

Second Courthouse at Hagerstown

But this stopgap measure also proved insufficient, and within a few years there was general agreement that nothing would do but a new courthouse and a new market. It proved possible during the legislative session of 1815 to have an act passed providing for the levying of up to \$30,000 for the new courthouse.⁶ This act, in addition, required that the old market and courthouse be razed and that the site be forever after reserved as a thoroughfare. The building commissioners named in the act were specifically directed to find a new and more suitable site. In the meanwhile, the Justices of the Levy Court were ordered to find suitable accommodations for the Clerk of Court who complained that his records were in jeopardy in the old building.⁷ Nor were these expenditures all, for as is customary in such cases, the funds provided for building the courthouse were inadequate and the county had to come to the General Assembly for a supplemental appropriation, the amount of which is difficult to determine. Provision was made for two annual levies of \$3,000 each, but in addition all those funds collected in the levy of 1821 for building a jail were to be turned over to the commissioners for building the courthouse.⁸ And finally, the commissioners had been authorized by the first Act for Building a Courthouse to borrow at six percent such funds as they might require before the levy had been collected. As things turned out, they borrowed more than any of the authorized levies could repay, and in 1823 they found it necessary to come back to the General Assembly to pay these outstanding debts and interest which by that time amounted to some \$8,000.⁹

It was certainly unusual for so much to be spent on a courthouse in Maryland during that period—the total amount has been estimated to be \$55,000—but what was even more unusual was the fact that the completed building was quite handsome. One of the commissioners for building the courthouse named in the Act of 1816 was Samuel Ringgold, who knew, or knew of, Benjamin Henry Latrobe, the architect of the Roman Catholic Cathedral of Baltimore and other notable structures of the period. Latrobe was employed by the commissioners to draw the plans for the Washington County structure. His drawings, two of which are preserved in the office of the Clerk of Court at Hagerstown and one of which is here reproduced, show “a fine example of his ideals of simple and monumental design . . .” in the romanesque tradition and strikingly resembling the Cathedral.¹⁰ Construction of the courthouse was supervised by Thomas Harbaugh.¹¹

Unhappily this courthouse of Latrobe's, perhaps the handsomest in Maryland at that time, did not long survive in its original form. It became apparent immediately that no one could be heard in the courtroom. A full account of the acoustical problem and how it was met is given by Scharf:

The court-room was originally on the ground-floor, and extended up to the dome, and was hung around with red tapestry. The effect of this was very handsome, but it was impossible for a speaker to make himself heard in it. Subsequently an upper floor was built, and the court removed up-stairs, but being still under the dome, its acoustic properties were as bad as before. The floor was removed and the hall brought back to its original position, and the next improvement attempted was a floor made directly beneath the dome, in which position it remained until a back building was constructed by R. C. Thornsburg, the contractor, in 1859.¹² The floor in the old building was then restored, and the space above was fitted up for offices. The court-hall was then removed to the back building, and no further change was made . . .¹³

⁶ Ch. 107; an act of the next year removed the responsibility for collecting this levy from the sheriff and assigned it to the county collector, Ch. 107, Acts of 1816; an act of two years later provided that the materials from the old combination courthouse and market or the proceeds thereof were to be assigned to the new market rather than to the courthouse, Ch. 28, Acts of 1818.

⁷ Ch. 84, Acts of 1816.

⁸ Ch. 81, Acts of 1820.

⁹ Ch. 91.

¹⁰ Edith Rossiter Bevan, “Fountain Rock, The Ringgold Home in Washington County,” *Md. Hist. Mag.*, XLVII, 24. Mrs.

Bevan notes that “much correspondence between Latrobe and Ringgold relative to the Court House has been found in the Latrobe papers in the possession of the [Latrobe] family.” This material has not been available to the writer.

¹¹ According to Scharf, *History of Western Maryland*, Vol. II, p. 1106, Harbaugh was also the architect, but this does not seem to have been the case. See also Talbot Hamlin, *Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, New York, 1955, pp. 460-62, and Ferdinand C. Latrobe II, “Benjamin Henry Latrobe: Descent and Works,” *Md. Hist. Mag.*, XXXIII, 260.

¹² As authorized by Ch. 311, Acts of 1858.

¹³ *Op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 1106.