

## **History of the Asheboro Municipal Building**

Summarized by Justin T. Luck

The Asheboro Municipal Building, located at 146 North Church Street, currently serves as Asheboro City Hall. The story of city hall at this location begins before the construction and completion of the Municipal Building. The previous City Hall was located on the same site in a "little red brick building" <sup>1</sup> that was built in 1914. The purpose of the previous City Hall was to provide space for the city's Republic fire truck and the water department. Also located on site is the Water Tank, also known as the "Round House." The tank was built in the summer of 1910 as part of a \$50,000 water system. Originally built to hold 175,000 gallons of water, it was expanded later to hold 250,000. In combination with other tanks on site, more than half a million gallons of water were stored behind City Hall. Only the Water Tank remains, primarily due to its virtually indestructible reinforced-concrete construction. With the construction of the city water plant on Winslow Ave. and the elevated tank on S. Church St in the 1930s, the tanks were rendered obsolete. A garage door was added to the tank, making it a storage area. <sup>2</sup> In addition to water, the current Municipal Building site was home to the town power plant. The existence of the water facilities and power plant are evidenced on site plans currently located in the Municipal Building.

The site appears to have been acquired in two tracts: Book 144 Page 106 (11/12/1910) from Armfield-Laughlin Realty Co. and Book 159 Page 456 (4/20/1916) from Leo Barker. First Baptist Church of Asheboro owned the adjoining property south of the current Municipal Building site. The church burned on November 19, 1933 and rebuilt on property across the street. The City of Asheboro already owned neighboring lots that were bought in the early 20th century for construction of the water treatment plant. A 1936 map of Asheboro shows footprint of City Hall and identifies the church as the owner of the adjoining lot. The map also shows what appears to be two of the "roundhouse" water tanks behind the hall.

Preceding the brick building, about 30 years before groundbreaking of the Municipal Building, City Hall was the wood structure on Main Street that Henry Moring Robins (H.M. Robins) used as his law office. The Marmaduke Swaim Robins Law Office, a two-room wooden building built by his father around 1860, is the last surviving building on Asheboro's nineteenth century courthouse square. Mr. Henry Robins served as Mayor of Asheboro from 1907 to 1909 and the law office building was used for town meetings for the city commissioners, the mayor's court, and place of most municipal business transactions. <sup>3</sup> The building was extensively altered and gutted around 1910. (See Marmaduke Swaim Robins Law Office under Cultural Heritage Sites for more information about this structure.) However, these spaces were not big enough to house all the necessary functions of a growing town.

Three years before ground was first broken for the Municipal Building, the Chamber of Commerce, under the leadership of President Charles McCrary, began campaigning for a community building. The original plan called for a gymnasium,

swimming pool, and other community features; however, approval of the federal Public Works Administration (PWA) funds needed to complete the project was delayed. Not having the desire to wait, local leaders initiated a community fundraising campaign and successfully raised the necessary funds to build a gymnasium on Cox Street. With the gymnasium complete, Town Commissioners elected to transfer the original community building PWA project to a City Hall, or Municipal Building. The transferred files were left with the PWA.

The Town then began to plan for the new Municipal Building. C.C. Cranford, D.B. McCrary, W.J. Armfield, and Mayor W.A. Bunch formed a committee to select the type of building. Greensboro architect Albert C. Woodroof was selected to design the building. Woodroof designed many buildings in Asheboro, including the gymnasium on Cox Street and several residential homes.<sup>1</sup> The new City Hall was to house city administrative offices, a public library, a recorder's courtroom, and provide dormitories and equipment storage for the fire department.<sup>4</sup> A project design was completed in January of 1936. Woodroff called the design "modern." The plans lay dormant until July 1938 when federal approval was received.

The Federal Government contributed \$32,947 to the project while the City of Asheboro sold \$40,000 in bonds to cover the rest of the \$73,215 total cost. Contracts for the building were awarded on September 8<sup>th</sup>, 1938. Dermont Construction Company of High Point, N.C. was awarded the building contract with a low bid of \$56,216. H.P. McCain, also of High Point, served as superintendent of construction for the company. J.L. Powers of Bennettsville, S.C. was awarded the plumbing contract with a low bid of \$3,034. Albemarle Plumbing and Heating Company of Albemarle won the heating system contract with a low bid of \$4,212. D.H. Cooke served as PWA inspector until becoming ill; W.F. Cooke took his place. The contracts specified that building be completed within 210 calendar days of the start of construction. Furthermore, the PWA set a time limit of May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1939.<sup>4</sup>

Ground was first broken for construction on September 27<sup>th</sup>, 1938 at 4:15 P.M. Mayor W.A. Bunch dumped the fist load of dirt with a power shovel to start the process. A ceremony was held to commemorate this historic event. In attendance included the Town Board of Commissioners, town officials, municipal employees, and civic leaders instrumental in sponsoring the new building.

Another commemorative ceremony was held on December 19, 1938 at 2:30 P.M. The "Laying of the Corner Stone of the Municipal Building" featured speeches from former mayors J.A. Spence, Arthur Ross, C.C. Cranford, D.B. McCrary, J.D. Ross, H.M. Robins; a call to order from Asheboro Chamber of Commerce President M.H. Birkhead; and invocation from Rev. L.R. O'Brian of First Baptist Church. The former mayors spoke of Asheboro past, present, and future. Mayor Ross, in his speech "*Asheboro Steps Out*," talked about things that happened during his term in 1923 and 1924, such as issuing water and sewer bonds. Mayor McCrary spoke on the future of Asheboro in his speech "*Asheboro of Tomorrow*." McCrary stated, "The Asheboro of tomorrow shall be the kind of city for which we shall never apologize, and of which

we shall be nobly proud." Mayor Robins closed with "Thirty Years in Asheboro," where he told the story where he told the story about "that wood-house of Clint Hayworth's was the town hall – at least the nearest approach to a town hall Asheboro could then lay claim to." He added that while it was his law office "it was also where the commissioners met, where the mayor held court, and where most of the municipal business was transacted." Mayor W.A. Baker and Commissioners John M. Neely, W.F. Redding, Sr., Dr. O.L. Presnell, J.F. White, Jr., and W.J. Armfield, Jr. did the actual laying of the corner stone, a huge block bearing "1938."

Following the two ceremonies, construction slowly progressed through the winter. The "little red brick building" was torn down to make way for the fire department wing of the new Municipal Building. The end result of construction was a large, green-trimmed, white, modernistic building that "took the appearance of a very handsome structure worthy of the modern, growing city which it represents." Grass was planted on the oblong lawn on both sides of the main entrance on Church Street.

The interior layout of the Municipal Building was best described in an article by *The Courier* on August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1939:

*In the entrance hall is a directory given the floor and number of the various offices. Immediately in front are the offices of W.E. Yow, city treasurer, purchasing agent, and superintendent of public works; and his secretary, Miss Exie Callicutt; and of Amos R. Winningham, city clerk, and water and tax collector; and his assistant, James Loudermilk.*

*To the left as you enter is the suite of offices of the city police department. Chief Dewey Bulla has a state police broadcasting radio, and fixtures for the installation of a city police broadcasting system, when the city grows large enough to support it. The police staff now includes P.F. Miller, Clifford Myers, Allen Myrick, W.E. Parish, Lee Moore, and Keith Hodgins as patrolmen.*

*Further to the left is the fire department, housing the two engines at present. There are quarters above for the full-time firemen who will be employed by the city after September 1<sup>st</sup>. These two large rooms, lockers, and bath will take care of future growth in this department. Fire chief Clarence Rush will take over the management of this department in September. The other two members of the fire department have not been named.*

*To the right of the entrance hall is the council room for the board of commissioners, and the Mayor's room. Mayor W.A. Bunch and his board, W.H. Grimes, W.F. Redding, J.F. White, Jr., O.L. Presnell, and John M. Neely, are present occupants of these rooms.*

*Still further to the left is the large bright commodious Randolph public library room. This large room is furnished in the newest type of library equipment and*

*furniture. The tables and shelves are of green-tinged leaded oak. There are three large desks, two oblong children's desks, and one round kindergarten table. The walls are light green trimmed in darker green, and the floor is blocked green and black rubber linoleum. Nine silvery indirect lighting fixtures are on the ceiling. There are 10 windows and a storm door.*

*Directly below the library is a storeroom for the use of the library. Directly above is the city courtroom not being used at present. There is also a judge's room and anteroom. There is an office for the city engineer of public works, but there is no resident engineer at present. This work is done now by out-of-the-city engineers employed for special projects.*

*Three other up-stairs offices are unassigned at present. Next comes the neat ladies' rest room. In the basement is a large storage room, a vault for old records, a coal room, a signal room, and a men's rest room.*

Truly, the new Asheboro Municipal Building was a "thing of beauty, as well one of service."<sup>10</sup> Although considered "Modern" by architect Woodroof, the Municipal building today is considered "the city's foremost example of Art Deco style."<sup>2</sup> In addition to the construction of the public library previously discussed, the *Courier* describes the floors of Mr. Yow's office as "oakwood blocks called parke." The article continues;

*The hall floors are hard-finish terrazzo. Asphalt tile covers the upstairs floors, except the bathrooms, where regular bathroom tile is used.*

*The interior walls are for the most part, painted a light green, and the woodwork, a darker green. The many and conveniently located electric outlets are painted ivory, making them easy to see. The overhead indirect lighting fixtures are silver and crystal, uniformly.*

*Most of the furniture in offices now being used are of dark walnut. Steam heat is used throughout.*

L. McKay Whatley describes the exterior of the Municipal Building in *Architectural History of Randolph County, N.C.*:

*The limestone façade is symmetrically massed around the central entrance pavilion. That section projects forward from, and is taller than, the body of the building. The words "Municipal Building" carved in the relief crown this bay, while a podium of steps with lamp pylons provides access to the entrance. The façade recedes in stages from the entrance bay, ending in what was originally the fire department on the north and the public library on the south. Stair tower windows are concealed behind pierced limestone panels. The building has a horizontal emphasis, with the window and door bays providing a vertical accent. Cast aggregate panels divide these bays at the second floor level.<sup>2</sup>*

A second carved relief of the word “Library” was made on the south façade above the original library entrance.

The formal opening was held on August 4<sup>th</sup>, 1939, in which residents of Asheboro were invited to attend. At this date, several things were yet to be completed; however parts of the building were already in use.<sup>10</sup>

Since its formal opening, the Municipal Building has undergone changes in both use and structure. The city courtroom described above was later used for the city’s traffic court, with the mayor responsible for municipal justice.<sup>2</sup> Today, the city courtroom is the city Council Chamber, where City Council, Planning Board, and other city commissions hold public meetings. The public library moved to a new location in 1964.<sup>2</sup> The City of Asheboro Community Development Division currently occupies this space. The only major addition was constructed ca. 1957 to the rear of the north wing to fit a growing Fire Department with more dormitory space. The fire department left the Municipal Building in 1972.<sup>2</sup> Upon relocation, the two large, street facing fire truck bay doors were filled with concrete walls and a small side door inserted into the north façade. Inside, the floor of the fire truck bay was dropped to accommodate a mezzanine office floor in the north wing. The dormitory addition and mezzanine were incorporated into the original building with doors in the north stairwell on the first and second floors. The City Water Billing Department now calls the former fire department home. This area is to undergo further renovations in October 2010. Other renovations have also occurred. In 1991, the building underwent a half million-dollar expansion for new offices, elevator, and wheelchair ramps to make the building more user friendly.<sup>6</sup>

The exterior, apart from the addition and replacement windows, remains largely true to its original state as described by Mr. Whatley, including light fixtures.<sup>7</sup>

In terms of the interior, disregarding the 1970s insertion of the mezzanine, very few alterations, which were primarily cosmetic, have been made. Most noticeably, carpeting has been installed in the Council Chamber (the former courtroom) and all office areas except the Engineering Department suite to the rear of the building. Also, the newly renovated Fire Inspections office on the first floor has re-exposed the original terrazzo floor. The original patterns of green and white decorative ceramic tile remain in every restroom, along with some original utilities. The basement floor is still an unfinished poured concrete slab. A drop tile ceiling has been installed throughout the building with the exception of the Council Chambers, the vestibule, restrooms, and some offices (notably the Planning & Community Development Department offices.) Rounded stepped molding remains visible in the vestibule. Original light fixtures and molding remain in the Council Chamber as well as both stairwells. The Council Chamber fixtures are exemplary of the “modern” decorative shapes of the Art Deco style. The “judges bench” and woodwork around the door and window frames in the chamber recreate the exterior’s receding façade in a linear motif. A distinct green stain is applied to the woodwork in the Council

Chamber and incorporated in the molding, doors, and door and widow frames throughout the Municipal Building. Various doors and door and window frames have been painted a muted gray or a darker green, but many remain untouched. Every office door is topped with an operable transom.<sup>7</sup>

The *Randolph-Tribune* published on August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1939, that the Municipal Building was “designed to serve needs of the city for years.” This has held true, as the Municipal Building, over 70 years after construction, still serves the needs of the citizens of Asheboro and its government.

## Sources

1. *The Randolph Tribune* (Asheboro, N.C.), August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1939
2. Lowell McKay Whatley, Jr., *The Architectural History of Randolph County, N.C.*, Page 216-17.
3. H.M. Robins, *Thirty Years in Asheboro*
4. *The Courier* (Asheboro, N.C.), September 28<sup>th</sup>, 1938
5. *Laying of the Corner Stone of the Municipal Building Program*, December 19<sup>th</sup>, 1938
6. *The Courier-Tribune* (Asheboro, N.C.) May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1991
7. Richard L. Cox, Jr., North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office Study List Application Draft
8. Arthur Ross, *Asheboro Steps Out*
9. D.B. McCrary, *Asheboro of Tomorrow*
10. *The Courier*, August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1939