

Greene County

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Court Square - Greene County



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COURT SQUARE - GREENE COUNTY

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Some years prior to the formation of Greene County, the General Assembly of Virginia, by an act of that body, created Court Squares as places to construct buildings for the governmental operations of the counties. Each Court Square, by this act of the legislature, was to be comprised of two acres of land, usually a square configuration.

Greene County, formed from Orange County in 1838, was named for General Nathanael Greene, a soldier of some prominence in the Revolutionary War. The land for Court Square, which was to contain a Court House, a Clerk's Office, and a jail, was donated by Captain William Stanard in 1838. Records show the Court House was completed in 1839 at a cost of \$6,832. The records are somewhat vague in that it is not known if this sum also included the cost of the jail. Minutes from a supervisors' meeting a few years later mention payments to a carpenter. It must be assumed that this was also for work on Court Square. Information contained in the files of the National Register of Historic Places indicates that the Court House, the jail, and a Clerk's Office were completed at the same time.

The three original buildings were arranged as an architectural composition with the Court House as its focal point. This is achieved by the pediment on the Court House being on axis with the main entrance and the gables of the roofs of the Clerk's Office and the jail running on a line normal to the gable of the Court House. The purpose of these secondary buildings being oriented on a different axis than the Court House was to enhance the Court Square composition by drawing the eye to the dominant feature of the square.

The jail and the Court House are laid in Flemish Bond brick with the characteristic 19th-century beaded mortar joints. No records indicate whether the Clerk's Office originally was brick or wood frame.

The payment to a carpenter seems to indicate that the original building was a frame structure. The Court House, with its two-story gabled roof, was a simple classic box. It is believed that the cornice and the Roman Doric entablature were a part of the original design. Fragments of shingles under the cupola base show that the first roof was a chestnut shingle roof. Every fifth course had scalloped edges. A similar shingle design is often found in Tidewater Virginia but not often seen in the Piedmont area.

The roof framing indicates that a cupola or bell tower was originally planned. The roof structure contained large wooden trusses, two of which were spaced so as to receive the cupola. Within the roof framing, prior to the fire, there was no indication of open joints or other structural distress. This lack of structural distress leads one to believe that the cupola, with its slightly drunken tilt, moved during the process of construction and had moved no further. No record has been found as to when the tin roof replaced the shingles. Tin roofs have been used for well over a hundred years, and the roof could have been replaced within the period of 1880 to the early 1900's. It is logical to believe that the building was re-roofed at least once, perhaps at the time the Clerk's Office was built.

The portico, which has Tuscan columns, was added in 1928. A bond issue for \$1,400 was used to add the portico. The Roman Doric entablature on the exterior of the Court House continues around the portico and entirely surrounds the interior of the portico. The columns are plaster finished and are probably brick internal construction. The pilasters on the face of the building were a part of the original design. No changes over the years appear to have been made to the exterior walls with the exception of closing two windows in the rear of the building. These windows were closed to accommodate the Judge's office and jury room which were constructed sometime after the First World War.

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The interior of the Court House has been renovated several times with remarkably few incongruities and little damage to its original beauty. During the Reconstruction Period, galleries were added to churches and to other public buildings for the seating of the newly freed and newly segregated former slaves. Greene County was no exception. The gallery which was added is in a colonial revival style. The twin stairs and the elliptical curves near the outside walls exhibit a level of sophistication not often found in rural architecture. The gallery, at some time in its history, was used as space for a jury room and judge's office. This was done when it was decided that the jury should not have to deliberate under the trees and that the judge should not use his buggy as an office. The Court House was partitioned down its length to one side to serve as a repository for records after the Clerk's Office was first destroyed by fire.

The writer has no clear understanding as to whether the jail was a single story structure or a two-story structure originally. It is possible that this was a one-story jail, as many of the rural jails were at one time. It is surprising that there are no indications that a second story was added. Generally, these early jails were built as one story with a heavy timber roof, sometimes with a timber ceiling. The Greene County jail has much interior concrete and at least one door frame indicates the use of modern jail equipment. The cinder-block interior walls were installed in the mid-twentieth century. It was not unusual for prisoners to dig their way out through the soft brick and lime putty mortar. In modern times, such a hole was being repaired by Frank Lamb when another prisoner leaped over him, dived through the hole, left the state and never returned.

Current efforts are now being directed toward retaining the charm and the dignity of Court Square as it was, while providing for modern governmental operations in these quarters. It is the philosophy of

the writer that historic buildings should be retained and used. The immediate past Board of Supervisors and the present Board concur in this viewpoint and have directed that it be carried out. It is with this in mind that we designed the addition to the Court House to be low in height and without highly visible trim so as not to detract from one of the most handsome Court Houses in Virginia.

In rebuilding the Clerk's Office, we are attempting to rebuild in keeping with the rest of Court Square. We have, for this reason, elected to run the peak of the roof perpendicular to that of the Court House. It is hoped that some day funds will be available to return the roof of the old jail to its appearance in the 1890 photograph which has been widely circulated, and to remove the entrance porch which was added to the jail structure. The Court Square buildings which have been used over the years are worthy of preservation as part of our heritage.

Although the writer has not furnished a complete bibliography or credits, the material in this article was gathered from conversations with Greene County people, magazine and newspaper articles, public records, the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission and other sources.