

---

MONUMENTS TO DEMOCRACY

---

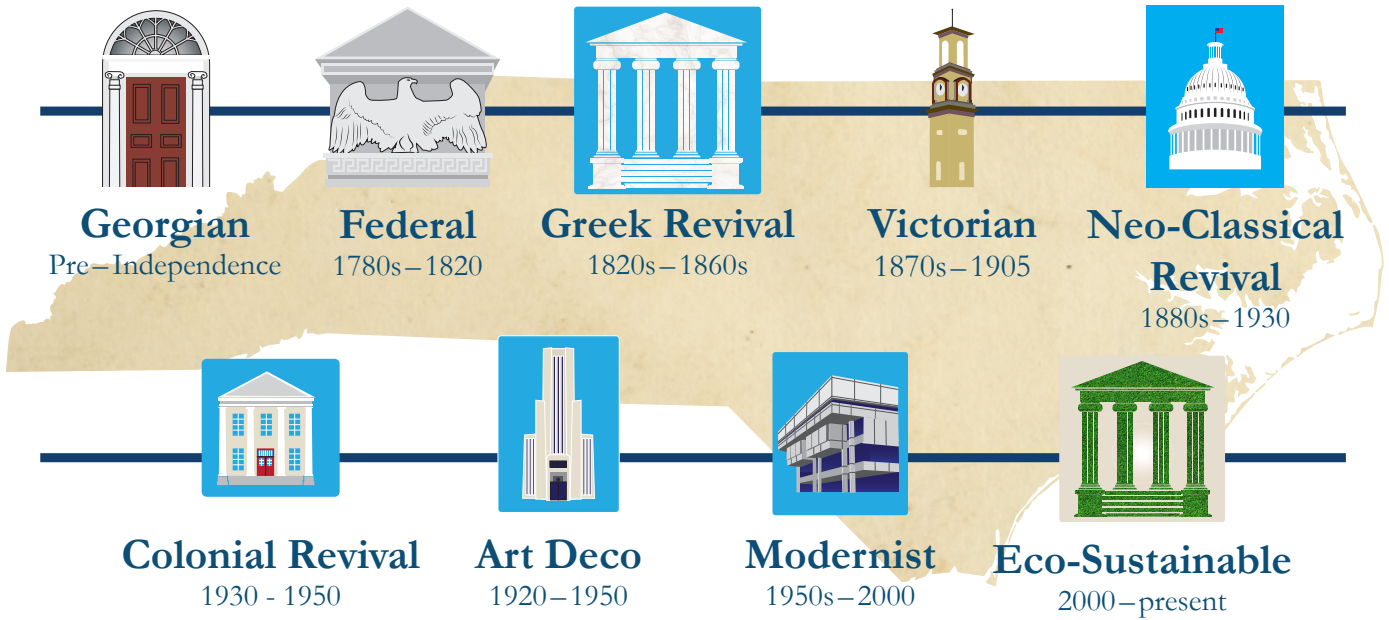
# Architecture Styles in North Carolina Courthouses

By Ava Barlow

*The judicial system, as one of three branches of government, is one of the main foundations of democracy. North Carolina's earliest courthouses, none of which survived, were simple, small, frame or log structures. Ancillary buildings, such as a jail, clerk's office, and sheriff's office were built around them. As our nation developed, however, leaders gave careful consideration to the structures that would house important institutions – how they were to be designed and built, what symbols were to be used, and what building materials were to be used.*

*Over time, fashion and design trends have changed, but ideals have remained. To reflect those ideals, certain styles, symbols, and motifs have appeared and reappeared in the architecture of our government buildings, especially courthouses. This article attempts to explain the history behind the making of these landmarks in communities around the state.*

---



The development of architectural styles in North Carolina courthouses and our nation's public buildings in general reflects the development of our culture and history. The trends in architecture reflect trends in art and the statements those trends make about us as a people. Often, the county courthouse is the main landmark, the showpiece of civic grandeur that residents consider to represent their city and county. The styles in which they are built are popular and well-established, reinforcing the concept of a courthouse as an icon of democracy and stability.

In colonial times, court sessions in North Carolina were held in private homes or in dedicated log structures. None of those original buildings remain. Eventually, the need arose for more permanent structures. Local

leaders and merchants would seek to have their towns chosen as a county seat to increase the prosperity, commerce, and recognition, and would sometimes donate money or land to build the courthouse.

Courthouses in the colonial days and in the early years of our history as an independent nation were built in a classical style, loosely based on the European Palladian style of architecture, inspired by the designs of the Venetian architect Andrea Palladio (1508-1580). Palladian architecture utilizes the symmetry, perspective, mathematical ratios, and values of the formal classical temple architecture of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Palladian style is evident in Georgian, Federal, Greek Revival, Neo Classical, and Colonial Revival architectural styles.





## Georgian Pre-independence

The Georgian style of architecture, named for the British monarchs George I–IV, was popular throughout England and the American colonies before the War of Independence.

The style can be very simple, or more ornate. Its main features are symmetry and panels in the door, often with a window above the door called a transom or a fanlight. Pilasters look like pillars or columns, but they are set in relief into the wall for decorative purposes. They feature cornices with moldings or dentils, which are rectangular patterns cut in relief into the wood trim. Most Georgian buildings have a chimney at each end.

### Georgian courthouse in North Carolina



Chowan County Courthouse, 1767 (Photo by Judge John W. Smith)

The Chowan County Courthouse, above, is North Carolina's oldest courthouse, built in Edenton in 1767. Believed to have been designed by British architect John Hawkes, it is considered one of the best surviving examples of Georgian architecture in the South. It is surrounded by a town green and many of Edenton's oldest homes. It is still being used, along with a newer structure built in 1979.



## Federal Architecture 1780–1830

After America became independent from Great Britain, our leaders sought new styles of art and architecture to express the concept of democracy. They began to more closely consider the ideals of government and society exemplified in ancient Greece and Rome. The ancient Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum, which were buried by an eruption of Mount

Vesuvius in 79 A.D., were rediscovered in the 18th century, which further reinforced the interest in classicism. The Federal style strongly resembles the Georgian, but it tends to use motifs and symbols of our new democracy such as the bald eagle and agricultural symbols such as ears of corn or tobacco leaves.

### Federal style courthouses in North Carolina



Perquimans County Courthouse, 1825  
(NCAOC file photo)



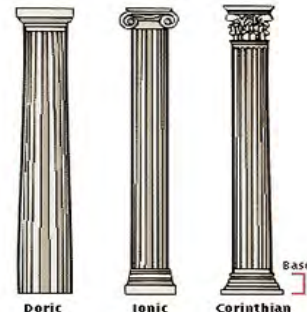
Gates County Courthouse, 1836 (NCAOC  
file photo)

The courthouses in North Carolina built in the Federal style that still remain are the Perquimans County and the Gates County Courthouses, built in 1825 and 1836. They feature plainer wall surfaces than in the Georgian style, with detail isolated in panels, tablets, and friezes.



## Greek Revival Architecture 1820s–1860s

After the War of 1812, the popularity of British styles waned sharply, and classicism increased. President Thomas Jefferson helped to bring Greek Revival Architecture to the United States when he appointed Benjamin Henry Latrobe to design the layout for the nation's capital. Latrobe designed many buildings in the Greek Revival Style. From the 1820s to the 1860s, structures show a greater effort to imitate the look of an ancient Greek temple in their design. Buildings usually are comprised of a single story on a brick or stone foundation. Columns are Doric, Ionic, or Corinthian. Roofs are gently pitched, sometimes with a carved relief, or frieze, on the pediments. Greek Revival became the first "national" style and was used widely in every state, even west of the Mississippi, in churches, private homes, and public buildings.





## Greek Revival Courthouses in North Carolina



Burke County, 1835 (NCAOC file photo)



Granville County, 1838 (NCAOC file photo)



Orange County, 1845 (NCAOC file photo)



Camden County, 1847 (NCAOC file photo)



Gaston County, 1847 (Photo by Ava Barlow)



Franklin County, 1850 (NCAOC file photo)



Davidson County, 1858 (Photo by Ava Barlow)



Northampton County, 1859 (NCAOC file photo)



## Victorian Architecture 1870–1905

Queen Victoria reigned as the British monarch from 1837 to 1901, but the Victorian style of architecture lasted roughly from 1870 to 1905. Many styles came together in the Victorian style: Italianate, Romanesque, Second Empire, Gothic Revival, Arts and Crafts, Art Nouveau, and Queen Anne. The United States and Great Britain had undergone industrial revolutions, and new building technologies were developed that would enable architects to create more complex designs with steel and glass. Meanwhile, some movements in

art rebelled against what was considered a lack of beauty the machine-made, mechanized production the industrial revolution brought about. The British Arts and Crafts, as well as the French Art Nouveau movements, sought to bring back some of the beauty of the handmade art of a previous era, while the technological advances of the Industrial Revolution made it affordable and possible to produce buildings more quickly and on a larger scale than ever before.



Queen Victoria

Typical features of a Victorian building include diverse styles of windows within the same structure, turrets, dentils, columns, gables and dormers, entablatures, transoms, and mansard roofs.

## Victorian courthouses in North Carolina



Caswell County, 1861 (NCAOC file photo)



Transylvania County, 1873 (Photo by Ava Barlow)



Cabarrus County, 1876 (photo by Ava Barlow)



Craven County, 1883 (NCAOC file photo)



Martin County, 1885 (NCAOC file photo)



New Hanover County, 1892 (NCAOC file photo)





## Neo - Classical Architecture 1880s–1930

### Neo-Classical courthouses in North Carolina



Iredell County, 1899 (NCAOC file photo)



Henderson County, 1904 (NCAOC file photo)



Carteret County, 1907 (NCAOC file photo)



Madison County, 1907 (NCAOC file photo)



Lee County, 1908 (NCAOC file photo)



Halifax County, 1909 (NCAOC file photo)



Pitt County, 1910 (NCAOC file photo)



Rowan County, 1912 (NCAOC file photo)



Jackson County, 1914 (NCAOC file photo)



Durham County, 1916 (Photo by Ava Barlow)



Guilford County, 1918 (Photo by Ava Barlow)



Rutherford County, 1925 (Photo by Ava Barlow)

After experimenting with the flamboyant styles of the Victorian era, Americans began to desire a return to more classical styles. The 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago celebrated the arrival of Christopher Columbus in the New World, and Neo-Classical buildings were constructed for the fair. Because of this, the Columbian Expo is credited with being the inspiration for the return of classicism in architecture. This is also known as the Beaux Arts period in architecture, which encompasses Baroque and Italian Renaissance elements, but the American version of Beaux Arts focuses mainly on the ancient Greek style. Many American architects took their training at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, returning home with an academic understanding of classical proportions and ratios in design.



World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893

Neo-Classical buildings are characteristically symmetrical, often with side extensions. They feature a full height portico with classical Ionic or Corinthian columns. They are larger in scale and richer in interior detail than Greek Revival structures. Ground floor offices of courthouses built in this style are typically separated by cross halls or a central hall, with a large courtroom on the second floor.



## Colonial Revival Architecture 1930–1950

Like the Neo-Classical movement, the Colonial Revival Style was also inspired by an exposition. The 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia spurred American sentiments of patriotism and an interest in our early historical roots. Colonial Revival became the most popular house design style throughout the first half 20th century, and some public buildings were built in the style, too.

Colonial Revival imitates the earlier Georgian and Federal styles. Buildings of this style have a rectangular footprint with a symmetrical façade. It uses brick or clapboard siding, and is usually two to three stories with a gabled or hipped roof and dormers. Simple, classical detailing is featured in the pillars and columns. Paneled doors are adorned with sidelights and transoms or fanlights. The porticos topped by a pediment create a temple-like entrance. Sub-categories of Colonial Revival include Dutch Colonial, Cape Cod, Neo-Colonial and Georgian Revival.





## Colonial Revival courthouses in North Carolina



Greene County, 1935 (NCAOC file photo)



Pender County, 1936 (NCAOC file photo)



Pamlico County, 1936 (NCAOC file photo)



Jones County, 1938 (NCAOC file photo)



## Art Deco Architecture 1920–1950

While certain movements associated with the Victorian style were concerned with rejecting the visual aspects of industrialization, an important style arose in the 20th century that embraced the imagery of the Machine Age: Art Deco. Also, in 1922, archaeologist Howard Carter discovered the tomb of the Egyptian King Tutankhamen and soon a fascination for ancient cultures found expression in art and architecture.

Some of the early Art Deco skyscrapers suggest Egyptian or Assyrian pyramids, or ziggurats, with terraced steps. Early Art Deco also employed the use of rich colors, stylized flowers, sunbursts, birds and machine gears. Art Deco was a style of art as well as architecture, and was expressed in fashion and consumer goods as well as architecture of commercial, industrial and public buildings. In addition to the employment of ancient and 20th Century machine imagery, Art Deco makes use of rich, lavish colors and strong rectilinear or geometrical shapes, arranged in a symmetrical fashion.

During the 1920s, this style enjoyed its most glorious expression. This decade produced such lavish examples at the Chrysler Building and Rockefeller Center in New York City. However,



Furniture, textile, and agricultural workers on the front of the Guilford County–High Point Courthouse of 1938 (Photo by Ava Barlow)

during the Great Depression and the years of WWII, the style was scaled back and simplified for the sake of austerity. Many public buildings and some Works Progress Administration projects, such as the Hoover Dam, were constructed in this scaled back Art Deco style.

During the lavish years of the 1920s, Art Deco depicted heroes and creatures of ancient mythology, but many Art Deco buildings of the austere years celebrated the American worker. As the rise of machine and industrial technology saved labor, workers were depicted as strong, efficient, and productive in the new era. Bulging muscles and angular features make the human laborer seem almost machine-like. A good example of this trend can be seen in the Guilford County-High Point Courthouse of 1938. Three major forces in North Carolina’s economy at the time—furniture, textiles, and agriculture—are represented by the carved relief of the workers above the front door.

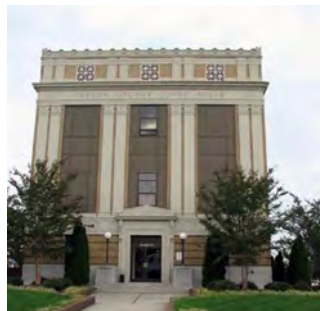
## Art Deco courthouses in North Carolina



Caldwell County, 1929 (Photo by Ava Barlow)



Guilford County - High Point 1938 (Photo by Ava Barlow)



Person County Courthouse, 1930 (NCAOC file photo)



Lenoir County, 1939 (NCAOC file photo)





## Modern Architecture 1950–2000

The Art Deco movement really marked the beginning of what is referred to as “Modern” architecture. As a growing reaction to the traditional eclecticism of Victorian and classical design, modern theories of abstraction and functionalism began to be expressed in the simplification of form and ornament. “Less is more” became the new philosophy of designers such as Frank Lloyd Wright and Walter Gropius of the German Bauhaus school. The modernist style became associated with the social and economic changes of the 20th century – the rise and growth of capitalism, industrialization, secularism and the nation-state.

One of the main hallmarks of the modernist style is that the building material is incorporated as a design element. Poured concrete slabs are exposed, usually with their seams visible, for example. There is a simplicity of form, usually removing anything considered unnecessary detail. The modernist form of architecture emphasizes strong horizontal and vertical lines.

### Brutalist courthouses in North Carolina



Hertford County, 1956 (NCAOC file photo)



Davidson County, 1959 (Photo by Ava Barlow)



Guilford County, 1974 (NCAOC file photo)



Forsyth County, 1972 (NCAOC file photo)



Wake County, 1969 (NCAOC file photo)



Cabarrus County (Photo by Ava Barlow)

There are different variations on modernist architecture, including the glass and steel International style towers that reach to the sky. But the form of modernism that North Carolina courthouses followed from about 1950 to 1980 is referred to as “Brutalist.” Brutalism is named for the French term “beton brut,” which means “raw concrete.”

What was on the minds of designers of the Brutalist style? The Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union was raging during the years of this style’s popularity. The heavy, concrete walls and narrow windows suggest surviving a nuclear attack was a priority. Brutalist buildings were also inexpensive to construct, so many public buildings such as schools, prisons, and government offices, were built in the style.

The growth in popularity of the automobile as the preferred means of transportation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century led to an increased need for parking. Courthouses of this period were often built away from city centers and made to resemble commercial and industrial structures surrounding them. The role of the courthouse as a public gathering place for political rallies, speeches, protests, and demonstrations changed as a result.



## Eco-Sustainable Architecture 2000–present

What is the future of courthouse design? Although our population has grown, the 21st century has brought a return to city centers. Old buildings are renovated and rejuvenated as a way to honor the past, while consideration is given to sustainability in the use of building materials, energy and natural resources. New courthouse construction incorporates classical design elements, but makes use of natural lighting and geothermal heating and cooling. The buildings are designed to be more efficient in water usage and to reduce waste.

Chatham County is a good example of this trend. In 2010, the 1881 courthouse caught fire while undergoing renovations. The damage was extensive, but Taylor Hobbs of Hobbs Architects says his company’s work is centered on “replacing what was there, while updating it for modern needs” such as updating Internet capacity and electrical wiring. The newly renovated courthouse will open in late April, 2013.

Before the fire, plans were being made to build the new, 90,000 square foot Chatham County Justice Center to house the offices of the clerk of superior court, the district attorney, the public defender, the department of juvenile justice and community corrections, in addition to district and superior courtrooms. The new building, designed by Corley Redfoot Architects of Chapel Hill, officially opened in January 2013. The massive structure features many classical design elements, but also utilizes natural light and geothermal heat.





## Eco-Sustainable Courthouses in North Carolina



Chatham County 1881 Courthouse reconstruction (Photo by Ava Barlow)



Chatham County Justice Center, 2012



Mecklenburg County, 2007 (Photo by Scott McKendree)



Durham County, 2012 (Photo by Ava Barlow)



Wake Justice Center, 2013 (Photo by Ava Barlow)

Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) is a system of ratings developed by the U.S. Green Building Council to set standards for certification in the design, construction, and operation of “green” buildings. Many designers pursue LEED certification, and if local governments can afford the up-front investment, a LEED certified building can save money over the lifespan of a building.

Every era of our nation’s history is represented in a North Carolina county courthouse. It is little wonder that in the 21st century, people are interested in preserving the old buildings, whether they continue to function as a courthouse or something else entirely. Each style of courthouse is a chapter in the unfolding story of who we are as a nation and as a civilization. Centuries from now, people will be able to look at these buildings and ponder the great experiment with democracy and self government that generations of people embarked on when they immigrated to the United States from distant lands, many of them poor and dispossessed of freedom and human rights, but holding in their hearts a dream of a better way of life. They will be able to see how North Carolina, as one of the original British colonies in the New World, fit into that experiment. They will also, by benefit of hindsight, know the degree to which we succeeded.

## Sources

Burns, Robert Paschal. “Functional, Historical, Architectural and Symbolic Values of the North Carolina Courthouse.” *100 Courthouses: A Report on North Carolina Judicial Facilities, vol. 1*. Raleigh, NC: Administrative Office of the Courts, 1978. 19-49. Print.

“Welcome to Chowan County, N.C. .” *Welcome to Chowan County, N.C.* . Chowan County Government, n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2013.

Bishir, Catherine W., and Peter B. Sandbeck. “Hawks, John (ca. 1731-1790).” : *NC Architects & Builders : NCSU Libraries*. The NCSU Libraries, The NCSU Libraries Copyright and Digital Scholarship Center, 2009. Web. 24 Apr. 2013.

Craven, Jackie. “Andrea Palladio (Andrea Di Pietro Della Gondola): Renaissance Architect.” *About.com Architecture*. N.p., n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2013.

Wentworth, Bruce, AIA. “Federal Style Architecture Facts and History | Guide to Architectural Styles | Home Design Tips From AskTheArchitect.org.” Web log post. *Askthearchitect Federal Comments*. Wentworth Studios, n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2013.

Craven, Jackie. “1825 - 1860: Greek Revival House Style.” *About.com Architecture*. N.p., n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2013.

Wentworth, Bruce, AIA. “Historic Styles / Greek Revival 1825-1860.” Web log post. *Greek Revival Houses & Architecture Facts and History*. Wentworth Studios, n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2013.

“Historic Styles / Georgian 1700-1830.” Web log post. *Georgian Style Architecture Facts and History*. Wentworth Studios, 2013. Web. 24 Apr. 2013.

“Victorian Architecture.” *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 1 Apr. 2012. Web. Dec. 2012.

Claurendeau. Features of Victorian Style Architecture Reference Sheet. N.p., 31 Oct. 2008. Web. Dec. 2012. <[www.eastconn.org/tah/FeaturesOfVictorianStyleArchitecture.pdf](http://www.eastconn.org/tah/FeaturesOfVictorianStyleArchitecture.pdf)>.

“Neo-Classical Architecture.” *Neo-Classical Architecture*. Social Ideas, LLC, 19 Oct. 2006. Web. 24 Apr. 2013.

“Neoclassical Architecture.” *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 31 Mar. 2013. Web. 24 Apr. 2013.

“World’s Columbian Exposition.” *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 16 Apr. 2013. Web. 24 Apr. 2013.

“Colonial Revival Architecture.” *Colonial Revival Architecture*. Antique Home, 2005-2010. Web. 24 Apr. 2013.

“Colonial Revival Architecture.” *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 12 Sept. 2012. Web. Dec. 2012.

“Art Deco.” *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 29 Nov. 2012. Web. Dec. 2012.

Craven, Jackie. “Art Deco Architecture.” *About.com Architecture*. N.p., n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2013.

“Modern Architecture.” *Infoplease*. Pearson Education, n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2013.

Morris, John. “Raleigh’s Brutal Government Buildings | Goodnight Raleigh.” *Goodnight Raleigh* RSS. N.p., 1 Sept. 2010. Web. 24 Apr. 2013.

“Brutalist Architecture.” *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 21 Apr. 2013. Web. 24 Apr. 2013.

“Architecture, Landscape, and Urban Design.” *Architecture Landscape and Urban Design: Modernism and Brutalism*. N.p., n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2013.

“Sustainable Architecture.” *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 19 Apr. 2013. Web. 24 Apr. 2013.

“Green Architecture: What Makes a Structure a ‘Living Building’?: Scientific American.” *Green Architecture: What Makes a Structure a ‘Living Building’?: Scientific American*. Scientific American, Inc., 15 Dec. 2009. Web. 24 Apr. 2013.

“Chatham County Historic Courthouse Reconstruction.” *Hobbs Architects, PA*. Hobbs Architects, PA, 2011. Web. 24 Apr. 2013.

“Chatham County Justice Center.” *Corley Redfoot Architects*. Corley Redfoot Architects, n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2013.

“Courthouse Consolidation.” *Designing a Courthouse for Consolidation*. Interiors & Sources, Stamats Business Media, 1 July 2010. Web. 24 Apr. 2013.





