

The Newton County Courthouse

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Newton County's first official courthouse was a log structure which was burned during the Civil War. From 1866, to about 1874, court was held in several places, including an old log house, a saloon, Dr. Montgomery's office and other places. In about 1873, Robbie Hobbs was contracted to build a courthouse that would "last forever".

According to the book "Beecher Moss's Turn of The Century Coming of Age Memoir," which tells about the building of this courthouse, the building was constructed by using cobble stone and mortar, made of pulverized lime, sand and water. The walls were then coated with the mortar, sanded and polished until it was smooth and hard.

One day a curious woman decided to start picking at the finish on one of the walls and picked a hole in it. As a result, some of the people grew dissatisfied with Hobbs' workmanship and killed Mr. Hobbs by cutting his throat.

This building sat there sometimes being used and sometimes not. An interesting and somewhat funny story about a Christmas party held in this old courthouse in about 1885 was told by J. Town Greenhaw, in the February 28, 1948 issue of *The Informer*.

"A week or so before the Christmas Eve party it had been generally discussed as to where the event should be held; in the public school building or in the county courthouse. As the courtroom had a larger seating capacity it was preferred by many, but there were a few who opposed this because three or four large cracks had appeared in the walls of the building and county officials and some citizens had begun to have some fear that the building was becoming unsafe and should be condemned. There was some grounds for this fear as the walls of the courthouse were of cheap construction, made of lime, sand and gravel, with only one door to the courtroom, reached by an outside stairway. Most folks were of the opinion that there was no danger as court sessions were still being held there and at times the courtroom was filled with people.

There were no new cracks in the walls and the old ones were not any larger, but still there was that fear in the minds of many.

A few days before Christmas two nice red cedar trees were selected from a grove close in on the South side of town and set up inside of the courtroom. They were nicely decorated with such materials as were available in those days; not as brilliant and fascinating as present day electric lights, but oil lamps and candles were used in a way most pleasing to the eye. Between the two trees, and suspended from the ceiling hung a dazzling chandelier. This was contributed by Doss Crawford, manager of a furniture store in Harrison. He and his wife were over visiting Mrs. Crawford's parents, Mr. and Mrs. A. F. DAVIS.

The room was comfortably warmed by a large wood burning stove and drum pipe extended along the ceiling to the flues.

Acting deputy sheriffs James Hensley, Jess Blackwell, and Dr. Montgomery were keeping the main aisle and doorway clear. All was ready and on time, 7:30 p.m., and all the seats were taken and many were standing in the side aisles and at the back.

This Christmas tree was planned in the good old-fashioned way, for there was something for everyone attending. Every face was brightly smiling from the boys and girls to the grandpas and grandmas.

Doss Crawford and Sam Davis were elected to hand out the presents and everyone had quieted down and were eagerly awaiting the gifts, when suddenly from outside, someone shouted, "The courthouse is falling." most of us rose to our feet despite the deputies warning to remain seated. Some crowded against the stove and the pipe came down on the heads of several. The drum toppled over and the rush to get out was on. Most everyone became panic stricken, rushing down the main aisle for the door, screaming and shouting and some were leaping from the windows in a wild scramble to get out.

In the courtyard below women were frantically searching for their children and children were screaming and shouting for their parents. All was in wild confusion and the noise was so loud that it was heard a mile or more away.

Deputy Sheriffs were placed at the stairway to prevent anyone from returning to the court room. Lamps and lanterns were provided to help doctors examine the wounded and to identify children lost from

their parents. It was about an hour before the crowd became quiet. They were told to gather in front of the court house and receive their presents.

The next day there was much talk of the incidents that happened during the stampede from the courthouse. Here are a few: The mother of the late James Phillips and Emma Clark was found lying on the courtroom floor in a faint and was promptly given relief and carried from the courthouse.

There were two women who did not leave the courtroom; but remained calmly seated. They were Mrs. Sharp and her daughter, Mrs. Frank Welsford, who were closely related to Jesse and Frank James, noted bandits.

Doss Crawford leaped from a window and crashed down through the top of a large wild plum tree. He was severely cut and scratched and after being treated he rushed to the courtroom stairway exclaiming "Oh my Chandelier, is it broken?"

Dr. Montgomery was standing near the door loudly saying "The house is not falling, be quiet, sit down!" Then when the stove pipe fell he yelled, "Let me out!" and leaped from the porch railing. His more than two hundred pounds and high heel boots left deep marks in the soft ground that was viewed by many and a few went so far as to make fancy remarks about the doc's bravery and high leap.

I was standing near the stove and the falling pipe struck my head. At the same time I heard someone saying "Goodbye Frank, we are goners." I then went wild and thinking the roof was caving in, I leaped on top of a man's shoulder's standing in front of me and made by way over heads and shoulders through the door and slid down a porch column to the ground. There was plenty of talk about Jasper for a good long time. There was no one seriously hurt, but everyone wondered how it was possible for anyone to escape uninjured from the community Christmas tree party."

This same building had to be blown down with dynamite when a new one was built in 1902.

The 1902, courthouse was destroyed by fire in 1939. The present courthouse was built by the W.P.A. and completed in 1942, at a cost to the county of approximately \$42,000. It is listed on the National Register of Historical Places.

Several interesting things have happened at the Newton County Court House, but that is another story.

The book "Beecher Moss's Turn of the Century coming of age Memoir" is available by contacting the Newton County Historical Society, PO Box 360, Jasper, AR 72641, (870) 446-6247 www.newtoncountyar.com