

Greene County

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1838: The Formation of Greene County



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1838: THE FORMATION OF GREENE COUNTY

by: Woodie Brown Parrott*

This year of 1988 marks the 150th anniversary of the founding of Greene County, Virginia. As we pass this significant milestone, it is an appropriate time to reflect on the character of our county in 1838, and on the early leaders who successfully undertook the challenge of self-government at the local level.

Although the first settlers had migrated into the area more than a century before the country's formation, Greene County in 1838 was, nevertheless, still a sparsely-settled, agrarian society. The 2,447 white residents shown in the U.S. Census of 1840 were small farmers. The labor force was largely comprised of 1740 black slaves, and these, plus 45 free blacks living in the area, brought the population of Greene County in 1840 to a total of 4232 residents.¹

Stanardsville was a thriving village in 1838, and it seems to have had no competition for becoming the seat of government for the fledgling county. The U.S. Post Office had come to Stanardsville in 1815,² and by 1835, the town contained 21 dwellings with a total population of 142 residents.³

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Not only was Stanardsville the judicial center of the new county, but it had long been the center of local commerce as well. As early as 1835, the busy village contained five mercantile stores, two taverns, one tanyard, a saddler, one boot and shoe shop, a tailor, two blacksmith shops, a wheelwright, one hatter's shop, a gunsmith and one physician.⁴

The county seat and the various hamlets throughout the county were, in the 1830's, connected by a primitive network of roads which, during inclement weather, were virtually impassable. Transportation was a principal concern of the local government, and the Greene County Court appointed a network of "overseers," or supervisors, to maintain the public roads. An "overseer" was usually responsible for a specific stretch of road near his home, and the slaves of the other property owners along the particular section of road would be placed at the service of the "overseer" by court order. As with most other counties, however, this system met with only limited success, and transportation was to be a primary concern of the local government for many years after the county's formation.

Indeed, it was the poor transportation of that era which served as the principal catalyst for the creation of Greene County. It was, according to Senator Thomas Davis, usually a two-day trip to attend court at Orange Courthouse for those who lived in the "upper district," as the

Greene County area was dubbed before its secession from Orange County.⁵ This posed an obvious hardship on all residents of the "upper district," and particularly for the court justices whose frequent attendance at Orange Courthouse was necessary for the conduct of public business.

Just when the idea first arose of forming a separate county from Orange's "upper district" is indeterminable, but doubtlessly the proposal gained currency well before 1838. It was a very divisive issue, pitting the secessionists of the "upper district" against the political establishment at Orange Courthouse, and that the former ultimately prevailed must be largely credited to one man -- Thomas Davis.⁶

Davis, a politically agile and physically rotund planter from South River, represented Orange County in the Virginia State Legislature during the 1830's. Davis had first bucked the Orange County political establishment when he warded off a challenge to his legislative seat in the bitter and contested election of 1830, in which he defeated former Virginia Governor and former Secretary of War James Barbor.⁷ However, it was in 1837 and 1838 that Davis, then forty-six years old, made his most lasting mark on local history.

It was probably in 1837 that Thomas Davis drafted a petition addressed to the Virginia Legislature requesting the formation of a new county from Orange County's "upper district," which was circulated

through the area of the proposed county and was endorsed by 122 citizens.⁸ The fact that Davis grossly overestimated the population of the proposed county in this document⁹ takes nothing away from the forthright and unpretentious language of the instrument, or the clarity with which he argued that both the convenience of private citizens and the uninterrupted conduct of public business would be mutually served by creation of the new county with a courthouse at Stanardsville.¹⁰

At the 1838 session of the Virginia Legislature in Richmond, Thomas Davis introduced a bill calling for the creation of the county, presented his petition, and doubtlessly lobbied among his colleagues for passage of his bill. The new county was formed on January 24, 1838, when the Virginia General Assembly passed "An Act forming a new County out of the County of Orange," which legislation specified that the new county would be named Greene County in honor of General Nathanael Greene, a commander in the American Revolutionary War.¹¹

The county courts of the 1830's were largely administrative bodies, somewhat similar to today's boards of supervisors. Although no knowledge of law beyond that of a layman was required for serving as a justice on a county court, appointments usually went to those who were prominent in local affairs and who had a general reputation for veracity and good judgment.

The organization of a government for Greene County began one day after the county's formation when, on January 25, 1838, Governor David Campbell appointed the following sixteen justices to the Greene County Court: William Parrott, Thomas Davis, William Dulaney, James Simms, Daniel White, Oliver Finks, Daniel Miller, Newton Hume, James F. Finks, George Stephens, George S. Blakey, James Beazley, William Sims, Jr., Elijah K. Davis, Joel Jarrell and James M. Fitzhugh.¹² The justices were appointed in order of seniority, and seniority on the court was important as the one with the highest seniority stood the best chance of being appointed high sheriff of the county.

During the organizational phase, of course, the new county had no public buildings in which to meet. The act passed by the Virginia Legislature, which had created the county, had specified that the justices were to hold a meeting on the first Thursday after the second Monday in April 1838, at the home of Robert Pritchett in Stanardsville, or other such house as might be mutually agreeable. The justices were directed to make nominations of suitable persons to fill the county's principal offices at this meeting, which nominations would then be referred to the Governor of the Commonwealth for his consideration in making actual appointments and issuing commissions.¹³

Whether or not the organizational meeting in April was held at the home of Robert Pritchett in Stanardsville, it was Mr. Pritchett who obtained the justices' nomination and later the governor's commission to serve as the first Clerk of Court in Greene County. Pritchett, who was selected to the clerkship over several other candidates,¹⁴ and who was an early resident of the Lafayette Hotel building on Main Street in Stanardsville, held his post for more than two decades.¹⁵

The justices nominated William Parrott for the office of high sheriff in April, and he received a commission from the Governor dated May 21, 1838.¹⁶ A former high sheriff of Orange County and a veteran of the Revolutionary War,¹⁷ William Parrott was the senior justice of the Greene County Court and was 84 years-old when he took office as the first sheriff of Greene County.¹⁸ Parrott served two one-year terms as sheriff, a precedent later followed by his immediate successors.

Other officials appointed during the organizational phase included James Beazley, coroner; Francis Whitely, surveyor; and John F. Carpenter, Thomas S. Thornton, Jennings Maupin and Richard H. Robinson, constables.¹⁹

It was the summer of 1838 before the new county line dividing Greene County from its parent county was surveyed. The survey was begun on June 12 and completed on June 16 by Wesley Fry of Madison County, Robert W. Brooking of Orange County, and Ira B. Brown of Albemarle. They

were assisted by Francis Whitely of Greene, surveyor, and Watts Yager and Edmund May, chain carriers.²⁰ In their report to the Greene County Court, they reported that the new county line had been marked by four chops with an axe in order that the county line not be confused with normal land survey markings.²¹

One of the most important issues which confronted Greene County in 1838 was the selection of a suitable and permanent site for the erection of the county's public buildings. The Act of the Virginia General Assembly which created the county also appointed Thomas Durrett of Albemarle County, Linn or Simm Banks of Madison County and Jacob Conrad of Rockingham County to "... ascertain the most proper place for holding courts and erecting public buildings for the said County of Greene ..."²² Nobody from Greene was named to this commission in order to maintain impartiality in selection of the county seat, but this commission served only in an advisory role; the final site selection rested with the justices of the Greene County Court.

The one-half-acre lot on a scenic hill in Stanardsville, which these gentlemen chose for the county's public buildings, was conveyed to Greene County by a member of the Stanard family,²³ but it would be another year before the site was improved. Meanwhile, most of the county business

appears to have been carried on at the home of Clerk of Court, Robert Pritchett, in Stanardsville, and State Senator Thomas Davis on South River.²⁴

Obviously desiring to build a courthouse of the first order, the county leaders chose a true artisan for the task. William B. Phillips, a master mason whom former President Thomas Jefferson had brought from Richmond to Charlottesville to work on the construction of the University of Virginia, built the Greene County Courthouse in 1839 at a cost of \$6,832.00.²⁵ The completion of this imposing structure gave the citizens of Greene County tangible evidence of their bold experiment in local self-government, and likewise effectively marked the end of the organizational phase in our history.

Greene County has grown and changed radically during its 150 years of existence. Yet, the people and events of this early chapter in our history makes for interesting study, and serves to remind us of the profound heritage which we all share in our local history.

1. Henry Howe, Historical Collections of Virginia (Baltimore, Md.: Regional Publishing Co., 1969), p. 289.
2. Nancy H. Morris, "Greene County Postmasters, 1832-1964," Greene County Magazine, Vol. I (Stanardsville, Va.: Greene County Historical Society, 1979), p. 42.
3. Joseph Martin, New and Comprehensive Gazetteer of Virginia and the District of Columbia, (Charlottesville, Va.: Joseph Martin, Moseley & Thompkins, 1835), p. 255.
4. Ibid.
5. Thomas Edward Johnson, A History of Greene County, Virginia (Stanardsville, Va.: Greene Publishers, Inc. in cooperation with The Greene County Record, no pub. date), upper Orange County could "seldom" attend court at Orange Courthouse and return to their homes the same day; Orange County Circuit Court records for references to the Greene County area as the "upper district."
6. Ibid., p. 41 for divisiveness of issue.
7. William H. B. Thomas, Orange, Virginia, Story of a Court-House Town (Verona, Va.: McClure Press, 1972), pp. 20, 21; Woodie Brown Parrott, "A Biography of Senator Thomas Davis," Greene County Magazine, Vol. 5 (Stanardsville, Va.: Greene County Historical Society, 1984), pp. 28-39.
8. Johnson, Greene County, Virginia, pp. 111-118.
9. Ibid., p. 112. Davis in this petition estimated the population of the proposed county at "... about seven thousand industrious citizens ..." whereas the U.S. Census of 1840 gave the population of Greene County as being 4,232 residents (Howe, Historical Collections, p. 289).
10. Ibid., pp. 111, 112.
11. "An Act forming a new County out of the County of Orange," passed by the Virginia General Assembly January 24, 1838, a true copy of which is recorded in Greene County, Va. Will Book 1 at pages 124 and 125.

12. Greene County Will Book 1, pp. 125, 126.
13. Ibid., pp. 124, 125.
14. Letter of John A. Miller to Thomas Davis, "The Isaac Davis Collection, "Manuscript Room, Alderman Library, University of Virginia. Miller applied for the office and referred to "other gentlemen" being candidates for appointment.
15. From perfunctorial search of Greene County Circuit Court records, Greene County, Virginia.
16. Performance bond, Greene County, Virginia Will Book 1, p. 127.
17. Pension File #S-10253, deposition of William Parrott, U.S. Department of Archives, Washington, D.C.
18. Woodie Brown Parrott, "A Biography of Sheriff William Parrott," Greene County Magazine, Vol. 2, (Stanardsville, Virginia: Greene County Historical Society, 19890), pp. 36-42.
19. Performance Bonds, Greene County Circuit Court.
20. Surveyors' Report, Greene County Will Book 1, p. 126.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., pp. 124, 125.
23. Johnson, Greene County, Virginia, p. 41.
24. For justices meeting at home of Robert Pritchett, see Greene County Will Book 1, pp. 124, 125; That some early county business was carried on at home of Thomas Davis is from Mrs. Donald Morgan of Stanardsville.
25. Data on William B. Phillips from: Jane Saunier, "Greene County - Historical Structures Report," unpublished draft, p. 3; date and cost of construction from the files of the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission, Richmond, Virginia.