

What a pity it was that the “plan for building of the Same” was returned! All we know about it now is given in one sentence in Lankford: “The building . . . was two-story, of brick, and with the entrance on Broad Street.” In the very next sentence he describes its fate:

This building was in use for a period of eighty-seven years. It was destroyed by a fire which occurred in the day time in the year 1831.¹⁴ The fire was discovered while the court was in session, engaged in the hearing of a cause in which the late Benjamin Lankford was plaintiff and Col. Gale, . . . was defendant. The origin of the fire was not known. The Court adjourned somewhat hastily for the day, and met the next day in the Somerset Hotel, which stood on the Southeast corner of Main and Prince William Streets; and this building also fell a prey to fire in the year 1880.

But this was long after the Somerset Hotel had been returned to private use.

Second Courthouse at Princess Anne

Meanwhile the county followed the usual procedure for building a new courthouse—or in this case a courtroom, for both the Clerk of Court and Register of Wills had been housed before the fire in what Lankford calls “the old bank building” where they remained until about 1904, or a year before the completion of the present courthouse. A bill providing for a special levy for the new courthouse was passed January 25, 1832.¹⁵ At the same session of the General Assembly an act was passed authorizing a levy of \$100 to be used to lay a sheet of lead over the floors of the offices of the Register of Wills and Clerk of Court as a fire prevention measure.¹⁶

A controversy now arose in the county about the location of the new courtroom. Some wanted it built on the old site on Broad Street, others preferred a lot of ground on Prince William Street, which had been acquired by the county some time before and on part of which the old bank building stood.¹⁷ The new site was favored but doubt arose as to the power of the Levy Court to build elsewhere than at the old location. In order to make a choice possible an act was passed at the next General Assembly specifically authorizing the court to erect the new building on any publicly owned property in Princess Anne and to tear down any buildings thereon with the exceptions of the county jail and the “fire proof building in which the county records are now kept.”¹⁸ The Prince William Street site was thereupon chosen.

We know almost less about this courthouse than any of its predecessors. We do not know the name of the builder or of the architect, or even the cost. We have only the impressions of Lankford:

. . . the work progressed so rapidly that the foundation was laid by the 1st of May [1833] and the building was completed by the end of the year.¹⁹ It was substantial and well built but poorly ventilated, and without any architectural pretensions. It was about the size of this courtroom [of the present courthouse] and was in use for a period of seventy-one years. It was demolished in the summer of 1904 to make room for the present courthouse.

Fortunately, a photograph of the courtroom and the record office is preserved in the office of the Clerk of Court, with whose permission it is here reproduced.

Third Courthouse at Princess Anne

At the 1904 session of the General Assembly an act was passed authorizing the county commissioners to borrow up to \$30,000 for the construction of a new courthouse, one which

¹⁴ It has been impossible to determine the exact date of the fire but from indirect evidence found in the Minutes of the Orphans' Court and the Levy Court it is possible to say that it occurred late in October or early in November.

¹⁵ Ch. 35, Acts of 1831.

¹⁶ Ch. 184.

¹⁷ *Somerset County Deeds, Liber G. H. No. 3*, pp. 482-84,

microfilm, Hall of Records. The date of the conveyance is April 23, 1827.

¹⁸ Ch. 85, Acts of 1832.

¹⁹ Meanwhile, the court met at the house of George Dashiell of John; Dashiell was also authorized to sell material from the old courthouse not used in the new one. (*Proceedings of the Levy Court of Somerset County, 1827-1840*, no pagination, Ms.)