

A visitor to the Burlington courthouse on Main Street will pass by two poster boards denoting important events in our courthouse's history. These events piqued my curiosity, and so I began to research some of the stories in depth. As a result, in conjunction with the Burlington Free Press, I am happy to present "The Chittenden County Courthouse Chronicles." This monthly column began last month with the case of Woodhouse versus Woodhouse, Alienation of Affection and is now followed this month with The Founding of Chittenden County and Its Courts. The next chronicle will be on the Chittenden County Jail on Main Street.

Thanks for reading!

Chittenden County Courthouse Chronicles



By Connie Cain Ramsey

The Founding of Chittenden County and Its Courts.

Thomas Chittenden's Fourteen Year Fight for the Fourteenth State.

At the same time America was fighting for independence from the British, Thomas Chittenden was fighting for Vermont's independence from New York and New Hampshire. Each had a claim on the land that was then called the New Hampshire Grants.

In 1777, Chittenden spearheaded the adoption of a constitution, making Vermont the first independent republic in the nation. He was elected governor, and began a fourteen year struggle with the Continental Congress to bring Vermont to statehood in the newly-formed union.

His hard-fought battle was won when, in 1791, Vermont became the nation's fourteenth state. The first governor of the Vermont Republic was then elected the first governor of the new State of Vermont. Later, a large tract of land that spread from Charlotte north to Canada, south to present Washington County, and west to New York, was named in his honor – Chittenden County.

Ira Allen Holds Court in His Living Room.

The county's first court session was held in 1788 at the home of war hero Ira Allen, (where The Winooski Block stands today), in a section of Colchester called Winooski Falls (which later became the city of Winooski). Colchester was declared the county's "Shire Town".

Two years later, in 1790, Burlington was named the new Shire Town, and court was held at Gideon King's Tavern, where duties of the court were carried out before the draught beer flowed. That noble establishment is still standing at 35 King Street. Gideon's son (Gideon Jr.) became the most famous ship captain in the history of Lake Champlain.

The First Courthouse is Built in the Center of City Hall Park.

By 1797, the citizens of Chittenden County felt the need for a courthouse solely dedicated to the ministrations of justice. A new facility was built just a stone's throw from the old tavern in the center of Courthouse Square (now City Hall Park) and served the county until 1801. It was razed just four years after its construction to make way for a facility large enough to also host the Vermont State legislature (who subsequently moved to Montpelier in 1805).

The new (second) courthouse was built on Church Street bordering the east side of Courthouse Square (where City Hall is now). A fire destroyed this courthouse in 1828 and it was promptly replaced in the same spot by a third courthouse that featured a Late Federal Style design and octagonal cupola. This building served the county for forty-five years until 1873 when it became the Fletcher Free Library.

The fourth courthouse was built further south on Church Street in 1872. This Second Empire Vermont Redstone building, with a three-story tower on the northwest side, served Chittenden County for almost 100 years. It was placed on the National Historical Registry in 1973, and was lost in a tragic fire in 1982. The land now serves as a parking lot for the current courthouse.

In 1907, after four years of construction, our current county courthouse (fifth) was opened as a U.S. Post Office and Customs House. Designed by James Knox Taylor, using his trademark Beaux Arts design (as seen in his U.S. Treasury Building in Washington, D.C.), features a white marble exterior, massive ionic columns, a classically detailed parapet, an intricate doorway design, a marble finished interior, hand carved oak archways, and Vermont red marble fireplaces.

In 1974, the U.S. Government donated the building to Chittenden County for use as the county courthouse. It was dedicated to two brave young men who gave their lives for their country in World War II – Charles P. Smith III and Bailey H. Goldberg. Although additions to the building were made at this time, the grandeur of the marbled hallways, hand carved oak walls and archways, remain as breathtaking today as they were at the turn of the Twentieth Century.

Bob Boyd and Jack Ramsey contributed to this chronicle.

If you have any questions about this chronicle, or you would like a tour of Chittenden County Courthouse please contact me at 651-1720 or Connie.Ramsey@state.vt.us.

Connie Cain Ramsey is the Assistant Judge of Chittenden County.



Gideon King's Tavern, 35 King Street as it is seen today.



This rare early photograph of Burlington's Courthouse Square, now known as City Hall Park was taken in 1859. The view is looking north from Main Street toward College Street. It shows the oval plan of radiating paths and green that replaced the first courthouse which had been in the center. Along the right hand side of the photograph the following buildings can be seen from right to left: part of the 1854 Town Hall, the 1828 County Courthouse (#3), and Strong's Block, where the county jail and sheriff's office were originally located.



Courthouse #3 is seen at left. Next to it is the Burlington Town Hall.



Digging the foundation of City Hall, where Burlington Town Hall and Chittenden County Courthouse #3 used to be. (Notice Courthouse #4 and #5 in the background).



Courthouse #4 at right (served Chittenden County for almost 100 years), and our present courthouse #5 at left (which was originally built as the U.S. Post Office and Customs House).



Chittenden County was named in honor of Thomas Chittenden, the first Governor of the Vermont Republic, as well as the first Governor of the State of Vermont.

Sources:

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