

# BEDFORD HISTORICAL SOCIETY *stories*

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## On January 28, 1788 the First Sessions Were Held at the Newly Built Court House



*The Bedford Court House was one of two county seats in Westchester until 1870 when White Plains became the sole seat*

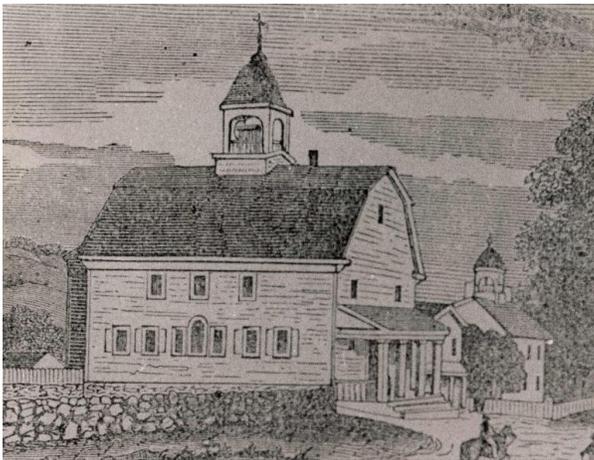
During the Revolutionary War judges started hearing cases at Bedford's Presbyterian meeting house because White Plains was not safe after being burned by the British. In 1779 after the British burned Bedford, court was then transferred to Upper Salem. After the war, Bedford and White Plains were selected as the sites of a split county seat. The Bedford Court House was constructed and the first cases were heard on January 28, 1788. Though the court house in White Plains was torn down in 1854, White Plains remained the county seat due to development opportunities and transportation options.

Below is an excerpt from former Town Historian Donald W. Marshall's story on the Court House. Our members help us bring history to life and [if you'd like to renew, become a member or make a donation, we welcome your support!](#)

## Our 1787 Court House

by Donald W. Marshall

Few motorists whizzing along Route 22 through picturesque Bedford Village realize that they have just visited a town that was once a county seat of Westchester and every bit as important as White Plains. From the end of the Revolution until 1870 both Bedford and White Plains were "half-shire" county capitals, and Bedford's Court House, built in 1787, is proof.



1787 Bedford Court House

The Court House, close to the Village Green, is a simple, dignified white frame building that is symbolic of the political status that Bedford formerly enjoyed. In those stagecoach and horseback days, travel was so difficult that one center for county courts and county business was not convenient. Bedford, which was centrally situated in northern Westchester and was on the inland post road, was a natural

choice.

Courts continued in Bedford until the Village was burned by the British in 1779. After the Revolution they came back to the rebuilt meeting house in Bedford, in 1784.

At that time, and for several years to come, Bedford was probably the most populous community in Westchester, but as peace was restored and normal life resumed, White Plains, the former county seat, reasserted its claims. The result was the Legislative Act of 1786 conferring "half-shire" status on both towns and ordering the building of two court houses. Both court houses were built in 1787 and opened in 1788. The one in



White Plains Court House

White Plains was torn down in 1854; the one in Bedford still stands. So we have here in Bedford the oldest Westchester county

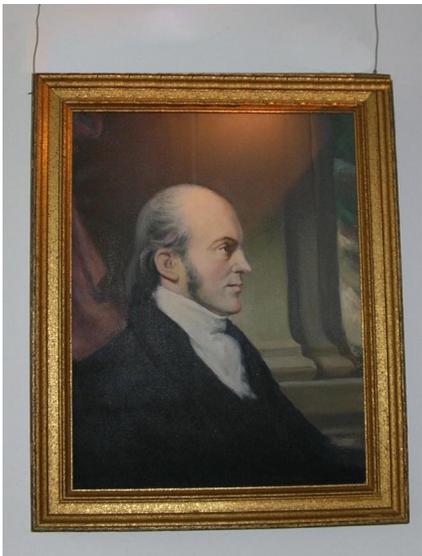
government building; it is also one of only three court houses in New York State that were built before 1800 and are still standing.

Moses Keyman dec. } Court in payment of Costs  
 Peter Tim cadem }  
 Abraham Canfield } On Motion of Mr. Burr Attorney for the  
 Plaintiff Ordered the Declaration be filed  
 the letter to the tenant having been  
 John Hunt. John } and Affidavit of Service  
 Strong tenant }  
 Benjamin Miller } On Motion of Mr. Pell Ordered that the

"Mr. Burr" noted as attorney for Plaintiff in Bedford Court

The first court sessions in the Bedford Court House were held on 28th January, 1788. On Monday, the judges opened court in General Sessions and immediately adjourned till the next day. In Common Pleas, they took up 14 lawsuits, eight of which were dismissed for lack of a plea. From the historian's viewpoint, the most interesting thing was the frequent reference to a Mr. Burr: "Mr. Burr produces to the court a habeas corpus"; "on motion Mr. Burr"; "Mr. Burr attorney for the plaintiff," and so on. Mr. Burr was the brilliant lawyer and politician Aaron Burr, later state attorney general and vice president, but remembered today as the man who killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel. Burr had come up from New York, probably on horseback, to try his cases in Bedford. He had a substantial practice in the Westchester courts at this time.

Including this winter term, the county courts met three times a year, alternating between Bedford and White Plains. The other sessions were in May and September, each term lasting usually a week. The Circuit Court and Court of Oyer and Terminer and General Gaol Delivery also held an annual session at Bedford, alternately with White Plains, between 1829 and 1851.



Portrait of Burr in the 1787 Court House

Returning to those old court records of the, 1780s and 1790s, we get the impression that our Westchester forefathers were a pugnacious, often cantankerous lot who liked nothing better than going to law. Towns quarreled with towns over the removal of a pauper from one to the other. Neighbors' quarrels wound up in lawsuits, or charges of assault and battery, or indictments for "stopping up a highway." These cases were not confined to the lower classes; James McDonald, a leading citizen of Bedford, and frequently foreman of the grand jury, refused to take down a fence that apparently encroached on a roadway; he was indicted "for a nuisance" and pleaded not guilty, but later changed his mind, removed the nuisance, and was discharged on

payment of fees. William Isaacs, a Bedford storekeeper and brother of the town clerk, pleaded guilty of assault on James Tyler; he was fined 50 cents.

The sagacity and eloquence of these lawyers made a great impression upon a young Bedford man who was then haunting the

Court House and preparing to study law in the office of County Judge Robert S. Hart, nearby. He was William H. Robertson, who went on to become a county judge, legislator, member of Congress and a power in national politics. [His portrait hangs in the restored court room in Bedford, along with that of another famous judge from Bedford, William Jay.]

The Bedford Court House must have been the inspiration that turned so many bright young country boys in the neighborhood to the law and politics. There were not only the judges I have mentioned, but county clerks, district attorneys and members of the Legislature, notably James W. Husted, for many years Speaker of the Assembly. Late in life, General Husted recalled his memories of the Bedford Court



Interior of 1787 Court House today

House, where as a boy of 7 he recited poems in costume and as a young man took part in weekly debates, to which he attributed his oratorical skill. Another of the debaters was John S. Bates, whose photograph in the gallery of Westchester District Attorneys [depicts him] with long ringlets, hanging Buffalo Bill fashion over his shoulders. According to a family letter, Bates, when a young man, was disappointed in love and swore never to cut his hair again.



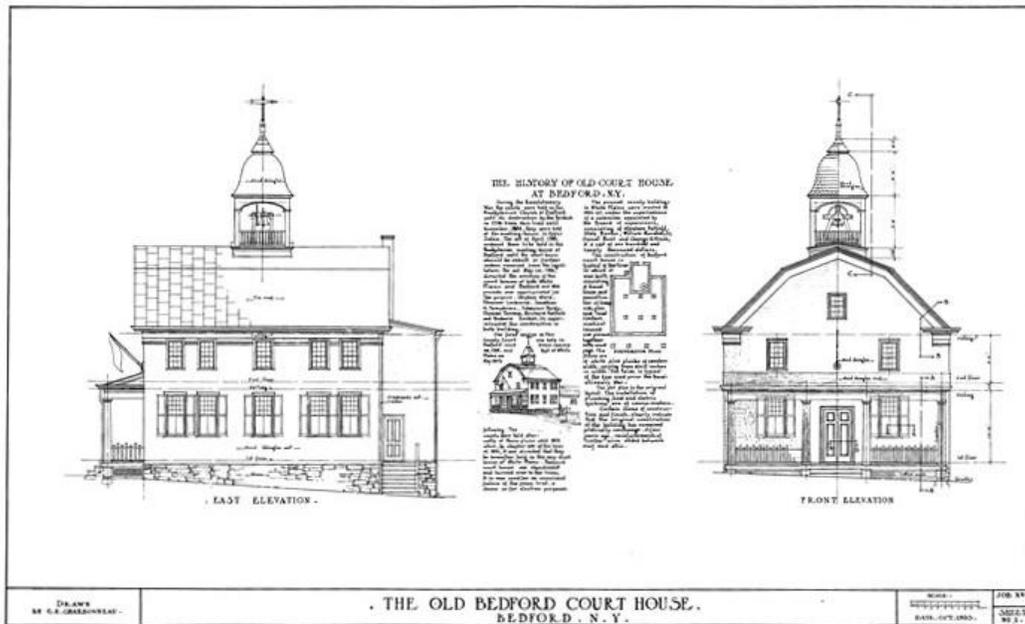
Chief Justice  
John Jay

Another influence that led Bedford men to the law was of course the presence in Bedford of the great John Jay, first Chief Justice of the United States. He was so revered at the close of his life in 1829 that a Bedford session of the Common Pleas, a week after his death, recorded the following minute: "The Court and members of this bar entertaining the highest respect for the pure and exalted character of the late John Jay do resolve that we will wear crape upon the left arm for thirty days in token of our respect for his memory." [William Jay, son of the Chief Justice, was a county judge from 1818 to 1843. He conducted trials so expeditiously that it

was said they never lasted more than a day.]

For everyone in Bedford Village, not only the aspiring young lawyers, the old Court House was the center of town life. "During a session of the court, every house was crowded, and it was sometimes necessary to erect tents for...the visitors." Between court sessions, the building was the scene of annual town meetings, public discussions, plays and other entertainments.

The Bedford Court House was used until 1870, when the Legislature decided that one county seat-White Plains-was enough. In 1878, the Board of Supervisors gave the old building to the Town of Bedford, which is thus the owner of this historic county edifice.



In 1965 the town entered into an agreement with the Bedford Historical Society for a historical restoration of the Court House, which was carried out with the financial help of the public, the town, and the state. Structurally, the ancient frame of hewn timbers was strengthened. The court room, which had been much altered in an earlier renovation ninety years ago, was returned to its original dignity and beauty. The second floor became a museum of town history. In exterior appearance, the outline of gambrel roof, bell tower, and Greek Revival porch remained, but with original windows and doorway restored. Today the old Court House is a familiar landmark filled with Bedford's past and a reassurance for its future.

You can read the full text of the story [here](#). You can learn more about the history of New York's Court system [here](#).



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