

Virginia native Frank Lee was convicted of killing Lewistown store keeper George Porter during the previous November. The sentence handed down by Judge Joseph M. Woods – death by hanging. The sentence was overturned on appeal to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court and a second trial ordered in Mifflin County court in 1910. The result and sentence were the same – guilty of first-degree murder and death by hanging. An appeal to the State Pardons Board was rejected and Frank Lee was executed in the courtyard of the County Jail in 1911.

By the 1870s, the once spacious and convenient courthouse of 1843 would need an addition and its roof raised. In time, a new steeple, bell and two different clocks would grace the building.

### 1878-79 EXPANSION

**The improvements to the courthouse** consisted of an addition of 40 by 48 feet. Two suites of offices were on the first floor, with what was described then as “an elegant pair of stairs to the second story.” Jury and witness rooms were added, plus consultation rooms, a hall and “water closets,” all in the new portion. The original portion was raised four feet to match the new height of the courtroom ceiling. The old jury room and vestibule was removed to expand the courtroom from its old size of 45 x 46 feet to 45 x 79 feet. Seating was increased from 20 to 80 benches.

The Lewistown Gazette reported on the exterior, noting, “A new tower gives grace and finish to its front, while the outside streets have been repainted and penciled.”

With a new, taller steeple came a new clock, glass faces illuminated with a single gas jet and a larger bell. The old bell was given to the Henderson Fire Company, which the firemen hung in their tower in October 1878. The new bell weighed 900 pounds without the machinery attached.

All the county offices moved into their new or renovated quarters on January 1, 1879, with the official opening held at 11 o'clock on January 13. A full house, estimated at 535, attended the ceremony, with members of the court, both active and retired, members of the bar and commissioners, plus taxpayers and citizens, many speaking and congratulating everyone for a job well done.

### PRESERVED AGAIN

**The historic Mifflin County Courthouse** underwent another renovation, one hundred sixty years after it was built. With the support of the Mifflin County Historical Society, The Juniata River Valley Visitors Bureau, Juniata Valley Area Chamber of Commerce and Downtown Lewistown, Inc., Mifflin County Commissioners Yogi Laub, Susan Metz McCartney and James Hildebrandt moved forward several years ago to secure state grants to complete the most extensive renovation of the aging building since the 1870s.

Besides extensive painting, plastering and new lighting fixtures, the renovation includes an elevator and modern heating, cooling and electrical systems. In addition to the Historical Society's office and research library, the area Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Bureau have offices in the renovated building. Downtown Lewistown, Inc. also occupies offices in the historic courthouse.

The courtroom on the second floor was returned to a close approximation of the way it appeared in the late 1800s, with the removal of aging air conditioners and installing lighting that imitates the original gas fixtures. The color scheme of the walls and woodwork is reminiscent of the courthouse's 19th century decor. The 1843 structure emerged as a revised version of the original, still serving the people of Mifflin County.

The county's current multi-storied courthouse, on the corner of Wayne and Third Streets, was built in the 1980s and is the fourth hall of Mifflin County justice. The newest version has itself undergone major renovation. The modern brick, reinforced-steel building, complete with multiple elevators and efficient offices is a far cry from the first 1790 log courthouse and jail. Today's courthouse is impressive and quite functional for the county offices housed there. However, it will take some doing to achieve the long, storied history of the Historic Courthouse, a building which mirrored the emergence and growth of Mifflin County for over 165 years.

## Office & Research Library

Historic Mifflin County Courthouse  
1 W. Market Street, Lewistown, PA 17044

Phone: 717 - 242 - 1022

E-mail: [mchistory@verizon.net](mailto:mchistory@verizon.net)

Office: Open every Tues. & Wed. 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Library: Open every Tues. & Wed. 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.  
and the 1st & 3rd Sat. 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.



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## Mifflin County's TRAIL OF HISTORY



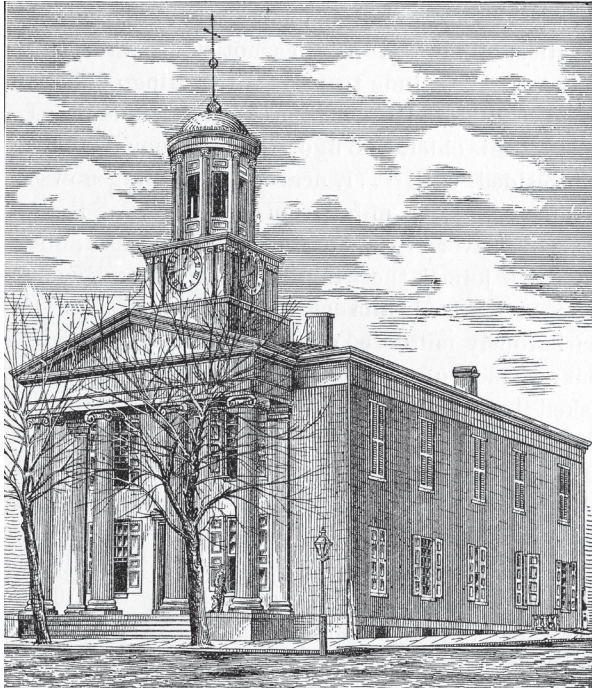
## Historic Courthouse

Mifflin County's 3rd Courthouse  
Built in 1843 on the Square

Mifflin County's  
Trail of History  
Pamphlet No. 5

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# Historic Courthouse



1843 Historic Courthouse prior to the 1878-79 expansion project. First clock and bell tower shown here. - MCHS Image

## CONSTRUCTION BEGINS ON THE SQUARE IN 1843

The **Lewistown Republican** reported that several log structures were located on the site, owned by Lewistown attorney R. C. Hale and sold to Andrew Mayes of Granville for the sum of \$75 and removed by him. By May 1842 the bidding was commencing on the new courthouse. The transcript of the specifications stated that the building was to be 48 feet wide by 86 feet deep, with the cellar excavation to extend to 49 by 87 feet and to be eight feet deep.

The building would be fabricated on the site from an extensive list of materials. Thousands of board feet of lumber were needed, as were hundreds of square feet of window glass, ranging in size from 8 x 10 inches to 11 x 17 inches. Specifications also called for, among many other things, 345,000 bricks, 34 marble window sills, 36 pairs of wrought iron shutter hinges, 29 door locks and keys, 132 window weights, four iron vault doors and frames, 2 pairs of outside shutters for fireproof offices, twenty-five kegs of nails and 6 cast iron columns 26 feet high with caps and a bases.

The dome was to stand on the front wall and the wall forming the lobby. Heavy timbers were to be laid across these walls and on the ends of the timbers were to rest the girders, all held together with large bolts and screws. The specifications also stated that the dome

was to be covered with copper at "every part... that was exposed to the weather." A large bell was to be placed in the dome.

The town clock and bell were installed. Mr. Holman turned over the keys to the commissioners in December 1843. The final cost in round figures - \$15,000.

A correspondent in the *Lancaster Intelligencer* in 1843 wrote a column titled "Notes on a Tour to the West" about Lewistown's new courthouse and said: A fine new courthouse was in progress of erection during our visit...the old building had been located in the centre of the town, similar to that of Lancaster...The Courthouse is now finished and the old edifice has been razed to the ground, and its materials are to be converted into a town hall and market building.

## LIFE'S PARADE PASSED THROUGH THOSE HALLS

The county's third courthouse was the scene of church gatherings, fraternal meetings and public spectacles, despite the intentions of the serving board of commissioners at the time, who were determined to keep the new building strictly for legal matters. That never happened, at least in the basement portion of the structure. It was a well used building over the years, in addition to its primary role as court, county seat and repository of county records. The courthouse was a hub of community activity, and a window to the world beyond.

Once in the 1880s, a traveling exhibition stopped in town, featuring Sampson, "The Human Skeleton," who amazed a paying local crowd with the lack of flesh on his bones. Then there was a wire walker who lithely crossed the street from a hotel across North Main Street to a window in the back of the courtroom. Even an Indian snake oil show touted its bottled product as the panacea for a healthful life in the old courtroom.

Groups gathered and met in the building all the time, according to numerous accounts in the local newspapers. Churches organized in the courthouse. The local Baptist Church even held services in the courtroom before their church was built.

The "Juniata Company" met there in 1849. The company's purpose was to organize area fortune seekers who wanted to "see the elephant," that is to try their hands at prospecting in California during the Gold Rush of the "Forty-niners."

In the 1870s, a group known as "Bratton's Party" organized in the courtroom with plans to migrate to Minnesota and the Dakotas.

Teachers from across the county also met in the courthouse for annual Teacher Institutes into the 1920s. Educators shared methods, heard lectures and discussed pedagogical methods at these meetings.

The courthouse was also the scene of hundreds of

naturalization ceremonies making United States citizens of immigrants from Europe and beyond. Many of these new citizens moved throughout the country, and their descendants can trace these forbearers to Mifflin County.

The traveling play, "Uncle Tom's Cabin," preformed in the courtroom in the late 1850s. Local factions, especially in the Milroy area, already had strong anti-slavery leanings. The play helped cement that sentiment.

During the Civil War, military groups organized in the courtroom, including a company, the Slemmer Guards, made up of the teenagers of the area. The "Silver Grays" was another group composed of the older gentlemen of town. Bounty meetings were held to encourage enlistment, and draft drawings were held there too, in both the Civil War and again during World War I.

Prior to the Civil War, members of the local African-American community planned a migration to Haiti to find a better life. Meetings were held there to raise money for the venture. Over \$80 was raised, not enough to finance the move, but enough to enabled the group to start the process. Although the colony from here never really prospered in the Caribbean, Haitians today can trace their ancestors to events that happened in Mifflin County's historic courthouse.

Susan B. Anthony spoke here on women's suffrage in the 1880s, lecturing a crowd in the courtroom on a woman's right to vote. The Women's Liberty Bell stopped at the courthouse while on a statewide tour in 1915, rallying thousands while promoting the Voting Rights Act. The courthouse steps made the perfect podium.

The building has seen tragedy, too. A lifeless baby was once discovered on the courthouse steps. It was kept at the courthouse for a day, in the hopes someone would claim or identify the child. No one ever did. Before the courthouse addition in 1878, a prominent local gentleman was on his way home after an evening of merrymaking. He entered a small yard behind the courthouse in which a well was located. Unfortunately he fell down the well and drowned. The well was uncovered during renovations in 2003, however, no skeletons were found. Some have heard sounds in the old building after dark, footsteps crossing the courtroom upstairs when no other living persons were in the building. Is this the resident spirit who produces those mysterious footfalls late at night?

The murder trial of the only man ever executed in Mifflin County history took place in the 1843 building, too. During the May court session of 1909,



During the 1878 - 1879 renovation project, the roof and front portico were raised 4 feet to allow for additional space in the front and rear of the building. Historic Courthouse. - MCHS Image