

Persistence of mayor and postmaster led to historic Athens post office

By Rebekah Davis
Limestone County Archivist

It was April, 1930, and the country was still reeling from the aftermath of Black Tuesday, when a mayor and a postmaster from a little Southern town arrived in Washington to plead for a new post office building.

Athens Postmaster C.M. Hillis and Mayor C.W. Sarver made the rounds, explaining why their rapidly growing town needed the building, but in the throes of the Great Depression, funds were few and far between. The Alabama Courier said in Feb. 5, 1930, that Athens was disappointed at not getting a post office building as they had been led to believe they would, but Congressman E.B. Almon wired Mayor Sarver that they were not to give up hope just yet.

And in fact, Almon was true to his word. The Feb. 19, 1930, issue of The Alabama Courier proclaimed that Congress would appropriate \$70,000 to Athens for the site and post office building. The federal government started looking for a corner lot, and they narrowed it down to either a spot on Hobbs Street or the old home of John M. Russell, on Washington Street just west of the Presbyterian Church.

Ultimately, they agreed to pay Russell \$6,500 for his lot and set about to clear the buildings and trees to make way for the new building, which would be built at a cost of \$58,100.

The building of the post office was an exciting project for Athens, and not just for the newness of the building itself. The construction meant jobs and survival for the men in the Works Progress Administration, at a time when jobs were hard to come by.

It was another Tuesday – Nov. 14, 1933 – and a much brighter Tuesday for Athens when the new Athens Post Office officially opened. Congressman A.H. Carmichael formally dedicated the building on Dec. 18, 1933, and for decades the post office was the hub of Limestone County communication. Its first postmaster was C.W. Sarver, the same man who as mayor begged the government to build in Athens.

By the end of the 1970s, the U.S. Postal Service had decided to build the more modern building that still serves the community at the corner of Market and Hine Streets. That was right about the time the Limestone County Commission had outgrown its offices in the Jefferson Street Annex, so in February 1979, the Commission purchased the building for \$103,500.

The move to the new building added not only new space for the County Commission, which still calls the old post office its home, but also a new county department to serve the public: The Limestone County Archives. The Archives was housed in the basement of the old post office from its founding in 1980 under the direction of first Archivist Eulalia Wellden until 2004, when Archivist Philip Reyer directed the move to its current location in the old L&N Passenger Depot on Washington Street.

In 1997, the Old Athens Post Office was named to the National Register of Historic Places along with many other buildings in the Athens Courthouse Square Commercial Historic District. Today you can still walk past the original 1930s lamp posts, under the original eight-light transoms that hang above the doors, and across the original marble floors to the counter, where you can imagine the many Christmas cards, bills, love letters and packages that passed through the building during its time as the Athens Post Office.

About the Archives:

Limestone County Department of History and Archives

Established: 1980

Staff: Archivist Rebekah Davis and Assistant Archivist April Davis

Location: 102 W. Washington St., in the 1905 L&N Passenger Depot

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