

Amelia's Courthouse Square in Historical Perspective

The village of Amelia Court House—once known as “Amelia Court House Depot,” from the town’s former stop on today’s Norfolk and Southern Railroad—has served as the Amelia County seat of government since 1793. The green in front of the current courthouse, which was built in 1924 to replace its predecessor, has existed since around 1850. The square has been a generally placid, rustic setting that psychologically underpinned the adjacent judiciary hall, itself representing institutional gravity, restraint, and justice. The lawn’s other purpose is as a public gathering place for citizens, usually in groups, under both the direct and implied imprimaturs of local and state authorities.

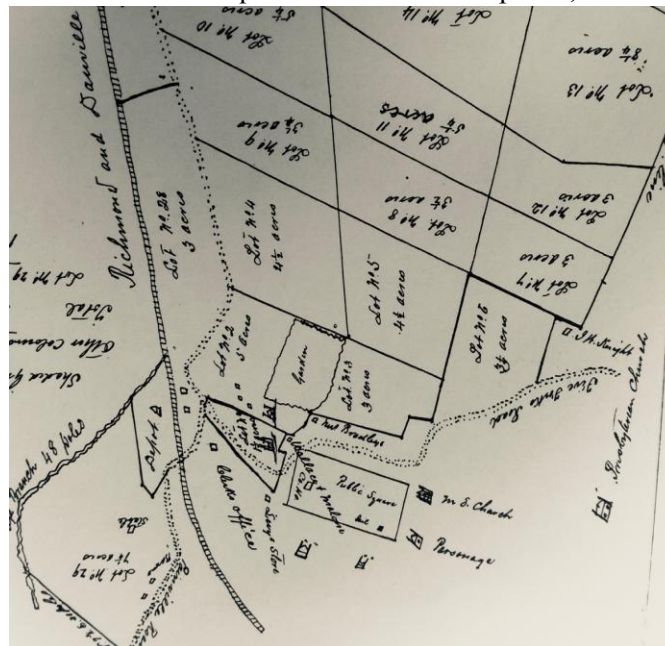
Prior to the construction of the Richmond and Danville Railroad (R&D RR), which began in Amelia in 1851, another courthouse stood several hundred yards to the north-northeast. The R&D RR company president, Lewis E. Harvie of Dykeland (near Chula)—who also sold real-estate lots from his 1,800 acres surrounding the village—desired to run the line through the old court house site. In exchange for that right of way, he donated the two-acre plot just up the hill to the south where today’s courthouse complex resides.

Plats that laid out the village in 1856 depict street alignments not radically different from today. The

town’s antebellum structures varied somewhat from present, with many larger buildings, now gone, centered on the railroad and its depot, and smaller enterprises faintly aligned with today’s setup, especially on the north and east. The 1864 Gilmer map depicts some twenty structures, including two churches. The roads were ungraded, and the courthouse square probably included few surface features, perhaps only young trees and some encroaching growth. Images from 40-50 years later show more tree cover in the village and a glimpse of an unkempt, partially fenced courtyard. Farm fields and residual plantation environs encroached the town, except for next to the railroad, depot, and adjacent buildings.

The sparse record shows that the courthouse square was used by Amelia militia units both before and at the outbreak of the Civil War. According to early 20th century letters written by Mrs. Rosena Hutzler Levy,¹ wife of Jewish store owner Leopold Levy, who operated in Amelia from about 1860-65, today’s square served as an ad hoc military assembly and staging point for county rebels offering service to Virginia after the fall of Fort Sumter. Individuals and small groups likely were sworn in on the square or in the nearby court building. Leopold, whose store and nearby home were sited northwest of the present

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Plat of Amelia C. H. 1864 – In the above image, the “Public Square” is at center in the lower third of the sketch. Levy’s Store is just to the left of it, with the old Clerk’s Office and the R&D RR to the left of the store. The depot and old Amelia hotel (“H”-shaped icon -?- NE of square) are on opposite sides of the RR. North orientation is nearly perpendicular to the left edge of the image. The gridded lots are Harvie real estate for sale or sold. The dotted main roads are (from the right) Five Forks, Goodes Bridge (left side, headed E-W parallel to the RR), and Pridesville (lower left corner). Interestingly, the 1857 courthouse is marked on the opposite end of the square from today’s building, which old photos clearly showed rested on the current site. On April 4, 1865, Lee, Longstreet, and Rosena Levy may have been anywhere between her store and the depot, or between the square and the hotel, most likely on or near Five Forks Road. The image is from *Historical Notes on Amelia County, Virginia*, p. 64, by the Historical Society, 1982, and originally from Deed Book Forty, p. 430.

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President's Message

Hello, all. Happy spring. As I write this quarter, things are returning to a semblance of normality at the Society. The stacks of chairs in the halls have diminished somewhat, the hat rack is back in its old place, and foot traffic has picked up. We nevertheless remain mask-wearing in company, keep an eye on crowding (no problem there, even at open house!), keep our spaces well-ventilated, and ask for COVID tracing sign-in. That's not as onerous as it sounds, but we shall remain situationally aware for everyone's benefit "for the duration." Meanwhile, I thank Librarian Sylvia Gray, former President Pearl Clifton, and our loyal members who chip in behind the scenes on such things as audits, obituary compilations, and bill-paying. The latter includes our outgoing Treasurer, Susie Gunter, whom the epidemic has forced to focus more at home, and Ann Clarke, who has replaced her. Thanks to all for all that you do.

Otherwise, we try optimally to conduct business in present circumstances. Our Board meets in person quarterly, but will entertain ad hoc and pressing business online as necessary and practicable. That is a bit cumbersome as we generally try to incorporate *Roberts Rules of Order*, but presumably you'd be pleased at the Board's democratic impulses. I do use my discretion as president from time to time for minor things, but will always try to remain judicious with our scarce resources.

In February, Don Shreffler and I were asked by County Administrator Taylor Harvie to respond to podcast questions on "small-town Amelia Court House life and history" from a journalism student at the University of Georgia. While we haven't read or heard the final production results, I'm trusting that it will be coherent and fair. In addition to discussing mainly (but not exclusively) the last week of the Civil War's events in Amelia, I tried to put the county into geographical and contemporary socioeconomic contexts, indirectly from the standpoints of tourism and economic development potentials. While the interview was not portrayed as representing the Society, I did mention that I was its President. Nothing should be controversial in the discussions, but in these days one never knows. Fear not, however; my views were all defensible.

Speaking of the Civil War, while the regional "Experience the End: The Appomattox Campaign" historical educational and tourism effort remains moribund during the pandemic, we plan to open Namozine Church on April 2 and 3 (Friday and Saturday) in commemoration of the skirmishes there. We have done this as an annual tradition, but held back last year owing to health uncertainties. This year our weekend activities fall on the actual 1865 battle anniversary. We shall offer brief informative tours and have books, church prints, and other materials for sale. If you would like to assist in this low-keyed event, please let us know at (804) 561-3180.

Michael F. Whitaker, President



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square, became a member of the Amelia Dragoons (Amelia Horse Troop), which existed before the war and subsequently became Company G of the 1st Regiment of the Virginia Cavalry, CSA. Mrs. Levy's letters noted her husband and his unit as readying for military deployment on "the green" in April 1861.

The Horse Troop and likely other units from Amelia moved piecemeal to Richmond in early May that year. They first encamped near Goodes Bridge on the Appomattox River. Levy's company was sworn in by the Governor in Richmond, and then trained for about six weeks at Ashland before it moved west into the Shenandoah Valley. Levy returned from Ashland once to the "C. H. [Court House] with Sergeant [William] 'Field' Mann" to retrieve "carbines [*sic*] and other small guns," suggesting the presence of an armory in the village. By March 1862, Levy himself had been promoted to sergeant and came back to Amelia to recruit new soldiers. Federal forces captured him in 1863 and he suffered debilitating injuries as he rode to prison. When paroled to Richmond, he joined the Confederate Commissary Department, but was soon released from service to Amelia, where he witnessed Union troops raid his home and store during their foray from Jetersville along the railroad to Amelia Court House on April 6-7, 1865.

Mrs. Levy also records her memories of the week of Lee's Retreat in the village: "Gen'l Lee's army passed through Amelia CH in April 1865, camping there for several days." She heard "one battle before [Lee's] reaching the Co Ho, another after leaving the Co Ho at Amelia Springs. We heard the sound of every cannon - it was fearful." She also records hearing the huge explosion in the late morning of April 5th as rebel ordnance officers exploded unneeded ammunition offloaded from the boxcars on the R&D RR from which Lee had expected rations for his starving army.

Rosena also reports that she overheard General Lee instruct General Longstreet to repulse Union cavalry south of the village as the Yankees arrived from the Deep Creek area of the county to attack rebel breastworks near the Five Forks. If this is true, she likely

was in the vicinity of Lee's tent near the old hotel (in Mrs. Smith's garden), near her home and store, probably on or near the portion of what in 1865 was Five Forks Road [now Virginia Street] and Goodes Bridge Road [near today's Amelia Street/Avenue]. Longstreet's running skirmish would have extended a mile or more south from that point, probably between today's Virginia Street and North Five Forks Road, and in part along Dennisville [then Avery's] Road to Whitaker Road, including on wagon traces no longer present.

The area would have incorporated the present courthouse square, from which military artifacts, including belt buckles, minié balls, smaller caliber projectiles, fuses, Union and Southern uniform buttons, bits and bridals, cooking utensils, lead "US" ammo box plates, press-type, Federal ration tabs, lantern pieces, era coins, and other relics, have been recovered. The finds indicate evidence not only of skirmishing, but also residue from the rebel ordnance detonation, and previous and subsequent encampments by both the blue and the gray.

Post-Civil War events on the grassy square pale in comparison to Amelia Court House's role in the Appomattox Campaign. Later activities included the rebel monument dedication in 1905, with many state VIPs in attendance and a crowd estimated at 1,800-3,000 persons; civil rights protests and a half-hearted counter-presence by the Ku Klux Klan on a single day in the 1960s on and around the square; and the 250th "Amelia Day" founders' day commemoration in May 1985. The latter event initiated the string of annual Amelia Days, with daylong crowds in the hundreds or thousands. The community gathering has failed to meet only twice since then: after the May 2003 tornadic winds that destroyed many of the trees that had matured on the square since the 1850s, and again in 2020 owing to the public health emergency stemming from the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic.

¹Source: **Viener, Saul**. "Rosena Hutzler Levy Recalls the Civil War," a reprint from *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, Vol. LXII, No 3, March 1973, The American Jewish Historical Society.



Levy's Store, Amelia Court House – Leopold and Rosena Levy ran this general store NW of the courthouse from 1860-65. Leopold, a rebel cavalryman, entered service on the square a week after Ft. Sumter fell. Rosena later wrote of her memories of the blue and the gray in action near the village. This picture is from about 1910 when the store was called "Robertson's." It burned down in 1916.

—From *Historical Notes on Amelia County, VA*, p.436



Mark Your Calendar

Namozine Church Open House

To Commemorate the 3 April 1865 Skirmishes Nearby

*Located at the Intersection of Greene's-Mill Quarter- Namozine Roads
Seven Miles East of Mannboro, Virginia*

Friday & Saturday, 2-3 April 2021, from 9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Amelia County Historical Society

(Restroom Facilities NOT Available)



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