

difficulties arose: the commissioners who had collected the special levy for the courthouse, which had been authorized by the act of 1773, and the sheriff of Baltimore County, who was also to collect a large tax for this purpose, were not willing to pay these funds to the commissioners for building the courthouse. The General Assembly found it necessary to order them to do so or to forfeit their bonds.⁶

But the courthouse was still far from built. Now a new rival for county town appeared in Havre de Grace with enough supporters to persuade the General Assembly to suspend once more the construction of public buildings.⁷ The General Assembly then felt the wrath of "Bell-air" again—it ordered another election to be held, this one a showdown between these two towns and no others.⁸ This time the choice of Bel Air was final, and the justices of the county seem to have proceeded to build on the two and five-eighths acres of ground purchased in Bel Air, April 27, 1782, from Aquila Scott of James.⁹ But they were soon in difficulty again. As was customary, there was not enough money to finish the work and there was also a special complication: it seems that the Sheriff of Baltimore County had not collected the full amount provided in the Act of 1773, or at least no one seemed to know for sure that he had. He was now ordered to provide the balance, and the justices of Harford County were authorized to lay an additional levy on the new county.¹⁰ When even this proved insufficient, a supplemental levy of £500 current money was authorized.¹¹

Meanwhile, the court was meeting in private or public houses, first in Harford Town and then, after 1782, in Bel Air. Its peregrinations are difficult to follow because of many losses in the court records and also because those which have survived are hardly more than the most abbreviated minutes. From time to time, though, there is some note of the place of meeting—for example, we find this notation in the Minutes of November 14, 1788: "Gilbert Jones Agrees with the Court to furnish them with the Same Rooms to hold Court in and Jury Rooms which they have been accustomed too and the Clerk's Office which he has now, and find the Court in fire wood for the Sum of forty pounds a Year."¹²

The record losses have also made it impossible to know the name of the designer and builder of this courthouse, but Preston found that the court agreed with James Johnson, January 10, 1791, to finish the building "agreeably to the plan filed in the clerk's office."¹³ For his work Johnson was allowed £550, which must have been only a small fraction of the total cost. Preston believes that the court met for the first time in its new building in March 1791. The plans filed in the clerk's office have long since disappeared but Preston, who might well have seen it, has given us a detailed description:

The courthouse which was then first used was built of brick and occupied the same position as the present [1859] court building in Bel Air. It had wings to the north and south. The wing on the north was used for the clerk's office, and that on the south for the office of the register of wills. The courtroom was down stairs, and the floor was made of bricks. Within the rail where the lawyers and jury sat the floor was raised, and the bench, or judge's seat, was high above like a pulpit. There were two immense open fireplaces in the room, in which hickory of cordwood lengths was burned. The other county officers were on the second floor, the steps to which went up from the outside, starting at the front door and slanting towards the south. The steps had no covering, and as the grand jury room was upstairs that body in passing from their room to the court and back again had to go out of doors, as also with the petit jury. There was a landing at the head of the steps, and from this landing it was customary for political speakers to address their audiences.¹⁴

The two wings, one for the register of wills and the other for the clerk of court, were

⁶ Ch. 10, Acts of 1784.

⁷ Ch. 58, Acts of 1785.

⁸ Ch. 24, Acts of 1786, November Session.

⁹ Harford County *Land Record, 1787-1788, Liber J.L.G. No. H.* f. 103, *Ms.*

¹⁰ Ch. 23, Acts of 1788.

¹¹ Ch. 34, Acts of 1790.

¹² Harford County *Court Proceedings, 1788, Ms.*

¹³ *Op. cit.*, p. 85.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82. There now hangs in the Judge's Chamber three drawings of the courthouse made in 1912 from the recollections of Joseph R. Ely, G. Smith Norris, John Moores and John F. Langan.