

DEMOLITION BEGUN

Removal of Old Buildings From Arsenal Grounds.

HISTORIC STRUCTURES

THE OLD PENITENTIARY CON- SIGNED TO OBLIVION.

Prison to Which Mrs. Surratt and Others Were Committed After Lincoln's Assassination.

The progress of the improvements at Washington barracks to fit it for its future use as the finest equipped training school for army engineers in the world has made it necessary to tear down many of the old buildings that have adorned the park for years and which are familiar to the people of Washington, particularly the older residents, who in years gone by would seek the cool shades of the arsenal, as the park was then known, in hot summer afternoons, and, under the boughs of the trees, enjoy the cool winds from the Potomac.

Several of the buildings at the southern end of the park were demolished last summer, and a day or two ago the workmen began the razing of the large building on the west side of the circle midway of the park. This building was a handsome structure of brick and looked massive and able to withstand the wear of centuries. For many years it was used as the quarters for the officer commanding the station when it was used by the artillery corps. Now, however, it must give place to other more modern buildings in accordance with the general scheme of improvement. In a few days nothing will remain of it except piles of bricks and timbers.

This building has a history, perhaps unknown to many now residing in Washington, although the record is familiar to all the older residents of the city. Prior to the civil war the District of Columbia had its own penitentiary. Its criminals were not sent to Albany, Moundville or elsewhere, as now the custom. The building being removed and the one standing opposite on the east side of the circle, formerly used as quarters for the staff officers, formed the west and east extremes of the penitentiary building. They were connected by a three-story brick structure, which was the prison proper, and a high brick wall, on which an armed sentry walked, surrounded them. The warden's house and office were located on the west end, and the building standing on the east side was a portion of the workshop of the prison.

When Building Was Erected.

The penitentiary was commenced in 1827 and in 1831 it was in use. From that time until the second year of the civil war it was used as a prison. Then the military authorities required more room for the operations of the government arsenal and it was determined to use the building for that purpose.

The transfer to the military authorities was made with the greatest secrecy. Some of the prisoners were released to go to the front, and a few who had but little time to serve were pardoned. A number, however, were retained as prisoners, and late one night were marched to a steamer nearby and taken to Albany to complete their sentences. With this transfer the history of the building as a civil prison ended.

During the war many military prisoners were confined there, and within its walls Mrs. Surratt and her male companions were incarcerated, tried and sentenced, and Mrs. Surratt, Payne, Atzerott and Herold were executed.

Here, too, the body of Wilkes Booth was buried, where it remained for two years. An old soldier a year or two ago pointed out to a Star reporter the spot where the grave had been. He said it was under the middle window on the first floor of the building now being torn down. He knew the location, he said, because he had assisted in removing the coffin from the grave.

The First Warden.

Colonel Williams of Virginia was the first warden of the old penitentiary. He was appointed by General Jackson in 1831 and was succeeded by Colonel John B. Dade, Major Robert Coltman, James B. Ellis, Thomas Thornley, Chas. P. Sidwick and Hiram I. King in turn. The latter was in office when the civil prison was turned over to the military authorities. The old penitentiary, as may be supposed, had many inhabitants. Some of them were deep dyed in crime and convicts of national reputation were there. The larger portion of the inmates, however, were serving terms for grand larceny, and as the value of the property stolen was required to be but \$5 to sustain this charge, the large proportion of this class is easily explained.

When the civil war ended the need of the military authorities for the building ended also, but it was not surrendered to the District. Peace demanded a station for the military forces in the neighborhood of Washington, as did war, and it was determined to transform the old arsenal grounds.

In 1867 the center, the prison portion of the old building, was torn out and its wings transferred into handsome residences. The site of the prison became a beautiful flower-grown circle and in its center a fountain was located that for many years spouted jets of sparkling water.

When the sparkings were completed the arsenal was the place of beauty so well known to many in Washington. Its grounds were strewn with old cannons and piles of cannon balls, relics of war times. About three years ago it was turned over to the engineer branch of the army, and, as stated, it is now being converted into the finest engineer school in the world.

When the work is completed the park will again be a beautiful place, but there are many in the city who regret the disappearance of the old buildings and the shady walks with which they were familiar in their younger days.