

NORTH CAROLINA STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE
Office of Archives and History
Department of Cultural Resources

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

Graham County Courthouse

Robbinsville, Graham County, GH0039, Listed 8/28/2007
Nomination by Clay Griffith
Photographs by Clay Griffith, August 2006



Façade view



Side and rear view

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Graham County Courthouse
other names/site number N/A

2. Location

street & number 12 North Main Street not for publication N/A
city or town Robbinsville vicinity N/A
state North Carolina code NC county Graham code 075 zip code 28771

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this X nomination/___ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property X meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ___ nationally ___ statewide X locally. (___ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official Date

North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria. (___ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting or other official Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that this property is:

___ entered in the National Register ___ See continuation sheet.	_____ Signature of the Keeper	_____ Date of Action
___ determined eligible for the National Register ___ See continuation sheet.	_____ Signature of the Keeper	_____ Date of Action
___ determined not eligible for the National Register	_____ Signature of the Keeper	_____ Date of Action
___ removed from the National Register	_____ Signature of the Keeper	_____ Date of Action
___ other (explain): _____ _____		

Graham County Courthouse
Name of Property

Graham County, North Carolina
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	3	objects
1	3	Total

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed
In the National Register

N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

GOVERNMENT/courthouse

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

GOVERNMENT/courthouse

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

Other: Neoclassical Revival

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Stone
roof Asphalt
walls Stone

other Concrete
Concrete block

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria
(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations
(Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or a grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property.
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Narrative Statement of Significance
(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Areas of Significance
(Enter categories from instructions)

- Architecture
- Politics/Government
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Period of Significance
1942-1957

Significant Dates
1942

Significant Person
(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)
N/A

Cultural Affiliation
N/A

Architect/Builder
Barber & McMurry – architects

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography
(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

- Previous documentation on file (NPS):**
- ___ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
 - ___ previously listed in the National Register
 - ___ previously determined eligible by the National Register
 - ___ designated a National Historic Landmark
 - ___ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
 - ___ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

- Primary Location of Additional Data**
- State Historic Preservation Office
 - Other State agency
 - Federal agency
 - Local government
 - University
 - Other
- Name of repository:
Pack Memorial Library, Asheville, NC

Graham County Courthouse
Name of Property

Graham County, North Carolina
County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acree of Property 0.68 acre

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

1	<u>17</u>	<u>244830</u>	<u>3912240</u>	3	_____	_____	_____
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
2	_____	_____	_____	4	_____	_____	_____
					See continuation sheet		

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Clay Griffith

organization Edwards-Pitman Environmental, Inc. date April 26, 2007

street & number 825-C Merrimon Avenue, #345 telephone (828) 281-3852

city or town Asheville state NC zip code 28804

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets**Maps**

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name Jeff Cabe, County Manager, Graham County

street & number PO Box 575 telephone 828-479-7961

city or town Robbinsville state NC zip code 28771

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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National Park Service

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Graham County Courthouse, Graham County, NC

Section 7. Narrative Description

The 1942 Graham County Courthouse occupies a prominent site at the intersection of SR 1106 (North and East Main streets), SR 1127 (South Main Street), and Siler Hill Road at the center of the small commercial district in the town of Robbinsville, North Carolina, population 747. The building is located at 12 North Main Street, at the northeast corner of North Main and East Main streets; Court Street surrounds the courthouse site on the north and east sides. The site of the courthouse was surveyed in 1872 and the first Graham County Courthouse was erected in 1873. The first courthouse served for approximately twenty years until the floor of the courtroom collapsed under the weight of a large crowd gathered to witness a sensational murder trial. A second courthouse dedicated in July 1895 was built on the same site. The first two buildings stood at the approximate location of the rear ell of the present courthouse building, which was built in 1941-1942 by the county with assistance from the Works Projects Administration, a federal relief agency established by President Franklin D. Roosevelt during the Depression.¹

Designed by the Knoxville, Tennessee architecture firm of Barber and McMurry in 1941 and dedicated in 1942, the Graham County Courthouse is a one-story Neoclassical Revival style T-plan building constructed of native stone. The stone reportedly came from the Mill Creek area approximately two miles southeast of Robbinsville, and the cut stone blocks, which include shades of red, orange, grey, and light brown, are irregularly coursed with concave mortar joints. The symmetrical five-bay façade, which forms the top of the "T," is defined by a prominent partial-width pedimented portico supported by four square masonry posts covered with stucco. The face of the pediment was originally finished with flush board sheathing, but it was covered with synthetic siding ca. 2000, at the same time a clock was placed in the pediment. The original double-leaf entrance of paneled wood doors and a wood-framed multi-light transom was replaced with aluminum-frame doors and a single-pane transom in the mid-1970s. The opening is topped by a flat arch with a stone keystone and voussoirs. The façade windows are large twelve-over-twelve double-hung wood sash with concrete lintels and sills. The lower story windows are positioned partially below grade with exterior light wells to permit natural light to enter.

The side elevations (north and south) of the front block are three bays deep with single twelve-over-twelve windows located on both stories, except that the lower story of the north elevation is less an opening at the northeast corner. Slender louvered vents with concrete lintels and sills are located in the gable ends, which also feature cornice returns. Two bays on the rear of the front block are visible on either side of the two-story ell, and contain twelve-over-twelve windows on the upper story and a recessed lower story entrance with a single-leaf door topped by an eight-light transom. Both rear entrance doors are modern replacements, but the wood frames and original transoms remain intact.

¹ *Graham County Centennial, 1872-1972* (Robbinsville, NC: Graham County Centennial 1972, Inc., 1972), 24-28.

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Graham County Courthouse, Graham County, NC

The rear ell of the courthouse extends to the east of the main block and houses the courtroom on the upper story with jail and former jailer's quarters located on the lower story. The north and south side elevations of the ell are seven bays wide with twelve-over-twelve windows illuminating the courtroom and lower story of the south elevation. On the north side, the windows on the lower story, which open into the jail, are multi-light metal frame sash with painted glass. All of the window openings feature concrete lintels and sills. A shed roof canopy supported on fluted columns shelters five bays of the lower story on the south elevation. The canopy was added in the 1980s following the retirement of Mrs. Dessie Odom, the last jailer to reside in the building. The east end bay of the covered area is an aluminum-frame glass vestibule that opens into the county manager's office, which is currently housed in the original living room and bedroom of the jailer's quarters. The glazed and paneled single-leaf entrance to the county manager's office is topped by a transom. The rear elevation of the ell is six bays wide with single nine-over-nine windows on the main story and features cornice returns, two slender louvered vents in the gable end, and an interior stone chimney. On the lower level, the three bays at the northeast corner contain six-over-six windows, but the three bays at the southeast corner are covered by a one-story, shed-roof, frame addition, also built in the 1980s. The addition, which is covered with plywood sheathing and accessed through solid wood doors, encloses the stairs to the basement and a small storage room. The open north end of the addition is supported by a single fluted column and shelters the recessed rear entrance to the building. The basement contained a boiler room and coal storage, which are no longer used.

The interior of the courthouse is accessed by a split stairway located immediately inside the front entrance. Interior masonry walls are finished with a thin coat of plaster and the painted concrete ceilings show outlines of the wood formwork used during construction. The floors are covered with linoleum tiles. Stairs to the upper story open onto a transverse hall with office suites located at either end (north and south) and double-leaf doors to the court room are located on the east wall. The courtroom doors feature a large, single panel of translucent privacy glass over a square wood panel. The walls at the front of the office suites are divided into grids with solid wood panels on the bottom row and translucent privacy glass in the upper rows, and office doors throughout are typically glazed with privacy glass and paneled. An elevator was added ca. 2000 to the north of the stairs. The Register of Deeds and Juvenile Counselor offices are located at the north end of the hall, and the Register of Deeds Office contains a deed vault located behind the elevator shaft. The Clerk of Court's offices are located at the south end of the hall and contain four interior offices. The main office beyond the reception area is separated by a gridded, semi-transparent wall, but the side offices are accessed by single-leaf glazed and paneled doors topped by transoms.

The courtroom is entered through double-leaf doors at the rear (west) of the large open space and is finished throughout with pine paneled walls. The dropped acoustical tile ceiling was installed in the 1970s. The raked floor of the courtroom is covered with carpet, and wooden auditorium seating is provided for the court audience. The judge's bench, bar, and jury box, located at the east end of the courtroom, are all constructed with pine paneling, but a center passage in the bar was cut ca. 2000. A painting depicting "Blind Justice" hangs behind the three-part bench. A paneled knee wall and raised platform distinguish the jury box,

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Graham County Courthouse, Graham County, NC

which is located at the southeast corner of the courtroom. Single-leaf solid wood doors in the wall behind the judge's bench enter into the judge's chambers and the jury room. The jury room at the southeast corner features pine paneled walls, and the judge's chambers at the northeast corner include an office and bathroom. A stair accessed through the north door behind the bench provides direct access to the jail located on the lower story of the building.

The lower story of the building is accessed from the front entrance by the split stair, which empties into a transverse hall. A projecting glass-enclosed booth for tax collections is located on the north side of the stairway as it enters the lower story. Various individual offices—originally assigned to the county attorney, grand jury, Board of Education, Health Department, and Agricultural Agent—are located on the north, south, and west sides of the hall. Restrooms are located at the northeast and southeast corners of the main block, near the rear entrances. Materials on the lower story are similar to those on the main level with linoleum tile floors, plaster walls, and exposed concrete ceilings, though a number of the office floors have been covered with carpet. The east wall of the lower story hall is pierced by several single-leaf two-panel wood doors that open into janitorial and storage closets. The central doorway on the east wall, however, opens into a small passageway that connects with a hallway along the rear of the jail. Originally designed as the "Visitor's Corridor," the hallway is accessed at either end by a secure single-leaf metal door and separates the jail on the north side of the rear ell and the former jailer's quarters on the south side. A special holding room is located on the south side of the hall at the west end. A freestanding metal cell salvaged from the previous jail is located within the room. The jailer's quarters contained three main rooms—living room, bedroom, and kitchen—with a private bathroom and closet located adjacent to the bedroom. The living room and bedroom, along with the bathroom and closet, were converted for use as the County Manager's office in the 1980s. A single-leaf doorway connecting the living room with the visitor's corridor was closed at this time, as was a door in the east wall between the living room and kitchen, which was renovated for use as the County Magistrate's office.

A central recessed rear entrance to the lower story provides access to the magistrate's office, visitor's corridor, rear stair to the courtroom, and sheriff's office. The jail is located on the north side of the ell and the primary entrance is through a heavy metal door in the small sheriff's office at the east end of the ell. The architect's designs for the jail show four separate cells divided by thick walls with a passageway along the north wall of the building. The proposed cells would accommodate eight bunks for white men and two each for white women, black men, and black women. Although the plans called for the cells to be constructed as rooms within the building, two freestanding metal cells were salvaged from the previous jail and placed within the open area, which is divided in the center by two concrete block walls that partition a space for toilets and showers. The jail area is plainly finished with concrete floors and painted concrete walls. The cells, which have open sides and solid tops, are constructed of flat metal bars and solid metal panels riveted together. The cells were made by the Pauly Jail Building and Manufacturing Company of St. Louis, Missouri. The jail, which is currently in use, can house eight prisoners and is the smallest penal facility in the state.

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The plaza in front of the courthouse, containing three non-contributing objects, was remodeled after 2000 with three memorial markers, planting beds, and stone veneer added to the retaining walls. The plaza was previously designed as a memorial to military veterans, dedicated in 1978, and consisted of blue and white marble paving tiles, central white marble cross engraved with the branches of the military, and a flag pole. During the recent remodeling—a project of the local chapter of the Veterans of Foreign Wars—the marble tiles were removed and replaced with concrete sidewalks and raised planting beds. Three granite slab memorials to Graham County’s veterans were erected, including a central marker commemorating fallen soldiers and two flanking markers located in grass planting beds to honor all who have served.

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Graham County Courthouse, Graham County, NC

Section 8. Statement of Significance

Summary

Located in the far western part of the state, the Graham County Courthouse is a two-story native stone T-plan building erected in 1941-1942 standing at the northeast corner of the main intersection in the small county seat of Robbinsville, North Carolina. Designed by the Knoxville, Tennessee, architectural firm of Barber and McMurry, the courthouse was built through the cooperative effort of Graham County and the federal government working under the Works Projects Administration (WPA), a New Deal-era relief program. The Neoclassical Revival style building—one of three courthouses in North Carolina built by the WPA—displays the conservative appearance and spare classical detail typical of WPA architecture. Since the Colonial period, counties have served as the basic unit of power and law in North Carolina and accordingly the county courthouse often represents the single most significant governmental building in each of the state's 100 counties. As the seat of government and center of court-related activity, the Graham County Courthouse meets National Register Criterion A for its association with the important functions of the county government. The Graham County Courthouse meets National Register Criterion C for its restrained Neoclassical styling using native stone. The building retains a high degree of integrity, having undergone minimal physical alteration since its construction. The period of significance for the courthouse, which remains in use as the county courthouse and jail, extends from its completion and dedication in 1942 to 1957. The years after 1957 do not meet Criteria Consideration G for exceptional significance.

Historical Background and the County Government System

The county has functioned as the chief unit of local government in North Carolina dating back to the Colonial period (1680-1776), and the county courthouse has been the physical and spiritual embodiment of the local government and rule of law. In 1663, King Charles II of England granted territory to eight lords proprietors, including what is now the state of North Carolina. The lords proprietors enacted a plan to govern the territory that was based on the work of the philosopher John Locke, and their proprietary government created precinct courts that were responsible for the judicial and governmental functions of precincts throughout the colony. The early courts met in private homes until 1722, when the colonial assembly passed an act to establish the precinct courts at definite places and authorized the justices of each precinct to

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Graham County Courthouse, Graham County, NC

purchase an acre of land and build a courthouse. The assembly passed a subsequent act in 1738 by which the precincts became counties and the precinct courts became county courts.²

From the Colonial period until 1868, when a new state constitution was approved, the main power of county government fell to the justices of the county courts, including the construction and maintenance of public buildings—chiefly courthouses and jails. The 1868 state constitution created a new plan for county government known as the County Commissioner Plan, under which the governmental and administrative powers and duties transferred to a board of county commissioners who were elected by voters in the county. The county commissioners then assumed responsibility for erecting and maintaining public buildings and roads.³

The earliest courthouses in North Carolina were typically small log or frame buildings containing the courtroom, jury room, a few offices, and occasionally the jail. Ancillary buildings including the clerk's office, sheriff's office, and jail (if it existed separate from the courthouse) were frequently located around or near the courthouse. As the population grew and administrative responsibilities of the counties increased through the nineteenth century, larger courthouses were constructed to accommodate additional offices for county officials and to provide storage for the growing amount of county records. The threat of fire, theft, or other damage to county records also influenced the replacement of early frame courthouses with more permanent structures, often of masonry construction.⁴

In January 1872, the North Carolina General Assembly created Graham County from Cherokee County, carving out a rugged, heavily forested area roughly framed by the Unicoi, Snowbird, and Cheoah mountain ranges. The new county commissioners held a public hearing on December 7, 1872, to select a site for the county seat. Three sites under consideration included Rhea Hill, Fort Hill, and property belonging to C. A. Colvard. Although a majority of property owners reportedly favored a site on Fort Hill, approximately one mile southeast of the present site, Colvard's property was chosen for the new county seat. Charging two dollars for two days' work, G. W. Ditmore laid out the town in February 1873, and the commissioners began accepting bids for a courthouse.⁵

² Milton Ready, *The Tar Heel State: A History of North Carolina* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 39-42. David Leroy Corbitt, *The Formation of the North Carolina Counties, 1663-1943*, 2nd printing (Raleigh, NC: State Department of Archives and History, 1969), xiii-xxi.

³ See *Courthouses in North Carolina (a thematic nomination)* National Register of Historic Places Nomination, 1978, sect. 8, p 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, sect 8, pp. 1-2.

⁵ Local tradition claims that Colvard's property unintentionally became the site of the courthouse when the surveying party stopped at a still near the present courthouse site on their way to the preferred site. After refreshing themselves, the surveyors began surveying the land adjacent to the still house, which then became the courthouse site. Official records neither confirm nor refute fully this recounting. See *Graham County Centennial*, 24-25.

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The contract for the first courthouse was awarded to John W. Harwood, who submitted a low bid of \$1,075. He was given one year to complete the building, which stood on the northwest corner of the present courthouse site. The simple wood frame building featured an exterior stair to the courtroom and opened for court sessions in the fall of 1874. With the courthouse under construction, the first session of the Graham County Superior Court was held in March 1873 at the Baptist Church of Cheoah Valley (the present day Old Mother Church) with Judge Riley Cannon presiding. The first courthouse served the county for about twenty years, but it had to be replaced in 1895, after the courtroom floor collapsed under the weight of a large crowd gathered to witness a sensational murder trial. The trial was continued in the Cooper-King General Store (no longer standing).⁶



(Second) Graham County Courthouse, ca. 1896

The second Graham County Courthouse was completed and dedicated in July 1895. The impressive two-story, front-gable frame building was erected on the same site and was covered with weatherboard siding and decorative wood trim painted a contrasting color. Overlooking Main Street, the façade featured paired pilasters, tall double-hung windows (the second story windows were topped by transoms), and a

⁶ Ibid., 24-25.

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recessed double-leaf entry with sidelights and a transom. When the second courthouse was razed in 1941 to make room for the present building, it was the last wood frame courthouse in use in North Carolina.⁷

Since its creation Graham County has struggled with its remote location in the far western end of the state and the lack of improved transportation routes. Organization of the county had little effect on economic conditions, which was highly restricted by geographic factors. In the late nineteenth century there were few merchants, but a number of small mills, most of which doubled as grain and saw mills, were scattered around the county. With its lack of outside trade, the heavily forested county supported small subsistence farms that produced a wide variety of crops. Logging was the first cash-producing industry in Graham County, which has been dominated through most of the twentieth century by the Bemis Lumber Company, organized in 1926. The Tallassee Power Company (Tapoco), a subsidiary of Alcoa, began harnessing the county's water resources in the early twentieth century, building dams on the Cheoah and Little Tennessee rivers in the 1910s and 1920s. Construction of the dams also prompted the county's first rail connection, with a line connecting the Cheoah Dam site (NR, 2004) to Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1916. The Nantahala National Forest, accounting for a large portion of the county's area, was created by the U.S. Forest Service in 1920. Completion of Tapoco's Santeetlah Dam (NR, 2004) in 1928 created Santeetlah Lake, and along with the construction of the first paved road into the county in 1931, Graham County began experiencing a growing number of visitors and outdoor enthusiasts.⁸

Two twentieth-century legal acts helped to facilitate the construction of the present Graham County Courthouse. The first was a measure passed in 1923 by the North Carolina legislature to encourage the construction of new and better courthouses by allowing county commissioners "to issue bonds or notes for the purpose of borrowing money with which to erect, build, construct, alter, and repair and improve courthouses and jails, and to purchase the necessary equipment and furniture to be sued therein." The act effectively stimulated courthouse construction with nearly half the state's counties building or rebuilding their courthouse since the 1920s.⁹

The second important act was the creation of the Works Projects Administration (WPA), a federal relief agency, in 1935, by President Franklin D. Roosevelt as part of his New Deal programs to ease the effects of the Great Depression. Originally created as the Works Progress Administration and headed by Harry L. Hopkins, the WPA sought to improve the economic plight of persons on relief by employing them in a wide range of useful projects. WPA-sponsored projects included not only an extensive building

⁷ Ibid., 25-28.

⁸ Bill Sharpe, *A New Geography of North Carolina*, Vol. III (Raleigh, NC: Sharpe Publishing Company, 1961), 1325-1332. Graham County Heritage Book Committee, *Graham County Heritage, North Carolina* (Robbinsville, NC: Graham County Historical Society, 1992), 13 (hereinafter cited as *Graham County Heritage*).

⁹ *Public Laws of North Carolina*, 1923, c. 143. Also see *Courthouses in North Carolina*, sect. 8, p. 2.

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program—public buildings, schools, roads and bridges, and airports—but also creative projects that produced an impressive amount of art, sculpture, public murals, written works, and theatrical productions. In 1939, the WPA was reorganized under the Federal Works Agency and renamed the Works Projects Administration. The WPA, which employed 8.5 million people during its existence, was eventually terminated in 1943 as private sector employment, sparked by the United States' involvement in World War II, grew steadily.

By January 1940, the WPA had completed 3,984 projects in North Carolina in cooperation with state, county, and municipal governments, who were required to contribute approximately one-fourth of the project costs. Prior to 1940, the WPA had helped to build two courthouses (Pamlico and Greene), five courthouse additions, a jail, twelve city halls, and a county office building in North Carolina. WPA-sponsored building projects included public buildings, schools, utility plants, airports, and recreation facilities across the state. In January 1940, work in Robbinsville was concluding on several WPA projects at the north end of Main Street, including a new stone school and gymnasium. Other WPA-sponsored improvements to the school site included adding stone veneer to an existing school building, landscaping work, and constructing new sidewalks, stone retaining walls, and an access road.¹⁰

In a letter to the Graham County commissioners dated December 20, 1939, Ben F. McMurry of Barber and McMurry, an architectural firm based in Knoxville, Tennessee, outlined his firm's proposal "to prepare preliminary drawings and estimates of costs for your proposed Court House Building in Robbinsville, N.C., in order that you may have the information...with which to make a W.P.A. application." The proposal called for the firm to complete all of the necessary studies and drawings and provide "general supervision of the work during the period of construction" for the courthouse project. Complete architectural supervision of the project would have required a fee higher than the proposed fee of 5% of the total building cost, which was budgeted for \$75,000. If the county failed to approve bonds for the purpose of constructing the courthouse or the project was permanently abandoned for any reason, the firm would receive \$100 for its preliminary work. The Barber and McMurry proposal was accepted, and preparations began on February 5, 1940, to hold a special election in March concerning bonds to pay for the county's share of the new courthouse.¹¹

The special bond election was held on March 23, 1940, with approximately half of the county's registered voters participating. The election ended with 1,279 voting in favor of issuing bonds and 271 against. With the measure passed, the bonds were issued on July 1, 1940, and an application was submitted to the North Carolina WPA. An item in the local newspaper (probably dating from late 1940) noted that the project had been approved by Charles C. McGinnis, the WPA state administrator, and that the application

¹⁰ Works Projects Administration, *North Carolina Works Projects Administration: Its Story*, pamphlet (Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Works Projects Administration, 1940), 2, 10, and 24-25.

¹¹ Graham County Minute Docket, Book 6, 416-417 and 430-431.

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was on its way to Washington DC for final approval. The newspaper also noted that the estimated cost of the building was \$87,750.¹²

Construction of the new courthouse appears to have begun in early 1941, following an order by the commissioners on January 14th to move “all records of the Register of Deeds, Clerk of Court, and county accountant” to the old stone school building at the north end of Main Street. The 1895 courthouse building was demolished to clear the site for the new building. The commissioners also recommended to the WPA that W. T. Moore of Andrews be appointed foreman in charge of construction and commissioner Dillard Stratton be appointed as a non-relief assistant to Mr. Moore.¹³

Construction of the building occurred from 1941 to 1942. The architect’s construction drawings for the courthouse are typically dated February and March 1941, with revisions noted as late as June. A ledger of expenses entitled “Courthouse Bills 1941” provides an interesting list of individuals and businesses that supplied labor and materials to the project, although the ledger is hardly exhaustive. Of note among the various expenses is the possibility that stone masons were brought from Bryson City in Swain County to complete the exterior stonework on the courthouse. Specifically, four charges totaling \$222 for “hauling men to work” were paid to Ed Cochran and Hobert Smiley. One entry indicates that Cochran was paid \$40 for transporting the men for eight days at \$5.00 per day. It seems possible that the workers were experienced stone masons from the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Swain County and may have even been members of the Civilian Conservation Corps, a federal relief agency created in 1933 for the purpose of putting young men to work on conservation-related construction projects on public lands. Barber and McMurry, architects of the courthouse, also designed the Oconaluftee Visitors Center for the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The Oconaluftee Visitors Center, located at the Cherokee entrance to the Park in Swain County, is a two-and-one-half story, T-plan building constructed of stone between 1938 and 1940.¹⁴

The Graham County Courthouse was officially dedicated on September 8, 1942, with Felix E. Alley of Waynesville, resident judge of North Carolina’s 20th judicial district, delivering the keynote address. A. F. Weaver represented the state administration of the WPA and formally presented the building to J. B. Crisp, chairman of the board of county commissioners. During the dedication it was noted that the building was constructed at a cost of \$81,778, with Graham County contributing \$30,989 of the total amount.¹⁵

¹² Graham County Minute Docket, Book 6, 430-431, 435, and 492. Undated newspaper clipping in collection of Mike Ingram, Robbinsville, NC.

¹³ Graham County Minute Docket, Book 6, 492.

¹⁴ Graham County Minute Docket, Book 6, 599-602. Robert W. Blythe, “Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Park Development Historic District” Draft National Register of Historic Places Nomination (National Park Service, Southeastern Regional Office, Atlanta, GA, 1999).

¹⁵ *Asheville Citizen-Times* (September 9, 1942).

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Since its completion, the courthouse has remained the center of governmental and judicial activity in the county and has undergone few physical changes. In the 1970s, the board of commissioners proposed and enacted several changes to the courtroom, including the dropped acoustical tile ceiling. During the following election cycle voters expressed their displeasure over the changes by voting out the full slate of incumbent commissioners. The local chapter of the Veterans of Foreign Wars has contributed various elements to the landscaping in front of the building, including the three granite memorials to Graham County residents who have served in the military and the clock in the portico pediment.¹⁶

Mrs. Dessie Odom (1903-1989) was the last jailer to occupy the living quarters on the lower story of the courthouse. Mrs. Odom, along with her husband John, began as the jailers in 1962, maintaining and cleaning the jail and caring for prisoners. Following Mr. Odom's death in 1964, Mrs. Odom was asked to stay on as the jailer, responsible for caring for the jail and its inmates, acting as police dispatcher, and keeping prisoner records. She prepared meals for the prisoners in the kitchen of her quarters, which she then delivered across the hall to the jail. Widely regarded as an excellent cook, it is believed that more than one individual over the years asked to be locked up for the benefit of Mrs. Odom's home cooking. At the time of her retirement in 1985, Mrs. Odom, then in her eighties, was the oldest working jailer in the country.¹⁷

Architecture Context

North Carolina's first courthouses were small frame or log structures erected in the designated county seat and designed to house the court functions of the county. The courthouse was frequently one of the only buildings in a newly created town, with a few other ancillary buildings clustered around the modest courthouse. The location of the county seat has always been an important issue to residents of the county. County seats were typically situated near the geographic center of the county and frequently near the intersection of important roads or trade routes. In establishing the county seat, the designated property was divided into town lots, often with a public square held in common for all residents of the county, and the courthouse was usually sited on or overlooking this public ground.¹⁸

¹⁶ Juanita Colvard and Jan Millsaps, personal communication, August 10, 2006.

¹⁷ Colvard, Millsaps, and Louie Sellers, personal communication, August 10, 2006. Mr. Sellers is currently the chief jailer in Graham County and the grandson of John and Dessie Odom. Mrs. Odom was profiled by Charles Kurault on the nationally televised program "Crossroads" in 1984. Also see *Graham County Heritage*, 136.

¹⁸ *Courthouses in North Carolina*, sect. 7, p. 5. In the winter of 1976-77, the Survey and Planning Branch of the North Carolina Division of Archives and History undertook a historical and architectural survey of the state's county courthouses, and the survey resulted in the thematic nomination *Courthouses in North Carolina*, which covered courthouses built from the antebellum period through 1939. Because of its age, the Graham County Courthouse was not included with the fifty-seven courthouses listed in the National Register under the thematic nomination.

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The threat of fire, theft, or other damage to irreplaceable county records necessitated the eventual replacement of the first frame courthouses with more permanent structures, usually of masonry construction. The oldest courthouse in North Carolina, the Chowan County Courthouse (NHL, 1970) in Edenton, is a brick building erected in 1767. Chowan County was a wealthy and important colonial county, and the courthouse established a precedent for courthouse design in North Carolina that continued through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The two-story, brick, Georgian style Chowan County Courthouse is sited at the head of the town green and is topped by a three-stage cupola. The scale of the building and level of classical detail provided a worthy model that was frequently emulated across the state.¹⁹

The Neoclassical Revival style, however, emerged as the most popular architectural style for courthouse architecture in North Carolina in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The reappearance of a classical vocabulary for public architecture in the early twentieth century grew out of the Beaux-Arts classicism of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The integration of classical forms and organizational principles with modern functionality held great appeal in a time of sweeping social and economic change across the state. Orderly Beaux-Arts-influenced planning conveyed a sense of hierarchy and propriety for public buildings, while the conservative Neoclassical style effectively asserted the "temple of justice" concept for courthouse architecture. The Neoclassical Revival style courthouses of the twentieth century were typically larger in scale than nineteenth-century courthouses, and stone replaced brick as the dominant exterior material. A common floor plan for Neoclassical Revival style courthouses appears in the twentieth century, with ground floor offices separated by cross halls or a central hall and a large second floor courtroom spanning the width of the building.²⁰

The large group of Neoclassical Revival courthouses in North Carolina built between the 1890s and 1940s evidences a stylistic progression that moves toward a restrained modern aesthetic integrated with a conservative classical vocabulary. Among the designers of early Neoclassical Revival style courthouses in North Carolina, Oliver Wheeler, a Charlotte architect working with several associates, completed nine courthouses between 1899 and 1913, primarily in central and western counties. The 1902 Wilkes County Courthouse (NR, 1979) designed by Wheeler and Runge exemplifies the basic Wheeler style with a symmetrical façade, Ionic portico, and mansard cupola. The Asheville firm of Smith and Carrier offered a more Beaux-Arts-influenced variation on the Neoclassical style for the 1907 Madison County Courthouse (NR, 1979) and the 1914 Jackson County Courthouses (NR, 1979). The buildings feature rich classical

¹⁹ Ibid, sect. 7. Cathernine W. Bishir, *North Carolina Architecture* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 47-49.

²⁰ Bishir, 364-365 and 385-389. Also see *Courthouses in North Carolina*, sect. 7, pp. 1-2.

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detailing, well proportioned pediments, Corinthian porticos, and bold, domed cupolas. The cupolas are crowned by statues of “Blind Justice,” a frequent symbol of the judicial function of the building.²¹

Other architectural firms also exerted considerable influence over courthouse design in the state during the first few decades of the twentieth century. Milburn and Heister of Washington, DC designed sixteen courthouses in North Carolina and the firm’s work was characterized by a determinedly academic approach to courthouse design that favored simple massing punctuated by imposing porticoes and grand classical cupolas. The Buncombe County Courthouse (NR, 1979) marked a radical departure for Milburn and Heister, who conceived the building as a seventeen story high-rise tower enriched with setbacks and applied classical motifs. The building was the last courthouse in North Carolina designed by Frank Milburn and was completed in 1928, two years after Milburn’s death. Harry Barton of Greensboro, an architect working in the 1920s, also influenced courthouse design through his use of uncomplicated forms, sophisticated classical details, and elegant materials. Barton designed at least five courthouses including the 1933 Alleghany County Courthouse (NR, 1979) in Sparta, a starkly monumental red brick edifice designed to meet the county’s depression-era budget of \$17,000.²²

Later examples of the Neoclassical Revival style reveal a growing reaction against the eclecticism of architectural design. Modern theories of functionalism and abstraction began to appear in courthouse design beginning in the late 1920s and evolving through the 1930s. The Haywood County Courthouse (NR, 1979) in Waynesville, designed by Rogers and Rhodes of Charlotte and completed in 1932, embodies some of these principles with its simplicity of form and massing, flattening and economy of ornament, and lack of a domed cupola. The three-story building of smooth ashlar blocks features a low-relief portico formed by two-story Doric pilasters supporting a broad pediment. The Greene County Courthouse (NR, 1979), one of three courthouses in North Carolina built through the WPA, was erected in 1935. The uncomplicated design and modest classical detail are characteristic of WPA architecture. Similarly, the Graham County Courthouse contains the modern government and court functions within a straightforward T-plan building, accentuated by the substantial, projecting portico and native stone exterior walls. The 1938 Pamlico County Courthouse, however, presents the WPA style reduced to its essentials, with a simple tetrastyle Doric portico fronting a two-story brick block.²³

²¹ *Courthouses in North Carolina*, sect. 7, p.2; and Catherine W. Bishir, Michael T. Southern and Jennifer F. Martin, *A Guide to the Historic Architecture of Western North Carolina* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 125, 247-248, and 354.

²² *Courthouses in North Carolina*, sect. 7, pp. 2-3; and Bishir, et al, 197 and 265. Also see Daniel J. Vivian’s article “Public Architecture, Civic Aspirations, and the Price of ‘Progress’: A Historic of the Buncombe County Courthouse” in *May We All Remember Well, Volume II*, edited by Robert S. Brunk (Asheville, NC: Robert S. Brunk Auction Services Inc., 2001), 154-177.

²³ Bishir, et al, 339-340, and *Courthouses in North Carolina*, sect. 7, p. 4.

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The architectural firm of Barber and McMurry, who designed the Graham County Courthouse, was formed in 1915 by Charles I. Barber, his cousin David West Barber, and Ben F. McMurry. Based in Knoxville, Tennessee, Charles Barber was the son of a nationally renowned architect, George F. Barber, who moved to Knoxville in 1888 and started the American Home Publishing Company to distribute his house designs through pattern books and mail-order catalogs. All three men studied under Paul Cret at the University of Pennsylvania School of Architecture, which was rooted in the philosophy of the Ecole des Beaux Arts. Cret later designed a number of public buildings employing a stripped classicism that combined Modernist abstraction with Classical proportions, massing, and forms. The Barber and McMurry firm worked predominantly in eastern Tennessee and quickly gained a reputation for Beaux-Arts-influenced designs. Charles Barber worked as the principal designer, McMurry served as the business manager, and West Barber oversaw the production of working drawings. The firm's regional reputation grew in the 1930s and 1940s, and its work expanded into educational buildings, churches, public buildings, and affordable housing throughout the southeast. Charles Barber also served as the chief architect of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) during the 1930s. The TVA, an independent public corporation created by Congress in 1933, was formed as part of President Roosevelt's New Deal programs with the purpose of guiding the economic, social, and physical development of the Tennessee River basin and adjoining territory. The agency's is most recognized for the construction of power generating and flood control dams on the Tennessee River and its tributaries, including Fontana Dam in Graham County, built in 1942-44. Although the firm continues to operate as BarberMcMurry Architects to the present day, the last of the original partners retired in 1969.²⁴

Barber and McMurry's design for the Graham County Courthouse embodies the distinctive characteristics of the Neoclassical Revival style, especially the sparsely ornamented later variations, and its native stone construction connects the building to the local building context. The stone for the courthouse reportedly came from the Mill Creek area approximately two miles southeast of Robbinsville. The exterior walls are faced with irregularly coursed multi-colored cut stone blocks. Stone was frequently used as a building material throughout the county, and several one- and two-story residences and a number of commercial buildings along Main Street in Robbinsville were built with colorful local stone. In the late 1930s at the north end of Main Street, the WPA constructed a stone school and gymnasium, added stone veneer to an existing school building, and built stone steps and retaining walls as part of the school's landscaping. The uncoursed stonework on the Robbinsville school buildings is more typical of the type of stone masonry found in Graham County, but modern additions and alterations have diluted the visual impact of this impressive collection of buildings. Another interesting group of stone buildings are located in the community of Stecoah in the eastern part of the county. The Stecoah Grocery, built in 1918 with stone from

²⁴ Katharine Wheeler, "Barber & McMurry Architects," *The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture* (Electronic version; <http://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/imagegallery.php?EntryID=B006>; accessed June 2006), and BarberMcMurry Architects, Inc., website (<http://www/bmi1915.com>; accessed June 2006).

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the Nantahala Gorge, served as post office in addition to the store. The Stecoah School, a large one-story facility with a gymnasium, was built after a 1930 fire destroyed the previous building. Although built before the WPA was created, the school resembles the Rustic Revival style school buildings of the WPA era that were constructed in many western North Carolina counties. The ca. 1933 Stecoah Baptist Church features similar stonework and was erected as a community endeavor.

The Graham County Courthouse retains its overall architectural integrity despite changes to the structure. Two exterior additions are confined to the lower stories on the rear and south side of the ell, and the south porch and glass vestibule are relatively transparent. Changes to the doors are typical modern updates for public buildings and do not alter the size of any original openings. Modern updates on the interior are also minimal in scope and visual impact. The installation of a passenger elevator ca. 2000 is the most significant addition. The conversion of the jailer's quarters to the county manager and magistrate's offices also alters the original plan of the building, although the number and division of rooms remain intact. The courthouse and jail, which continue to serve in their intended capacity, endure as the physical embodiment of local government in Graham County.

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Section 10. Geographical Data

Verbal Boundary Description

The nominated property for the Graham County Courthouse contains the full extent of Graham County tax parcel 5660-00-EX-002. The boundary is shown by the shaded parcel on the accompanying Graham County tax map.

Boundary Justification

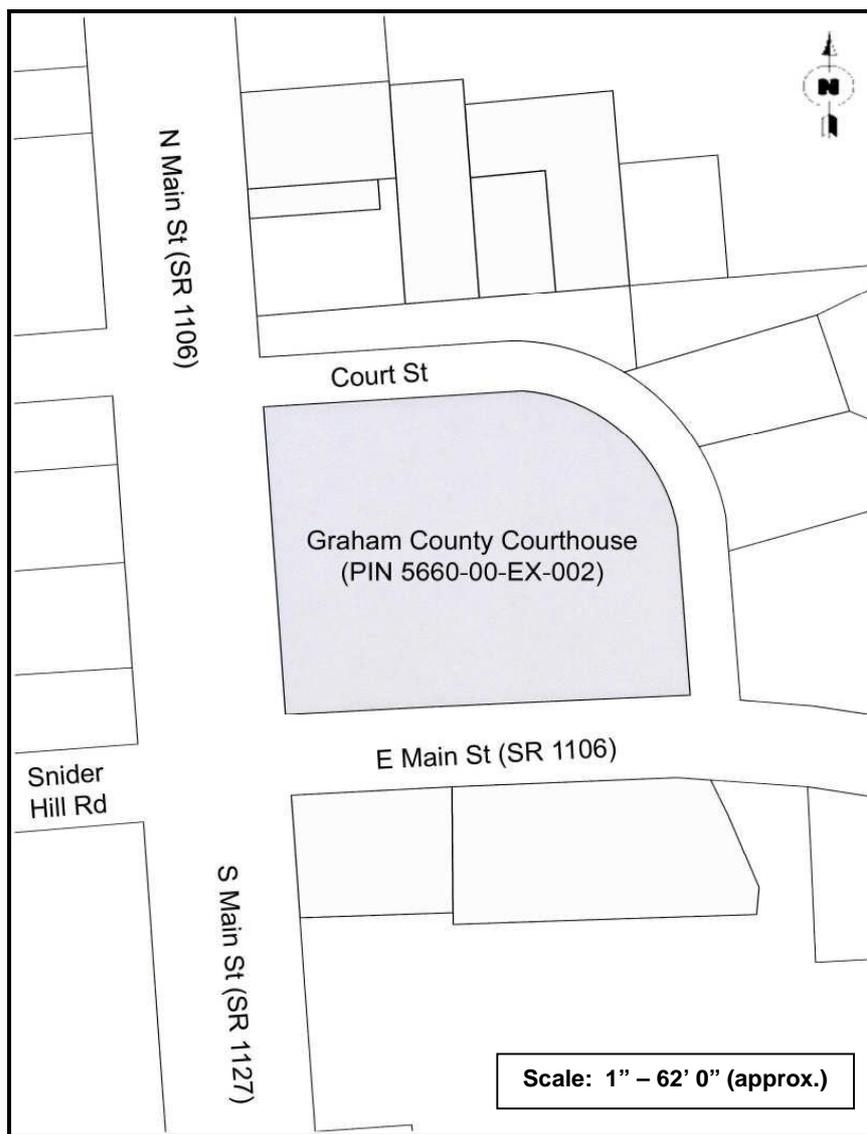
The nominated property includes all of the acreage historically associated with the courthouse.

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Graham County Courthouse – National Register Boundary Map

Tax Parcel PIN 5660-00-EX-002

(Source: Graham County Land Records Department)

The National Register Boundary is shown as the shaded parcel.

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All photographs of the Graham County Courthouse at 12 North Main Street in Robbinsville by Clay Griffith of Edwards-Pitman Environmental, Inc., on August 10, 2006. Negatives are kept at the North Carolina Office of Archives and History Western Office in Asheville, North Carolina.

1. Façade, view to east
2. Front portico, oblique view to northeast
3. South side elevation, oblique view to northwest
4. Oblique view of rear ell, view to southwest
5. Interior – 1st story hall, view from entrance
6. Interior – Clerk of Court offices, view from hallway
7. Interior – Courtroom, view east to the bench
8. Interior – 4-person jail cell