

THE WASHINGTON COUNTY COURT-HOUSE, A HISTORY *

By NED IRWIN

“We shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us.”¹

—Winston Churchill

This is a profound statement if you think about it. Once constructed, buildings take on a life of their own and influence the place and the people that surround and use them. In the case of Jonesborough, Tennessee, the community itself was formed round the Washington County Courthouse. This bears repeating. Without the need for a courthouse, a central seat of county government, Jonesborough would not exist. The connection between building and town is both old and symbiotic.

After years of struggling for some form of local government, the scattered frontier settlements of North Carolina west of the Appalachian Mountains finally were granted their wish in the creation of Washington County. This occurred in 1777,² in the second year of American independence. The county’s boundaries were about as broad as any county’s ever were. These stretched from the ridge tops of the Unaka and Smokey Mountains in the east to the Mississippi River flowing muddily 600 miles to the west.³ Initially, county court met in individual member’s homes. The first session was held at Charles Robertson’s home on Sinking Creek on Monday, February 23, 1778.⁴ Later, counties in Tennessee would be named after some of the men who made up the early Washington County Court or who then lived here.⁵

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¹ Winston Churchill, “Rebuilding the House of Commons,” speech to the British House of Commons, October 28, 1943, in *House of Commons Debates* (Hansard) volume 393, page 403.

² Walter Clark, ed., *The State Records of North Carolina, Laws: 1777-1788*, volume XXXIV (Goldsboro, NC.: Nash Brothers, 1905), page 141.

³ The actual distance is 544 miles from Mountain City to Memphis, but from the northeast tip of Johnson County to the mighty river could be construed as close to 600 miles.

⁴ Minutes, Washington County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, February 24, 1778, volume I, page 23.

⁵ This included Carter County, Cocke County, Crockett County, Hardin County, Robertson County, Sevier County, and Tipton County.

The earliest county court meetings were held in members' homes such as Charles Robertson, Matthew Talbot, Christopher Taylor, and others, since the county existed before either a county seat or a courthouse. Thus, the meetings were intimate settings, more personal than they would become. People got along because they knew they had to get along. It was the hard lesson of survival that living on the frontier had taught each justice of the peace.

Meeting in people's homes wasn't convenient. The county needed a county seat. Jesse Walton, the county's legislative representative in the North Carolina General Assembly, introduced a bill on Monday, February 8, 1779 to establish the town.⁶ A committee was formed to select a site, its' membership consisting of John Carter, William Cobb, Andrew Greer, George Russell, John Sevier, James Stuart, and Jacob Womack. By November, they had chosen a site, where Jonesborough sits today.⁷ One hundred acres of land near the head of Little Limestone Creek was purchased (probably from early grant holders James and Robert Allison) for the town site. The town was named for Willie Jones.⁸

Jonesborough's site was chosen because of a confluence of factors. It was a central distance from the then existing major areas of settlement on the frontier: the Watauga settlement along the Watauga River to the east (later Carter County), Jacob Brown's settlement along the Nolichucky River to the southwest (later southern Washington County and eastern Greene County), the North of the Holston settlement (later Sullivan County) to the northeast, and the Carter's Valley settlement (later Hawkins County) to the northwest. Thus, one could reach the county seat in one day's travel or less from every frontier settlement. The site also was serviced by a series of fresh-water springs. This was important since Jonesborough was not near any river.

⁶ William L. Saunders, compiler and editor, *State Records of North Carolina*, volume XIII (New York: AMS Press, 1968 reprint), page 709. The final reading and passage of the bill occurred on November 6, 1779 (SRNC, volume XIII, page 977.)

⁷ Minutes, Washington County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, November 23, 1778 session, volume I, page 48.

⁸ Jones (1740-1801), as a member of the North Carolina legislature, was a strong supporter of the western settlers. In an interesting side note, he also took in a young sailor who claimed to have no name and no home and became to him a second father. The youth took the Jones surname and during the American Revolution distinguished himself as John Paul Jones, founder of the American navy. (Mrs. Reginald de Koven, *The Life and Letters of John Paul Jones*, volume 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), pages 55-57.)

First Courthouse (1779-1785)

In the late autumn of 1778, the justices of the peace meeting at the county's court of pleas and quarter sessions authorized James Carter to build Washington County's first courthouse in Jonesborough.⁹ Sometime between November 1778 and May 1779, a small one-story log building was built. According to historian Miriam Fink, it stood in what is now Main Street in front of the present courthouse.¹⁰ The log structure was covered by a clapboard roof.¹¹ The first county court in the town of Jonesborough was held in this courthouse on May 24, 1779.¹² In 1781, repairs were made to the building and a table for the clerk, a bar for attorneys, and a bench for the jury added.

The establishment of a county courthouse meant that people had to travel to Jonesborough to attend court, pay taxes, register a deed, obtain a marriage license, and otherwise conduct public business. To reach the courthouse from the many scattered settlements, roads were developed leading to and from Jonesborough. "Bright's Trace" came out of North Carolina along Yellow Mountain and the mountains just east of Roan Mountain and down the Doe River to the Watauga settlement. It connected the western frontier to established government east of the mountains. From the Watauga settlement, this route ran along Buffalo Creek to the present-day Tipton-Haynes site, where it merged with a road that came out of North Carolina via Iron Mountain Gap and down through Limestone Cove. This merged road then continued along Little Limestone Creek until it arrived at Jonesborough. From the North of the Holston settlements in what became Sullivan County, a road developed following Beaver Creek through what became Bluff City and Watauga on into present-day Washington County where Boones Creek enters the Watauga River at Flourville and then on upstream to Jonesborough. This was often later referred to as the "Jonesborough Road." From the south, a road developed out of North Carolina following Cane River, crossing Spivey Mountain (into present-day Unicoi County) on to Greasy Cove and then on to Jonesborough. From Jonesborough, settlement roads soon developed westward to reach inhabitants putting down homesteads in southwestern Washington County and later into Greene County and points further west. The modern highways of U. S. 11-E, U.S. 19-W/23, and I-26

⁹ Minutes, Washington County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, volume I, page 43.

¹⁰ The foundation of this first courthouse was unearthed in 1930 when excavation work was being done for water mains on Main Street. See Miriam Fink, "Some Phases of the Social and Economic History of Jonesboro, Tennessee, prior to the Civil War," Unpublished thesis, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 1934, page 13.

¹¹ J. G. M. Ramsey, *Annals of Tennessee* (Charleston, 1853), page 281.

¹² Minutes, Washington County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, May 24, 1779, volume I, page 71.

follow in places many of these early routes.¹³ As roads improved, regular stage lines began to pass regularly through Jonesborough beginning about 1825.¹⁴ This remained the dominant means of transportation until the arrival of the railroad in the late 1850s.

To house, feed, and entertain people once they arrived, inns and taverns opened. Robert Sevier was granted a license to open an inn and tavern in town the same year Jonesborough was established.¹⁵ The following year, Sevier would die in the fighting at King's Mountain. In 1781, James Allison and Richard Minton were also granted similar licenses by the county court.¹⁶ James Stuart built just east of town what was probably the first inn west of the Appalachians. It was known as "Buckhorn" for the deer antlers he hung above the front door. This inn was rebuilt in 1800 by John Irwin.¹⁷ At one time, it was the residence of famed attorney T. A. R. Nelson and still stands on East Main Street. In 1797, Dr. William P. Chester built the Chester Inn on Main Street in the heart of town. Other early inns were established in the following years, usually along the main roadways such as the Great Stage Road. These include Daniel Barkley's "Green Tree" inn on the northwest edge of town (1825), the Devault Tavern in Leesburg (1821), and the Rocky Hill Inn in the Oakland community operated from the mid-1780s by the Carson family.

Within a year of its' creation by act of the North Carolina General Assembly, Jonesborough had a store, blacksmith shop, grist mill, and tavern.¹⁸ With the development of these businesses and the need to provide services to the visitors, residents began to build homes, and a town developed. In 1780, the town was laid out in lots, and Jonesborough grew out of the wilderness.¹⁹ Thus, around the Washington County Courthouse a community grew.

¹³ The early road descriptions are based on Malone Young's research found in his "Pioneer Routeways of Northeast Tennessee," *Washington County Historical Association Speeches, 1987-1988*, edited by Mildred S. Kozsuch (Johnson City, Tenn.: Washington County Historical Association, 1993), pages 103-105.

¹⁴ Miriam Fink, "Some Phases of the Social and Economic History of Jonesboro, Tennessee," *op. cit.*, page 78, quoting *Knoxville Enquirer*, November 17, 1825.

¹⁵ Minutes, Washington County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, volume I, page 87. Robert Sevier (1749-1780) was a younger brother of John Sevier and a son-in-law of Charles Robertson.

¹⁶ Minutes, Washington County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, volume I, page 139.

¹⁷ *History of Washington County, Tennessee, 1988*, compiled by the Watauga Association of Genealogists-Upper East Tennessee (Johnson City, Tenn.: The Association, 1988), page 144, 156.

¹⁸ Malone Young, "Pioneer Routeways of Northeast Tennessee," *op. cit.*, page 105.

¹⁹ The plat of the original town allotments is found in Washington County Deed Book 32, page 323. For his work at laying it out, surveyor John Gilliland was paid \$1,115 in February 1781 (page 8 of Miriam Fink thesis, *op. cit.*)

One sees the beneficial if unforeseen outcome that the establishment of the Washington County Courthouse had upon the economic, social, and transportation development of the region.

Second Courthouse (1785-1794)

The first courthouse was soon outgrown, and a new two-story log structure was built in 1785.²⁰ It will be in the county's second courthouse that the first meetings to establish the government of the State of Franklin are held.²¹ Here at the end of the statehood effort, on February 12, 1789, James Sevier filed suit against Colonel John Tipton for the return of a gun and shot pouch taken from him a year earlier at the Battle of the State of Franklin. Sevier had been taken prisoner and Tipton had threatened him with hanging until cooler heads prevailed.²² Tipton, the arch opponent of the Franklin movement, even attempted to have North Carolina legislation passed to move the county seat from Jonesborough. In this, he was foiled when the commissioners appointed to select the new site instead chose to keep the location at the old one.²³ It was also in this second courthouse on May 12, 1788 that a young Andrew Jackson came into court and was admitted to the practice of law.²⁴

These early courthouses were by shape and necessity small. If the buildings were small in the early decades, much like larger versions of the homes in which the justices had been meeting, they were small because the needs of government on a frontier were small. Gathering, of necessity, was infrequent. Later, as the county's population grew, as the world became more complicated, political, and litigious, so grew the need for more written and published records, the need for more space, the need for larger buildings to house a growing government. A clear example of this record proliferation is found in an examination of the county court minutes. For the year 1778, the minutes run to 34 pages. By 1820, the count is 123 pages. It has only gotten worse. Volume 71 (the latest bound volume of county court minutes), which covers only the three months

²⁰ Minutes, Washington County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, November 3, 1784, volume I, page 261 and November 8, 1785, volume I, page 268.

²¹ Minutes, Washington County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, May Term, 1788, volume I, page 323.

²² James Sevier vs. Colonel John Tipton, February 12, 1789, Washington County Court Records, Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City.

²³ William L. Saunders, comp. and ed., *State Records of North Carolina*, volume XXIV (New York: AMS Press, 1968 reprint), page 850.

²⁴ Minutes, Washington County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, volume I, page 323. Jackson was then 21 years old. John McNairy (1762-1837), for whom McNairy County, Tennessee would later be named, was also admitted to the bar at the same time. President Washington would appoint him the first federal judge in the state of Tennessee in 1797.

of March, April, and May of 2011, runs to 375 pages. If studied, a similar proliferation would likely be found for all other types of county records. Jobs that were often brief and temporary, such as a clerk's duties, gradually became demanding full-time jobs. Give any form of government time, and it will grow itself a bureaucracy.

The two-story second courthouse was 24 feet square with diamond corners and a nine foot ceiling between the first and second floors. Each floor was laid with plank boards and the roof made of joint shingles hung on with pegs. A justice bench, lawyers and clerk's bar, and a box for the sheriff to sit in were included.²⁵ John Chisolm was hired to build it, but apparently he must have had difficulties because Charles Robertson eventually did the work and was allowed 50 pounds for doing so.²⁶

As we shall see, each courthouse building was representative of the style, technique, and needs of the era in which it was built. In the 1770s, lacking any local sawmills, a log structure was built using the basic construction techniques and materials of the log cabin, which would have been the home-type all would have been using and with which they were most familiar.

Third Courthouse (1794-1820)

In 1794, a new courthouse was built.²⁷ It was located on the site of the second courthouse. Like the earlier ones, it was of log construction. It had two-stories, with outside steps used to reach the second floor. The first floor served as the county jail. County court meetings and court cases were held on the second floor. To pay for its construction, the county court levied a tax of 25 cents per each 100 acres of land as well as 25 cents for each white male aged 21-50 and 25 cents for each slave aged 10-50.²⁸ This building was outgrown within less than 15 years as the county population grew and legal proceedings vastly increased the number of records being created and needing to be stored.

²⁵ Minutes, Washington County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, November 3, 1784, volume I, page 261.

²⁶ Minutes, Washington County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, November 8, 1785, volume I, page 268.

²⁷ Minutes, Washington County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, May 28, 1794, volume I, page 490. The county court authorized paying Charles Robertson \$100 to continue his work. Thus, Robertson apparently was the builder of both the second and third county courthouses.

²⁸ Chapter 15, Acts of Tennessee, Sept. 27, 1794, in Edward Scott, *Laws of the State of Tennessee* (Knoxville: Heiskell & Brown, 1821), volume 2, pages 502-504.

During its' existence, the courtroom in this building witnessed many interesting cases. It was here that Judge Andrew Jackson, holding the Superior Court of Law and Equity, ordered the arrest of Russell Bean, when the latter, having cut the ears of his infant son he believed his wife had conceived with another man, refused to face charges in court. Jackson ordered the sheriff to summon everyone in the courthouse to assist in making an arrest. The wily sheriff then proceeded to summon "your honour first." Jackson left, pistol in hand, followed by a crowd. Bean seeing the approaching Jackson in his wrath, peacefully surrendered himself up saying he would have done so for no other man.²⁹

Another interesting case during this period relates to a country girl named Mary Doherty. She was charged with murdering her father. When asked by the judge to plead guilty or not guilty, Mary went dumb and spoke no word during the course of the trial. The jury examined her closely trying to determine if she was faking her ability to speak or whether she had been struck dumb by a visitation of the Holy Spirit. Jurors concluded that her dumbness was due to divine intervention. By request of the judge, a plea of not guilty was entered, and the jury found Mary Doherty innocent of patricide. She was freed. It was said she left the courtroom with a smile, and once outside the courthouse proceeded to talk freely with her friends.³⁰

It was also in this courtroom that the great case of Ingram's Heirs vs. Cocke was first heard before Judge John Overton. This was the case that changed Tennessee law and established the validity of court actions taken by the courts of the state of Franklin. It provided that peaceful settlement of much confusion caused by Franklin, which still lingered after the lost state's demise.

Fourth Courthouse (1820-1839)

In 1819, the Tennessee General Assembly passed an act allowing the county court to levy a tax to build a new courthouse. The chairman was authorized to sell the old building and use any monies to help in the construction costs.³¹ This building was

²⁹ This episode is best described in John Allison's *Dropped Stitches in Tennessee History* (Nashville: Charles Elder, Bookseller, 1971, reprint of 1897 edition), pages 119-120. The actual court documents related to this case have not been found.

³⁰ *Goodspeed's History of Tennessee, containing historical and biographical sketches of thirty East Tennessee counties* (Nashville: Charles and Randy Elder, Booksellers, 1972, reprint of 1887 edition), page 896. The actual court documents related to this case have not been found.

³¹ Scott, op. cit., page 559.

finally dismantled in 1821.³² By January of 1823, the new courthouse was in use. By this time period, brick was commonly replacing wood as the building material of choice, and this is reflected in the new courthouse. It was the first brick courthouse, a two-story structure. There was apparently enough additional space beyond the needs of the court clerks that attorney John Kennedy rented one room for \$50 a year.³³

This fourth courthouse would be used until 1839. In 1826, the sheriff was ordered by the county court to lock the courthouse door between times it was used for court or court meetings. If clerks wanted to get into their offices during this period they were obliged to cut an outside door directly into their offices at their own expense.³⁴ In 1831, a cupola and bell were erected atop the courthouse.³⁵

Beginning in 1830, Jonesborough's courtroom began to receive a greater influx of cases of interest as the state supreme court met annually here. Cases being appealed to the state's highest court from not only Washington County but Carter, Greene, Hawkins, and Sullivan counties were heard in Jonesborough.³⁶ Some of the more interesting cases involved slaves and the efforts of slaves to receive their freedom, often as part of an estate settlement following the death of their master. In the strange case of Adam Waterford vs. Isaac Baker, Waterford, an ex-slave and freeman, was found to have slaves of his own, which he attempted to prevent Baker securing as payment for a debt.³⁷

Within less than a decade of its completion, room in the structure was apparently becoming tight again as the county's population and litigation grew. Thomas Patton was paid \$85 to put in a floor over the courtroom, which could have its' rooms rented out. So there must have been considerable height to the building's original ceiling. At the same time, Seth J. W. Lucky was permitted as clerk of the Supreme Court, to occupy a new room as his office.³⁸ Around this time, the county court briefly attempted to

³² Minutes, Washington County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, October 15, 1821, volume VII, page 330.

³³ Minutes, Washington County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, January 21, 1823, volume VIII, page 105.

³⁴ Minutes, Washington County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, April 10, 1826, volume XI, page 5.

³⁵ Minutes, Washington County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, January 10, 1831, volume XII, page 193.

³⁶ *Acts Passed at the Stated Session of the Eighteenth General Assembly of the State of Tennessee, 1829* (Nashville: Allen A. Hall and Frederick S. Heiskell, 1829), pages 10-11 and 79.

³⁷ Adam Waterford vs. Isaac Baker case transcript, Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City.

³⁸ Minutes, Washington County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, October 12, 1829, volume XII, page 220.

charge the county court clerk (James Sevier) and the circuit court clerk (James Anderson) for use of their rooms. Sevier appealed, and this effort was eventually rescinded.

Sometime in the early months of 1839, the county's fourth courthouse was "consumed by fire." At its April 1, 1839 meeting, the county court voted to rent a house owned by Samuel Chester as a place to hold its meeting and for temporary use as a courthouse. Apparently, it was already by this date being used by the clerk for office space after his displacement from the courthouse. The lease was to be for two years as a cost of \$75 per year. Chester was to furnish three upstairs rooms and a stove, with county court offices using the downstairs.³⁹

Fortunately, it appears there had been time to remove existing records housed in the courthouse before the fire could reach them. There were probably some records lost, but the bulk of the county's public records seem to have survived.⁴⁰

Fifth Courthouse (1847-1912)

It would be 1847 before another permanent home was completed for the courthouse. This fifth courthouse was in operation before April 1847 because the county court that month authorized reimbursing Robert L. Blair and his brothers \$225 for money they had advanced to purchase the courthouse bell.⁴¹ When completed, the 1847 brick courthouse had a basement and two stories. It was 42 feet wide and 78 feet deep, with a wing on either side of the front 22 feet wide and 42 feet deep. The building had a dome containing a clock that faced in four directions. This courthouse was used until 1910.

Many interesting antebellum court cases occurred in this building. These often involved land disputes, family arguments over estates, etc. One complex and lengthy

³⁹ Minutes, Washington County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, April 1, 1839, volume XIII, pages 137-138.

⁴⁰ In an 1870 Chancery Court case there is noted in a bill of complaint filed by trustees of the Methodist church at Johnson City information that an attempt to find a deed from 1811 made by David Nelson that would have helped prove their case was not successful in the Register of Deeds office. "As the Registers books and all papers in his office together with said deed was destroyed by fire in the conflagration at Jonesboro which resulted in the burning of the Court house and all books and papers therein contained." The last part of this statement cannot be true because there are few gaps in the records. But, it must have been true regarding David Nelson's deed, as this deed still cannot be found today. Source: William P. Reeves, et. al., trustees of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (Johnson City) vs. Thomas Walker, P. M. Reeves, et. al. in Record Group 4.2.A: Chancery Court Case Files, Box 81, folders 2-3.

⁴¹ Minutes, Washington County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, April 5, 1847, volume XV, page 2.

case involving several such issues was Ford vs. Ford. The case, which began in 1840, was a dispute between Loyd Ford, Sr.'s white children and his "black children" over the settlement of his estate. In his will, Ford had left his farm to the latter, as they had treated him more kindly than the former over the years. The case, which finally went before the Tennessee State Supreme Court, stretched on for twenty years. In the end, the court found in favor of Ford's "black children."⁴²

The Civil War had its impact on the courthouse as well as everywhere else in America. Speaking in favor of the Union on the courthouse square in May 1861, Andrew Johnson, who would lead the country at the end of the war, was threatened with shouts of "Kill him" from secessionists in the audience and nearly attacked.⁴³ During the skirmishes around Jonesborough in the fall of 1863, county court was not held in September or November and only very briefly on October 5th. Damage was apparently done to the courthouse during this period. The building was used at one point as a military hospital.⁴⁴ At its' January 1864 meeting, county court authorized new doors and window shutters at the basement level and plaster repair in the Circuit Court space. A repair committee was appointed to oversee this work.⁴⁵

Throughout the 19th century, the courthouse and square was often the location for important political and social events in the area. Political rallies and speeches were a common part of every election year. During the last third of the century, temperance rallies were held to promote the passage of liquor prohibition in Jonesborough and Washington County. In addition to these activities, festivals and special events were often held for the celebration of historic anniversaries. And finally, public hangings held at the rear of the courthouse became major public spectacles. In all this, the courthouse space served an important function as the central meeting place for social and civic events during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

By the late 1800s, the courthouse was becoming overcrowded with the increasing workload and paperwork of its courts and county offices. Vault room extensions were eventually added to both the east and west ends of the courthouse. In the sometimes tragic interconnection between building and man, disaster struck this courthouse on April 22, 1892. About midday, workers building the vault room extension on the east end of the structure suddenly felt the violent vibrations of the wall giving way. The

⁴² Ford vs. Ford case file, Washington County Court Records, Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City.

⁴³ N. W. Harris, *Autobiography* (Macon, Ga.: J. W. Burke Company, 1926), page 40.

⁴⁴ Jim Maddox, "The Civil War and Reconstruction," in *History of Washington County, Tennessee*, compiled and edited by Joyce and W. Eugene Cox (Johnson City, Tenn.: Overmountain Press, 2001), page 201.

⁴⁵ Minutes, Washington County Court, January 4, 1864, volume A, page 91.

extension under construction collapsed. Three workmen were killed and several others were injured.⁴⁶ While it wasn't applied at the time, in hindsight, one wonders if the brick work and instability of the foundation that would lead to this courthouse being replaced 20 years later wasn't already a problem and a factor in the construction accident.

Sixth Courthouse (1913-present)

Much of the soft burned brick used in the foundation of the 1847 courthouse had deteriorated to such an extent by the early 1900s that its demolition was advised. At its' October 1911 meeting, county court authorized erection of a new courthouse on the site of the existing one at a cost not to exceed \$50,000 to be funded by a bond issue.⁴⁷ The final ultimate cost actually ended up being \$53,296.30.⁴⁸ In April 1912, county court approved the plans of the Knoxville architectural firm of Bauman Brothers and created a "Committee on the New Courthouse" composed of Judge Newton Hacker, W. F. Carter, and W. A. May to let the construction bid and supervise the work.⁴⁹

Soon afterwards, county court began meeting across the street in the Hoss and McCall building until the new courthouse was completed in 1913. The various county offices were scattered in buildings around town. In August 1912, a "Homecoming" week was hosted in Jonesboro inviting residents and former residents of the town and county to visit and be on hand for the laying of the courthouse cornerstones.

Not one but two cornerstones were laid on Thursday, August 15, 1912. The one on the northeast corner was laid at 10 a.m. with Masonic ceremonies by members of the Rhea Lodge No. 47 F.A. & M. In it were laid the relics taken from the old courthouse cornerstone, along with a roster of the officers and members of the lodge. On the outside of it was placed a marble block with the dates 1845-1912 (the dates of existences of the old courthouse.) A second cornerstone was laid on the northwest corner at 10:30 a.m. by the citizens of Jonesboro and Washington County. Inside this was placed a copper tablet with the names of all the county court members and county officials, a Grand Army of the Republic badge, and a Southern Confederacy badge (the two badges "fastened together to emphasize the friendly relations now existing between these two organizations"). In addition, citizens who wanted were permitted to place a small coin

⁴⁶ Jonesborough *Herald and Tribune*, April 28, 1892.

⁴⁷ Minutes, Washington County Court, October 1911 term, volume Q, pages 236-237. The Tennessee General Assembly had passed legislation permitting the court to take this action. See Senate Bill No. 609 and Chapter 288 of the Private Acts of Tennessee, 1911.

⁴⁸ Minutes, Washington County Court, October 1913 term, volume R, page 77.

⁴⁹ Minutes, Washington County Court, April 2, 1912, volume Q, pages 355 and 358.

(a 1-cent, 2-cent, or 3-cent piece) with their name on it in the cornerstone. A block of marble was placed over the cornerstone inscribed with “the date of birth of the free and independent State of Franklin and that Jonesboro was its capitol and the oldest town in Tennessee.”⁵⁰ The markers remain on the courthouse corners still.

J. R. Gardner and Newton Hacker gave addresses. Music was furnished by the Soldiers Home band. After the close of the exercises, addresses were given by native (and now returning) sons Nathaniel G. Taylor of Macon, Georgia and Charles Slack of Nashville on the school campus on the west end of town. There a barbecue was served to the estimated 5,000-6,000 people attending the ceremonies. Former residents came from all parts of the United States, many not having been back in 40 years. “Drinking of the waters of the Mill Brook Spring was one of the features” of the homecoming week, for, “according to an old legend, ‘whoever drinks from the old mill spring is sure to come back to drink again.’”⁵¹

The courthouse was apparently completed but not occupied by July 1913. On July 7th, the courthouse building committee had what was probably the first meeting ever held in the new building. At that meeting, members W. A. May, chairman, W. F. Carter, treasurer, and W. E. May, secretary, established what offices would go where. In the southeast corner was the Clerk and Master’s office next to the County Court room. In the northeast corner was the County Court Clerk’s office (where it remains today). The Register of Deeds was located in the northwest corner (now Trustee’s office). The County Trustee was housed in the southwest corner. The county chairman had an office in the front room adjoining the county court clerk. And the county superintendent of public schools’ office was in the front room adjoining the Register of Deeds. All other rooms upstairs remained as designated on the blueprints.⁵²

On Monday, October 6, 1913, the county’s sixth (and current) courthouse was dedicated. At 9:30 a.m., a called meeting of the county court formally accepted the building. This was then followed by a parade of 341 school children from the schoolhouse to the courthouse, each child waving an American flag as they marched down Main Street signing “America.” This was followed by a number of speeches at the courthouse by John Allison, Jeter C. Pritchard, Robert Burrow, A. A. Taylor, John P. Smith, Hal H. Haynes, Tyler Campbell, Samuel Cole Williams, and others. After the speeches, there was adjournment for dinner. In the afternoon, the ladies of the Grand

⁵⁰ Minutes, Washington County Court, August 15, 1912, volume Q, pages 435-436.

⁵¹ Minutes, Washington County Court, August 15, 1912, volume Q, page 436.

⁵² Minutes, Washington County Court, July 1913 term, volume Q, pages 27-29. It is to be regretted that these original courthouse blueprints have not been found.

Army of the Republic presented an American flag, which was raised on the courthouse flag-staff. Methodist Bishop E. E. Hoss and Judge N. E. Harris (both native sons) made concluding addresses. About 6,000 people attended the dedication ceremonies.⁵³

By the spring of 1914, screens were being installed on windows and doors “to save the Court-House from being seriously damaged by the flies, etc.”⁵⁴ It, thus, appears that overlooking important items in a construction project is nothing new. As a link between the historic 1847 courthouse and the new one, the clock from the old courthouse was preserved when that building was demolished and its works installed in the clock tower of the new courthouse. It kept the town’s time until it was replaced by an electric clock in the 1980s.⁵⁵

The 20th Century and After

In 1913, there was no radio, no television, no penicillin, and no social security, much less any concept of satellites, computers, or cell phones. There were tuberculosis sanitariums and polio and segregation. Most homes in the county didn’t have electricity. Ice cream was hand-churned. Cokes cost a nickel. When this building opened, cars were a rarity in the county. No one who owned one of the few that did exist had to obtain a license plate. How many car titles and car tag renewals have occurred here since those simple times? How many marriage licenses have been issued? How many deeds have been recorded?

Literally multiple thousands of court cases were held here between 1913 and the removal of the court system to the justice center on Highway 11-E in 2010. Most were overlooked even as they were happening. Some caught the public attention, and a few remain in the collective memory still like the Hack Smithdeal/Roy Faircloth murder trial of 1962 with country music star Roy Acuff as a key witness and noted attorney Ray Jenkins for the defense.⁵⁶

The courthouse of 1913 is in one sense no more. At various times over the years, renovations, remodeling, updating has taken place. Windows and doors were changed. Elevators were installed. Offices moved around. Some came, and some went. The town’s sesquicentennial celebration in 1930 saw the placement of a monument fountain

⁵³ Minutes, Washington County Court, October 6, 1913, volume R, pages 169-170.

⁵⁴ Minutes, Washington County Court, April 1914 term, volume R, page 212.

⁵⁵ The original clockworks may be viewed now in the Jonesborough-Washington County History Museum at the Visitors’ Center in Jonesborough.

⁵⁶ This case is documented in Patty Smithdeal Fulton’s book *Let the Record Show: the True Story of Hack Smithdeal and Johnson City’s Trial of the Century* (Franklin, Tenn.: Hillsboro Press, 2001).

on the sidewalk in front of the building.⁵⁷ In the Cold War era of the 1950s, a fallout shelter was constructed under the front steps. Seeing it now, you wonder how it would have saved anyone in the event of an attack. Air conditioning was eventually added. Now we wonder how people working and using the courthouse all those uncooled decades survived in the heat and humidity of an East Tennessee summer.

Certainly the greatest change to the building came in the mid-1960s when the rear entrance with its graceful white columns was eliminated and a jail and other offices came to cover the view of officeholders looking south. While this addition didn't improve the aesthetics of the building, it has provided one long-term benefit. The county archives can now use the old jail space of the second and third floors for overflow record storage as the Archive Annex.

The last major renovation to the building was nearly a generation ago now in 1986. Where the 1960s addition destroyed the original 1913 look of the building's exterior, the 1986 work did something similar for the interior. The main lobby was narrowed to extend office counter space for the clerk and trustee. And the graceful marble stairs that took one to the second floor courtroom were removed and replaced by bathrooms, hardly an equal trade. That second floor courtroom itself was remodeled, reoriented, its ceiling lowered, its chandelier gone. It took on much of the utilitarian uniformity of the late 20th century and lost most of the beauty found in its' turn-of-the-century character.

Some effort in this year's most recent remodeling of the courthouse was made to return the building closer to its' original appearance. The second floor courtroom has gone back to its' original orientation. Benches reminiscent of what was used originally were put in place. A chandelier was installed. But nothing can bring back the stairways that we lost. While bringing back the original high ceilings with the detailed molding might be nice, we probably wouldn't want to bring back everything from the building's past. Would we give up air conditioning and a modern HVAC system for open windows on hot summer days? Buildings change and so do people.

Conclusion

For more than two centuries now the courthouse has been the center of public activity in Washington County. You could call it the county's front porch. Major events, speeches, parades, political and social rallies involving the issues of the day, and even hangings occurred around it. It continues to serve as a town meeting place today with

⁵⁷ In the summer of 2013, this monument was relocated to the west side of the courthouse.

festivals, musical events, and a farmers' market. If people shape buildings and buildings in turn shape the people using them, then the courthouses of Washington County have witnessed and helped in the shaping of many remarkable individuals. Their number has included future governors, senators, congressmen, state legislators, judges, justices of the United States Supreme Court, cabinet members, and even presidents. I close by naming a few: John Sevier, Evan and Isaac Shelby, James and Charles Robertson, Jacob Brown, James White, Daniel Kennedy, William R. Davie, David Campbell, William Campbell, Archibald Roane, Hugh L. White, Joseph Anderson, William C. C. Claiborne, Matthew Talbot, Jr., William Blount, George Doherty, Nathaniel Taylor, Bob and Alf Taylor, T. A. R. Nelson, Landon Carter Haynes, Seth J. W. Lucky, John Catron, James W. Deaderick, William Cocke, John McNairy, LeRoy Reeves, Thad A. Cox, Robert L. Taylor, William E. Miller, Samuel Cole Williams, Andrew Johnson, and Andrew Jackson. And let's not forget the far more numerous citizens of Washington County who have likewise felt the influence of the Washington County Courthouse.

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