

RANDOLPH COUNTY COURTHOUSE #7
145 Worth Street
1909; National Register of Historic Places

History

At the July 1, 1907, meeting of the Randolph County Board of Commissioners there was a lengthy discussion of the need for a larger, more conveniently located building for the county offices.ⁱ Commissioners J.W. Cox, H.G. Lassiter and Chairman Arch N. Bulla of Randleman were then meeting in the 6th Randolph County Courthouse built in 1839 at the intersection of Salisbury and Main Streets in Asheboro. That brick structure had been built by construction superintendent (and future Governor) Jonathan Worth, and expanded in 1876, but it had lost its place as the focal point of Asheboro almost 20 years before. With the completion of the High Point, Randleman, Asheboro and Southern Railroad on July 1, 1889, the village had begun a gradual migration of businesses and services from the 1792 courthouse center toward the Sunset Avenue railroad stations.

The commissioners considered and deferred further public decisions until November 4, 1907, when they paid \$300 to the Charlotte firm of Wheeler, Runge and Dickey for copies of the plans and specifications of their Iredell County Courthouse design.ⁱⁱ Oliver D. Wheeler and his various partners ultimately built eight courthouses similar or identical to Randolph's, of which six remain in existence today.ⁱⁱⁱ The Iredell Courthouse (1899) was the first of these, followed by Scotland County (1901), Ashe, Stokes, Wilkes and Watauga counties (all 1904), Randolph (1909) and Avery (1912). In December, Chairman Bulla was reimbursed \$18 expense money for travelling to Statesville to inspect the Iredell County offices.^{iv}

There was evidently considerable public concern being expressed about relocating the court house, with some opposing any move away from the historic town center, and others wanting it rebuilt adjacent to the railroad tracks. The topic was discussed in February, and again in March, 1908, with no decision other than to pay 75 cents to give the old courthouse a thorough cleaning.^v In April, twenty-eight of the leading citizens of Asheboro decided to break the commissioners' deadlock by offering \$2600 to purchase the old courthouse and public square at Main and Salisbury, together with the jail property at the southeast corner of Salisbury and Cox, on the condition that the county begin to build a new court house by July on property belonging to Col. A.C. McAlister. The stated desire of the citizens was "that a new, commodious and up-to-date, modern court house with fireproof vaults for the protection of the records of the county be erected at a convenient and desirable location." That location was McAlister's barnyard and pasture on Worth Street, known locally as "the windmill property"^{vi} because McAlister had a "pump tower and power house" located there.^{vii} McAlister had agreed to sell for \$3400, with the contract being held by D.B. McCrary as Trustee for the anticipated sale to the county.

Taken together, the contracts gave the commissioners an opportunity to relocate the courthouse to the new site at a net expense of \$800. In May the Commissioners set a public hearing on the proposal, and in June, 1908, they found that "the erection of a court house suitable to the needs of the county and the board... is desirable in the interests of the county and its people."^{viii} To sweeten the deal even further, a group of lawyers interested in relocating their

practices from the so-called “Lawyer’s Row” on the northwest corner of the old Public Square agreed to buy the western 40 feet of the McAlister property from the county to build new lawyer’s offices. Their purchase price of \$1300 meant that the county had made \$500 on the property transfer before construction even began.^{ix}

The optimistic board originally “proposed to use the county convict force to make the brick and let out the masonry and wood work to contractors.”^x Less than a month later, on July 6, 1908, Joseph R. Owen of Randleman was hired to supervise construction at a wage of \$22.50 per week.^{xi} The Commissioners retained the right “...to discharge Owen at any time if his work or conduct in connection therewith be unsatisfactory to the board.” It appears that the board had no plans for financing construction other than paying out of general revenue, and this rather quickly proved expensive. In September the payroll for work on the new courthouse was \$1,616.17. In October, stone work cost \$223.57. In November “boarding carpenters” cost \$12.00 and Glenola Brick Works billed \$1,082.00 for 168,812 bricks,^{xii} only a fraction of the million bricks which they would ultimately supply. Even more expensive were the 700,000 yellow hydraulic-pressed “Washington” exterior face bricks shipped via railcar from Ohio, invoiced at \$70 per thousand.^{xiii}

1908 was an election year, and the escalating cost of the new court house became a campaign issue. W.J. Armfield, Jr., the young High Point native who had moved to Asheboro in 1898 to start the Bank of Randolph, campaigned as a commissioner candidate who could find a means of financing construction. In November Armfield replaced H.G. Lassiter on the board and was elected Vice Chairman; J.W. Cox replaced Arch Bulla as Chairman, and the board immediately took steps to cut costs.^{xiv} Owen was fired, with the basement walls just waist high, and the commissioners began to oversee the job themselves. J. M. (“Bud”) Allred of Randleman was hired as carpenter foreman; Ed Frazier as bricklayer foreman.^{xv} After consultation with High Point builder Dennis Hall, the entrance hall’s tile floor was replaced with bare concrete, and other changes made to lessen expenses.^{xvi} By May, 1909, work had advanced to the point where the county was advertising in the Greensboro newspapers for bids for plastering the interior. One last casualty of the construction period was former Chairman Arch Bulla, who resigned from the board and was replaced by R.L. Coltrane of New Market in May.^{xvii}

To finance construction \$15,000 was borrowed from Armfield's bank; his son recalled that “the only thing he wanted is that it be recorded in the minutes and the clerk, or person with authority, sign a note.”^{xviii} Commissioner minutes show that the county also borrowed money from a number of individual citizens at six per cent interest for varying periods of time, in order to complete construction. In the final analysis, the total cost to Randolph County of about \$34,000 compares favorably with the price range of the seven similar courthouses, which ranged from \$20,000 (Ashe County) to \$74,000 (Stokes County).

Work was completed and county offices began to move in preparation for the first term of court, set to begin July 19th.^{xix} On July 12, 1909, the commissioners’ minutes noted:

“It is a matter of satisfaction to the commissioners that the county officers are domiciled in their respective offices in the new court house... which is adequate in its accommodations and furnishes ample room and comfort to those in attendance.”^{xx}

The 1839 courthouse was demolished and its bricks used to build a new county jail in the rear of the building in 1914; a county agricultural building and health department headquarters where later added to the complex. A sizeable addition for the register of deeds and clerk of court was built in 1950 at a cost of \$100,000; it provided offices for the Clerk of Court, Register of Deeds, Tax Department, and county School Board. In 1975 the annex was remodeled to provide addition courtroom space, and it was expanded again in 1979 to provide space for two more courtrooms and an even larger Register of Deeds. In 1998 planning began for the eighth Randolph County Courthouse, and after that structure opened in July 2002, the 1914 jail and the 1950 courthouse annex was demolished. As part of the new construction, the 1909 courthouse received a new roof and exterior paint job in 2001, but was mothballed, awaiting future renovation, once court activities moved to the 2002 building.

Architectural Analysis

The courthouse design combines the complex, flamboyant massing of nineteenth-century Victorianism with the motifs of American Beaux-Arts classicism. The form of the 1909 building is reminiscent of the neighborhood of “American Foursquare” homes along nearby Worth Street—boxy two-story cubes with hipped roofs. The brick facades of the building rise from a roughly-hewn granite base. Round arched windows on each side define the courtroom on the second floor level; the windows of the southern (Worth Street) façade feature elaborate molded terra lintels in a variety of shapes and sizes. The complex textures of materials such as tile, rough granite, sandstone, brick, wood and metal are combined with bold ornamental shapes to create the active, highly plastic surface of the building.

The two-story main block is covered by a square hipped-roof, lit by attic dormer windows, and topped by a powerful Second Empire cupola covered by a ribbed copper dome. Massive columns with Corinthian terra cotta capitals support an elaborate pediment where a pressed-tin bearded male face of indeterminate mythological significance broods at the local Confederate Monument.

The portico shelters the entrance into a rectangular vestibule flanked by stairs. Much of the original interior finish has survived the extensive alterations; original staircases, vertical panel wainscot, flat panel doors and spittoons can be seen in the first floor cross hall. The plan and functional uses of the building were “in every way a duplicate of the Iredell courthouse.”^{xxi} Entering from Worth Street, the offices of the Clerk of Superior Court were first on the left, and those of the Register of Deeds first on the right. Adjoining the Clerk’s office were separate rooms for the Solicitor and the Grand Jury; adjoining the Registry was the Commissioner’s meeting room. Beyond the east-west cross hall was the Sheriff’s Office on the left, and the Treasurer’s Office on the right.

Both the Clerk’s office and the Registry featured large fireproof vaults, with additional vaults below in the basement. The southwest basement vault was given over to historical record storage and became the domain of Miss Laura Worth, county historian. After construction of the annex, the function of the original offices changed, with the Estates Division taking over the former Registry, the Law Library and District Attorney taking over the former Sheriff’s office.

The Treasurer's Office became the County Finance and Accounting office, with additional space devoted to the NC Department of Revenue and the Highway Patrol.

On the second floor was the court room, with pew-style benches seating some 200 people. Behind the courtroom were private rooms for the Judge, the Jury, prisoners and witnesses. The interior was rather plain, with a wooden chair rail below the window sills, and plain plaster walls above. The finest feature of the courtroom was its pressed tin ceiling, where a cornice of acanthus or tobacco leaves surrounded the room, with patterned tiles divided into large panels by decorated ceiling joists. A balcony or "gallery" provided additional theater-style seating, originally meant for segregated Negro defendants and spectators.

The courtroom was completely remodeled in 1966 by the local architectural firm of J. Hyatt Hammond and Associates.^{xxii} The gallery was closed off at that time and transformed into offices for the county manager, county planner and a meeting space for the commissioners. Public toilets were created in the basement in the 1940s, but the 1966 renovation added two more in the courtroom, as well as three private ones for the judge, jury and solicitor. The original wooden rear stairs were also removed in that renovation and replaced by a narrow set of steel steps wrapping around a phone booth-sized elevator. The building's first air conditioning system was also added in 1966, with most of the original attic space eaten up by the school bus-sized unit.

Related Objects

While the courthouse itself is one of Randolph County's most important architectural possessions, two objects related to the building are historically valuable. Its bell, the earliest surviving artifact from Asheboro's past, was for 90 years installed in the belfry. In August, 1838, Jonathan Worth, Hugh McCain and John Balfour Troy were ordered by the county justices to buy and hang a bell in the courthouse. The bell was preserved and moved from building to building as county government expanded. In 2002 it was removed, restored, and installed in a glass case on the second floor of the 2003 courthouse, no longer able to ring, but more visible than ever before.

The confederate monument was purchased by the United Daughters of the Confederacy under the leadership of Elvira Worth Walker Moffitt, the daughter of the county's only Governor of North Carolina, Jonathan Worth. The bronze statue of a confederate soldier was purchased from the W.H. Mullins Company of Salem, Ohio, and cost \$1700. It stands on a 25-foot, ten-inch tall pedestal and 9-foot, six-inch square base of Mt. Airy granite, and was dedicated in an elaborate ceremony on September 2, 1911. In September 1989 the statue was damaged by Hurricane Hugo, when it was discovered that the internal armature reinforcing rods had rusted.^{xxiii} The statute was restored and rededicated in January, 1990.

-By Mac Whatley, 29 September 2008.

ⁱ Mills, Randolph Guide, 11 Nov. 1964. Barron Mills, long-time editor of the Randolph Guide, read through years of minutes of the Commissioners' Meetings and conducted interviews with long-time residents such as W.J. Armfield, Jr., in researching this article. Most of the information from the county records is taken from that article.

ⁱⁱ Mills, Randolph Guide, 11 Nov. 1964.

ⁱⁱⁱ Catherine W. Bisher, *North Carolina Architecture*, p. 454.

^{iv} Mills, Randolph Guide, 11 Nov. 1964.

^v Mills, Randolph Guide, 11 Nov. 1964.

^{vi} The Courier, 4 June 1908.

^{vii} The original contract, in the Randolph County Courthouse file in the Randolph Room of the Public Library, has the handwritten note inserted "Pump, tower and power house excepted and to be removed by Grantor."

^{viii} Mills, Randolph Guide, 11 Nov. 1964.

^{ix} The whole topic of purchasing and financing the new site has never been totally clear. The Barron Mills/Randolph Guide articles of 11 Nov. 1964 and 19 May 1999 have slightly different versions, which, taken together with the original Offer and Contract signed by the McAlisters, and the Offer to Purchase signed by 27 local citizens (both original documents now located in the Randolph County Courthouse file in the Randolph Room) have been used to piece together the transaction.

^x The Courier, 4 June 1908.

^{xi} Mills, Randolph Guide, 11 Nov. 1964.

^{xii} Payments found in the commissioners' minute books by Barron Mills, reported in his Randolph Guide article of 19 May 1999.

^{xiii} Mills, Randolph Guide, 11 Nov. 1964. That they were shipped from Ohio is found in a subsequent Mills article, also in the Randolph Guide, from 19 May 1999.

^{xiv} Mills, Randolph Guide, 11 Nov. 1964.

^{xv} Mills, Randolph Guide, 11 Nov. 1964.

^{xvi} Mills, Randolph Guide, 11 Nov. 1964.

^{xvii} Mills, Randolph Guide, 11 Nov. 1964.

^{xviii} Mills, Randolph Guide, 11 Nov. 1964.

^{xix} Mills, Randolph Guide, 11 Nov. 1964.

^{xx} Mills, Randolph Guide, 11 Nov. 1964.

^{xxi} The Courier, 4 June 1908.

^{xxii} An interior perspective drawing of the proposed Hammond renovation was published in the Courier-Tribune of Thursday, January 20, 1966, with an extensive caption listing the renovation work to be done. Commissioner Chairman Ira McDowell presented the plans to the Board at the January meeting and asked to consider bids at the February meeting.

^{xxiii} A photograph of the upended statute was published in the 30 Sept. 1989 edition of the Courier-Tribune. Its restoration was conducted by Adrien Van Der Staak, a sculptor and teacher at Randolph Community College, for the sum of \$4,880.