

10-2005

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### Recommended Citation

Utley, Dan K. and Brinkman, Bob (2005) "More than Bricks and Mortar: Preserving Historic Courthouses in East Texas," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 43: Iss. 2, Article 7.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol43/iss2/7>

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## **MORE THAN BRICKS AND MORTAR: PRESERVING HISTORIC COURTHOUSES IN EAST TEXAS**

*By Dan K. Utley and Bob Brinkman*

In the context of the built environment of Texas, schoolhouses and churches were among the earliest manifestations of community. Sometimes these took the form of one-room frame structures that served both ecclesiastical and educational functions. Commercial institutions such as stores, cotton gins and sawmills provided other structures in which people gathered and sometime served as community spaces as well. When there were sufficient communities in a given area to warrant the development of government, the state legislature formed counties. And each of these new judicial and political entities required a courthouse, usually followed in short order by a jail. Courthouses established a framework for government and provided a hub from which cities grew. The footprint and placement of county courthouses literally determined where development – even commercial development – would take place, at least in the formative years of county seats.

Early courthouses in East Texas were more often functional than monumental. Many were constructed of logs or locally milled lumber. As county organizations stabilized, however, courthouses began to reflect such public concerns as growth, permanence, and security. As architectural historian Willard B. Robinson noted, “durable architecture provided psychological security and cemented the stones of faith in posterity.” Much has been written about the power of architectural symbolism exhibited in courthouses, and frequent comparisons are made to grand community landmarks of past cultures. With that, and a broad, international context of public architecture in mind, Robinson viewed the county courthouse as a temple of justice, representing the collective spirit of an era and a people. “Rather than focusing upon a church or a palace, as in Europe and in other countries in the Americas, society in the United States found security and organization in county courthouses,” he wrote.<sup>1</sup>

The symbolism of courthouses derived from architectural themes collectively understood, regardless of style, ornamentation, or the formation of the square within the surrounding cultural landscape. Courthouse architecture in Texas, especially late in the nineteenth and early in the twentieth centuries, relied on mass, soaring or sweeping visual lines, and progressive detailing. The design also represented implied levels of self-governance, from county to state and federal, with the county borrowing symbolically from the others. Courthouses were, in effect, county Capitols, and this politically significant role was reflected in the architecture.

What sometimes became lost in the translation of concepts was the fact that counties are also entities of the state, and so courthouses, in effect, belong not only to residents of individual counties but to the people of the state as well. That was the basis and justification for early legislation in Texas that responded to a public concern for the state’s unique collection of courthous-

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es. The legislation was born within a decade of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, which codified recognized preservation standards through the National Register of Historic Places and statewide historic site surveys. Both are now considered essential elements of community planning.

As the historic preservation movement began to evolve in Texas, there was a growing public awareness that county courthouses were among the most vulnerable landmark structures. Not only were they commonly lacking comprehensive maintenance planning as a result of inadequate or misguided budgets and the cyclical turnover of county governments, but they also suffered from a relatively small pool of adequately trained preservation professionals. Texas lagged behind other states in that regard for years.

A pattern of vulnerability threatening Texas courthouses became evident in the 1950s, when thirteen counties demolished their landmark court buildings in response to unprecedented growth in the decade following World War II. The destruction slowed somewhat in the 1960s, but by the early 1970s another twelve courthouses were gone.<sup>2</sup> Among those in East Texas lost during this post-war era were those in Huntsville, Walker County, and in Madisonville, Madison County. The overwhelmingly complex decisions and financial burdens that counties faced following such devastating losses were not lost on state officials. Their initial reaction, developed by legislators in conjunction with the Texas Historical Commission (THC) – the state’s designated State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) under the National Historic Preservation Act – was to formulate a pro-active approach to the situation.

In 1973, the Texas Legislature adopted Section 442.008 of the Texas Government Code, which required counties to notify the THC six months prior to proposed demolition or alteration of a county courthouse considered to be historic as defined under the National Register of Historic Places criteria. Such structures generally must be at least fifty years old and retain a high degree of original architectural integrity. At the time it was passed, this state legislation was unique on a national scale. The mandated review period, backed by provisions for injunctive relief and penalties, was designed to ensure a county-state dialogue about preservation. Enforcement was problematic in the early years, but over time, due to education efforts targeted at county officials and further definition through case law and regulatory practice, the “courthouse law” became widely accepted. The provision has been effective in addressing the loss of historic courthouses. In the thirty years since its implementation, only three have been demolished. Two were in West Texas, in the counties of Stonewall and Nolan. In East Texas, the loss of the 1889 Bowie County Courthouse at New Boston in 1987 was attributed to arson.<sup>3</sup>

The citizens of Texas were alerted in dramatic fashion to the vulnerability of historic public buildings in February 1983, when a late-night fire spread alarmingly fast through the east wing of the Texas Capitol in Austin. Years of deferred maintenance and interior alterations, including dropped ceilings and a virtual warren of hollow-frame walls and partitions in what had originally been open spaces, coupled with the absence of a fire suppressant system, put

the grand 1888 Capitol in jeopardy. One writer, making the association between the state's premier public building and those temples of justice at the county level, noted that "The Texas Capitol, like the aging courthouses throughout the state, had been transformed into something resembling a Dagwood sandwich left in the refrigerator a bit too long."<sup>4</sup>

The Texas Legislature responded quickly to the fire. Lawmakers established the State Preservation Board within a matter of weeks to oversee the rehabilitation of the burned-out wing and to implement a full restoration of the statehouse and the nearby General Land Office Building, which would eventually serve as a visitor center for the refurbished Capitol. Central to the restoration effort was the development of a master preservation plan that provided detailed analysis of several factors: the original structure, the changes that had taken place over the years, the immediacy of the restoration needs, the inadequate protection measures, and the plan for updating systems and spaces within the context of a historic building. Preservation master plans had long been an essential element of restoration projects, but this particular plan, highlighted in part by a bold decision to expand the Capitol by means of a massive underground extension to the north, gained the attention of government officials, the national preservation community, and the general public. It became a model for others to emulate.

Before work was complete on the state's largest preservation effort to that time, another incident drew attention to historic preservation of public buildings. On January 1, 1993, the ornate 1890 Hill County Courthouse in Hillsboro burned. Designed by architect W.C. Dodson of Waco, the building exhibited elements of Italianate, Second Empire, and Classical Revival styles. Recognized as unique among the state's historic courthouses, the building was designated a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark and State Archeological Landmark, and was listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The damage caused by the Hill County Courthouse fire was, in some respects, even more devastating than that sustained by the state Capitol a decade earlier. Generally believed to have started as a result of wiring problems, the fire began on the seldom-used third floor and quickly spread into the bell tower, which eventually collapsed downward into the second-floor courtroom. The rusticated limestone walls of the exterior wall held firm, containing the blaze, but as a number of fire departments responded to the scene, including a unit of the Texas Forest Service in Lufkin, the interior space suffered extensive damage from both fire and water.<sup>5</sup>

The loss of the Hill County Courthouse marked an important turning point in both public and private perceptions of historic preservation in Texas. While it was without a doubt devastating and dramatic, the fire occurred in a community with a proven preservation ethic and at a time when sentiment toward saving historic structures was on the rise. In 1981, Hillsboro became one of the first cities in Texas to join the Main Street Program, a partnership between municipal governments, the Texas Historical Commission, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation. It promotes pragmatic development

and marketing against backdrops of historic preservation and heritage tourism. Hillsboro's early success within that new program helped community leaders and citizens to understand both the potential and feasibility of preserving the past, and the Hillsboro town square had been preserved as a result. The 1890 courthouse was central to the historic square, and as the largest structure in the downtown area was a landmark visible for miles.

Given the community's positive view of historic preservation and the support of county officials and state leaders, there was little doubt that county residents would choose to restore rather than replace the damaged structure. Even so, the decision was not easy. The insurance settlement proved inadequate to replace the historic structure completely; replacement required an additional \$8,000,000, a substantial sum to be raised by a relatively small town like Hillsboro.

The commitment for preservation came quickly. Within days, the Hill County Historical Commission sponsored a public forum on the campus of Hill College to discuss the matter. Donations had already been received by the time of the meeting, which resulted in the formation of a courthouse restoration committee and the establishment of restoration accounts at a local trust company. Staff members from both the Texas Historical Commission and the State Preservation Board provided technical assistance. Despite lacking the basic records and archives vital to the early stages of the restoration project and the development of the master preservation plan, the coalition of committed county and state officials, project architects, local citizens, contractors, and workers persevered. The rehabilitated, refurbished, and restored courthouse opened to the public in 1995.

The lessons learned from the Hill County Courthouse fire directly affected public attitudes toward courthouse restoration. The Texas Historical Commission, with funding from a federal transportation enhancement grant administered by the Texas Department of Transportation, quickly established the Texas Courthouse Alliance (TCA). The TCA brought together a team of trained technical preservationists and architects who traveled the state and identified fifty-five of the most endangered county courthouses. Through on-site documentation and analysis of thirty-one courthouse buildings, five of them in East Texas, the TCA team developed detailed reports that pointed to specific deficiencies in the historic buildings. East Texas courthouses studied by the TCA team were in the counties of Cass, Hopkins, Leon, Newton, and Red River. The team conducted thorough research on courthouses in three other East Texas counties as well – Grimes, Fort Bend, and Shelby – that did not result in the comprehensive reports.<sup>6</sup>

As the TCA neared the end of its grant funding cycle, public awareness of the need for courthouse preservation in Texas gained momentum. Governor George W. Bush, then running for a second term, included courthouse preservation in his campaign platform. On December 3, 1997, he said:

And as we build our future, we must not forget our grand Texas heritage. I propose a joint state and local courthouse revitalization project

to preserve and restore the unique and historic structures that are a 'symbolic' center of our Texas community: our county courthouses.'

On June 15, 1998, the National Trust for Historic Preservation announced that the historic courthouses of Texas – 225 at the time – would be included in its list of Eleven Most Endangered Historic Sites for that year. At the same time, Governor Bush also furnished further details of his courthouse initiative. Over the ensuing months, he appointed an advisory group and a working group to begin outlining legislation necessary to implement the program. The next year, the Texas Legislature approved the Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program (THCPP), a precedent-setting preservation effort, and Governor Bush signed it into law. That set the stage for what has been the largest preservation effort undertaken – \$145,000,000 to date – by a state on behalf of its county courthouses.

Lessons learned in restoration work on the State Capitol and the Hill County Courthouse were incorporated into the new program. Preservation master plans, which the counties had to fund, and community involvement sustained the process. A set of criteria addressed such concerns as age, endangerment, historical and architectural significance, life safety issues, and code compliance. Programmatic qualifications restricted the funding to county-owned courthouses, rather than those then in private ownership, and favored those that were still used for primary county court functions. The objective was to promote the viability of the buildings as functioning courthouses, rather than as museums or annexes.

The first two rounds of the new preservation funding provided full restoration grants and planning grants for East Texas courthouses in Grimes, Harrison, Hopkins, Lamar, Leon, Newton, Rains, and Red River counties. In 2000, the program neared the end of its first biennium of funding, \$50,000,000. State officials soon faced further legislative debate over continuing the effort for another biennium. Some legislators expressed concern about the project in light of the state's fiscal woes. Restoration funds, they thought, would seem less important than other, federally mandated programs and crucial social service needs. Because of budgetary constraints, legislators needed to shift funds to meet those needs, and the request for an additional \$50,000,000 for courthouse preservation seemed vulnerable. Adding to the debate was the scope of the work; THC estimated that full restoration cost of the state's historic courthouses could exceed \$1 billion.

In August 2000, as legislators began preparing for the upcoming session, the state received another wake-up call. This time the alarm was sounded in Deep East Texas. At the end of a workday, a fire started and began to spread in the upper floors of the 1902 Newton County Courthouse. Fortunately, the structure had already been documented through the Texas Courthouse Alliance project, and consulting architects had analyzed the building for a master preservation plan in association with the Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program. Because of this, there were detailed records and photographs, unlike the situation in Hill County seven years earlier, and that gave

Newton County an advantage with regard to accurate reconstruction. But Newton County has a considerably smaller economy and population than Hill County, considerations that made the decision to preserve more difficult.

The fire in Newton left the courthouse a shell of sound exterior walls with no roof and a gutted interior space. County officials weighed their options and decided to continue with the courthouse preservation program. They were rewarded with emergency funding that provided structural stabilization and a roof system that would help enclose the ruins until full restoration could get underway. The project remains in process as of the writing of this article.<sup>8</sup>

The courthouse fire in Newton gained statewide attention because of its scope and its tragic outcome, but the root causes of such potential disasters often go unreported or are little noticed by the media, even when disaster is narrowly averted. In 1998, for example, a fire erupted in the 1891 portion of the Tyler County Courthouse, but was quickly contained in one room. Such close calls illustrated the vulnerability of historic courthouses. In the case of Tyler County, members of the THC's courthouse team visited the building and noted that the wiring in the courthouse was among the worst they had encountered across the state. As a result, the agency's commissioners approved emergency funding to address immediate needs.<sup>9</sup>

In response to the successes of the first-round funding, and realizing that many Texas courthouses remained in imminent danger, the Texas Legislature approved additional funding for the 2001 and 2003 biennia, with \$50,000,000 funded in 2002-2003 and \$45,000,000 in bonds issued for 2004-2005. In 2005, legislators will once again reevaluate the program and try to match needs with available funds; preliminary discussions may involve a bonding mechanism of up to \$250 million.

In six years of operation, the Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program has provided full restoration funding for forty-four courthouses, eight of which are in East Texas (Grimes, Harrison, Hopkins, Lamar, Leon, Newton, Rains, and Red River). Additionally, the counties of Cass, Harris, San Augustine, Trinity, and Tyler received partial funding for planning or emergency work. As of early 2005, another ten East Texas counties (Fannin, Fort Bend, Houston, Liberty, Marion, Polk, Rusk, San Jacinto, Upshur, and Van Zandt) have approved master plans and wait funding if the program is continued.

The lessons of the Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program are many. The funding has addressed important problems but also brought to light important historical discoveries that were forgotten long ago. The program has shown the need for systematic, thorough master planning that balances preservation needs with the modern demands of county government. It has also, in certain cases, corrected inadequacies in original design or construction. The program has educated communities, many of which came late to their preservation needs, about the economic benefits of history and heritage development. And it has strengthened historic governmental ties between the State of Texas and the counties. An analysis of the program to date, with a focus on developments in East Texas, points to its early successes and also to the need for further work.

Since there are no definitive boundaries for the East Texas region, the authors have restricted their study to fifty-three counties (see appendix). This regional approach to an understanding of historic courthouses provides important insights into statewide conditions and concerns. East Texas serves as a microcosm of the state and yet possesses significantly unique characteristics that make it a viable area of study.

No single architect dominates the historic built environment in East Texas, and that is particularly true with regard to courthouses. In other regions, even today, there are identifiable clusters of counties whose courthouses were designed by the same individual or firm. Often these are grouped around the architect's home city. There are several examples of this phenomenon in other parts of Texas. In the Permian Basin, David Castle designed seven extant courthouses between Kermit, Gail, and Mertzon, just west of his base in Abilene. San Antonio architect Henry T. Phelps also designed seven courthouses in a region north and west of his hometown, and the firm of Townes, Lightfoot and Funk built six courthouses in the Panhandle centered around its Amarillo office.<sup>10</sup>

East Texas, however, does not display similar spheres of influence or territorial claims. The designs for forty-five historic courthouses in the region are spread among thirty-two architects and firms, with only two of these having designed more than a pair. The leader is C.H. Page and Brothers of Austin, well outside the region, whose five courthouses in Fort Bend (1908), Anderson (1914), Trinity (1914), Hunt (1929), and Orange (1937) counties form the largest number, yet they are geographically dispersed. Cornell Curtis designed three courthouses—Rusk (1928), Liberty (1931), and Chambers (1936)—two of these in partnership with A.E. Thomas. J. Riely Gordon, Eugene Heiner, L.L. Thurman, Elmer G. Withers, and the firm of Voelcker and Dixon, all well-known courthouses architects in the state, each designed two standing courthouses in East Texas, while all others are responsible for only one (see appendix).

There seems to be no simple explanation for the lack of a pattern when analyzing the influence of architects in East Texas courthouses. Like other parts of the state, the designers of courthouses in this region vary widely from homegrown products to imported professionals. Shirley Simons of Tyler was a prolific architect in the region, but curiously his only courthouse design was in nearby San Augustine County in 1927. On the other end of the spectrum are the Bryan Architectural Company of St. Louis, Missouri and the Falls City Construction Company of Louisville, Kentucky, who designed and built the Rains County Courthouse. Architect Andrew J. Bryan designed at least forty-one courthouses throughout the South, but with the demolition of the 1910 Fisher County Courthouse at Roby in West Texas, the courthouse at Emory became his only surviving Texas design.<sup>11</sup>

The lack of a dominant architect in East Texas is due in large part to the fact the counties have been settled longer and therefore had more opportunity to lose courthouses through poor construction, neglect, fires, or changing architectural



tastes. At one time, however, more influence was exerted by individual architects. Houston architect Eugene Heiner, for example, designed at least eighteen courthouses in Texas, only six of which survive, and four of those have had major alterations to their original design. Heiner's previous courthouses in Smith (1882), Galveston (1882), Trinity (1884), Walker (1888), Nacogdoches (1889), Montgomery (1891), Jefferson (1893), and Polk (1894) counties do not survive. Austin-based Frederick Ruffini also influenced early East Texas courthouse design, building structures in Gregg (1879), Rusk (1879), Hopkins (1881), and Wood (1883) counties that are no longer standing.<sup>12</sup>

From the time that they were organized, the fifty-three counties in the study area have been home to an aggregate total of 231 courthouses, an average of more than four courthouses per county. All but five of the counties have had at least three courthouse buildings, and Cass County is an exceptional case, still using its 1859 courthouse, albeit with later additions. At the other end of the spectrum are Fannin, Galveston, and Liberty counties, each of which has called seven different buildings the seat of justice and county business.

In the rest of the state, 201 counties have gone through 603 courthouses, or an average of three courthouses per county. But west of the Brazos River there are many more examples of counties still using original or early courthouses, with fifteen counties still in their original building and another fifty-six counties utilizing only their second courthouse. Again, this can be explained as a function of the greater age of the counties in the eastern part of Texas.

Despite the greater number of newer courthouses, East Texas still has a higher proportion with historical designations than does the rest of the state. The Texas Historical Commission administers three levels of designations for eligible historic properties: Recorded Texas Historic Landmark (RTHL); State Archeological Landmark (SAL); and the National Register of Historic Places (NR or NRHP).<sup>13</sup> In the study area, forty-five county courthouses are greater than fifty years of age, and thirty-two of them, or 73 percent of those eligible, carry one or more historical designations. Twenty-four are listed in the NR (53 percent), twenty-six are RTHLs (58 percent), and seventeen are SALs (38 percent). By comparison, there are 201 eligible courthouses in the remaining 201 counties of Texas, with 121 of these, or 60 percent, carrying at least one historical designation. Ninety-six are listed in the NR (48 percent), ninety-seven are RTHLs (48 percent), and seventy-seven are SALs (38 percent). East Texas counties have obviously been more active than their statewide counterparts in pursuing historical designations for their courthouses. This indicates long-term commitment to the conservation of cultural resources in East Texas and a widespread inculcation of preservation values in the region. The designations have also proven beneficial to counties as part of the evaluation criteria for restoration funding from the state.<sup>14</sup>

Although the counties in the study area have done a better job at securing historical designations for their courthouses than the state as a whole, the region is underrepresented in restoration efforts. As a result, East Texas has a higher concentration of endangered courthouses than other parts of Texas. Only eight

of the region's counties have received major restoration funding through the THCPP, out of forty-four counties statewide. Many more East Texas counties are eligible to participate in the program, with courthouses ranging from late-nineteenth-century buildings to ones from the Art Deco and Moderne periods of the 1930s and 1940s and the International style of the 1950s.

Without exception, the physical changes brought about by recent East Texas courthouse restoration projects have been dramatic, as the following six stories show. The changes are multi-layered, reaching from the footprint of the historic building to the encompassing grounds, to the square that developed around the site, and even beyond to residential areas and other county towns. The following restored courthouses reveal the scope of historical architecture in the region and provide an insight into the adaptability and resilience of the historic fabric that has served many of the counties for a century or more.

The two oldest East Texas courthouses to receive comprehensive restoration grants in early-round funding through the THCPP are those in Red River County and Grimes County. While markedly different in size, site, and ornamentation, both are good examples of Italianate design, a preeminent style in the Victorian era. Italianate architecture was characterized in general by broad, pronounced rooflines accented by dentils and brackets, by clean horizontal lines, and by gables. The styling also frequently incorporated projecting pavilions and other vertical, exterior details to break otherwise open expanses and to create shadows that added drama and stateliness. Overall, the accent was on the vertical, with high sight lines, tall windows and doors within arched openings, and, in the case of courthouses, tall central bell towers.

Examples of Italianate architecture, stylistically evocative of early Mediterranean villas, were found outside the East Texas region in the Shackelford County Courthouse in Albany and the Stephens County Courthouse in Breckenridge, both completed in 1883 and designed by Dallas architect J.E. Flanders. In East Texas, the courthouses in Red River County and Grimes County represented the waning years of the design's popularity, most likely echoing the standard architectural lag of popular designs as their influence moved west. By the 1890s, the style was giving way to sweeping changes in classicism that characterized what would come to be known as the High Victorian era.<sup>15</sup>

Completed in 1885 on the design work of William Wilson, the Red River County Courthouse in Clarksville reflects Italianate influences in an articulated cornice with pronounced dentils, the use of high circular windows to accent the third floor space, tall, vertical windows with rounded arches, and a central bell tower topped by a Mansard roof with clock faces on each side and a smaller, open cupola. The yellow limestone walls are smooth and relatively flat, devoid of exuberant detailing; the accent is on the vertical elements. Projecting wings flare at the ends toward unique corner columns and finials that give the impression the vertical lines pierce the roof.

The restoration design philosophy selected for the Red River County Courthouse centered on 1910, the year of a major addition to the original plan. To choose an earlier period of restoration would have necessitated removing a

sizable wing. In keeping with the 1910 period, interior restoration work included removal of non-historic sheathing and dropped ceilings. The most dramatic change came with the opening of the second-floor courtroom space and its complete realignment following the original design, which had been compromised over the years. Also dramatic were the reintroduction of colorful Victorian paint schemes that featured lavender, yellow, blue, and gray, among other colors, and the careful replication of a banner motif above the judge's bench bearing the biblical admonition to all, "Thou Shalt Not Bear False Witness."<sup>16</sup>

Exterior work included restoring the stonework, reintroducing metal roofline cresting, and installing a new roof and cupola for the bell tower. Where exterior stonework had failed or was otherwise in need of replacement, workers fashioned replica elements, including two chimneys, using limestone from the same quarry in nearby Honey Grove that had supplied the original material.

In the course of the restoration project there were also landscaping considerations to be addressed. Most significantly, a parking lot adjacent to the north side of the building was removed and replaced with sod, emphasizing a broader, pre-automobile footprint for the square. The building's original cupola, replaced due to severe deterioration, found a new ground-level home on the northeast side of the square, where it serves as a close-up reminder of Italianate detailing.<sup>17</sup>

In contrast to the broad, high style of the courthouse in Clarksville, the Grimes County Courthouse in Anderson appears diminutive, although it embodies the same Italianate design philosophy of verticality and clean styling. The structure's dramatic setting on a high point above the small town and the surrounding rural landscape adds to the vertical feel. Completed in 1893 on the site of an earlier courthouse and incorporating a salvaged vault, the three-story structure was designed by F.S. Glover & Company. Original detailing includes tall, arched windows and a deep red brick core with contrasting details of rusticated limestone corner quoins, arches and pilasters, and white cast stone window-hood moulds.<sup>18</sup>

Primary entrances to the courthouse are on the north and south sides, and both, because of the small size of the square, are close to the road that encircles the building. On the north side, steps lead from the road up to the elevated square, and another set of steps continue upward through a stone arch that anchors the central entry section. The central section, topped by a gable, is dropped in relation to flanking twin towers with hipped roofs and chimneys. The tripartite design, a classical arrangement accented by the road that rises to the façade, provides visual movement upward toward a central, hipped cupola with tripartite windows that provides a historical reference to roof lanterns of earlier styles.

The south side of the courthouse faces the historic commercial section of Anderson, thereby providing a sense of the more common entrance. It is also less complicated architecturally. It nevertheless provides its own drama, primarily through a flared set of frame stairs—a later addition to the courthouse—that lead to the second floor. Flanking stone pilasters guide the eyes upward to a central gable and then on toward the rooftop cupola, retaining the

overall sense of vertical massing. The east and west sides are accented by linking window arches with a projecting keystone at the apex of each. The white stairs, in stark contrast to the red brick body, evoke porches and verandahs common in the Old South. The Grimes County Courthouse, in fact, would not seem out of place in the Virginia Piedmont, the Cumberland region of Tennessee, or the Carolina low country.

Much of the THCPP-funded restoration work focused on accessibility and code compliance, repointing and cleaning exterior masonry (some of which had been painted), rewiring, replacing structural elements and the heating/air conditioning system, and other necessary updates. While exterior masonry restoration and repainted woodwork brought back the original crisp lines of the Italianate design, the most significant changes came on the interior, where alterations had obscured early detailing. In the vault area, architectural investigations led to the discovery of a long-forgotten but significant design feature – an elaborate decorative floor pattern. Underneath a safe that remained *in situ* for decades were remnants of the intricate design, which utilized brightly colored quarry tiles in diamond and square patterns. The design had once graced larger expanses of the courthouse but was removed and replaced with more utilitarian coverings over the years. Only relatively small sections remained, hidden from view, but architects were able to recreate the overall effect by replicating patterns from the tile bed in other areas.<sup>19</sup>

Other restored elements on the interior included pressed metal ceilings, plaster walls and detailing, and historic hardware. Work in the courtroom centered on refurbishing the decorative woodwork and replicating furnishings, some of which still existed. Outside, workers reconditioned concrete retaining walls that serve as a visual border for the limited landscaping space on the small square.

The next THCPP-funded courthouse in the stylistic chronology represents the Late Victorian era. The 1894 Hopkins County Courthouse in Sulphur Springs is a good example of the Richardsonian Romanesque (Romanesque Revival) style, named for Henry Hobson Richardson, a native of Louisiana trained at Harvard and at the prestigious *École des Beaux Arts* in Paris. Richardson's eclectic design elements, evocative of medieval European churches, represented the first truly American version of Victorian design. Romanesque detailing reflected strength, permanence, power, and security, important architectural statements for courthouses and other public buildings.<sup>20</sup>

Richardson's design quickly gained a popular national following and continued as a dominant style even after his death in 1886. Its range included Texas, where its arrival coincided with, and came to express in some regards, the so-called "Golden Age" of courthouse construction.<sup>21</sup> In 1881, the Texas Legislature enabled counties to issue bonds for the financing of buildings, ushering in an era of new construction, principally for courthouses and jails. Such noted architects as Galveston's Nicholas Clayton, Waco's W.C. Dodson, and San Antonio's J. Riely Gordon embraced the style and, in the process, developed a long list of admirers, apprentices, and clients. While all three were successful in their endeavors, it was the prolific Gordon who became most close-

ly associated with the style through his distinctive courthouse plans.<sup>22</sup>

Gordon apprenticed with W.C. Dodson and later the Supervising Architect of the U.S. Treasury in Washington, D.C., but he returned to his former home of San Antonio to oversee construction of a federal courthouse and post office. He stayed to develop one of the most successful Texas architectural practices of the era. Gordon not only understood the intricacies of Richardson's design elements but stretched them to provide even more expression and exuberance. He perfected basic forms and adapted them to individual client needs and to the local availability of materials. As architectural historian Jay C. Henry noted, "Among Gordon's dozen surviving Texas courthouses, a single design parti was employed seven times: at Decatur, Sulphur Springs, Waxahachie, New Braunfels, Giddings, Gonzales, and Marshall."<sup>23</sup>

Gordon's unique adaptation of the Richardsonian basics included using corner entryways that directed visitors diagonally across squares and into central, open stair shafts that led upward through hallways on the various floors. Topping the core and the courthouse was a dominant tower structure with clock faces. Gordon's new approach was a departure from the conventional cross-axial designs of earlier courthouses, and it reflected his architectural interpretation of equal access to the law. In his design, no dominant façade provided favoritism, commercial or otherwise.<sup>24</sup>

Gordon's design of equality had to be adapted to the unique setting in Sulphur Springs, where the courthouse was slated for a corner lot. As a result, his plan lacked "the normal quadrilateral symmetry of entrances, substituting a modified plan with entries on the northwest and southwest." The building demonstrated Gordon's penchant for polychromatic masonry. As noted in the National Register of Historic Places file on the building:

Walls were ashlar masonry in pink granite. Walls and steps were of polished blue granite. Completing the vivid polychromatic treatment, voussoirs, lintels and strip courses were of red sandstone. A band (billet) of stones of contrasting hue, set in a checkerboard pattern forms a border at the roof line.<sup>25</sup>

Restoration work on the Hopkins County Courthouse included extensive rehabilitation of masonry features, primarily the Pecos red sandstone which, depending on how the bedding planes were utilized, could be subject to water deterioration and infiltration. Other exterior work included the removal of non-historic elements, the opening of enclosed balconies, the reconstruction of chimneys to full height, and the replication of sandstone columns using material from historic quarries. Also replaced were historic entrance doors, encaustic tiles in the entryway porches, and a copper roof on the cupola. Wood windows were restored throughout.

Interior work on the courthouse, as with most of the THCPP projects, proved dramatic. The restoration philosophy called for a vault area dating from the 1920s and 1930s to be returned to its original use as the commissioners' courtroom, complete with wainscoting of longleaf and curly pine, chair rails, and other decorative woodwork. Work in the district courtroom required the removal of dropped ceilings and the opening and restoration of

the balcony. Throughout the project, supervising architects were able to utilize not only the historical evidence normally extant in such work, but also similar features in other Gordon-designed courthouses, including those in Gonzales, Wise, and Ellis counties.<sup>26</sup>

At the turn of the twentieth century, the dominant styles in public architecture, such as Romanesque Revival, waned in favor of the Beaux Arts style. Inspired by the buildings of the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, American architects sought training at the *École des Beaux Arts* in Paris in increasing numbers. The *École des Beaux Arts* emphasized continued incorporation of classical architectural elements and proportions from Greek and Roman idioms, manifested in the movements of Neoclassicism and Beaux Arts design. Columns, pediments, balustrades, and domes were featured prominently on building exteriors, while grand rotundas and wide hallways gave interiors a monumental feel.<sup>27</sup>

The venerable J. Riely Gordon, master of Romanesque Revival in the 1890s, became one of the leading proponents of Beaux Arts architecture in the 1900s with a quick shift of stylistic gears at the turn of the new century. In 1899, Gordon's design for the Lee County Courthouse was a marvel of the Romanesque Revival style for which he had become most famous. But beginning the following year, he designed three courthouses at Marshall, Waco, and Lufkin that displayed his prowess in Beaux Arts design.<sup>28</sup>

The Harrison County Courthouse (1900) features Gordon's familiar semicircular wings placed between the right angles of a cross-corridor plan. The Beaux Arts Classicism manifests itself in stone pediments, balustrades, window hoods, decorative sculptures, and a dominant dome and clock tower. While Gordon was the architect of record, Marshall native C.G. Lancaster was the supervising architect both for the original design and for a 1920s expansion. At that time, both the east and west wings were detached from the main body of the courthouse, and an extra twenty-two feet of office space was added to each wing.<sup>29</sup>

Harrison County built a new courthouse on the west side of the square in the 1960s and gradually moved most of the county offices and courts, with the historic courthouse becoming primarily a historical museum. County officials funded periodic repairs, but through the years various alterations and deferred maintenance compromised the original design and endangered the building. Harrison County successfully completed a master plan for restoration through the THCPP, but was not among those selected in the initial round. In 2000, voters narrowly defeated a bond election to utilize local funds for restoration. Finally, the Harrison County Courthouse received a \$2.5 million construction grant for restoration in the fourth round of the THCPP. Among the considerations that aided the county in securing the funding was a commitment to once again use the courthouse as the primary seat of county government. With assistance from the Harrison County Historical Commission, the county was also able to demonstrate a national level of historical significance based on the civil rights demonstrations of the 1960s that centered on the courthouse

square. Restoration is still in progress on this notable historic courthouse.

In the second decade of the twentieth century, Classical Revival architecture became the style of choice for public buildings nationwide. As a reflection of the City Beautiful movement emphasizing formal public spaces, and reinforced by such spectacles as the World's Fair at St. Louis in 1904 and the Pan-American Exposition at San Francisco in 1915, Classical Revival architecture once more highlighted the elements and proportions of Greek and Roman architecture in the ancient world. Materials and details varied within the style, but symmetrical façades and formal columns, pediments, entryways, and hallways were among the common characteristics.

The 1909 Rains County Courthouse is a two-story Classical Revival building in the town of Emory. The building has a cruciform plan, with two-story projecting wings at each corner that form an unusual footprint. Pilasters, pediments, a metal dome, and a symmetrical arrangement are among the classically inspired elements in this courthouse. Interior materials include floors of concrete and wood, plaster walls on brick, pressed tin ceilings, and oak staircases. The Rains County Courthouse also has a unique first-floor interior plan, with hallways forming a T rather than the more familiar cross-hallway X. The architects closed off the north hallway to incorporate the clerk's vault from the 1884 courthouse, the only thing that survived a fire that leveled that building. As a result, there is no entry into the courthouse on the north side. Thus, the north side of the courthouse square never developed commercially, and historic buildings now stand on only three sides. A prominent golden dome was not in the original design but was added at the urging of the citizenry. In 1952, a two-story jail and office space was added to the north side of the courthouse, further decreasing the desirability of commercial development there.<sup>30</sup>

The Rains County Courthouse is also noteworthy for its relatively inexpensive building cost—\$18,700—which in 1909 was less than half the cost of comparably sized courthouses in the state. The exterior of the Rains County Courthouse is clad in Ginger brick, so named for the light brown color and for the brick manufacturing plant founded by Walter B. Fraser in 1905 in the town of Ginger, three miles east of Emory. The Fraser Brick Company also provided exterior brick for the Oklahoma City Post Office (1908), the Rice Hotel in Houston (1912), and many other buildings in Texas and adjoining states.<sup>31</sup>

Rains County received initial funding through the THCPP of \$229,385 for a planning grant, and later an additional \$203,615 to construct a ramp for disabled access, a back fire stair to provide emergency access from the second floor, and a smoke detection system. In 2004, Rains County received additional funding of \$1.6 million for full restoration, including removal of the incompatible 1952 wing. The removal of non-historic partitions and dropped ceilings from the courtroom will not only eliminate hazardous flammable materials, but will also expose the potential for a future full restoration of the interior. The hand-stenciled records vault that remains from the 1884 courthouse will also be stabilized to prevent further corrosion of the steel floor, ceiling, and shutters.

The 1916 Lamar County Courthouse tells a story of survival and rebirth. The town of Paris, named the seat of Lamar County in 1844, has suffered two devastating fires in its history. The first, in 1877, destroyed the 1846 courthouse that had been abandoned a few years before in favor of a new building on a new courthouse square. In 1889, County Judge Charles Neathery championed the construction of a fireproof annex with a new vault for the county clerk's records. The building had double-thick brick walls and steel shelving and furniture; County Clerk Sam Hancock boasted that the building contained no piece of wood big enough to light. A modest property tax was levied to pay for the building. Some residents insisted that the cost was unnecessary, and the following year Judge Neathery and three of the county commissioners were voted out of office.<sup>33</sup>

Early in 1894, the twenty-year-old brick courthouse showed signs of instability, and Lamar County issued \$90,000 in bonds to pay for a new courthouse. The county hired the Fort Worth firm of Messer, Sanguinet, and Messer to design an opulent Romanesque Revival building, with huge stones of pink granite taken from the same quarry used for the Texas State Capitol a decade before. The castle-like courthouse featured octagonal turrets, corner entrances, small balconies, dormers, a slate roof, and a soaring central masonry tower that could be seen for miles. The monumental structure took more than three years to build, finally opening in November 1897. Also noteworthy in the development of the courthouse square was Pompeo Coppini's 1903 Confederate monument, the first Texas commission of this noted sculptor's career.<sup>33</sup>

The foresight of Judge Neathery and the county commissioners in 1889 was borne out one awful day in March, 1916. A fire that began at a warehouse a few blocks southwest of the courthouse square was spread by gusting winds. The blaze jumped from one side of the street to the other, destroying entire residential neighborhoods and commercial blocks. The conflagration gutted the courthouse and destroyed the newspaper office, along with decades of records and archives. Only the county records, kept in the slightly scorched 1889 clerk's annex, survived the fire that raged all night. In all, more than 1,400 buildings were destroyed in a mile-wide swath.

The county hired Paris architects William G. Barry, Edwin R. Smith, and Elmer G. Withers, along with the Fort Worth firm of Sanguinet and Staats, to draw up plans for a new courthouse. Following a statewide tour of county courthouses and jails, Judge Tom Beauchamp and the county commissioners worked with the architects to design a new four-story building faced with granite salvaged from the burned courthouse. The new courthouse became the cornerstone of a massive rebuilding effort for Paris, whose commercial district was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1988.

The basic form of the courthouse is Classical Revival, with symmetrical facades, columns, balustrades, and monumental entries. Some of the details, particularly the stone arches and columns at the entries, recall the Romanesque Revival architecture of the previous building. The pink granite blocks were numbered and dismantled, and then reused on the entries of the



new courthouse. The 1889 clerk's office was incorporated into the building footprint as a courthouse annex.

The 1916 Lamar County Courthouse was long subjected to a number of alterations that obscured original design elements. These features will be returned to their initial character in an ongoing restoration project. Lamar County received a \$464,500 planning grant in an early round of the THCPP, and then a \$3.5 million grant for full restoration. The project will include removing non-historic partitions and dropped ceilings throughout the building, opening the courtroom to its original two-story configuration, and restoring the courtroom balcony and the plaster and stencil work throughout the corridors, stairwells, and courtroom. Construction began in the fall of 2003 and is expected to take approximately two years to complete.

The six courthouses described in detail as part of this article, as well as those in counties like Jasper and Shelby counties that were restored prior to the THCPP program and those that remain in hopes of further state assistance, represent some of the best of early East Texas architecture. Collectively, they speak of change over time, of symbolism that reflected progress, and of cultural aspirations. While they are functioning vestiges of our government, they are far more than bricks and mortar. They are, in effect, detailed historical records of past societies bequeathed to future generations. As public buildings, they were designed as expressions of hope to be held in trust for the common good. Those who designed and built the courthouses believed that they were leaving something permanent, and they depended on residents of the counties to honor that commitment.

In 2005, the task of preserving historic Texas courthouses continues on several fronts. The Texas Legislature will debate whether or not to continue the state-funded grant assistance program through the Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program. The Texas Historical Commission will provide technical assistance to both funded and non-funded projects and will also monitor planned alterations to courthouses across the state. And county officials and county historical commissions will continue to work together to maintain, preserve, and protect their grand temples of justice as viable, functioning centers of government and community.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Willard Robinson, *The People's Architecture: Texas Courthouses, Jails and Municipal Buildings* (Austin, 1983), pp. 4-5.

<sup>2</sup>Stanley O. Graves, "Justice Under the Dome: The Symbolism of Our County Courthouses," *Heritage* (Summer 1998), p. 9.

<sup>3</sup>Graves, "Justice Under the Dome." p. 9.

<sup>4</sup>Vincent P. Hauscr, "Learning from Hillsboro," *Cite* (Winter 1996), p. 37.

<sup>5</sup>"Rising from the Ashes," *Texas Architect* (March/April 1993), p. 14.

<sup>6</sup>"Texas Courthouse Alliance Project," Texas Historical Commission, final report to the Texas Department of Transportation, 1999. Copy in courthouse files of the Texas Historical

Commission. Of the eight East Texas county courthouses documented for the TCA program, seven later submitted master preservation plans for grant consideration under the Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program (THCPP). Shelby County provided its own funding sources for the courthouse restoration and did not become a part of the THCPP, although its restoration work was reviewed by the Texas Historical Commission.

<sup>7</sup>Graves, "Justice Under the Dome," p. 6.

<sup>8</sup>THCPP files for Newton County Courthouse, including field notes.

<sup>9</sup>THCPP files for Tyler County Courthouse, including field notes.

<sup>10</sup>Bob Brinkman, "They Left a Legacy: Architects and Builders of Landmark Courthouses," paper delivered to the West Texas Historical Association, Abilene, Texas, April 2, 2004; Texas Historical Commission courthouse database.

<sup>11</sup>"Rains County Courthouse." National Register of Historic Places nomination, on file at THC.

<sup>12</sup>Compiled by the authors from the Texas Historical Commission courthouse database.

<sup>13</sup>To be eligible for historic designation, a property must be at least fifty years of age, be architecturally significant, and retain sufficient historic and architectural integrity. The National Park Service officially lists properties in the National Register of Historic Places, but delegates authority for the preparation and recommended approval of nominations in Texas to the THC and its State Board of Review.

<sup>14</sup>Statistics are accurate as of January 2005, compiled by the authors and the staff of the Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program of the Texas Historical Commission.

<sup>15</sup>Willard Robinson, *Texas Public Buildings of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (Austin, 1974), pp. 197-199.

<sup>16</sup>THCPP files; conversation with Stanley O. Graves, AIA.

<sup>17</sup>Jay C. Henry, *Architecture in Texas, 1895-1945* (Austin, 1993), p. 13.

<sup>18</sup>Graves, "Justice Under the Dome," p. 7.

<sup>19</sup>Graves, "Justice Under the Dome," p. 7.

<sup>20</sup>Henry, *Architecture in Texas*, p. 14.

<sup>21</sup>Henry, *Architecture in Texas*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>22</sup>Henry, *Architecture in Texas*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>23</sup>Henry, *Architecture in Texas*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>24</sup>"Hopkins County Courthouse," National Register of Historic Places nomination, on file at THC.

<sup>25</sup>"Hopkins County Courthouse," National Register nomination.

<sup>26</sup>THCPP files, completion reports, on file at Texas Historical Commission.

<sup>27</sup>"County Courthouses." Ron Tyler, ed., *The New Handbook of Texas* (Austin, 1996). Thirty-year old J. Riely Gordon was doubtless aware of the fashionable architecture of the Columbian Exposition, since his design for the Texas Pavilion was accepted and built there.

<sup>28</sup>Gordon's final three designs in Texas before he moved to New York were for Harrison (1900), McLennan (1901), and Angelina (1903) counties. The first two remain, but the Angelina County Courthouse was razed in the 1950s.

<sup>29</sup>Harrison County commissioners court minutes, Volume H, pp. 251-252, 429-431, 462; *Marshall Messenger*, December 3, 1947.

<sup>30</sup>"Rains County Courthouse," National Register of Historic Places nomination, on file at THC.

<sup>31</sup>"Rains County Courthouse." National Register nomination.

<sup>2</sup>A.W. Neville, "Backward Glances," *Paris News*, September 25, 1929; August 4, 1931.

<sup>3</sup>Carol Morris Little, *A Comprehensive Guide to Outdoor Sculpture in Texas* (Austin, 1996), p. 352.

## APPENDIX

## Historic Courthouses of East Texas

County	City	Year Built	Architectural Style	Architects	NR	RTHL	SAL
Anderson	Palesine	1914	Classical Revival	C. H. Page and Brothers	X	X	
Angelina	Lufkin	1955	Institutional	Wilbur Kent			
Bowie	New Boston	1885	Institutional	Thomas and Emberton Associates			
Brazoria	Angleton	1897	Romantic Revival	Eugene Heiner		X	X
Brazoria	Angleton	1940	Moderne	Wynn Hedrick			
Camp	Pittsburg	1928	Classical Revival	Smith and Praeger		X	
Cass	Linden	1899	Classical Revival	Charles Ames	X	X	X
Chambers	Anahac	1936	Moderne	Cornell Curtis			
Cherokee	Rusk	1941	Moderne	Gill and Bestett, Inc.			
Delta	Cooper	1940	Moderne	Hook Smith			
Fannin	Borham	1889	Second Empire	Dodson and Dudley		X	
Fort Bend	Richmond	1908	Beaux Arts	C. H. Page and Brothers	X	X	X
Franklin	Mount Vernon	1912	Classical Revival	L. L. Thurman			
Freestone	Fairfield	1914	Classical Revival	W. R. Kaufman			
Galveston	Gulveston	1966	Institutional	Raymond Rapp, Koten & Assoc.			
Gregg	Longview	1932	Art Deco	Voelcker and Dixon			
Grimes	Anderson	1893	Italianate	F. S. Glover	X	X	X
Hardin	Kountze	1959	International	Dickson, Dickson & Associates			
Harris	Houston	1910	Beaux Arts	Larg, Wittzell & Barglebaugh	X		X
Harrison	Marshall	1900	Beaux Arts	J. Rely, Gordon	X	X	X
Henderson	Athens	1913	Neoclassical	L. L. Thurman		X	
Hopkins	Sulphur Springs	1894	Romantic Revival	J. Rely, Gordon	X	X	X
Houston	Crockett	1939	Moderne	Blum Heiser		X	
Hunt	Greenville	1924	Moderne	C. H. Page and Brother	X	X	
Jasper	Jasper	1889	Italianate	Eugene Heiner			X
Jefferson	Beaumont	1932	Art Deco	Fred Stone & A. Rabin	X		X
Lamar	Paris	1917	Classical Revival	Dary & Smith, Sargant & Staats	X	X	X
Leon	Centerville	1886	Italianate	William Johnson	X	X	X
Liberty	Liberty	1931	Moderne	Cornell Curtis, A. E. Thomas	X		
Madison	Madisonville	1970	Moderne	Dickson, Dickson, Buckley & Bullock			
Marion	Jefferson	1912	Classical Revival	E. G. Withers	X	X	X
Montgomery	Conroe	1936	Moderne / Institutional	Joseph Finger			
Morris	Dringertfield	1973	Moderne	Pierce, Pace & Associates			
Nacogdoches	Nacogdoches	1958	Moderne	J. N. McCarron			
Newton	Newton	1902	Second Empire	Martin and Moodie	X	X	X
Orange	Orange	1937	Moderne	C. H. Page			
Panola	Carthage	1951	International	Preston Geren			
Park	Livingston	1923	Classical Revival	McCliland and Fink	X	X	X
Rains	Emory	1908	Classical Revival	Bryan Architectural Company	X	X	
Red River	Clarksville	1884	Italianate	William Wilson	X	X	X
Rusk	Henderson	1928	Moderne	Curtis and Thomas	X		
Sabine	Hemp Hill	1906	Classical Revival	A. N. Dawson			
San Augustine	San Augustine	1927	Moderne	Shirley Simons	X	X	
San Jacinto	Coldspring	1917	Classical Revival	Row Lane and Wilkes Dewdy	X	X	
Shelby	Center	1885	Romantic Revival	J. J. Gibson	X	X	X
Smith	Tyler	1955	International	Thomas Jameson & Merrill			
Titus	Mount Pleasant			Unknown			
Trinity	Groesvenor	1914	Classical Revival	C. H. Page and Brother	X	X	
Tyler	Woodville	1891	Italianate	T. S. Hoopes		X	
Upshur	Gilmer	1933	Moderne	E. G. Withers			
Van Zandt	Carleton	1957	Moderne	Voelcker and Dixon		X	
Walker	Huntsville	1970	Institutional	James, Coburn and King			
Waller	Hempstead	1955	International	Herbert Voelcker			
Wood	Outman	1925	Classical Revival	C. H. Leinbach		X	

NR = National Register of Historic Places  
 RTHL = Recorded Texas Historic Landmark  
 SAL = State Archeological Landmark

**Editors' note:** The 1882 Morris County Courthouse, which is still standing, was not included in the table because it is not currently county owned and therefore not eligible for the THCPP. In Brazoria County, both the 1897 and 1940 courthouses are extant and owned by the county, so both were included for statistical purposes.