

Burgwin-Wright excavation reveals arches of old jail

Written by Allen, Joy

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By *Sarah Ann Craven, StarNews*

The house was built by John Burgwin in 1770, but earlier it had been used as the main jail in Wilmington.

WILMINGTON -- One of Wilmington's colonial treasures, the Burgwin-Wright House & Gardens, has recently been undergoing an excavation that includes installing a new drainage system to protect the historic structure. During this process, the arches of two jail cells beneath the property were uncovered, a site not likely to be seen again for many years.

"The excavation confirmed to us the size of the jail and the fact that the outdoor jail cells were, in fact, present," said Christine Lamberton, the museum's director. "Essentially, you can see the outline of the jail walls in ballast and the divider between the two cells"

The Burgwin-Wright House is one of the only houses that has survived from the colonial period in the area. The house is one of the finest examples of Georgian architecture in the state.

"The Burgwin-Wright House property is the oldest and largest open to the public," Lamberton said. "There are only five colonial sites left in Wilmington, with eight structures total. Our site is a dual site, with four of those eight structures."

It's a dual site because it's home to both the jail and the house.

The house was built by John Burgwin in 1770, but before the land belonged to Burgwin it had been used as the main jail in Wilmington. The jail moved to a different location after a fire in the late 1760s.

Left behind were the three original jail structures, without the wooden roof that burned in the fire.

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In 1770, John Burgwin built arches over the two jail cells.

Those arches emerged as the excavation progressed. “The town minutes and maps clearly indicate that this property was the first city ‘gaol’ jail of Wilmington from 1744-1768,” continued Lamberton. “We have record indicating that there were stocks, pillory, a cage, and gallows here along with the two jail buildings and the jailer’s quarters.”

The museum has always known about the history of the land, but the uncovering of such an old structure is nevertheless exciting and shows how far back the history of Wilmington goes.

The arches have since been recovered, and there’s no telling when they might be visible again.

Visitors can tour the house during the week from Tuesday through Saturday. Tours start at 10 a.m. and go until 4 p.m., with the last tour starting at 3 p.m.. After a tour, the gift shop is available with a variety of different gifts and trinkets. In addition to the house, the lush gardens are open to the public and free of charge.

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