

Greene County didn't exist prior to 1838, when several residents petitioned the General Assembly to separate from Orange County. It would often take more than one day travel time to reach the courthouse in the Town of Orange and would then require lodging in Orange before returning back to Greene. In a time without easy access to information channels, court days were some of the most exciting for remote communities like ours. Many villages would halt work during court day and people far and wide would come to town to do their business and catch up on the news of the day. The local newspaper would list the names of the jurors the week prior to the event and the Justices would hear lawsuits, criminal cases, wills, and more. At that time, they also had the power to determine roadway access and tell residents to clear the land for it.

The Courthouse was built between 1838-1839 by master mason William B. Phillips, who studied under Thomas Jefferson at the University of Virginia. Through the design and construction of the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Jefferson taught his style to architecture students, but also to many carpenters and master masons, including Phillips. Jefferson even wrote a recommendation letter for Phillips, saying he “executed much of the bricklaying at the University and of the best work done there.”<sup>1</sup> During the second quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, more than 20 courthouses exhibiting the Jeffersonian idiom were built throughout Virginia. Jefferson himself provided designs for three courthouses, but only one remains: Charlotte County Courthouse, completed in 1823.<sup>2</sup> The Institute of Classical Architecture & Art listed in 2012 the Greene County Courthouse as among the best surviving Jeffersonian courthouses and it was the final one Phillips constructed.<sup>2</sup> The final cost for the building was \$6,832.

When the building was first constructed, the Greene County Courthouse looked different than it does today. Greene County was then, and remains today, a rural county. By the 1840 U.S. Census, Greene County only had a population of roughly 440 households, 4,232 residents with about half listed as slaves, limiting the budget for the new construction. When it was built there was no portico or columns, which were added in the mid-1920s. The balcony with seats and two staircases was also added at that time as was a cement fence and walkways—for a cost of \$10,000.00, according to a 1927 *Greene County Record* article.

In the years since its construction, the courthouse has seen a lot of history. Probably the most well-known was the shooting of Magistrate Sullivan in 1919 in the courthouse by defendant Edgar Morris. Morris testified in his own defense after a manhunt saying he thought he saw the Magistrate reaching for a gun so he “quickly drew his own and got in six shots before Sullivan could act.”<sup>3</sup> The article goes on to state that Morris's own counsel denied that the justice was going for a weapon.

The only record of an execution uncovered for Stanardsville was in 1860 when the overseer of a property off Simmons Gap Road, Joseph Hoy, was attacked with an ax and Winston, an enslaved man, was found guilty of it. Hoy was the manager of Dr. John R. Woods's property in Greene County, though Woods lived near Ivy in Albemarle County. Only one newspaper account could be located

---

<sup>1</sup> Ross, A. (2009). *William B. Phillips, “Bricklaying . . . of the Best Work Done.”* A Ross.  
[https://libraetd.lib.virginia.edu/public\\_view8049g5567](https://libraetd.lib.virginia.edu/public_view8049g5567)

<sup>2</sup> Loth, C. (2012, June 3). *Jeffersonian Temples of Justice*. Institute of Classical Architecture & Art. Retrieved December 9, 2021, from <https://www.classicist.org/articles/classical-comments-jeffersonian-temples-of-justice/>

<sup>3</sup> “Edgar Morris Relates Tale of Court Tragedy.” (1919 June 27). *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 1.

about the hanging: the May 21, 1860, Alexandria Gazette, and there is little mentioned except that he was hanged. Utilizing the trial books at the Greene County Clerk of Court Office and transcripts from the Library of Virginia you can see no one spoke on Winston's behalf, though he did have a lawyer defending him. Witnesses included Hoy's wife and son, who was 11 at the time, and a doctor who examined Hoy—who survived the attack. Dr. Woods received \$1,200 from the state as compensation for the taking of his "property." Also uncovered at the Library of Virginia is that Hoy himself asked the governor for a stay of execution for Winston, though it was not granted. In the judgement, Judge George Sheaman tells the sheriff to hang Winston "at the usual place," but no definite location of a gallows was found in Stanardsville so it's unclear where the punishment took place or if there was a crowd for the event. Thousands attended executions in Madison and Orange counties throughout the same time period.

Court days were an exciting affair for many residents. Patent medicine men would travel from court square to court square to provide entertainment and sell their "miracle elixirs," or snake oils. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Stanardsville was known for being a "rough and tough town with brawls and fights occurring on court days," according to the Greene County Historical Society's book "Greene County." A former attorney certainly agreed in his personal diaries, found in the Albert and Shirley Small Collections Library at the University of Virginia.

"Greene court day was unlike any day I ever knew," remembered R.T.W. Duke Jr., a former lawyer, in his "Recollections." "Large crowds of men, women, and children attended the courts and by dinner half the population of the town and visiting mountaineers were drunk: there were innumerable fights and cracked crowns, and bloody noses were much in evidence."

There was a riot on the June 1911 term day in Stanardsville, according to the *Evening News* newspaper. "Several gentlemen of the section were present and saw the whole affair. They report that they had never before witnessed anything to equal it in the way of drunkenness, cursing, throwing rocks, and fist-fighting. About 100 people were engaged in the mix-up, which a man named Moyers was shot by Ellis Dean and numerous others got bleeding heads and contusions on the face," the article noted.

Judge Holt was the presiding judge that day and empaneled a special grand jury to investigate the riot. "Five indictments were returned for felonious assault, but no information was gotten of the 'booze' which it is stated at least a wagonload of moonshine was sold during the day," the article continued.

In a July 1924 *Greene County Record* newspaper article, it was the patent medicine men that attracted the largest crowd with their "Punch and Judy" show. The Punch and Judy puppet show made its first appearance in England in 1662. Punch was mischievous and by the end would succumb to his homicidal tendencies. During prohibition—1920-1933—dockets were full of moonshining or other illicit alcohol-related offenses. The *Greene County Record* newspaper even noted that more "ladies were attending court here" in 1929.

A natural gas explosion on site and the subsequent fire in the courthouse in 1979 decimated much of the interior of the structure. The 1979 fire gutted the interior of the courthouse, requiring all plaster to be taken down to the masonry, a damp-proofing bond added, and new plaster installed. Bricks were repointed and the building was waterproofed two years ago, making the work inside the building possible this year. A new judge's desk was crafted, the balcony was fixed, the cupola was repaired, and the roof redone. This will allow this historical building to continue to be used, safely, as the circuit court and meeting area for organizations.