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And Old Views

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And Old Views

One event that did much to sensitize the citizens of Huntsville to the need to protect their built environment was the demolition of the old courthouse in 1964 to make way for the present building, the fourth on the Square.

There is no doubt that the old courthouse was outdated for the needs of the greatly expanded community; however, consultants recommended that it be retained for use by the courts and a new building to house county offices be erected elsewhere on the Square. This would seem to be a far more satisfactory solution than the one adopted since it would have retained the original scale and space of the Square as well as the fine old structure.

Earlier in the century, in 1913, when it became obvious that additional courthouse space was needed, there was also disagreement about whether the existing courthouse, the second, should be enlarged or replaced. The second courthouse had been designed by

George Steele in 1835 and opened in 1840. After much debate among county commissioners and citizens about which course to adopt, the commissioners decided to enlarge and remodel Steele's courthouse.

A number of architects had submitted proposals both for additions and for new construction. Edgar Love, a local architect who designed many of Huntsville's early 20th century commercial and institutional structures, presented a plan for renovation and enlargement. His proposal was to add two wings to Steele's building and then completely modernize the existing part. Fortunately as part of his work, Love made measured drawings of the Steele courthouse which have been preserved.

Two other architects submitting plans were T. E. Brown of Atlanta and the R. H. Hunt Company of Chattanooga.

But the commissioners finally selected the proposal of C. K. Colley of Nashville that provided "for remodeling the building, adding another story and placing two new entrances." ¹

¹ *MERCURY*, March 5, 1913, page 6.

The construction contract was let in June of 1913 to the Little-Clecker Construction Company of Anniston whose bid of \$59,000 was the lowest. According to the MERCURY, "the fact that the Little-Clecker Company underbid all competitors is due to their making a specialty of court house construction. They built the Jackson county court house, also that in Athens, Georgia, and have recently completed two court houses in Mississippi. The plans of Architect Colley provide a first class, strictly up-to-date building of modern construction. The old building will be torn away except the walls and two wings will be added." ²

"The Little-Clecker Construction Co. is making rapid progress on the work of wrecking the court house and the ancient building has lost nearly all of its outlines. The timbers that are being taken out show the character of materials that were used 75 years ago. Yellow poplar beams 50 feet long and 12 by 18 inches hewed out of solid log are taken out and are in almost perfect condition." ³

However by September, serious problems had developed; everything had been demolished except the columns of the two porticos and the foundations, and it was discovered that even the columns were so weak that they would have to be torn away or rebuilt. The commissioners, architect, and contractor met to discuss this new development; the commissioners claimed that the contractor had made the contract to rebuild the courthouse, and they seemed disposed to hold him to it -

even though the entire building had been razed. A short time later the columns were knocked down; a large crowd watching the destruction was surprised to learn that the columns were hollow and that the "cornerstone contained nothing of interest." ⁴

The commissioners were now in the position of having to build a complete new courthouse since nothing but the foundations remained of the old one. The new building was erected on those foundations, and an east and west wing were added. The new columns were to be of hewn solid stone, the exterior walls of light or gray, best quality pressed brick, and the stonework of the best Indiana Buff limestone.

By early 1914 construction was moving along rapidly. The hoisting derrick was placed in position in February to raise the stone columns into place on the foundations, and the cupola was being framed. But the columns remained the most interesting aspect of the work to the reporters and the spectators.

There were twenty columns, each composed of four sections with each section weighing 3000 pounds. What could have been a serious accident during their placement turned out to be merely amusing: "Breaking into four sections under the strain of the enormous weight of a big section of stone column that was being hoisted at the new court house today, the cog wheel of the hoisting derrick was thrown across the street into the stores on Exchange Row (North Side Square) nearly 200 feet distant and several hundred damage done.

² June 18, 1913, page 5.

³ MERCURY, July 30, 1913, page 1.

⁴ DEMOCRAT, October 15, 1913, page 1.

"One section, about 10 or 12 inches long, was thrown through the glass above Terry Brothers display window. After penetrating through the glass, it went through three leather suit cases and stopped in the third. Another piece went through a big window of the Goldsmith-Grosser store and smashed a telephone. Another piece went through Damson's & Abraham's plate glass window. The fourth piece went lower than the others and took a spoke out of the wheels of a buggy that was standing in front of the Terry store and in which a lady was seated...." ⁵

By April finishing work had begun on the interior, the contract for furniture let to Office Outfitters of Birmingham for \$12,000, and the eight foot long brass arrow mounted above the dome. The completion of the courthouse was celebrated on September 10, 1914.

It would seem, however, that the unanticipated expense of having to erect an entire new building forced some work to be eliminated at the time of construction. The grand juries of 1928 and 1929 repeatedly urged the county commissioners to have various repairs made to the building. A typical report read: "The column at the north east corner of the Court House is out of plumb about four inches and its foundation is disintegrating. This condition is a constant menace to public safety and, although it has been brought to the attention of the commissioners, nothing has been done to remove the danger which threatens injury to persons who gather in large numbers at and near the column referred to. The sanitary closets in the Court House are

in bad state of repair and are poorly kept. There are leaks in the roof of the north and south porches. Radiators in the Circuit Court room and in the Inferior Court are leaking, causing damage to the cork floor in the Circuit Court. The interior of the Court House presents a dingy and unkept appearance...it is specially recommended that the entire interior of the Court House be painted." ⁶

That April a contract was let for the painting. "Colors have not been definitely decided upon but shades proposed are dark gray for the lower portion of the walls and a lighter shade of gray for the upper portion, and canary for the ceiling. With the exception of several rooms, the court house has never been painted, and the work to be done will make a great improvement in its appearance." ⁷ Additional repairs were made in the next few years.

In 1962 with lack of space again a pressing problem for the county, the commissioners voted to demolish this courthouse and replace it with a large, modern structure. Two years later the demolition contract was signed and the building razed. The twenty fluted columns were saved for possible reuse elsewhere, and the brass arrow found a new home atop the First Alabama Bank on West Side Square. *

⁶ *COMMUNITY BUILDER*, February 23, 1928, page 3.

⁷ *WEEKLY TIMES*, April 19, 1928, page 4.

⁵ *MERCURY*, March 11, 1914, page 6.