

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

In May of 1842, bidding commenced for the new courthouse. Specifications stated that the building was to be 48’ wide by 86’ deep, with the cellar excavation to extend to 49’x87’ and to be eight feet deep.

The building would be fabricated on site from an extensive list of materials including thousands of board feet of lumber, hundreds of square feet of window glass ranging in size from 8 x 10 inches to 11 x 17 inches, 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, two pairs of outside shutters for fireproof offices, 25 kegs of nails and six cast iron columns 26 feet high with caps and bases.

The dome is to stand on the front wall and the

wall forming the lobby. 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. Once the town clock and bell were installed, the keys were turned over to the county commissioners in December 1843. The final cost in round figures - \$15,000.

LIFE’S PARADE PASSED THROUGH THOSE HALLS

From the start, this courthouse was a hub of community activity despite the wishes of the county commissioners at the time. They wanted it used for government related business like court proceedings, act as the office of the official county seat and repository of county records. But the new building became the scene of church gatherings, fraternal meetings and public spectacles.

A traveling exhibition stopped in town in the 1880s. It featured Sampson, “The Human Skeleton,” who amazed a paying crowd with the lack of flesh on his bones. A wire walker gracefully crossed the street from a hotel across North Main Street to a window in the back of the courtroom, and an Indian snake oil show touted its bottled product in the old courtroom as the panacea for a healthful life.

The local newspapers regularly reported on a variety of groups that met in the building. Several churches organized in the courthouse and a local Baptist Church even held services in the courtroom before the 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

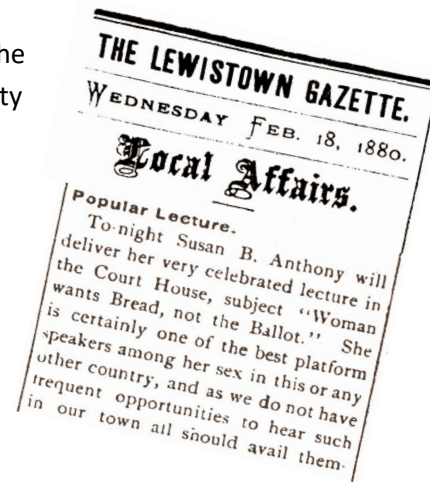
to try their hands at prospecting in California during the Gold Rush of the “Forty-niners.”

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.

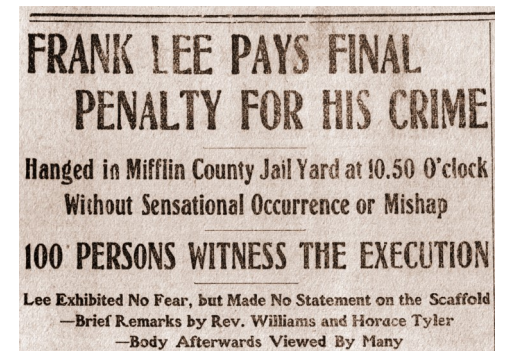
The traveling play, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” performed in the courtroom in the late 1850s. Local factions, especially in the Milroy area, already had strong anti-slavery leanings. The play helped cement that sentiment.

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. 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 fell down the well located there



and drowned. The well was uncovered during renovations in 2003, however, no skeletons were found. Another story involves an older gentleman serving as the court clerk suffered a fatal heart attack at the bottom of the front stairs. Stories of ghostly noises and shadows that have been seen in the building keep these twice told tales on the minds of the people working in the building as well as the students on school tours.



The murder trial of the only man ever executed in Mifflin County history took place in the 1843 building. During the May 1909 court session, Virginia native Frank Lee was convicted of killing Lewistown storekeeper George Porter during the previous November. The sentence was 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.

1878-79 EXPANSION

The improvements to the courthouse consisted of an addition of 40'X 48'. 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, as well as consultation rooms, a hall and "water closets," all in the new portion. The roof of 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 an additional 33' to accommodate seating on 20 to 80 benches.

With a new, taller steeple came a new clock, four glass faces illuminated each 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 ringing mechanism attached.

All the county offices moved into their new or renovated quarters on January 1, 1879, with



During the 1878-79 renovation, project, the roof and front portico were raised four feet to allow for additional space in the front and rear of the building. - MCHS Image

the official opening held at 11 a.m. 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

This historic building underwent another renovation, 160 years after it was built. Mifflin County Commissioners Yogi Laub, Susan Metz McCartney and James Hildebrandt moved forward in 2003-2004 to secure state grants to complete the most extensive renovation of the aging building since the 1870s.

Along with extensive painting, plastering and new lighting fixtures, the renovation included adding an elevator, HVAC and electrical systems.

The courtroom on the second floor was returned to a close approximation of the way it appeared in the late 1800s. The color scheme of the walls and woodwork is reminiscent of the courthouse's 19th century décor. Renovations were completed in 2004. The 1843 structure

emerged as a revised version of the original, still serving the people of Mifflin County. Offices for the Mifflin County Historical Society, The Juniata River Valley Chamber of Commerce, and the Juniata River Valley Visitors Bureau are currently filling the rooms. The MCHS research library is also located in the building. The majestic court-

room is used for public events, private weddings, community meetings, and concerts during the annual Festival of Ice.

Use of the courthouse is monitored by the County Commissioners' Office and the Chamber of Commerce. Daytime use is registered by the Chamber. Contact them at 717-248-6713. Evening and weekend use is registered by the Commissioners Office. Contact them at 717-248-6733.



The Lewistown Community Band performs in the courtroom during the Festival of Ice. - JRVVB Image



Office and Research Library
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Office Hours: 10 a.m.-4 p.m.
Tuesday and Wednesday
Library Hours: 10 a.m.-3 p.m.
Tuesday and Wednesday
March through November



Mifflin County's TRAIL OF HISTORY



Historic Courthouse

Mifflin County's Third Courthouse
Built in 1843 on the Square

Revised 2020- Mifflin County Historical Society