

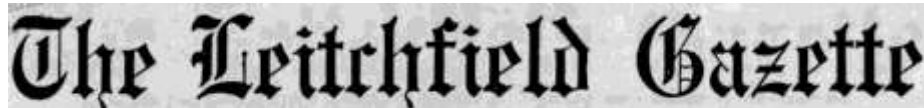
# Grayson County, KY Courthouse Fires

By Jerry Long  
c.2024



Grayson County was organized on 25 January 1810. It was established from the western part of Hardin County and the eastern part of Ohio County. The 54th county formed in the state it was named in honor of Colonel William Grayson, a native Virginian, an aide to Gen. Washington and a member of Congress in 1784, later a U.S. senator. Leitchfield, the county seat, was named after Major David Leitch of Campbell County, KY, who was the patentee of the land on which the town stands and whose heirs donated the site for a town to be named in honor of Leitch.

During the Civil War the county's first courthouse was destroyed by Confederate troops when it was burned on 24 December 1864. The second courthouse, a brick structure, replaced it and was destroyed by a fire on 16 June 1896. The third seat of justice also was destroyed by fire on 3 April 1936. All of the county's records were lost in the 1896 fire. No records were lost in the fire in 1936.



The Leitchfield Gazette, Leitchfield, KY, Wednesday, 10 July 1963, p.1:

MARKER TO BE PLACED

A marker commemorating burning of the Grayson County Court House in December, 1964 [sic – 1864], will be placed on the court house lawn Thursday. A short ceremony has been set tentatively for Friday at 2 p.m. The marker is scheduled to be placed by State Highway Department workers. E. L. Lewis, traffic engineer with the highway department at Elizabethtown, was in Leitchfield last week making arrangements for determining site of the marker.



### “Courthouse Burned”

Inscription: “Twenty-two Kentucky courthouses were burned during Civil War, nineteen in last fifteen months: twelve by Confederates, eight by guerrillas, two by Union accident. See map on reverse side. Dec. 24, 1864, a contingent of CSA Gen. Lyon's force ordered to harass and delay pursuing Union troops, burned courthouse at Leitchfield. Records destroyed.”

The historical highway marker formerly stood on the public square in Leitchfield, Grayson County, Kentucky. The marker was erected in 1963 by the Kentucky Historical Society and Kentucky Department of Highways. (Marker Number 589.) The marker is now missing; it disappeared during 2009-2018. The Grayson County Historical Society noted in 2018 that the marker has been missing for a long time.



**The Courier-Journal**

**Courier-Journal, Louisville, KY, Wednesday, 17 June 1896, p.3:**

**COURT-HOUSE BURNED.**  
**Grayson County's Handsome  
Structure Destroyed With  
All the Records.**

Leitchfield. Ky, June 17. – (Special) – The Grayson county court-house, a handsome and costly structure, was destroyed by fire this morning.

The flames were discovered at 12:15 o'clock. The building is a total loss and no records are saved unless some that were locked in the vaults.

The cause of the fire is a mystery.

Efforts are now being directed to saving the buildings on and around the public square.



**THE MORNING HERALD.**

**The Morning Herald, Lexington, KY, Thursday, 18 June 1896, p.2:**

**COURT HOUSE BURNS**

Incendiary Caused the Loss of Grayson County's [sic] Records

Leitchfield June 17. — At about 12:20 this morning fire was discovered in the Grayson county court house. Every effort was made to save the county records but it was impossible as the heat was intense and the danger from falling floors and walls was continually imminent.

The loss to the building will reach \$20,000. The loss to records cannot be estimated as none were saved. Judging from the position of the fire one is bound to believe that it was of incendiary origin. There is absolutely no clue at this writing.



**THE HARTFORD HERALD.**

**Hartford Herald, Hartford, KY, Wednesday, 24 June 1896, p.3:**

**Court House Burned.**

The Grayson county court house with all the records, save the sheriff's tax book, was burned at midnight of the 17th inst.

The Grayson Gazette, in speaking of the cause of the fire, says:

WHAT CAUSED THE FIRE.

It is a mystery beyond solution, yet there are several theories offered, all of which are mere guess work. There are several ways that it might have occurred, but only one direct cause and that, if known to anyone, has not been exposed.

#### SAW A LIGHT.

About an hour before the fire was discovered, at eleven o'clock, Percy and Warren Stone saw a dim light in the court hall from about the center of the square. They walked over to the bank and there they could also see it from the north side. They thought the double doors at the entrance of the court room were open. They say it looked about like the light from a candle or lamp, although they could not see either, and concluding there was somebody up there, perhaps playing a card game, they turned and went home. This might, possibly, have been caused by a slow fire burning at that time. It might have been some one had left a lamp burning in the room. The lamp might have exploded – perhaps there was no one present – perhaps there was. This is guess work. All that is known to the public now is that the light was there. It was seen. It was suspicious. Some one must know why it was there.

Some think the fire was the work of an incendiary – some one who I wanted to cancel a mortgage or an indictment probably. Some think it was fired above and below at the same time but this story is not likely. It is also claimed that the door to the judge's office was broken in. Others say they heard an explosion. This was likely brick or material falling in the burning building. Parties who slept near the building noticed nothing of the kind. Several revolver shots were fired to awaken the people, however.

Of course some one is responsible for the fire. If the building was not fired for a special purpose it occurred through accident or neglect of some kind, but no amount of speculation will mitigate the loss.

The people of Grayson will have to build another court house. It will come pretty hard upon us as, we still have about four years of railroad tax to pay. There was no insurance upon the building. At present the county officers have selected temporary quarters. The county clerk is over the postoffice, the circuit clerk over the bank, while the county judge, attorney superintendent and sheriff have quarters at the jail.

The greatest personal loss was that of Jess T. Gosnell, which he now estimates at about \$1,000.

#### LOSS ON BUILDING.

The original cost of the court house was slightly in excess of \$17,000 and with the improvements since added in the way of fixtures, iron shutters, cornice, etc., the total was swelled to about \$19,000. The walls only are left, and while the greater portion of them appear to be in fair shape, with the exception of the south-east corner, it will take a careful investigation to determine to what extent they will have to be taken down, or whether they will be safe for use in rebuilding.



# The Courier-Journal

**Courier-Journal, Louisville, KY, Wednesday, 16 September 1896, p.9:**

## THE CONTRACT LET

For the Building of Grayson County's New Court-House at Leitchfield.

Leitchfield, Ky., Sept. 15. – (Special.) The bid for the construction of the Grayson county court-house here were opened at noon to-day, W. H. Bailey, of Henderson, was the successful bidder, his bid being \$13,759. the next lowest bid being \$13,824 by IH. H. Cornell, of Henderson. There were only four bids in all, one of which was by a local firm. The building, which is to be constructed of brick with stone facings, will be located in the center of the public square, instead of the corner where the old one was burned. The offices of the Clerks and County Judge are to be made fire-proof. Mayor J. A. Bishop, Capt. D. O' Riley, O. F. Hughes and Geo. Fletcher are the Commissioners. This ends Caneyville's movement for the county seat, which at one time threatened to be a bitter fight.



Third Grayson County Courthouse  
destroyed by fire on 3 April 1936





# The Leitchfield Gazette

The Leitchfield Gazette, Leitchfield, KY, 10 April 1936, p.1:

## GRAYSON COUNTY COURT HOUSE BURNED LAST FRIDAY MORNING

Blaze Starting in Upper Part of Cupola Soon  
Claims Whole of Forty-Year-Old  
Structure in Leitchfield

THIRD BUILDING OF KIND LOST HERE

Taxpayers Lose Building



This picture of the court house was taken shortly after the fire broke out. The walls of the building still stand and the flag pole on the west side remained standing until Tuesday morning when a high wind from the west caused it to fall inside the walls.

The Grayson County Court House was destroyed by fire Friday morning of last week when a blaze, starting in the south side of the cupola, in a few minutes enveloped the entire tower in flames. The smoke curling out of the top part of the cupola was first noticed by men in the H. A. McClure Jewelry Shop and the alarm sounded, attracting hundreds of persons to the scene of the conflagration.

### Third Grayson Court House

This was the third court house the taxpayers of Grayson County have lost by fire in the past 72 years. The first court house was burned December 24, 1864 by the Confederate troops of General David Lyons. The second one burned at midnight on June 16, 1896. The third court house was built the following year by the Bailey Contracting Company, of Owensboro. George Fletcher, local carpenter, was employed by county as its supervisor. The contract price for the structure was \$13,500, but when it was decided to fireproof a part of the building, that increased the cost to \$17,500. The building complete with furnishings cost \$22,000 thirty-nine years ago. Improvements made in the years that followed probably doubled the cost. The building probably could not be replaced today for \$50,000, exclusive of furnishings, it is said.

How the fire started last Friday morning will never be known. Some attribute the blaze to faulty wiring, while others think that possibly a spark from one of the nearby chimneys was carried into the belfry by the wind, igniting the numerous birds' nests there. Others advance the theory that a bird carried a lighted cigarette into its nest, thus starting the fire.

Fire insurance totaled \$45,000, according to county officials. Adjusters representing the various insurance companies issuing the policies were here this week to lookover the ruins.

Judge Bratcher said this week that the Grayson County Fiscal Court would be called together some time this month to discuss plans regarding a new court house.

T. J. Nolan, of Louisville, who designed the Bank of Clarkson building, furnished the original sketch on the Leitchfield school building, planned the court houses at Elizabethtown and Munfordville, was here last Saturday looking over the situation.

One of the things lost in the court house fire last Friday which is being missed more than any other feature is the old town clock. Folks were in the habit of glancing up at the clock at any time in order to determine the hour. But now it is gone and yet folk are still noticed looking up into space to see what time it is.

The clock was installed in the tower a number of years ago by H. A. McClure, local jeweler, who received a \$10 profit on the ponderous \$700 time piece which served hundreds of citizens.

The building had hardly stopped blazing before theories were being advanced as to where the new court house would be located. Albert Mulhall phoned from Clarkson and offered a free site for the new structure if it would be built in his town. This was a moot question in 1896 when the court house burned here. Loyal public-spirited Clarkson citizens used every means of persuasion in an effort to get the court house in their town.

The offices of County Judge C. L. Bratcher and County Attorney C. O. Carrier are now located in the State Bank building. Miss Mary Landis Cave, county court clerk, is now located at the jail building in the offices formerly occupied by Clarence Nimmo, W.P.A. project supervisor, who is now at the Opera Hall building.

Quarters of county officials will probably be maintained at their present location for several months.

Discovery of Blaze at 9:15

The fire was discovered at 9:15 where the hands of the town clock stood as the tower collapsed. A 1,500 pound weight used in the mechanism of the clock crashed through the upper floors into the hall below and embedded itself, narrowly missing those engaged in saving records and furniture from the building.

Charles Claggett was first in cupola and found only a small fire which he said could have been extinguished with a little water. He said the fire was not near the wiring used in lighting the clock dials and the interior. The hose from the local chemical engine would not reach up to the cupola and volunteer firemen had to abandon the idea of putting out the fire.

In a few minutes the news of the fire had spread over the country, and George Shively, head of the Elizabethtown Fire Department, volunteered to bring equipment here. The men and a pumper arrived in time to halt the blaze in the lower floor. Water was pumped from the cistern in the rear of the Masonic Hall.

The Elizabethtown firemen did splendid work, and Judge Clyde L. Bratcher expressed deep appreciation for their valiant efforts and kind neighborliness in coming here.

A stiff wind was blowing from the west and as the fire entered the second floor of the court house, burning bits of wood were caught in the gale and carried to nearby buildings including the State Bank structure, Alexander Hotel, Heyser Hotel, County Jail and other points where men were stationed to forestall any fresh outbreak.

Within an hour after the blaze broke out, the court house was gutted and all that was left was the fire-proof part of the building. The offices of County Assessor C. R. Gaither, Circuit Court Clerk, Claude E. White County Court Clerk, Mary Landis Cave and Judge Bratcher escaped serious injury to their contents. However, practically all records were taken out.

Some damage was done in court in the office of the county court clerk where the outer fire-proof door jammed and could not be closed.

Friday afternoon county officials began the task of locating their records and opening up offices in the Opera Hall Building. Judge Bratcher resumed his duties in his office which had not been injured to any great extent.



# The Courier-Journal

**Courier-Journal, Louisville, KY, Monday, 18 January 1937, p.3B**





Grayson County's new Court House at Leitchfield will soon be a reality. The structure was designed by Thomas J. Nolan, architect, Kentucky Home Life Building.

Ground for the new Grayson County Court House, Leitchfield, Ky., to replace the Court House recently destroyed by fire, was broken Wednesday, January 6. The structure was designed by Thomas J. Nolan, Louisville architect.

The new building will be located in the center of the square, and will have a width of sixty-six feet, and a depth of 110 feet.

Building will be two stories and basement, exterior walls will be of red brick, trimmed with cut stone.

The circuit court room on second floor will have a seating capacity of approximately 450. The county court room will be located on the first floor.

Other Court Houses designed by Mr. Nolan include: Marion County, at Lebanon; Hardin County, at Elizabethtown; Hart County, at Munfordville.

Recent schools include: Bradfordville High School, Marion County High School, Rineyville grade and high, White Mills grade and high, Glasgow Junction grade and high, and Holy Trinity School at St. Matthews.



## The Leitchfield Gazette

The Leitchfield Gazette, Leitchfield, KY, Friday, 4 February 1938, p.1:

**New Grayson County Court House**



Above is a view of the south entrance of the new Grayson County court house, designed by T. J. Nolan, Louisville architect, and built by Jenkins-Essex Construction Company, of Elizabethtown. The beautiful structure was paid for out of funds collected in insurance on the old building which burned April 6, 1936, and money given to the taxpayers of Grayson County by the Public Works Administration of the Federal Government.

Entering at the south door there is a short flight of steps to the basement where on the left you will find in the order named, offices of County Agent R. T. Faulkner, men's washroom, offices of Mrs. Nell Mudd, certifying clerk for W.P.A., and Roy Carter, county project supervisor.

Going back to the entrance in basement, on the right first the boiler room, women's washroom, and then the offices of Dr. Layson Swann, county health officer.

Entering from the south door a short flight of steps takes you to the first floor where on your left, in the order named, are located the offices of Sheriff W. A. Smith, Tax Commissioner C. R. Gaither, county court room and offices of Judge Clyde L. Bratcher.

Starting again at the south entrance on the right, in the order named, is the office of Circuit Court Clerk C. E. White, County Court Clerk Miss Mary Landis Cave, and County Attorney C. O. Carrier.

On the third floor are the offices of Commonwealth Attorney Allen P. Cubbage and the old age assistance workers, Mrs. Clythia Armes and T. E. Layman.

New equipment and furnishings are in use throughout the building which is modern in every respect. The north entrance is exactly the same in appearance as that of the south.



## The Leitchfield Gazette

**The Leitchfield Gazette, Leitchfield, KY, Wednesday, 25 September 1968, p.4B; and Thursday, 24 June 1976, Bicentennial Edition, p.15:**

### History of Grayson County

By Duvall Morrison

#### Grayson County courthouses and jails

Grayson County has erected four courthouses at Leitchfield. The first one (a log house) was built by Richard May, who lived on Valley Creek in Hardin County, and it stood in the northwest corner of the public square. The first story was divided into four sections. The Judge's stand, in the Circuit Court Room, was highly elevated, and the bar was enclosed by a high barricade. The place where the jury sat was so much lower than the Judge's stand that their heads were below the feet of the Circuit Judge. The first courthouse was burned by the Confederate soldiers on December 24, 1864, who were under the command of General H. B. Lyons. The Confederate Army had been passing through Leitchfield for several days, closely pursued by the Union forces, and when the rear ranks reached the town, there was an order to burn the town in order to cut off supplies from the pursuing Union soldiers. After fire was set to the courthouse, the Union Army was so close to the town and so much stronger than the troops of General Lyons that they fled in haste rather than be overtaken by the Union Army. Tradition says that the Confederate soldiers forced a number of boys who were loafing near the courthouse to enter the court room and chop up the wooden benches and set them on fire, which resulted in the complete destruction of the courthouse.

The second courthouse was a brick structure built in the southeast corner of the public square in 1870. This building stood until the night of June 16, 1896, when it, with all the county records, was destroyed by fire of unknown origin.

The third courthouse was built in the center of the square and was completed about the year 1898. It was a good building and stood until April 3, 1936, when a fire which started in the cupola consumed the entire building. However, all of the records were saved.

The fourth courthouse was completed in 1939, and it stands upon the same spot as the third courthouse stood. The fourth and present courthouse is a handsome structure, large and commodious, an ornament to any county, and equipped to serve the needs of the county in a splendid way.

[The preceding article was also published in the book, A History of Grayson County, Kentucky, 1810-1958, Duvall Morrison (Utica, KY: McDowell Publications, 1979) pp.3-4.]



The Leitchfield Gazette, Leitchfield, KY,  
Thursday, 24 June 1976, Bicentennial Edition, p.15:



GRAYSON COUNTY  
**News-Gazette**

News-Gazette, Leitchfield, KY, Thursday, 11 May 1978, p.1B:

## The four courthouses of Grayson County

The first courthouse of Grayson County was a one-story structure on the northwest corner of the square and was built by Richard May of Hardin County. John L. Helm, a candidate for mayor, made a speech dedicating the building

The building burned in 1864 as indicated by the marker on the square today. The building was burned by Confederate troops to slow the advancing union army. It is said that several nearby buildings fell prey to the massive flames.

The next courthouse was a brick structure on the northeast corner of the square. This building stood until the night of June 3, 1896 [note – this date was corrected in the May 25, 1978 issue of the News-Gazette, it should have been April 3, 1896] when it was destroyed by fire. All the county records were burned in the fire.

Louis Vienez, who at the time lived on a farm near Millwood (now owned by Gilbert Carrier) said there was a high wind and burnt papers were scattered over the farm.

The third courthouse was constructed by the Bailey Contracting Co. of Owensboro. George Fletcher, an Englishman, was employed by the county as supervisor. The contract price was \$13,500, but it was decided to fireproof a part of the building and the cost was increased to \$17,500. The complete cost with furnishing was \$22,000.

It was a commanding structure, with two stories and a basement. The first story contained the offices of the county judge and other officials. The second story was mostly the courtroom and smaller rooms for members of the jury. There was a large balcony in the rear of the courtroom. A watering trough on the east side furnished water for the thirsty horses.

During the torrid summer days, one could see several wagons of melons on the square. The melons sold at a price one could afford— 5 cents to 40 cents— and were delicious as only Kentucky produces. Some of us recall “Uncle” Billy Wortham, who was famous for his melons. He was the great-grandfather of our present judge Earl Glenn.

This third courthouse was completed about 1870, the year that the first passenger train passed through Leitchfield. It too fell prey to flames on Friday, April 3, 1936.

The first to discover the flames were men in the H.A. McClure Jewelry Shop, who saw small smoke coming from the cupola. It is believed that the fire was caused when a bird carried the butt of a cigarette while in the process of building a nest or by improper wiring.

The Leitchfield Fire Department fought bravely but the supply of water was a big problem. We began to carry records from the building and all documents were saved. There was a high April wind. The firemen from Elizabethtown came down and the fire was contained. The walls which were still standing were pulled down for the protection of the public.

One might call the second story of the Opera Building as the “fourth courthouse” (This building is now occupied by Dunn’s Hardware). The April 1936 term of court was held in the second story. George R. Holbert of Elizabethtown was circuit judge. Allen Cabbage was Commonwealth attorney and Chester O. Carrier was county attorney.

The bricks from the courthouse were hauled to the area now used as a parking lot by the Houchens supermarket, where they were cleared by WPA workers. This winter was the timekeeper and recalls one of the workers “Jim Lidd” Willis, a well-known negro.

The bricks were used to construct a county garage on South Main Street. The WPA offices were also located in the building. At a later date Vermont American Corp. used the building and today it is headquarters for the Leitchfield fire and police departments.

The present courthouse was designed by T.J. Nolan of Louisville and built by Jenkins-Essex Co. of Elizabethtown. The cost of the present ' building was paid and money collected from the insurance of the previous courthouse and funds given by the Public Works Administration of the federal government.

We miss the old clock which pounded the hours from the capula, as well as the bell which called us to court. The present courthouse was occupied in 1938. These were the officials at that time: Judge Clyde L. Bratcher Sheriff W.A. Smith, Tax Commissioner C.R. Gaither, Circuit Court Clerk C.E. White, County Court Clerk Mary L. Cave and County attorney C.O. Carrier

— Charles H. Vienez



Fourth Grayson County Courthouse built in 1937-1938





Fourth Grayson County Courthouse built in 1937-1938