

The evolution of counties' courthouses

In 1785, two years after the end of the American Revolution, South Carolina set up a county system that was intended to provide local government to the people. Three county officers were mandated. The chief officer was the sheriff. To assist the sheriff were a clerk of court and an ordinary (now called a probate judge).

Louise Pettus



NEARBY HISTORY

The state also mandated that in due time a courthouse would be built in the center of the county so that it would be equally accessible to the citizens.

Among our three local counties, York, Lancaster and Chester, it was York that built the first courthouse. The first York courthouse, unlike the Lancaster and Chester courthouses, happened to be built at the same location as the present-day courthouse.

There was as yet no Yorkville. The spot chosen was called Fergus Crossroads. The July Court of 1786 ordered that the courthouse be 10 feet long and 22 feet wide, a story and a half high, and to be built of logs with a shingled roof.

Both Chester and Lancaster counties held their first court ses-

Among our three local counties, York, Lancaster and Chester, it was York that built the first courthouse. The first York courthouse, unlike the Lancaster and Chester courthouses, happened to be built at the same location as the present-day courthouse.

sions in private homes. Chester records show that the "Gill house" near Lewis Turn Out was their first. Lancaster's first courthouse was in James Ingram's home (very near to Hanging Rock, the site of one of the Revolutionary battles and not in the center of the county).

Both Chester and Lancaster held court in several locations before they finally settled on their present sites.

Chester's present courthouse was built between 1852 and 1855. The architect of the gray stucco building is uncertain. Some say that the courthouse is modeled after a Princeton University structure attended by a Chester lawyer, John J. McClure. Others contend that it is a Robert Mills design. The courthouse was added to in 1896 and 1928.

It is certain that the Lancaster courthouse, an architectural gem,

was designed by Robert Mills in 1825. Mills, a native of Charleston, was the first American-trained architect. Andrew Jackson appointed Mills to design Washington buildings, among them the first U.S. Treasury building, the Post Office building and the Washington Monument.

The Lancaster courthouse, which has been remodeled three times, survived an 1859 fire and an attempt by Sherman's troops to burn it in 1865.

While all three towns have a Confederate statue, Lancaster is the only one to have the statue on the courthouse lawn.

Robert Mills designed the York courthouse built in 1821 to replace the 1785 log structure. The brick and stone building burned in November 1894. Fortunately, court records were saved.

In 1911 a York citizen, Mason L. Carroll, concerned that the exist-

ing courthouse was too small, began a campaign to build a new courthouse. He pointed out that the jury rooms were too small. The Clerk of Court had to rent outside space. To build a new courthouse, bonds would have to be issued and the S.C. legislature would have to approve.

No one gave Carroll much of a chance to persuade W.H. Stewart, the York County senator, to back a \$75,000 bond issue. Two Yorkville lawyers, John R. Hart and Thomas F. McDow, went to Columbia to see Senator Stewart. Hart later said in a speech to the Crusbreakers Club that "sometime around midnight Sen. Stewart promised to support the bill if the bond issue would be voted on by the people of York County."

After much hard work, especially by Mason Carroll, Dr. W.G. White, Editor Grist of the Yorkville Enquirer and Lawyer Hart, the taxpayers were persuaded to vote to build York's current courthouse. Now, with population growth and expansion of local government in general, all three courthouses have been called inadequate and some of their offices have expanded into other locations. What will the future hold?

Louise Pettus is a retired history professor from Winthrop University. Her column appears Saturdays.