

COURT SQUARE



UNDERSTANDING COURT SQUARE

The original Albemarle County Courthouse located in Charlottesville was a wood frame structure built after the County seat was relocated from Scott's Ferry in 1761. Originally the crucial fall-line port at Milton was considered for the courthouse location. Instead, Dr. Thomas Walker donated fifty acres of land, located west of Milton, to be carved into a court square and city blocks. Colonel William Cabell won the bid to clear the timber and build the courthouse as the first civic building in 1762.

It was here that local elections were held with the help of attorneys and magistrates like Thomas Jefferson and James Monroe, who practiced law in Charlottesville. The Albemarle County Courthouse was the only voting location until the mid-1800s. It was customary for candidates to supply food and drink to their supporters on Election Day. Rum punch was a favorite beverage during that time. Voting was conducted by voice, with each male publicly selecting his candidate.

In May 1781, the Virginia General Assembly designated the courthouse the temporary state capitol building as British troops attacked Richmond. Patrick Henry, Benjamin Harrison, Thomas Nelson, Richard Henry Lee, John Tyler, and Daniel Boone met at the courthouse and surrounding taverns to deliberate about the Revolution.

Residents in the homes surrounding Court Square often owned one or two slaves, who lived in their homes or nearby buildings, through the antebellum period.



JUSTICE

Until the 1870s, corporal punishment, meted in public spaces, was a popular method of addressing criminals. The whipping post, pillory, stocks, and gallows were used in the process. The jail played a small background role as a space for housing those on trial or awaiting punishment. Court Square included these public punishment structures.

The first jail was built on Court Square in 1766. By 1876, the jail had outgrown the available facilities. Rather than reconstruct the jail next to the courthouse in full view of the public, the jail was relocated on a low plot of land behind High Street. This followed national patterns in criminal justice and crime prevention, which favored confining inmates away from the general population.

By the 1850s, there were many laws regulating the lives of slaves and the relationships among slaves, slave owners, and freed blacks. During the decades leading up to the Civil War, rebellious slave activity was increasingly common. Throughout the 1850s, multiple cases were heard at the courthouse related to slaves burning barns and other farm structures, or attempting to poison their masters. When found guilty, slaves were either lashed at the public whipping post on Court Square or hanged.

In 1861, Virginia declared that all freed blacks between eighteen and fifty years old must register to fight for the Confederate States of America in the Civil War. The state of Virginia asked that urban and rural slave owners volunteer their slaves to help build defenses in Richmond. On December 12th of 1862, 540 slaves from Albemarle County were brought to Court Square before they traveled to the state capital to fight for the Confederacy.

CHARLOTTESVILLE PAST AND PRESENT

- 1762:** Founding of Charlottesville
- 1766:** First Albemarle County jail is built at Court Square
- 1770:** Swan Tavern is built
- 1775-1783:** THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR
- 1781:** Charlottesville serves as the temporary state capital
- 1781:** Jack Jowett's ride to warn of British troops
- 1800:** Brick courthouse (now facing High Street) replaces wood courthouse
- 1803-1806:** LEWIS & CLARK EXPEDITION FOR THE LOUISIANA PURCHASE
- 1819:** THOMAS JEFFERSON FOUNDS THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA
- 1820:** Number Nothing is built as a mercantile duplex
- 1823:** The Charlottesville Library is established on Sixth Street
- 1829:** Thomas Jefferson's memoirs are published on McKee Block
- 1832:** The Swan Tavern falls down
- 1840s:** Businesses on Main Street compete with Court Square as the City's commercial center
- 1850s:** The Louisiana Railroad Company completes a rail line that passes through Charlottesville
- 1852:** Town Hall is built with citizen investment
- 1861-1865:** THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR
- 1870:** A public school system is established in Virginia
- 1887:** Charlottesville's first streetcar is built and pulled by horse and mule
- 1888:** Charlottesville is declared an independent city (population 5,000)
- 1914-1918:** WORLD WAR I
- 1918:** McKee Block is purchased and demolished by Paul Goodloe McNire
- 1920:** WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE IS LEGALIZED (19TH AMENDMENT)
- 1921:** Jackson Park is created complete with a statue of Stonewall Jackson
- 1926:** The Monticello Hotel is built
- 1936:** Courthouse is remodeled in the Colonial Revival style
- 1939-1945:** WORLD WAR II
- 1954:** PUBLIC SCHOOL SEGREGATION LEGALLY ENDS (BROWN VS. BOARD OF EDUCATION)
- 1959:** The Barracks Road Shopping Center opens
- 1960:** A referendum passes to develop Orange Hill using federal Urban Renewal money
- 1969:** City Hall is constructed
- 1975:** Construction begins on Charlottesville's Pedestrian Mall
- 2002-2004:** Court Square undergoes rehabilitation
- 2012:** Charlottesville celebrates the 250th Anniversary of its founding

STYLE

The appearance of Court Square has changed over the past 250 years. The Albemarle County Courthouse has been expanded and renovated, undergoing significant stylistic changes as late as 1938, when the building was remodeled in the Colonial Revival style you see today. A lively street called McKee Block predated the statue of Stonewall Jackson on the west side of the square until 1921. The open space in the square was formerly occupied by a number of lawyer offices, a jail, and whipping post.

The original courthouse was a wood frame building built on the northern boundary of the town of Charlottesville, surrounded by houses rather than streets, in the style of an "English green." In 1803, the wooden courthouse was replaced with a new two-story brick building that now forms the rear elevation facing High Street.

In 1860, the southern side of the Courthouse was expanded with a stucco exterior and Gothic Revival facade with octagonal stair towers. The two-story portico and large columns were added ten years later.

In 1938, the courthouse was renovated as part of a Works Progress Administration project using New Deal funding. The renovation disguised signs of the Gothic architectural style and introduced the Colonial Revival style.



CHARLOTTESVILLE
Official Website
Read the rest of the story:
charlottesville.org/historicresources



Who was the last criminal hanged in the City of Charlottesville?



How did Paul Goodloe McNire and the national City Beautiful movement change Court Square?



What did Richard of Thomas Jefferson give the Courthouse? How did the Jeffersonian ideal begin to form?