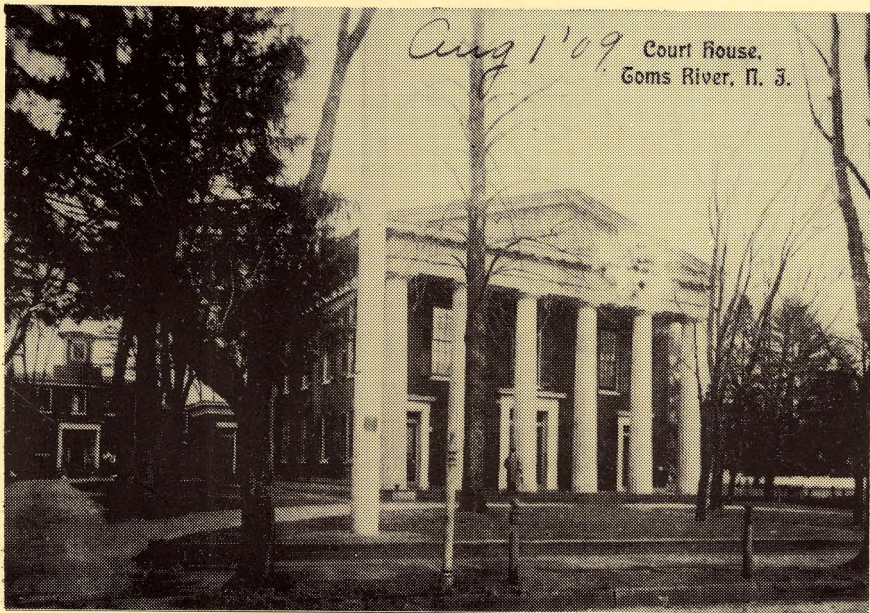


The Ocean County Courthouse Complex

1850 - 1990

A Brief History



The 1850 Courthouse and Sheriff's House

Produced by
The Ocean County Cultural & Heritage
Commission 1990

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OCEAN COUNTY COURTHOUSE COMPLEX

The Legislature Act which set off Ocean County from the southern half of Monmouth County on February 15, 1850 was created after an appeal from Joel Haywood, a pioneer Stafford Township resident. Haywood complained that the citizens south of the Manasquan River were not receiving their fair share of funding for roads, bridges and welfare for its poor.

Toms River was selected the new county seat of government over Lakehurst by a one vote margin.

The new governing body of Ocean County conducted their organizational meeting on May 8, 1850 at the Tavern of Thomas P. Barkalow, located on the corner of Main and Water Streets in Toms River. Colonel Samuel C. Durham, the local dock master, was chosen to be the first director from among the body of twelve freeholders. Each of the six townships selected two representatives to the Freeholder Board. (Stafford, Dover, Jackson, Plumsted, Union and Brick.)

While the new Freeholder board was conducting monthly meetings, which began at 8 a.m. and sometimes lasted for two to three days, consideration was being given to determine where the new Courthouse would be built. Several lots in the Village of Toms River were offered by interested citizens, but the one chosen was "a lot on the center of my lands on the north side of the road from the meeting house to the Schenck's Mill Road", a cornfield on what is now Washington Street. It was offered by Joseph Coward who was so pleased when his site was selected that he presented the Board with 6,000 bricks to start the construction.

The design of the Greek Revival-style Courthouse reflected the mid-nineteenth century interests in classical architecture which was built from the architectural plans borrowed from Hudson County. With its tall Doric columns supporting a massive pedimented portico, the Courthouse is an excellent example of the temple form that was the most distinguishing feature of the Greek Revival style.

The new Courthouse began to take form with the bricks shipped from Haverstraw, New York by schooners and unloaded at Robbins Cove at the foot of Allen Street. Teams of horses pulled the wagon loads of brick up the hill to the new building site. The building was finished in September 1851 so that all of the official business of the County could be conducted in one building.

While the construction was going on, the freeholders continued to meet in the Thomas P. Barkalow House (later the Ocean House) and at the Riverside Hotel across the street.

After the Courthouse construction was completed, the Hudson County architectural plans were entrusted to a local man to be returned to that county. He did not get too far out of town on horseback before he stopped off at Hyers Tavern in Jackson. The plans have never been seen since.



1850 Greek Revival Courthouse

The official county seals were selected at their first meeting. The County Freeholders' seal was a sloop, the County Clerk's seal was a schooner and the Surrogate's seal was a steam boat. These seals reflected the commercial interest of the citizens enclosing the words "Ocean County, N.J."

The old cornfield, where the courthouse was built in the center of what later became a city block, is now bounded by Horner Street, Hooper Avenue, and Washington Street.

Hooper Avenue was just a narrow dirt lane to Cedar Grove and the Metedeconk in 1850. Thomas Hooper, a local Toms River merchant, felt so strongly the the town was now going to expand eastward that he used his own money to widen the Metedeconk Road. He was honored by having the road bear his name.

Washington Street, at that time, was called the "Meeting House Road." The old Methodist Meeting House stood in the cemetery at the crossroads of the two roads.

The Meeting House Road had only extended to Dock Street; its name was changed to Washington Street in the 1870's for Washington Hadley who built his mansion at what is now known as "The Mott Place" at Dock and Washington Streets.

The first County Courts were held in the old Morman Church which was located at the triangular point formed by Flint Boulevard and South Main Street on the south side of the river. Governor Daniel Haines had appointed James Gulick, as the first Judge of the Court on Common Pleas in Ocean County. Other officials appointed by the Governor were Joseph Parker, Sheriff, John J. Irons, County Clerk, and David I. C. Rogers as Surrogate. The first Supreme Court Justice to sit in the new Courthouse was James C. Nevins.



The Courthouse, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches, Washington Street 1860

The second floor in the new Courthouse housed the Courtroom which seated 250 persons on plain straight - backed benches. The judge's bench of carved black walnut was on a raised dais behind the walnut rail which separated the bench from the spectators.

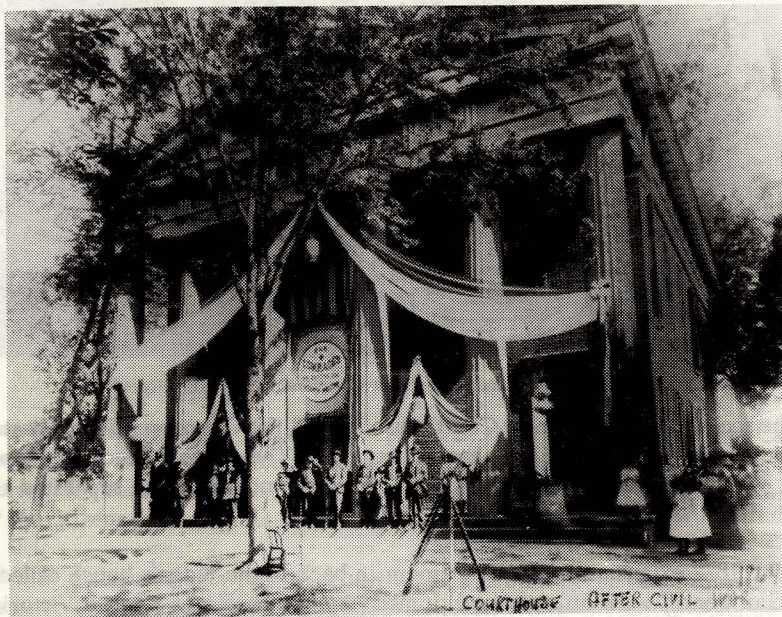
The 1872 extension of the Courtroom in back of the judge's bench called a "Grecian bend," with an overhead domed skylight, brought a more Victorian look to the Greek Revival style 1850 Courthouse. It is believed that it was at that time that the use of dark wood and elaborate ceiling carvings of birds, cupids and ribbons were added in the French Rococo period of the late Victorian period.

A costly fire in the Grecian bend on October 26, 1929 destroyed the judge's bench and furniture, charred the seats and woodwork and damaged the courtroom with smoke. The fire broke through the skylight which caused a draft that fueled the fire, but the local firemen were able to contain the fire to the Courtroom, thus saving the Courthouse.

This large Court Room, located in the most impressive building in town, has been used for many community, civic and religious functions other than the courts. During the Civil War, this room was the scene of Union recruiting rallies. Company F, Fourteenth New Jersey Volunteers, under the Command of Captain Ralph B. Gowdy, was organized in this room. Military drills were conducted on the lawn in front of the Courthouse steps.

On August 17, 1862, Company "F" assembled on the Courthouse grounds for the appropriate stirring farewell exercises before the Company started for Camp Vredenburg in Freehold, in a long array of carriages, sent off amid sounds of music and peals from the Village church bells and the booming of cannons.

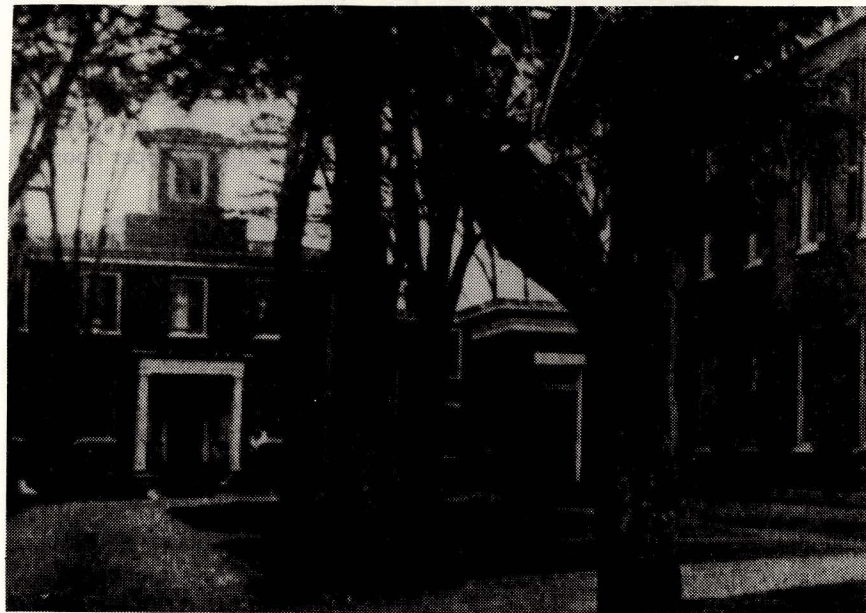
It was here again in 1872 where the GAR (the Civil War veterans) assembled on the Courthouse steps under banners draped between the Doric columns. At this time, a circular driveway led from the street to the front steps, with a hitching post which allowed customers to bring their carriages of horses up to the front portico.



Concrete sidewalks were laid in front of the Courthouse in 1871 by a local building contractor, John Walton, to replace the dusty, and sometimes muddy, dirt sidewalks.

As the village expanded during the building boom of the 1850's the Courthouse became surrounded by homes. The Gulicks, Havens, Van Hise and the Van Nostrands were some of the famous who lived in the block. In 1853 the Methodist Church built a church on the northeast corner of the block, at the corner of Hooper Avenue and Washington Street. That church stood until 1874 when the congregation built another church across the street. All of these homesite eventually became part of the Courthouse Complex as the County began to expand and the need for additional governmental facilities became necessary for its efficient operation.

The Sheriff's House, with ten attached jail cells, was built behind the Courthouse by Robert Aitken for \$4250 in 1851 in the Federal/Greek Revival style. The Sheriffs and their families occupied this building for over 75 years. In 1921 twenty-four new jail cells were added in a wing at the rear of the building.



Sheriff's House

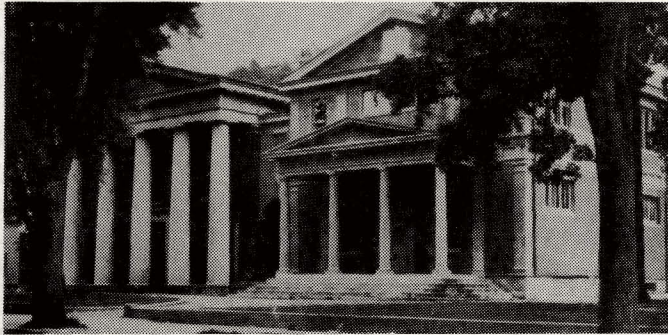
Until 1926, family functions and social affairs were held in the living quarters of the Sheriff's House, which occupied the front section of the building, while prisoners were incarcerated in the cells attached to the back of the house. Those first ten cells were nine feet long, nine feet high and five feet wide. Each cell had a cot behind iron doors. A corridor divided the cells with men and women fraternizing there during the daytime hours, but locked in separate cells at night. In the first two decades of the jail there were rarely more than two prisoners confined at one time with an annual average of about twelve prisoners.

No prison records were kept until 1860 when Sheriff Charles Wardell began compiling them. His records show the crime cost the County about \$1,000 per year. The sheriff's wife cooked the meals for the prisoners which the sheriff carried through the connecting door of the living quarters to the prisoners in the jail. The County paid the sheriff fifty cents for each meal fed to the prisoners.

The old bell, housed in the cupola on top of the building, was used by the Sheriff to alert the Village when there was a prisoner escape. This bell is now in the belfry of the Cedar Grove Methodist Church on Bay Avenue and Cedar Grove Road.

The old wooden portion of the Warden's house and several cells were torn down in August, 1921. The Freeholders hired the Pauley Jail Company of St. Louis, Missouri, at a cost of \$75,000, to build twenty-eight cells attached to the old jail, fourteen cells on each tier. These cells had running water and a toilet.

The County began to show signs of population growth after World War I and the need for an additional Court Room became apparent. A new Hall of Records, to house the County Clerk in the first floor, a Court Room and law library on the second floor, was built in 1926 at cost of \$55,805.42. An alley was created between the two buildings with a bridge connecting the upper floors of the original Court Room to the new Court Room.



Courthouse with 1926 addition

The County showed little population growth during the depression years of the 1930's. World War II brought officers to the area from the Naval Air Station at Lakehurst and Fort Dix. After the war many returned to live here permanently. By 1950 the County population began to expand.

In 1954, when the Garden State Parkway was completed and new housing developments began to sprawl about in the County and new citizens began to flock to the County from the cities, this second jail of 1921 could no longer accommodate the increasing crime rate. In 1940 we had a County population of 36,706. The demands for additional facilities became apparent as the County population expanded to 56,622 in 1950. In 1958 there were 98,300 citizens.

In 1950 the first of two additions were made to the west wing of the original Courthouse called the West Wing. The County Clerk's Office occupies this addition while the Surrogate and Small Claims Courts occupy the 1974 second expansion of this West Wing.

The 1926 Clerk's Hall of Records was torn down to make way for the 1950 East Wing expansion. In 1965 Hankin & Hyers, Architects, designed four new court rooms which were added to the 1950's section of the East Wing. New Judges were added to the Courts as the population growth propelled the County into a new era.



1950 East Wing Extension



1961 Jail Extension

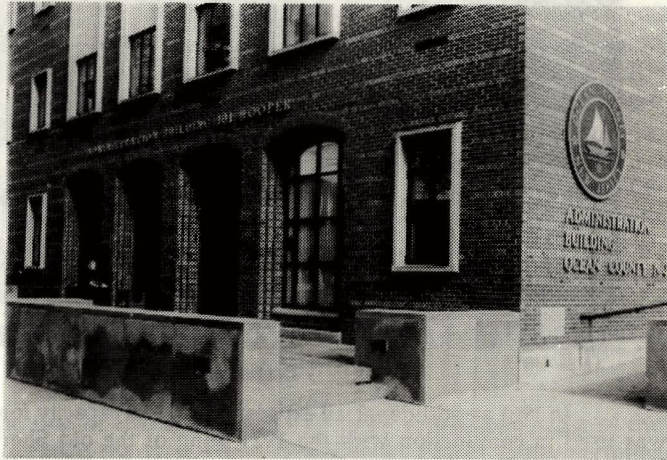
In 1961 an additional jail expansion added a capacity for 110 inmates which was used in conjunction with the 1921 wing of the old Sheriff's House. The Probation and Sheriff's Department were also located in this addition located behind the 1950 East Wing addition.

This 1961 jail addition still did not meet the court and jail needs of the County since the population was increasing by 100,000 each decade. It had reached 346,038 by 1980. In 1985 the fourth jail to be built in the County along with seven new courtrooms were added in a new facility called the Justice Complex. The new jail, with 196 cells, was built to the north of the Courthouse, incorporating the old Sheriff's Street and former home sites in its building site.



Court House
Annex

The Courthouse Annex was built on the east side of Hooper Avenue, opposite the Courthouse in 1959 to house the Board of Election and the new voting machines which replaced the paper ballots. These machines were removed in the early 1970's and stored elsewhere. The first and second floors of the building then become the headquarters for the Planning Board, Road Department and the Engineering Department.



Administration
Building

The Courthouse became so crowded by the 1970's, when the County population had grown by an additional 100,000 in the decade of the 60's and had reached 208,470, that a new facility was required to house the Board of Freeholders and the administrative division of the County. The Administration Building was built in 1973 on the east side of Hooper Avenue, opposite the East Wing of the Courthouse.

The continued population growth, up to about 415,000 by 1988 continues to put pressure on the freeholder board to look for new avenues to house the increasing departments to service the county's growing needs.

The grounds include commemorative trees, flagpole, flower beds and war memorial plaques.



War Memorial monument corner of Washington Street and Hooper Avenue.

The cannon on the lawn in front of the Greek Revival section of the Courthouse was placed there in 1908 by the Toms River Camera Club. It is believed to have been one of the four cannons from the Toms River Blockhouse which was spiked into the Toms River by the British on March 24, 1782. The British had attacked and sacked the town that day leaving the entire village destroyed.



The public drinking fountain near the front steps of the original Court House was donated in 1957 by the Toms River Kiwanis Club.



Ocean County Courthouse 1850 - 1988

The traditional architectural style of the original Greek Revival Courthouse and the Federal/Greek Revival Sheriff's House were placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1983. These buildings, with their modern additions, have helped to retain the architectural integrity of Washington Street. The adjacent Justice Complex addition and the nearby proposed expansions will take Ocean County in the 21st century.

