



NHL Executive Summary



- Name of Property:** Loudoun County Courthouse
- City, State:** Leesburg, VA
- Period of Significance:** November 1933 – February 1934
- NHL Criteria:** 1
- NHL Theme:** II. Creating Social Institutions and Movements
2. reform movements
IV. Shaping the Political Landscape
1. parties, protests, and movements
- Previous Recognition:** Contributing resource to Leesburg Historic District, National Register of Historic Places, 1970 (NRIS 70000807); district updated and expanded in 2001 (NRIS 02000531); VDHR #253-0035
- National Historic Context:** N/A
- NHL Significance:**
- The Loudoun County Courthouse served as the location of the 1933-1934 *Commonwealth of Virginia v. Crawford* case, an important civil rights trial that marked a turning point in the history of both African American lawyers and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) civil rights jurisprudence.
 - In *Commonwealth of Virginia v. Crawford*, the NAACP for the first time entrusted an all-Black legal team with conducting the high-profile criminal defense of a Black man in a southern courtroom.
 - Led by the now celebrated civil rights attorney Charles Hamilton Houston, the defense counsel also included Leon Ransome, James Tyson, and Edward Lovett, all of whom were affiliated with Howard University School of Law. They defended George Crawford, who stood accused of murdering two White women in Virginia.



- Crawford’s defense became an important civil rights effort for the NAACP at a time when the gross injustices done to African American citizens within the nation’s legal systems garnered increasing publicity. Black men like Crawford faced considerable risk of being falsely accused of violent crimes and either lynched outright by White supremacists or denied constitutional due process in so-called “legal lynchings”—sham trials rushed to convictions with poor legal representation, an intimidating mob atmosphere, and all-White juries. Crawford’s defense centered on the unconstitutional exclusion of Black men from juries in the South.
- The unique circumstances leading to Crawford’s Virginia trial attracted national publicity and made the trial one of the earliest, most high-profile demonstrations of Black lawyers’ abilities in the Jim Crow era. The defense lawyers’ highly regarded performance directly undermined White supremacist assumptions about Black inferiority and showcased Black legal expertise and professionalism at a national level.
- *Crawford* led directly to Houston’s appointment as the NAACP’s first special counsel in charge of implementing its emerging legal program to methodically dismantle segregation.
- Houston and Ransome used *Crawford* to develop a widely distributed legal template for fighting unconstitutional jury exclusion of African Americans. Through Houston, *Crawford* helped establish an important NAACP pattern of using test cases to shape public opinion and stimulate grassroots efforts. *Crawford* played a significant role in the NAACP’s emerging campaign to use constitutional law and test cases to dismantle the legal premise of racial segregation embedded in the “separate but equal” doctrine of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896).

Integrity:

- The exterior of the Loudoun County Courthouse, built in 1894, retains a high integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship. The building exterior, grounds, and iron gates have changed very little since 1933-1934.
- Despite interior alterations in 1956, including the shortening of the courtroom to enlarge the rear offices, much of the room’s volume and organization remains and is easily recognizable as the 1930s courtroom. Craftsmen rebuilt the judge’s dais using the same style of railing and replicated other woodwork. The room retains much of the furniture and architectural detailing in place during the period of significance.

Owner of Property: Loudoun County Commissioners

Acreeage of Property: Approximately 1.5 acres

Origins of Nomination: Loudoun County contracted WSP USA to complete this National Historic Landmark nomination as part of an effort to document the full history of the courthouse and its role in “the Path to Freedom, Justice, and Racial Equality in Loudoun County.”¹

Potential for Positive Public Response or Reflection on NHL Program: The elected officials and the appointed Heritage Commission support the designation and its acknowledgement of an important chapter in United States history. They hope that recognition will bring awareness of civil rights history in the county and beyond and contribute to racial justice and equity in their community.

¹ Robert A. Pollard, ed., *Report of the Loudoun County Heritage Commission, The History of the Loudoun County Courthouse and Its Role in the Path to Freedom, Justice, and Racial Equality in Loudoun County*, March 1, 2019.



Potential for Negative Public Response or Reflection on NHL Program: None known.

Public Comments Favoring Designation (received as of *Add Date*):

Landmarks Committee Comments:

Landmarks Committee Recommendation:

Advisory Board Recommendation: