

THE TREASURE OF THE ASHE STREET COURTHOUSE

A hidden treasure trove of county records was recently uncovered during renovation of the old Ashe Street Courthouse in Johnson City. In removing a wall partition, contractors uncovered a two-level vault hidden for decades. When they got it open, 113 bound volumes of Washington County court records were found inside.

These records include volumes as early as 1891 when Johnson City Law Court was created to allow civil cases to be heard there as well as in Circuit Court at the Jonesborough courthouse. The latest volume is from 1963, so it is surmised that the vault got covered sometime after that date. While 113 volumes may not seem that extensive, most of the heavy books weighed about 20 pounds apiece. So, over a ton of records were moved! They fill 84 linear feet of shelf space.

Like a mummy in its' tomb, the records lay undisturbed for a long time. The records are in remarkable condition considering being closed in the vault for so long, suspended in time like the tombs of the pharaohs without light or air. Many stories are now recovered that were lost in the various court cases heard in Johnson City. For instance, the very first case listed on the docket of the court when it opened in April 1891 was W. M. Simpson vs. Mayor and Aldermen of Johnson City. The plaintiff won a judgement against the city of \$96.30. Records document many types of civil cases, including divorces, damages, debt, disputes, and numerous other causes. The records include divorce dockets, execution dockets, rule dockets, trial dockets, witness dockets, bond books, cash books, minute books, magistrate dockets, and an index book.

The Ashe Street Courthouse was constructed in 1910 as a United States post office for Johnson City on land donated by industrialist George L. Carter. When a new post office opened on East Main Street in 1940, the Ashe Street building was purchased by the county and converted to house court offices. Both Johnson City Law Court and Chancery Court cases were heard here until 1986, when these offices moved to the newly-opened Downtown Center on Market Street. Thereafter, the building housed the offices of the county's 911 service until these offices vacated the building in November 2017. In 2022, the building was transferred by the county to the City of Johnson City and renovation work began on the former courthouse.

The archives thanks Jay McCusker of the architectural/design firm of Clarknexsen in Johnson City for assisting in the recovery of these records and thanks the employees of contractor BurWil Construction Company for uncovering this county treasure.



Partial view of the volumes and boxes once moved to our building



The vault after it was opened



Inside the vault