

The First Courthouse: Blackberries and Buildings

According to historical accounts, courts were held in the Baum home until May 18th, 1829, and courts were adjourned to the log school house on east Monroe (present-day site of Honan Hall) and then were transferred to the Clerk's and Recorder's office, a small frame building located in the middle of the public square. The Board of County Commissioners had ordered it built on November 10th, 1829 and it was finished a few weeks before the May term. It's hard to imagine that the area was nothing but a blackberry thicket.

In the year 1831, according to John Odell, the county commissioners proceeded to erect a building for the courts and other purposes. On the 18th of July, a contract was entered into by the Board of commissioners and Theophilus Hardman, who afterwards surrendered his contract and was released. The contract was then awarded to John Dolason in September, 1831. At that time there was in the hands of Aaron Dewey, county agent, the sum of \$275, money realized from the sale of town lots, which was in accordance with the grant of the

land for a county seat. The contractor received as a second installment \$200; the third installment was \$500. The building was of brick, and was completed and accepted at the September session of the board of commissioners in 1832. The contractor received the further sum of \$376, making in all the sum of \$1,351. This contract did not include painting, inside work and the cupola. This work was done by T.C. Hughes for \$972.63.

The walls were painted a straw color, which engendered a fair amount of controversy because some wanted them red. Along with other work accomplished the cost of the entire structure reached the sum of \$3,500.

The drama of the courthouse bell is quite another story in itself. The courthouse bell, which weighed 730 pounds of bronze and cast iron, was a feature of both the first and second courthouses. It was used to announce the shelling of Fort Sumter, the victory at Appomattox, and the death of President Lincoln. One would never dream that the bell, which stands mounted in the first floor of the present courthouse, was at the bottom of the

Ohio River. The bell, which is about 24 inches across the base, was cast by G.W. Coffin and Company at the Buckeye Bell Foundry in Cincinnati. It was purchased by order of the county for \$100 by Samuel Davis Gresham, county sheriff from 1836 to 1840. It was loaded onto the stern-wheeler Othello along with merchandise, including sugar, salt, white lead and other items which had been ordered by James P. Dugan, a Delphi receiving agent who would later join forces with his brother-in-law James Spears and Reed Case in a bank on the corner of Main and Washington. According to public records from the Cincinnati Public Library, the Othello collided with the steamboat Peru at Rome, Indiana on March 23, 1839. The Othello sank and two lives were lost. The bell was retrieved and stored in Rome.

Several months ensued and the Delphi residents petitioned county commissioners asking that they supply \$93 to cover the \$50 unpaid balance to avoid the possibility of the bell's being sold. Another petition went forth to the commissioners with a warning that the bell was about ready to be sold. Delivery was finally made in late 1840. The bell was mounted and stood in not only

the first but second structure and upon the demolition of the second courthouse was donated to the Milroy family east of Delphi. Harry Milroy's widow, Mollie, gave it back to the county in 1969.