

If Courthouses Could Only Talk—

Caswell Structure Might Tell a Tale of Stirring Days
and Clear Up a Famous Mystery

By MISS MARY WILSON BROWN

THE Caswell County Courthouse, with its stately columns and handsome Grecian lines, has witnessed some stirring days and deeds. Built at the outset of the War Between the States, it has witnessed successively civil war, rebellion, and reconstruction, followed by a great era of progress, and climaxed by a World War. It has seen our nation develop from a loosely-knit federation of states into a mighty union that ranks with the world's powers. It has watched silently but zealously while the South retook its rightful position in that Union and the State assumed a place of leadership among the members.

Were it able to talk, the building which is the subject of our cover could tell some interesting stories, and might clear up one of North Carolina's celebrated mysteries. The reference, of course, is to the disappearance and murder in broad daylight, May 20, 1870, of John Walter Stephens. The Republican Senator had been accused of inciting the Negroes to insurrection and had made himself most unpopular. He was sitting in the back of the court room when someone tapped him on the shoulder and told him he was wanted in his office downstairs. He was never seen again alive. Although credited by tradition to the Ku Klux Klan, the crime has gone down in history as one of the country's famous unsolved crimes.

Yanceyville, county seat, was the scene of much excitement and feeling during Reconstruction days. Governor Holden had already sent "Kirk's Army" to guard the courthouse, and now he asked President Grant to reinforce Kirk's troops with a regiment from the federal army. Caswell County was in a state of insurrection, he said, and had seceded from both the State and Federal governments. Thus Caswell became the only county in the United States in which both State and Federal armies were assembled at the same time. The Federal soldiers were said to be gentlemen in every sense of the word, and their colonel, W. W. Eldson, later married a Yanceyville girl. However, Kirk's men included a number of carpetbaggers and scoundrels, and were not recognized by the best people. The courthouse still bears mute testimony of their occupation, a piece having been chipped off of one of the columns by a bayonet.

Caswell County was formed out of Orange County in 1777. It derives its name from Richard Caswell, the first Governor under the Constitution. The courthouse at this time was at Leasburg, a small village on the western border of the county. It was moved in 1831, and the town which grew up around it was named Yanceyville in honor of James Yancey, who was instrumental in settling the dispute over the location. The present courthouse which was ~~completed~~ ^{Reynolds} ^{completed} in 1861, stands on the same spot except that it faces north and south instead of east and west.

The 75-year old building, which was constructed with slave labor under the supervision of Dr. N. M. Roan, prominent physician planter, slaveholder, and chairman of the board of county commissioners, was built of native

brick with native rock foundations. The architecture is Grecian in form and Corinthian in style. The building was first stuccoed, painted a steel grey, and marked to give the appearance of a stone building. About fifteen years ago the commissioners painted it a dark brown with markings.

The interior is characterized by its high ceilings, walnut walls, and stately columns. In the center of the court room is a massive medallion of acanthus leaves done in white plaster with fixtures to hang a chandelier. I have been told that a handsome chandelier of cut glass was ordered from New York by Dr. Roan, but for some unknown reason it was never received nor placed in the courtroom. Tradition has it that the old clock which hangs in the tower and which keeps perfect time today was ordered from England, but that the weights which were of solid lead were stolen by the soldiers during the war to make bullets. The weights that are used in the clock today are wooden boxes filled with scrap iron.

The courthouse was completed in 1861 and was dedicated by Judge John A. Abbott of Edenton. Judge Miles A. Eure of Gates County presided over the first term of Superior Court to be held in the new building. Among the judges to hold court here were A. W. Turgee, a Republican carpet-bagger from Greensboro, who later moved to New York and became a Democrat, serving as an elector for Bryan in 1896. Judge Turgee wrote a book entitled "Fool's Error," one of the characters of which, "Judge Snoutout," was supposed to represent Judge John ~~Sever~~ ^{Kerr}, a Yanceyville jurist of the Civil War period.

The plans for the Caswell County Courthouse were drawn by McKnight and Berry, a Philadelphia firm. That was before the days of labor unions and minimum wage scales. Slaves were hired from nearby plantations at four dollars a month, while Dr. Roan's compensation for his services as superintendent of building operations was two dollars per day. In this way the handsome structure was erected for the surprisingly small cost of \$28,000.

A long fight between two brothers, Lee and William Graves, who lived on opposite sides of the county line creek, preceded the location of the courthouse at Yanceyville. Each was intent upon the ridge nearest his plantation. Lee appealed to Mr. Yancey, who was in the Legislature, and offered to give the land if his site were accepted.

Finally it was decided to accept his proposition. "You have won the fight," Mr. Yancey told him. "Now name the town." Mr. Graves replied, "No, you have been instrumental in the decision. You name it." And so it came about that the county seat was named Yanceyville.

Strangers passing through the little town of Yanceyville today stop to admire the stately beauty of the old building and listen with great interest to the stories of its historic past. It stands a shrine which old and young of Caswell are justly proud to honor, and remains a thing of beauty whose loveliness increases as time passes.