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# Mason County's First Temple of Justice

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## MASON COUNTY'S FIRST TEMPLE OF JUSTICE

Contributed by

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It stood for 115 years when a bolt of lightning struck the old landmark causing its total destruction by fire on "hoo-doo day" of Friday, August 13, 1909

Standing on a slight elevation about 150 feet from Main street in Washington, Mason County's first courthouse was built by Lewis Craig, the pioneer Baptist preacher and stone mason who brought his "traveling church" from Spotsylvania County, Virginia, to Kentucky in 1781. Of the simplest style of architecture, the historic building was constructed of native limestone, 50 feet long and 23 feet wide; walls two feet thick; two stories high with small windows and doors, and contained four rooms. Extending across the whole front of the building was an impressive colonial porch with eight massive stone pillars and paved floor. The cupola for the bell was surmounted by an octagonal tower 25 feet high topped by a weather vane and gilded ball --- with an arrow showing the bent of the wind. On a keystone over the door were carved the initials "L. C." for the builder, and the date 1794. On one side of the stately old structure was a long, low brick annex used as the county clerk's office. Locust trees, sacred with associations, kept vigil over the flagstone walk leading to the main entrance.

The courthouse was built just two years after Kentucky became a state in 1792, and five years after the county of Mason was created by the Virginia Assembly out of a part of Bourbon County, District of Kentucky, May 1, 1788.

The first court of Mason County - the court of General Quarter Sessions - was held May 26, 1789 at the home of Robert Rankin in Washington, which had been established as a town in 1786 by an Act of the Virginia Legislature. After sustaining the following appointments made by the Governor of the county officials: Thomas Waring, Esq., sheriff, Thornley Berry, deputy sheriff, Robert Rankin, clerk, Henry Lee, surveyor, and Miles Withers Conway, coroner, the next business before the court as then constituted, was the order issued to Henry Lee, Miles W. Conway, John Machir and Jacob Edwards, or any three of them, "to view and report upon the most convenient place within the bounds of Washington for fixing the

publick building on." June 20, 1789, the Commission reported that "the vacant ground between Miles W. Conway and John Williams is the most proper and convenient place for the location of the publick building."

Plans for the first courthouse were presented in court on May 29, 1793. The contract for the building of same was let to Rev. Craig for which he was "to receive the sum of 739 pounds and 10 shillings and same to be built of brick or stone." On October 26, 1796, "the court adjourned to the publick building there to sit in the future." October 28, 1799, Rev. Craig was allowed by the court 286 pounds for additional work on the courthouse.

In the north east corner of the "publick" grounds - "stray pens" were erected for the purpose of impounding strayed stock so that their owners might recover same. Jacob Thomas was the first keeper.

The pillory or whipping post - in the rear of the courthouse - where the offender was exposed to public scorn and court punishment -- the court sentence generally being twenty lashes on the bare back "well laid on." With a rawhide, it was the duty of the sheriff to perform the court's decree by laying on the number of "stripes" while the transgressor stood with naked body and up-stretched hands tied to the whipping post.

In the front yard of the building was the old slave block upon which "Uncle Tom" and "Topsy" were sold. When Harriett Beecher Stowe was traveling through Kentucky in 1833, she stopped in Washington to visit the Marshall Key family. The next morning Colonel Key took her to the courthouse to see some slaves sold. Washington claims Mrs. Stowe received the inspiration for her characters in "Uncle Tom's Cabin" while on this memorable visit in Washington.

The old courthouse stood 115 years until Friday, August 13, 1909, when it was struct by lightning and leveled by fire. "So perished the chief glory of Washington" to use the words of the late Mrs. Edna Hunter Best, well known historian and author of "The Historic Past of Washington, Mason County, Kentucky."

A bill to remove the seat of justice of the County of Mason from the town of Washington to the city of Maysville, was introduced in 1847 in the Kentucky House of Representative, and reads: (in part) -- "Be it enacted by the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Kentucky, that

at the next August (1847) election, a poll shall be opened to ascertain the will of the people of the said county of Mason as to the location of the Seat of Justice."

At the election, August 5, 1847, - 1,426 votes were cast for moving the county seat from Washington to Maysville, and 1,194 against - making a majority of 232 favoring the removal. January 14, 1848, the bill removing the county seat of Mason County from Washington to Maysville passed the House of Representative with only 4 dissenting votes, and January 18, the Senate, with only 2 votes against.

After the county seat was removed to Maysville in 1848, the old courthouse was used as a school building for many years. Later the Rev. Robert McMurdy, an Episcopal rector, conducted an academy in the historic structure.

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