

The History of the Santa Cruz Courthouse

By Margaret Souza

Santa Cruz County has had five courthouses since its formation on February 18, 1850, and a sixth is currently being built [1966]. The five courthouses have been in four separate buildings, three of which were not built by the county. The first location was in a hotel on the north side of Santa Cruz. The second was in a building purchased by the county for that purpose. The third was on the second floor of a building, locally known as the "flatiron" edifice. A lot was donated in 1866, upon which the fourth courthouse was built and subsequently destroyed in 1894 by fire. Then, on the same site, a fifth courthouse was constructed, which still serves today.

The Eagle Hotel, which was the largest building of the Santa Cruz Mission complex, was the location of the first Santa Cruz courthouse. This two-story, fifty-year old adobe building was located on the upper plaza, just south of School Street, and was in use only twenty-one months.

In 1852, Santa Cruz County bought a wood-frame building for \$3,500, which faced the mission plaza on the site now occupied by the reproduction of the original mission chapel, which was on the east side of Emmet Street. Lack of space and the resultant inefficiency made it desirable to seek larger quarters.

The county leased the upper floor of a two-story brick building (the "flatiron" edifice), built by Hugo Hihn in 1860, between Main and Willow (now Front and Pacific). These facilities were to suffice until a new courthouse could be built.

In 1866, a Mission Hill group, led by R.C. Kirby, the local tanner, offered the old Chappel home on the upper plaza to the county for \$400. This was accepted but was later rescinded because the Cooper brothers offered the county a more attractive package. The Cooper brothers and Thomas W. Moore deeded to the county, a 110 foot square tract of land on Cooper Street, which was in the heart of Santa Cruz. The provisions for this grant were as follows: the courthouse was to face the northerly side of Cooper Street; it was to have suitable accommodations for the county officials; it was to be built within a reasonable length of time; unless it were built according to these provisions, the land would revert back to the original owners; and if ever the courthouse should be unused for more than two years, the property would revert back to the original owners and/or their heirs.

To finance their new courthouse, the Board of Supervisors decided to put a \$20,000 bond issue before the county residents, and it was passed. The total cost was \$27,000, the rest coming from the county treasury.

In April, 1867, the foundation work, which was well under way, had to be delayed because the plans had been drawn for the chalk rock on the Mission Hill site. They had to be redrawn for the Cooper site because the ground here was soft dirt and therefore needed more foundation.

The building, which was constructed by Sedgewick J. Lynch and George T. Gragg under the supervision of the architect Thomas Beck, was fifty-five by sixty-five feet. It was a New England type structure, with a tower. The height of the building to the top of the dome was eighty feet, with the dome twenty-nine feet higher than the main buildings. It was

brick with stone trim; the brick work was handled by McMillan. Lynch and Gragg did the woodwork and the carpentering, while the painting and graining was done by Otis Longley. The tin work was handled by Lucien Heath and the gas fixtures were installed by the Santa Cruz Gas Company.

The first floor contained offices for the sheriff, treasurer, district attorney, two other offices, and a jury room. The offices were all twenty by twenty-four feet, while the jury room was twenty-four by twenty-four feet. The hall was twelve by sixty feet and the ceilings were fifteen feet high.

Upstairs, there was a thirty-six by sixty foot courtroom; a clerk's office, which was twenty-four by twenty-four feet; a twenty by twenty-four foot supervisor's room and a hall thirteen feet wide. The ceilings were eighteen feet high.

The dome, which was ten feet square at the base, was subdivided into two sections. The base of the dome was square and the top was octagonal.

The following comments were made after the building was turned over to the county in September, 1867. It was referred to as "one of the neatest, most convenient, best proportioned and at the same time, perhaps the cheapest public building in the state,"[1]

Another was:

"The design has been carried out in all its details, and when we consider the usefulness, capacity and arrangement of the interior, with the decoration and fanciful display of architectural taste, its beautiful cornices, splendid roof, its tastily and finely proportioned cupola, we can point to it as an edifice deserving unrivaled admiration."[2]

Although these favorable comments had been made, the courthouse was totally inadequate for the completion of county business from the beginning.

Saturday night and Sunday morning, April 14 and 15, 1894, a fire destroyed a good part of the business section of Santa Cruz, including the courthouse. Because of a lack of water (one of the main pipes had developed a leak on the Friday before and it was not fixed until the fire was extinguished), the courthouse was totally destroyed. The Hall of Records, which had been built next to the courthouse in 1882, was not touched by the fire.

After the fire, the court temporarily held its cases in the Lower Odd Fellows Hall and later in the Leonard Building, until a small wooden structure could be built on the courthouse property in order to comply with the Cooper deed. After this was built, the judges held court here, while the county offices were located in other buildings.

In July, 1894, the county bought the William F. Ely lot, which adjoined the courthouse property for \$16,000. This was purchased for expansion purposes. There was also discussion of extending Locust Street through to Front Street, which would enlarge the county domain by twenty feet along Cooper Street. Although many people were in favor of this project, it was not carried through because of the financial complications involved.

Financing of this new courthouse was through insurance money from the old courthouse supplemented by a direct tax. Immediately after the fire, the insurance was thought to be \$10,500 for the \$27,000 building, but later \$2,000 more was found. The insurance adjustors said that the damage to the courthouse was not equal to the amount of the insurance, although it was totally destroyed. They proposed to pay sixty percent of the insurance money. As the supervisors and the adjustors could not agree, they decided to leave it up to an arbitration committee. The supervisors were to choose one man and the adjustors were to choose another; these two men were to choose a third. But as they could not agree on a third man, they resigned. However, soon after, the insurance adjustors decided to offer \$10,683, which was accepted by the Board of Supervisors. The total bill for the construction of this new courthouse was \$54,000.

Architect N.A. Comstock and R.H. McCabe, the contractor, continuously wrangled with Superintendent Thomas Beck to delay the courthouse construction. There were problems over the design; the first plans did not have the entrance on Cooper Street (as the Cooper deed said it must). There were problems with the specifications and the actual

construction of the courthouse. The architect complained because the Superintendent wanted the plans followed; the architect either would not or could not prepare the specifications to agree with the plan he designed himself.

All of the brick for the courthouse was made in Santa Cruz County, except for 50,000 brought in from San Jose. The cement, also made in the county, for the foundation floors, was furnished by I.L. Thurber and Company. The work was done by Santa Cruz laborers.

The building was constructed of light buff brick with facings of Plumas County bluestone. The chief entrance on Cooper Street was arched and trimmed in bluestone. Above the arch was located the lofty tower which was open on all sides. All this made a very handsome building.

The interior of the courthouse was of the very latest furnishings; the quarters of the officials were commodious, high-ceilinged and well ventilated. The courtroom proper was very roomy.

Although the first public meeting in the new courthouse was on November 19, 1896, the building was not officially turned over to the county until December of that year.

It was the opinion of experts that the Santa Cruz courthouse was the best public building in the state of California for the amount of money spent.

At 5:12, Wednesday morning, April 18, 1906, an earthquake rocked California. The Santa Cruz courthouse was described as a total wreck; the slate roof, on the west side of the tower, had settled an inch past the apex and nearly a foot at the base; part of the cupola had fallen through the ceilings and landed in the basement; one half of the supervisors' room had no ceiling and no floor; the courtroom itself was damaged; and in the clerk's office the walls were shattered though the roof had not caved in. At first it was feared that the damage had been too great to warrant its being repaired. Later, it was estimated that \$15,000 and three months would be needed to put the courthouse back into shape.

The Board of Supervisors in May, 1906, decided to enlarge the courthouse to the full size of the lot as part of the repairs to be done. F. R. Cummings put in a \$10,850 bid but as he would not fulfill the conditions of the contract, the supervisors selected Thomas Beck to do the repairs.

Before the repairs were started, the Board of Supervisors was offered five acres of land on Bay Street for a courthouse site. This offer was made by C.B. Younger, esq. Since the city failed to make good in regard to negotiations on this courthouse site, the Bay Street proposal was abandoned.

As time passed county officials realized that the courthouse was becoming inadequate but early efforts to get a new courthouse failed. About 1927, the public was made aware of the fact that the courthouse was inadequate. To help relieve the now overcrowded courthouse, an annex was built in 1937. Then, in 1938, Albert Roller, a San Francisco architect, made up a master plan for the courthouse but it was never put on file with the county as he was never compensated for the work. But this shows that the Board of Supervisors was interested in a new courthouse and were eyeing the Garibaldi Hotel site. In 1945, a committee selected the Garibaldi Hotel site as the site for a new courthouse which was being planned; but these plans fell through and the courthouse was remodeled in 1949.

The estimated cost of remodeling was \$30,000 for both the courthouse and the courthouse annex. The courthouse got new entrance doors, roof and floor repairs and a restroom on the second floor.

Petitions in 1950 urged the Board of Supervisors to put an elevator in the courthouse so that the elderly residents of the county would have easy access to the county clerk's office on the second floor, However, the Board decided not to put it in.

The flood of 1955, which hit many of the businesses downtown, also hit the courthouse, the Hall of Records, and the courthouse annex. The ceiling high waters in the basements of these buildings soaked many of the records. It took months to dry these out as it had to be done page by page.

This courthouse is presently being used and will continue to be used until the new one that is currently being built is finished [as of 1966, when this article was written]."

Footnotes

1. *Santa Cruz Yesterdays.* "Santa Cruz Sentinel and News, May 1, 1955.
2. *"Santa Cruz Yesterdays."* Santa Cruz Sentinel and News, May 1, 1955.

Sources

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