Historic Court Square
This building, in continuous use as a courthouse for over 200 years, is one of America's most historic. No other courthouse has been used by three early American Presidents at the same time. The original wood frame courthouse was erected on a two-acre lot in 1762 when the city was founded by Dr. Thomas Walker. Here local elections were held and the County Court conducted business with the help of young attorneys and magistrates such as Thomas Jefferson and James Monroe. These men along with James Madison later became Presidents and could at times be seen here together.
After a stirring patriotic sermon by Rev. Charles Clay on a public Fast Day in 1774 the freeholders of Albemarle County met here and made a resolution to the Virginia House of Burgesses that called for a boycott of trade with England and for a meeting of a Continental Congress. When the British attacked Richmond in the summer of 1781 the Virginia General Assembly made Charlottesville its temporary emergency capital and met here for deliberations, including Patrick Henry, Benjamin Harrison, Thomas Nelson, Richard Henry Lee, John Tyler and Daniel Boone.
The courthouse was also a place of worship and Jefferson himself helped organize an independent congregation led by Rev. Clay beginning in 1777 called the Calvinistical Reformed Church. A member of this church, Col John Harvie, introduced Jefferson's famous Bill for Religious Freedom to the Virginia legislature that same year. Many years later Jefferson called the courthouse the "common temple" and proudly spoke of its use each Sunday by four Protestant denominations in turn.
The square was enclosed with a railing in 1792 and a second building of brick was built in place of the wooden structure in 1803 and now forms the north wing to your right. It faced a public square with taverns and shops behind you (on today's Park Street). A whipping post, stocks, pillory and a stone jail stood on this public square that also was the commercial center of the town. The south wing of this courthouse, which is located behind this display was built in 1860 in the Gothic Revival style and was modified to its current appearance in the 1930's as part of an extensive renovation. This work restored the Colonial features of the original building and remodeled the portico in the Colonial Revival style.
COURT SQUARE
AUDIO TOUR