

History of Court Houses in Berrien County

By Skeeter Parker

Only two buildings have actually been called the "court house" in the history of Berrien County, while a new county administration building is in the planning stages as we celebrate Berrien County's 150th birthday here in 2006. Even so, the first term of Superior Court in November 1856 was held in a log school house according to an article in the Centennial edition of *The Nashville Herald* in 1956.

The school house was on the farm of Mrs. Amy Kirby who lived on the Coffee Road, just one mile northeast of the present courthouse. "This was the most convenient and accessible building that could be obtained at the time, and being near the newly laid out town of Nashville where visitors to the court and its attaches might find accommodations among citizens who had already begun business in 'town'" said the article.

"This arrangement was considered adequate and until the fall of 1857 the terms of Superior Court were held at the log school house, when the Inferior Court passed an order that 'Future sessions of the Inferior and Superior Courts be held at Nashville instead of the school house at Mrs. Kirby's'" said the 1956 article.

First Courthouse Ready for Occupancy

Bids for the first court house were advertised on orders of the January 1857 term of Inferior Court. A court house committee of James Griffin, Sr., R.A. Peeples, and E.C. Morgan, along with a building committee consisting of William Lastinger, Mitchel S. Griffin, W.D. Griffin, Henry T. Peeples, and John Lindsey were formed.

Plans specifically called for a two-story building, and the bid was awarded to Woodford J. Mabry for \$2,600. Joe Newbern was chief carpenter. In a report by the committee it was stated, "The dimensions of the building were fifty by sixty feet and twenty feet high.

On March 22, 1858 the building committee reported the court house ready for occupancy. According to notes in the Berrien County Centennial book, the committee's reaction was "The workmanship in the construction of the building exceeds our most sanguine expectations." The only drawback to the new building was that seating arrangements for spectators had not yet been made resulting in "confusion arising from the tendency of spectators to crowd around the Bar during the sessions of court." This was soon remedied by the Grand Jury.

This building served the county well, but after 40 years of use the court room grew too small for the growing county. Thus, the only court house that any of us alive today have ever known was then constructed.

When the present courthouse was constructed in 1898, the first structure was moved, still in good repair, to the east side of the square, having been purchased by Dr. W.B. Goodman for \$200. In its new location it was used for almost thirty years as the Hansell hotel. An article in the Centennial edition of *The Nashville Herald* said the building was torn down in 1925.

1898 – Present Court House Constructed

Erected in 1898 at a cost of \$17,000 after extras were put in the building, the Berrien County court house was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1977. The court house was designed in the Romanesque Revival/Colonial Revival style with designs drawn by W. Chamberlain of Knoxville, TN. It was built by Hugger & Winston with an original bid of \$15,918.

An article in *The South Georgian*, Vol. 1, Number 1, Thursday, August 3, 1899 shared the following about our court house:

“There are 535,000 brick, 85,000 of which came from Macon, the others were made here, 600 barrels of lime, 400 barrels of hydraulic cement and a small mountain of sand. The tower rests on three steel beams weighing more than 6,000 pounds each, every beam is of iron, no wood supports at all. All the ceiling is of steel and every door either solid steel or covered with it. The doors and window frames are also covered with steel. The floor of the upper story is of wood but it is laid upon ten inches of cement, making it impossible to affect the lower story or the roof if this floor with all the furniture should burn. The entire floor of the first story is of solid cement and roof of building covered with slate.

“The clock in the tower is a superb piece of machinery costing \$367.50 and its weights over 600 lbs. each. The bell of the clock weighs 500 lbs. and can be heard for many miles as it strikes the hour. The building was erected by the county without having to issue bonds or borrow money and the treasury isn’t broke yet.”

1938 – Annex on Southwest Corner

An addition was completed to the front part (southwest corner) of the building in 1938, as again after 40 years Berrien County was outgrowing its facilities. According to articles in *The Nashville Herald* from that year, the annex was built to house offices for the sheriff and school superintendent on the first floor and for the Grand Jury on the second floor. As these were still days of segregation, the basement housed a new set of restrooms for white men.

Work began on March 25, 1938 with a Mr. Bailey as the contractor. The construction was done through the WPA and was completed sometime in June, as a June 2 article said the building had “taken on finishing appearances” and that interior construction was beginning. M.E. Perry was the chairman of the Berrien County Commissioners when the plan was approved.

Occupants of the Venerable Building

The first floor of the addition is the area occupied by the sheriff’s office until they moved out following the 1981 renovation. More recently the Probate Court expanded their space and used the addition until they moved to Jefferson Street.

At one time every county office was located in the court house. This included Clerk of Court, Probate Court, Sheriff, County Commissioners, Tax Commissioner, and School Superintendent. I am sure I am leaving someone out. Eventually, most of the offices found other locations until at this writing only the Clerk of Court holds an office used daily in the building. The School Superintendent’s office was probably the first to move out and for many years was in a building where the entrance to the drive through windows of the United Bank now is.

Either with the 1981 renovation or soon after the County Commissioners and Tax Commissioner moved into the building on the south side of the square that currently house's Vivian's. This same building previously was the site of Allied Department Store and before that, A. Levin's Department Store.

The sheriff still maintains a small office at the court house, but during the renovation the department moved into the building on Jefferson Street formerly occupied by the Top Dollar Store and currently by the Chinese restaurant. Eventually the sheriff's quarters were moved to Jefferson Street in the old health department building which is now occupied by the Probate Court. They then moved to the new law enforcement facility at the county farm.

Previous Attempts to Replace/Add to the Court House

While my research is incomplete at this time, on at least three occasions, including back-to-back bond votes only about seven months apart in 1966-1967, the issue of replacing the court house or adding on to it was brought up. The third time was in 1976.

In the November 1966 general election voters of Berrien County voted NO to bonds to build a new court house and to build a new county library. On May 30, 1967 voters again voted NO to a new library and to a renovated court house with new construction on the front. An architect's drawing in the May 25, 1967 edition of *The Berrien Press* showed the proposed addition, which in this writer's opinion would have ruined the appearances of our stately lady on the square.

Drawings of another proposed addition, this time to the back side of the court house, were published in *The Berrien Press* on September 30, 1976. This addition seemed to follow more of the original architecture, but the proposal ended in a law suit and renovations would have to wait until 1981. According to a December 30, 1976 *Press* article on Judge H.W. Lott's ruling on the case, the county commission had previously planned to build a new court house but decided to renovate instead when federal funding for the new building fell through.

Memories of the Building and its Vicinity

In a 1975 article in *The Berrien Press* long-time Probate Judge Johnny Pat Webb relayed some memories of the court house. He recalled "great politicians who have trod these grounds and the great speeches they have made" and reminded readers not to forget the "great political rallies on our lawns" or the old band stand, Gospel preaching, "Ole" time fiddler conventions, singing conventions, and the like.

He went on to recall "huge street dances that used to be held adjacent to the courthouse for the entertainment and amusement of our citizens." Likewise, he mentioned tobacco harvest drawings from the days when that time of year brought tremendous crowds to the town square.

I'm sure that readers of the *Press* could share more memories of events in or around our court house, and we will compile them for a future article if our readers will send them to us.