

Taylor County Courthouse Scope of Work

The 1915 Taylor County Courthouse was designed by Waco architect George Burnett. It is an excellent example of Classical Revival architecture, evident in its well-balanced, symmetrical facades; use of colossal columns and classical details; and use of brick and stone to create a sense of permanence and grandeur. It is a three-story rectangular building with a partially below-grade basement and contains approximately 40,000 square feet. The building is centrally situated on an entire city block, heightening its scale and presence. The structure was conceived as fully fireproof and constructed of a reinforced concrete structural frame; brick and limestone exterior walls; clay “speed tile” and solid plaster interior partitions; and largely noncombustible interior finishes such as stone, terrazzo, and mosaic tile flooring, along with plaster walls and ceilings featuring cast ornamental plaster cornices, capitals, and decorative beams.

The basement and first floors form the base of the building. They are comprised of dark purplish-brown brick with dark gray mortar, providing a somewhat monolithic appearance, particularly from a distance. The floor line, window sills, and first-floor window head course are highlighted by buff limestone. A continuous colonnade of engaged limestone columns wraps the second and third floors. The main east façade has round columns with Ionic capitals. The other facades have simpler engaged piers with Doric capitals. The base of the colonnade forms the second-floor line. Decorative spandrel panels, subdivided into a tripartite pattern align with the wood window mullions, highlight the third-floor line. The entries on each side project from the building and are marked with bracketed hood molds capped with pediments. The main entry features a grouping of three paired double doors, while the other facades have single paired doors. Petite cast-metal lamp posts further highlight the main entry, reducing the scale and welcoming visitors to the building.

The 1915 courthouse is Abilene’s oldest and most intact governmental building. It served as the county’s seat of government until 1972, when another courthouse was constructed to the east; together, the two buildings formed the hub of the county’s judicial system and courts. Planning efforts to restore the courthouse began more than twenty years ago, when the county submitted its first master plan to the Texas Historical Commission (THC) in 2001. In January 2019, Taylor County was awarded a grant provided by the Texas Historical Commission’s Courthouse Preservation Program (THCPP) to update its master plan. This update included a re-evaluation of the county’s current programming needs, an evaluation of the building to meet present code requirements, and an updated cost estimate for construction. Taylor County Judge Downing Bolls led the effort to restore the 1915 Courthouse, emphasizing the need for restoration and helping steer the project to preserve the historic building. During the master plan update, the county decided to move ahead with the preparation of 95% Construction Documents to better position itself to obtain a THCPP construction grant to fully restore the courthouse. Architexas prepared the Construction Documents while additionally assisting the county in preparing the courthouse grant application. In June 2020, the county was awarded a construction grant of nearly \$6 million to fully restore the courthouse.

In the 1950s and 1960s, a number of major alterations to the building occurred, including removal of the stepped concrete balcony structure on the east side of the District Courtroom;

construction of a floor structure to subdivide the two-story courtroom to provide much-needed office space; removal of the suspended plaster ceiling, decorative plaster beams, and cast ornamental plaster cornice in the courtroom; addition of partitions throughout, subdividing the once-generous public spaces and offices; and introduction of modern materials such as carpet, resilient tile, and suspended ceilings throughout, concealing historic materials. All exterior door and window assemblies had been replaced with aluminum storefront assemblies. A small brick masonry addition had been added to the southeast corner of the courthouse, and the east portion of the courthouse square had been paved for parking.

Construction was undertaken in two phases: selective demolition and interior and exterior restoration. Following the selective demolition phase, which removed the majority of non-historic materials and assemblies (materials and assemblies required to keep the building watertight were retained and removed in Phase 2), the condition and extent of once-concealed historic elements and finishes could be confirmed and documented for repair and/or reconstruction and included in the final bid documents.

The selective demolition phase brought clarity to the project. Finish analysis was undertaken at this time, as many of the original finishes were now exposed. Where finishes or assemblies had been removed, remnants or ghostings (i.e., outlines of removed materials) were left behind to be accurately documented and included in the construction documents for replacement or reconstruction. At the main first floor and in the original District Courtroom on the second floor, the historic flooring is comprised of small ceramic field tile in a herringbone pattern with a decorative mosaic tile border. The flooring pattern outlined the position of original walls and door openings. In courtroom spaces, the tile border outlined the locations of built-in furnishings such as the judge's bench, jury box, and dividing rail. This was documented, and the positions of final walls and built-in furnishings were adjusted on the drawings to align with the floor pattern. Following removal of the small addition from the southeast corner of the building, a blocked-in window opening was exposed. The opening contained a remnant of the original window frame and brick mold. Not only were the profiles accurately replicated, but the remnants also identified the wood species (quarter-sawn white oak) and the interior and exterior finishes (a honey oak stain on the interior and a vibrant green paint on the exterior).

Selective demolition started in April 2021, with Substantial Completion reached in July 2021. Phase 2 work went out to bid in February 2022, and Joe R. Jones Construction Inc. was awarded the project in June 2022. The interior and exterior restoration generally included the following: limited selective interior and exterior demolition to remove nonoriginal or damaged elements, assemblies, and finishes; site construction including sidewalks, curbs, curb ramps, gutters, parking, landscaping, utilities, and a lawn sprinkler system; exterior restoration including masonry cleaning, repointing, and stone, brick, and concrete repairs; construction of concrete areaways including steps and ramps for egress and accessibility; restoration and reconstruction of existing entry steps; membrane roofing replacement; door and window reconstruction; and installation of a lightning protection system. Interior restoration included new MEP, IT, A/V, and dry fire riser systems; an enlarged ADA-compliant elevator; a new accessible platform lift; ADA-compliant restrooms; metal pan and concrete stairs providing a second means of egress from the

third floor; restored and new wood and metal door assemblies; restoration and reconstruction of cast ornamental metal railings and guardrails; flat and cast ornamental plaster wall and ceiling finishes; reconstruction of marble finishes at entries, steps, and wainscot; terrazzo flooring restoration; restoration of mosaic tile flooring; incorporation of acoustic ceiling systems in acoustically sensitive courtrooms and meeting and conference rooms; restoration and reconstruction of columns and piers with a scagliola finish in main public corridors; interior and exterior staining and painting to match historic colors, including a vibrant green accent on the monumental stair railings; and reconstruction of courtroom furnishings and dividing rails to closely match the historic design.

The goal of the project was to preserve and restore the site, exterior, and primary public spaces to the 1915 period of significance; program the building to meet current and future county functions; replace building systems to meet modern standards; and address life safety and accessibility requirements to increase compliance with applicable codes and regulations while maintaining the character-defining features of this important historic structure.

The culmination of more than 25 years of planning and effort, the community will celebrate its restored courthouse in a rededication ceremony on April 16, 2026.

– Information by ARCHITEXAS – Architecture, Planning, and Historic Preservation, Inc.