

The Three Bears

The half-shire public buildings of Seneca County, so pleasantly situated on a knoll fronting Court-House Square in the Village of Ovid—now commonly called “The Three Bears”—are one of the best-known historical landmarks in the scenic Finger Lakes region of New York State. The largest of the brick buildings—the Court-House—is called with affection “Papa Bear.” Next south (i.e., the middle of the three buildings) comes the “Mama Bear” and next south is the smallest of the three—the “Baby Bear.” The Historic Preservation League of New York State indicates that these structures are unique in the entire United States—that there is no other set of three adjacent public buildings in tact of the Greek-Revival style of architecture. That alone helps to explain why they are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Court-House was erected in 1845 as a replacement for the original wooden courthouse building which had deteriorated and become unsafe. The building contract was awarded to the brothers Obadiah B. Latham, Jr. and Oliver S. Latham of Seneca Falls. Obadiah was an architect and civil engineer. As was typical for nineteenth-century courthouse construction in New York, architects and builders were chosen for demonstrated competence and their work was carefully supervised by an appointed committee. For this construction project, the committee consisted of Elijah Denton, Dr. Claudius C. Coan, and Clement Jones. Clement Jones and Sidney Grant drew up the plans for the courthouse. Bricks for the courthouse and the Clerk’s Office (i.e., the Baby Bear) were produced locally at John B. Seeley’s farm. The use of local materials not only kept costs down but also served to benefit suppliers and builders in the area.

The new courthouse (Papa Bear) and the clerk’s office (Baby Bear) were impressive Greek Revival-style brick structures with Doric order porticos. The cupola of the courthouse was crowned by a weathervane reportedly from the first courthouse. The basement of the courthouse housed a kitchen, dining room, and stone jail with three cells. Two of these cells have doors of riveted iron bars and were secured with padlocks. The third cell has a solid steel plate door with a single opening as the only source of light or fresh air. The sheriff’s living quarters and office were housed on the first floor so that he was available on site at all hours. The grand jury room was also located on the first floor. The large courtroom with its tall ceiling and windows, and tiered seating is located on the second floor. Like its predecessor, the new courthouse was not only the setting for court trials and political debate but also for concerts, lectures, and meetings of community organizations. One of the most celebrated speakers to give a lecture in the courthouse was Horace Greeley, editor of *The New York Tribune*, who spoke there on September 30, 1857.

The design of the first Clerk’s Office (Baby Bear) with its Doric temple front was similar to the courthouse, though on a smaller scale. The flooring of the loft was fireproofed with a thick layer of ash to help protect the county’s records. The records, stoves, and furniture of the two County Clerk’s Offices (Ovid and Waterloo) were moved from one to the other at the close of each three year term. Ten teams of horses were required for transporting the equipment and records. The Committee on County Buildings rented out the Clerk’s office at Ovid during those terms when the clerk was in Waterloo. This arrangement continued up until about 1905 when the Clerk’s Office remained permanently in Waterloo.

In its early days, Courthouse Square was rented out to farmers as a pasture for cattle and hogs, but in the years following the completion of the new courthouse in 1845, the square was regraded, reseeded, trees were planted, and fence installed around its perimeter. Stone walks were installed in the courthouse square beginning in 1869.

In 1859 it was decided that a new Clerk's Office was needed. Local builder Horace H. Bennett and mason Tunis S. Van Horn were contracted to build a new clerk's office on the site between the courthouse and the old clerk's office. Work began in 1860 and was completed in 1862. The Greek Revival temple-front design of the new Clerk's Office (Mama Bear) complemented the design of the two older buildings at the complex.

A number of changes in use have taken place at the Three Bears throughout the years. The Papa Bear ceased to be the site of court sessions sometime before 1975. This was largely because the courtroom is not handicapped-accessible. The Seneca County Board of Supervisors occasionally meets in the Ovid courtroom. Following the resignation of Undersheriff Gerald Brewer in 1974, the jail and undersheriff's quarters were no longer used in that capacity. The Papa Bear today still contains a satellite office of the Office for the Aging.

Mama Bear served as the County Clerk's Office, alternating terms with the Waterloo office, from its completion in 1862 until 1905, when it became the Ovid Free Library. It remained the library until 1962 when it became the Health Center of the Seneca County Department of Health. In 1974, when the Health Department moved into Papa Bear, it became a satellite office for the Seneca County Sheriff's Department and remains so today.

After the completion of a new County Clerk's Office (Mama Bear) in 1862, the old clerk's office (Baby Bear) became the county surrogate's office during alternating terms. Baby Bear was also once used as a temporary facility for a local bank after a disastrous fire destroyed most of the business portion of the village on October 13, 1874. Sometime later the Baby Bear was used virtually exclusively by the Grand Army of the Republic, the organization of Union veterans of the Civil War. As Civil War veterans passed away, the Sons of Union Veterans, Caywood Chapter, the successor organization of the local chapter of the G.A.R., has continued to use the Baby Bear exclusively.

The Three Bears are outstanding local interpretations of the nationally popular Greek Revival style. Greek Revival was the dominant style of American architectural design during the period of the 1830's to the 1850's and was used for houses, schools, churches, commercial buildings, courthouses, and other government buildings. The popularity of the Greek Revival style in the United States was partly due to its symbolic association with the democratic ideals of ancient Greece. The style was widely disseminated by carpenters' pattern books, including Asher Benjamin's *The Practical House Carpenter* and *The American Builder's Companion*. The Mama Bear, completed in 1862, is a relatively late example of the style and has more attenuated proportions but was compatible in design with the existing buildings.

Many of the historic county courthouses in New York State were built in the Greek Revival style. The symmetry, dignity, and formality of the Greek Revival style reflected the high regard in which law and local government were held. The Papa Bear courthouse is architecturally significant as an example of an intact mid-nineteenth-century courtroom. It possesses a high level of period architectural integrity and retains many of its original materials and features. As was typical for nineteenth-century courtroom architecture, the Ovid courtroom is graced with large windows (on three walls) and a tall ceiling. The judge's bench, jury boxes, and witness chair were placed on elevated platforms so they could be seen clearly from anywhere in the courtroom. The seating in the courtroom was tiered and curved to allow for better viewing by the public.

In recent years Seneca County government has been moving away from usage of the Three Bears. Fortunately, a group known as the Friends of the Three Bears has emerged to spearhead efforts to maintain the buildings and to put them to use to enhance tourism, promotion of local history and other beneficial economic uses. On November 20, 2003, the Preservation League of New York State designated the Three Bears as one of New York State's "Seven to Save," the nonprofit group's annual list of New York's most threatened historic places. Thanks to the efforts of The Friends of the Three Bears, it is likely that in the near future the Three Bears will be preserved and become a great tourist mecca like what has been true of the Rose Hill Mansion.

[This article was written by Walter Gable, Seneca County Historian, September 2004.]