

Records of the Commissioners of the House of Corrections, 1868–1885

The Charleston Archive, Charleston County Public Library

Compiled by Nicholas Butler, PhD, Manager, 2008

Collation: 0.5 linear feet

Description: The collection consists of a one-volume register covering the years 1868–85 (with gaps). The register contains information on each inmate who occupied the institution: their date of admission, name, age, birthplace, last residence, how long in Charleston, occupation, discharge date, and remarks. Although arranged chronologically, the volume lacks entries for the years 1876–80. Of particular interest is the number of women admitted to the institution, as well as the significant number of children, some as young as 9 years old, with an occupation frequently listed as “vagrant.” The early years of the register, 1868–69, reflect a predominantly African-American population. Here can be found a number of former slaves, many listed as “field hands,” recently arrived from the plantations in the countryside surrounding urban Charleston. After April 1870, however, the records rarely denote race, but careful examination indicates this pattern continued.

Historical Note: On 20 December 1855, newly-elected Mayor William Porcher Miles suggested to Charleston’s City Council “the early establishment of a Bridewell or House of Correction for persons taken in custody by the police, for drunkenness and rioting, as well as for vagrants and juvenile offenders. In particular, Miles complained that the city lacked a proper facility to house juvenile offenders, “a rapidly increasing class, stating “neither the Jail nor Poor House is a fit place for them. The associations there are very often such as are likely to do them harm, rather than good.”¹ On 4 March 1856 Mayor Miles repeated his suggestion to council and offered a few more specific ideas:

I would suggest to Council the importance of establishing at once, by ordinance, a Bettering House or House of Correction, at the old Poor House, in Mazyck-street, which has been vacated by the Commissioners of the Poor ever since they have taken possession of the new Alms House in Hampstead. We must have some such place for the reception of drunken and disorderly persons arrested by the police. It would be necessary that the Mayor should have the same powers to commit to the Bettering House that he has to commit to the Poor House, and that the keeper of the former should be required, under the same penalties as the keeper of the latter, to receive all persons so committed. It might also be desirable to embody in the ordinance establishing such Bettering House some general regulations for its government, and to draw a line distinctly between it and the Poor House, so as to have no conflict of jurisdiction, and to avoid the difficulty which might gradually arise of having two Poor Houses instead of one.²

¹ Charleston Courier, 22 December 1855. Bridewell Prison in London operated between 1556 and 1855 as a detention facility for homeless children, vagrants, and “disorderly women.”

² Charleston Courier, 6 March 1856.

City Council concurred with the suggestions put forward by Mayor Miles, and on 9 May 1856 they ratified “An Ordinance relating to the Alms House and Bettering House.”³ This ordinance established the “Bettering House” in the old Poor House facility on the west side of Mazyck (now Logan) Street and defined the titles and duties of its staff. The name of the new institution must have caused some confusion in the community, however, for one month later, the commissioners of the “Bettering House” petitioned City Council to change the name of the establishment to the “House of Correction.”⁴ The commissioners then submitted to Council a bill to revise the name of the institution, as well as to reorganize the structure of its staff, which Council ratified as “An Ordinance in amendment of an Ordinance relating to the Alms House and Bettering House” on 8 July 1856.⁵

At the Conclusion of the Civil War in 1865, the activities of the House of Correction were apparently suspended. Around the year 1868 the House of Correction opened again for the reception of “vagrants and offenders of City Ordinances.” The prisoners served brief sentences (5–30 days) of manual labor, such as cultivating the City Farm or caretaking of the Public Cemetery (Potter’s Field).⁶

By an act of the South Carolina General Assembly ratified on 25 November 1873, the City of Charleston opened a “House of Refuge and Industrial School” to house and train juvenile offenders.⁷ In the wake of this action, therefore, the number of children detained at the House of Correction diminished.

By an ordinance of 12 December 1870, the governance of the House of Correction was transferred to the Commissioners of Public Lands, who were also charged with overseeing the city’s Public Cemetery (Potter’s Field) and the Ashley River Asylum.⁸

Located “within the enclosure” of the Ashley River Asylum, an institution for “old and infirm colored people, and children, of both sexes,” the House of Correction stood on the west end of Mount Street (now Sumter Street), “on a most eligible point on Ashley River.”⁹ A board of twelve Commissioners of Public Lands managed the operations of the Ashley River Asylum, the House of Correction and their neighboring institutions, the City Farm and the Public Cemetery.

By 1885 only five offenders were admitted, and by 1886 the House of Correction ceased operation. Today, Johnson-Hagood Stadium and the old National Guard Armory stand at the old location of the House of Correction.

³ John R. Horsey, comp., Ordinances of the City of Charleston from the 14th September 1854, to the 1st December 1859 (Charleston, S.C.: Walker, Evans & Co., 1859), 28–29.

⁴ Charleston Courier, 12 June 1856.

⁵ Horsey, Ordinances of the City of Charleston from the 14th September 1854, to the 1st December 1859, 33–34.

⁶ Ordinances of the City of Charleston, 1870, 110.

⁷ E. W. Mackey, comp., The Ordinances of the City of Charleston, Revised and Codified, and the Acts of the General Assembly Relating Thereto (Charleston, S.C.: News and Courier Job Presses, 1875), 188–90.

⁸ Mackey, The Ordinances of the City of Charleston, 1875, 110.

⁹ City of Charleston Year Book, 1880

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Collection Outline

Box 1 Register of the House of Corrections, 1868–1885