

A History of the Public Square  
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If you have traveled through Williamstown over the last few weeks you would have inevitably noticed the construction zone in front of the Grant County Courthouse. Though construction and renovation is never an easy process, the completed work was a necessity. After 85 years of wear and use, the porch, which sits atop an old cistern, began to show major signs of deterioration. After review and weighing several options, a decision was made to replace and expand the Courthouse porch, resulting in the beautiful new porch and steps you can see today. As continuous renovations such as these are completed at the Grant County Courthouse, and as old materials are found within the building and on the grounds, we are often presented with questions regarding the history of not only the current building, but of the buildings and structures of the past. Though the current Courthouse has served Grant County for over 40% of its history, there have been three Courthouses in total, two separate jails, an annex/sheriff's office in the front left corner, and a stray pen. The grounds have featured a water fountain, a pump house, a natural spring, and at one point, even parking meters lined the front of the building. As discussions surrounding the building's history took place, it became evident that the history of the Public Square is important and is something that needs to be preserved and remembered.

Though it is difficult to imagine, Williamstown, and the ground in which the Courthouse and Clerk's Office now sit, was simply the farm of William Arnold. His house was on what is now High Street, and a dirt path, known as the Dry Ridge Road, ran right through the middle of his farm. What would eventually become Williamstown and the entirety of Grant County was once the western portion of Pendleton County, where the Pendleton County Court relied on Justices of the Peace and County Constables to bring order and to bring information back to Falmouth. However, because of the distance and long journeys, rumblings began to form among the people about the possibility of forming a new County. Furthermore, a major infrastructure bill passed by the Kentucky General Assembly greatly expanded the Dry Ridge Road which enabled easier travel from Lexington to Covington. The combination of these factors finally put the pieces in place to form a new County. Thus, on February 12th, 1820, Grant County was formed. The next discussion was simple: Grant County needed a Court, and they needed a new County Seat.

After the Governor of Kentucky signed "An Act for the Division of Pendleton County" into law, he soon after appointed Jediah Ashcraft, William Layton, Samuel Simpson, William Woodyard, John Sipple, Benjamin McFarland, and Nathaniel Henderson to serve as Justices of the Peace, and he appointed William Arnold to serve as Sheriff. At the first County Court meeting, the Justices appointed Hubbard B. Smith (During Good Behavior) to serve as County Clerk, and appointed four constables. Because there was not yet a Courthouse, and no official County seat, the first Court Meetings of Grant County were held in the house of Henry Childers, and later at the house of William Arnold. However, after considering the massive farm of William Arnold and the surrounding areas, a committee appointed by the State Legislature determined that the farm of William Arnold was to be the best location of the new County Seat.

As lots of William Arnold's Farm were sold over the next few years, a committee of County Justices, William Layton, Samuel Simpson, Nathaniel Henderson, and William Woodyard were appointed to superintend the construction of the first County Jail. The Jail was

ordered to be three stories tall, have 7 foot ceilings, and boast a large iron door. Furthermore, the same committee of men were appointed to build a fence and stray-pen on the Public Square for the purposes holding lost or recovered livestock. A month later, at long last, the same committee was chosen to superintend the construction of the first Grant County Courthouse.

Because several of the leaders of Grant County's newly formed government were previously members of the Pendleton County Court, it is not surprising that the first Grant County Courthouse was modeled after the one in Falmouth. It was to be made of "good mercantile brick," be 34 by 30 feet, two stories high, and to be "completed in a good workman manner equal and similar to the Court House in Falmouth." Interestingly, the workers appointed by the committee of Justices failed to complete the construction of the Courthouse, so the Justices of the Peace appointed County Sheriff William Arnold to complete the construction. After nearly two years of conducting County Business at the House of William Arnold, William made a motion that the Justices of the Peace accept the new Courthouse in which he completed. Thus, on December 10th, 1821, nearly two years after the County was formed, the Justices of the Peace met in the new Courthouse, in a new town that was decided to be called Williamstown.

Though the first Courthouse was modeled exactly like the one in Falmouth, the Justices may not have anticipated the growth of the town, nor the growth of the entire County, to happen as fast as it did. After the Kentucky General Assembly's Bill of 1819 turned the old Dry Ridge Road into the "Covington & Lexington Turnpike" it was much easier for stagecoaches and larger caravans to pass through Grant County. Businesses, taverns, and houses were built to accommodate the increasing traffic and population. In addition to the school that William Arnold and others formed, churches began to form in Williamstown after seeing the ever-increasing population growth in the area. The town grew at a rapid pace and after just a few decades of growth, it became apparent that a new Courthouse needed to be built.

Thus, in 1852, after fundraising efforts brought in an adequate amount of money to demolish and construct a larger building, the second Grant County Courthouse was constructed. Like the first one, it was a two-story brick building that featured a large wooden bell-tower that was said to be the finest example of craftsmanship and beauty. Furthermore, over the next few decades a new Jail was constructed, an annex building was completed, and the current County Clerk's office was constructed in order to be used to house records and to serve commodities to Grant Countians.

In addition to many other historical facts, the second Courthouse and the holding cells within it played an important role in the Civil War. It was said that Confederate Soldiers were held there for a spell, as well as other Grant County citizens who were suspected of being southern sympathizers. Historians claim that the Confederate soldiers even carved their names and rank into the walls as they were held. Furthermore, Elder William Conrad, an early preacher and farmer in Grant County who was held prisoner in the Courthouse, lamented in his autobiography that he was held captive in the same Courthouse in which he donated funds for its construction. Aside from the Civil War history, many prominent people passed through its doors. Presidential Candidates, Governors, Politicians, and many prominent lawyers gave many speeches in and outside the building. Given its history, when Grant Countians of the 1930s learned that a new Courthouse was to be built, people were saddened by the amount of history that was going to be lost by the destruction of the building, but were excited to see a modern building take its place.

In any event, as the Great Depression was nearing its end, it was announced that a new Grant County Courthouse was to be built using public funds from the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works. Project Number KY-1271-DS, the new Grant County Courthouse was built in 1937 and it quickly became a building that Grant Countians were proud of. Because there was a jail on the third floor of the new building, the old jail was demolished, leaving space for the addition of the Grant County Clerk's Office used today. Furthermore, because the Sheriff's Office stood at the front left corner of the grounds, many Grant Countians were upset that they couldn't see the Courthouse as they were traveling north on Main Street. After expressing their opinion in the Grant County news, the Fiscal Court voted in favor of tearing down the old Sheriff's office which effectively moved their office to inside the new Courthouse. The grounds then looked similar to how they do today: The Courthouse, and the Clerk's Office. Though it is hard to imagine, every elected County Office, from the Jailer to the County Clerk, operated inside of the building that stands today. Today still, the Courthouse holds the offices of the Judge/Executive, County Attorney, Child Support, Property Valuation Administration, Building Inspector, Planning & Zoning, and the Solid Waste Director, including several others.

Though the coal shoot, the old boiler, cistern, jail, jury room, and the old built-in safe are no longer used in the County Courthouse, the bones of the 1937 Building are holding strong. It stood long before most Grant Countians were born, and it will likely be here long after we are gone. Every time a hole is drilled into a wall or a piece of concrete is removed, you can hear someone say, "They don't make buildings like they used to." And in my own personal opinion, they don't make them as pretty, either. Stop by and see the new porch if you have time, and while you are there, listen for the bell to strike on the hour. It is the same bell your Great, Great, Great, Great Grandparents heard as they walked into the second Courthouse.