

# THE COURTHOUSE OF WILLIAMSON COUNTY, Georgetown, Texas

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The Williamson County, Texas, Courthouse located on the Public Square in Georgetown, was completed in 1911, the fifth of the county's official court houses since its founding in 1848.

The present Neoclassical Revival structure was designed by Charles H. Page, an architect of Austin, whose firm had inspected the previous structure, finding defects which the firm recommended not to be repaired. After receiving this negative report, County Judge J. E. Lawhon and the Commissioners Court met on Sept. 9, 1909, and voted to order an election for December 14 to approve \$100,000 in bonds for construction of the proposed new structure. The bond issue carried and the Charles H. Page Brothers company was selected to furnish detailed plans, specifications, and to oversee construction of the Courthouse. Thirteen bids were submitted by contractors, and William C. Whitney of Beaumont, age 35, was selected.<sup>2</sup> On May 3, 1910, demolition on the 1877 Courthouse began, and the new cornerstone was laid on October 6, 1910. In about a year construction appeared nearly complete, but "the job was not without its problems." Whitney was under grand jury investigation in Beaumont for contractual irregularities there, and three different construction superintendents had to be appointed as overseers of the Georgetown project within a period of six months.

Dedication of the new Courthouse was held November 7, 1911, and, although many were loud in their praise of the handsome building, the Commissioners Court refused to accept the job from Whitney until a long list of corrections were made. They finally settled with him on March 12, 1912. Four interesting details of the extended controversy are described in "Williamson County Courthouse Preservation Plan" by David L. Voelter, architect, and the architectural firm of Walker, Doty & Freeman.

The Courthouse consists of the basement, three full stories centered by a rotunda, and a large dome above. Exterior walls are faced with Elgin Butler brick No. 425, buff in color, and trim includes limestone and terra cotta. Four galleries supported by Ionic columns form the entryways facing each of four directions. Originally the gallery roofs held large pediments ornamented by terra cotta figures of angels and other patterns. Extending from the galleries were balustrades which encircled the entire rooftop. (In 1965, the Commissioners Court ordered the pediments and balustrade removed after some of the balusters railing post became loosened, and the decorative trim was replaced by a plain

brick facing matching the other exterior brick.) The copper dome was circled by decorative Fins, and four chimed clocks are set into each of the four sides on the dome. A figure of Justice holding traditional scales in her hand tops the dome. Indoors, terrazzo floors in the rotundas, oak floors and trim in offices and courtrooms, and marble wainscoting were used. Handsome cast iron spiral staircases, one of them later replaced by an elevator, were installed. Total cost of the Neoclassical Courthouse in 1912 was approximately \$120,000. Besides serving as a visual centerpiece of downtown Georgetown, the Courthouse has been the setting for innumerable events encompassing both the regular business of county government and numerous other public affairs. Two significant events gained statewide and national attention on the Courthouse and its activities. Leading to one of them was a vote by the Texas Legislature in 1918 to give women the right to vote, but that body allowed women only about two weeks in which to register. A Georgetown resident, Jessie Daniel Ames, had lobbied in the Legislature for women's suffrage and was incensed at what she considered their deliberate attempt to limit women's voting in the coming primary. Traveling throughout the county, she campaigned vigorously for them to register. At election time on a hot July day, 3800 women from throughout the county appeared at the Courthouse "by wagon, by hack, by foot. The county has been cleaned up from the Legislators to the Janitor in the Court House. There's never been anything like it again," Ames wrote. The turnout of women was an astounding percentage of the county's population of that day. It was also a great triumph personally for Ames and helped propel her career toward considerable successful work for minority rights throughout Texas and the nation. She is perhaps best recognized for her long campaign against lynching.

Five years after the large contingent of women voted for the first time at the Williamson County Courthouse, another series of events there reverberated throughout the country. A gifted young attorney, Dan Moody of Taylor, who had served Williamson County as County Attorney from 1920 to 1922 and as District Attorney from 1922 to 1924, proved his skills as a prosecutor in widely publicized Ku Klux Klan trials held in the Courthouse in 1923 and early 1924. His winning of these cases focused national attention on this 30-year old figure and is credited with helping break up the powerful Klan's grip on much of the South. Moody was subsequently elected Governor of Texas for two terms.

The County of Williamson was organized early in 1848 and by August had elected its first county officials. The Chief Justice (later known as County Judge) and Police Court (now Commissioners Court) ordered a log house built directly east of the "Public Common" (at 700-709 1/2 "main Street"). This 16-foot square log room was completed late in 1848 or early 1849. Until then, meetings of county officials were held outdoors under a live oak tree at the corner of present Church and Ninth streets (previously called Red and Mule locust) streets. The Court purchased a small frame residence at 113 East Eighth Street in 1850, and moved its primary operations there, around the corner from the log Courthouse. The frame residence served as the second Courthouse until 1857.

By 1850 the Police Court was also planning a stone two story Courthouse to be erected on the Public Common, in the heart of the business district. The

Commissioners were beset by construction problems during the entire seven years it took to finish the limestone building, and continued having them for the next twenty years. In spite of its obviously faulty construction, the 1857 Courthouse was the first known stone structure in town and represented stability in its own way to the community.

A fourth Courthouse was ordered by the Commissioners Court in 1877, for which Preston and Ruffini, well-known architects, drawing the plans in the Italianated style of that Victorian age. The new Courthouse headed a long list of Victorian period commercial and public buildings and residences built in "Georgetown between 1877 and 1900, many of them still standing and in use, and many of them appearing on rosters of the National Register and Texas Historic Landmarks. The Italianate Courthouse had brick exterior walls and considerable ornamentation. It served until its demolition May 3, 1910, to make room for the fifth and present Court-house. The present Courthouse and the commercial and public buildings surrounding and near it, comprise the Williamson County Courthouse National Register Historic District.

The Courthouse site is land patented by the Republic of Texas August 19, 1844, to Clement Stubblefield, who sold this and the remainder of his 1/5 league to George Washington Glasscock on February 20, 1846, for \$500. Glasscock was a partner in this real estate with Thomas B. Huling, and agreed to survey the land.

When Williamson County was formed in 1848, they offered a part of their land for the location of a county seat, amounting to about 172 acres. The offer was accepted in May 1848 and the town was named Georgetown for Glasscock, who made the offer and stipulated that the county "site" be named for him. The Public Common (now called the Square) was reserved by the County near the southeast corner of the tract, and this Common since 1857 has housed the Courthouse. The block was bordered on the west by Brushy Street (now Austin Avenue), on the north by San Gabriel Street (now West 7th), on the east by Main Street., and on the south by Oak (now West 8th) Street. By July 4, 1848, the remainder of the 172 acres were surveyed and marked off into city blocks and streets, and were offered in a public sale. Proceeds were used in setting up the new county government.

Beginning in 1982 through the Main Street program and through other projects sponsored by the Georgetown Heritage Society and City of Georgetown, the area surrounding the Courthouse was extensively and carefully rehabilitated. The copper dome, which had been painted for some years, was restored in 1985 along with its accessories, including the clocks, figure of Justice and decorative fin trim. A Texas Sesquicentennial project provided the same area now brick sidewalks, landscaping and appropriate lighting. Pocket parks were placed at the corners opposite the Square, all this enhancing the downtown section materially. A long term goal of local preservationists is to see the pediments and balustrade restored on the exterior of the Courthouse, and improvements in the sidewalks and landscaping on the Courthouse

lawn similar to that surrounding it.

"Courthouses of Williamson County" leaflet with text by Clara Scarbrough, illustrations by J. U. Salvant and Robert L. Lancaster, circa 1980.

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