

by Mrs. Buford Robinson - 1947 History

The program subject this afternoon is "The History of the Warren County Court House." I knew when I first learned I was to speak to you in December about this historic and interesting building that I would enjoy the searching out from old papers and books, the facts about the fine old building. And I was not surprised to soon feel a thrill as I came upon one bit after another of historic interest. In fact I was soon able to get the feel, and I hope you do also, of one Robert Moore and his brother, George, and his cousin, Ed; perhaps one John McNeil and Williamson Gatewood, traveling through this rough country from the North or East through the State which was called Kentucky, and stopping to build huts or cabins in this section which as yet had no name or boundary. Very soon after their homes were built -- perhaps they came in the late summer; in December 1796, the Governor of Kentucky established Warren County. It was cut from the County of Logan, and as was the custom and law then, justices of the peace were appointed who met and formally established the new county. History tells us the meeting was held in the largest, best built cabin in the section. This place was Robert Moore's. Following the first meeting, all of the pioneers met once a month in Robert Moore's home, probably through the cold days of the winter months. However as Spring came and Robert Moore was able to walk about the brush and shrub and fine trees that made up his land, I like to think of him, in great pride and dignity offering a part of this land upon which to found the town.

Assisted by his brother, George, in July, 1797, he offered two acres of land around his spring for public buildings. This was the custom, in those days to dedicate two acres of ground near the center of the county. It was a Spanish idea, not an English one.

It was not until 1807 that the first court house was built. On what is now our Fountain Park was built a log Court House. It was constructed one and one-half stories high from hewn logs and was twenty-four by twenty feet in dimension. There was one room downstairs and two upstairs, no doubt for the juries. A log jail was likewise constructed, the logs one foot square and the jail sixteen by twelve feet with a partition separating it into two rooms.

After the erection of the court house and jail during the same year there was erected upon the public square by an order of the County Court stocks and pillories upon a platform, together with a whipping post.

But, as has happened many times at later dates, there must have been some dissension in the new township. In 1808, a new faction headed by one John McNeil declared they would set up a new court house and a new square for public buildings. Evidently falling out

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with the first founders, they established "New Town" or Jeffersonville, as it was first called. This location was near the river, at what is now State and Second where the negro school now is located. The new site for what was to be Bowling Green, only lasted a few years, the court held actually only four meetings during the February term of court. It was not satisfactory for various reasons and for a period of several years the county courts were held in the homes of the magistrates. For three years in the home of William Gatewood, which was located where the Elks building is now on Main Street.

At last in 1812, a second Court House was built, evidently all the citizens agreeing this time on the permanent location. At this time there were 154 people in the town and 12,000 in the county. A red brick colonial style courthouse was erected in what is now Fountain Square. The logs from the old court house were made into stalls for a market on the northern end of the public square. It faced what is now Morris Jewelry Store. Dr. Frank Thomas, in an article written in 1898, in honor of the centennial anniversary of Bowling Green, quotes an early description of that building as being a "handsome court house of brick forty feet square, two stories high and containing ample accommodation for all time to come." This early writer could not foresee that Bowling Green could ever need a larger administration building than this one. It must have been a building admired and beloved by our ancestors in their day.

The Kentucky Library owns a copy of an illustration from "Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper", March 2, 1862 with a sketch of this court house. Also the Library owns another unusual reproduction of it woven in a Jacquard coverlet. The coverlet was made for Mrs. Nancy Dunanan, grand-daughter of Bowling Green's founder, Robert Moore. Mr. Laurence Graham, a great, great nephew presented it to the Kentucky Museum.

(B) There are a few interesting bits of information I would like to give here before passing on to the erection of the third and present court house.

In 1799, George Moore, owner of the section of the town, now Main to 8th and State to College, dedicated a spring on his land for public use. He "regularly conveyed" to the trustees of Bowling Green in "1809" Spring Allen, running from State to College, twenty feet in width, just as it stands today from the livery stable or Nahm Building to the Hulen-Toops building with a space surrounding the spring of twenty by one-hundred twenty feet. This spring and location must have been famous many years as it flowed continuously until 1830.

It was during the early years that we think Bowling Green received it's name. During the time, the Moore brothers and other early settlers were meeting, perhaps behind the old Moriah Moore location now 8th and State, the young men who comprised our first township leaders, would wind up their meeting often with games, perhaps as is referred to in old letters as games of "bowling". It is easy enough to imagine the young magistrates and land owners in the county seat referring to the town, eventually as Bowling Green. At least that is as good a reason for the naming as any other. In fact, Judge Rodes, in his fine History of Bowling Green, says there is no positive doubt about it!

It is also interesting to know that the Acts and Ordinances concerning the purchase, sale, care, and maintenance of any courthouse or jail in Warren County were made in an early act, February 26, 1863. As to what the Judge of the Warren County Court may or may not do, is all set forth in this act in eleven sections. "Be it enacted the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Kentucky -- etc.".

As you know the Civil War came from 1861 to 1866.

In early 1866 the old jail burned and it was decided to take the advice of a local civil engineer, John C. Underwood, son of U. S. Senator Joseph Underwood, a distinguished early settler. He suggested enlarging the Public Square. There were business houses on what is now Park Row. He suggested tearing thses down, making a large park, including the old court house and jail location, which is now as I've said several times before, Fountain Park --- and the Park Row block for the park and entrance to the present court house location, which was purchased from Mr. Rumsey Skiles. Mr. Skiles had built a station and depot for the Portage Railroad on this lot, facing Plain Street or Tenth Street as it is now. This tiny railroad, only a mile long built ten years before the L and N railroad (and that of eighteen years before that) ran from the station as mentioned to Barren River and where the city wharf now is. The story of this railroad is an interesting one but will not be reviewed at this time.

The court house and jail were, in fact, built where they are now and the Park laid out as it is now, but the business block was not bought, unfortunately. Had it been, a beartiful approach to our Court House and larger space for a park would have been had.

The present Court House was finished in 1869 just as it is today. It was referred to in Collin's "History of Kentucky, 1878", as "the most elegant court house in Kentucky", built at a cost of \$125,000. There is a very handsome picture of this building in Collin's

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"History of Kentucky". You will find it, in appearance, outwardly, just as it is today, the same iron fence of eighty years ago. It is Greek Revival architecture with Corinthian columns. The cornice is one of the handsomest in Kentucky. It's staircase is very beautiful in it's proportions. However, although the outward appearance of the building may seem the same today, eighty years ago the fresh new brick and stone shone; there were the unworn wide steps, the clean pillars stately standing; the floors inside of tile; polished wood work; gleaming door knobs and walls hung with handsomely framed pictures

I quote from Collin's "History of Kentucky":

"Bowling Green, the county seat of Warren County, has the most elegant Court House in Kentucky. Bowling Green has two banks, two newspapers, ten churches, several seminaries of high grade, twenty-five lawyers. No small city in the union has so handsome a public park and fountain, nor such superior water works, excellent gas works."

Of interest to those natives of Bowling Green, who are still searching out bits of historical facts concerning the early settlers and builders of our city, will be these few additional notes on the actual erection of the Court House columns. A Mr. William Bachus who settled in Bowling Green, originally from Canada, and was 89 years of age in 1936, referred often to a Mr. Charles Ott who employed him in 1867 to work on the Court House. Mr. Ott was a stone contractor and skilled workman and carved one of the four Corinthian capitals of the columns on the court house. He also made the stone fountain and small figures which were originally in our Fountain Park.

Mr. Bachus remembered that two other capitals were carved by a Mr. Sam Johnson and the fourth by Mr. Pierce Malone. Mr. Bachus, himself and another young man had to dress down the four columns in year 1868, giving the finishing touches and had to miss a horse race at Gordon's race track in Jackson's Hollow!

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