

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Registration Form

1. Name of Property

historic name Peirce City Fire Station/Courthouse/ and Jail

other names/site number Pierce City Fire Station/ Courthouse/ and Jail

2. Location

street & number Walnut Street [n/a] not for publication

city or town Pierce City [n/a] vicinity

state Missouri code MO county Lawrence code 109 zip code 65723

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this  
[x] nomination [ ] request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the  
National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my  
opinion, the property [x] meets [ ] does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered  
significant  
[ ] nationally [ ] statewide [x] locally.  
( See continuation sheet for additional comments [ ] )

Signature of certifying official/Title Claire F. Blackwell/Deputy SHPO

Date

22 July 1998

Missouri Department of Natural Resources  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property [ ] meets [ ] does not meet the National Register criteria.  
( See continuation sheet for additional comments [ ] )

Signature of certifying official/Title

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

[ ] entered in the National Register  
See continuation sheet [ ].

[ ] determined eligible for the  
National Register  
See continuation sheet [ ].

[ ] determined not eligible for the  
National Register.

[ ] removed from the  
National Register

[ ] other, explain  
See continuation sheet [ ].

Signature of the Keeper

Date

## 5. Classification

Ownership of Property	Category of Property	Number of Resources within Property	
		Contributing	Noncontributing
<input type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<u>1</u>	<u>          </u> buildings
<input type="checkbox"/> public-local	<input type="checkbox"/> district	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u> sites
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public-State	<input type="checkbox"/> site	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u> structures
<input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal	<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<u>          </u>	<u>          </u> objects
	<input type="checkbox"/> object	<u>1</u>	<u>          </u> Total

Number of contributing resources  
previously listed in the National  
Register.

Name of related multiple property listing.

N/A

0

## 6. Function or Use

Historic Function  
GOVERNMENT/fire station  
GOVERNMENT/courthouse  
GOVERNMENT/correctional facility

Current Functions  
WORK IN PROGRESS

## 7. Description

Architectural Classification  
LATE VICTORIAN- Italianate

Materials  
foundation brick  
walls brick

roof asphalt  
other metal

## Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

## 8. Statement of Significance

### Applicable National Register Criteria

☒ **A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history

☐ **B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.

☒ **C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.

☐ **D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

### Criteria Considerations

Property is:

☐ **A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.

☐ **B** removed from its original location.

☐ **C** a birthplace or grave.

☐ **D** a cemetery.

☐ **E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.

☐ **F** a commemorative property.

☐ **G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

### Areas of Significance

Politics/Government

Ethnic Heritage-Black

Architecture

### Periods of Significance

1886- ca. 1940

### Significant Dates

August 18-20, 1901

### Significant Person(s)

n/a

### Cultural Affiliation

n/a

### Architect/Builder

unknown

## Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

## 9. Major Bibliographic References

### Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

### Previous documentation on file (NPS):

☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested

☐ previously listed in the National Register

☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register

☐ designated a National Historic Landmark

☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey

# \_\_\_\_\_

☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record

# \_\_\_\_\_

### Primary location of additional data:

☒ State Historic Preservation Office

☐ Other State Agency

☐ Federal Agency

☐ Local Government

☐ University

☐ Other:

Name of repository: \_\_\_\_\_

## 10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property less than one

### UTM References

A. Zone	Easting	Northing	B. Zone	Easting	Northing
15	410685	4089100			
C. Zone	Easting	Northing	D. Zone	Easting	Northing

[ ] See continuation sheet

### Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

### Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

## 11. Form Prepared By

name/title Jane Beeten, Revolving Fund Coordinator  
organization Dept. of Natural Resources, Historic Preservation date December 29, 1997  
street & number P.O. Box 176 telephone 573/751-5373  
city or town Jefferson City state Missouri zip code 65102

### Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

### Continuation Sheets

### Maps

A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A Sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

### Photographs

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

### Additional Items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

### Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name Department of Natural Resources, Revolving Fund Program  
street & number P.O. Box 176 telephone 573/751-5373  
city or town Jefferson City state Missouri zip code 65102

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section 7 Page 1

Peirce City Fire Station, Courthouse, and Jail  
Lawrence County, Missouri

Summary: The Peirce City Fire Station, Courthouse and Jail is a two-story brick building located on Walnut Street near downtown Pierce City, in Lawrence County, Missouri. The building is in its original location, a city lot roughly the size of the building, and is closely flanked on either side by the circa 1899 United Methodist Church and a new masonic lodge. This 1886 Italianate property is a forerunner of the modern multipurpose facility, serving the community as a fire station, courthouse, jail, and city hall, and has always been used for governmental purposes. The two-story flat roofed building has a number of Italianate features, including a distinctive square, hipped roof belltower, tall vertically oriented windows topped by rectangular topped hoods and tall double entry doors. The building has had no additions or major alterations, and most of the historic fabric of the building remains. Lack of maintenance over the years necessitated a stabilization effort following the building's acquisition by the State of Missouri during 1993-1997. The building's exterior retains a high degree of integrity of location, design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling and association, making it eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

Narrative

Type / Setting

The Peirce City Fire Station is a commercial building, located 1 1/2 blocks from the downtown commercial district, within sight of the community bandstand, in a block of mixed commercial and residential structures. The front facade is adjacent to the city sidewalk, facing east. The United Methodist Church immediately to the north is but a few feet from the side of the structure. To the south, a new Masonic Lodge has recently been constructed, approximately 10 feet from the south wall of the fire station.

The building is a rectangular two-story, 25' x 75' two-bay structure constructed primarily of brick, with metal cornice and trim on the front facade, a wooden belltower and stone walls in the first floor jail section. The two bays on the front facade are of different widths, with the south bay being the same width as the belltower and thus the narrower of the two, while the north bay is the width of the double doors of the fire station. The walls are constructed of brick, with the front facade being laid in the stretcher, or running bond pattern, the side and rear walls laid in a common bond variant with seven stretcher rows per header row, except for the walls surrounding the jail. On the first floor only, rectangular natural faced cut stone blocks laid in regular courses comprise the rear wall, and this construction extends 18 feet from the rear wall to the east on both side walls. Five courses of brick above the top of the stone portion of the wall are a total of six small openings, two on the rear, and two on each side. These openings, which serve as ventilation for the jail, are covered by iron bars. While a portion of the walls have been relaid or tuckpointed in order to stabilize the building, some areas remain damaged due to vandalism, mostly near the ground. The top of the side walls are gently stepped from front to back, reflecting the slope of the roof. The roof is flat, sloping from front to rear, hidden from view by the parapet walls. Windows and doors are original, and retain the original trim.

The front facade features a recessed main entrance, topped by decorative metal trim which continues above the doors in both bays. The main entrance has tall double doors, topped by a tall two-pane transom window. These original four-panel wooden doors have two tall rectangular raised panels on top, and two small, almost square rectangular raised panels on the bottom. The recessed entry has a much shorter and simpler door on the north wall, allowing access to the fire station without opening the main doors. The main doors to the fire station are wide double doors opening inwards, topped by a four-pane transom window which is similar to but not as tall as the transom over the main entrance. These are simple doors constructed of vertical boards, supported on the inside by horizontal cross members. On the second story, tall vertically oriented windows in each bay are capped by hoods with fake keystones and

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section 7 Page 2

Peirce City Fire Station, Courthouse, and Jail  
Lawrence County, Missouri

detailed flat cornices covering arched window tops. The window in the south bay on the front facade is a single window, while the north bay features two paired windows. The cornice over the paired windows features a date of 1886. All windows are two-over-two double hung sash. Very little original glass remains, and some muntins are missing. Plywood boardup covers all windows and doors, for security reasons. The belltower has a distinctively Italianate character, due to its square design, arched detailing topping the paired, vertically oriented openings on each side, heavy brackets at the cornice, and hipped roof. The tower is supported by a square wooden base, detailed with horizontal moulding at top and bottom, separated by a section covered in narrow vertical boards, and capped by a shallow roof mimicing the hipped roof. During the recent stabilization effort, the belltower was removed from the building, rotted portions of the structure replaced, new roof decking and shingles installed, and all wood surfaces painted. This work included replacement in kind of two of the massive corner posts, and replacement of all brackets. While these new brackets match the original in size and shape, cut-out detailing on the sides of the brackets was eliminated. The decorative metal finial was removed during the recent stabilization, and the pieces remain in the state's possession. The original cast-iron bell still hangs in the belltower, bearing a date of 1884. A vertical chase remains for the bell's rope to hang down to street level, protected within the recessed entry area, but the rope is currently missing.

Additional decorative elements exist on the front facade. Topping the north bay is a metal cornice. Originally, this cornice exhibited seven semi-circular motifs extending above the top of the cornice. These motifs were apparently bent backwards during stabilization efforts, and may still exist, but are no longer visible from the ground. Dividing the bays on the front facade is a projecting vertical band of masonry 1 1/2 bricks in width. This band exhibits decorative stepped projections between and at both ends of the metal trim topping the first floor doors, and again just below the belltower and at the end of the metal cornice. More decorative masonry in an alternating stepped pattern tops the south bay just below the belltower. A round-topped metal finial originally protected the northeast corner above the projecting masonry detailing, but was removed during the stabilization. This finial is in the possession of the owner.

The interior features an entry hall with a stair on the south wall, the hall leading to the jail in the rear of the building. Two steps lead down to a entry area outside the single jail cell. Two doors secure the cell, first a metal door of vertical tubes reinforces with horizontal metal plates, then a wooden door constructed of two layers of wood, (running diagonally in opposite directions). The cell has stone walls which have been painted white some time previously, and a metal grate between the cell and the ceiling joists. Light and air are provided by the six small openings covered by iron bars. To the north of the hallway is a large rectangular room with a gravel floor, unfinished walls and exposed ceiling joists which served as storage for the fire department's equipment. The second floor is one large open room.

During the recent stabilization, some interior features were, unfortunately, eliminated. Wood wainscoting extending from the main entrance to the stairway and down the hallway was removed, although most of the wainscoting beside the stairs remains intact. The stair bannister, which was totally intact, was removed, along with a number of original stair treads and risers. The newel post and some ballisters have been stored in the jail cell. A partition of metal bars extending to the ceiling, which separated the hallway from the space outside the jail cell, was removed. The door which allowed access to this area is stored in the jail. On the second floor, all partition walls were removed. Originally the second floor had a partition wall separating the stair from the adjacent courtroom, a small stair landing and two small offices in the rear of the building, which were most likely intended as the judge's and clerk's offices. All of the roof rafters and some of the floor joists were replaced on the second floor during stabilization, and temporary plywood flooring replaced the deteriorated wooden floors. Other stabilization work, which focused on roof

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section 7 Page 3

Peirce City Fire Station, Courthouse, and Jail  
Lawrence County, Missouri

replacement and brick stabilization, has been described previously. While these changes are disturbing, their impact on the integrity of the building is relatively small. The building still reflects the periods of significance.

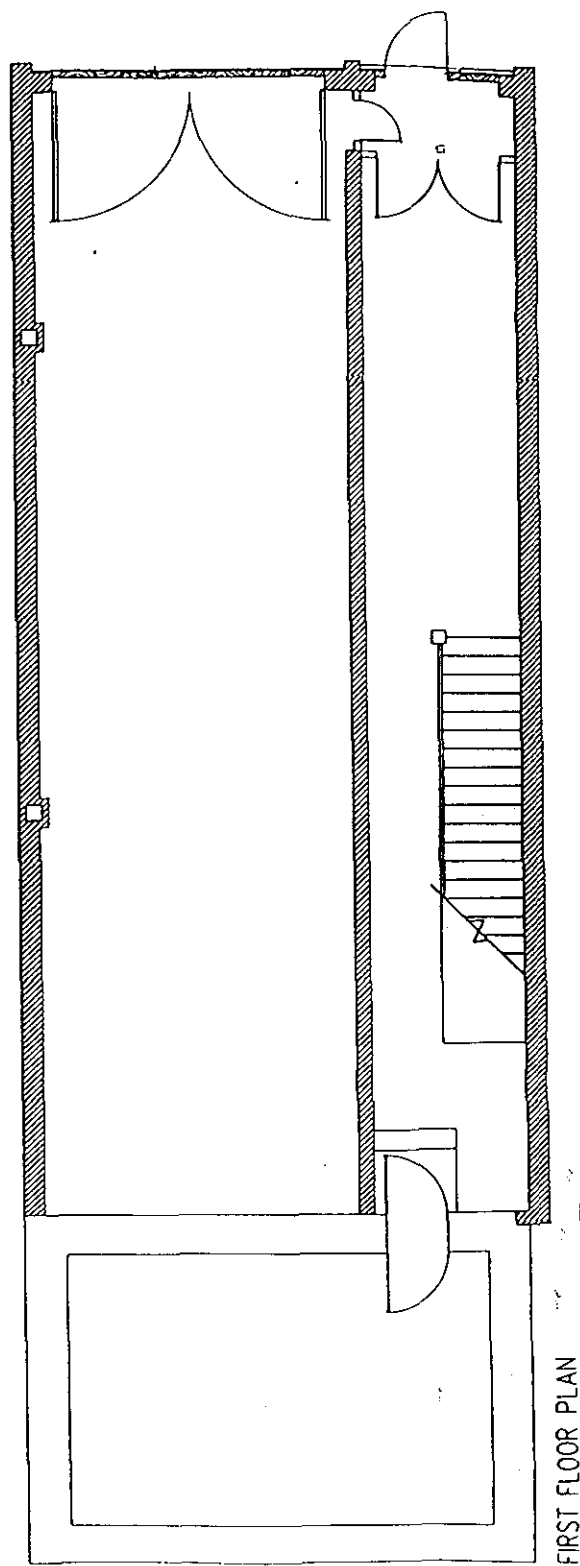
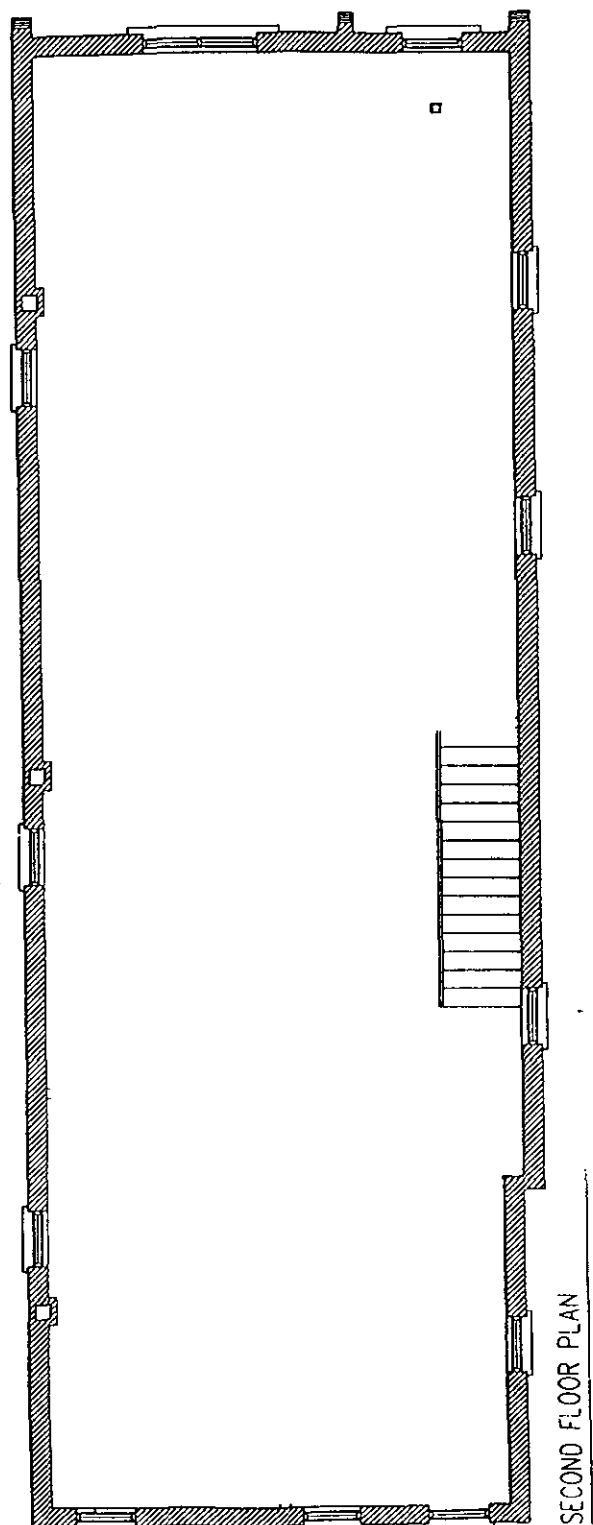
Much of the deteriorated portions of the building have been addressed by roof replacement, and relaying or repointing of brick walls. However, the lower portions of the side walls have sustained some damage due to vandalism. On several occasions, children have knocked holes in the brick walls large enough to gain access, and these were quickly repaired. Wooden windows have not been painted in many years, and are currently protected by plywood boardup. Deterioration of this type is normal for a building which has been under utilized for a period of time, and does not diminish the building's integrity.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section 7 Page 4

Peirce City Fire Station, Courthouse, and Jail  
Lawrence County, Missouri





United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 5

Peirce City Fire Station, Courthouse, and Jail  
Lawrence County, Missouri

Summary: The Peirce City Fire Station, Courthouse and Jail, Walnut Street, Pierce City, Lawrence County, is significant under Criterion A, in the areas of POLITICS/GOVERNMENT and ETHNIC HERITAGE--BLACK and under Criterion C in the area of ARCHITECTURE, with local significance. The fire station is eligible under Politics/Government due to its construction and use as an early forerunner of the modern multi-purpose public facility, housing three distinct governmental functions: fire station, courthouse/city hall, and jail. Under the area of Ethnic Heritage - Black, the building was the focal point of a race riot August 18-20, 1901, which received national attention and which served at least partially as the inspiration for an essay by Mark Twain, "The United States of Lyncherdom." The building is eligible for listing under Architecture as an elegant, though restrained, example of the Italianate style applied to a public building. The building was designed to accommodate three distinct governmental uses and is simply embellished with Italianate details and rendered in a scale comparable to other commercial buildings in the Lawrence County community. The building's exterior retains a high degree of integrity of location, design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling and association. The period of significance under Politics/Government extends from 1886 to circa 1940, reflecting the building's construction in 1886 and use for governmental purposes until circa 1940, and it continues to reflect this period. Under Ethnic Heritage; Black, the period of significance is limited to the specific dates of the racial conflict, August 18th -August 20th, 1901. Architectural significance is limited to the year of construction.

Peirce City - A Brief History

Modern day Pierce City was originally named for Mr. Andrew Peirce, a vice-president of the Atlantic-Pacific Railway, who during 1870 donated land for establishment of a town in exchange for naming the town in his honor. The town flourished, based on an economy sustained by the railroad. In 1879 the Peirce City Baptist College was founded, and by the early 1890's, the town's population had reached nearly 3,000, making it the largest town in Lawrence County. In 1887, the community's first step in the road to decline occurred, when the Frisco railroad moved its junction to Plymouth Junction - later known as Monett. Immediately, many railroad workers and their families left. Peirce City received another significant blow in the 1920's, when the Lawrence County Bank, one of two banks in the community, closed and did not reopen. As this was prior to federally insured deposits, this would have deprived the citizens, and their community, of a substantial amount of wealth. As a result, the community has a large percentage of commercial and residential properties which retain a high degree of integrity, with few additions or alterations. During the 1920's, the spelling of the town's name was changed to Pierce City.<sup>1</sup>

Politics/Government

The Peirce City Fire Station, Courthouse and Jail was built in 1886, as the town reached its peak.<sup>2</sup> On February 23, 1887, Representative George Purdy introduced House Bill No. 689 in the Missouri House of Representatives to provide "for the holding of two terms of the Lawrence county circuit court at the city of

<sup>1</sup> Lawrence County Historical Society, Lawrence County Missouri History, (N.p., 1974), p. 200-202; Down Turnback Trails: Sketch Book of Lawrence County (N.p., n.d.), p. 24.; Pierce City Centennial Book, (N.p., n.d.), p. 31; and Jack George, lifelong Pierce City resident, phone interview with Jane Beetem, Missouri Historic Preservation Program, 12/23/97.

<sup>2</sup> No article describing the dedication of the new facility was uncovered, but based on the date of 1886 on the front of the building, and the 1884 date on the fire bell, a construction date of 1886 has been used.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 6

Peirce City Fire Station, Courthouse, and Jail  
Lawrence County, Missouri

Pierce City....<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately for Peirce City and Rep. Purdy this legislation did not pass, and the citizens of Peirce City were unable to fully capitalize on their investment in this building, and the voters outside Peirce City did not support Rep. Purdy for re-election. While Rep. Purdy's plans did not materialize, the building was used as a city hall and for occasional trials and inquests. In February 1902, editor Henry Price of the Aurora Daily Argus was tried in this building on libel charges, apparently stemming from statements in his column claiming that certain judges and the county clerk had received kickbacks in awarding the contract for furniture for the new Lawrence County Courthouse. In his defense, Attorney Tom Whitney of Aurora was quoted as stating:

May it please the court and gentlemen of the jury, I come today in defense of one who by the fates decree has been universally cursed. I sing not of a man, but of poor Si, who hails from Neosho. Who has a diarrhea of words and a constipation of ideas....<sup>4</sup>

Oral tradition holds that the city hall and jail functions were removed from this building circa 1940. One older citizen recalled the city hall relocating about the time his National Guard unit shipped out for WWII, moving to a building downtown, where a cage was installed to serve as a holding cell. This same person remembered the jail being in use circa 1934, as his scout master was held in the jail for a time.<sup>5</sup> Another citizen remembers his father being hired to install a wood stove in the jail during the 1930's, since a woman was being held there over the winter.<sup>6</sup> Pierce City continued to use the building for storage of trucks and other city equipment until 1992.

The Peirce City Fire Station, Courthouse and Jail was constructed as the community was developing rapidly. A strong fire department was a critical municipal service. Newspapers of the day recounted not only details of the fire, but how much insurance business owners had, and on what property. Not only was this free advertising for insurance companies, but of interest to the entire community, as a significant uninsured loss could cost the town a business they depended upon. In 1886, Peirce City's fire department was striving to protect the community using the most modern equipment available, as described in an article on a southwest Missouri fire department tournament in the Peirce City Empire, April 15, 1886:

"Peirce City now has three companies - hose, engine and hook and ladder. The 'hooks' have recently purchased a new truck of the latest and most improved pattern, and they now propose to capture the championship trumpet....Eugene Bavington, formerly foreman of Hose Company No. 1, of Peirce City has been elected Chief of the department of that flourishing city."<sup>7</sup>

Being an all volunteer fire department was not without challenges, however. Following a disastrous fire in Peirce City on October 9, 1886, which destroyed five buildings, the newspaper reported:

---

<sup>3</sup> Journal of the (Missouri) House of Representatives, February 23, 1887. p. 632.

<sup>4</sup> Mount Vernon (Missouri) Lawrence Chieftain, February 6, 1902. p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Jack George, interview, 12/23/97.

<sup>6</sup> Murray Stringer-Bishoff, Monett, phone interview with Jane Beetem, 12/10/97.

<sup>7</sup> Peirce City (Missouri) Empire, April 15, 1886.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 7

Peirce City Fire Station, Courthouse, and Jail  
Lawrence County, Missouri

Dozens of men refused to take a turn at the pump last night, and would inquire 'where is the fire department?' The members were at their posts, and doing their duty. They are not paid for their services, and even if they were, there is not enough of them to run the pump any great length of time.<sup>8</sup>

The community responded to this problem by passing City Ordinance Sec. 138, reported on October 21, 1886:

The chief of the Fire department shall have police authority at the time of fire or fire alarm, and during the existence of a fire shall have authority to command all able bodied male citizens under the age of fifty years to assist in subduing the same and saving property, and may arrest or cause to be arrested any person for refusing to obey such order, and any person for such refusal, shall, on conviction thereof, be deemed guilty of misdemeanor, and may be fined not less than one, nore more than one hundred dollars, and pay costs of suit.<sup>9</sup>

Ethnic Heritage: Black

The events of August 18-20, 1901 forever changed the lives of all black citizens of Peirce City. The Peirce City Fire Station, Courthouse and Jail was directly involved in these events, as its fire bell was rung to alert citizens to the murder of Geshel Wild, and later the two black men suspected of the crime were held in and subsequently removed from the jail by an angry mob. Because of the connection between these events and the building, it is significant the area of Ethnic Heritage--Black.

In order to gain insight into how the events of August 18 - 20, 1901 contributed to the overall pattern of events in our history, it may be helpful to note some of the state and national trends prior to this year. In 1883, the United States Supreme Court declared the Civil Rights Act of 1875 unconstitutional. The 1875 law had attempted to ensure blacks access to accomodations such as restaurants and theaters. Following its overturn, southern states passed segregation laws. In 1877 President Rutherford B. Hayes was elected after narrowly defeating Samuel J. Tilden. The election was finally decided by a congressionally appointed commission, and Hayes won only after agreeing to certain concessions to the South, which included the withdrawal of federal troops placed there during Reconstruction.

Missouri's 1875 constitution provided for separate schools for blacks and whites. In 1887, a white teacher in Grundy County, Missouri refused to admit black students to a white school which had previously been open to them, and the parents sued on grounds their 14th Amendment rights had been violated. While this case made its way through the courts, in 1889 the Missouri Legislature passed a law ordering separate schools be established for blacks. In 1890, the Missouri Supreme Court heard the Grundy case, and ruled against the black students. In 1896, the United States Supreme Court established "separate but equal" in Plessy v. Ferguson, making separate but equal accomodations for blacks constitutional. In Missouri, no laws on the subject existed, but custom prevented blacks from joining whites in hotels, theaters, hospitals, and other public places. (While these events in no way justify the events in Peirce City

---

<sup>8</sup> The Peirce City (Missouri) Weekly Empire, October 21, 1886.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 8

Peirce City Fire Station, Courthouse, and Jail  
Lawrence County, Missouri

in 1901, this information is provided to demonstrate how the following events are part of a pattern in our state and national history.)<sup>10</sup>

On August 18, 1901, nineteen year old Geshel Wild was returning to her home two miles west of Peirce City following Sunday school, following the railroad tracks. While only 1/2 mile from the business district, she was attacked, her throat cut and her body thrown into a ditch below a culvert. Her brother, who left church only 15 minutes later, found her and phoned the sheriff from the nearest house. When news reached the city the community's fire bell was rung and great crowds began to gather, "ready to hunt down the inhuman brute." Will Roark stated that "he had seen a negro sitting on the culvert just awhile before the crime was committed, which caused the crowd to suspect who the perpetrator was...."<sup>11</sup>

By Monday, August 19, 1901, "thousands of armed and determined men gathered in Peirce City and the failure to catch the criminal added fuel to the flames and the generally accepted fact that it was a negro that committed the crime aroused the bitterest feeling against that race. This led to the arrest of Will Godley, a notorious negro, and Gene Barrett, on suspicion..."<sup>12</sup>

The two were held in the Peirce City Jail. Monday's headline in the Peirce City Empire read: "FOULLY MURDERED -Geshel Wild's Throat Cut While on her way Home from Church - The Most Atrocious Crime Ever Committed in this Vicinity - The Murderer Supposed to be a Colored Man." The article contained the following suggestion:

That case of murder which took place just west of the city Sunday evening, and one might say within the glare of the electric lights, was the most awful occurrence our people ever had to contend with, and it is to be sincerely hoped that the guilty wretch may be brought speedily to justice. No such crime should ever be let go unpunished, and every citizen should constitute himself an officer for the time being to help down the murderer. 'Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord,' yet in this instance the crime is such that every nick and corner of the city should be thoroughly searched, and when discovered no punishment is too bad.<sup>13</sup>

Around 9:00 p.m. Monday evening, August 19, 1901, the crowd headed for the Peirce City Jail where the two men were being held. Using a sledge hammer, the jail door was broken down, and the two were taken to the Lawrence Hotel downtown where Godley was hung from the awning, then riddled by bullets from the mob. According to a Mount Vernon newspaper,

---

<sup>10</sup> Lorenzo J. Greene, Gary R. Kremer, and Antonio F. Holland, eds., Missouri's Black Heritage, rev.ed. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), p. 104-107.

<sup>11</sup> Peirce City (Missouri) Empire, August 22, 1901.

<sup>12</sup> Mount Vernon (Missouri) Lawrence Chieftain, August 22, 1901. p.1.

<sup>13</sup> Peirce City (Missouri) Empire, August 22, 1901.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 9

Peirce City Fire Station, Courthouse, and Jail  
Lawrence County, Missouri

It is not claimed that Godley killed the young girl, but his reputation was of the worst. He had recently completed a sentence in the penitentiary for rape committed on a white woman 60 years of age, near Peirce City. He was suspected of attempted assault on two young girls.<sup>14</sup>

Following the hanging of Godley, Gene Barrett named two other black men as suspects, and was released. However the mob was not satisfied, and before the night was out French Godley, father of the deceased, and Pete Hampton were shot and burned when the elder Godley's house was burned. Four more houses of black families were burned that night. Tuesday's Peirce City Empire headline read: "HUNG - Will Godley Taken From the City Jail and Hung. Gene Barrett confessed Who Did the Deed."<sup>15</sup> In Mount Vernon, the headline of the Lawrence Chieftain read:

HEINOUS CRIME AT PEIRCE CITY, A Young Lady Assaulted and Brutally Murdered. HER THROAT CUT FROM EAR TO EAR. Mob Law the Result. One Negro, Will Godley, Lynched and Two Others, Pete Hampton and Frank Godley, Riddled With Bullets and Their Bodies Burned in the House Where They Fell. ALL THE NEGROES, 200 IN NUMBER, DRIVEN FROM PEIRCE CITY.<sup>16</sup>

This article describes the riot and subsequent exodus of the black population, in part, as:

The mob was composed of people from Peirce City, Monett and the surrounding country. Every kind of firearm was used by the immense crowd. Hardware stores were broken open and their stocks of guns and pistols seized. The armory of the company of national guards was rifled and every musket taken. The attack on the negroes continued as long as one of the hated race could be found. Most of the colored people ran away from their homes as soon as they saw the bent of the mobs fury. It is about one-fourth of a mile from Peirce City to the woods. Some of the frightened ran to this shelter. Others took the first train and left, never to return. Many did not have time to pack their household goods. Tuesday morning the exodus of the blacks continued and some of the terror stricken people left for Springfield and other places of safety. It is reported that there is not now a colored person left in Peirce City or vicinity.<sup>17</sup>

Wednesday, August 21st, 1901, the Peirce City Empire included a single line stating "Sarah Godley, and the rest of the colored folks took the evening trains yesterday for different points on the Frisco."<sup>18</sup> Eventually a black man named Joe Lark of Peirce City was charged and in November, 1901 was tried for the murder of Geshel Wild, but found not guilty.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Mount Vernon (Missouri) Lawrence Chieftain, August 22, 1901. p.1.

<sup>15</sup> Peirce City (Missouri) Empire, August 22, 1901.

<sup>16</sup> Mount Vernon (Missouri) Lawrence Chieftain, August 22, 1901. p.1.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Peirce City (Missouri) Empire, August 22, 1901.

<sup>19</sup> Mount Vernon (Missouri) Lawrence Chieftain, November 28, 1901. p. 1.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 10

Peirce City Fire Station, Courthouse, and Jail  
Lawrence County, Missouri

Peirce City lost its entire black population during August 18th, 19th and 20th, 1901. This follows the statewide trend, as in 1890, only 47% of Missouri's black population lived in urban areas, but by 1900, this number had increased to 55%. During the 1890's, neglect of blacks by political leaders led many lawless whites to feel they had a license to harass them. This oppression manifested itself in the growing prevalence of lynching throughout Missouri and the nation during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The late nineteenth century was a violent period in American history. Industrialization shattered the nation's agricultural lifestyle. Labor unrest, financial panics and an increasing number of immigrants challenged whites for jobs, causing them to search for scapegoats. When a scapegoat was found, lynching blacks was a chief form of violence. Around the time of the Peirce City lynching, there were several Pullman railroad strikes reported. In describing Monett's lynching during this period, which occurred in 1894, The Carthage Press reported "the white railroad men were out to drive the Negroes from the city." Clearly from newspaper accounts of the day, there were a considerable number of outsiders in Peirce City, presumably to hunt down Geshel Wild's killer, and railroad workers most likely contributed a good bit to this effort.<sup>20</sup>

The number of lynchings in Missouri reached an all-time high in the 1860's, dropped during the 1870's, but rose again through the 1880's and 1890's, declining somewhat in the early 1900's. While lynching was common in many states, during the late nineteenth century eighty-one people were lynched in Missouri, with fifty-one being black. During the same period, seventy-eight were lynched in Virginia, fifty-three in North Carolina, twenty-four in neighboring Illinois, and twenty-two in Kansas. Mob leaders generally escaped punishment, often with the complicity of legal authorities.<sup>21</sup>

The events in Peirce City during August, 1901 were reported nationally and moved former Missourian Mark Twain to write an essay entitled "The United States of Lyncherdom," which was intended for publication in the North American Review. In his article, Twain mused:

"Why does a crowd . . . stand by, smitten to the heart and miserable, and by ostentatious outward signs pretend to enjoy a lynching? Why does it lift no hand or voice in protest? Only because it would be unpopular to do it, I think; each man is afraid of his neighbor's disapproval, a thing which, to the general run of the race, is more dreaded than wounds and death. When there is to be a lynching the people hitch up and come miles to see it, bringing their wives and children. Really to see it? No--they come only because they are afraid to stay at home, lest it be noticed and offensively commented upon."

Toward the end of the essay, Twain appealed to the missionaries in China to return to the United States to return to where they were equally needed: "O compassionate missionary, leave China! come home and convert these Christians!"<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Missouri's Black Heritage, Rev. Ed. p. 107-108; and Murray Bishoff, Monett, Missouri, phone interview with Jane Beetem, 12/10/97.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 108; and Harriet C. Frazier, "The History of Death as Punishment in Missouri," (Chart, Criminal Justice Department, Central Missouri State University, Warrensburg, Missouri. November, 1993).

<sup>22</sup> The Complete Works of Mark Twain: Europe and Elsewhere. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1923), p. 244-245.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 11

Peirce City Fire Station, Courthouse, and Jail  
Lawrence County, Missouri

Twain also proposed to his publisher, Frank Bliss, a book, available through subscription, on the history of lynching in America and, which would require for its composition, according to Twain, only a pair of scissors and the daily newspapers.<sup>23</sup> The article on lynching was intended to serve as the book's introduction. To Bliss, Twain enthusiastically wrote of his dual motivations: "Nothing but such a book can rouse up the sheriffs to put down the mobs and the lynchings' . . . 'No book is so marketable as this one-- the field is fresh, untordden, and of the strongest interest.'" However, Twain ultimately relented when he realized that sales in the South would probably be nonexistent: "'I shouldn't have even half a friend left down there, after it issued from the press.'" However, as he consigned the article to his growing collection of writings intended for postumous publication, he noted that its impact would remain undiminished, whenever it was eventually published, since it contained "plenty of vitriol . . . and that will keep it from spoiling."<sup>24</sup>

Architecture

The Peirce City Fire Station, Courthouse and Jail is significant for its architecture, as it was designed to accommodate three distinct governmental uses, is simply embellished with details of Italianate influence, and retains integrity of location, design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling and association with the period of significance.

Use of the building as a fire station was accomplished by a large double-doored entry to the fire truck storage area, a belltower to house the fire bell, and a small chase to house the fire rope which is protected by a recessed entry area, allowing anyone to ring the firebell and call the volunteer firemen. The courthouse on the second floor consisted of a large courtroom, supported by two small offices, presumably for the judge and clerk. The jail on the first floor consisted of an entry area next to the single jail cell, constructed of stone with an iron grate ceiling, iron bars over the small ventilation openings, and double doors to the single entry for security. Italianate influences evident in the building include tall vertically oriented windows on the front facade capped by hoods with fake keystones and detailed flat cornices covering arched window tops, tall four-panel double entry doors, and a square belltower with arched detailing topping the paired, vertically oriented openings on each side, heavy brackets at the cornice, and hipped roof. The building has changed very little since the period of significance, with minor changes occurring between 1993-1997 during stabilization, and so reflects the architecture of the period.

Recent History

The Peirce City Fire Station, Courthouse and Jail was purchased by the State of Missouri, Department of Natural Resources through the Missouri Historic Preservation Revolving Fund in 1992. At the time, it was clear that immediate stabilization was necessary, as the roof was greatly deteriorated. It was discovered that the roof contained asbestos, which had filtered into the building as the roof decayed. This had mixed with the pigeon debris which littered the building, hampering removal. Finally, in 1997, the stabilization effort was completed. The building is currently being marketed, and will be sold with preservation covenants attached to protect its integrity into the future.

---

<sup>23</sup> Geismer, Maxwell, ed., Mark Twain and the Three R's: Race, Religion, Revolution--and Related Matters (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1973), p. 33.

<sup>24</sup> Kaplan, Justin, Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966; reprint ed., New York: Pocket Books, 1968), p. 433.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section 9 Page 12

Peirce City Fire Station, Courthouse, and Jail  
Lawrence County, Missouri

The Complete Works of Mark Twain: Europe and Elsewhere. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1923.

Down Turnback Trails: Sketch Book of Lawrence County. N.p., n.d.

Frazier, Harriet C. "The History of Death as Punishment in Missouri," Criminal Justice Department, Central Missouri State University, Warrensburg, Missouri. November, 1993.

Geismer, Maxwell, ed. Mark Twain and the Three R's: Race, Religion, Revolution--and Related Matters. New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1973.

George, Jack. Pierce City, MO. Phone interview with Jane Beetem. 12/23/97.

Greene, Lorenzo J.; Kremer, Gary R.; and Holland, Antonio. Missouri's Black Heritage. Rev. ed. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993.

Journal of the (Missouri) House of Representatives, February 23, 1887.

Kaplan, Justin. Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966; reprint ed., New York: Pocket Books, 1968.

Lawrence County Historical Society, Lawrence County Missouri History. N.p., 1974.

LeMaster, J.R.; and Wilson, James D., eds. The Mark Twain Encyclopedia, New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993.

Mount Vernon (Missouri) Lawrence Chieftain, February 6, 1902.

Pierce City Centennial Book. N.p., n.d.

The Peirce City (Missouri) Weekly Empire, October 21, 1886. page?

Stringer-Bishoff, Murray. "The Lynching That Changed Southwest Missouri." Monett Times. August 14, 1991, p. 1.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Area Minorities Disperse as PC Murder Trial Set." Monett Times. August 15, 1991, p. 1.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Riot Victims Sue PC Residents for Damages." Monett Times. August 16, 1991, p. 1.

Stringer-Bishoff, Murray. Monett, Missouri. Phone interview with Jane Beetem. 12/10/97.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

Section 10 Page 13

**Peirce City Fire Station, Courthouse, and Jail  
Lawrence County, Missouri**

---

**Verbal Boundary Description**

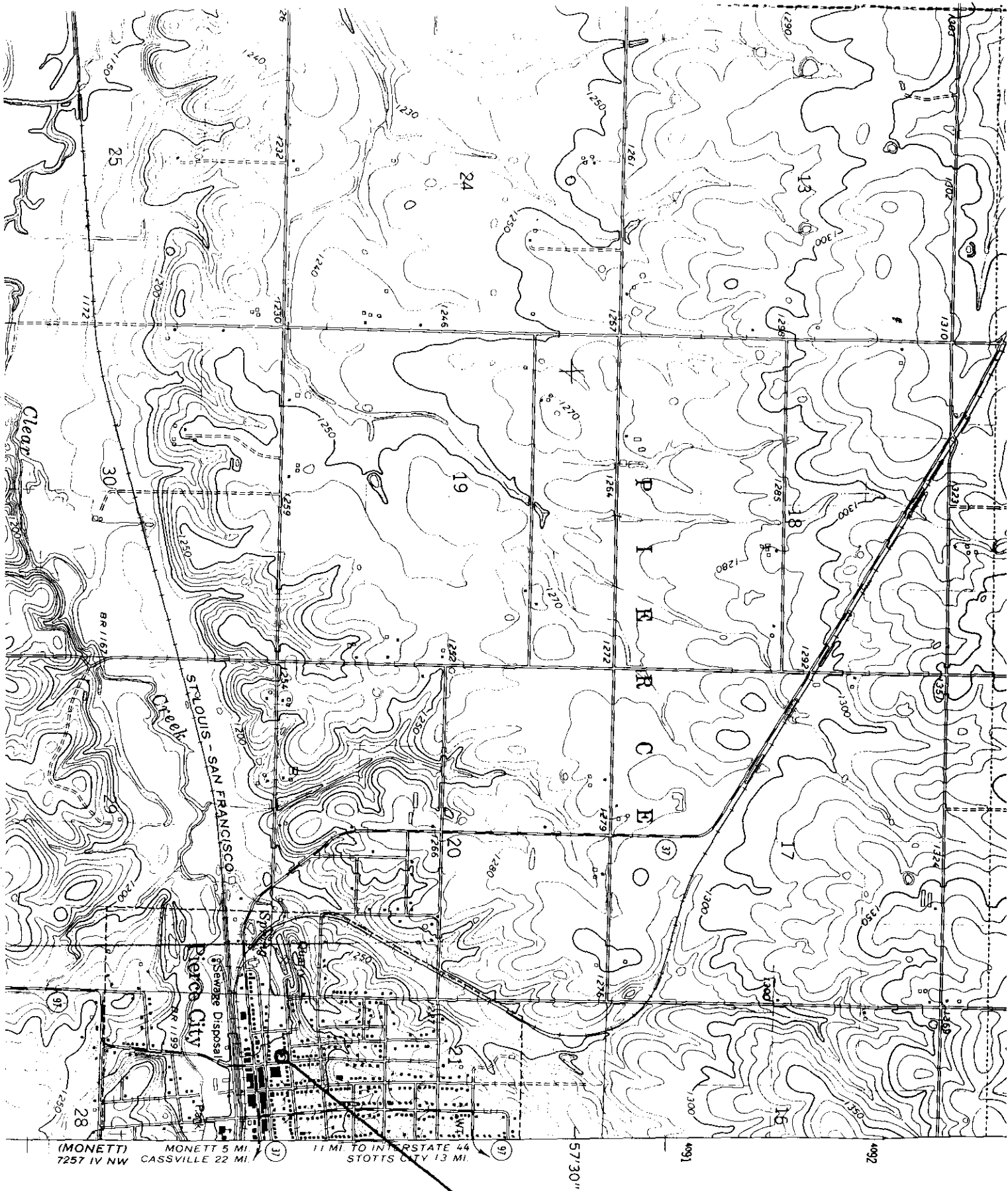
Lot 3, Block 20, Original Survey to Pierce City, Lawrence County, Missouri.

**Verbal Boundary Justification**

The boundary includes the entire city lot which has been historically associated with the Pierce City Fire Station, Courthouse, and Jail.

PEIRCE CITY FIRESTATION/COURTHOUSE/AND JAIL  
LAWRENCE COUNTY, MISSOURI

15/410685 / 4089100



#1  
PEIRCE CITY FIRE STATION / COURTHOUSE / AND JAIL  
LAWRENCE COUNTY, MO

PHOTO BY JANE RHODES BEETEM, MARCH 1998

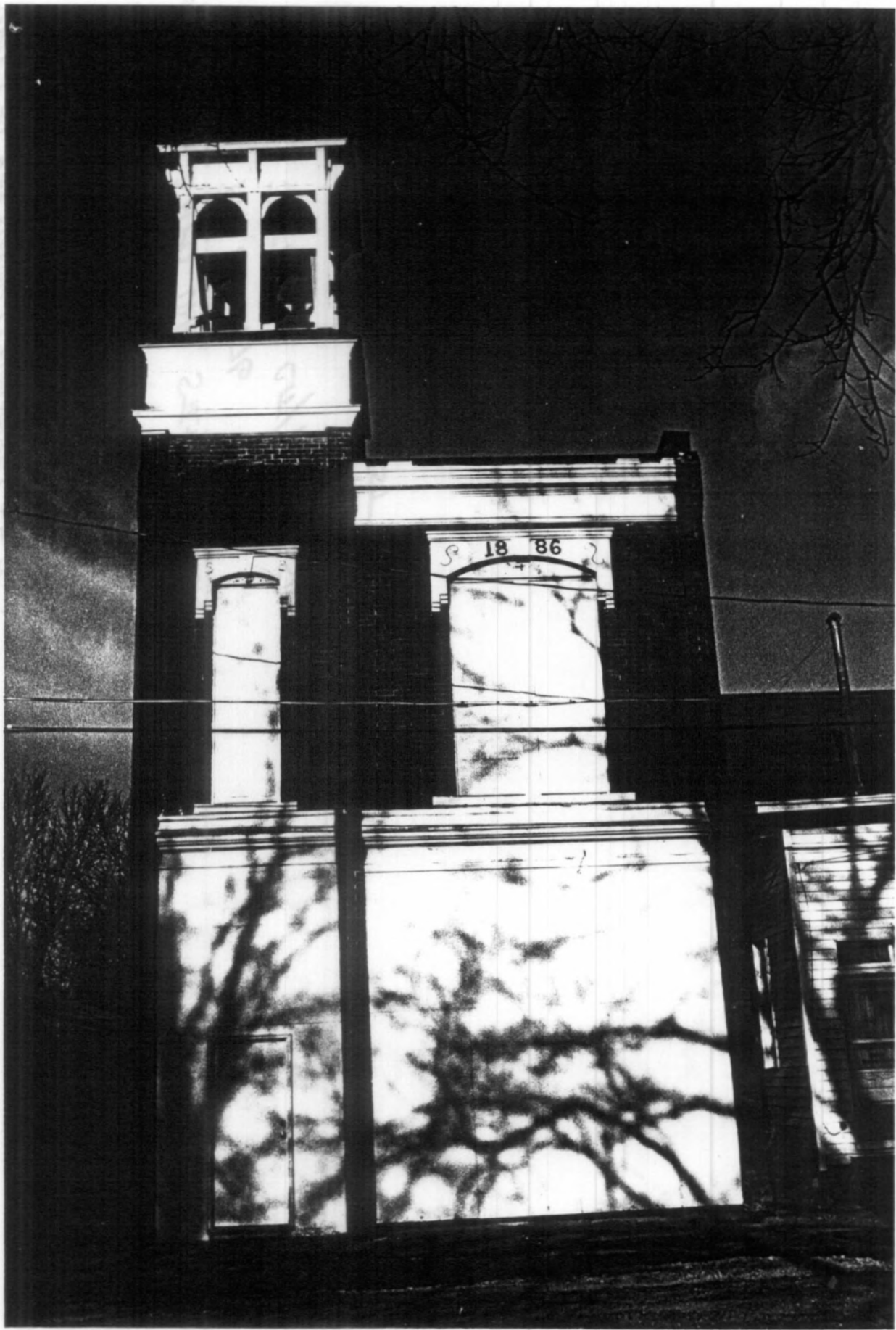
LOC. of Neg: SHPD, DNR, STATE of MISSOURI

P.O. BOX 176

JEFFERSON CITY, MO 65102

FRONT FACADE, LOOKING WEST

#1 of 6



PERCE CITY FIRESTATION/COURTHOUSE/ AND JAIL  
LAWRENCE COUNTY, MO

Photo by JANE RHODES BEETEM, MARCH 1995

LOC. OF Neg: SHPO, DNR, STATE OF MISSOURI

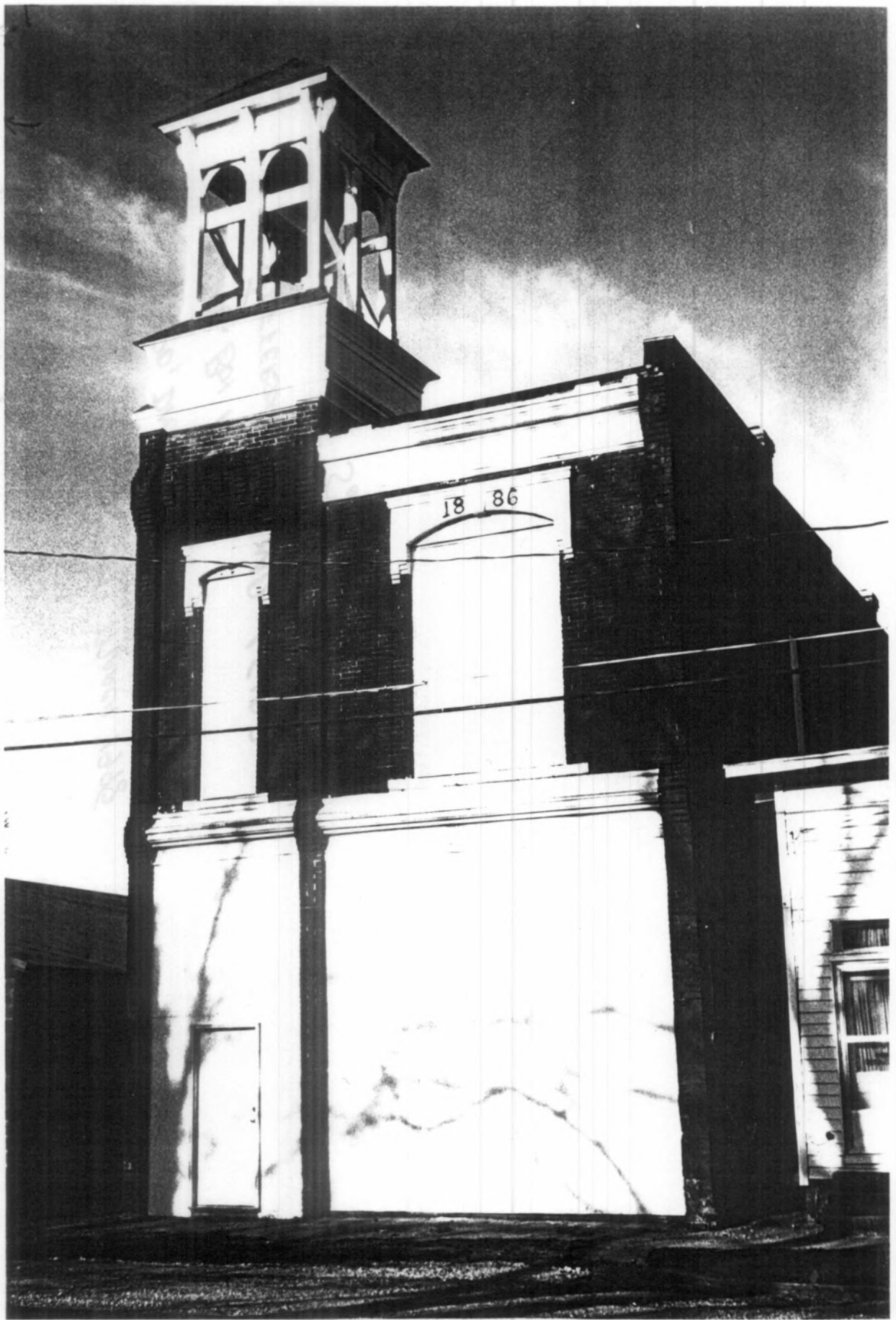
P.O. Box 176

JEFFERSON CITY, MO 65102

FRONT FACADE, Looking Southwest

#2 of 6

#2



PEIRCE CITY FIRE STATION/COURTHOUSE/AND JAIL  
LAWRENCE COUNTY, MO

Photo by: JANE RHODES BEETEM, MARCH 1998

Loc. of Neg: SHPO, DNR, STATE OF MISSOURI

P.O. Box 176

JEFFERSON CITY, MO 65102

Back of Building, looking EAST  
# 3 of 6

#3





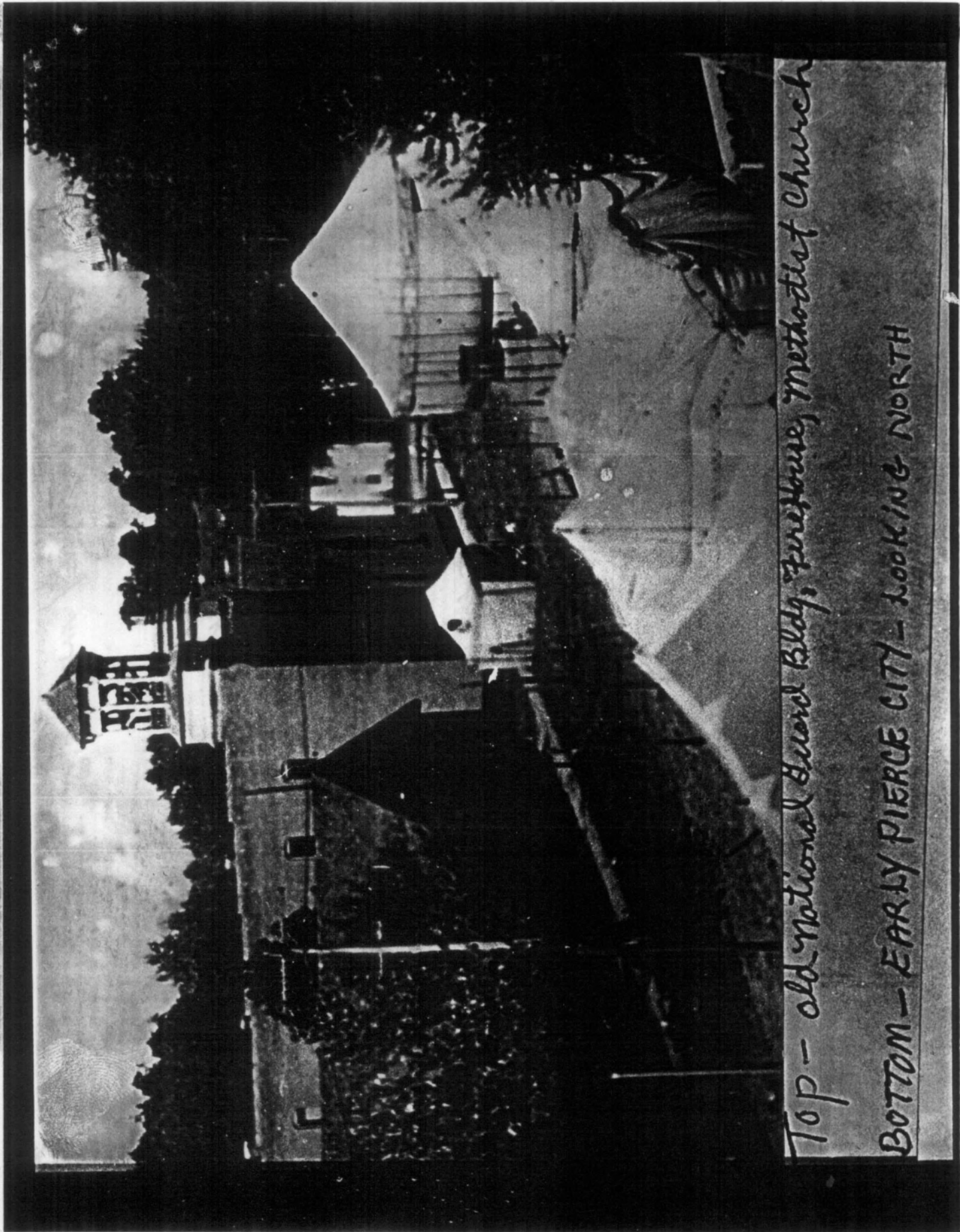
#4  
PEIRCE CITY FIRE STATION / COURTHOUSE / AND JAIL  
LAWRENCE COUNTY, MO

PHOTOGRAPHER - UNKNOWN, DATE UNKNOWN

LOC. of Neg. - SHPO, DNR, STATE OF MISSOURI  
P.O. Box 176

JEFFERSON CITY, MO 65102

HISTORIC VIEW OF WALNUT STREET, LOOKING NORTH  
#4 of 6



Top - old National Guard Bldg, Firehouse, Methodist Church

Bottom - EARLY PIERCE CITY - LOOKING NORTH

PEIRCE CITY FIRE STATION/COURTHOUSE/AND JAIL  
LAWRENCE COUNTY, MISSOURI

#5

PHOTOGRAPHER - JANE RHODES BEETEM 3/98

LOC. OF NEG - MD SHPD

P.O. BOX 176

Jefferson City, MO 65102

Detail of bell tower

#5 of 6

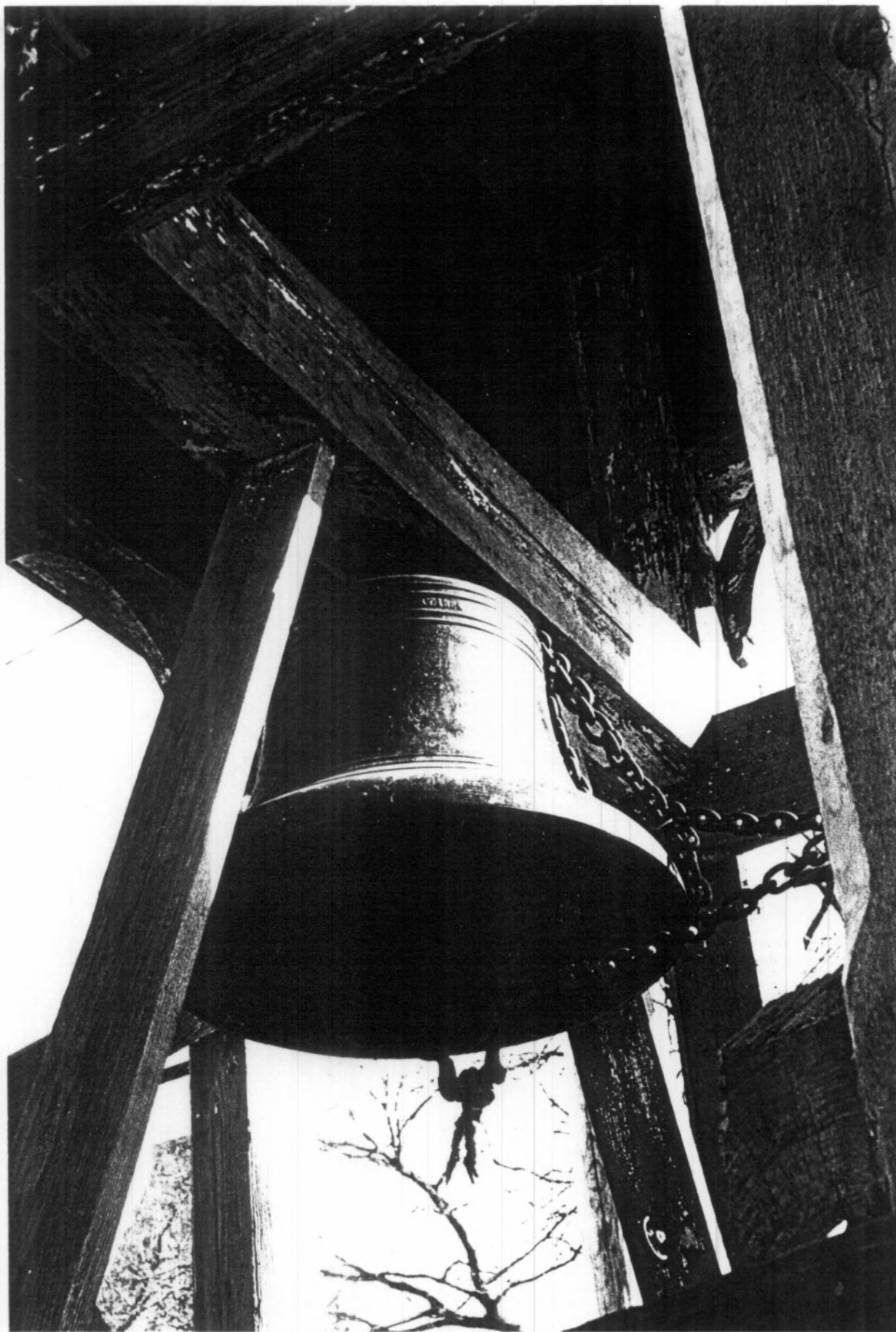


Photo of  
Detail  
of

PEIRCE CITY FIRE STATION/COURTHOUSE/AND JAIL  
LAWRENCE COUNTY, MISSOURI

#6

PHOTOGRAPHER: JANE RHODES BEETEM, 3/98

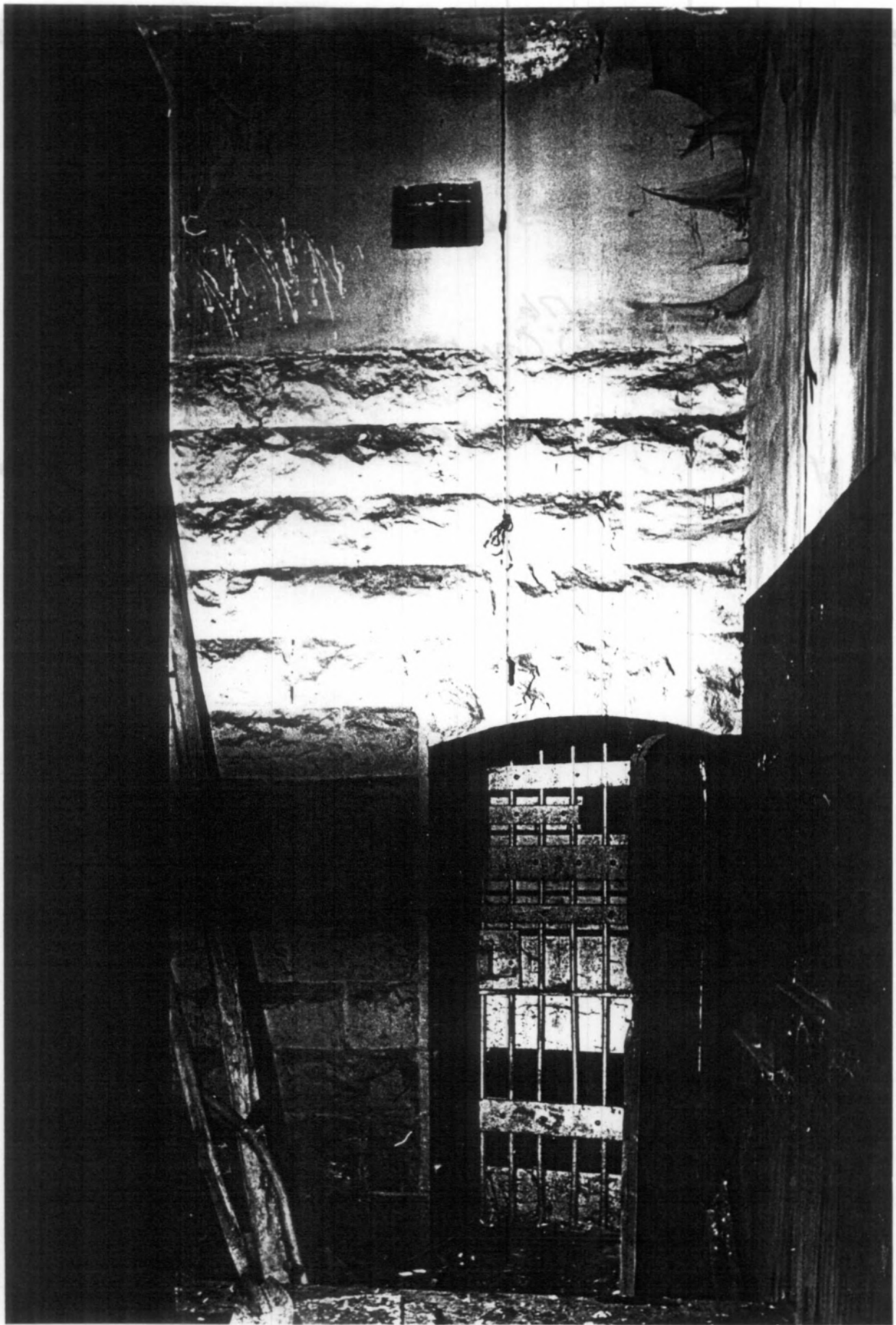
LOC. OF Neg: MO. SHPO

P.O. Box 176

JEFFERSON CITY, MO 65102

INTERIOR VIEW OF JAIL CELL ENTRANCE

#6 of 6



EXTRA  
PHOTOS



















