

NASSAU COUNTY COURTHOUSE
Atlantic Avenue and Fifth Street (SW corner)
Fernandina Beach
Nassau County
Florida

HABS No. FL-358

HABS
FLA,
45-FERB,
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL DOCUMENTATION

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

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

NASSAU COUNTY COURTHOUSE

HABS No. FL-358

Location: Atlantic Avenue and Fifth Street (SW corner), Fernandina Beach, Nassau County, Florida.

Present Owner: Nassau County.

Present Occupant: Nassau County.

Present Use: Nassau County Offices.

Significance: The Nassau County Courthouse is one of the finest examples of public architecture in Florida during the late nineteenth century. It is notable that it still functions as a successful public building.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1891-1892.

Chronology of erection:

June 10, 1891: Agreement to buy property. (Minute Book, Vol. 1, 228-29)

November 1891: Construction begun. (Minute Book, Vol. 1, 259)

April 12, 1892: Cornerstone laid. (Minute Book, Vol. 1, 283)

May 18, 1892: Construction complete except for details. (Minute Book, Vol. I, 294)

2. Architect: A. E. McClure of Jacksonville, Florida. (Minute Book, July 22, 1891, Vol. I, 239)
3. Original and Subsequent Owners: The Nassau County Courthouse was built on lots 13 through 15 of Block 24 of the official plat of the City of Fernandina which was lithographed and issued by the Florida Railroad in 1857 and enlarged, revised, and reissued by the Florida Town Improvement Company in 1889 and 1901. The chain of title is drawn from the Deed Books of Nassau County, Florida:

1891 Deed, July 1, 1891, recorded November 10, 1891 in Book Z, page 191. Lots 13 through 15 of Block 24 were sold for \$2,500 by Henry E. Dotterer to County of Nassau.

4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: W. H. Mann of Fernandina received the construction contract. (Minute Book, October 20, 1891, Vol. I, 256-57)

Clark and Loftus Company was given the contract to furnish the building for \$2,050. (Minute Book, December 14, 1892, Vol. I, 332)

J. W. Mason and Company received the contract for supplying the chairs for the Courthouse. (Minute Book, December 14, 1892, Vol. I, 332)

5. Original plans, construction: Although plans were apparently drawn for the building, they have not been located.

The County Commission advertised for bids for plans for the Courthouse. It gave specific requirements for the new structure. The building was to be 50' x 100' costing around \$18,000. It was to be brick with "stone trimmings." The interior would be finished in wood and the roof would be slate. There were to be eleven rooms:

1 Court Room

1 Clerk's Office with vault

3 Jury Rooms (1 grand and 2 petit)

1 County Judge's Office

1 Tax Assessor's and Collector's Office

1 County Commission Room

1 Board of Health and Board of Public Instruction Room

1 Sheriff's Office

1 Armory (length 35' x 45')

(Minute Book, July 1, 1891, Vol. I, 233)

After rejecting several proposed plans, the County Commission finally accepted a "general plan" from A. E. McClure. The terms of the agreement with McClure were as follows: "for preparing plans, specifications, contracts, etc. . . . \$300.00. For visits of inspections during erection and any others . . . \$5.00 (per trip)." He also received expenses for his presence at the opening of the bids. (Minute Book, August 4, 1891, Vol. I, 240)

W. H. Mann was contracted to undertake the construction of the Courthouse only after all bids including his were refused. Mann offered three alternative bids following the rejection of his initial bid. He offered the Commission three alternatives:

- 1) To build according to specifications with wood floors in offices and halls on the first floor. Cost: \$20,870.
- 2) To build according to specifications but place a tin roof on the specified roof framing. Cost: \$20,614.
- 3) To build according to specifications but install tin roof on a different roof framing system. Cost: \$20,364.

The Commission voted to accept Mann's second alternative and the contract was signed. (Minute Book, October 20, 1891, Vol. I, 256-57)

The location of the structure was fixed by the Commission with the northeast corner of the building 12' from Fifth Street and 16' from Center Street (Atlantic Avenue). (Minute Book, November 11, 1891, Vol. I, 259)

On May 11, 1892 A. E. McClure certified that the building had been completed except for a few details. (Minute Book, Vol. I, 292) The County Commission accepted the building on May 18, 1892. (Minute Book, Vol. I, 294)

When Mann submitted the final construction bill to the Commission the total cost for the new edifice was in excess of \$25,036. This was of course a cost overrun of \$5,000 on the construction. (Compiled from reports submitted by Mann, in Minute Book, Vol., I)

The Nassau County Courthouse reflects the trend of architecture in courthouse construction in the late nineteenth century in Florida. While each one was different, the various buildings of this type built in Florida during this time contained several common characteristics including the tower, the brick construction, the exterior details, the location of the court rooms on the interior, and the simplicity of interior details. The connection between the Florida courthouses can be illustrated by the fact that the Nassau County Commissioners voted twice to travel and visit recently completed courthouses in Green Cove Springs and Orlando. (Minute Book, Vol, I, 188, 190)

6. Alterations and additions: The 1926 Sanborn map showed a one-story brick structure which apparently had been added to the building after 1909. The extension on the southeast side of the building measured approximately 22' x 16'. (Sanborn map, February 1909; February 1926)

In 1953 the County Commission retained Abner C. Hopkins of Jacksonville to design an addition to the building and to renovate the interior. The two-story, brick addition was to the west side of the existing building. The 1926 addition, a vault, was given a second story at this time. The County Commission made the plans for these alterations available for reproduction and a copy is included with this report. It has been suggested that the plans of the existing structure were traced from McClure's original plans, this cannot be documented. The accompanying set of plans include a site plan, elevations, existing floor plans, and proposed changes. Most of the alterations were carried out except for the clock which was never installed.

Clyde Knowles Company of Jacksonville received the general contract for the alterations at a cost of \$166,061.78 with discount. (Minute Book, March 10, 1954, Vol XI, 458)

Abner Hopkins certified the alterations complete and the Commission approved his certification on May 17, 1955. (Minute Book, Vol. XI, 156)

- B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure: The Courthouse has served the county since its construction. Before that, the county offices were located in various private stores in Fernandina through rental agreements. The building is a landmark to Fernandina Beach being the tallest structure in the Historic District. It remains a center of activity for the residents of Nassau County.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Plans: Hopkins, Abner C. Alterations and Additions, Nassau County Courthouse, Fernandina Beach, Florida. 14 sheets. November 2, 1953. In Nassau County Courthouse, Fernandina Beach, Florida.
2. Old Views: Photograph of Courthouse under construction. Shows the walls nearly complete and the tower incomplete. In possession of the Fernandina Beach Chamber of Commerce, 100 Atlantic Avenue, Fernandina Beach, Florida, ca. 1892.

Post card showing the east and north sides of the building. In possession of George Davis, Fernandina Beach, Florida. n.d.

Post card showing the main facade of the Courthouse with tower.
In possession of George Davis, Fernandina Beach, Florida. n.d.

Photograph showing the north and original west side of
building. In possession of George Davis, Fernandina Beach,
Florida. n.d.

Photograph showing the east and south sides of the Courthouse.
In possession of George Davis, Fernandina Beach, Florida. n.d.

3. Primary and Unpublished Sources:

Nassau County. Deed Books. Nassau County Courthouse,
Fernandina Beach, Florida.

Nassau County. County Commission. Minute Books. Nassau County
Courthouse, Fernandina Beach, Florida.

4. Secondary and Published Sources:

Sanborn Map and Publishing Company. Fernandina, Florida,
February 1926. New York: Sanborn Map and Publishing Company,
1926. In Gainesville, Florida: University of Florida, Library
East, Map Room.

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HABS-Fernandina Beach, Florida
August 27, 1974

Addendum To:
NASSAU COUNTY COURTHOUSE
Corner Fourth and Center Streets
Fernandina Beach
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PHOTO-COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

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PHOTOGRAPHS

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