

The courthouse which was presumably ready in 1687, as demanded by the contract, served the county for almost a century. This extraordinary durability of a frame public building may be accounted for at least in part by certain special, favorable conditions prevailing which were reported by a committee of the General Assembly, March 23, 1697/8: "Dorchester County has good Court house with a brick chimney, no ordinary is kept therein and the Records are kept att the clerks house."<sup>7</sup> Then in 1770, a petition was dispatched to the General Assembly requesting authorization to raze this old courthouse because it was too small for the growing county, and to build a new one.<sup>8</sup> There was some delay, however, for the Commissioners appointed to supervise the construction of the new building found that the public land on which the old courthouse stood was inadequate for the newer and larger courthouse. The General Assembly of 1771, confronted with this problem, solved it by granting the commission permission to purchase an adjoining lot, thirty feet by forty-five feet, from Henry Ennals, infant, and to pay his guardian forty pounds for it.<sup>9</sup>

## Second Courthouse at Cambridge

In spite of the acquisition of this additional building area, the unimpressed contractor placed the new courthouse in part on the property of Joseph Dowson and up against his house. Whether this was an honest error on the part of the surveyor or is to be explained otherwise is not now clear. In any case, after the unhappy fact was established, remedy was sought in the General Assembly. Chapter 20 of the Acts of 1797 begins as follows:

Whereas . . . the records of said [Dorchester] County are unsafe, and liable to be destroyed, by reason of a private dwelling-house being contiguous to the courthouse of said county, and that a part of said court-house stands upon a lot of ground formerly the property of a certain Joseph Dowson, and it hath been prayed that a sum of money may be levied on the said county for the purpose of purchasing the said lot of ground . . . .<sup>10</sup>

The petition was found to be reasonable and was granted. The conveyance for parts of lots fourteen and fifteen was made and recorded the next year.<sup>11</sup>

Although this courthouse stood until 1852, there appears to be no description of it which has survived. Jones, perhaps drawing on James S. Shepherd (whose work *Court Houses at Cambridge* was not available to this writer), states that it was made of brick—and no more.<sup>12</sup> In spite of all the precautions which had been taken against fire, it appears that it was fated for this courthouse to be destroyed in that way. The sad facts of the disaster are found in the Proceedings of the Orphans' Court which met on the day following the fire:

Whereas the Dorchester County Court house was by an Incendiary act totally destroyed by fire on Sunday morning the ninth day of May Anno Domini 1852 between the hours of 2 & 3 A. M. together with all the records and papers of this court—(except the rough and recorded minutes of this court, which two books had been taken home on the Saturday previous by the Deputy Register for the purpose of bringing up the unfinished work of Shadrack Mitchell late Register of Wills for Dorchester County)—by which unfortunate occurrence this court has been deprived of their usual place of meeting . . . .<sup>13</sup>

The Orphans' Court found it difficult to believe that the cause of the fire could be anything but incendiary and this belief was widespread, causing the County Commissioners to take the following appropriate action:

Ordered by the Board, that a reward of one thousand dollars be offered to any person or persons, who may give such information as may lead to the Detection,

<sup>7</sup> *Arch. of Md.*, XXII, 102-03.

<sup>8</sup> Ch. 13, Acts of 1770, September Session.

<sup>9</sup> Ch. 16. For some reason, now obscure, the General Assembly of 1704 found it advisable to confirm the title of the Commissioners of Dorchester County to the original courthouse lot (Ch. 76).

<sup>10</sup> Kilty, William, *Laws of Maryland*, Annapolis, 1800, Vol. II.

<sup>11</sup> *Land Record*, No. 15 H. D., 1799-1800, 43-44, Ms.

<sup>12</sup> *Op. cit.*, 40.

<sup>13</sup> *Liber T.H.H. No. 1, 1845-1854*, p. 258. Microfilm copy.