

200 South Main Street
Giddings
Lee County
Texas

HABS
TEX
144-GIDD,
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, DC 20240

Historic American Buildings Survey

Lee County Courthouse

HABS No. TX-3446

HABS
TEX
144-GIDD,
1-

Location: Giddings, Lee County, Texas.

Present Owner: Lee County, Texas.

Present Use: County Courthouse.

Significance: Completed in 1899, the Lee County Courthouse was one of the last Texas Courthouses designed by San Antonio architect James Riely Gordon. A handsome example of Romanesque Revival, the design of the courthouse reflects a popular style of its time within Gordon's broader system of designing for climate control.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1898-1899. Issued bonds for constructing the new courthouse April 5, 1898. Considered plans and specifications submitted by architects on March 15, 1898 and selected James Riely Gordon. Ordered a granite cornerstone in August 1898. Completed June 2, 1899.
2. Architect: James Riely Gordon
3. Original and subsequent owner / occupants: Lee County, Texas.
4. Builder, Contractors, Suppliers: Sonnefield, Emmins, and Abright (a San Antonio construction firm).
5. Original plans and construction: The contractors, Sonnefield, Emmins, and Abright, were awarded the contract to construct the building for \$32,270. Except for a few minor alterations the building retains its original appearance.
6. Alterations and additions: Most alterations to the Lee county Courthouse were structural modifications that did not alter the overall appearance of the building. A Howard clock was purchased in November 1899 for the clock tower. In 1901 iron columns were added to the district courtroom to add support to the ceiling structure. The original slate roof was replaced gradually by a pressed metal roof between 1902 and 1905. Around 1910 the original "Peck Sneed Hot Air Heating System" was replaced by a

steam heating system. In 1911 Austin, Texas Architect Charles Page designed a new foundation for the Courthouse that was installed by an Austin, Texas construction firm. In 1919 the courthouse was wired for electricity. In 1931 a local carpenter placed metal straps across the south side of the building because the corner arches had begun to lean.

Finally, in 1981 the courthouse went through a minor renovation. The only major alterations were the installation of a drop ceiling that covers the courtroom's original pressed metal ceiling, the installation of a central air-conditioning system, and the installation of an elevator. Other minor alterations that have occurred over the years include the installation of carpets and window air-conditioning units in some offices. In most instances the building's original fabric was concealed by alterations and not destroyed.

B. Historical Context:

Lee County was established May 2, 1874 and contains land that was formally part of Burleson County, Washington County, Fayette County, and Bastrop County. The county is named in honor of General Robert E. Lee who was admired for his efforts in both the Mexican War and the Civil War. Giddings was selected as the County seat even though it had been founded only three years earlier in 1871 and was not located in the center of the county. The choice of Giddings was based on its being a railroad town for the Houston and Texas Central Railway. A two-story courthouse was completed in 1878. This courthouse was built on a Public Square one block south of the business district on land acquired from the Central Railway Company. However this courthouse burned down in November of 1897, and plans were made to build another Courthouse on the same Courthouse Square.

Funds were set aside for a new courthouse, and from February 27 to March 3, 1888 the county commissioners visited courthouses of other Texas counties in order to decide what type of building they preferred. The commissioners considered plans submitted by numerous architects on March 15, 1888 and decided on San Antonio architect James Riely Gordon. It is likely that the commissioners saw examples of Gordon's work while on their tour of Texas courthouses, as Gordon had already built courthouses in nearby counties such as Fayette, Victoria, Bexar, Erath, Hopkins, Gonzales, Ellis, Wise, and Comal. After rejecting the first set of construction bids, the Commissioners accepted a low bid of \$32,270 from the San Antonio construction firm Sonnefield, Emmins and Abright. The construction company used convicts to remove the rubble left by the destroyed original courthouse at a rate of one dollar a day, in order to keep their costs down.

James Riely Gordon was one of the most prolific designers of Richardsonian Romanesque in Texas (Henry, 13). Romanesque Revival gained popularity throughout the United States after Henry Hobson Richardson's death in 1886. This style remained popular until near the end of the 19th century. However the Columbian exposition in Chicago (1893-93) and the World's Fair of 1898, both attended by Gordon, introduced the Classical Revival Style that gradually overtook the popularity of Richardsonian Romanesque. By the end of the century, Classicism had definitely replaced Romanesque as the style of choice. Thus, the 1899 Lee County Courthouse represents the close of an important chapter of America's preference in an architectural style. The Lee County Courthouse is the last building that Gordon designed in the Richardsonian Romanesque Style. Gordon's final Texas courthouses, the Harrison County Courthouse in Marshall (1900) and the McLennan County Courthouse in Waco (1901), are similar in plan to his previous courthouses but are "rendered in classical dress" (Henry, 14).

Although Gordon is most famous for his adept interpretation of the Richardsonian Romanesque style, his courthouses are primarily successful for his ability to design for function. Gordon combined the Romanesque Revival style with the practicality of native Southwest architecture. Gordon's buildings were "put together and worked. . . like the old missions. The massive walls with relatively small apertures and arcades of the old buildings endure, and they were designed in harmony with the prevailing circumstances and conditions. They took advantage of the stabilizing temperature of the earth that remains constant, and they used natural forces for ventilation" (Patton). Gordon not only recognized these properties, but was able to translate them into numerous architectural styles.

Gordon's understanding of natural environmental control increased with every courthouse he built in the Richardsonian Romanesque style and culminated with the Lee County Courthouse. The Lee County Courthouse is also an example of Gordon's patented cruciform plan. This plan was devised to increase the building's ability to naturally regulate a comfortable environment. Gordon arranged all offices and the courtroom around a central staircase below a central tower. The staircase and tower combined to work as a climate controlling open air shaft because "as air strikes the building it gives off heat, forced through an opening it expands absorbing heat, and rising through a central atrium it gives off heat which then rises [and escapes] through the central tower" (Salisbury). Further, since the building's entrances are located at the four corners of the cruciform configuration, all offices are corner offices that receive both abundant natural lighting and cross-ventilation. The two-story courtroom is located in one wing of the second floor where it is removed from the activity of the first floor entrances and is open to catch cool breezes. The courtroom is also set up like a theater with a second story balcony and rounded corners that create better acoustics. Finally, the courtroom only has windows that flank the judge's bench in order that the sun's glare does not impede the vision of the spectators.

Although Gordon completed the Arizona State Capitol in 1900 from his San Antonio office, it was after Gordon relocated to New York in 1903 that he gained more national recognition. In New York Gordon continued to work in the Classical Revival style until his death in 1937. While in New York, Gordon's commissions included the Copiah County Courthouse in Mississippi, and the Garrett County Courthouse in Maryland. He continued to specialize in symmetrically planned public buildings with a central tower or dome. These Classical Revival buildings benefited from the functional and symbolic qualities that Gordon had already established in his Romanesque Revival Texas Courthouses.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The building is an example of Richardsonian Romanesque. The building has a cruciform plan with rounded porticos between each wing of the building. Each of these porticos protects an entrance to the building. These four corner entrances bring the visitor "diagonally into a central stair hall, culminating in a clock tower" (Henry, 14). The exterior is composed of red brick walls that are contrasted with white limestone trim. Exterior details include blue granite steps and columns, carved limestone capitols, and a pressed metal roof. The interior is simply detailed. The ground level's floors are finished in marble tile with different colored marble borders and bases. The second and third levels have tile floors with geometric patterns.
2. Condition of fabric: excellent

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: 89'-10 1/2" x 76'-3 1/2"
2. Foundations: The brick masonry foundation walls resting on brick spread footings.
3. Walls: Brick and limestone
4. Structural systems, framing: Load-bearing brick masonry walls.
5. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Wood doors, painted brown or yellow arched transom windows above.

- b. Windows and shutters: Wood trim. Double hung windows throughout building. Casement windows open onto porticos.
 6. Roof: Hipped roof with pressed metal shingles
- C. Description of Interior:
1. Cruciform planned building with offices arranged around a central stairway.
 2. Stairway: Cast iron treads and wrought iron railings.
 3. Flooring: Marble tile and base in the ground floor's central lobby. Ceramic tile in the second and third floors' central lobbies. Offices have resilient tile or carpet.
 4. Wall and ceiling finish: Plaster with wood trim.
 5. Openings:
 - Doorways and doors: Painted wood doors with operable transom windows above provide access to offices and to the courtroom.
 6. Hardware: Original decorative doorknobs. Original hardware on the interior doors' transom windows.
 7. Mechanical equipment: Forced air central system
- D. Site: On original courthouse square. Lawn with trees. Walkways lead diagonally to all four entrances.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

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PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This report was prepared by Jessica Juarez and Lawson Newman.