

Story behind the photo: Courthouse burned in war, rebuilt from the inside out

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Limestone County Archivist

Limestone County's third and fourth courthouse were actually one and the same beautiful Federal-style building, built and rebuilt again to house the county government.

But its beauty belied the anger that surrounded it, as this courthouse was a focal point of conflict during the Civil War and afterward.

On April 6, 1833, the Limestone County Commission contracted to build a new brick courthouse to replace the first brick courthouse that had fallen apart. Records show that supervisors Aaron Redus, William McCracken and John R. Evans were budgeted \$75 for their year's work in 1835, but the county's court order book does not say when the building was actually completed.

A quarter-century later, when war broke out between the States, this Limestone County Courthouse was central to local residents' sentiments.

One week after Alabama seceded from the Union, Limestone County residents showed their loyalty to the Union by flying an American flag from the Courthouse spire. The Democrat reported:

"Today has been a glorious day for the town of Athens, in spite of the threats of that arch-traitor, Yancey, to compel us, the citizens of Limestone County, to submit to treason and disunion. We have this day run up the glorious flag of our Union, on the Court House, and the working men of Athens have just been out and fired one hundred guns in honor of the Union and the flag. Long may it wave!"

However, just a year later, Union troops sacked Athens under the shadow of that courthouse, and in 1864, the building was gutted in a blaze. Some sources said it was the U.S. troops who burned it; others say it was accidental, but either way, only the walls were left standing.

On June 30, 1866, the newspaper reported that a contract to rebuild the courthouse interior had been let to a Mr. Johnson for \$13,500. By August, however, work was suspended "due to the inability of the contractors to meet their obligations." It was the first of many snags in the project.

The State authorized Limestone County to print its own money to pay for the work, but in October, work stopped again. The Post reported that workers were "unwilling to accept county money not sustained. Merchants and farmers refuse to accept it."

A month later, new contractor Cyrus Crenshaw quit the project, saying that the county had paid him only \$2,000 for his \$5,000 worth of work.

Finally, in February 1867, the judge and commissioners took matters into their own hands. They persuaded the workers to wait one year for their wages in exchange for receiving the full amount plus 8 percent interest. The interest came directly from the judge and commissioners' pockets, a fact that was praised by the Post: "This act of generosity on the part of the officers should ever be appreciated by the citizens of Limestone County."

Finally, on May 15, 1869, the Post announced, "It Is Finished!"

The building stood and served until 1916, when it was torn down to make way for the present Limestone County Courthouse. In the next issue of the Valley Star, I'll share the story of the courthouse that stands on the Limestone County square today. In the meantime, you can come by the Archives anytime you need your local history fix!