

Greene County

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The Day of the Holocaust



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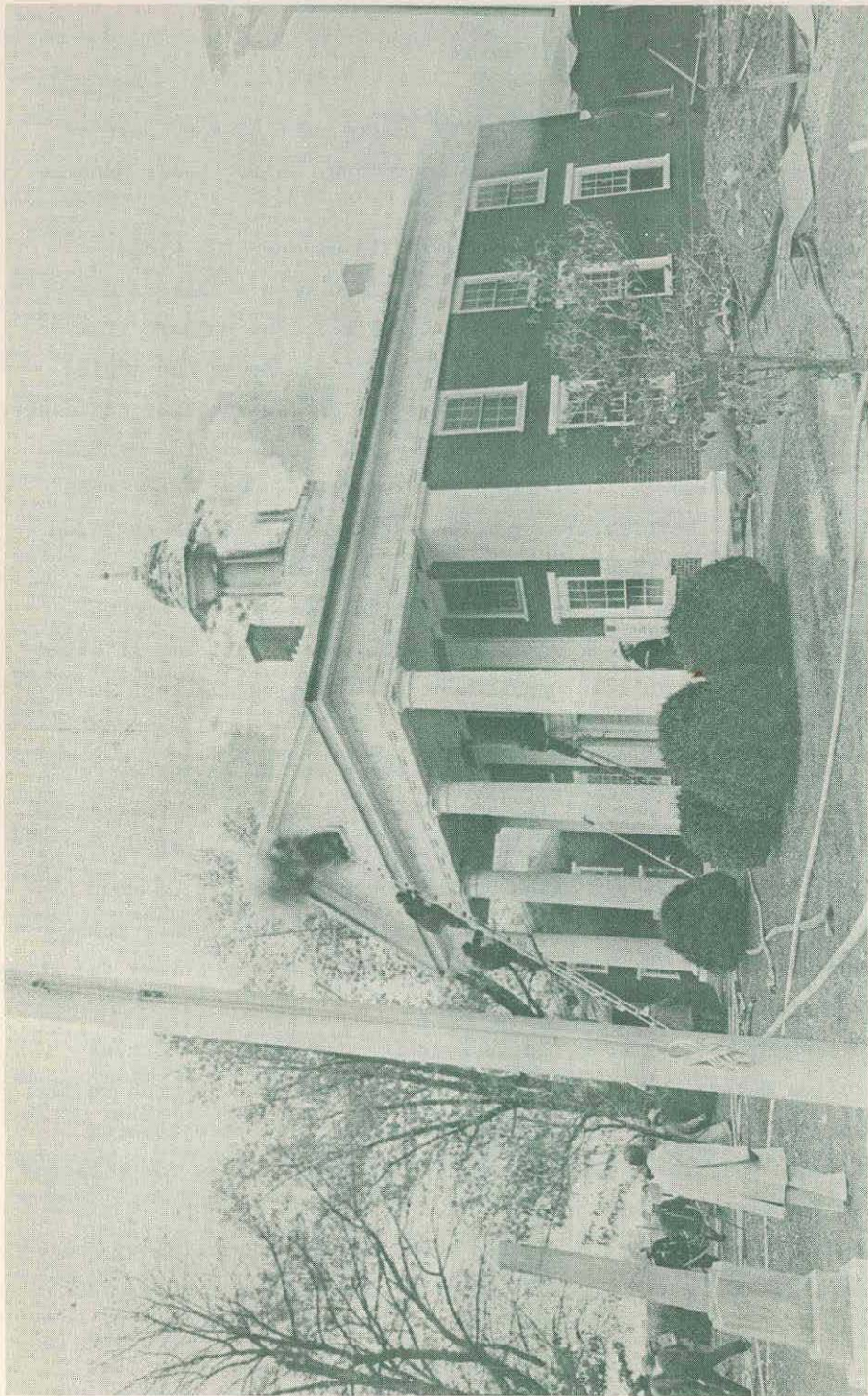


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Court House on Fire

THE DAY OF THE HOLOCAUST

Blanche M. Parrott

"When you lose a court house, it is losing part of you, part of history, part of the Commonwealth. It is unique." - Dr. Louis Manarin, State Archivist.

Greene County, Virginia, in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, lost its court house October 24, 1979 when a backhoe driven by an employee of J. S. Mathers ruptured a gas line. The Mathers firm was renovating the County Office Building and Court House and adding an office complex that joined the two previously free-standing buildings.

The accident occurred at approximately 10:00 a.m. near a window-well outside the Treasurer's office. Most witnesses agree that about ten minutes elapsed before fire from the furnace ignited the escaping gas. There followed a tremendous blast which knocked out the west wall of the Treasurer's office, sending bricks, mortar, and broken glass flying in a westerly direction. Windows were shattered in buildings near by. It was in this bombardment of flying debris that most of the injuries were received.

At least one fire truck was on the scene when the explosion occurred. Davis Haney and Max Tolliver had responded to an emergency call several minutes earlier. Ironically, these two men left their vehicle trying to locate gas mains hoping the valves could be shut off in time to save the buildings. When the blast came, Haney remembers being in the middle of Ford Avenue and being thrown across the street into parked cars beside the Lamb Building.

Davis Haney, Mark Rowden, David Rodgers, Jay Klingel, Michael Early, Julius Morris, Max Tolliver, Clarence Shifflett, Kenneth Dudley, Frank Lamb, Fred Allen, Richard Lamb, and Calvin Hill were treated for injuries. Only three persons required hospitalization for a period exceeding forty-eight hours.

Fifteen to twenty fire companies responded to the emergency call. The firemen were hampered in their efforts to bring the flames under

control by a lack of water. State Route 33, the main artery through town, was closed to all but emergency units. Set up on Main Street was a canvas-sided reservoir into which fire department tankers discharged water brought from area ponds, lakes, and rivers. A battery of hoses drew on the reservoir and finally brought the flames under control. By this time, only the exterior walls of the Office Building remained and the roof and cupola of the Court House had collapsed. By approximately 2:00 p.m., flames were still lapping at the edges of the mid-town complex, and it was a scene of almost total destruction.

All units of the Greene County Rescue Squad were pressed into service only minutes after the incident began. Soon nearly twenty rescue units were on the scene. The Greene and Madison Ladies Auxiliaries set up a canteen to serve food to the emergency crews.

C. C. Kurtz, Chairman of the Board of Supervisors and Greene County Emergency Director hurried to the scene to assume his duties. He was aided by the Director of Emergency Services for the Commonwealth of Virginia, Mr. George Jones. Mr. Jones was in Blacksburg, Virginia attending a meeting when the news of the Court House disaster reached him. He was flown by a private airplane to Charlottesville in order to be of assistance. Judge David Berry and Emergency Director Kurtz made decisions on how to best handle the court and other legal records.

Court Records Were Salvaged

In the exodus from the County Office Building, the vault was left open. Clerk of the Court, Mrs. Lelia Bickers, pleaded with firemen to turn their hoses on the court records. Several firemen complied and, according to Richard (Dickie) Durrer, managed to wet the contents of the vault. Firemen aimed hoses at the open door hoping to close it with the force of the water. They were able to force it to within inches of complete closure.

In a short time State Archivist, Dr. Louis Manarin, had dispatched two members of his staff to Stanardsville, although all reports

concerning the records were pessimistic. These men arrived early in the afternoon and were able to begin removing the county records from the vault. The only means of access to the vault was through the windows. Fire hoses had turned the surrounding lawn into a quagmire making it difficult to get the archives' truck near the window. Citizens formed a "bucket brigade" and passed the heavy volumes to men in the truck who packed them for the journey to Richmond. State archivists began the next day to save, catalog, and record on microfilm thousands of pages of the county's history.

Hundreds of historic volumes were stored in vacant offices where every effort was made for restoration. These volumes included about 500 books containing vital records of the court, records of property transfers, wills, books of induction and discharge rosters from World War II. Some records were lost and can never be replaced. Some are being rebuilt slowly and tediously.

Mission That Failed

The courage of three men who ignored the uncertainty of the gas-filled County Office Building in an attempt to reach the cut-off valve and close it, will long be remembered. The heroism of the act is in no way diminished because the mission failed.

Richard Lamb, Jay Klingel, and Michael Early had entered the furnace room and had positioned the wrench on the valve when the explosion occurred. They sought to escape the inferno and were dismayed to find the first floor had collapsed on the stair railing. They found a small opening and crawled through to the sidewalk. Lamb and Klingel were concerned when they discovered that Early was not following them. Relief came seconds later when they learned that Early had made his way to a window and escaped. All three were seriously injured with first to third degree burns.

Frank Lamb was standing near the door when the gas exploded and

was blown across the street and under a car, suffering severe injuries. Mark Rowden, standing near a west window, was blown to the corner of Ford Avenue and Stanard Street; he suffered burns to about forty percent of his body. Many acts of courage were commonplace during the disaster that struck Greene County on October 24, 1979.

The Fire Incited Public Interest

Nothing that ever occurred in Greene County has ever generated as much public interest and publicity as did the disaster on Court Square. Television gave it wide coverage with the smoking ruins as a backdrop. Newspapers carried the story nationwide with the fire making front pages in Tokyo, Japan and Paris, France.

Due to the wide interest shown, it was decided by the Emergency Director to preserve the media coverage of the fire for posterity by reprinting it in book form. Watch the Greene County Record for further details.