

Blueprints, photos tell story of Limestone County icon

By Rebekah Davis

Limestone County Archivist

Most folks around here would agree that the most iconic symbol of Limestone County – and certainly the image used most often to promote Athens and Limestone County – is our nearly-century-old courthouse. Sitting at the heart of the county seat, the courthouse and surrounding square have been at the heart of government, business and community life since the first settlers chopped down trees to clear the square and then used the resulting logs to build the first courthouse there.

That's why you have to be careful when you talk about making changes to the courthouse. Careers have been lost and companies bankrupted over merely renovating it, to say nothing of tearing down an old one to build a new one in its place.

And that's why we've had a few folks in the Limestone County Archives lately looking for some very specific photos of the courthouse. They've got changes to make, and they're not going to do it without at least some semblance of proof that if they could, Limestone County's forefathers would put their stamp of approval on the plans.

The first photo we've tried to track down has been a depiction of the inside of the courtrooms. The courtrooms have been renovated over the years, but contractors are trying to get them back to the way they looked when they were brand-new, with the detailing of the early 20th century. The only problem is that while photos of the courthouse exterior abound, taking a photo inside has never been that easy. We've had to make do with a handful of photos from earlier renovations, and copies of the original 1919 blueprints like the image here.

This drawing, available in the Archives' collection, depicts a cross-section of the interior of the courthouse. Many other details are available in these blueprints, from the dimensions of the clock on the dome to the type office chairs that would be used to the layout of the very courtrooms where renovations are now planned. Even though the work didn't always go according to plan – for example, the courthouse steps were built from concrete instead of the intended marble when the cost of materials skyrocketed during World War I – the blueprints still provide a priceless look at the way the courthouse was “supposed” to be.

The second set of photos we've looked for were images of the courthouse east side; specifically, photos of the hemlock tree now dropping limbs on the lawn. We've been more successful at finding those, thanks to the many events on the east side of the square that have been chronicled over the years. Because of those, we know that the tree was planted sometime between a 1931 hay rake auction and the 1949 Athens parade and celebration of 15 years of TVA electricity in North Alabama. That makes the tree old, certainly, but not necessarily “historic.” Contrary to legend, the tree wasn't planted by city founder Robert Beaty, and no Civil War generals ever surrendered under its branches.

Because these images and thousands of other photos, documents and other artifacts are preserved at the Archives, people who want to find the truth from decades gone by can still get it straight from the horse's mouth, so to speak, whether they're looking for more about a local icon or simply want to know who their great-great-granddaddy was. We always welcome submissions of photos, books and documents to add to our collections. You never know when the story of your family might help tell the shared story of our community.

About the Archives:

Limestone County Department of History and Archives

Established: 1980

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