

## 1851 county courthouse was center of activity in its time

*Floyd County's 1851-1950 courthouse will be featured as part of the county's 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration. A painting of the old courthouse by Frances Harman is one of two commemorative postal cache envelope designs available for special postmark during the official ceremony Sunday, January 15, 2006 at the new courthouse. Printed here is a brief history of the 1851 courthouse with additional folklore and background information compiled by Kathleen Ingoldsby, Floyd County Historical Society member.*



**The old Floyd courthouse**

The chosen site of the first Floyd County Courthouse led to the very beginnings of the new village of Jacksonville, but exactly where to locate the new seat of government was not easily decided. When the new jurisdiction of Floyd County was split off from Montgomery County in 1831, the Virginia Assembly initially approved Spangler's Mill as the Floyd county seat, and the first governing sessions were held at the log home of Daniel Spangler on Pine Creek near the mill. Reported opposition from Jacob Helms at Falling Branch eventually led the Virginia Assembly to order a compromise location for the Floyd county seat near the center of the county, at a point approximately equidistant from Spangler's Mill and Helms's Rose Hill property at Falling Branch.

The site was a good choice. It was near to the center of the new county, had willing landowners, was situated on a gentle promontory, and contained abundant sources of spring water. The new county seat, the village of Jacksonville, originally named for Andrew Jackson, the seventh President of the United States, was later renamed and incorporated as the Town of **Floyd**.

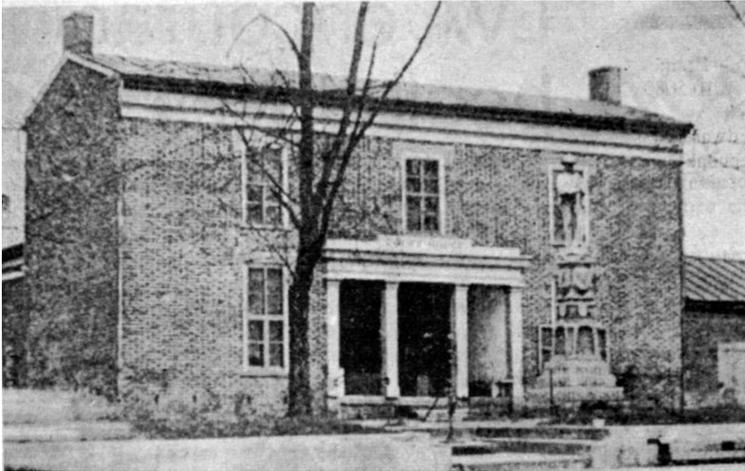
The progression to a new county is detailed in the 2005 National Register of Historic Places Statement of Significance for the Town of **Floyd**. It notes that by deed dated July 16, 1832, Abraham **Phlegar** and his wife conveyed to the Justices of the Peace of Floyd County one acre of land "for and in consideration of the location of the county seat of said county being located on and adjoining the lands of said Phlegar." The deed stipulated that "Public Buildings" for the county would be erected on the property. Construction of the county courthouse and jail on the property donated by the Phlegars was begun in 1832.

In addition, Manasseh Tice and his wife conveyed five acres of land to the Justices by deed dated July 16, 1832, "for and in consideration of the county seat for said county being located on and adjoining their land." The Tice land was described as "... being a part of and adjoining the public square... and included within the boundaries of ten acres with the reservation of every other lott for the benefit of said Tice .... Reserving as aforesaid every other half acre lott to the said Manasseh Tice for his own benefit."

In an article written for the New River Historical Journal, Marguerite Tise explained this arrangement as a benefit for both sides. She stated that the construction of the courthouse "on the public square" was begun in 1832 and "lots were made available for sale." The names of the two streets were Main Street, going east and west, and Cross Street :(now called Locust Street), going north and south.

Floyd's local "Gentlemen Justices," appointed for life by the governor, were still meeting in the home of Daniel Spangler, when on June 19, 1832 the court signed a contract with James Toncrey to erect the first courthouse for the sum of \$5,000. Ms. Tise observed that early Virginia County Courts ,served both judicial and administrative functions in their monthly meetings. While awaiting the new building, not officially completed until exactly two years later, the court eventually moved to a temporary log structure, which proved inadequate, and then to the home of Eli Phlegar. When completed, the 1834 courthouse was described as "handsome Federal style" but little else is known. Worship services were authorized for the "upper room" The sheriff held posts as both county treasurer and as tax collector.

The 1840 county census, the first after the formation of the new county, showed a population count of 4453. Of those who were employed, and bear in mind that many of these extended households had ten or more members, including children and women (who were without professions), the predominance, a total of 1202, were in agriculture. By this time the newly established county seat had begun to prosper around the



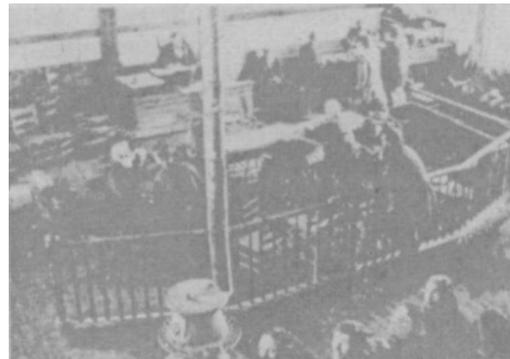
courthouse supporting small scale industry and commerce with two general stores, a blacksmith shop, a tan yard, a tavern, and a saddle making establishment, all located in the new village.

Within ten years, by 1850, Jacksonville had a census population of 209 (free residents) and the necessary trades of six merchants, three physicians,

**The old courthouse (above) was the center of activity in its time. (Right) Citizens crowd into the courthouse.**

a blacksmith, gunsmith, surveyor, coach maker, and many leather workers and cabinetmakers. The Jacksonville Male Academy had, by that time, become an important educational influence in the region.

By February of 1850, economic expansion led the General Assembly to pass an act for the construction of the Floyd courthouse



and Hillsville turnpike road "... of the same width and dimensions with the Rocky Mount turnpike, from a point on the said turnpike at or near Floyd courthouse to the town of Hillsville in Carroll county." Further efforts to improve transportation access to and from Floyd continued into 1851 with the passage of two more acts related to road construction in the county. And yet another 1850 General Assembly act authorized the new "Jacksonville Savings Bank" with assets "not to exceed twenty thousand dollars." The anticipated increase in commercial activity from a new roads might have inspired the Court to approve plans for the new courthouse.

Henry Dillon, an Irish born stonemason who apprenticed in Charleston, South Carolina, moved to the town sometime prior to 1845, the year he began construction of the "Old Brick" Jacksonville Academy. Dillion was responsible for the brickwork masonry of the second courthouse, pictured here. As Marguerite Tise noted in her 1995 article, by 1850 the original courthouse had "deteriorated over time to such an extent... the Court voted to raze the building and build a new courthouse."

To save money and to reuse as much material as possible, they directed that the new construction be of the same size as the old one. Joel Pepper was given a contract for \$2,590, and Henry Dillon was paid \$400 in December, 1852 having "done the brickwork . . . and executed the same faithfully." Pepper wasn't paid until 1854, presumably after plaster work and exterior appointments were completed. While the second courthouse was being constructed, court was held at the Jacksonville tavern house of Asa L. Howard.

The 1851 courthouse was smaller by far than today's existing courthouse. It held the expected early governing functions such as the Clerk of Courts, County Clerk, Commissioner of Revenue, Commonwealths. Attorney , and court room as well as later probation and social welfare offices, and, during World War II, space for the American National Red Cross Executive Secretary, Susan Harris Hall. The jail was a separate building.

The front facade of the 1851, two-story, side-gable courthouse was faced with an ornate, structural, Flemish bond brick course pattern and featured a prominent, recessed columned entry in Greek Revival styling. We know that Henry Dillon employed the architectural use of local soapstone in many of his buildings, and it is reported that the step to the entry portico of the Greek Revival 1851 Courthouse was soapstone and wore down four inches from use by the time the building was torn down in 1950. Massive, exterior side gable, brick chimneys flanked the building. Decorative window lintel detail showed influences of Gothic Revival styling, newly in fashion.

The interior was outfitted with wood paneling, plaster walls, wainscoting, and beaded ceiling board. Wooden file cabinets held official records and documents in the clerk's office to the right side of the entry. The court room had two stairways, on either end, leading up to a balcony access to upstairs office rooms. As seen in this early photo, one could view court proceedings from an excellent vantage point. Offices were heated with potbellied coal stoves. Secretaries often carried pails of coal up to their office to fuel the heaters.

In her research article, "Early History of Floyd County - 1831-1870," Miss Tise wrote: "After the completion of the courthouse in 1851, the Public Square was enclosed with a fence of good white oak paling, trees were planted, a vestibule was constructed at the courthouse door, a walk was built from the gate to the steps of the courthouse, and it was ordered that there should not be any ball or marbles played in the lobby or the courthouse. lot and that hogs, horses, cattle or calves were prohibited from entering the

yard. In 1867 a retaining wall and a walk of flagstones were erected, and in 1899 an iron fence was placed around the square.

Monthly "Court Day" was an event that drew many countians to town. Viewers packed the trials held on the second Tuesday of the month. (Amos D. Wood's book notes that earlier court was held on Thursdays.) At times the crowd was known to be boisterous, and some families purpose fully kept children at home. Hucksters and vendors came to sell their wares, goods, or produce. Grace Phillips once noted, "The town would be full of people. Everyone earns to see what was going on. That was a big day." The courthouse square also served as a public place for social functions. Sometime in the nineteen twenties or so, for a visit from the Governor of Virginia, tables were outfitted for a luncheon catered by the Brame Hotel kitchen right on the courthouse lawn. On pleasant Sunday afternoons Ma Sue Hall (Susan Harris Hall) arid Mayday Harris would pull an organ out on the green space and everyone would sing hymns. Marguerite Tise said that as a young woman she was drafted to play the organ on occasion, and that these Sunday afternoons were so popular, crowds of, people would come to sit in their cars and listen. Traffic would jam, and the square became clogged with automobiles.

In July of 1950, demolition began on Henry Dillon's stately 1851 courthouse. The county had passed a \$250,000 bond issue (after defeating one much higher, in cost) for>a new combined courthouse, clerk's office, and jail. The; contractors were A.P. Sneed,, builder, and the Clark Brothers. A wrecking ball began the task;, and some of the old bricks were used as infill around the courthouse lot or in other places around town.

Dedication of the new brick and concrete courthouse, a striking design by architect J. L. Williams in the Modern style with classical detailing, took place on October 15, 1951.