

MANATEE COUNTY'S HISTORIC COURTHOUSE



In 1912, the County Commissioners began planning a new courthouse and jail south of Manatee Avenue in downtown Bradenton. The existing wood framed courthouse built in 1894 and located near the present day law enforcement memorial was insufficient to meet the needs of the growing county. The jail, a wooden building described by the Manatee River Journal as an “inefficient and unsightly structure which now occupies one of the prominent corners of the public square,” was subject to frequent jail breaks. County Commissioners felt it was important to build a new and modern county seat during a period of economic growth and prosperity. The new courthouse would join several other newly constructed brick buildings changing the face of downtown Bradenton.

On Friday, May 24, 1912, County Commissioners, McWorter C. Davis, Chairman, J. Samuel Brand, Moses Graham Ruston, Samuel C. Corwin and George W. Blackburn voted to publish a notice of intent to build a new courthouse and jail in the Bradenton Herald for thirty days. It was agreed that the Board would act on hiring a designer for the courthouse at the first meeting in July. They invited proposals from architects, contractors and builders to be presented to the Board no later than June 15, 1912.

On June 4, the Board also voted to appoint a committee of Commissioners Davis, Ruston and Blackburn to visit other courthouses in the area and authorized \$150.00 in travel expenses.

On June 15, proposals were ready to present to the Board, but the Board agreed to postpone review until June 22. That afternoon, the Board gave each presenter one hour to make their proposal and continued the presentations to another day on July 3. On July 6, the Board voted to levy taxes of 5 mills per year for five years to pay for the courthouse and despite a petition by seventy-five citizens to move the courthouse closer to the dividing line between Manatee and Bradenton, voted to keep it on the site of the existing courthouse.

On July 8, the Board hired J.L. McGucken and C.J. Hyer of McGucken and Hyer Construction of Tampa, Florida to design the building. It was agreed to pay them 2.5% of the price for the building construction once a building contract was signed. They were given thirty days to complete the plans.

Upon completed of the plans, the Board set a deadline of October 7, 1912 to receive bids for the construction. Potential contractors were told to be prepared

to present a \$2,500.00 bond along with their bids. During this time, the Board also received a petition to utilize only union labor on the project, which they rejected as being beyond their scope of authority.

On September 13, 1912, Willis R. Biggers, Supervising Architect for the Board of Public Instruction sent a letter to the Board stating his objections to the plans developed by McGucken and Hyer and asking that they be relieved of their duties. He noted that not only were the plans inadequate and lacking proper form, but that it would be difficult for a contractor to bid on the work because essential details were left off the plans. He suggested that it was not necessary to have separate sheets outline electrical, plumbing and heating elements and that the design of those phases be left up to the subcontractors. He was also concerned that elevation sheets lacked delineation of dimensions and that scales on plans were subject to change by shrinkage on paper. He stated that there were no notes on the location and sizes of materials such as brick, terra cotta and stone nor proper ventilation or lighting for the jail kitchen or women's cell room. He suggested windows should be cut into the gable ends to allow ventilation and light. He concluded that the existing plans were purposefully deficient in order to keep other contractors besides the designers from bidding the work.

When the Board refused to take his suggestions, two other men, local plumber, Rudolph Wrobble, and J.S. Tarrer filed for an injunction in the Tenth Judicial Court on October 7, 1912. The injunction was granted, and the Board restrained from signing any contracts until the Judge ruled in the case.

While they did not sign a contract, the Board continued to review bids, select a contractor and prepare a contract for the work. Three bids were submitted. H.C. Edwards of Edwards Construction Company bid \$103,700 and noted that if gas lines were not needed \$750 could be deducted from his bid. McGucken and Hyer submitted a price of \$99,450.00 with a deduction of \$700 for gas lines. The winner bidder was George Langford of Falls City Construction of Louisville, Kentucky with the price of \$97,445.00. Langford was so confident he would be selected that he included a payment schedule with his bid.

The Board approved a contract with Falls City Construction on November 4, 1912 contingent upon dismissal of the injunction. That dismissal was granted by the Honorable F.A. Whitney in Bartow on December 2, 1912.

Falls City Construction began work on the building in fifteen days and was given 200 working days to finish construction. They were notified that for every day over 200 days, the company would be charged \$15.00 per day. The work would include the first reinforced concrete construction in the county as well as a basement, courtroom, offices and a jail.

On January 7, 1913, three new Commissioners took office to replace Brand,

Corwin, and Davis. There were Henry F. Tabor, J.T. Kersey and Robert F. Willis. A few months later in June, the Board authorized the purchase of a cornerstone with the names of the present Board members to be inscribed upon it.

On April 7, 1913, Falls City Construction presented their request for the first payment on their work. The Board of County Commission borrowed the funds from other county accounts such as roads in order to make the payment because collection of taxes had been slow. Work proceeded steadily with few issues other than a petition by local citizens in June to make the steps out of terrazzo instead of concrete because concrete would “cheapen the appearance of the entire structure.” It was agreed that this change order would be implemented.

On February 2, 1914, after a thorough inspection by the Board of County Commission and the county engineer, the Board voted to accept the courthouse as completed except for the still incomplete terrazzo steps and unfinished jail fixtures.

The new courthouse would only be sufficient for the county’s needs for a little over a decade. On June 11, 1925, the Board of County Commission voted to notice the citizens that in thirty days they would consider the need to repair and add an addition to the courthouse. On August 3, they voted to impose a tax of 4 mills per year for five years to be used for courthouse repairs and additions. Architect J.H. Johnson was hired and presented sketches for the work at the September 9, 1925 Board meeting. It was agreed that the Board would pay him 6% of the amount of the construction costs.

Despite the resolution, it was not until August 2, 1926, that the issue of how to actually pay for the work was resolved. Taking advantage of a newly adopted State law, the Board voted to issue \$250,000.00 in bonds to use for the repairs. That same month the Board advertised for contactors to complete the work and Robert G. Cregan was awarded the job. The work consisted of removing the wooden dome from the roof, deemed a fire hazard, but also thought by some to be too provincial for an up and coming town, building an addition to the south of the existing courthouse that would add more offices and jail cells and a new roof. Construction was completed and accepted by the Board of County Commission on November 7, 1927.

Three and a half decades later and after complaints about courthouse disrepair and talk of moving the courthouse out of Bradenton, it was agreed in 1965 to conduct courthouse repairs and place a third addition to the courthouse. The work included an addition of a new roof, installation of modern windows, repairs to wiring and elevators, and a T-shaped addition placed on the south side of the building along Sixth Avenue West. The architect was Sidney R. Wilkinson, engineering firm, Ebaugh & Goethes, Inc. and the contractor Settescasi and Chillura.

Although the interior has been changed many times over the years, the exterior looks much as it did over eighty years ago and current repairs and restoration will enhance the historic look of the courthouse which has served Manatee County citizens for almost one hundred years.