

The first Lubbock County Courthouse

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Lubbock County Clerk's office on the interior of the original Lubbock County Courthouse, circa 1900.

[PHOTO COURTESY OF THE SOUTHWEST COLLECTION.]



Editor's Note: This Caprock Chronicle is edited by John T. "Jack" Becker, who is taking over the editorship of the Chronicles. This week's essay, written by Chuck Lanehart, is on the history of Lubbock County's first courthouse in the late 1800s.

Lubbock County's first courthouse was literally — and figuratively — the center of the community. By today's standards, it was little more than a two-story wooden shack, but the building served the people's needs for many years.

Early in 1891, Lubbock County organizers established the seat of local government — near its geographic center — on a two-block rectangular tract of land purchased from a “Mr. Farris,” for \$1,920. Soon, the Dallas architectural firm of Gill, Woodward & Gill designed a modest courthouse.

The structure was to be 48 feet wide, 56 feet long, and 24 feet high, at a proposed cost of \$12,000. Court minutes indicate lumber for the project could be purchased at “Amorillo” or Colorado City, the nearest rail heads.

During construction, commissioners met in what was identified in court minutes as a “house used as a courthouse.” Later, the court met in a building on the northwest corner of Texas Avenue and Broadway owned by W.M. Lay, Lubbock County's first sheriff. The commissioners then moved to W.E. Rayner's building, which was rented until the courthouse was completed.

By the close of 1891, county government was being conducted in a proud and imposing whitewashed wooden structure, the largest public building within hundreds of miles. The style was “Italianate,” featuring a peaked roof and a distinctive square tower terminating in a steeple, known architecturally as a “cupula.”

The cupula did not last long. In 1895, a huge windstorm hit the town. The courthouse was so twisted doors would not shut, and the central tower was blown away. The roof had to be removed before the building could be squared. In the rebuilding, the tower was not replaced.

The courthouse square, surrounded by a scattered business district, was the focal point of all activity in the little village, populated by fewer than 300 souls at the time. A windmill on the square provided a communal trough which, for many years, was the town's only civic water supply.

Public barbecue pits were dug on the east side of the square. Locust trees — provided by Lubbock County Clerk George Wolffarth from his farm north of town (now Lubbock Country Club) — interspersed with hitching posts and tie rails, surrounded the seat of government.

With its shady lawn, the courthouse square was a favorite gathering spot. On Sunday afternoons, families often brought picnic baskets to long tables on the courthouse lawn, and after a leisurely lunch, spent the afternoon visiting with friends.

A bandstand was built on the square, and in addition to playing for dances, parties and special events, the Lubbock Band (organized in 1891) gave concerts and benefit performances until the early 1920s.

Dances were held at the courthouse, a “Literary Society” was organized and met there, and an organ was installed in one of the second-floor rooms for church services and community singing.

Alas, in 1906, the commissioners court ruled that the courthouse could no longer host dances.

In the early years, church congregations held services at the courthouse. The Church of Christ, Quakers, Baptists and Methodists each worshipped at the courthouse on successive Sundays. Services alternated in similar fashion as a matter of convenience. Many people attended services each week at the courthouse, regardless of the auspices under which they were held.

Two interesting criminal cases were tried in the original courthouse. In 1892, Jim Vance — a boy accused of horse theft — was acquitted in Lubbock County’s first jury trial. In 1912, Lubbock City Marshal William Taylor was acquitted of murder in the shooting deaths of two men at the Blue Front Restaurant.

Early photos of the courthouse depict “Uncle Tang” Martin. According to legend, Martin fought in the Civil War and later captained a packet boat on the Mississippi River. He ended his career as a cowboy on the South Plains.

As an old man, Uncle Tang lost his legs due to an infection. County commissioners provided him a wheelchair, living space in the courthouse, and a ramp for access. He became the unofficial greeter to courthouse visitors, spawning many interesting stories.



Bird's-eye view of downtown Lubbock, 1907, looking northwest. The original Lubbock County Courthouse is in the upper right of the scene.

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One night, he snuck into a store looking for liquid refreshment. By mistake, he fumbled for a bottle of bluing solution, spilling the laundry product on his long white beard. The next day, with his blue beard, he had a hard time successfully defending his innocence. When Uncle Tang died, the town turned out for a large funeral.

The next step in courthouse growth came in 1915, when \$100,000 in courthouse bonds was authorized for a new Lubbock County Courthouse.

To make way for the new courthouse, the 1891 structure was moved to the southwest corner of 10th Street and Avenue G, so county business could be conducted without interruption during construction.

After it was moved, there is no record of what became of the original courthouse, site of so much of Lubbock's early history.