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# The Vintage Rabun Quarterly

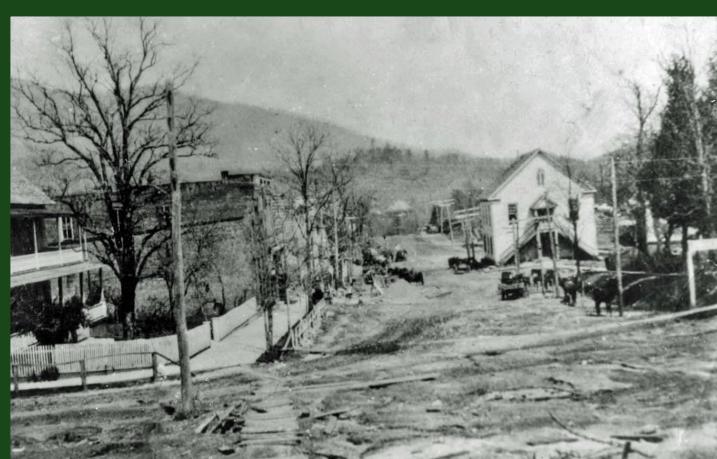
## The Story of Rabun's Five Courthouses

Rabun County officially became a county by an act of the Georgia Legislature in 1819. Following a relentless campaign by the State of Georgia to seize Cherokee land, Native Americans were removed from their homeland in what is now Rabun County. Their land was divided into parcels of 250 and 490 acres and given away to white settlers in a lottery. In 1820, the population of the entire new county was only 524, and by 1850, there were still fewer than 2,000 settlers. The region remained only sparsely settled throughout the nineteenth century.

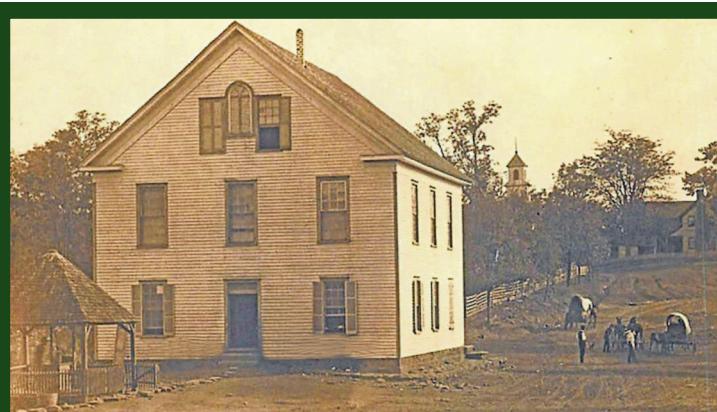
The need for a courthouse was not great

because there was little business to be conducted and the county government had no funds. A story is told that the

county held its first court under a tree, and sometimes court was held at the home of a private citizen.



The courthouse pictured here is the third one, built in 1879-1880. The Old Clayton Inn building is on the left with a picket fence in front.



A view of the same courthouse from the north side. The steeple of the Clayton Methodist Church can be seen in the background above the trees.

The county seat, originally called Claytonville, was created in 1824. At that time, the Rabun County government purchased 67 acres from Solomon Beck for \$150. The county began selling three-quarter acre lots and raised enough money to build a log building for court purposes on the public square in Clayton. The square was at the intersection of what is now Main Street and Savannah Street. The building was poorly constructed and was condemned in 1836 to be replaced in 1838 by an entirely new, but similar, structure. In 1878, the second log

## The Vintage Rabun Quarterly

Page 2



The 1879 courthouse served as the Bleckley House until 1964. It was located at the eastern end of Savannah Street. It is shown here just before it was moved and the hill was graded down to extend the road to the new highway. Screamer Mountain is in the background.

courthouse was declared unsafe after it partially collapsed while court was in session. Court was moved to the Masonic Hall. Construction of a new frame courthouse began in 1879 at the same location. A new jail was built in 1892 near the square.

By the turn of the twentieth century, Clayton's population was still fewer than 200. The Tallulah Falls Railroad, which had been completed from Cornelia to the resort town of Tallulah Falls in the mid-1800s, was extended to Clayton in 1905. With the arrival of the railroad, Clayton at last began to grow. Lumber companies were logging in the mountains, and tourists arrived at Clayton's depot. Main Street in Clayton was soon lined with hotels and boarding houses. By 1910, the town's population had reached 541. The 1879 frame courthouse was deteriorating, but Rabun County voters refused to approve a 1906 bond issue to fund a new court building. In 1907, the courthouse was condemned, and the county ordinary, M.H. James, ordered a direct tax to fund a new building. James was not re-elected.

The 1879 courthouse was auctioned off to the highest bidder and moved south on Main Street across from the current Reeves location. The new owners, the Bleckley family, operated it as a hotel in that location for several years. It was later moved to a new location on top of a hill at the intersection of Savannah Street, Warwoman Road, and Chechero Road. It was just across the road from Clayton's train depot. Porches were added along with other enhancements and it continued to operate as the Bleckley House. In 1961, new Highway 441 was constructed, which bypassed Main Street. The hill on which the Bleckley House sat was bulldozed to create access to the highway from Main Street, and the building was moved yet again to a location behind the Savannah Street shops. It is privately owned and is still being used today.

The 1908 construction of a new courthouse was completed on Highway 76 West. It was constructed of concrete and steel, and vaults were installed to ensure preservation of county records. The building included a clock tower, and residents remember when the clock

## The Vintage Rabun Quarterly

Page 3

malfunctioned and struck continuously until repairmen arrived. Another new jail was also built in 1913 at that site with John Beck Dockins as the first sheriff to occupy the building that would be used until 1967.

By 1965, the sheriff was paid \$6,000 annually. There was one deputy at \$3,600 per year and only one patrol car. Cells for prisoners were

upstairs at the jail, and the sheriff's living quarters, office, and kitchen were on the ground level. There was no administrative help, so the cook or the sheriff's wife often assisted in answering

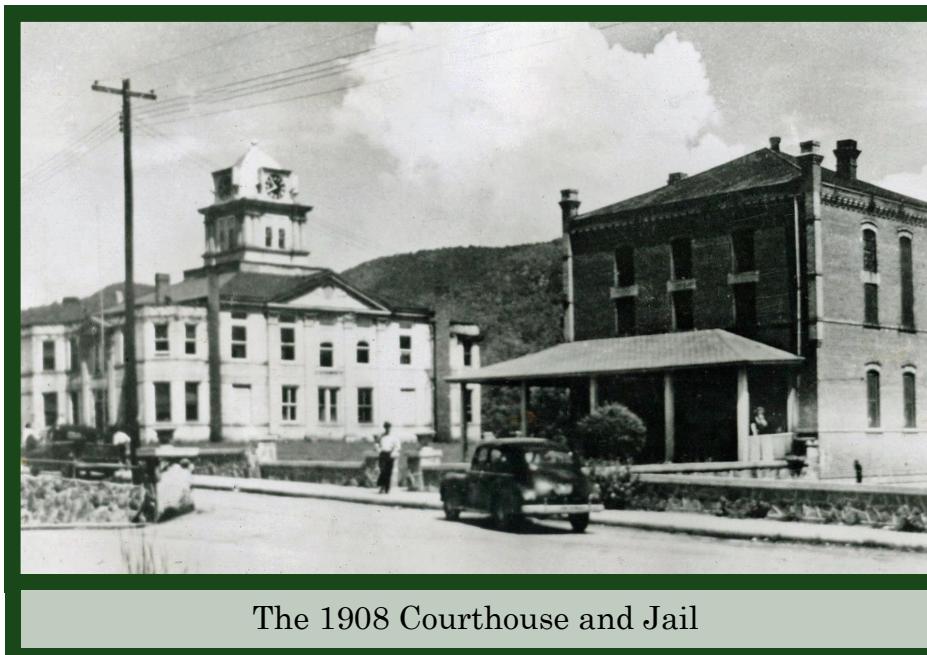
the phone. A second deputy was hired in 1966, but non-violent offenders were often used as "trustees" to answer the phone and run errands or buy groceries. There was no base radio at the jail, and in an emergency the state patrol would have to be phoned to radio the sheriff's patrol car.

The concrete building served the citizens well, but it had not been properly maintained. In the 1950s, heat was furnished by wood stoves and air conditioning consisted of opening windows if it was too hot. In 1964, the grand jury recommended that a new courthouse be constructed because the building was in such

bad condition that it could not be repaired. Termite damage was extensive. Robert Vickers, County Ordinary, called for a referendum to determine if voters would agree to finance new construction. The referendum passed and construction was completed in 1968. A jail on the basement level was included in the new plan. In 1997, a second story was added to the building to accommodate new offices.

By 2004, the jail was seriously over-populated. A new detention center, removed from the courthouse site, was constructed with Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax funds and

opened in the summer of 2005. The sheriff no longer lives in the facility, and no cooks are required to answer the phone.



The 1908 Courthouse and Jail

### Rabun's Five Courthouses

1824 – Log Cabin

1838 – Log Cabin

1879 – Frame Building

1908 – Concrete and Steel Building

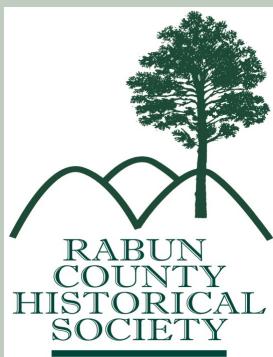
1968 – Current Courthouse

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- Please visit our museum and research library on Mondays and Fridays from 10:00 until 2:00
- Group tours by appointment



Scene of Julius Pickett's funeral in February, 1909. The view is to the west and the new courthouse. What we know as Savannah Street was then Courthouse Street.