



THOMAS COUNTY COURTHOUSE

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Fireworks, brass bands, festivals and speeches all made up the year of our country's Bicentennial Celebration in 1976. In Thomas County, the year went out with a bang as well: On November 21st, just four days after the 70th anniversary of the laying of the cornerstone, the present day Thomas County Courthouse was entered on the National Register of Historic Places.

At that time, the courthouse was one of 223 Kansas places of architectural, historical and archeological significance which were listed on the Register and to this day it is the only place in Thomas County with that distinction. It is a well deserved distinction as the courthouse, which celebrates its 90th birthday this year, still serves the county and retains a f history in its walls in addition to what has happened within those walls

On November 23, 1905, the Colby Tribune carried the headline "A Very Close Election: Un-Official Returns Indicate that Court House Proposition Carried by Three Majority." In the election to determine whether Thomas County should issue \$50,000 in bonds for the purpose of building a new court house, the vote was 380 to 377 in favor of the bond issue (these numbers were reported as official in the November 30 edition). As February, 1906 began, county commissioners, James Earnist, John Stover and Charles Hardin voted (Hardin voting 'no') to retain J.C. Holland of Topeka as the architect for \$1624 of the future Thomas County courthouse after considering the plans submitted by five architects. They also prepared the bids for letting for construction of the courthouse.

The contracts were awarded on May 3, 1906 to L. Crosby and Son of Kansas City, MO to do the general contracting for the building proper for \$41,705. Crosby's grandson, Harry (d. 8/93), was a member of the TCHS for years and Harry's widow, Alma, of Evansville, IN, is a current member of the Society.

F.A. Louis of Colby was hired to do the plumbing and electrical wiring for the building at a cost of \$3638 and the steelwork was contracted to Hardmetal Co. of St. Louis for \$1350. Sheriff Sam Pratt's bid to relocate the courthouse used at that time was accepted. The original courthouse had to be moved further west to clear the site chosen for the excavation and construction of the brick building.



One year after the bond election, the cornerstone for the courthouse was laid on November 17, 1906 at 2 p.m.. 'The Masons were in charge of the services and other orders were invited to attend and participate. There were over 300 people in attendance, however the expected speakers did not show up so Asa Smith and Ed Benson, local attorneys, filled in. Each school district presented a short history of their district. The program also included prayer, singing, and the reading of a list of papers and documents to be included in the cornerstone. The cornerstone is located in the north-west corner of the building.

The anticipated completion date was July 1, 1907 but as that date neared a great deal of work still needed to be done. However, the Romanesque Revival style 3-story red brick structure with its square bell tower was up and stood out against the horizon. Native stone was used for the steps, balconies, columns, arches and trim.

Work continued on the inside: hard yellow pine floors were laid and stairs were built of red oak. Seven fireplaces were put in as well as six metal vaults. The brick used for the inside layer of the walls and the partitions were made by Crosby and his crew in Colby (the exterior brick was a Coffeyville 2 type brick).

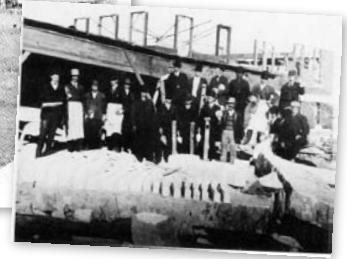
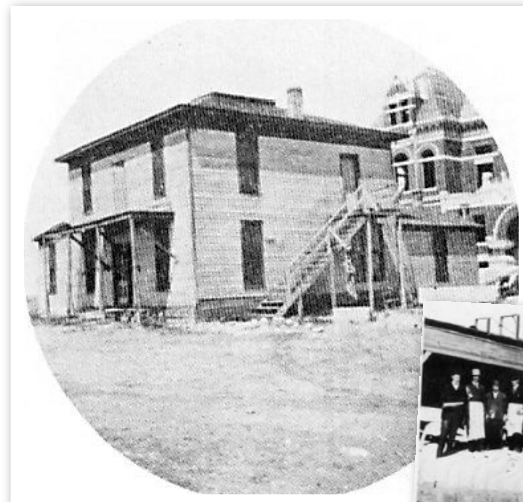
A feature that has since been covered is that the court room once had the same 18' tin ceilings that are found in the hallway of the court room floor. The court room ceiling had a curve where it met the wall creating an overall arch effect. The ceiling has been lowered to reduce the echo that the proceedings had to contend with for years.

In August (1907), the old courthouse structure was sold to R.M. Chelf for \$501 but the terms stated that the county would remain in the building until the new one was ready.

At the same time, the commissioners finalized their decisions in purchasing the clock for the tower. The August 15, 1907 Colby Free Press published the following account:

"The county commissioners met yesterday to buy the new clock for the courthouse. We understand that the order was given to the Seth Thomas people and the clock is to cost twelve hundred dollars complete. It will be warranted for a term of ten years and to be first class in every respect. The striking gong will weigh about one thousand pounds and can be heard for some distance. The subscription for the clock amounts to six hundred dollars and the money for the sale of the old court house will augment this sum five hundred more and this will nearly be enough to pay for the clock." James Earnist has been credited in several accounts with raising the \$600 subscription for the clock.

The county commissioners formally accepted the building from the contractors and proclaimed the building as the property of Thomas County to be kept and maintained as a courthouse on November 22, 1907. In that first newsletter that TCHS put out in October 1972, Betty



Secrest noted that there wasn't any information as to when the move into the courthouse was completed or of a dedication ceremony. Mrs. Blanche Jasperson nee Misner recalled that the courthouse was mostly incomplete when her wedding ceremony to Nalce on November 27, 1907 (the first in the new courthouse) was held.

Today, the courthouse is a firmly rooted fixture in the Colby city landscape where it sits on a knoll at the East end of Third Street, two blocks east of Franklin. Though it may be difficult to imagine the courthouse in any other location, there was some concern about building the courthouse at that spot in 1906. In the March 29, 1906 issue of the Colby Free Press, J.R. Connelly wrote: "What we say on the subject of a court house location for the new court house will probably go unheeded and will not be considered much, but we have never allowed that to prevent our talking when we think a matter is right.

"Our contention is that the present location of the court house is too far from the business portion of town and not for any reason a desirable location. The east part of Colby, or that part toward the present site of the court house, is the most unsightly part of town. It is built up of shops and livery barns and is not by any manner of means a proper place to build the county building. The soil around the present site is poor and to buy trees and attempt to make them grow on that ridge is worse than bucking the shell game or buying the lightning rods. The court house when completed will be the finest building west of Salina in this state and should not be put up on the present location.

"We know that a certain number of our people, who are financially interested in keeping it where it is, will not take kindly to these suggestions. We do not expect that anyone will take interest enough to r take the matter in hand. But we want to go on record as being opposed to building the new court house on the old site and we want those who read this to remember, when twenty years from now the majority of our people will see the mistake that is now about to be made."

The courthouse has seen many changes over the last 90 years. The more common changes have been the planting and then subsequent removal of trees (they did grow well on that "ridge" after all); the relocation of and changes to offices and remodeling work done in the court room. There has been the addition of electricity, heating and air conditioning and computers.

There were several reshingling jobs the last of which was done in 1993 and involved removing three layers of shingles, roof repairs, laying tar paper down and then shingling. The new shingles are of a slate gray color which was chosen to match the original slate shingles that had covered the court house in 1907.

Parking lots were added, first south of the courthouse to create a space for parking for both the courthouse and the law enforcement center and then more parking was added to the north side of the courthouse.



In August, 1963 the Colby papers reported that plans to start a drive to build a new county courthouse were announced by W.E. Cooper, a former Colby mayor and longtime civic booster. He recommended that a new building be only one story and could be located on the vacant lot immediately south of the present courthouse. He suggested the old building, constructed in 1906, be converted into a museum or demolished.

It was thought that the question would be voted on in the fall of 1964 but nothing more was ever mentioned of the project or election.

As a significant symbol of the history of Thomas County, the center front of the sidewalk in front of the courthouse was selected to erect the statue Spirit of the Prairie, a bronze by Charles Norton of Leoti in 1985 during the county's Centennial celebration.

The cornerstone that was laid in 1906 was cut open June 1, 1985 as a Centennial project and revealed a capsule. The capsule was opened on June 15th in the courtroom. Its contents were removed and placed on a table for an interested audience. Copies were made of the contents and then returned to the capsule.



Mae Hurst Smith and John Pratt were in the audience that day and were present at the time the capsule had been placed in the cornerstone in 1906.

After being on exhibit in the courthouse, the original contents were returned to the capsule and it was replaced in the cornerstone. Mementos from the 1985 Centennial were placed in a new capsule which was then placed in the base of the statue in October, 1987.

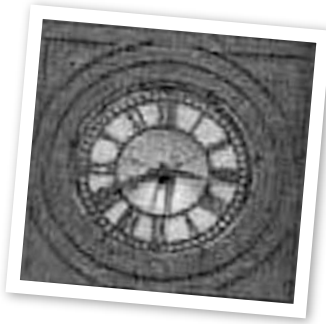
On November 11, 1991 a special memorial was dedicated to honor those who served in the U.S. Armed Forces with the names of 42 men and women from Thomas County who had lost their lives since

WWI inscribed on the memorial This memorial sits on the front lawn of the court house.

Probably the most memorable change to the courthouse and one of the most recent was the remodeling involved to increase accessibility for the handicapped. Because the courthouse is listed on the National Register for Historic Places, the commissioners had the difficult task of planning for an elevator that met the Kansas State Historical Society's approval.

The project was an uphill battle from a defeated bond issue (\$882,000 to \$891,000) to pay for the project to threats from the Kansas Attorney General's office for failure to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act to securing the go-ahead for the elevator in the former south entrance with a wheelchair ramp. The elevator was finally opened to the public on July 3, 1995.

The courthouse, ever vigilant from its spot overlooking downtown Colby, has been a constant fixture on the city's skyline for most of the county's 112-year history and it will serve Thomas County into the next century.



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