

Ashland's Original Courthouse

By Lori Adams

Ashland's original courthouse was used for 75 years after being opened in 1853 at a cost of \$20,000. Back in those days, there was always a courtroom full of spectators whether the case involved a murder or a divorce; and if you couldn't attend in person, there were always the local newspapers that covered the legal trials and tribulations of Ashland County. Local Historian William Duff documented three interesting incidents related to courthouse activities while writing his columns.

Joe Abbe, the night policeman, was summoned by citizens on April 10, 1890, at 1:30 a.m. after seeing what looked like a man standing inside the building with the front door ajar. After shouting warnings to the man to come out with his hands up, the policeman rushed the potential crook only to find out the figure was a dummy. The citizens and Abbe reasoned that some mischievous children had placed the dummy there only to scare the janitor when he opened the building in the morning.



A horse and buggy travels past the original courthouse used from 1853 until 1928

On April 14, 1914, Frank Zehner herded a group of bulls down Cottage Street. One of the one-ton bulls bolted away and headed straight to the courthouse. The Probate Judge and County Recorder slammed the door to keep the raging bull out of the building. Fortunately, attorney Charles Campbell diverted the disorderly bull, and it was captured and led away by a rope that went through the ring in its nose.



Ashland's first courthouse was located at the corner of Cottage and Second Streets

In 1925, the Logan Gas Company had assessed a 75 cent service fee to its customers. 200 citizens gathered at the courthouse in protest and presented a petition that had been signed by 1,200 citizens. J.L. Devor took the petition, along with 67 others from cities in Ohio, to the Public Utilities Commission in Columbus. The 75 cent charge was dismissed, but later passed when the Ohio Legislature approved it anyway.

One of the most famous cases held in the original courthouse was a murder trial. The body of the victim, Harry Williams, was exhumed and his battered skull passed around among the jurors. This tactic was used by the prosecution as a strategy to convict George Horn of first-degree murder.

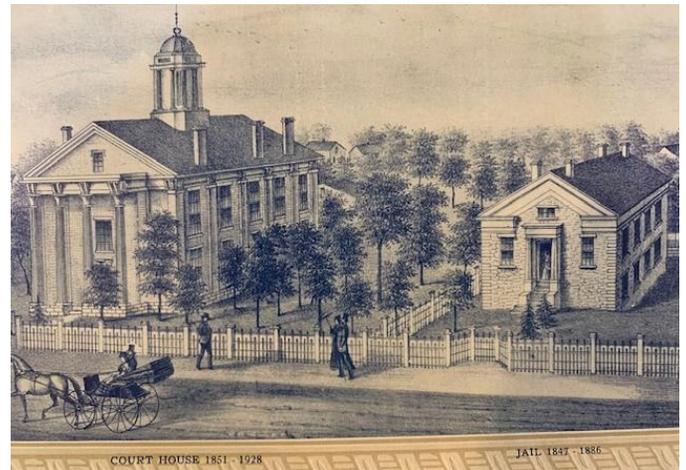
ASHLAND'S ORIGINAL COURTHOUSE

In 1883, Williams and his brother-in-law, Tom McAvoy, Horn and his best friend, William Gribben, were all reportedly in West Salem to collect their paychecks, but lingered awhile in the local saloons. Horn and Gribben decided to hop a train back to Polk. Williams and McAvoy walked back to Polk along the tracks when a brawl started and Horn threw a large stone at Williams breaking his jaw. Horn then hit Williams on the head with three blows from an axe.

Many said there was nothing but circumstantial evidence against Horn; but when he was located after the murder, the axe was located in a hay stack on his property. He also had blood on his shirt, but claimed he always got nosebleeds when he drank. Only Horn's parents and sister testified on his behalf, swearing he was in bed asleep at the time of the murder.

Gribben was also charged as an accomplice in the murder, even after McAvoy stated he never struck a blow. Crowds who attended the trial often interrupted the proceedings with applause or jeering, because public opinion did not favor Horn's claim of innocence and being framed.

Both men were hanged for the crime on May 16, 1884, in the courthouse yard, but many precautions were taken in advance to prevent anticipated rioting. The National Guard provided about 350 men in addition to local law enforcement to control the crowd. The area between the old stone jail and the courthouse was blocked off, and an 18-foot wooden fence was built and reinforced to conceal the scaffold.



Ashland County courthouse and jail as they looked in 1874

Before dawn, thousands of people began flocking into town. About 150 tickets were issued to the event to local people who Sheriff Isaac Gates had deemed prominent citizens to invite. They were permitted to sit inside the enclosure to witness the hanging. This enraged the crowd of about 8,000 people who gathered to watch and protest.

Ashland's first courthouse was razed in 1928 due to deterioration of the building and the growth of the county. On Labor Day, September 2, 1929, a new courthouse was dedicated and remains our current courthouse today.



Ashland County Historical Society

420 Center Street
Ashland, Ohio 44805
Phone: 419.289.3111
Email: ashlandhistory@zoominternet.net
Website: ashlandhistory.org