1. NAME

**COMMON:**
Polk County Courthouse

**AND/OR HISTORIC:**

2. LOCATION

**STREET AND NUMBER:**
Courthouse Street

**CITY OR TOWN:**
Columbus

**STATE CODE**
North Carolina 37

**COUNTY CODE**
Polk 149

3. CLASSIFICATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY (Check One)</th>
<th>OWNERSHIP</th>
<th>STATUS</th>
<th>ACCESSIBLE TO THE PUBLIC</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
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<td>Object</td>
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**PUBLIC ACQUISITION:**
- In Process
- Being Considered

**STATUS:**
- Occupied
- Unoccupied
- Preservation work in progress

**ACCESSIBLE TO THE PUBLIC:**
- Yes
- Restricted
- Unrestricted
- No

4. OWNER OF PROPERTY

**OWNER'S NAME:**
Polk County Commissioners (Fred Foy, Chairman)

**STREET AND NUMBER:**
P. O. Box 308

**CITY OR TOWN:**
Columbus

**STATE CODE**
North Carolina 37

5. LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

**COURTHOUSE, REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC:**
Polk County Courthouse

**STREET AND NUMBER:**

**CITY OR TOWN:**
Columbus

**STATE CODE**
North Carolina 37

6. REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

**TITLE OF SURVEY:**
Historic American Buildings Survey

**DATE OF SURVEY:**
1937

**DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS:**
Library of Congress

**STREET AND NUMBER:**
East Capitol and Independence Avenue

**CITY OR TOWN:**
Washington

**STATE CODE**
D. C.
The Polk County Courthouse is a two-story T-shaped brick building, in the Greek Revival style. The five-bay main (west) facade is dominated by an engaged, three-bay portico with a plain pediment, supported by four square pillars. The large, six-over-six sash windows have stone lintels and sills. Though no shutters remain, the driven pilasters which supported them survive. The central entrance consists of double doors with six panels in each leaf. Flanking the doorway are paneled pilasters and three-light sidelights, flanked in turn by engaged repeats of the pilasters. Above the doors and sidelights is a large, reeded transom bar and a nine-light transom, which is flanked by truncated pilasters. Framing the entire entrance are large engaged pilasters with molded capitals supporting an unadorned entablature. In the shallow north and south walls of the porch are six-panel doors. A wide, plain frieze carries around the building as does a molded brick watertable. Each corner of the building is defined by a brick pilaster with molded brick capital. A three-stage cupola sits astride the north-south roof ridge of the main facade block. The first stage, square in section, resting on an unadorned base, has an even row of quoins at each corner and is protected by a small hip roof. The next stage is shallow and has only corner posts for adornment. The third stage has a tall, round-headed, louvered ventilator in each face with a flat molded band outlining each arch and linking the arches. The pyramidal roof is pedimented above the four faces of the cupola and is adorned with dentils. A pointed finial, bulbous at its base, completes the cupola. Two interior end chimneys rise at both the north and south ends of the two-bay pedimented gable ends.

Extending east from the rear of the main facade block is the four-bay stem of the T. Brick pilasters separate the bays of the north and south sides of this rear wing, but not the bays of the four-bay gable end at the rear (east). This gable end is pedimented also.

Entering the front door, there is a large entry hall with office space to the left and right with a center hall running to the rear of the building, giving access to more office space. Rising from the north and south sides of the front door are unusually handsome, matching spiral stairs with moderately large turned newels, molded handrails and slender, rectangular balusters. The stair climbs gracefully to the second-floor stair hall which opens into the large courtroom area to the east and more office space to the north and south. The stair is continued, again in a matched pattern, in a straight run along the north and south walls, turning abruptly at the corners and rising to meet in the center where a door gives access to the upper sections. This second-floor stair is rendered in Federal style with a square newel which is tapered toward the top. The handrail is rounded and is supported by slender balusters. Simple architraves are used throughout the building, as are unadorned Greek Revival mantels which depend on proportion rather than ornament for their effect. In the courtroom, which has been remodeled, the window architraves continue to the baseboard and frame a flat panel beneath the window. Broad, flat moldings predominate throughout the building.
The Polk County Courthouse, completed in 1859 by builders Ephraim Clayton and George W. Shakelford, is the first and only permanent courthouse serving this western county. Praised by Thomas Waterman in The Early Architecture of North Carolina, the courthouse is an imposing brick structure in dignified Greek Revival style, notable especially for its strong, simple classical detail and graceful double spiral stair.

Polk County was first created by the General Assembly in January, 1847, from portions of Rutherford and Henderson counties. In this act the Assembly authorized a group of commissioners to "lay off and locate the county seat ... at or within five miles of the residence of Murrell/Marvill/Mills. ..." The proposed county seat was to be known as "Schuywicker" in honor of a courageous Cherokee Indian guide named "Skyuka," who is said to have assisted a group of white militiamen in 1776. In January, 1849, bitter disagreement concerning the exact location of this county seat resulted in repeal of the 1847 act authorizing the establishment of the county. Polk's lands and records were thereupon returned to the respective custodies of Rutherford and Henderson counties.

A law enacted by the General Assembly at its 1854-1855 session provided for the re-creation of Polk County and ordered that John R. Logan of Cleveland County, Joseph Ervin of Burke County, and Benjamin Burgin of McDowell County be appointed commissioners "to lay off and locate the county seat of Polk County ... upon which a town shall be laid off to be called Columbus, and on which the court house and public buildings shall be erected. ..." The law further provided that proceeds from the sale of town lots be used to finance construction of the new county's public buildings.

In December, 1855, the Polk County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions ordered William S. Mills, newly-elected treasurer of public buildings, to "Contract with some suitable person for the Building of a Temporary Court House at Columbus ... until a Permanent Court House can be Built. ..." E. L. Foster was chosen to construct the temporary facility, which was utilized at least as early as March 3, 1856. Foster was paid $190.87 for his efforts, which apparently included construction of a temporary jail. The court also ordered that a committee be created to assist Mills in entering into a contract with a low bidder for the construction of a permanent courthouse and jail and for the enclosure of a proposed public square.
Successful bidders on these projects were Ephraim Clayton and George W. Shakelford, both of Buncombe County. Clayton, son of Revolutionary soldier Lambert Clayton, is said to have been born in present-day Transylvania County in 1804 and to have spent most of his early life in the Asheville area. He became a building contractor at an early age and was the builder of the fourth Buncombe County Courthouse at Asheville, which he completed in 1850. This structure, like its counterpart at Columbus, included a cupola; unfortunately, it was completely destroyed by fire on January 28, 1865. In addition, Clayton was hired to enlarge and remodel St. John's in the Wilderness, an early Episcopal church located at Flat Rock in Henderson County. He designed the fence to enclose the proposed public square and probably designed the courthouse itself. After the Civil War he departed the construction trade and entered the field of railroad contracting. He is said to have suffered a severe loss when the Spartanburg and Asheville Railroad Company failed without satisfying its creditors.

Of G. W. Shakelford much less is known. He was born in Tennessee in 1818 and apparently settled in Buncombe County sometime before 1850. He spent a number of years in the Asheville area as a brickmason and died intestate and penniless in March, 1883. It is uncertain whether he practiced this trade throughout his entire lifetime.

At its March, 1857, term, the Polk County Court received word from William S. Mills that the courthouse had been commissioned and was "progressing very well" in spite of a bitter winter which had delayed the original completion date of the new jail. Mills also advised that Shakelford had been paid $4,999.13 on his contract. One year later Mills reported to the court that Clayton and Shakelford had been paid a total of $10,591.93 on their total contract price of $16,836, for "Building C, H & jail and for enclosing the public square /and/ for building Cupalo /and/ furnishing a bell for the Court House. . . ."

Clayton and Shakelford apparently completed their work by September, 1859, when a grand jury reported to the court that the new public buildings were "in good order." The building survives today in essentially its original state and continues to function as the county courthouse.
### 9. Major Bibliographical References

- Buncombe County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions. Minutes, July, 1840–April, 1854. Archives, Division of Archives and History, Raleigh.
- Buncombe County Record of Appointment of Administrators, Executors and Guardians, 1868-1890. Originals in State Archives.
- Polk County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions. Minutes, March, 1855–March, 1866, State Archives.

### 10. Geographical Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Corner</th>
<th>Latitude Degrees Minutes Seconds</th>
<th>Longitude Degrees Minutes Seconds</th>
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<td>NW</td>
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<td>82° 11' 54&quot;</td>
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</tbody>
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**Approximate Acreage of Nominated Property:** 1 acre

**List All States and Counties for Properties Overlapping State or County Boundaries**

<table>
<thead>
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<th>State:</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>County:</th>
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### 11. Form Prepared By

**Name and Title:**
Survey and Planning Unit

**Organization:**
Division of Archives and History

**Street and Number:**
109 East Jones Street

**City or Town:** Raleigh

**State:** North Carolina

**Code:** 37

**Date:** 24 September 1974

### 12. State Liaison Officer Certification

As the designated State Liaison Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service. The recommended level of significance of this nomination is:

- National [x]
- State [x]
- Local [ ]

**Name:**
Robert E. Stipe

**Title:**
State Historic Preservation Officer

**Date:** 24 September 1974
Polk County Courthouse  
Courthouse Street  
Columbus, North Carolina

USGS Map, Lake Lure Quadrangle  
Scale: 1: 62,500  
Date: 1959

<table>
<thead>
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</table>
| 35° 15' 05" | 82° 11' 54"

Mapped, edited, and published by the Geological Survey  
Control by USGS, US&GS, and TVA  
Topography from aerial photographs by photogrammetric methods. Aerial photographs taken 1955, field check 1959  
Polyconic projection. 1937 North American datum  
10,000-foot grid based on North Carolina coordinate system  
1000-meter Universal Transverse Mercator grid  
Zone 17, shown in blue