

The west side of the Courthouse, showing sign commemorating the Kirk-Holden "War". Photograph by Susan Lassiter

Courthouse History

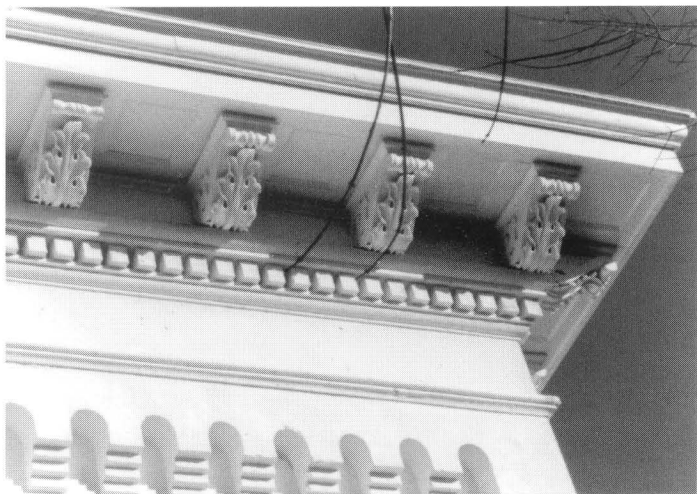
by Sallie Anderson

Our county is just now coming to realize the true value and potential of our historical and architectural treasures, the greatest of which is our 1861 Courthouse. Improved research in the latter part of this century is constantly adding to an already dazzling jewel. For instance, it was not discovered and made public until about 20 years ago that the architect-builder of the old courthouse was a gifted foreigner, William Percival, instead of John W. Cosby. In fact, a Milton newspaper announced early on that Cosby had the contract. In 1980 William B. Bushong published an article in the North Carolina Historic Review revealing that Percival was a native of England who had demonstrated his designing and engineering skill

in Richmond before coming to Raleigh. His plans and architectural sketches took first prize in that category at the State Fair at Raleigh in October of 1858. Caswell County Minute Books reveal that William Percival was paid a final amount of \$200 at the July Term of Court, 1861. Scholars are still seeking records of what happened to him afterward.

What can we say about the building that ranks, at the very least, as one of the three most impressive courthouses in the state? It speaks for itself in its architectural detailing: the curvilinear roof, the hand-carved corbels, the fleur-de-lis windows, the massive doors, the ultimate balcony off the courtroom upstairs, the wonderful spiral staircases, the cast iron and plaster ornaments, the cupola with its tower-clock. The structural details are proof of a rare and timely inspiration never before and never since exhibited in Caswell, one for which we, the viewers, are forever thankful.

Sometimes we pause and think back to the beginning of the County in 1777 when large portions of land were still in original forest. After the County was divided in 1792, the home of Joseph Smith became the first courthouse and was almost certainly a log building. As a result of their meetings at Smith's



*Details of the corbels and dentils of the cornice.
Photographs of architectural details by Ann G. Everitt*



Close-up showing architectural detail of the front portico.

house, the Court decided to have a sturdy frame building placed in the exact center of the 20-mile square county bounds, which happened to fall on the lands of John Ingram, a Revolutionary soldier then on his death-bed. Eminent domain prevailed, and by 1794 John Adam Wolff, whose little church still stands at Old Salem, had completed a serviceable structure facing east on what is now the Town Square in Yanceyville.

In 1830, according to William Powell's book, *When the Past Refused to Die*: "The respectable standing of Caswell would seem to require of our Court, if not a splendid, at least a respectable House for the accommodation of Courts of Justice and the citizens of the county..." The first brick courthouse was commissioned and executed by John Berry of Hillsborough, North Carolina. We do not have pictures of the Berry building but it may have been similar to the 1839 courthouse he built for his own county in Hillsborough.

Caswell's Berry Courthouse is said to have suffered a fire in 1857. It was dismantled as work proceeded on the Percival building just yards away to the south. When it was finished, one of the ironies of fate was apparent—we had the building, but where were the orators? Gone with the wind? Well, not exactly. There have been a few occasions when the lions roared again in the vaulted courtroom.