

The Trials of Chardon's Courthouses

Casting its imposing presence upon historic Village Square in Chardon, Ohio, is one of the most photographed buildings in the Western Reserve. For more than 100 years, the Geauga County courthouse has dominated the square's north park, its elegance and solidarity reflective of the North Italian Romanesque design.

Constructed in 1869, the present building is the most recent of four courthouses built since the early 19th

century to serve Geauga County.

When Chardon Village was founded in 1812 on land originally owned by Peter Chardon Brooks, the first Geauga County courthouse occupied the southeast corner of Chardon Square Park. The simple log cabin, with a lean-to jail annex, was built by Captain Edward Paine, Jr., who was one of Chardon's first two permanent residents and Geauga County's first clerk.

The following year, the town commissioners recognized an increasing need for a "regular" courthouse, and commissioned Samuel King to replace the original structure with one of more appropriate design. Located west of the town's present business block, the two-story log and frame building housed the jail on the first floor, the courtroom on the second. The King Courthouse, as it was known, served the needs of Geauga County from 1813 until 1824.

It was during this period that the populace of the area witnessed its first and only legal hanging. Historical records indicate that at the regular meeting of the state militia, a Mr. Wright was apprehended for a stabbing and subsequently sentenced to hang for his crime.

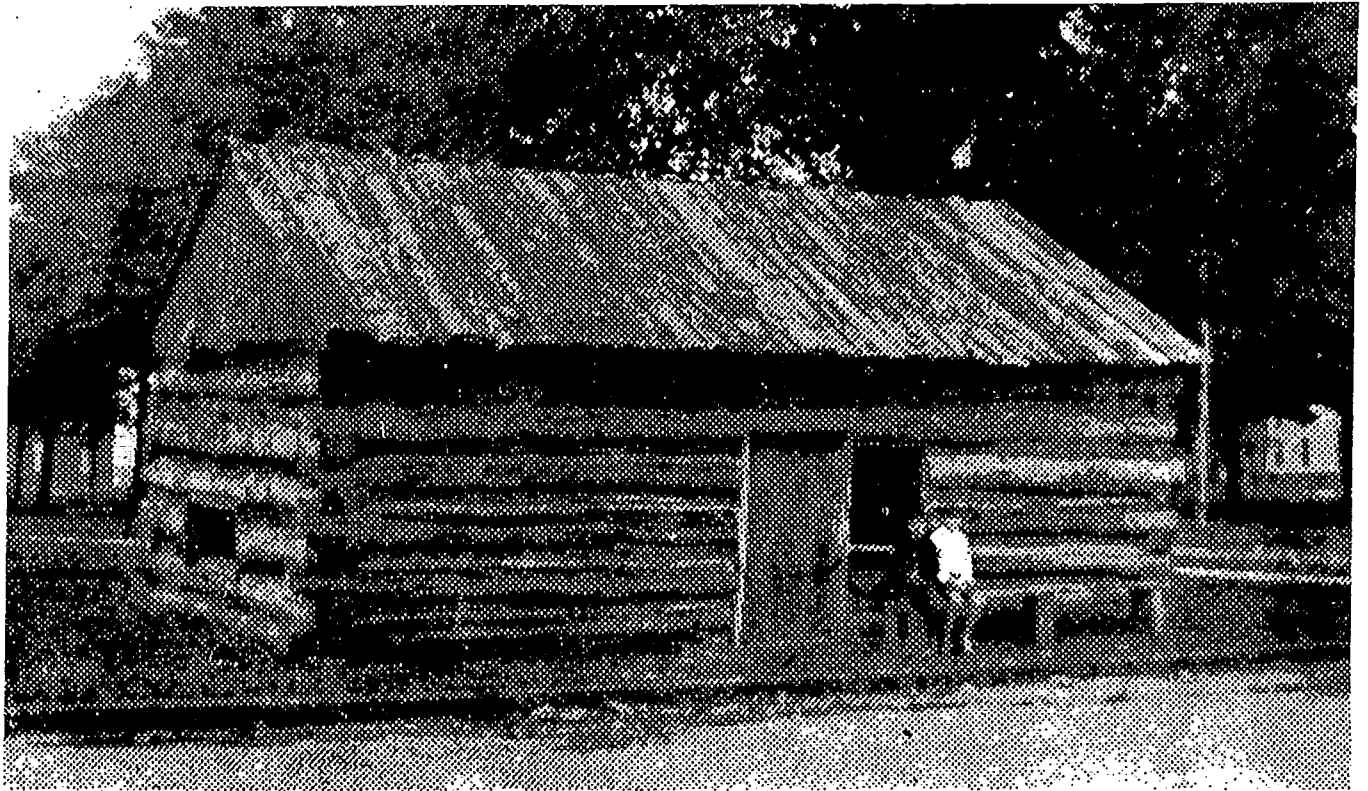
As his last request, the accused asked that he be permitted to hear his own eulogy. In the midst of the enormous crowd which had gathered for the hanging, Wright was allowed to witness his memorial service. As he was led to the gallows, his mother is reported to have remarked, "Keep a stiff upper lip, and hang straight as a steelyard!"

Between the years of 1824 and 1829, a third courthouse was erected at the existing corner of Main and Court Streets. The impressive brick structure was completed in two stages. The first section, constructed in 1824, housed the offices for all the county's elected officials except the prosecutor, who maintained a private office. The second section, which comprised the jail and living quarters for the sheriff and his family, was completed five years later. A bell, encased in a wooden cupola, was added to the top of the two-story structure in 1845.

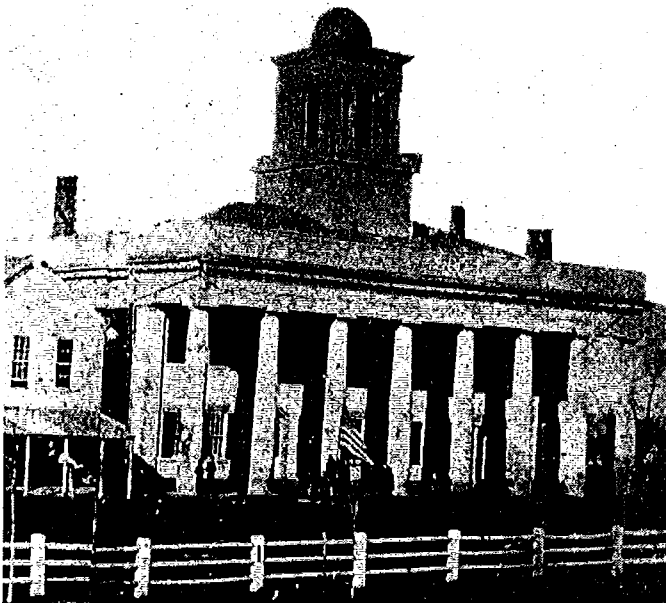
The classically designed, pillared courthouse was an impressive architectural achievement for the town, but like its predecessors, it, too, was destined to survive only a short time.



Built in 1869, this is the fourth—and final—of Chardon's courthouses erected between 1812 and 1869.



Clockwise from above: Chardon's first courthouse was a log cabin built in 1812, recreated in this authentic replica for the 1905 Geauga County Centennial; the King Courthouse served as county jail and courtroom from 1813 until 1824; a third courthouse, constructed in two sections between 1824 and 1829, was destroyed by a major fire in Chardon's business district in 1868.



*Gaugua County Court House, Chardon Ohio
1813 - 1824*

During the middle of the night of July 24, 1868, a massive fire erupted in three different locations on Chardon Square. Arson was suspected, and the entire square, with the exception of the Methodist church, burned to the ground. An apparent shift in the wind from the northwest caused the wooden cupola to catch fire, and the courthouse was lost along with the other buildings.

Court on the Commons

The following year, work commenced on the present courthouse, which is located in the center of the north park on the square. At the time, the park was known as the "commons," its name derived from the fact that horses were permitted to use the fenced-in area as grazing land. Thus it developed into a "common" area for visitors and the townsfolk of Chardon.

The construction of the new courthouse on the north park site was in violation of the town plat, which stipulated that no buildings could be erected on the commons to obstruct the view of the park through North Street. No objections were raised, however, and work proceeded on the structure under the auspices of architect Joseph Ireland, of Cleveland. The building was constructed of locally made bricks at a cost of \$88,862.

Housed in the new courthouse were the offices of the county auditor, treasurer, recorder, surveyor, school board, and clerk of the courts. The common pleas court and probate court also were included, with space for additional offices still available. Each of the offices contained a woodburning stove to help discourage the permeating chills of the Ohio winters.

Criminals were incarcerated in a jail cell located in the basement of the building, where 30 years later a central-heating coal furnace was installed. The coal for fueling the furnace was shoveled in through a basement window.

The spectacular second floor courtroom contained a ceiling which

reached to the roof of the third floor, and a balcony for spectators interested in witnessing court proceedings.

The tolling of the courthouse bell by the bailiff signified that court was about to convene. Rising a lofty 112 feet into the air, the bell tower offered those who were willing to exert themselves a spectacular view of near-by Painesville and Lake Erie.

Although the bell frequently sent the townspeople scurrying for seats to watch the action, repeated attempts to assemble juries during the summer months ultimately led a frustrated court to dispense with sessions during that time of year. The rural areas surrounding Chardon and Geauga County demanded long days for a populace engaged largely in agricultural pursuits, and it was not until the end of World War II that sessions were resumed during the summer.

Periodic structural changes in the courthouse during the course of the last century have created an interior vastly different from the original. The spectators gallery no longer exists, the space having been converted to welfare offices. The dome in the original courtroom has been eliminated, and the ceiling lowered to conventional heights, creating an area for the probate court on the third floor. Other changes include the installation of an elevator and the replacement of the double steel doors on the front of the building.

Registered & renovated

In 1976, Chardon Park, along with the courthouse itself, was entered into the National Register of Historical Places, with tours of the building offered to the public during the Maple Festival.

The following year, the courthouse underwent a complete renovation at a cost of \$325,000. Offices of all elected officials not directly related to the courts were transferred to the Courthouse Annex across Main Street, and a new courtroom was constructed on the first floor.

Over the years, the stately court-

house has survived a number of catastrophes which have threatened its existence and maintenance.

Approximately 30 years following its completion, a fire broke out in one of its chimneys. Efforts to detect the cause of the blaze revealed that a wooden beam inadvertently had been built into the chimney. Fortunately, the fire was contained, having taken more than a quarter century actually to ignite.

In 1909, a clock which was purchased through public subscription, was added to the courthouse tower. Considerable damage was incurred soon afterwards when one of the massive weights on the timepiece became dislodged and crashed through the floor and ceiling before finally coming to rest.

Lightning strikes twice

During a particularly severe thunderstorm just prior to World War II, a bolt of lightning penetrated two of the chimneys on the east side of the building, knocking them down. In a preventive measure, officials had the chimneys lowered to roof level. This precaution seemingly rendered the necessary protection for the chimneys, but three years ago, another bolt of lightning struck the bell tower. Weakened with age, partially due to its soft brick (sans mortar), the tower sustained enormous damage.

Due to the historical significance of the courthouse, plans and designs for repairing the damage were subject to the approval of the State Historical Society. Federal funds funneled through the Society assisted in underwriting the cost of repairs, which amounted to \$105,000. By the time the work on the tower was completed, its bells had been silenced for a period of two years.

Today, having entered into its second century of service to the people of Chardon and Geauga County, the historic courthouse continues as a source of pride to ardent preservationists.