

Breckinridge County, KY Courthouse Fire

By Jerry Long
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Breckinridge County Herald – News, Hardinsburg, KY,
Friday, 14 February 1958, p.1 & 12:

Courthouse Hit By Fire; Records Saved



The Breckinridge County Courthouse shown here only minutes after the blaze was discovered was destroyed by fire early Friday afternoon. Fire trucks from Cloverport, Irvington, Brandenburg and Radcliff assisted the Hardinsburg Fire Department in bringing the fire under control and keeping it from spreading to other buildings. Photo by Thos. D. Trent.



County records were saved when local merchants send trucks to remove them to safety. Among the records was the original land grant signed by Patrick Henry. Furniture saved included the chair which has been in use for many years by Circuit Court Judges. County offices have been opened in temporary locations. Phot by Thos. D. Trent.

Fire, believed to have been caused by defective wiring, gutted the Breckinridge County Courthouse last Friday afternoon.

The blaze started in the Courthouse tower about 1:30 p. m. and, fanned by a lively and extremely cold wind, rapidly spread into the courtroom on the second floor. Smoke was spotted by former County Court Clerk Roy McCoy, who ran from his office in the Farmers Bank building to warn county officials.

Mrs. Mary Alice Phelps, telephone operator for the Fire Department, turned in the alarm.

Cloverport, Irvington and Brandenburg tire trucks were sent to help control the fire. The four pumpers exhausted the water supply but not before the blaze was brought under control and prevented from spreading to other business establishments.

Trucks were provided by local merchants to haul to safety furniture and as many records as possible. The Judge's chair from the second floor Circuit Court room was saved, but historical

documents stored on the second floor were lost. The original land grant signed by Patrick Henry as Governor of Virginia was saved.

The 89-year-old brick walls withstood the fire and were left standing.



INSURANCE INCREASED

Former County Judge J. W. Hoskinson has informed The Herald-News that he and former County Attorney P. M. Basham persuaded the Fiscal Court six years ago to increase the fire insurance on the Courthouse. from \$50,000 to \$100,000.

Total insurance at the time of the fire was \$149,800.



County Offices Are Re-located

The Veterans of Foreign Wars Clubhouse on the Fordsville road is being used as offices by Circuit Court Clerk Tommy Smith and Judge P. M. Basham will convene the next term of court there.

County Judge Raymond Butler has also opened his office in the V. F. W. Clubhouse. County Court Clerk Charles L. Miller, Sheriff Arthur Beard and Tax Commissioner Guy Gibson have offices in the Commercial Hotel.



Judge Thanks Fire Fighters

As your county Judge, I take this opportunity on behalf of myself and the other County Officials to express our thanks to those, who came to our aid at a time when fire so quickly caused us to suffer the loss of our 89-year-old Breckinridge County Courthouse. But it was by your faithful and untiring help we were able to save what we hope to be the most valuable records from the different offices of the courthouse.

Fire Departments of Cloverport, Irvington, Brandenburg and Radcliff who cooperated and did all they could to help we also extend thanks, and also to those who are trying to make it possible for us to locate elsewhere until we can rebuild.

We ask that you bear with us in all the inconveniences we will have to endure in our sincere efforts to give you our best service.

Again we say thanks to one and all.

RAYMOND BUTLER
Judge Breckinridge County



Courthouse History Told

The Breckinridge County Court House was finished in 1860 and it is said to have taken four years to construct: The bricks were molded and fired at the location where Breckinridge County High School now stands. Stones for the formation were hand quarried and chiseled. They were quarried at Bennett's Quarry near Irvington. The stones cost 10c each. Collins History of Kentucky, published in 1882, noted that the new court house was built at a cost of \$37,000 and that the population of Hardinsburg 455 in 1870.

The only other Breckinridge County Court house was a small log building. When this was destroyed or done away with in some way, legend has it that records were carried out by women and children and taken to a cave under the town of Hardinsburg for safe keeping. This same cave, which at one time had two entrances and contains two large rooms is where Capt. William Hardin ran to get away from a chasing bear. Capt. Hardin known as "Big Bill" was a well known Indian fighter and a very determined man. Most of his fighting was in other states. However, a story is told of his standing in front of his cabin at Hardin's Fort cleaning his gun when an Indian arrived, The Indian wanting to clown around, said 'P'oof, Big Bill." With that Big Bill shot him.

This rugged man was a true builder of "these parts." He received from the King of England a land grant, signed by Patrick Henry. This document, on goat's skin, gave grant to Hardin for land that is now Breckinridge County, at that time 'Kentucky was part of Virginia. In the same year that Kentucky became a state, in 1792, the County of Breckinridge was formed.

Before that time and after the land grant, Capt. Hardin in 1782 made an original land plot for Fort Hardin. He used grape vine to lay off the plot an then it was sketched on paper. The town of Hardinsburg to-day follows practically that same plot, In 1801 the town of Hardinsburg was incorporated by the Kentucky Legislature. It is the oldest town standing with its original name and the second oldest in the state. Harrodsburg Is the oldest Kentucky town but was originally named Boonsboro.

Since the burning of the court house last Friday many people have been recalling from their memories facts handed down to them of events connected with the forming of the County. The court house contained a vast amount of history making documents. Most all of the records were saved, however, some of the oldest ones were not. It is of interest to know that Capt. Hardin's land grant from the King of England and his plot for Hardin Fort were saved.

The Judge's chair nearly 100 years old, has been occupied by distinguished men of the county and district. The Circuit Judges who have served are the present judge: Paul M. Basham, William Hodges, Geo. K. Holbert, J. R. Layman and Judge Chelf. Records of the county officers who have served in the old court house are not available at present.

When a new court house is built, this original judge's chair, will have a place of honor, as it was saved from the fire; and all the documents saved will have a new kind of regard by the people of Breckinridge county because they were almost lost—but saved.



The Courier-Journal

Courier-Journal, Louisville, KY, Saturday, 8 February 1958, p.1:

Flames Raze Breckinridge Courthouse

Most Records Saved;
Historical Papers Lost

By The Associated Press



FLAMES shoot from the roof of the 89-year-old Breckinridge County Courthouse as fire destroys the Hardinsburg landmark. Most of the County's records were saved.

Hardinsburg, Ky., Feb. 7. – Fire destroyed the 89-year-old Breckinridge County Courthouse Friday and cut off the community's water supply for an hour.

Four fire trucks, pumping water from the reservoir faster than it could be replenished, quit operating until pressure could be restored to normal.

The blaze broke out in the Courthouse tower about 1:30 p.m. and was spotted by former County Court Clerk Roy McCoy, who ran inside the two-story brick building to warn County officials. All were evacuated safely, some carrying out their records as they fled.

Heat Felt Inside Bank

"The heat was so intense we could feel it, inside our bank across the street," said Paul Pace, vice-president of Farmers Bank.

Mrs. Mary Alice Phelps, volunteer telephone operator for the Fire Department, said she glanced out the window of her apartment and "saw a blaze pop out of the top of the building. I summoned help immediately."

By the time firemen arrived, Mrs. Phelps continued, "the tower had collapsed and most of the top floor was gone."

Merchants Help Save Records

She said firemen from Cloverport, Irvington, and Brandenburg were called to help keep the fire from spreading to adjoining business establishments.

A number of merchants donated trucks to move records from the Courthouse.

County Court Clerk Charles L. Miller said most records were saved, but that historical documents, stored on the second floor, were lost.

Miller said County offices would probably be moved into the Veterans of Foreign Wars clubhouse for the time being. "I don't know what we'll do about getting a new Courthouse," he added. The building was insured for \$100,000.

Miller said the blaze apparently started in the wiring system, then spread downward through the walls.



**Breckinridge County, Kentucky History, Guida Goodman-Snavely
(Elizabethtown, KY: Ancestral Trails Historical Society, 2005) pp.114-116:**

Courthouse

The first Breckinridge County Courthouse was built of logs soon after Breckinridge became the thirty- ninth county in the state of Kentucky in 1799. The location of the courthouse is not known.

In 1816, plans were drawn up for a new courthouse, the forgotten one. The building was 87 feet in length and 33 feet in breadth. It was built of brick, the walls of the lower story being eighteen inches thick and the second story thirteen and one half inches thick. The first floor to the ceiling was thirteen and one half foot and the second story nine feet between the floor and ceiling.

The outside door was of walnut and the inside doors and the window shutters were of poplar. The roof was of joint shingles made of chestnut and painted Spanish brown. The cornice

and large boards were painted white, and the outside door painted mahogany. The shutters were painted green, the door, window frames and sash painted white. It had four, large white pillars out front, similar to the old Methodist Church.

There were two fireplaces on the second floor and two stoves in the lower section.

This house was used for court only and was ready for use in 1818. It was located near the present location of the Breckinridge County Public Library on Main Street.

The contractors were Charles, Wallow, Thomas Myars and Thomas Taylor. The courthouse cost \$4,284.00. Wallow, Thomas and Myars built the clerk's office, which was a separate building, at the same time at a cost of \$787.00.

On December 24, 1864, during the Civil War, Captain Basham and twenty guerrillas raided Hardinsburg and set fire to the courthouse and damaged it beyond repair. The town had gotten word that the raid was planned and all of the records were removed from the courthouse and secured in a cave. The records were all saved.

In 1869, the third courthouse was finished. It was in the making for four years. The brick was molded and fired at the location where Hardinsburg Primary School now stands. Stones for the formation were hand quarried and chiseled from the Bennett's Quarry near Irvington. The stones cost ten cents each. The cost of the new building was \$37,000. The population of Hardinsburg at this time was 455.

On February 7, 1958, a bitterly cold day, fire struck the third courthouse. The fire started in the tower not long after lunch; therefore several people were in the building. The county officials and others worked quickly to remove the records. Due to their quickness, the county's first marriage book and some historical documents from the circuit court room were about all that was lost. It was reported that the fire was believed to have been caused by defective wiring. Rumor has it that the fire was the act of an arsonist wanting to destroy evidence and that it started in the basement not the attic.

This could have been the starting of another town destruction. The firemen responded promptly as did trucks from Cloverport, Irvington, Brandenburg and Radcliff. The five pumpers exhausted the water supply but not before the blaze was brought under control, preventing it from spreading to other buildings.

Local merchants and farmers provided trucks to haul the records and furniture to safety.

Court was held in the V.F.W. headquarters. The offices were moved to the Commercial Hotel, Lee Abbott building and the Farmers Bank building.

The new brick courthouse was built by the Ramsey Construction Co. of Tell City, Indiana, at a cost of \$280,973. The new building opened for business on May 1, 1960. It was one of the newest and best-equipped courthouses in the state.

On the top floor, is a 300-seat capacity courtroom, plus the Circuit Judge's Office, and offices for the Circuit Court reporter and the Circuit Court Clerk.

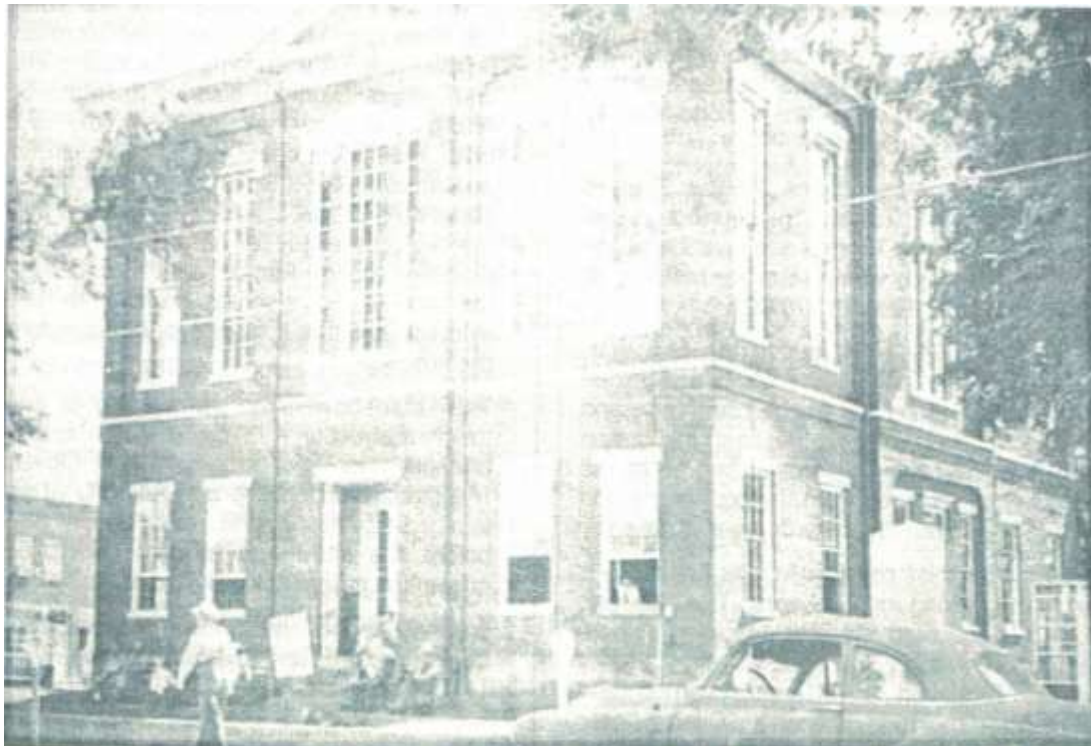
The ground floor housed the County Court Clerk, County Judge, County Attorney, County Sheriff, County Tax Commissioner and County Treasurer.

In the basement there was the Breckinridge County Library, Health Department and homemakers.

Since its opening, a lot of the offices have been switched around or moved. The library and health department have moved out. The County Judge has moved to new quarters and all offices are bulging at the seams again. There is never enough room. The Breckinridge County Archives are located in the basement of the courthouse.



Hardinsburg street scene, 1878-79, reveals the new County Courthouse at right, built 1868-69 and the two-story John Dean building stands on the site now occupied by the Farmers Bank.



The third Breckinridge County Courthouse. It was destroyed by fire in 1958.





Third Breckinridge County Courthouse



Fourth Breckinridge County Courthouse



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 31 July 1960, pp.1A & 12A:

Breckinridge County Courthouse Dedicated As 400 Proudly Watch

By GEORGE H. KERLER
Messenger and Inquirer Staff Writer

Hardinsburg, Ky. – A new hall of justice in Kentucky was dedicated here Saturday by a proud crowd of 400.

The orange-brown brick Breckinridge County Courthouse became the newest jewel among the seats of county government in the commonwealth.

The \$300,000 courthouse replaces one that burned down Feb. 7, 1958. As one speaker said, "It was a big fire that inured to benefit of the public."

The burned-down courthouse was built in 1869. (The Daviess County Courthouse was built in 1868 and still stands.

Breckinridge County's new showplace houses all the county officials on the first floor. Judge Raymond Butler has a private office, reception room and a county courtroom that will be the envy of most every county judge in Kentucky.

The corridor of the first floor is walled in tan tile. The walls of offices of each official are large, smooth concrete bricks, painted a pale green. New furniture and desks have been provided.

But the circuit courtroom upstairs is the main attraction. There are 15 rows of seats for spectators on each side of the aisle in the rear half of the courtroom. There are accommodations for 360 persons here.

The front half has the judge's bench with what looks like a hand-carved oak seat for Judge P. M. Basham. The jury will be able to swivel in 12 tiltable chairs. There is ample working room for both the defense and prosecution attorneys.

Grand Jury Room Roomy

Walls of the circuit courtroom are pale green with a tan wood base.

The grand jury room, with a long table, looks like a conference room for executives. Judge Basham has been given office space that will make many of his colleagues wince.

The building is completely fireproof and was designed by Architect Walter Scott Roberts of Owensboro.

Called upon for a few words, Roberts said the cooperation he had received from officials during construction of the building made for friendly relations. Waving his arm generally at the building, he asked the crowd "to take care of it."

Henry Gibson, county attorney, served as chairman of the dedication proceedings. It took one hour and 15 minutes to introduce county officers, school administrators and other visiting dignitaries before former Circuit Judge J. R. Layman, Elizabethtown, could be presented for the main speech.

Breckinridge County was in the 9th judicial district, along with Hardin, Grayson and Meade Counties, until the 1956 legislature lopped off Hardin and made it a separate judicial district. Hardin became No. 9 and Breckinridge, Grayson and Meade became No. 46.

Appellate Judge John Palmore, Henderson, brought greetings and congratulations to the courthouse from the Kentucky Court of Appeals at Frankfort.

Several natives of Breckinridge who are practicing law elsewhere returned home for the ceremony, Paul D. Miller, Owensboro, was among them.

Flags presented

The Breckinridge County Junior Chamber of Commerce presented the American flag to the court and the Veterans of Foreign Wars presented the flag of the commonwealth. The VFW post here permitted county officials to use its facilities for their offices while the new courthouse was being built.

Patience and cooperation seemed to be the theme of the dedication. Officials noted that it is not easy to administer a government without a capitol building.

They frequently complimented the voters of Breckinridge County for having approved the courthouse bond issue by a vote of 3,999 to 158.

Modern as it is the circuit courtroom took on the temperature aspect of most of the courtrooms in Kentucky during the summer. The air-cooling system issues a low drone, interfering with hearing the speakers. It was turned off after the ceremony began and out came the hand fans and perspiration.

A loud speaker was yet to be installed and there is no clock on the wall. The first term of circuit court starts here Nov. 7.

The courthouse is bounded on two sides by U. S. 60 so that tourists will have another place to ogle as they drive through Hardinsburg.

Gibson suggested that parents bring their children to the courthouse to inquire of officials what their duties are. He said this will give youngsters a healthy interest in government.

Judge Basham recalled that when he was a student, classes were dismissed so that the class could attend trials and watch American justice in action.

