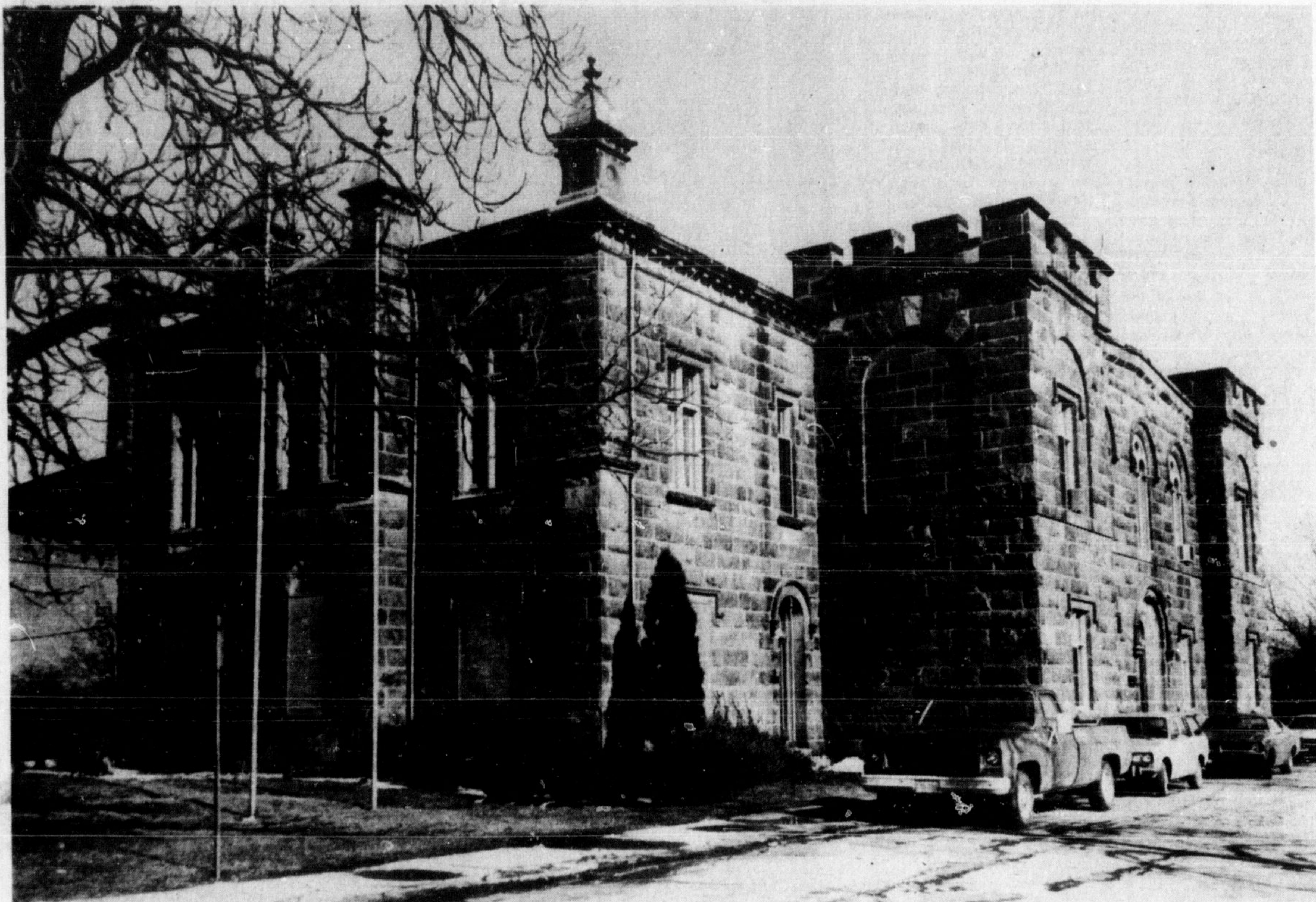
The County's three hangings in 1858, 1862 and 1883 were held in that County Square.

On the County Square, named Victoria Park in 1909 when the bandstand was built, there has been a lot of community activity.

In March 1889 *The Champion* reported that "Court House square, for many years allowed to remain unfenced and unimproved, is about to be planted with trees and laid out as a park by the county council."

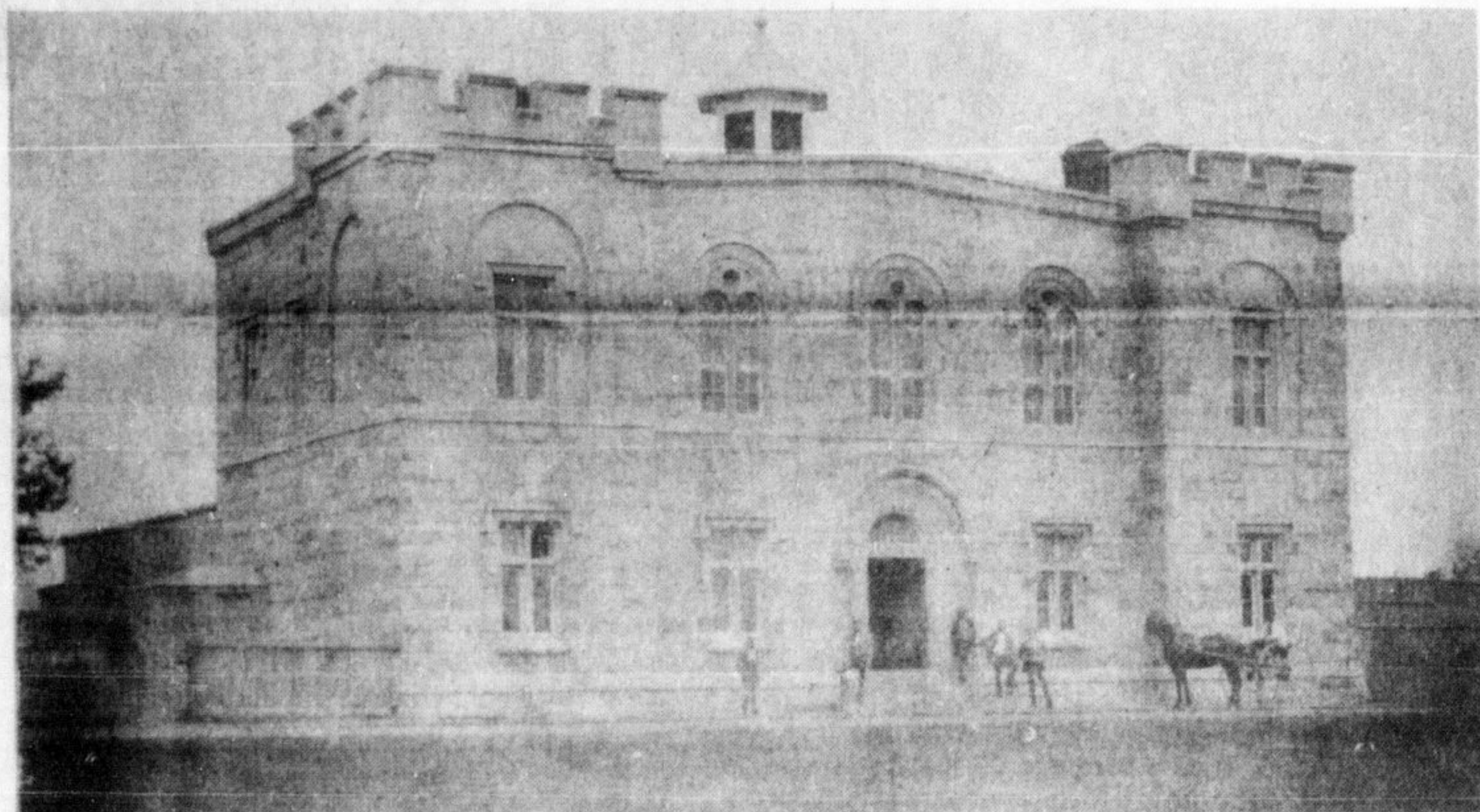
But well before that, in May 1857, the Queen's birthday was celebrated there. "There was a bril-

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THE COUNTY COURT HOUSE, built in 1854, and the Jail addition of 1877, are impressive reminders of how well the fathers of the County built. Architect Anthony Adamson of the Heritage Foundation has said the buildings have provincial architectural

significance, sitting on one side of about the only small town, grassed urban square in Ontario. Currently owned by the Region of Halton and unused, the buildings await the political resolution of their future.

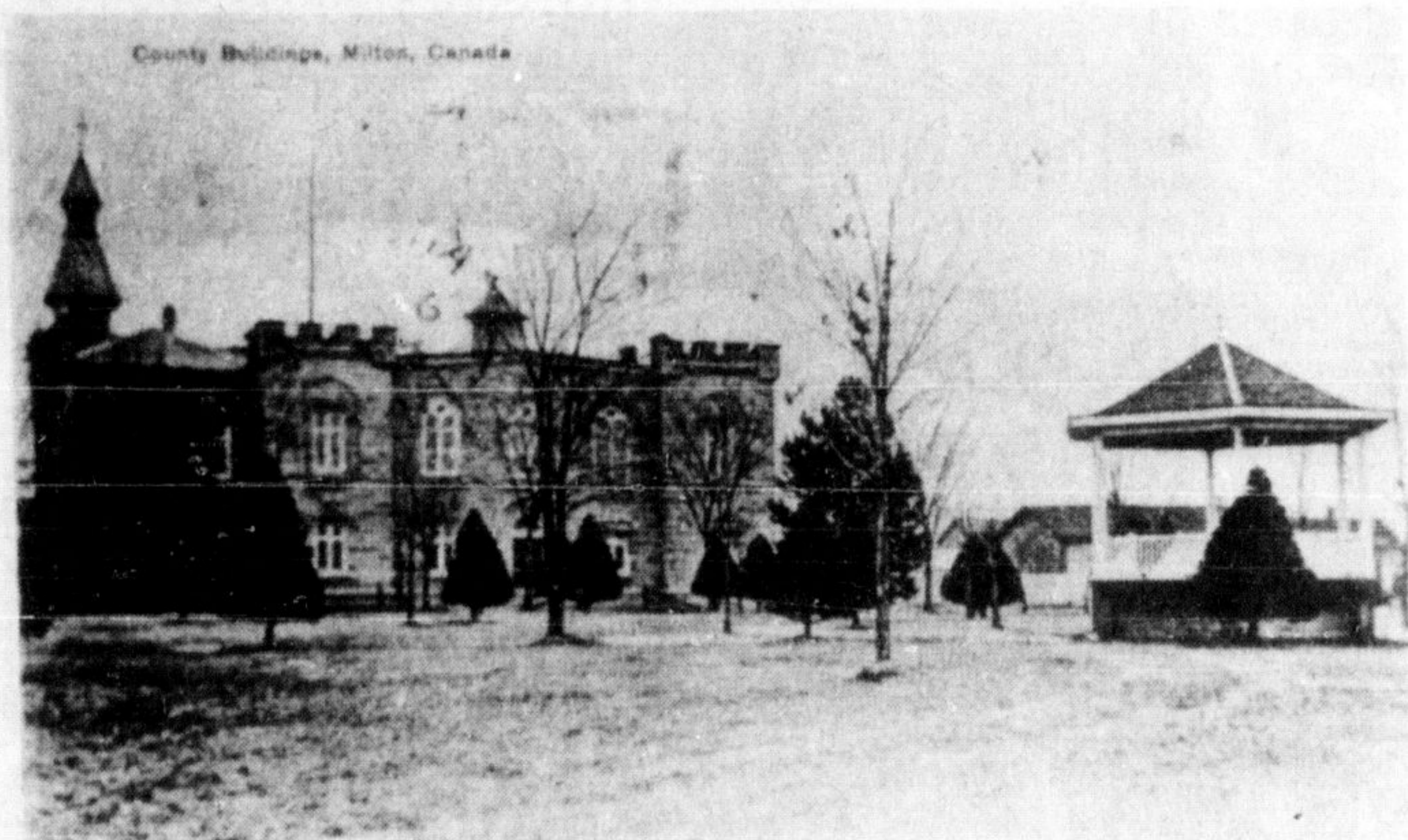


COMPLETED IN 1855, the original Court House built by the new County of Halton, presented an impressive, solid appearance. In 1877 a jail and yard to the north of this building was added and remains today.

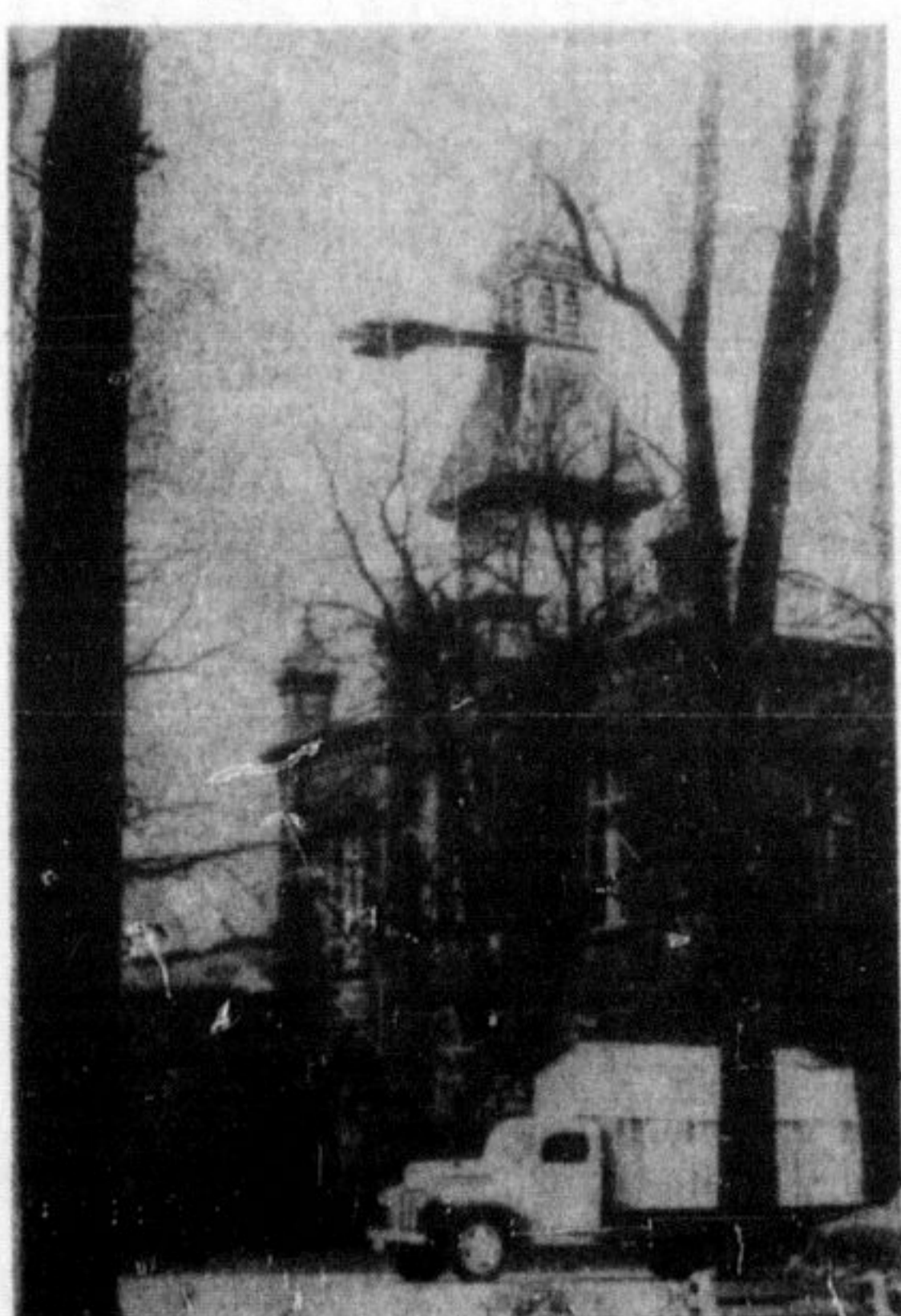


THE ORIGINAL COUNTY SQUARE, a four acre gift of Hugh Foster in 1854, is seen in this aerial view taken before the removal of the Brown St. arena. At the bottom of the photo is Bell St. with Hugh at the top. Mary St. is on the left and King St. on the right. The

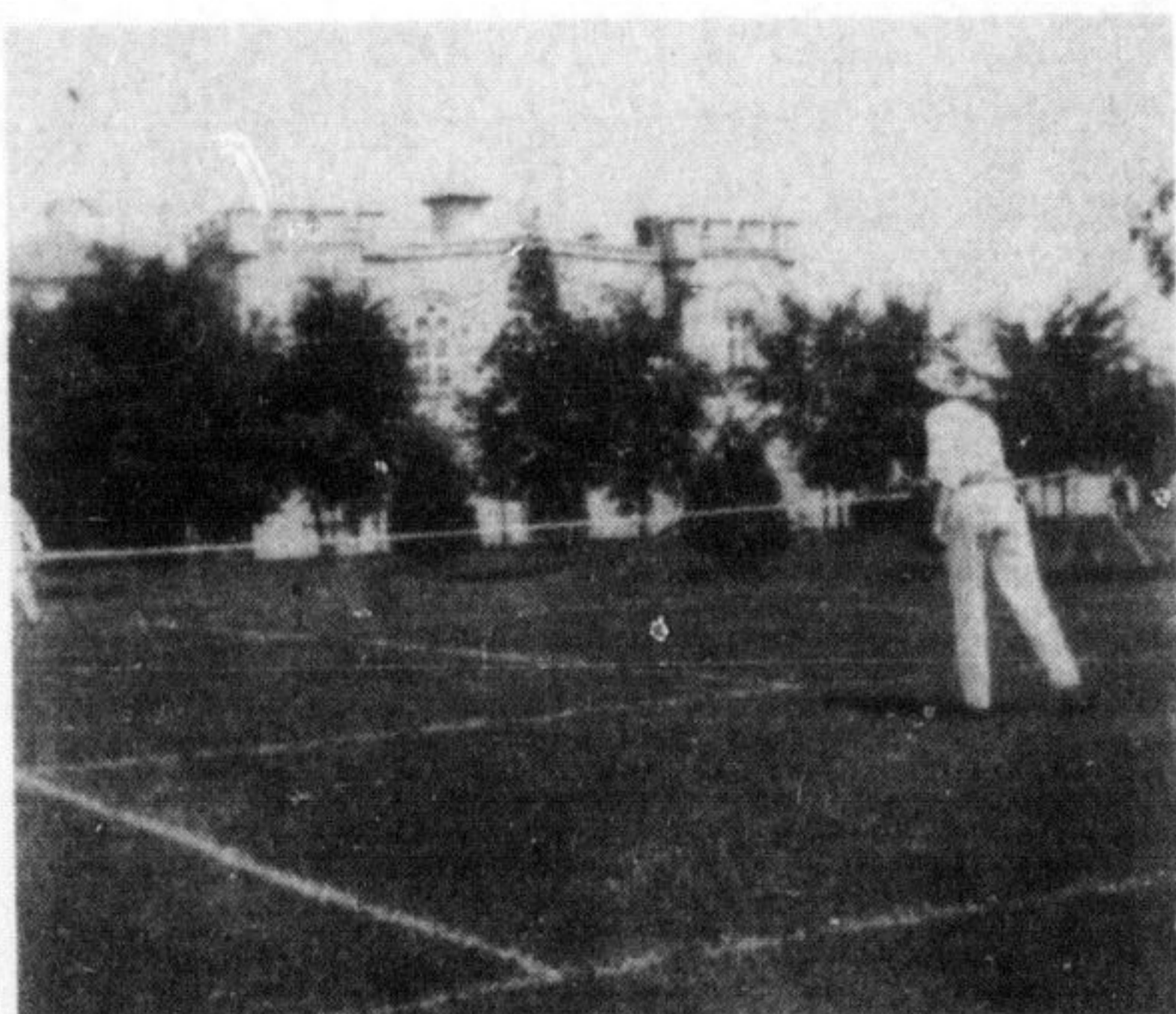
County Court House and Jail are evident with the small 1915 Registry Office to the side. The parking lot, which accommodates the Farmers Market is to the top left of the two block "square".



LOOKING ACROSS THE present Victoria Park, this 1915 post card indicates the young trees and the community band stand that was the site of concerts. In the background the County Buildings are evident.



AN IMPRESSIVE but unused tower was removed from the 1877 jail section in 1954.



SPORTS WERE PLAYED on the County Square. Tennis is seen but cricket was played here in 1857 and on the Queen's Birthday fireworks were set off here in the same year. The town now owns this park.

All photos are from the files of *The Canadian Champion*. The original Court House from the Ruthven Campbell collection, the tennis in the park from the Myrtle Field collection. Major research for the article is from *The Canadian Champion*, *The Halton Journal*, *The Toronto Globe* and *The Hamilton Spectator* by Jim Dills, former publisher of *The Champion* and president, Milton Historical Society.