

DOWNTOWN

Downtown Knoxville looks different from most reviving downtowns. Part of it's the scale. These streets are narrow. Especially on Gay Street, the ratio of building height to street width is striking. Even Market Square isn't square at all, but an oblong rectangle.

Part of it's the topography. Most of downtown Knoxville is on top of a steep bluff. Some downtown streets require downshifting. Several buildings have useful space, with windows, three floors below the street level.

And it's all very concentrated. Everything—the historic theaters; the county; state, and federal courthouses; city and county government; all the banks; the cinema complex; 50-odd restaurants and bars; five churches; two public libraries; a museum; about eight hotels; and perhaps 3,000 residences—are in the same half-square mile patch.

Its peculiarities reflect its history. Downtown Knoxville is on exactly the same street grid laid out in 1791. When most buildings were only two stories tall, and most commuters were pedestrians, these streets seemed sufficiently broad. And only in the early 1790s did it seem prudent to put a capital city on top of a steep hill, for defense against Indian factions who sought to destroy the white man's capital.

As it happened, defense was a less urgent issue by 1800 after the Indian threat had lifted—but the city was already up here, and here it stayed. Of course, altitude also eliminated the risk of flooding, an annual reality across much of the Tennessee Valley until a network of TVA dams was completed, over 75 years ago.

That hilltop spot between Clinch Avenue and the river that was once the capital of Tennessee is the oldest part of Knoxville. Very little remains from the capital era, 1791 to 1818. Overlooking the river is Blount Mansion (*see p.24*), just off Gay Street on West Hill Avenue. Reputedly the first frame house ever built west of the Appalachians, it's the rare survivor of the era when Knoxville was an administrative center. Just east of there is the reconstruction of James White's Fort (*see p.20*).

MAIN STREET & VICINITY

1 OLD COURTHOUSE

Located at 300 Main Street
865-215-2385 • knoxcounty.org

MON-FRI: 8AM-4:30PM

This courthouse is the most durable of four courthouses around the intersection of Gay and Main since the 1790s. It's a late-Victorian creation, dating to 1884–86, designed by Stephenson & Getaz, local architects from England and France respectively—based on a Palliser & Palliser pattern. In days before air-conditioning, crowds often formed on the lawn to witness high-profile cases through the open windows. The courthouse's tower holds the "Cheshire clock" visible from the river and referenced in Cormac McCarthy's novel *Suttree*.

LOOKING SOUTH ON GAY ST, RECOGNIZED BY
THE AMERICAN PLANNING ASSOCIATION AS ONE
OF THE "GREAT PLACES IN AMERICA"

Gay Street once HOSTED NINE separate MOVIE THEATERS

GOV. JOHN SEVIER'S REBURIAL AT THE KNOXVILLE COURTHOUSE IN 1889 ATTRACTED A HUGE CROWD OF 30,000 SPECTATORS



GOV. JOHN SEVIER MEMORIAL

buried in the wilderness of what was only later known as Alabama.

Sevier's grave was missing for years, but in the 1880s a new appreciation of Sevier's legacy coincided with the construction of a new courthouse, and a movement led by Gov. Robert Taylor resulted in the exhumation of what little remained of Sevier, and a reburial here in 1889. Some 33 years later,

his famous wife Bonnie Kate was disinterred from her original grave elsewhere in Alabama, and reburied alongside Sevier.

The courthouse is still used for several public purposes, but today most trials are held in the adjacent City County Building, a large modernist concrete building designed in 1978 by McCarty Holsaple McCarty.



1934 U.S. POST OFFICE BUILDING, NOW TENNESSEE SUPREME COURT BUILDING

Among the judges' decisions handed down in this building, perhaps none were more significant than Judge Robert Taylor's 1956 ruling that Clinton High School, 25 miles northwest of Knoxville, would have to desegregate immediately, making it the first school in the South to do so. The decision got immediate national attention—and unfortunately drew segregationist militants from across the country, and elicited some dynamite bombings.

The soldier statue commemorates the Spanish-American War, as do the "cannons", which make a peculiar story. Originally they were captured Spanish cannons from that war, perhaps donated to the city at the time



THE OLD COURTHOUSE LAWN AT GAY ST AND MAIN ST WITH JOHN MASON BOYD MEMORIAL PORTE-COCHÈRE

of Admiral Dewey's visit in 1900. The county chose to contribute them to a World War II scrap drive. They were missed, though, and some 50 years later, county government chose to replace them with fiberglass replicas.

The marble porte-cochère at Cumberland and Main is a memorial to "Our Beloved Physician," Dr. John Mason Boyd (1833–1909), known for his expertise in obstetrics.

The lawn of the courthouse is a burial place, albeit with unusual circumstances. It holds the grave of Revolutionary War hero, Indian fighter, and first governor of Tennessee, John Sevier. But what was buried here in 1889, before 30,000 spectators, were only a few bones. Sevier was a 70-year-old congressman on a surveying expedition on land acquired after the War of 1812 when he died and was

2 POST OFFICE

Located at 505 Main Street

MON-FRI: 7:30AM-5PM

To the west along Main Street and across the street is the old U.S. Post Office and federal courthouse building. Designed by Baumann and Baumann in 1932, it's believed to show the influence of French-born architect Paul Cret. One of downtown's best buildings to show off the area's distinctive pink marble, it becomes pinker when wet! The marble eagles across the pediment are perhaps the best-known architectural work of Italian-immigrant stone carver Albert Milani, who worked in Knoxville for 60 years, much of it at Candoro Marble in South Knoxville.



MARBLE SCULPTOR ALBERT MILANI

Frontier hero JOHN SEVIER was a bitter enemy of ANDREW JACKSON

Several ITALIAN STONECUTTERS moved to Knoxville to work with LOCAL MARBLE