



Bracken County's Court House At Brooksville

The sixth and present Bracken County Court House taken from the back side along old Madison Street. The addition of a communications tower for the sheriff's department, and modern insulated doors and windows are the only items that make the appearance different from that in the views taken in earlier years. Although the clock is of a modern version, the bell is the original 700-pound bronze casting that was installed in 1915. A modern timing device is used in conjunction with the electric clock to strike the hour and half hours. The original wind up clock mechanism is still present in the bell tower.

(All Photos Courtesy of the Author)

A Look At Bracken County's Court Houses Through The Years

Six Court Houses Have Served The County During Last 200 Years

By John E. Leming Jr. - 1997

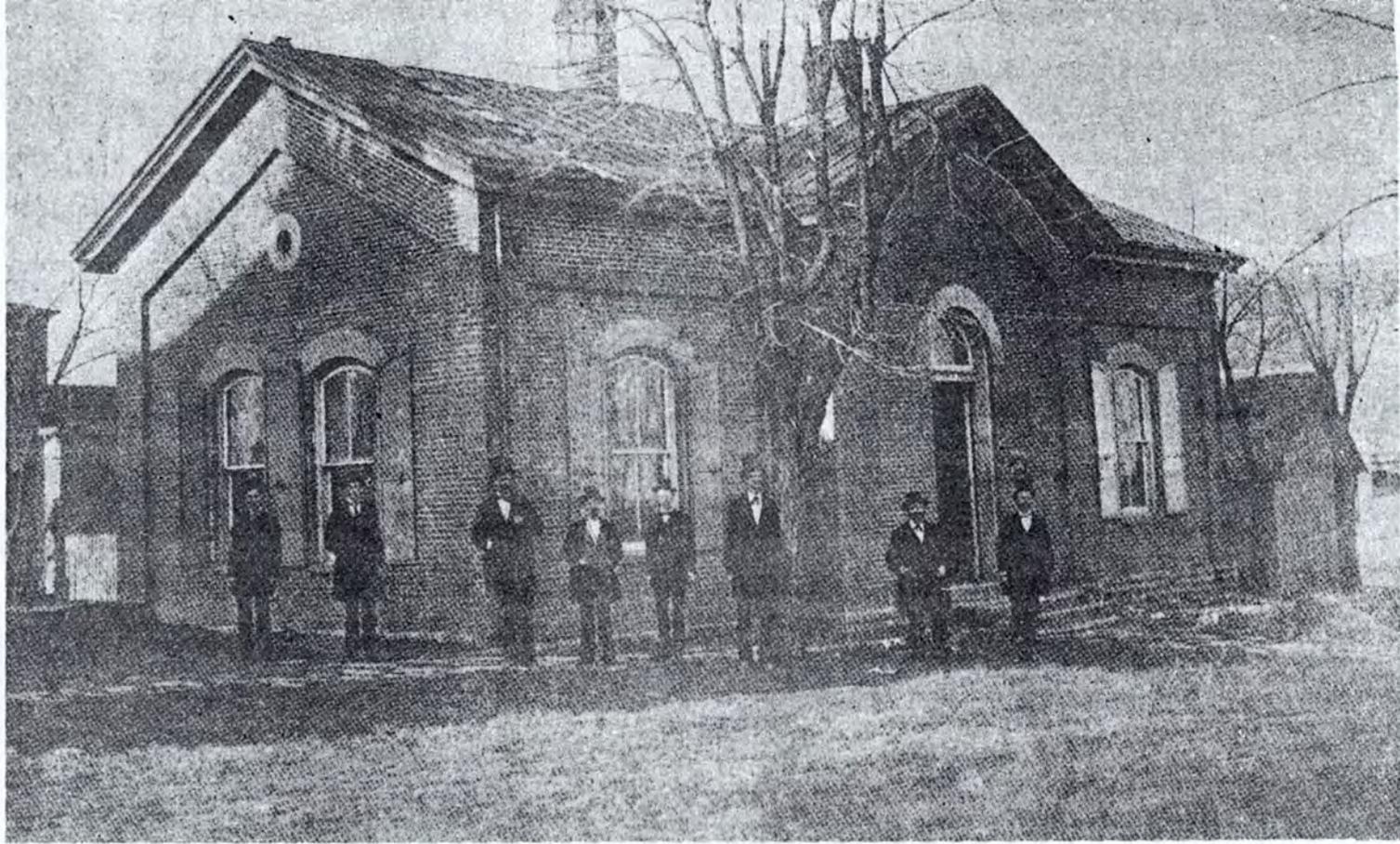
When Bracken County was formed in 1796 and signed into legislation in 1797, there was no official town meeting place for the purpose of holding court proceedings. Augusta was used in the earliest years before an official site was chosen. The first session of Bracken County Court was held in Augusta at the home of Justice Dickenson Norris. It does not appear that any official buildings were constructed for the sole purpose of holding court proceedings at that time.

Early in 1800, an act of the General Assembly specified that justices in Bracken County should choose a permanent site and construct buildings for the purpose of the court proceedings. In September, gentlemen justices William Woodward, Isaac Day, and Alexander Hughey paid the sum of \$100.00 to Andrew Morrow for

two acres of prime land on his plantation for the purpose of constructing public buildings specified as a court house and jail. The site was located near Woodward Crossroads. The first meeting was held in October 1800.

By June 24, 1801, the decision was again before the court to determine a permanent location. At a meeting in Augusta on that date, Richard Young, Joseph Crocket, and Robert Johnson were appointed by yet another act of assembly to fix the permanent location. On June 26, 1801, an official document was signed by the three men stating that "based on geography and the situation of settlements in Bracken County, the permanent seat of Bracken County would be located at Andrew Morrow's plantation near a red oak stump, marked 'B.C.'" On that same day, Andrew Morrow conveyed fifteen acres of land to Bracken County to be laid off in a square figure to include the red oak stump at the middle marked B.C. In December 1801, two

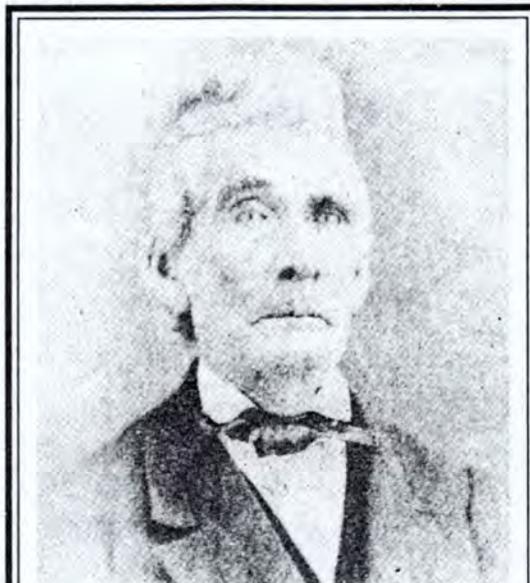
The devil lies brooding in the miser's chest. --Thomas Fuller



County officials standing in front of the old circuit clerk's office on the court house square at Brooksville in the late 1880s. The building was located in the northwest corner of the square along Miami Street and was razed with other buildings in 1914 to make way for the new and present court house structure. The men are identified as, left to right: J.B. Clarke, attorney; George B. Poage Jr., deputy circuit court clerk; Henry Clay Weaver, attorney, and late captain of Company D of the 16th Kentucky Infantry; George Adamson, sheriff; J.A. McCane, deputy circuit court clerk; George B. Poage Sr., circuit clerk; James W. Staton, master commissioner; and R. K. Smith, attorney. The court house is to the left and slightly behind the building, and the old jail building is directly behind the circuit clerk building.

cabins were proposed for construction, one to be fourteen feet square for use as a jail, and the other to be eighteen feet square for the use of a court house. It was specified that both buildings were to be constructed of logs, the jail of double logs. With the absence of official documentation showing proof of a court house at Augusta, it appears that this building was the first official Bracken County Court House. In February 1802, John Morrow received an order of the court to turn over 85 acres of land for condemnation. The land would be used by Bracken County to construct a town by the name of Oxford, this being the official birth document for that historical Bracken County community.

The court documents specifically stated that the land was to be used to construct the town



State Representative David Brooks who drafted a bill to move the court house to Woodward's Crossroads in order to make county government more centralized for all Bracken County citizens. Brooks served the state legislature in 1837, 1838, 1839, and 1845.

of Oxford, and that it would include the permanent seat of Bracken County. It was also ordered that a stray pen and stocks be built and finished before the next regular session. At that session on March 20, 1802, the buildings were inspected by justices, Rudolf Black and John McDowell. It was also obvious at this session that there appeared to be some controversy between the justices at Oxford and those from Augusta, concerning the selection of the permanent county seat.

Only three justices were present at the meeting at Oxford that day, and the meeting was adjourned and court was ordered to be reopened at Augusta later in the day. In a separate document filed in May 1802, William Woodward and Levi Moore petitioned the court in protest, stating, "Justices cannot act as judicial offic-

ers at another place but the court house at the permanent seat of justice”

The controversy continued, and in September of that same year, documents prove that yet another decision was to be made concerning the location of the county seat. As early as September 1802, money was being pledged for construction of buildings at Augusta. This document stated that “money is promised to erect public buildings provided the seat of justice is fixed permanently at Augusta.” By January 1803, the decision appears to have been made in favor of Augusta. A plan of the new court house was submitted in May 1803. The building would be thirty-six by twenty-four feet “in the clear.” A memorandum, submitted to the court on May 31, 1803, specified that the building would be constructed by John Marchel of Clermont County, Ohio, and was to be complete in four months. Marchel would also plaster the interior if required.

In yet a final document submitted in August 1803, the specification further stated that the court house would be located on the east side, and a jail on the west

side of Main Street. These documents appear to serve as final proof of the decision to relocate to Augusta. Final payments were being made on the new building as late as October 1805, for items such as windows and shutters. This building was the scene of the first murder trial held in Bracken County in 1820, when “Sarah, a woman of color” was found guilty of murdering her child with a fork. Sarah was later hanged on the hillside overlooking Augusta. In February 1823, commissioners were elected to receive and approve plans for yet another court house to be built on the public square at Augusta. It appears that this building was used continuously until 1839.

Change was again on the horizon in Bracken County and in 1838, Representative David Brooks drafted a bill to move the court house to Woodward's Crossroads. The Kentucky General Assembly approved the bill on February 16, 1839, and the name of the town was changed to Brooksville in honor of Brooks.

Henry Fronk, Nimrod Routt, John Bassett, and Rudolf Black were appointed commissioners to appropriate funds to erect public buildings for the purpose of holding and conducting court matters. A small brick court house measuring thirty by thirty feet was erected, and the first term of court was held at Brooksville in October 1839. This court building was the scene of many of the heated debates in 1849 between abolitionist, Cassius M. Clay, and Thomas F. Marshall, a Whig from Augusta. It was also the scene of the trial of seven slaves, accused of organizing the escape of forty other slaves from Fayette, Bourbon, Mason, and Bracken Counties. Three of the slaves were found guilty of attempted murder and the organization of the escape, and were hanged in the court house yard in the fall of 1849.

During the 1850s, abolitionist, John Gregg Fee (founder of Berea College), spoke on many occasions on the court house square,



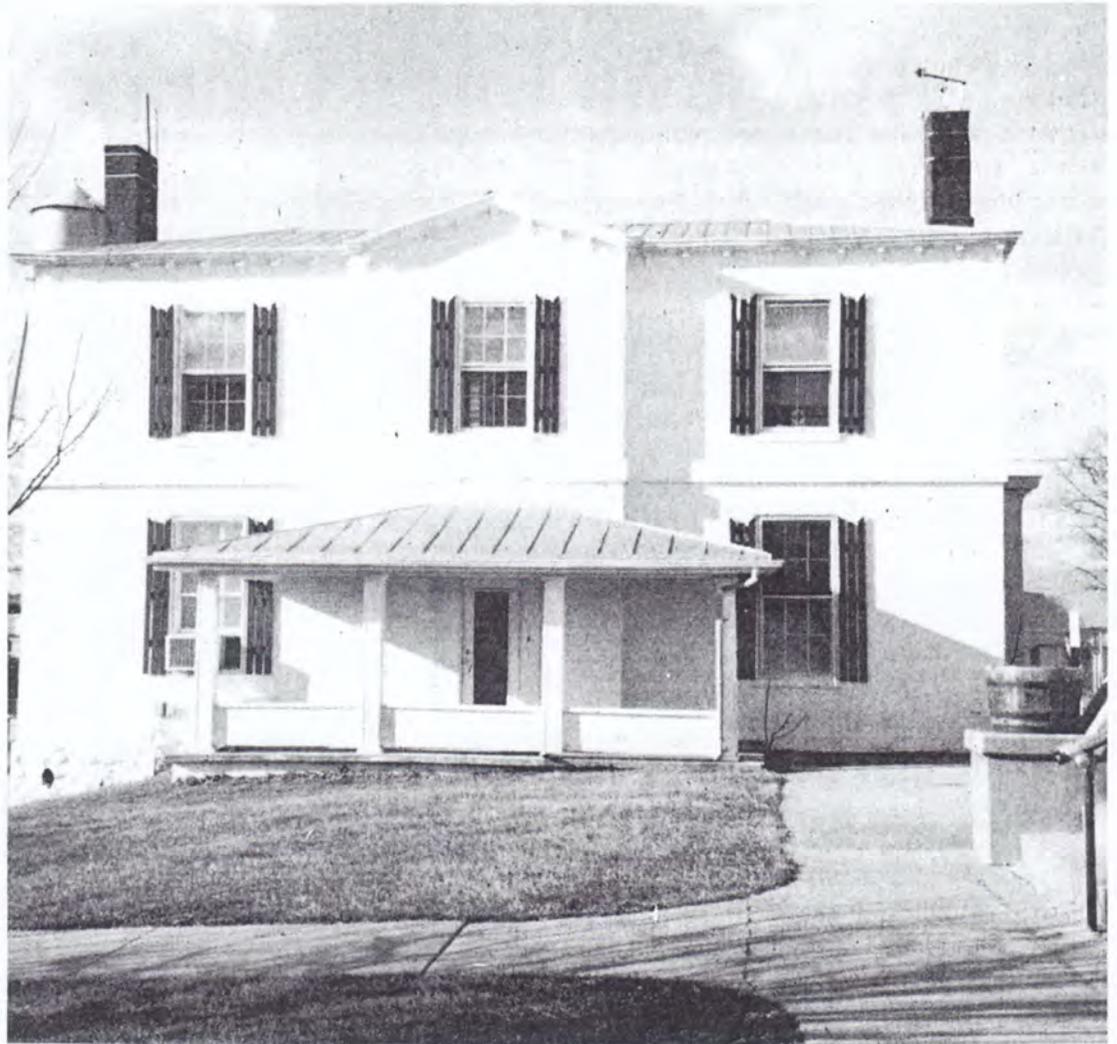
A rare view of the fifth Bracken County Court House in Brooksville during the late 1800s. The event appears to be court day.

and those antagonistic speeches led the grand jury to draft a resolution to remove him from the county. The building also played a part in the final chapter of the Battle of Augusta, when on September 28, 1862, Basil W. Duke, who was organizing the parole of Federal home guards in the court room, was attacked by Federal troops from Maysville. Duke, his men, and many of the prisoners fled to Cynthiana, but one Federal soldier and several Confederates were killed in the hurried escape.

This structure served the county until 1863 when demolition began to make way for a new structure with adjacent circuit court and county clerk offices. The new court house was built of stone block on a rock foundation, and consisted of a large one-story court room with jury rooms on either side. Plans were drawn by a Cincinnati architect consisting of 8 working drawings.

In January 1861, bids for the construction were received. The four bids were from Thomas W. Gideon for \$7,500.00, Ed Berwanger for \$6,750.00, E.H. Hannah for \$6,275.00, and M. Florer for \$4,000.00. The bid of \$4,000.00 was chosen as submitted by Marcus Florer on January 28, 1861. The second court house was erected and the first session was held November 25, 1864, in the midst of the Civil War. This building was the scene of the famous trial of Robert Laughlin in 1897. Laughlin was accused of the murder of his family and was hanged in the court house yard amid a crowd estimated at near 3,000. The building was used continuously until it and all other structures with the exception of the present jail building (constructed in 1869) were condemned and dismantled in July 1913.

The present Bracken County Courthouse was built by the Falls River Construction Company between 1913 and 1915, at a cost of \$50,000.00. Many of the materials were delivered to the site via the Brooksville and Ohio River Railroad, thus providing much needed revenue for



The present old Bracken County jail building located on the corner of the court house square. This building has not been used as a jail since the 1970s. Presently it is occupied on the lower right side by the Bracken County Emergency Dispatch Center and on the lower left side (including the old jail cells) by the Bracken County Historical Society. Note the addition of the porch and awning.

the failing railroad at the time. The court house was dedicated by Deputy Grand Master of the Masonic Lodge, T.J. Adams, amid a crowd estimated at 3,000 on June 14, 1915. The court house remains virtually unchanged today and shares the property with the old jail building which is now used by the Bracken County Emergency Dispatch Center and the Bracken County Historical Society.

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