

## **The Story of Cameron County Courthouses**

Norman Rozeff, May 2006



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It was on 12/3/97 that Governor George W. Bush announced his bid for re-election as governor of Texas. In his speech he stated: "And as we build our future, we must not forget our grand Texas heritage, I propose a joint state and local courthouse revitalization project to preserve and restore the unique and historical structures that are a 'symbolic' center of our Texas community: our county courthouses."

In June of the following year, the National Trust for Historic Preservation named the historic courthouses of Texas to its 1998 list of Eleven Most Endangered Sites. These sites were characterized as "highly significant symbols of our American heritage threatened by neglect, deterioration, lack of maintenance, insufficient funds, inappropriate development or insensitive policy."

Governor Bush at the same time laid out a plan to seek an initial legislative commitment of \$200 million. The state funds would be available on a matching grant basis with priority given to the facilities in the direst need of preservation. With 230 courthouses Texas has more than any other state. Initially \$50 million was granted and resulted in the restoration of 47 Texas county courthouses. The Texas Historical Commission (THC) was the administrating agency. By the year 2000 one THC architect put a price tag of \$750 million to complete the restoration work on the courthouses.

Cameron County was established by the state legislature in February 1848. Split off from San Patricio County, it was much larger than it is today, for four other counties were later carved from it. The county's first seat was at Santa Rita, five miles north of Brownsville at a site now the colonia at Villa Nueva (South). By December however, the fledgling town of Brownsville was voted to be the county seat and became such on 1/13/49.

The county had no official courthouse structure for many years. The County simply rented or purchase office space for its use. In 1882, its first courthouse was constructed at 1131 E. Jefferson Street. It was designed in the Second Empire Style by architect Jasper N. Preston and constructed by S. W. Brooks. The three-story structure featured corner pavilions and central pedimented projections. Pilasters provided relief as did balconies. The building was occupied for use in 1883. In 1914 after a second courthouse was built, the structure was purchased by the Rio Grande Masonic Lodge AF & AM No.81 which occupies the site to this day. The 1933 Labor Day Hurricane demolished the central tower and cupola. The building was awarded a Texas Historical Commission Marker in 1962.

County Judge Oscar Cromwell Dancy was the leader who moved for the construction of a new courthouse. He pushed through a bond issue for \$200,000 to fund the courthouse construction along with that of a jail. In 1912 work began on the structure at 1150 E. Madison at 12th Street. What was fabricated to the designs of architect Atlee B. Ayres (1873-1969) was a Classical Revival Style building. The Gross Construction Company of Dallas constructed an imposing rectangular cross axial plan three-story structure with an elevated basement. The brick exterior features banded ground floor course, Corinthian columns and pilasters. It had terra cotta details and its interior featured Sullivanesque details in plaster. Lewis Henri Sullivan was the most famous architect of that era, and his designs were being aped across America. One of the building's most outstanding features was its beautiful and colorful and elaborate art-glass dome above a central octagonal rotunda. The building was occupied by 1914.

This old courthouse was entered into the National Register List in 1980. A very detailed description of the building compiled at this time may be found on the Texas Atlas website (<http://atlas.thc.state.tx.us/>) under Cameron County, Cameron County Courthouse, and National Register Listing. It ceased being used as the County Courthouse when the new 1979 courthouse was erected on the 900 block of E. Harrison. This structure's modern architecture was designed by the firm of Swanson, Hiester, Wilson, and Claycomb of Dallas.

In 1994, the Cameron County Court Commissioners under the leadership of Judge Antonio O. Garza voted to move ahead with the restoration of the 1912 courthouse. It was projected to take two years and cost \$1.2 million, all of it local money. Garza left Cameron County to become Texas Secretary of State under Gov. Bush and later was appointed U. S. Ambassador to Mexico by then President Bush. In 1995 Gilbert Hinojosa took the judge's seat. New plans for the courthouse were drawn up and projected costs were expected to be \$4 million, \$3.4 million of which would come from the Texas Historical Commission's up to 80% matching courthouse restoration budget. Through March 2004 the state had approved \$237,786 for planning alone and then \$3.17 million in a second round of appropriations.

Things moved erratically as problems arose from many directions. There were contractor changes, the replacement of one architect with another, one bankruptcy, and cross-countering litigation.

Initial work on the exterior was completed by August 2003. The next step was to be instituted in early May 2003 when contractors were to bid on the removal of all non-historic material from the interior. This work was supposed to be completed within a 90 day period but was finalized in early October. By the end of February 2004 all bids for interior restoration work were to be in. According to architect Roberto Ruiz, this did not occur until the end of April. By 6/20/04 the county had signed a contract to start interior renovations which were forecast to be a \$7.7 million project. By 8/15/04 the former courthouse's basement had been lowered 15" in order to accommodate air conditioning ducts and by December work was ongoing on the third floor. At that time all interior work was forecast to be complete within a one and a half year period. To the east of the courthouse the discovery of an estimated 700 graves in the lot, where some utility lines were to be installed and which was planned as a parking lot, eventually resulted in this area being set aside and designated as a state archaeological preserve. In early 2010 it was designated by the Texas Historical Commission as a Historic Texas Cemetery.

By July 2005 expenditures that had started in the \$4 million neighborhood had then reached \$15 million. In actuality the Cameron County restoration work wasn't the only one of its type in the state to face a large cost overrun. Numerous others did too, some being forced to find additional revenue sources to complete the work. For example, Nueces County after spending \$3 million on restoration work on part of its Corpus Christi building ran out of funds in April 2006. Needed was \$30 million more to complete the work. By November 2005 through 80-85% grant monies, the THC had expended \$15.3 million to-date on the Dancy Building as the second Cameron County Courthouse was affectionately called.

As the year 2006 moved towards its summer solstice, the completed courthouse restoration was ending and a dedication was approaching. A press release described it as "one of the city's architectural jewels, boasting a spectacular stained-glass dome and intricate interior marble detailing." Tentative plans were to set aside a first floor room to display the building's history and provide the opportunity for the public to view the beautiful rotunda. Other plans considered using space for the offices of the judge, commissioners, and staff.

Unexpected hitches continued to plague the building . In May over a weekend a disconnected or malfunctioning reservoir pump sent overflowing water into the building's basement where new furniture was being stored. An inch to six inches of water ruined desks, chairs, cases and much of the woodwork. Loss estimates were put at \$100,000. Perhaps this was minor when compared to "at least three changes of contractors, two architectural changes, one bankruptcy and a bit of litigation here and there."

October 17, 2006 saw the evening rededication ceremony of the courthouse. Judge Hinojosa invited a wide circle of dignitaries including Texas Historical Commission Chairman John Liston Nau III who let out "Wow, what a great job" during the ceremony. Everyone was impressed as well they should have been after an expenditure of \$17 million over a twelve year period. The second story meeting room of the Commissions Court was especially impressive as was the magnificent stained glass rotunda, intricate ornamental plaster, marble, wood work and arches. An old gem had been restored to its original glory. The pains in the undertaking will be forgotten, but the treasure will be the pride of the community for a long, long time.