

Petersburg Hustings Courthouse

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Petersburg grew up around Fort Henry on the Appomattox River beginning in 1645, and the town of Petersburg was founded in 1748. In May 1784, Petersburg was incorporated as a borough. Under that incorporation, a court of hustings was to be held on the first Wednesday of each month. That court still functions in the modern city of Petersburg.

In colonial Virginia, the county, or hustings, courts handled cases below the General Court, which met in the capital city of Williamsburg. Typical hustings court proceedings involved legally binding records and cases such as business contracts, debts, land deeds, and wills. Before a frame courthouse was constructed in 1793, the city conducted all of its court business in taverns.

The current hustings court building replaced the frame courthouse and was most likely built from 1837 to 1839. It was constructed in the Greek Revival style, which was popular in American public buildings from 1820 to 1845. Renowned New York architect Calvin Pollard drew up the plans. He also designed the 1833 National Theater in New York and the 1838 St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Petersburg (which burned in 1854). Daniel Lyon and Beverly Drinkard built the courthouse. Lyon served on the Hustings Court and was an alderman, a major in the militia, and mayor of Petersburg from 1838 to 1839. Drinkard served as a militia captain in the Petersburg Blues in 1833. Many of Drinkard's workers who built the courthouse were slaves. The courthouse was erected just south of the site of the original 1793 frame courthouse. Its west face retains the six columns with Greek Corinthian pediments originally constructed. The courthouse, which included a courtroom, clerk's office, and city offices, was the venue for city council meetings. Currently, the City Council meets in Union Station on River Street in Old Towne Petersburg.

Several important events in Petersburg history occurred on the courthouse property. The two companies of Petersburg volunteers that served in the Mexican War (1846 to 1848) were organized and disbanded on Courthouse Square. A mere 13 years later, hundreds of Petersburg citizens fought in another, much bloodier war. From March 12 to 14, 1861, Petersburgers cast their votes at the courthouse either in favor of or against immediate secession. The vote tally was 53.6 percent for secession. Six of the 17 companies of Petersburg soldiers that fought in the Civil War formed up on Courthouse Square at 12:30 pm on April 20, 1861, and marched from there to board a train to Norfolk. These six companies were the core of the 12th Virginia Infantry Regiment.

The city was spared from the ravages of war until 1864. When Union troops approached the city in June 1864, the courthouse bell sounded out the alarm early on June 9, calling out the second-class militia to defend the city. Over half of the 125 old men and young boys who responded became casualties “in this—Petersburg’s most heroic—effort.” Eight days later, Union artillery was close enough to shell the city, and the first rounds fell on Bollingbrook Street and close to the courthouse. Soon after the siege began, the roof of the courthouse was occupied by a Confederate signal station. In fact, the clock in the Courthouse tower was the timepiece that both the Confederate and Union soldiers used during the 9 1/2-month siege. Three Union artillery shells hit the courthouse, one each on the roof, the tower, and the east side of the structure. Early on the morning of April 3, 1865, soldiers of the 1st Michigan Sharpshooters were among the first Union troops to enter Petersburg. At 4:28 a.m., soldiers from this regiment entered the courthouse, “the city’s most prominent landmark,” and climbed up to the clock tower. From the tower, they held out the regiment’s colors--the first Union flag flown in Petersburg since the beginning of the war.

The shell damage to the courthouse from the siege was not repaired until 1877, and the clock was replaced in 1880. In 1899, the state of Michigan returned the United States flag taken from the courthouse on April 3, 1865, by the 1st Michigan Sharpshooters. It had been presented by the ladies of Petersburg in 1850 to a pre-war company, the Petersburg Grays. Another flag was taken from the courthouse early on that fateful morning when Union soldiers under the

command of Brevet Brigadier General Ralph Ely seized a Confederate flag. In 1954, this flag was returned to the Centre Hill Mansion Museum by General Ely's grandson.

Early in Petersburg's Civil Rights Movement, on March 7, 1960, 11 African- American students were arrested for trespassing in the whites-only area of the Petersburg Public Library. On the following night, approximately 200 people participated in a prayer protest on the steps of the courthouse. Almost exactly one year later, on March 1, 1961, about 200 students from Peabody High School and Virginia State College marched silently up and down the steps of the Courthouse and throughout downtown Petersburg to protest segregated schools and theaters in Petersburg.

In 1965, a thorough restoration of the courthouse was conducted and a 30-foot section was added. Despite its renovations, the courthouse remains true to its original architectural fabric. The Goddess of Justice statue atop the courthouse was removed in 1998 after a storm loosened it from its base. An exact replica of this sculpture replaced the original in 2003.

In the early 1970s, only five hustings courts remained in Virginia. The present judicial system in Virginia is based on these courts, the local circuit courts, and the Supreme Court of Appeals. The Petersburg Hustings Courthouse was added to the Virginia Landmarks Register and the National Register of Historic Places in 1973.