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Born by bonfire and a shotgun, Lee County Courthouse turns 100



A postcard (top left) features the original courthouse. The courthouse through the last 100 years (above and left).

The Lee County Courthouse, that 100-year-old neoclassical building in downtown Fort Myers, was created through an unlikely combination of schemes and counter-schemes, political rivalries and competing visions for the future.

It involved midnight skullduggery and subterfuge, a bonfire, a shotgun-toting county commissioner, a railroad dash to Arcadia, all mixed together into a spicy historical stew.

While the building is still called the "courthouse," it now serves as the headquarters for the Lee County Commission.

As county officials prepare to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the April 13, 1915 placing of the cornerstone and the opening of the building in December of that year, it's unlikely many local residents know its creation story.

An earlier, wood-frame courthouse opened in 1894, only seven years after Lee County was carved out of Monroe County. In the mid-1890s, the county's population was likely little more than 2,000.

Twenty years later, the county had grown to about 8,000 residents. On Oct. 24, 1914, county commissioners, led by Chairman

Williams Towles, voted 3-2 to build a new courthouse.

Two days later, opponents of the new courthouse boarded a train at 4 p.m. to seek an injunction from an Arcadia judge to stop the new courthouse from being built. Harvie Heitman, leader of the anti-courthouse crowd, didn't want tax dollars spent on the project.

Mr. Towles was not cowed.

This is how author Karl H. Grismer described him in his 1949 book, "The Story of Fort Myers: "Heavy set, red cheeked and curly haired. ... (Disputes) almost invariably ended with Towles getting his way."



COURTESY PHOTOS



Mr. Towles didn't take any chances on how the judge would rule. While Mr. Heitman was rattling up to Arcadia, Mr. Towles assembled 150 men with one mission: disassemble the courthouse. Take down the old building and make way for a new one.

They used axes and crowbars, according to an official Lee County history of the event. The men took down the old courthouse over night. A bonfire helped them see their handiwork.

"A huge crowd gathered," Mr. Grismer wrote. "Men, women and children cheered the workmen on. It was great sport. Never before had anything like this ever happened in Florida. Oldtimers say Towles sat on steps nearby with a shotgun in his hands. ..."

The next morning Mr. Heitman returned from Arcadia with a court order in hand. He was too late. The courthouse he wanted to save no longer existed.

"When Heitman came back, he gave up," said Joanne Iwinski Miller, a deputy county clerk and historian of the courthouse.

Ms. Miller refers to the courthouse's location as the "Courthouse Square."

"Everything that has happened for Lee County has happened on the Courthouse Square," Ms. Miller said.

It all began 100 years ago.

What they know and remember

The courthouse is a special place for county commissioners Frank Mann and Cecil Pendergrass. As boys, they both played on the courthouse steps and in its halls.

The steps and the columns and wide halls were wondrous places for these men when they were children.

Mr. Pendergrass can recall playing with a Slinky on the courthouse steps and ducking into the cool building to sip from a water fountain.

"We didn't have iPads," Mr. Pendergrass said.

Now, the courthouse and its Doric Order fluted columns is surrounded by paved road with the swanky Indigo Hotel across the street and other government buildings close by. It's the center of a muscular metropolitan county with more than 600,000 citizens.

In 1915, though, the courthouse was on a dirt road and the city of Cape Coral didn't exist and no highway connected Fort Myers to Tampa and Miami.

But a grand courthouse was built at a cost of roughly \$100,000.

"You don't see architecture like this anymore," Mr. Pendergrass said.

Indeed, look at the other city, county, state and federal government facilities in and around downtown Fort Myers and the only one that might equal it in splendor is what is now the Sidney & Berne Davis Art Center. It opened in 1933 as a post office.

Mr. Mann recalls riding his bicycle as a boy down to the courthouse and along the sidewalk in front of the building. He would ride circles around the banyan and oak trees in front of the steps.

His family's history with the courthouse goes back even further, back to when his late mother, Barbara B. Mann, was 17 years old. Mr. Mann said his mother, who died at the age of 100 in 2013, worked in the building as a teenager and on lunch breaks would sit outside with her friends.

Mrs. Mann worked there around 1930. A century after opening, the courthouse is still a functional building, one where the Lee County Commission meets and the commissioners have their offices.

In a more modern downtown Fort Myers county building, Ms. Iwinski Miller, a deputy court of the clerk, functions as an unofficial historian. She's created a display showcasing the building's history in a case on the second floor.

She treasures the history that unfolded in the courthouse.

"The reason I think the 1915 courthouse is so significant is that all the decisions regarding Lee County were made in that building from 1915 to when it was remodeled in the mid-1980s," Ms. Iwinski wrote in an email to Florida Weekly. "Roads were created, bridges were built, documents were preserved and people's lives were affected by the decisions made. ... I love the old building and when I look at it, I try to imagine how it was back then."

That history will be celebrated this year. Lee County officials are planning and will soon announce details of events to celebrate the courthouse's centennial.

"We ought to have a renewal ribbon cutting at least," Mr. Mann said.

The history, though, was in danger from 1984 to 1988.

"The courthouse, vacant and unused, did not have a maintenance program and fell quickly into disrepair," notes the county's official courthouse history.

The splendor of its early days was fading away. In 1987, commissioners voted to restore the building and work began in 1988.

State Rep. J. Keith Arnold helped get state funding in Tallahassee for the project, including a \$300,000 State Historic Preservation Grant. The total price tag was \$5.1 million. The renovated courthouse was opened on Sept. 22, 1989.

"In many respects, it's the focal point of downtown," said Mr. Arnold, who now works as a lobbyist.

It is in 2015 what it was in 1915, a courtly structure redolent of a graceful architectural style.

"There's no courthouse in South Florida that remotely compares with it," Mr. Arnold said.

When those workers took the old courthouse down 100 years ago this month, they just didn't throw the wood into the bonfire.

It was put to good use.

The lumber was used to build the first Lee Memorial Hospital, which opened in 1916.

Today's Lee Memorial, with its various locations and buildings, doesn't look anything like it did 100 years ago.

But the Lee County Courthouse? It's still the same grand building with the same granite steps and floor and those same majestic Doric columns and in the same location.

"This building will last forever," Mr. Pendergrass said. †

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