

Today's courthouse remains hub of community life

By Rebekah Davis
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Toward the end of 2011, the Limestone County Commission began taking the steps toward completing major renovations to the Limestone County Courthouse. The work, they estimate, will cost around \$2 million.

Times have changed quite a bit, and so have economics, in the near-century since the courthouse was built for \$124,700.

But some things never change, like the amount of controversy that surrounds any work that the county contemplates doing on the courthouse. Weeks of debate preceded the county's decision in 1916 to tear down the 1833 courthouse that had been rebuilt after the Civil War. The county commission employed Bem Price, one of the South's leading architects, to design the new structure, and the contract to an Anniston firm, Little-Clecker Construction Company. But what was to be done with the old courthouse? Enter M.A. Pope, who purchased the old courthouse for the salvage. One Monday morning in mid-July of 1916, Athenians arose to find the cupola and practically the entire roof of the old courthouse removed. Meanwhile, most of the courthouse business was conducted "under the trees," as government offices were temporarily relocated throughout town. Judge Malone moved the probate office to the Warten warehouse, the register in chancery to the office of Leo Warten, and the sheriff and circuit court in former restaurant near the Methodist Church.

The first shovel of dirt was turned in November 1916, and by February 1917, the project was already in financial trouble. County attorney J.E. Horton Jr. demanded that several concessions were needed since the old county board had exceeded the constitutional debt limit. Changes called for wood instead of steel in the ceiling, concrete steps instead of stone, eliminating the concrete basement and outside walls, elimination of clocks and other changes.

Then along came World War I, the cost of building materials skyrocketed, and Little-Clecker had to forfeit its contract. Finally, local firm Johnson-Chambers Lumber Company completed the work and officials moved in during August 1919.

When the courthouse was first built, it housed not only the circuit courtrooms and judges' and clerk's offices it does today, but also offices for the Red Cross, county superintendent of education, probate judge, tax collector and assessor, sheriff and Commercial Club.

The first repairs began in 1939, at a cost of \$34,190, and in 1974 more repairs included the addition of the elevator. Recent repairs have included replacement of the steps when the foundation was found to be crumbling in 2003, and the beginnings of interior renovations in the last two or three years that will be continued in 2012.

Many of the courthouse offices have been moved out in recent years – some to the new Clinton Street Courthouse Annex, and some to other locations – but the courthouse and the square that surrounds it remain the hub of community life in Limestone County.

About the Archives:

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