

COURTHOUSE CORNERSTONES

A Quarterly Update of the Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program

TRAGEDY IN NEWTON AFFECTS THE TEXAS PRESERVATION COMMUNITY

The preservation community awoke to sad news one sultry morning this summer. Overnight, one of Texas' majestic historic courthouses was reduced to a shell of rubble and debris. It happened in a matter of hours, with no warning to the dozens of county employees who had been busy at work just minutes before.

The Newton County Courthouse in the small east Texas town of Newton was substantially damaged by the fire that engulfed it on Aug. 4. No one was injured in the blaze, but much of the building's interior was destroyed and many county records and documents were damaged. Fire officials in Newton County believe the fire began around 6:15 p.m. with faulty electrical wiring near the bell tower and spread rapidly throughout the courthouse.

"People stood around the square all night crying and consoling each other," said Newton County Historical Commission Chair Bonnie Smith. "That courthouse means a great deal to Newton. It's where we saw our boys off to war and where we had community celebrations. We mark time by that clock tower striking," she said. "It's a loss."

In July, Newton County officials submitted a master plan for preservation of the courthouse to the Texas Historical Commission (THC) in hopes of receiving a Texas Historic

Courthouse Preservation Program grant to restore the structure. Just days before the fire, the county learned that the THC approved the plan, making them eligible to submit an application for the program's second round of grants.

THC Architecture Division Director Stan Graves and Courthouse Program Administrator Dan Utley arrived in Newton shortly after the fire to provide assistance and historic preservation consultation.

"Although there is severe damage to the building, I was encouraged that the majority of the remaining walls appear to be structurally sound," said Graves. "This is a devastating setback for Newton County, but fortunately full architectural documentation exists, and the THC will work with the com-

munity to rebuild and restore the courthouse to its original grandeur."

Newton County is still working with state fire marshals and the insurance company to pinpoint the cause of the fire and determine the extent of the damage. All county employees were relocated with the help of local property owners. County officials seem confident that the courthouse can be salvaged and restored and will once again be a source of pride for Newton County.

"Our community is pulling together now," said Newton County Judge Truman Dougharty. "We are committed to rebuilding."

The historic Newton County courthouse was built in 1902 by Comanche, Texas contractors Martin

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Only a ghostly shell of the Newton County Courthouse remains, exposed and empty after the tragic fire.

and Moody and is reminiscent of the 19th-century Second Empire architectural style. The graceful three-story brick building featured an unusual truncated clock tower, a mansard roof and corner quoins. The courthouse is the focal point of Newton's downtown.

The building was designated a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark by the THC in 1974 and was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1979. It is also a State Archeological Landmark. Unfortunately, no measure of protection by historic designation could have prevented this fire. The only preventative measure is regular maintenance and careful inspection.

"A loss like this affects the entire preservation community in Texas," said THC Executive Director Larry Oaks. "This tragedy serves as a reminder that historic courthouses, should be not only properly maintained and inspected, but well documented so that they can be repaired and rebuilt if disaster strikes."

The THC's Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program provides matching grants to Texas counties to restore their historic courthouses. The THC hopes to receive an additional \$200 million from the Texas Legislature this session to continue efforts towards restoring Texas courthouses and making them safe, functional and a source of pride for Texas communities.

■ For more information about historic courthouses or the Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program, please contact the THC Architecture Division at 512/463-6094 or visit the THC web site at www.thc.state.tx.us.

■ To contribute to the fund created for the Newton County Courthouse, please call the First National Bank in Newton at 409/379-8587.

■ For information about advocacy issues concerning historic courthouses, please call Preservation Texas at 512/472-0102. ★



Above: Ashes rest on the one remaining staircase in the Newton County Courthouse. Shown right: The Courthouse before the fire.



Courthouse Fires Spark Preservation Efforts

The Newton County Courthouse, empty after its catastrophic fire on Aug. 4, is a recent example of the devastation fires can cause. And the Newton County story is only the latest in a series of similar incidents across the state. Fortunately, most survived with little damage.

Lampasas County experienced a scare last fall. Smoke and sparks coming from a light ballast caused county employees to call the fire department. Firemen quickly disconnected the fixture, and the light never caught fire. Although much of the grant monies they received from Round I of the Texas Historical Commission's (THC) Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program will pay for replacing the aged electrical system, Judge Ed Lilley said they continue to struggle with alleviating the load on the current one. Until construction begins, county officials will keep their fingers crossed. Judge

Lilley said that every morning as he gets to work he is thankful the building has survived one more day.

Wiring at the Tyler County Courthouse in Woodville caused a small fire on Christmas Day, 1998. The wiring in the district clerk's office sparked a fire, which threatened to reach the county clerk's office. It began around air conditioning wiring where some Christmas lights were also located. County Judge Jerome P. Owens, Jr., remembering the incident, said, "If the fire had gone another fifteen minutes, we would have had a situation like Newton County." He added, "All the problems that caused the fire are still here. I can probably show you another 150 similar areas in the courthouse." Tyler County has since applied for funding in the Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program to correct the problems.

The Old Reagan County Courthouse in Stiles burned on Jan. 3, 1998.

The cause of the fire, officially undetermined, was most likely arson. After surviving earlier arson attempts, the building, abandoned for years, now remains in ruin in a remote part of the county.

You may also remember the Hill County Courthouse fire on New Year's Day, 1993. Only the building's shell remained after the disaster. Choosing preservation as their course of action, the county used local support and grant monies to restore its courthouse to the original design. This fire brought the numerous problems in historic courthouses to the forefront, making them a statewide concern.

Today's Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program represents the most recent step in saving Texas courthouses. As the second round of grant applications flood the THC offices, it becomes more apparent that counties statewide want to save their beloved courthouses. ★

Courthouse Fire Hazards Widespread

Courthouses around the state wait in danger. Will Newton County's recent tragedy spur counties to begin work preventing fires in their own courthouses?

Brad Patterson, preservation specialist at the Texas Historical Commission, has visited more than 100 courthouses during his work for the agency. He recalls that the majority of them have at least one easily identifiable fire hazard. Here are his most common finds:

■ **Antiquated electrical systems** — The insulation on old wiring breaks down and becomes brittle over the years, leaving it susceptible to damage and wire exposure. Bare or damaged wires pose a fire threat as well as an electrical shock risk to anyone who might accidentally touch them.

■ **Overloaded circuits and extension cords** — Today's office workers rely on computers, copiers and many other electrically powered items. The use of these machines, not yet invented when many courthouses were originally wired, leads to overloaded circuits. Extension cords, also a common hazard, are often too long or lightweight. They may become hot to the touch, melt and possibly start fires.

■ **Exposed and disorderly connections** — As power demand grows throughout a building's life, electrical circuits often are altered bit by bit, leaving haphazard wiring in an unidentifiable jumble. Electrical connections often hang midair, twisted together and unprotected.

"I remember seeing exposed connections used for Christmas lights on courthouse roofs," Patterson said, "and exposed electrical junctions can lead to short circuits." If a short circuit occurs and a breaker malfunctions, a fire inevitably breaks out.

■ **Moisture problems** — Leaks, broken sump pumps or landscaping issues cause moisture problems in many buildings. Moisture rusts metal conduits or cables, which, in turn, exposes wiring. Running new exposed conduit remains a fairly common method of adding electrical capacity to historic buildings. Metal conduits should not be used if excess moisture exists within the walls or anywhere nearby.

■ **Need for storage space** — Many of the materials stored in courthouse attics, vaults and closets are flammable. Piles of boxes, files and old furniture indicate areas most commonly ignored. County employees rarely use or enter storage spaces, leaving potential problems unnoticed. Debris should be cleared from storage areas and all rooms evaluated periodically for safety.

■ **Hazardous materials** — With storage options limited, hazardous materials often end up next to dusty papers and furniture. Hazardous and flammable materials can also be found stored near old wiring and underneath wooden stairs. When flammable items ignite beneath stairs, employees on upper floors lose their escape options.

■ **Fire safety systems** — "Fire safety systems are often as outdated as electrical systems," said Patterson. "Counties should examine their needs, look for insufficient exits and numbers of alarms or extinguishers and inspect these regularly to ensure that they function properly."

No one is completely prepared for a disaster. With proper maintenance and regular inspections and by taking the time to evaluate and update fire safety systems, more tragedies may be avoided. ★

Right: Open junction boxes and haphazard wiring create dangerous conditions in a courthouse attic.

Visit the THC web site at www.thc.state.tx.us.

Common Courthouse Questions

Q: Where can I find resources about protecting my county's historic courthouse?

The National Park Service web site contains information on everything from conserving energy in historic buildings to repairing wooden windows. Visit www.cr.nps.gov/architecture.htm for more information.

For state and federal regulations about preservation and guidelines on hiring a preservation professional, visit the THC web site at www.thc.state.tx.us. THC staff members are available to consult on plans for historic courthouse restoration projects. Contact the THC Architecture Division at 512/463-6094.

Q: How can I reach my state legislators about the importance of preserving historic courthouses?

A list of senators and their contact information can be found on the state senate web site, www.senate.state.tx.us. A list of representatives and their contact information can be found on the house web site, www.house.state.tx.us. Those sites can also help you determine who your legislators are if you are unsure. More information about contacting your legislator can be found at www.capitol.state.tx.us.

For additional information about advocacy issues and saving Texas historic courthouses, please contact Preservation Texas at 512/472-0102. ★





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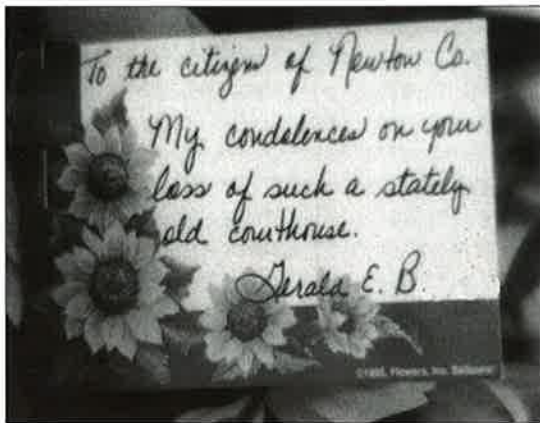
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**TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION
TEXAS HISTORIC COURTHOUSE PRESERVATION PROGRAM**

*WORKING
Timeline*
2000 - 2001



Right: The stately Sutton County Courthouse.

2000 | 2001

In Rounds I and II of the Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program, the THC received 115 master plans from counties for the preservation of their historic courthouses.

The THC approved 93 of those master plans, and 92 counties submitted applications representing more than \$250 million of requested funding.

OCTOBER
10

Deadline for architectural plans and specifications for Round I

OCTOBER
27

Texas Historical Commission awards Round II grants

DECEMBER
31

Deadline for construction to begin for Round I grant recipients

APRIL
2

Deadline for architectural plans and specifications for Round II