

Bexar County Courthouse  
20. Dolores Street  
San Antonio  
Bexar County  
Texas

HABS No. TX-3174

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PHOTOGRAPHS  
HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA  
REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

BEXAR COUNTY COURTHOUSE

HABS No. TX-3174

- Location: 20 Dolorosa Street, San Antonio, Bexar County, Texas.
- Present Owners: Bexar County.
- Present Use: Courthouse.
- Significance: -The building is the latest in a series of courthouse buildings for Bexar County, and by its growth and size is indicative of the progress and development in the area since the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Imaginatively designed in the Romanesque Revival style, this structure is unique in San Antonio and a credit to the architect, James Reily Gordon, a noted professional of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

- A. Physical History:
1. Date of erection: 1891-92; 1894-95. The building formally opened in 1895, though plumbing work was not completed from 1895 to end of 1896.
  2. Architect: James Reily Gordon.
- B. Historical Context: The present Bexar County Courthouse was begun less than a decade after the construction of the previous Courthouse building on Soledad Street and indicates the rapid development of the county and the resulting need for larger space to accommodate expanded government functions. The old Courthouse, erected in 1882 on the east side of Soledad Street, proved inadequate to cope with the new growth for it was severely limited in expansion possibilities.

By 1890 the question of expanding the old Courthouse was a favorite topic of conversation and contention. One faction was a favor of attempting to enlarge the old building or to acquire adjacent property and erect a new structure thereon, while another faction determined that the old site was too restricted and not properly located for the seat of county government.

The controversy was finally resolved by the County Commissioner's Court on March 13, 1891, at which time a resolution was passed declaring that Bexar County was in need of a new courthouse and that it should be located on a new site. On May 11, 1891, a \$94,000 bond was voted for the purchase of the property, a large block of land fronting on the south edge of the Main Plaza. This property, encumbered with several old business structures, was purchased soon afterward from the estate of Joseph Dwyer.

On the same date that the bond issue for the purchase of the new site was voted, there was also a second bond issue for \$10,000 for the purpose of erecting the building that was accepted. On May 21, 1891, the San Antonio Express reported that work on the new courthouse would soon begin:

The architects of the new county courthouse, Messrs. Gordon and Laub, have been charged with the preliminary arrangements for the commencement of work on the new structure. They are now hard at work perfecting the working details and preparing estimates for the contractors who are expected to bid for the job.

The present tenants of the old buildings encumbering the site for the courthouse have until June 11 in which to gather up their goods and vacate. As soon as the county can get possession the site will be cleared and excavations for the foundations begun. To this end the commissioners have advertised an offer to donate the materials in the old buildings to any one who will enter into a contract to remove them. Some two months will be required to finish the detailed plans. County Judge McAllister yesterday intimated that one of the features of the contract would be a clause requiring the completion of the building within two years.

Ground breaking ceremonies were held on August 4, 1891, and the cellar excavations were begun. On February 8, 1892, an additional bond issue for \$24,000 was voted. The foundations were completed in December, 1892, but work was halted at that time because of a controversy that arose concerning the adequacy of the construction. The original plans and specifications called for five tiers of granite, but the contractors substituted larger stones and used three piers. The constructed foundations were found to be in accordance with the specifications. An investigation was held and the County Commissioners concluded that the foundations were more substantial as built than they would have been if erected in the manner originally designated. The controversy over the adequacy of the foundations, however, failed to deter the ceremony of laying the cornerstone which took place December 12, 1892, with Masonic honors.

Following the settlement of the foundation controversy, work was further delayed by yet another conflict of opinions. In the beginning, the County Commissioners selected a local limestone to be used in the building. This rock, however, was later judged to be unsuitable for such a permanent structure as the Courthouse, and an attempt was made to substitute Pecos sandstone. For some reason, the County Judge, Bryan Callaghan, opposed this change and created the second major delay, although a fourth bond issue of \$115,000 was voted on August 18, 1893, for continuation of the work.

Construction was not resumed, however, until after a fifth bond issue was voted on February 16, 1894, this for the sum of \$64,000. The superstructure was rapidly erected, and by September 16, 1894, it was reported that the structure was completed with the exception of the interior ceilings.

On November 14, 1895, yet another bond issue was voted for the construction of the Courthouse, a sum of \$82,000.

It appears that the building was in use in 1895 or 1896 although the plumbing was not completed until the end of 1896. A third controversy arose in October, 1896, over the acceptability of the plumbing, resulting in the arrest of the plumbing contractors. This situation was brought about by the City Plumbing Inspector who determined that the work violated the city plumbing ordinance. The case, however, was resolved in favor of the contractors.

Additional controversy was created by the architect, James Gordon, who reported to the County Commissioners on October 29, 1896, that he could not consider the building acceptable under the contract as there were deficiencies in the plumbing, heating and electrical work which did not comply with the drawings and specifications. Gordon stated that he could not issue the vouchers for final payment until the work was corrected.

On October 31, a board of arbitration was appointed and the problems were eventually resolved.

In 1914-1915 a large wing was added on the south and was the first major expansion. The cornerstone credits Leo M. Dielmann and Charles T. Boelhaue as associate architects and the H. N. Jones Construction Company as contractors.

A second expansion was begun in 1925 with the passage of a \$2,000,000 bond issue at which time the Courthouse was given its final form. By 1928 when the work was completed, the building had been extended again, two wings added on the west side and a fifth floor and new roof erected. At this time the interiors were also extensively remodeled.

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The Romaneque Revival north facade, dating from 1892, is one of the few examples of this style in the city and is imaginatively designed. The building interior was, however, remodeled extensively in 1928, when it was also extensively enlarged.
2. Condition of fabric: Excellent.

### B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The main portion is 400 feet long by 140 feet wide. Of this, the north third constituted the 1892 building. Also, along the central portion of the west side, the building was widened to 200 feet after World War II. The number of stories of the north and south portions of the building is four plus basement. The central portion is five stories high. The layout is a rectangle with an adjoining west wing.

2. Foundations: Ashlar quarry-face granite, three courses above grade, slightly battered. Above it is a dressed granite, molded water table.
3. Walls: Dark red, quarry-face, ashlar sandstone. The first floor is lighter in color than those above and set off from them by a dentilated string course with classical moldings above which rests a smooth-face sandstone frieze course. The other floor levels are set off by simple string courses. The upper floor has a frieze course with typical Romanesque foliate pattern in relief.
4. Structural system, framing: Masonry load-bearing walls; segmental, round arch and trabeated openings.
5. Porches: The two-story porch on the north facade is one of the principal features of the building. At either side rise a round tower that is capped with a domical roof. The lower porch, approached by a flight of steps, is spanned by a wide segmental arch springing from round bolster-imposts embedded in the tower walls. The vouissoirs are of quarry-face finish and carved on the intrados with simple rebate moldings. The second level of the porch is a colonnade of typical Romanesque columns which support a deep entablature with plain architraves, decorated frieze with drilled foliate pattern and corbel-dentil cornice.

A corresponding porch is located on the south facade. This porch, also reached by a broad flight of steps, is only one-story and is composed of three round arches supported by piers at the ends and Romanesque style columns in the middle.

There are three secondary porches on the east facade, all spanned by round arches and complete with Romanesque details.

6. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: The north doorway is formed by two wide piers each carved to resemble four adjoining columns. There is a horizontal transom bar, a transom and sidelights. The double doors are modern aluminum and glass as are all other exterior doors.
  - b. Windows: There are both round arch and flat arch window openings with the latter predominating except on the upper floor where the openings are all round arches. Windows generally are wood sash, 1/1 double hung.
7. Roof: Hipped with green glazed tile covering. There is a cornice gutter. The south and northwest towers are pyramidal with glazed tile roofs. The northeast tower has a domical roof.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: Central corridor with flanking rooms.
2. Stairways: Marble and concrete stairways.
3. Flooring: Patterned encaustic tile flooring in the corridors; resilient tile flooring elsewhere.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Plaster walls and ceilings; seven-foot high marble dado in corridor.
5. Doors: Wood doors with glass panels and transoms.
6. Mechanical equipment:
  - a. Heating, air conditioning: Steam radiators; room unit air conditioners.
  - b. Lighting: Electric incandescent and fluorescent fixtures.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The building faces north onto the old Main Plaza of the city, now the heart of the commercial district, with its long axis oriented north to south. The building is bounded on the west by San Fernando Cathedral. Concrete walks and a small landscaped park are at the north, blending with the plaza.

PART II. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Bibliography:

Newspaper articles:

<u>San Antonio Express:</u>	March 14, 1891	June 21, 1893
	May 21, 1891	October 22, 1893
	August 5, 1891	September 16, 1894
	January 2, 1892	October 17, 1896
	December 15, 1892	October 20, 1896
	December 17, 1892	October 30, 1896
	December 18, 1892	January 14, 1897

San Antonio Light, July 5, 1938.

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1968

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

The San Antonio project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in the summer of 1968, and was made possible with funds from HABS and two sponsors, the Bexar County Historical Survey Committee and the San Antonio Conservation Society. Under the direction of James Massey, chief of HABS, the project was carried out by Wesley I. Shank (Iowa State University), project supervisor, and by student assistant architects, Charles W. Barrow (University of Texas); Les Beilinson (University of Miami); William H. Edwards (University of Illinois); and Larry D. Hermsen (Iowa State University) at the HABS field office in the former Ursuline Covent buildings, San Antonio. John C. Garner, Jr., director of Bexar County Architecture Survey, did the outside work on the written documentaries. Susan McCown, a HABS staff historian in the Washington, D.C. office, edited the written data in 1983, for preparation of transmittal to the Library of Congress. Dewey G. Mears of Austin, Texas took the documentary photographs of the San Antonio structures.