

Causes of Courthouse Destruction

by Paul K Graham, CG, AG

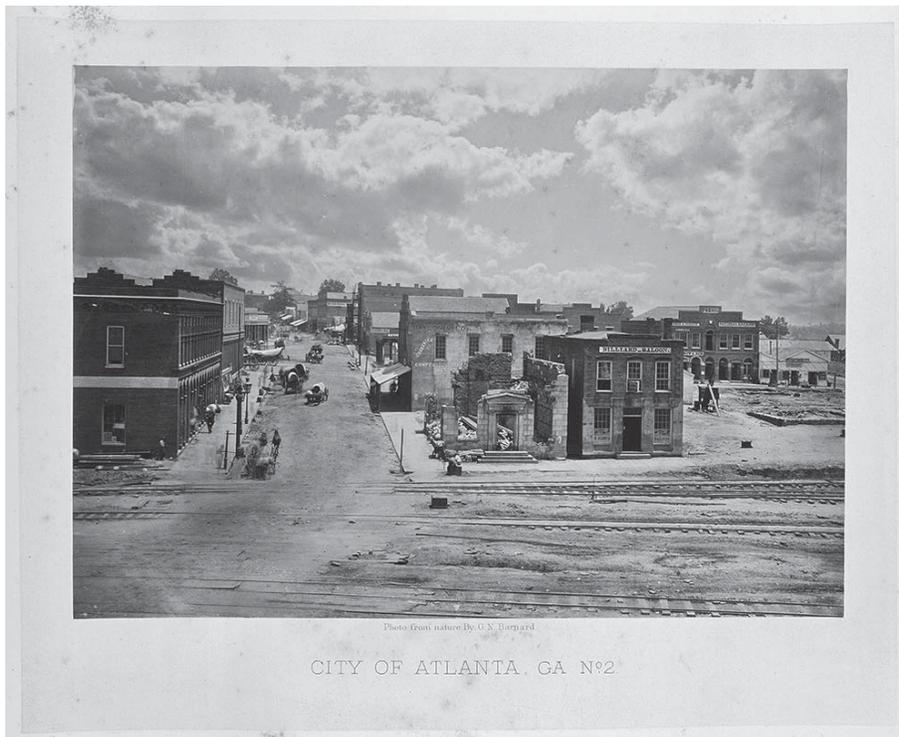
Losses due to courthouse disasters have created many localized but irreplaceable holes in the historical and genealogical record of the United States. Few places dramatize the loss better than Georgia, where seventy-five of the state's 161 counties saw 109 events leading to the destruction or severe damage of their courthouse from 1787 to 1994. These events serve as a useful sample for studying disasters that plagued courthouses across the South. Georgia's disasters reveal the immediate causes, mitigating factors, and aftermath of destructive events.

Causes of courthouse destruction in Georgia fall into two broad categories: human activity and natural disasters. The primary cause of courthouse disasters is human activity, which comes in the form of arson, accidents, and war. Natural events also destroy courthouses, although the buildings' sturdy nature means that only the most forceful floods, tornadoes, and hurricanes have had a major impact.

Arsonists have wreaked the greatest havoc on courthouses. Twenty-nine courthouse disasters in Georgia can be linked conclusively to arson. The causes of another forty-two disasters were not published, but it is statistically likely that at

least thirty of those were set deliberately. Some arsonists were targeting court records or election results, but reasons for most remain unexplained.

In one dramatic example of serial arson, someone set fire to the Walker County courthouse during the night of 2 February 1883, destroying the building and most of the county records.¹ Someone made repeated attempts to burn the county's records over the following six months. Then on 6 September 1883 someone tried to burn down the new courthouse built to replace the one burned in February.² The fire was caught



1. "Brief State Specials," *Atlanta Constitution*, 3 February 1883, p. 2.

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and extinguished. The identity of the arsonist (or arsonists) was not determined.

A variety of accidents played significant roles in courthouse disasters. Sixteen courthouses were destroyed due to accidental causes, and an additional ten to fifteen likely suffered similar fates. Heating and electrical systems failed. A painter accidentally dropped a cigarette into paint stripper. Firework embers ended up on top of a courthouse. Multiple courthouses burned when fires started elsewhere swept through downtown business districts.



The most destructive internal accident occurred on 7 February 1901, when flames consumed the Twiggs County courthouse.³ The building was one of the oldest courthouses in the state, constructed in 1825. The fire started under the roof; by the time it was discovered, there was nothing anyone could do. The fire's origin in a difficult-to-access area strongly suggests it was ignited by a spark from a defective flue. Courthouse fireplaces were often kept burning continuously during winter months.

The most destructive external accident occurred on 24 March 1855, when fire destroyed not just the courthouse, but the whole town of Sandersville, county seat of Washington County.⁴ A fire that started in Nathan Renfroe's wood shop on the edge of town, combined with high winds quickly turned it into a major conflagration. Citizens made an attempt to save the courthouse records, taking them to the office of the *Central Georgian*

newspaper, but the fire would take that building—and the records—as well.

Courthouses were also destroyed during times of war. Fourteen Georgia courthouses were destroyed or severely damaged during the Civil War. Two of those were destroyed in 1863, and the remaining twelve succumbed during General Sherman's Atlanta Campaign and March to the Sea in 1864. Nine of the fourteen Civil War courthouse disasters were the result of direct orders as part of a military action. The remaining five were destroyed through carelessness while being occupied by federal soldiers. A fifteenth courthouse was also destroyed during an act of war, when Creek Indians retaliated against white settlers and burned the town of Greensboro, county seat of Greene County, in 1787.⁵

Nature also plays a role in courthouse destruction; seven disasters can be attributed to natural causes. Floods have repeatedly impacted Newton, county seat of Baker County, which lies along the Flint River in South Georgia. The historic courthouse

2. "Trying to Destroy Records," *New York Times*, 7 September 1883, p. 1.

3. "Twiggs' Courthouse Was Burned to the Ground," *Macon Telegraph*, 8 February 1901, p. 3.

4. "Sandersville in Ruins," *Milledgeville Southern Recorder*, 27 March 1855, p. 2.

5. Charleston (S.C.) *Columbian Herald*, 2 November 1787, p. 1.

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was inundated six times in the 20th century, with the most dramatic flooding occurring in 1925 and 1994. The Glynn County courthouse was damaged beyond repair by a hurricane on 29 September 1896. Four courthouses have been hit by tornados.

In one of the most horrific events in Georgia history, two tornados converged on downtown Gainesville in Hall County on the evening of 6 April 1936.⁶ Scores of people lost their lives, and about a thousand more were injured. The second floor of the courthouse was blown away. The 1936 storm was the third courthouse disaster for Hall County, and the third time that its records survived destruction.

Besides the causes, detailed study of courthouse disasters also revealed other factors that impacted the survival of records. Fireproof vaults began to be regularly installed in southern courthouses in the 1870s. Many records were saved by vaults in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Increased use of brick and stone—rather than wood—also decreased the impact of fire. And, the diligence of clerks and citizens has saved many records through the state's history.

One particularly noteworthy example of personal efforts to save records occurred in Oconee County. At midnight 7 January 1887, an arsonist started a fire in a printing office in the town of Watkinsonville.⁷ While others watched the fire, a judge and minister worked together to carry the county's books from the courthouse. People initially said the efforts were not necessary, but by morning the county's courthouse had succumbed to the blaze. The records, on the other hand, were safe in a nearby structure that had been kept wet under a mix of water and snow.

Even when county records were destroyed, no one should give up on research before considering other strategies. Many documents were brought back and

recorded again after fires. Records of overlapping jurisdictions—state and federal primarily—can fill in gaps. Private institutions like newspapers, churches, and businesses created records as well. Consider other repositories as well. Finally, expand research to friends, neighbors, and extended family, especially those who lived in jurisdictions not affected by record loss.

The history of Georgia courthouse disasters provides a useful summary of the causes of these disasters. Arson has, by far, had the greatest impact on courthouses and county records. However, some of the most significant record losses in the state's history were the result of fires started by accident. Modern vaults, construction techniques, and fire suppression has significantly reduced the number of courthouse disasters. Although past events will affect researchers well into the future, a broader view of each research problem can mitigate the impact of record loss.

Disaster Causes	
Human Causes	Percent
Internal Accident	2%
External Accident	7%
Heating	4%
Electrical	2%
Arson	25%
War	13%
Unknown	40%
Natural Causes	
Tornado	4%
Flood	2%
Hurricane	1%

6. "150 Are Known Dead at Gainesville," *Atlanta Constitution*, 7 April 1936, p. 1.

7. "Fire," *Athens Weekly Banner-Watchman*, 11 January 1887, p. 3.

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Paul K. Graham, CG, AG, is a genealogist at ProGenealogists, the research division of Ancestry.com. He specializes in genealogical problem solving among Southern families and has published numerous reference works and articles pertaining to the state of Georgia. His most recent book is Georgia Courthouse Disasters, on which this article is based. Paul's work has been recognized with multiple awards, including the ASG Scholar Award, and he was

the 2013 winner of the NGS Family History Writing Contest.

Paul holds a master's degree in Heritage Preservation from Georgia State University. He moved to Salt Lake City from Georgia in 2011. His personal research interests relate primarily to land use history and the post-Civil War history of cities in the South.

Georgia Courthouse Disasters



Paul K. Graham, CG, AG

The complete list of Georgia courthouse disasters—with date, time, circumstance, and impact. **75 Counties**
The story of every event is **109 Disasters** told, whether accident or Mother Nature, arson or war. Based entirely on first-hand accounts and historical records, all are carefully documented and source cited. **26 maps** show the geographic impact of major disasters.

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