

certainly there before the courthouse was burned in 1858 but they were not an original part of the building.¹⁵ Their construction was authorized in 1830 by an Act of Assembly which appointed a special commission with power to levy up to \$2,000 for this purpose.¹⁶

It was specified in the act that the two wings would be built adjoining the courthouse. This was a recognized hazard for the records, but safeguards were taken when it was also ordered that the wings be fireproof. In any case, when the courthouse burned on the night of February 19, 1858, the older central building was totally destroyed while the two wings containing so many valuable records of the county were saved. A vivid account of the fire was published in the *Baltimore Sun* the next Monday, February 22, part of which is here reproduced:

We learn that on Saturday morning, a fire broke out in the county court house located at Belair, which consumed the main building. The fire caught from a stove in the county commissioners' office, in the second story, and occupied by H. D. Gough, Esq., clerk to that body. When first discovered, at 4½ o'clock, the flames were bursting through the windows, and the inhabitants of the village and surrounding country were aroused by the startling cry of "Fire" to collect around the doomed structure without being able to give battle to the flames, there being no fire apparatus of any kind in the village. The flames, thus uncontrolled, burned furiously for an hour and a half. Fortunately, a severe snow-storm prevailed at that time, and the snow upon the roofs of the nearest dwellings prevented the flames from spreading beyond the court-house. But for this circumstance a good portion of the village must have been laid in ashes, as the wind was blowing heavily from the north-east. The Methodist Protestant Church in the rear, a dwelling on the left, and law offices on the right, were in considerable danger, but escaped. At 6 o'clock the main buildings were in ruins, but the two wings, occupied by the register of wills, Benedict H. Hanson, and clerk of the court, William Galloway, were uninjured.

They are low one story offices, built of brick, covered with slate, and protected by iron fire-proof doors and shutters. To these the county is indebted for the preservation of valuable records, the destruction of which would have caused an incalculable amount of confusion in county affairs. The main building, which fell a prey to the flames, was also of brick, two stories high, and contained on the first floor the court room, clerk's office, petit and grand jury rooms, and on the second floor the county commissioners' office and an apartment used by the societies of the county and for the holding of the village balls, etc.

All the books of the commissioners' office were destroyed. They related to the public business of the county, such as roads, taxes on property, etc., and cannot be replaced, it is thought, without a reassessment.

The court-house was erected about the year 1820 [1791], but the register's and clerk's offices, adjacent, were not built until 1827. The edifice was 60 feet long by 40 wide, and stood near the centre of the village, surrounded by a court-yard. As the regular sitting of the court takes place in May, the county will be without accommodations at Belair. The loss is supposed to be between \$3,000 and \$4,000, upon which we learn there is no insurance.

Second Courthouse at Bel Air

Fortunately, the General Assembly was in session when the fire occurred so that it was only a matter of days before a bill had been introduced and passed authorizing the construction of a new courthouse.¹⁷ A bond issue of \$20,000 was to be sold by the special commissioners named in the act, and as Preston has noted, the courthouse was completed for this amount—an occurrence almost unique in the history of Maryland public buildings. Moreover, it was ready for occupancy in 1859. While construction was going on, the courts met in the building of the Masonic Order and Union Church which occupied a part of the original courthouse lot.

¹⁵ Nor did the lot remain the same, for in 1827, a considerable part of the original two and five-eighths acres was sold to the Masons for the erection of a meeting hall (Ch. 36, Acts of 1826; *Harford County Land Records, H. D. No. 11, f. 77*. Microfilm copy, Hall of Records).

¹⁶ Ch. 133, Acts of 1829.

¹⁷ Ch. 91, Acts of 1858.