

## Architecture Around Us

By Lu Donnelly

### Courthouses

Courthouses fulfill many functions in modern society. Symbolically they are the bedrock of our democracy and its rule of law. Everyday, they serve jurists, juries, and journalists. They are the place we register warrants, wills, and incorporation papers.

The courthouse buildings still standing in Western Pennsylvania span more than 200 years, from a 1797 log courthouse in Greene County to the newest courthouse still under construction in Beaver County. There are a surprising number of similarities among them; in fact, there are two sets of twins.

The first pair of twins was begun in 1867 in Clinton and Venango counties. Both were completed in 1869. They are each illustrated on their recent county history books, showing a pride of place invested in them by the local citizenry. Both were designed by Philadelphians Samuel Sloan (1815 – 1884) and his partner, Addison Hutton (1834 – 1916). Sloan designed a total of four Pennsylvania courthouses, but these two are so similar that only the painted brick on the courthouse in Lock Haven, Clinton County, distinguishes it — until you realize the shorter tower is on the left in Franklin, Venango County, and on the right in Lock Haven. Ironically, Samuel Sloan sued Northumberland County for having a contractor copy his earlier (and now demolished) Lycoming County courthouse in Williamsport, and he won. Northumberland paid more for its knock-off than it would have paid had it hired Sloan in the first place. Of course, Sloan constantly copied his own ideas and was a prolific publisher of his plans, a practice which, it would seem, invited imitation.

The Warren County courthouse was the first of five courthouses in Pennsylvania designed by Milton Earle Beebe (1840 – 1922) of Buffalo between 1872 and 1892. He used what today we call the Second Empire style, characterized by its mansard roof and named for Napoleon III's reign in France (1852 – 1870). Four of these were in Western Pennsylvania and only one, McKean County's, has been destroyed, by fire. Ironically, about the time Beebe was designing his second Pennsylvania courthouse, Elk County commissioners were searching for a courthouse design. Rather than go to the trouble of engaging an architect, they simply hired Warren County's contractor, J.P. Marston. He built Elk County's courthouse using Beebe's plans. So the "twins" are actually fraternal rather than identical. It's not clear



Allegheny County  
courthouse, Pittsburgh,  
1883–1888,  
Henry Hobson  
Richardson architect.

why Beebe didn't sue the Elk County commissioners, unless he either approved of Marston using his plans and received some compensation for them, or perhaps never knew of the imitation.

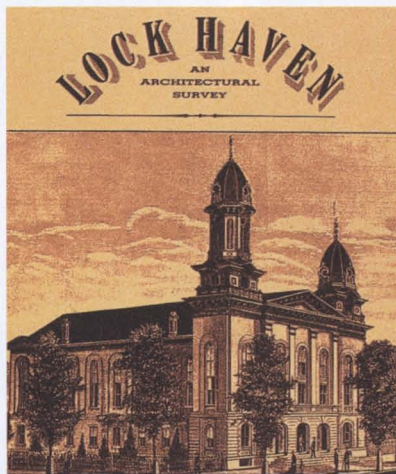
There were other sets of twins, but fire or demolition has erased the pairings. One was the Greene County courthouse of 1851, designed by request to emulate the Fayette County courthouse (now demolished). Harrisburg builders Samuel and John Bryan substituted cast-iron Corinthian capitals on the Greene County courthouse at the commissioners' urging rather than the simpler Ionic columns on the Fayette version. The building has recently been restored by Landmark Design Associates.

Nearly all of the 13 courthouses built before the Civil War in Western Pennsylvania took their basic designs from Thomas Jefferson's 1785 Virginia state capitol in Richmond. (Seven of the 13 remain, many with alterations.) Jefferson was inspired by a c. 20 B.C. Roman temple called Maison Carree in Nimes, France, with its pedimented portico. Jefferson adapted the form as a reaction to English Georgian architecture and a symbol of the United States' independence and reverence for Roman republicanism. These "cousins" all have pedimented porticoes supported by four to six columns with either Ionic or Corinthian capitals, and most at one time or another had cupolas (unlike Jefferson's capitol).

Such eminent architects as William Strickland, who designed Crawford County's courthouse of 1824 – 1828 (now demolished), and his student, Thomas U. Walter, who designed the 1855 portion of Erie County's courthouse, chose what came to be called the Greek Revival style. Fulton County's 1850 – 1852 courthouse designed by local cabinet-maker Jacob Stoner, like the Greene County courthouse,

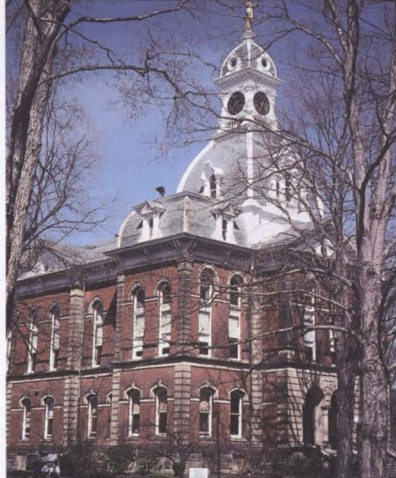


Clinton County courthouse, Lock Haven, 1867–1869, Samuel Sloan and Addison Hutton, architects, as seen on the cover of *Historic Lock Haven: An Architectural Survey* by Dean R. Wagner, 1991.



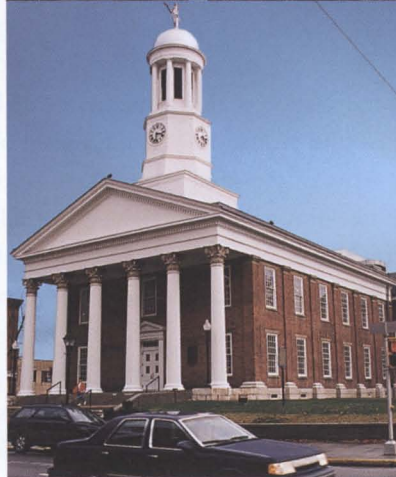
Clinton County Historical Society, cover photo by Tucker Trainor

Warren County courthouse, Warren, 1872–1877, Milton Earle Beebe, architect.



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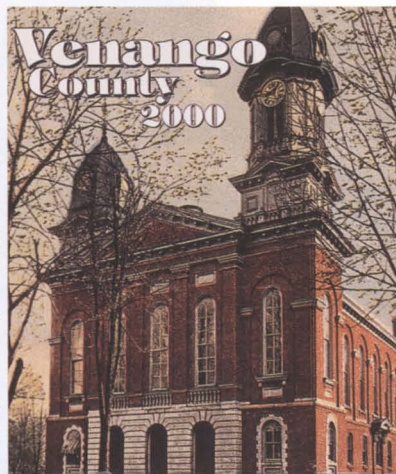
Greene County courthouse, Waynesburg, 1850, Samuel and John Bryan, builders.



Landmark Design Associates

relies on a vernacular version of the Greek Revival style by using brick rather than cut limestone.

Only Henry Hobson Richardson (1838 – 1886) again raised courthouse design to the level of national significance earlier achieved by Jefferson. Between 1883 and 1888, his Allegheny County courthouse changed our perception of grandeur dramatically, without a portico in sight. Using massive stones in symphonic harmony, his work generated an entirely new style eventually called “Richardsonian Romanesque.” The Allegheny County courthouse, widely copied in



Venango County Historical Society, cover photo by Tucker Trainor

Venango County courthouse, Franklin, 1867–1869, Samuel Sloan and Addison Hutton, architects, as seen on the cover of *Venango County 2000: The Changing Scene, Volume 1*.



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Elk County courthouse, Ridgway, 1880, J.P. Marston, builder.



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Fulton County courthouse, McConnellsburg, 1850–1852, Jacob Stoner, builder.

the 1880s and beyond, is a nationally recognized work of genius and embodies the reverence for the law vital to a strong democracy.

Lu Donnelly is one of the authors of *Buildings of Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania*, a forthcoming book in the 58-volume series on American architecture sponsored by the Society of Architectural Historians titled *Buildings of the United States*. She has authored several books and National Register nominations on Allegheny County topics.