

Terrell County Memorial July, 2016  
Sanderson, Texas

# Museum News

## The Terrell County Courthouse



*The first Terrell County Courthouse, built in Spanish Colonial Revival style, was designed by architect Henry T. Phelps. Built early in his career, Architect Phelps went on to design many public buildings in Texas and the US. He was also responsible for the current Mediterranean-style courthouse.*

The Terrell County Courthouse in Sanderson, Texas, began life in 1906 as a completely different building from what is seen today.

The original building was designed by architect Henry T. Phelps in the

Spanish Colonial Revival style. The district courtroom upstairs featured a paneled dome over the judge's bench, with marvelous woodwork throughout.

The building was equipped with the latest business equipment, much of



*The second Terrell County Courthouse was built in Mediterranean style by architect Henry T. Phelps, who also designed the first courthouse and the red brick school. His design for the second courthouse was unique... there are no other Mediterranean-style courthouses in the state of Texas.*

which is now in the county museum. The fledgling county was served well by this imposing edifice, but by the late 1920s it was evident that the building was too small, and worse, in dilapidated condition.

From the beginning, the building was plagued with roof and window problems. Repairs were made on repairs, but the roof still leaked and the windows did not seal out the infrequent rains and the never-ending West Texas dust. There was no hue and cry when the Commissioner's Court decided to replace the prematurely-aging edifice.

In 1930, choosing to go with a completely different style, the old building was demolished and replaced by a new one, using the old foundation, new materials and the best of salvageable materials from the old.

The new building was designed in

a modified Mediterranean style, again by Henry T. Phelps at the end of his career, and it was markedly different from the old.

The courthouse was vacated in February, 1930, and the offices moved to the third floor of the new Kerr Mercantile building.

In addition to demolishing the old courthouse, the old jail, a foreboding



Sanderson - The courthouse force has been very busy all this week packing and getting ready to move into the third story of the Kerr Mercantile Company store building which will be used as a temporary courthouse while the present one is under repair and construction. Just what effect the J.E. Jarratt Co. going into the hands of a receivership will have upon the work on the building has not been determined. This company had made arrangements to take up the county warrants. When shown the article in the Express of Saturday that the company had gone into the hands of the receiver, Judge Henshaw expressed the opinion that he guessed some other firm would take the warrants. Actual work of tearing down and remodeling on the present courthouse building will commence about the 20th of February.  
*Sanderson Times, February 14, 1930*

structure adjacent to the courthouse, was also removed and a third-floor addition was created for the jail and sheriff's office atop the new courthouse.

By September, 1930, the new building was almost complete, except for addition of furniture and some plumbing work. The county began to move its offices back into their new spaces.

1930 was a bumper year for new buildings in Sanderson. Along with the new courthouse, a new Art Deco high school building and the grand Masonic Lodge building were also begun. Just the year before, the Princess Theater moved into its new building and shortly before that the Kerr Mercantile building was inaugurated. These were heady times for the citizens of Sanderson and

Terrell County, but only a year later the cold reality of world-wide Depression would set in and the economy would grind to a halt.

The new building served through the war years and the 1950s. In the 1960s and '70s, with the advent of new heating and cooling systems and advanced communications, the courthouse was in need of modernization. The

Sanderson - County officers the latter part of last week moved into the courthouse which has just been completed. C.M. Breeding, contractor for the \$40,000.00 building, which was torn down and along with new material has made a structure that is as good as new, and would have cost something like \$125,000 or \$150,000 if built new. The building is fire proof, all modern, and beautifully finished. A three-story building that is two floors for office purposes and the third floor consists of the jail, well equipped and well ventilated. The offices of the county clerk, tax assessor, sheriff and tax collector, justice of the peace, surveyor, and the county court room are located on the main floor. Second floor consists of the offices of judge, attorney, superintendent, petit jury, grand jury, district attorney, and district judge combined, and district court room. The building is complete with the exception of plumbing which will soon be finished. New furniture has been bought and when installed will make one of the best courthouses you would care to visit. Terrell County now has a courthouse building that they should be, and are proud of. *Sanderson Times, September 26, 1930*

sheriff's office and jail had outgrown their quarters on the third floor, and it was time for a change.

In 1983, a major renovation was completed at the courthouse, moving law enforcement from the third floor into a new annex on the north side of the building. The third floor jail was removed and a hipped roof with terra cotta Spanish tile was added to give the building a true Mediterranean appearance. The Terrell County Courthouse is the only courthouse in the state of Texas constructed in this style.

Features inside the core building remain much as they were originally designed. The Clerk, Treasurer and Tax Offices have vaults with heavy ornate doors and metal shutters inside to protect against cataclysm.

Most of the offices have small windows called transoms over their doors, though now blocked and sealed, with original control mechanisms in place. The building was the pride of its citizenry and a handsome addition to the town.

In 2010, the Texas Historical Commission (THC) contacted Terrell County about renovating one more time, to restore the courthouse to its original 1906 appearance.

After a visit by the THC architect, it was deemed too expensive to mount



that kind of project with the funds available. The THC has been very successful at doing courthouse restorations in Texas, but in our case, to return the building to its former appearance would require totally demolishing the present structure and building a new one using the old plans and historically correct materials. At an estimated \$10,000,000 price tag, THC funding meant to renovate several courthouses would be totally depleted by just one project.

So, blessed with good bones and a strong foundation, the Terrell County Courthouse shall sit tight, well able to go into the next century as the seat of government for the Cactus Capitol of Texas.