

THE WARREN COUNTY COURTHOUSE

HISTORY AND NOTABLE FEATURES

Courtesy of the

Warren County Historical Society

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“If we return to the question ‘What is law?’ the personalities that look down upon us are not entirely in agreement. To Moses it meant commands from God. But Common Law has boasted of being ‘the perfection of human reason.’ The Digest of Justinian defines Law as ‘the art of what is right and fair,’ and Justice as ‘the constant and perpetual desire to render everyone his due.’ But upon one thing I think they all would agree with our American forefathers: Nothing will be accepted and will endure as law that does not possess the moral qualities of a natural justice measured by standards supplied from the conscience and thought of disinterested men.”

—Justice Robert H. Jackson (April 2, 1950)

COURTHOUSE HISTORY

Warren became a county by a request of Col. Joseph Hackney on March 16, 1819. While citizens were pleased with the new legislation and happy to no longer be traveling to Meadville or Franklin for judicial proceedings, Warren sorely lacked a space fit for court. Regardless, on Monday, November 29, 1819, Warren's first court session ran in an unfinished room of a house being constructed by Ebenezer Jackson. 1820 brought little progress as the courts moved into the town's new schoolhouse.

Finally, in 1825, Warren County Commissioners agreed it was time to build a courthouse. The \$7,000 brick building was completed in 1827 on the site of the present-day courthouse. A stone jail was built nearby and county offices were located in a one-story brick building maintained by the Warren County Commissioners. This state of affairs held for quite some time. The county building was destroyed by a fire in 1854, but a replacement quickly occupied the charred space and the town went on growing and developing while its county facilities remained stagnant.

As years passed, visitors commented more and more frequently on the disheveled state of the county courthouse until, in 1873, the grand jury condemned the courthouse, jail, and county office space. By April, 1876, Buffalo architect M.E. Beebe's plans were accepted by Warren County Commissioners and construction was underway. Thomas Bell oversaw demolition of the standing courthouse and jail while J.P. Marston was charged as superintendent of construction. Though the \$107,000 finishing cost far exceeded Beebe's \$65,000 opening estimate, the courthouse was completed by December of 1877 and was commended as a "model courthouse of the state."

COURTHOUSE HISTORY

The building was placed on the national register of historic places in 1977.

By installing the building's elevator and parking ramps, renovating the basement to create more office space, purchasing property to accommodate parking needs, and even expanding the courthouse to make room for all the county's business, the Warren County Commissioners have worked tirelessly to improve and maintain Warren's "model" courthouse, a vital part of the county's historic landscape.

While the physical courthouse of Warren County has a rich history, so do the people and proceedings within it. In 1954, Judge Allison Wade was hearing the case of Norman Moon, who was refusing to pay a court-ordered \$30 per week in support to his estranged wife, Janet. As Judge Wade called Moon forward for sentencing, Moon pulled a gun from his waistband and began firing. Judge Wade was shot that morning and died in the courtroom before help could arrive. He was the first judge to be shot and killed while sitting on the bench in the United States.

Additionally, the Justice Robert H. Jackson courtroom was built in the courthouse's second floor and dedicated in 2005 in memory of the local Chautauqua County attorney who later became U.S. Attorney General, U.S. Supreme Court Justice, and Chief American Prosecutor at the Nuremburg War Trials.

Judge Maureen Skerda is also a notable individual marking her place in Warren County history, as she is the county's first female judge. She was sworn in on January 3, 2006, and is currently serving as Warren's first female President Judge.

THEN AND NOW



At top left, a photo taken from Tanner Hill in 1863 depicts the old county courthouse many called “unsightly” and “old-fashioned.” The building in the photograph dated back to 1827.

A new courthouse was built and opened in 1877, its Italian Renaissance standing proudly in the photograph at top right, taken in the early 1900s. The new courthouse featured Georgia Pine courtroom floors and marble tile hallways, with

elegant woodwork in walnut and chestnut. The black walnut furnishings were large and elegant.

While changes and improvements have been made, the courthouse still stands as a graceful, historic monument as pictured in 2012 at bottom left.

LADY JUSTICE

While no one quite knows who made her or where she came to life, Lady Justice has been an integral part of the Warren County landscape since June of 1877 when she took her perch atop the courthouse. Standing over ten feet tall and weighing in at 240 pounds, the statue was originally carved out of a log to create the neo-classical



beauty. The wooden model was then used to shape 125 zinc plates that were used to make up Lady Justice. On Saturday, May 30, 1998, Lady Justice was removed from the courthouse's dome after withstanding 122 years of Warren's elements for a renovation project taken on by Ralph Miller Jewelers of Erie. She came back to the courthouse after her makeover, valued at \$900,000, and now sits just inside the building's Fourth Avenue entrance while a \$23,000 fiberglass replica presides over town from the top of the courthouse. Lady Justice has wings blindfolding her eyes, representing the fair administration of justice regardless of what is seen; the scales she holds symbolize the weighing of evidence to determine truth; and the sword she holds at her side serves as a reminder of the execution of court order.

DOUGHBOY



This soldier has been on guard at the Fifth Avenue entrance of the Warren County Courthouse since the early years of the Twenty-First Century. The Doughboy goes without a definitive identity because he was created to represent all soldiers of World War I. “Doughboy” is a term dating back to as early as the Mexican-American War used in reference to footmen who commonly

ate fried flour while at war. Though the term is much older, its height of popularity was reached during the years of the first world war. The 1.3 million dollar statue was placed in the local Oakland Cemetery in 1925. After nearly 80 years of watchfully guarding his outdoor post at the cemetery, it was time to take him down for restoration or risk his life. In February 2004, the Doughboy was removed from the cemetery and taken by Fiske Associates of Erie for cleaning and neutralization of damage. Just as Lady Justice was not returned to the top of the courthouse after her similar procedures, the Doughboy needed a climate-controlled home after his makeover. He now stands watch in the county courthouse while plans for a fiberglass replica are in the making to fill his empty post at Oakland Cemetery.

WARREN COUNTY JAIL

Though court ran without great issue in Warren's early days, despite not having an appropriate venue for its proceedings, the same could not be said for the county jail. For the first few months after the county



began holding court, Warren's Eddy family housed prisoners in their home. The situation agitated the family and was not suitable for the prisoners, so, even before construction of a suitable courthouse commenced in 1825, a log-house jail was erected on the site of the present-day courthouse and jail. Warren's first public building, the jail had a stockade in the rear yard for the exercise of prisoners and its cells' furnishings consisted of two bunks with straw mattresses, four cups, four blankets, four plates, a candle, and a chamber pot.

Construction of a suitable courthouse was completed in 1827 and a new jail soon followed in 1831. While this facility stood for quite some time, it was replaced again in 1876 when the courthouse and jail were both condemned and then rebuilt. The photo above was taken in 1909, depicting, on the left, the courthouse which stands today and, on the right, the jail built in 1876. This jail was razed in July of 1978 when a \$2.3 million project led to a new, more modern prison facility. It opened in August of 1980, welcoming prisoners on September 1 of that year.

WARREN'S COUNTY JUDGES

1800-1803	Alexander Addision
1803-1824	Jesse Moore (6th District)
1825-1839	Henry Shippen (6th District)
1835-1839	Nathaniel Bailey Eldred (18th District)
1839	Alexander McCalmont (18th District)
1840-1843	Nathaniel Bailey Eldred (6th District)
1840-1845	James Thompson (6th District, Pres. of District Court)
1843-1851	Gaylord Church (6th District)
1851-1860	John Galbraith (6th District)
1860	Rasselas Brown (6th District)
1861-1871	Samuel Porter Johnson (6th District)
1871-1881	Lansing Ditmars Wetmore (6th District, 37th District)
1881-1890	William D. Brown (37th District)
1891-1898	Charles H. Noyes (37th District)
1898-1909	Wilton Monroe Lindsey (37th District)
1909-1910	William E. Rice (37th District)
1910-1920	Watson Dexter Hinckley (37th District)
1920-1922	Edward Lindsey (37th District)
1922-1942	Delford U. Arird (37th District)
1942-1954	Allison D. Wade (37th District)
1954-1969	Alexander C. Flick, Jr. (37th District)
1969-1970	Samuel Bonavita (37th District)
1970-1993	President Judge Robert L. Wolfe (37th District)
1993-2006	Senior Judge Robert L. Wolfe
1994-2005	Judge William F. Morgan (37th District)
2006-present	Senior Judge Paul H. Millin
2002-2005	Judge William F. Morgan (37th District)
2006-2009	President Judge William F. Morgan
2010-present	Senior Judge William F. Morgan
2006-2009	Judge Maureen A. Skerda (37th District)
2010-present	President Judge Maureen A. Skerda
2010-present	Judge Gregory L. Hammond