

# Dungeon mystery dug out

By FRANCA LEWIS

Demolition contractor John Merrbaugh is satisfied his efforts have unraveled the mystery of the dungeon at the site of the former county jail on the corner of Jonathan and Church streets.

Merrbaugh, who was hired by the county to demolish the jail, said yesterday his findings should end years of speculation and confirm the legend that a dungeon has been hidden under the jail since the early 1800s.

The historical breakthrough will be lost forever on Monday, though, when the site will be leveled under the terms of the demolition contract.

Merrbaugh said he had hoped the discovery would convince local officials to find the money to preserve the site.

But while representatives of county and city governments and the local historical society commended his efforts, they said there was no money to undertake a preservation endeavor.

"It looks like the only thing that can be done is to photograph it and record as much as we can for the history books," said Ralph Donnelly, president of the Washington County Historical Society.

The dungeon will be open over the weekend for the public "to enter at their own risk," Merrbaugh said.

Merrbaugh's curiosity was peaked last summer when workers demolishing the former jail unearthed an iron-barred door. Further excavation revealed an arched tunnel lined with small, symmetrical bricks.

The discovery did not convince local officials, though, who were skeptical about the significance of the find. They said then it was probably nothing more than a cistern used to hold water in the early days.

But Merrbaugh was determined to prove that there was more to the find



Photo by Bill Green

**DUNGEON DIG — Members of the Merrbaugh family stand at the entrance of the dungeon beneath the old jail and show off artifacts found**

**there. From left, John Merrbaugh, his wife, Vickie, their daughter Vickie, and son, Jack, who was a member of the excavation crew.**

than met the eye, and he began to work carefully around the tunnel in demolishing the 158-year-old jail building.

What he found was an underground room with six tiny cells on each side. Remnants of a heating system were also unearthed, including two air shafts with bars across them. The single entrance was proof that the room was used for prisoners. Merrbaugh said.

"It cost me all my profit," Merrbaugh said, in explaining the process of removing 200 tons of steel from atop the passage. Normally, the site would have been leveled and the rubble carted away.

The county paid \$16,000 for the job and granted an extension to Merrbaugh's contract needed to com-

plete the extra work in clearing the tunnel.

Without the funds to preserve the dungeon, Merrbaugh said he has no other choice but to crush over the site. "I've done all I can," he said.

Merrbaugh said the mystery of the dungeon became a family affair, with his wife Vickie digging carefully among the stones for artifacts, and his son Jack dusting off research books at the public library to find any information to support the claim.

"The history books prove that prisoners were kept in the dungeon as early as 1818," the younger Merrbaugh said. "It was also used to keep slaves there in 1825."

A jail was built at the Jonathan Street site in 1825 according to recorded history. It burned down in

1857 and was rebuilt the following year.

Merrbaugh said he found record evidence to prove that dungeon cells were being used to hold runaway slaves and criminals. The original county jail on Franklin Street was closed in 1818, he found. The record shows the site at Jonathan and Church streets was being used as temporary quarters for prisoners until the new jail was built.

An extra block of steel cells was erected over the dungeon in 1888. Damaging portions of the underground holding area, he said. Another floor was added to the jail structure in 1904.

"It gives me a good feeling to know that I was right all along," the contractor said. He said he'd share the artifacts with his work crew