



# Harrison Heritage News

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## Courthouses of Harrison County (Ky.)

Bill Penn and George Slade

### Introduction

When Harrison County was formed in 1793, only ten years had passed since Daniel Boone first began surveying in this region and there were Indian attacks at the future site of Cynthiana as late as 1790, two years before Kentucky became a state in 1792.

Courthouses were the focal point of early Kentucky towns, where governments could record deeds, issue marriage licenses, probate wills, and serve as a polling place.

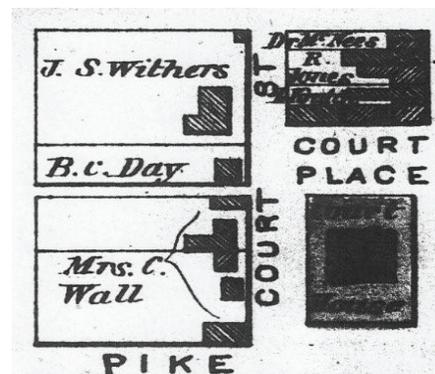
### First Courthouse – 1794 - 1795

Within a few months of an act to establish the town of Cynthiana, December 10, 1793, (then in Bourbon County) and Harrison County, December 23, 1793, by the Kentucky General Assembly, the first court of Harrison County was held in February 1794. The June, July, September and October sessions were held at the house of Morgan Van Matre [Van Meter], a town trustee, and the December 1794 session was held at home of John Merryfield. The location of these early residences, probably log, could not be determined. At the June 1794 session of the court, it was "ordered that [a] public building for the County be erected." The February 1795 session was held at the Court House, which dates the first courthouse to 1794-1795. At the session of the court held October 1797 an order was passed to repair the courthouse, further indicating one was built by that date. This building was used until 1816, when it was referred to as being two-story log, which was sold and moved to help pay for the next courthouse.

A proposed courthouse appears not to have been built. In December 1797, commissioners drafted a plan for a second courthouse and in March 1798, ordered them to supervise its construction. However, the court minutes had no further comment on the matter.<sup>1</sup>

### Market Place

The first courthouse was built on a public square given to the town by Robert Harrison in 1792. Originally, this square extended from Pike Street to Pleasant Street. In 1816, to obtain funds for the building of the new courthouse, five lots on the north end were sold. At this time, space was provided between the courthouse yard and these lots to be used for bartering and other functions. This area was first known as "Court Place" and later "Market Place." Over the years a market house, sheds and other buildings were constructed in the courthouse yard facing Market Place. During the Civil War and earlier, the north side of Market Place was a line of equally unsightly buildings known as "Jones Row."<sup>2</sup> Before the north end of the square was sold, there was a log building there which contained a fire wagon on one end and a farmer's market on the other. "On the west side there was a stall where Thomas Odor sold meats and on the east side a stall where Pinky McCarthy sold meat." A log jail, pair of stocks, and whipping post also occupied this area until moved in 1844 to the site of the present Old Stone Jail.<sup>3</sup> Presently, the Market Place has been named Joe B. Hall Court, in honor of the former University of Kentucky basketball coach, a native of Harrison County.



1877 Beers Map (detail) of Court Place, above the courthouse.

## Second Courthouse - 1816

The second courthouse was built in 1816 on the same foundation as the earlier structure. According to Perrin's history, "The plan ... was as follows: Brick, upon a stone foundation, fifty feet in the clear, with a chimney at each corner. The first story twenty feet high, the second one in proportion, with hip roof, and cupola in center. Gallery over court room reached by two flights of stairs from opposite sides; the building entire cost about \$12,000. A clerk's office was erected in a separate building on the square with two apartments, each sixteen feet square, and fire-proof." A third story was added and used as a church, ballroom, and assembly room, topped by a "lofty spire." The Episcopal Church met here in the late 1840s before building a church. On January 24, 1851, this second courthouse burned in a fire that was sparked by A. J. West's Pike Street stable. Perrin's *History* says that "none of the county books or papers were lost."<sup>4</sup>

William W. Trimble, a Cynthiana lawyer, included in his memoirs one of the few descriptions of the second courthouse and the separate clerk's building. Trimble worked 1837-1839 for Thomas B. Woodyard, Harrison County court clerk, recording deeds, wills, and copying other documents. This office had on hand the U. S. Gazetteer, Goldsmith's Annotated nature, the Spectator by Addison and Steele, and other books to give the young man "a taste for reading." In 1843 he began working in his father's law office. "He kept his office in the northeast corner of the old court house. It was a room about 11 feet square partitioned off with planks from the open space in the court house for the stairway, then ran to the upper stories. There

was a little closet to it that held about one cord of sawed wood. An old fashioned wood stove with the pipe projected out of one of the window panes and the outer end resting on a post which was stuck in the ground out about six or eight feet from the wall. When the wind blew from the east the office smoked considerably." During the summer, the room would reach one-hundred degrees, and so the occupants would sit on the cooler west side in the mornings, in a space occupied by the jailer's office. <sup>5</sup>

## Third Courthouse - 1853 <sup>6</sup>

The present and third courthouse was begun in 1851 and was completed, except for installing the clock, in 1853 by John Huddleston for \$12,000. The Greek Revival pattern was influenced by the Gideon Shryock designed Franklin County courthouse (1835) with a Doric tetrastyle portico. The court minutes confirm court was held in Cynthiana churches during the two year construction period, including the Christian, Methodist and Presbyterian churches (all have since been replaced by newer church buildings). The stone door sills and lintels were hauled by E. Wyatt Martin from Cincinnati on wagons. The original layout was as follows: the second story contained an auditorium and two jury rooms, and on the ground floor were the circuit court clerk's office, along with the office of county clerk, and office of the county judge, sheriff, and two law offices. The Cynthiana News praised the new building, but complained that the grounds and public square were not attractive. "On one side it is flanked with a long low market house, a receptacle of beef and other eatables, while on the other side the public square is disfigured with irregular one story offices that mar the architectural effect of the edifice



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A fine photograph of the 1853 Harrison County courthouse, with a horse and buggy in front and a gazebo or bandstand on the right. The cupola appears proportionately larger without the later wings, which were added in 1916. Photo, ca.1890, courtesy of [www.harrisoncountyky.us](http://www.harrisoncountyky.us).

they surround." By 1877, these smaller buildings on the courthouse lot appear to have been removed.

In 1856, Samuel Wheritt installed the clock, which weighed 3,000 pounds and cost \$494.59, a part of which was paid by public subscription. Charles Rieckel, a watchmaker and recent immigrant from Germany, assisted him. Mr. Rieckel was in charge of the clock during the Civil War and for many years thereafter, resigning a few years before the cable broke in 1886. At that time a timber caught and held the weights.

There was a hitching rack around the "Cynthiana Square," which probably dated to before the Civil War. In 1867, The Cynthiana City Council ordered that the hitching rack be "the same distance as the old ones now there. The posts to be locust six inches in diameter at the top, to be three feet in the ground and six feet apart and iron rod one and one-half inches in diameter to run through the posts eight inches from the top and four feet from the ground." An 1882 engraving of the courthouse shows a plank fence around the courthouse lawn. An iron fence replaced the plank fence by 1898. A gazebo or bandstand was located in the north yard in a ca. 1890 photo (see p. 2).

### Civil War<sup>7</sup>

The first incident of record at the courthouse relating to the Civil War was not military, but instead a divisive factional struggle between those who supported the South and those who remained loyal to the Union. On September 21 and 23, 1861, citizens attended a large courthouse meeting and debated the secession issue. Attending was Lucius Desha, Harrison County's state representative, whose two sons, Jo and Ben, had already recruited Confederate compa-

nies from the county.

During the First Battle of Cynthiana, July 17, 1862, Union commander Colonel Landram ordered Captain Glass and his artillery crew, with a 12-pounder cannon, to a location near the courthouse. Being only a block north of the covered bridge, the cannon covered Morgan's expected point of attack. Some of the Federal soldiers retreated from the depot toward the safety of the courthouse, only to find themselves surrounded. After the town was captured, the Confederates marched the Union prisoners to the courthouse. Their paroles were made out later that evening. The Rebels burned 300 Union muskets at the courthouse after breaking them over the wheels of railroad platform cars. After Morgan's Raiders left the state, Federal soldiers held about thirty Confederate prisoners at the courthouse, who were possibly left behind as wounded or missing. Federal soldiers forced some local farmers, suspected to be pro-Confederate, to provide food for the prisoners.

In the Second Battle of Cynthiana, during Morgan's early morning attack on June 11, 1864, Union soldiers at the depot fled north along the railroad tracks to the Rankin Hotel on Pike Street and other nearby buildings, including the courthouse. A reporter from a Cincinnati newspaper accompanied the 168th Ohio and found himself in the middle of the fighting. He witnessed a company of Union soldiers falling back toward the courthouse, where they began firing out the windows at the "rebels swarming up the streets on foot." About seventy men from various Union companies made a stand on the second floor of the courthouse, but after being surrounded they held out a white flag and surrendered. It is fortunate Morgan's officer did not burn the courthouse to force a surrender.

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Harrison County courthouse, 1940s Postcard

A Union soldier, Adjutant Edmund Wood, watched from the courthouse clock tower for most of the afternoon and evening. He and a staff assistant were hiding in the courthouse when the Confederates surrounded the building, but escaped detection when they hid in the dark recesses of the clock tower. From this vantage point overlooking downtown, Wood could hear the Confederate soldiers "making a great deal of noise down stairs, breaking guns, and swearing."

The hiding place had one drawback, the earsplitting noise from the large clock bell which "struck the hours regularly." Wood and his friend finally sneaked out undetected about midnight. Crawling on the second story floor, Wood said, "I passed over the body of one dead man, came to the doors leading to a wide stairway...crawled downstairs on [my] hands and knees to the [north] door" and escaped down the alley toward Poplar Street, to the Licking River.

General Burbidge's troops arrived the next day, June 12, 1864, and defeated Morgan's Raiders at the present site of Battle Grove Cemetery. The Federals held nearly 300 captured Confederates at the courthouse overnight. Squads of Federal soldiers gathered the Union dead from downtown and carried them to the courthouse for identification before the bodies were temporarily buried in the Old Cemetery on North Main Street.

For the occasion of the funeral of Abraham Lincoln in Washington, on April 19, 1865, the Cynthiana city council ordered that the front of the courthouse be draped in black.

After the war, the fifth reunion of the Confederate Orphan Brigade was held at the courthouse, August 6, 1886. On January 19, 1917, Confederate veterans again assembled here. There were also

Union reunions held at Cynthiana, probably at the courthouse.

### North and South Wings Added<sup>8</sup>

The Cynthiana Democrat, dated June 4, 1914, carried a large architectural drawing of the proposed additions, accompanied by a complete description. October 8, 1914, the Democrat carried a story stating that the Harrison County Fiscal Court had let the contract for the building of the wings to Interstate Construction Co. of Louisville for \$13,940, however, on March 27, 1915, the contract was voided. It seems that the county took over the completion of the project. Mr. J. R. Poindexter's suggestions as to the completion were to be followed. At this meeting Judge R. M. Collier suggested that the first floors of both wings be removed and new concrete floors be installed. The second floor of the north wing was unsafe and should be replaced with a new concrete floor. The second floor of the south wing could remain providing it passed inspection when the forms were removed. On July 16, 1915, it was decided to improve the main part of the court house in connection to adding the wings. July 27, 1915, interior work was discussed, including the decorating of the Circuit Court room. February 16, 1916, other interior decorations were discussed and it was ordered that bids be let for book racks.

At the October 3, 1916, meeting of the court it was ordered that, "The Report of the Court House Improvement Committee" be received and accepted, recorded and published. The cost for construction of the wings, including the work in Contract of Interstate Construction Co. totaled \$13,353.10. This does not include work done on main part of court house. At the November 24, 1917, meeting it was decided that a new heating system would be

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Harrison County courthouse, aerial view, 1970s.

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installed.

The National Register of Historic Places inventory form states that the wings, designed by architect John T. Gillig, are well-proportioned and harmonious although they modified the original sense of a classical temple. The fanlight was added over the main entrance by the time the wings were added.

### **Clock mishaps and modernizations**

The clock was improved with new dials and electric lights in 1922. The cables holding the clock weights failed in April 1933 and again in July 1942. In each case the weights, weighing fifty pounds each and numbering eighteen or more, fell through the floor of the cupola to the stairway, then rolled down to the lobby, causing much damage. After the last mishap the clock and bell remained silent for over two years until repairs were made in December 1944. At that time the I. T. Verdin Co., Cincinnati, repaired and electrified the timepiece.

Above the landing, at the top of the stairways leading to the courtroom, can be seen a rope, extending through the ceiling, tied into a hangman's knot. Originally this rope extended within reach of a person standing on the landing. The bell could be rung manually by pulling on the rope. In the distant past, the court house bell was used to summon jurors, for alarms such as fires, as a curfew for slaves and other purposes.<sup>9</sup>

### **Courthouse additions considered**

Smaller changes to the appearance of the public square occurred in 1937 when the fiscal court allowed the city to widen Main Street by taking four feet

of the public square in front of the courthouse for parking places, and in 1938, when the courthouse was painted white. Proposals in 1976 to either build a new courthouse or expand the existing one were set aside after a group of concerned citizens, Save Our Courthouse, objected. The fiscal court instead approved a \$100,000 renovation, which included installing paneled wood wainscoting in the entry, reworking the ceramic tile floors and walls, painting the walls and installing chandeliers.

Some pressure was taken off making major structural changes to accommodate needed office space when the fiscal court purchased the old Smith-Rees funeral home for a county clerk's office and annex. After the 1997 flood damaged many records, the county clerk's office was relocated to a building on Oddville Avenue acquired from Harrison Rural Electric, where it remains today. In 1998, plans were published for another expansion of the courthouse, this time approximately tripling its size with rear extensions closing Court Street. However, this plan was set aside after the fiscal court approved the Harrison County Justice Center in 1999, which was completed in 2001.<sup>10</sup>

The Harrison County courthouse was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974, and included in the Cynthiana Commercial District – National Register of Historic Places (1982.) The building was considered significant because of its architecture, age, role in county government, and site of famous trials, including David Sheeley. Nationally-known lawyers tried cases here: Henry Clay, John G. Carlisle, Stanley F. Reed, and Judge John Trimble.

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(right) The **Harrison County Justice Center**, completed in 2001, is located on Court Street behind the Harrison County courthouse. It has one district and one circuit courtroom, The circuit clerk's office is also located on the first floor of building. In addition, offices for court support services including Court Designated Worker and Pretrial Services are located in the building. The Justice Center was planned and designed by CMW, Inc. This corner was the site of the Harrison County courthouse annex, which was formerly the Smith-Rees Funeral Home. Photo, Philip Naff.

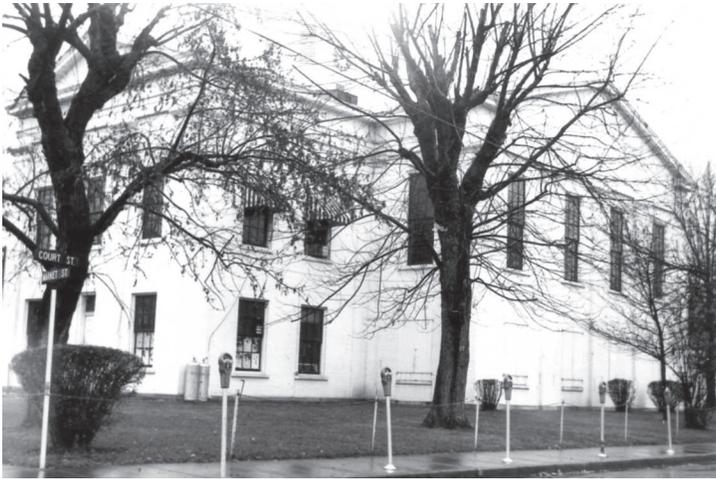


## Was the Old Log House Used as a Courthouse?

Dr. James McPheters built the two-story log house on Court Street in 1790, later owned by D. R. Rees. It was in Perrin's *History of Bourbon, Scott, Harrison and Nicholas Counties, Ky.* (1882) that the author claimed the old log house had been "successively residence, court house, law office, printing office, and, perhaps, church."<sup>11</sup> George Slade, a Cynthiana historian, examined the court records, which are complete from the first session, and wrote: "Some accounts state that the building was used as a courthouse and that Henry Clay practiced law here. This is unlikely, as there is no mention of it in the official records of the county, and there was already a public courthouse in use on the adjoining Public Square." Virgil Peddicord, who documented every lot downtown, agreed, writing: "There is no record or mention of court ever having been held in this [McPheters/Rees] building." Mrs. Marshall McDowell reached this same conclusion in a lengthy Cynthiana Log Cabin article after examining all the court minutes. She also pointed out that the minutes verify the 1806 murder trial where Henry Clay defended the House brothers in Circuit Court was held in the courthouse, not the McPheters/Rees log house.<sup>12</sup>



"The Old Log House," or, 1790 McPheters/Rees House, on Court Street before remodeling and additions. Several historians, after reading the court minutes, agree this site was never used as a courthouse.



Rear of courthouse and courthouse bell in cupola, 1961, B. Penn.

**(Endnotes)** Introduction: Garr, Elisabeth Headley, *The History of Kentucky Courthouses*, 78; "Daniel Boone Surveyed..." *Harrison Heritage News*, May 2006.

<sup>1</sup> McDowell, Mrs. Marshall, "Early Minute Book Gives Court History," *Log Cabin*, April 21, 1950; Rogers, Lloyd, "Notes on Local Government in Early Harrison County, Ky.," *Harrison Heritage News*, v. 6-11; Perrin, Wm. Henry (ed.), *History of Bourbon, Scott, Harrison and Nicholas Counties, Ky.*, 247, 248; Feix, Charles W. (chairman), *One Hundred and Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of Harrison County*, 11, 15.

<sup>2</sup> Slade, George D., "The Market Place," *Harrison Heritage News*, v. 2-7; Rogers, Lloyd, "Notes on Local Government in Early Harrison County, Ky.," *Harrison Heritage News*, v. 6-11.

<sup>3</sup> Perrin, *History*, 252; Peddicord, Virgil, *Cynthiana Since 1790*, 40.

<sup>4</sup> Perrin, *History*, 252; Cromwell, John M., *Cromwell's Comments*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Penn, William A., "William W. Trimble's Memoirs," *Harrison Heritage News*, v. 8-4; Trimble, Cassandra Webb, "Autobiography of Judge William Wallace Trimble," unpublished manuscript.

<sup>6</sup> Perrin, *History*, 220; Cynthiana News, August 11, 1853, July 9, 1867; Lancaster, Clay, *Antebellum Architecture of Kentucky*, 195..

<sup>7</sup> Penn, William A., "Harrison County, Ky., Courthouse in the Civil War," *Harrison Heritage News*, v. 2-12.

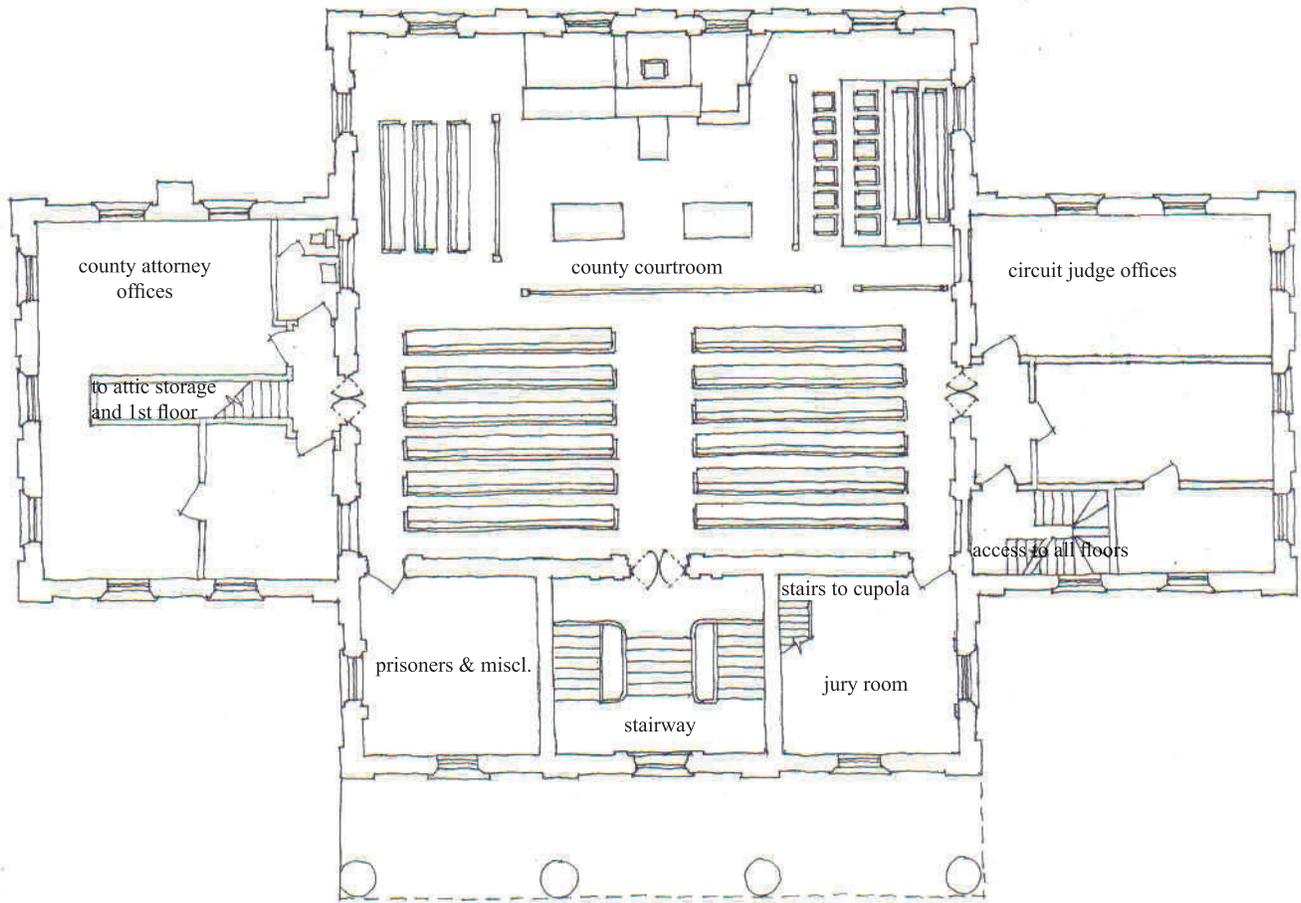
<sup>8</sup> Slade, George E., "Harrison County, Kentucky, Court House: North and South Wings Added," *Harrison Heritage News*, v. 1-8; National Register of Historic Places Inventory - Nomination Form (1974), Kentucky Heritage Council.

<sup>9</sup> Slade, George D., "The Court House Clock," *Harrison Heritage News*, v. 2-6.

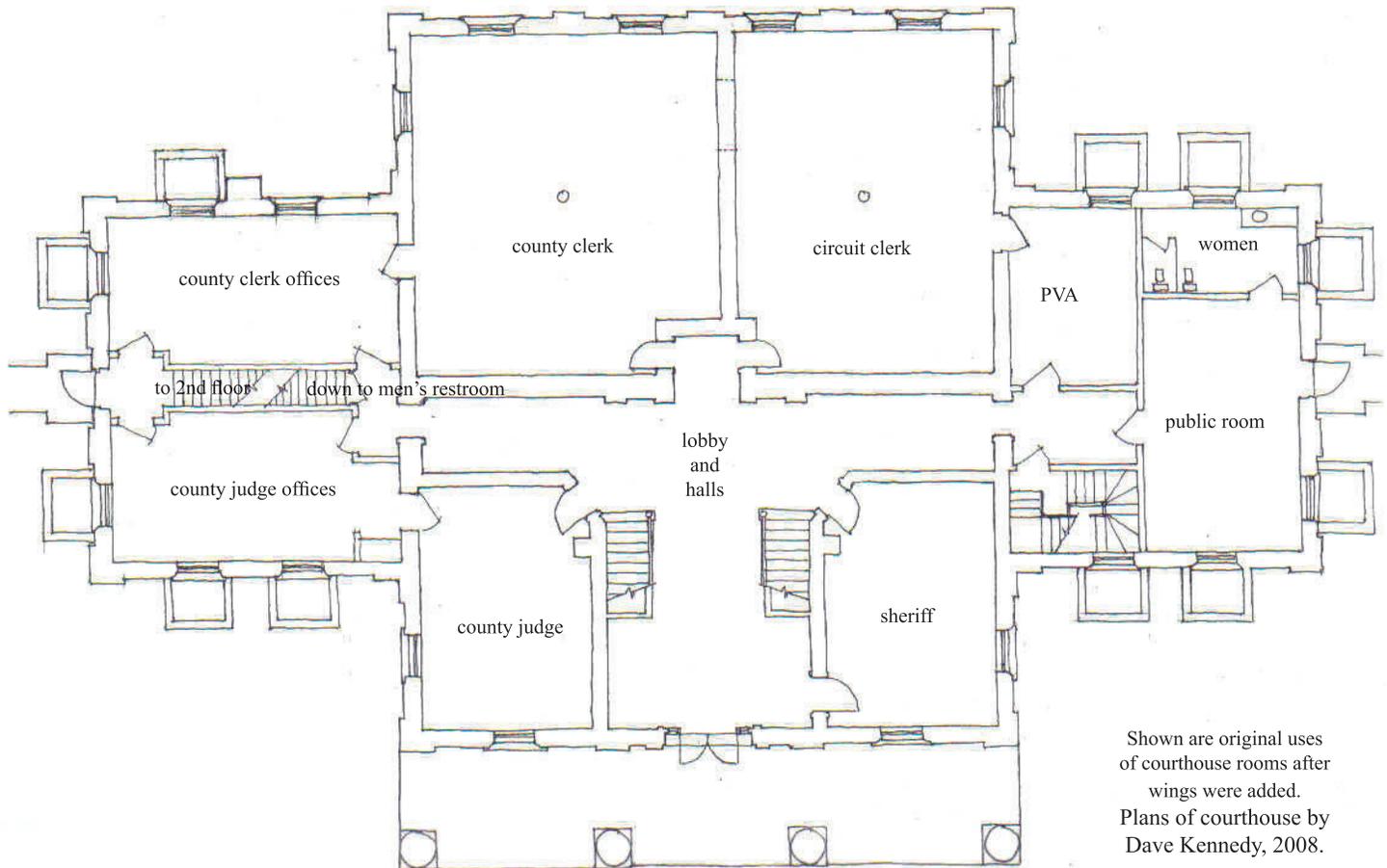
<sup>10</sup> Cynthiana Democrat, May 19, 1977; the significance of the courthouse from National Register of Historic Places - Inventory-Nomination Form (1974).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 248.

<sup>12</sup> Slade, George D., "The Old Log House," *Harrison Heritage News*, 3-9; Peddicord, *Cynthiana Since 1790*, 47; *Log Cabin*, April 21, 1950.



HARRISON COUNTY COURTHOUSE - UPPER FLOOR PLAN



HARRISON COUNTY COURTHOUSE - GROUND FLOOR PLAN

Shown are original uses of courthouse rooms after wings were added.  
Plans of courthouse by Dave Kennedy, 2008.

# Harrison County Historical Society

Bob Owen, President  
 Billy Fowler, Vice President  
 Janie Whitehead, Secretary  
 Dorothy Slade, Treasurer  
 Bill Penn, editor: pennwma@aol.com

## Program Notes - September 18, 2008

Bob Owen, president, talked about the Ghost Walks at the Rohs Opera House and the upcoming historical society programs and the program at Indian Creek Baptist Church Sunday Nov. 2 at 3 p.m. Mel Hankla will do his recreation of Simon Kenton. The program is free to the public. Bob mention the possible need to make some changes to the newsletter. We agreed to discuss this issue at a later time.

Program: The meeting was at the Handy House where VP Billy Fowler explained the status of the house in the plans of the fiscal court and city. He also told about the University of Kentucky graduate students who will document the house. They are competing for The Peterson Prize, given to the best set of measured drawings to Historic American Building Survey standards, under the National Park Service.



Members and guests in one of the parlors of the Handy House. Photo, Sharon Fowler

## Harrison County History Calendar

**November 2** - Mel Hankla's presentation as Simon Kenton on Sunday, at 3:00 P.M. at the Endicott Meeting House (currently know as the Indian Creek Baptist Church).

**November 20** -Society Mtg: Denise Marshall will present the program.

**December 5** - Society Mtg: Potluck 6 p.m. First Methodist Church - bring a dish.

## President's Corner

Bob Owen  
 robert\_owen@bellsouth.net

The September meeting was held at the Handy House and we had a great turnout. I want to thank our Vice President Billy Fowler for hosting and for his informative dialogue. I think all attendees enjoyed the evening.

Please come to Mel Hankla's presentation as Simon Kenton on Sunday, November 2nd to be held at 3:00 P.M. at the Endicott Meeting House (currently know as the Indian Creek Baptist Church) across the road from Indian Creek Christian Church on Millersburg Road. THE EVENT IS FREE TO THE PUBLIC. The presentation is being sponsored by the Cynthiana Arts Council in conjunction with the Licking Valley Community College. The presentation tells about the life and times of Kentucky frontiersman, Simon Kenton. This is an excellent presentation which lasts about an hour and a half and the presenter is in period costume. The meeting house/church has heating and an indoor bathroom. There is plenty of parking and refreshments will be available. I strongly encourage your attendance at this event. Bring family and friends, they will enjoy it.

Roger Slade and James Smith have reinstated the *Ghost Walks* which have been very successful and enjoyed by many this year. The walks will continue on Friday and Saturday evenings in October and depart the Rohs Opera House at 7, 8, and 9 PM. Brochures describing the walks are available at the Chamber of Commerce and at the Cynthiana-Harrison County Library. Show your support; attend a Ghost Walk.

Finally, I want to thank all members for their support to preserving the history of our area. I especially want to single out our out of town members for sticking with us. We are a small entity, but we strive to present the type of stories everyone will enjoy. To do this we need your feedback. Let us know what stories you enjoyed and what you would like to read in a future edition. Happy Thanksgiving to everyone.

*"When he came near this lonely grave,  
 David Sheely's ghost arose out of it, white  
 and tall, with the [hangman's] rope  
 thrown over his arm, and his eyes starting  
 out of his head, [saying]....'There's nobody  
 here but you and me to-night.'"*

# Cynthiana-Harrison County Museum

Martha Barnes, President

## Courthouse artifacts - old photos, globe, weights, and bayonet

When school groups visit the museum, one of their favorite displays is the wonderful model of Cynthiana before 1900 built by Harold Slade and Neville Haley with contributions from Donald Hill and Raymond Landrum. When a docent asks the children to identify the court house, they inevitably say, "Where is it?" or "It isn't a part of the town." They do not recognize the red brick building without its wings.

The museum collection of photographs contains several of the court house at various time periods. One early drawing shows the red brick square with great trees and horses and buggies around it. A photo from the late 1920's or early 1930's includes the fence around the red brick court house with the added wings. A bandstand is to the right of the court house.

Another photograph taken during World War II is of a huge billboard entitled "In the Armed Forces." This billboard stood in the northeast corner of the court house yard. Listed on the billboard are one thousand plus names - those from Harrison County serving our country during World War II. The grand fence around the court house was taken down as a part of the war effort's scrap drive in 1942.

The Museum has a globe (actually the pieces of a globe) from a courthouse lamp post was saved by James Brooks and meticu-

lously restored by Harold Slade. Construction of the original part of the court house was completed about 1853. In 1856, the clock was installed in the court house cupola. The entire mechanism weighed about 3000 pounds. On April 24, 1933, the cable bearing the weights snapped sending the 1500 pound cable of twisted weights crashing through the second story to the stairway in the lobby, where it rolled down the steps to the first floor. Thanks to the Harrison County Fiscal Court, four of the original clock weights are on display in the museum. The weight powered clock machinery was later replaced with the present electric motor driven mechanism.

Our museum collection holds a wealth of some eighty videotapes, all related to the museum and Cynthiana-Harrison County history. These tapes currently are being transferred to DVD's. One of the most amazing tapes is of several men touring the cupola of the court house. They discuss the clock mechanisms, show marvelous views from the top, and discuss dates and graffiti written there. Another museum item is a bayonet scabbard which was found in the cupola after the Civil War - the scabbard belonged to a soldier who hid in the cupola. There is so much to see and learn.



Harrison Co. courthouse in 1882 engraving from Perrin's *History of Bourbon, Scott, Harrison and Nicholas Co., Ky.*





