



Harrison County, Marshall (est. 1901)

Rededicated Sept. 14, 2013 • Photographed March 10, 2014

The Renaissance-Revival Harrison County Courthouse was designed by J. Riely Gordon, who is credited with 12 "Golden Age" Texas courthouses still standing, including his acknowledged masterpiece, the restored Ellis County Courthouse.

PRESERVING THE PAST

An artist continues his mission to record the historic courthouse structures of Texas.

STORY AND ARTWORK BY JAMES MCKINNIS

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JUNE MARKS THE 15TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION'S TEXAS HISTORIC COURTHOUSE PRESERVATION PROGRAM. It also marks 20 years of following a passion of mine—traveling around the Lone Star State photographing courthouses.

My interest was ignited in 1992 when a New York publisher commissioned me to write a book on contemporary hand-colored photography. While interviewing a fellow artist in New Orleans that Christmas season, I learned she had been hired by the Louisiana State Bar Association to photograph the state's courthouses. I thought that

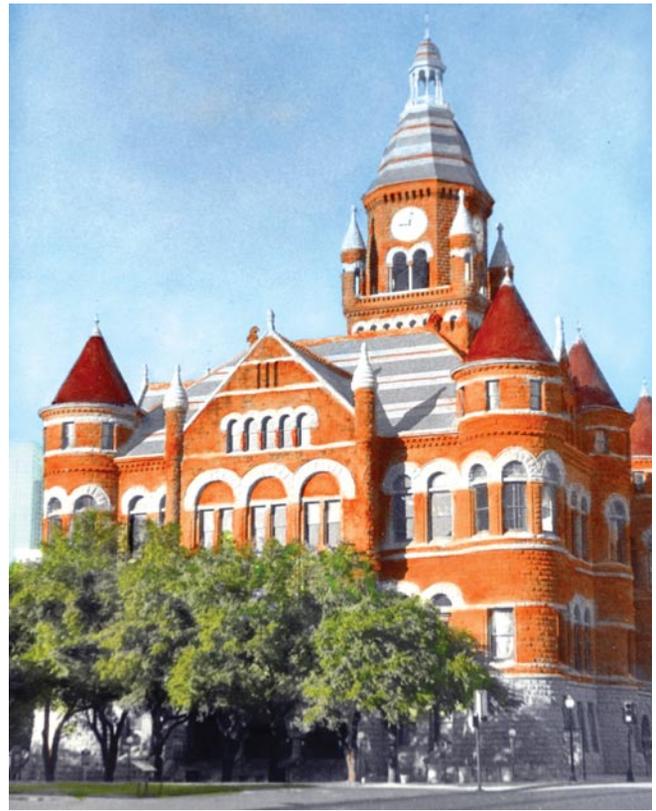
I should do the same in Texas, not only because we have the most courthouses but also because ours are the best. By the end of January, I had photographed the courthouse in Bexar County and the courthouses in five neighboring areas and produced hand-colored works of each. My odyssey had begun.

Initially, I gained little support for my project. But that summer, after I had doubled the collection to 12 pieces, I met with Kelly Jones King, then-managing editor of the *Texas Bar Journal*, who arranged for a photo essay in an upcoming issue. The response to the article proved



Newton County, Newton (est. 1903)

Rededicated Dec. 8, 2012
Photographed March 10, 2014



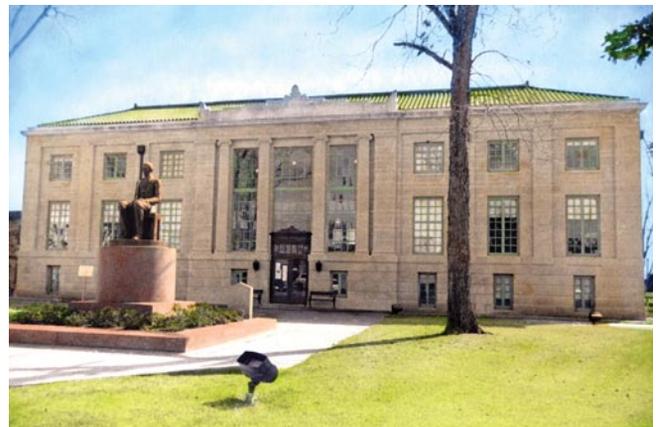
Dallas County, Dallas (est. 1892)

Rededicated May 15, 2007
Photographed March 12, 2014



Cass County, Linden (est. 1861)

Rededicated Feb. 18, 2012
Photographed March 11, 2014



**San Augustine County, San Augustine
(est. 1927)**

Rededicated Nov. 20, 2010 • Photographed March 10, 2014

encouraging, and by June 1994, I had amassed a collection of 180 hand-colored photographs of courthouses.

By 1999, through local efforts of Hill County citizens—among them Willie Nelson—the Hill County Courthouse had risen from the ashes of the 1993 New Year's Day fire, rebuilt as the unblemished beauty that had been unveiled a century earlier. Several similar initiatives were underway to refurbish and restore other courthouses around the state. However, more was needed.

In 1999, I had the pleasure of being present when then-Gov. George W. Bush announced the creation of

the THCPP, which was designed to preserve our historic courthouses. Some of these structures had been included in the National Trust's 11 Most Endangered Properties list the previous year. The THCPP requires initiative, organization, planning, sacrifice, and support. Because many century-old courthouses might not be able to accommodate a community's growth or modern needs, several of the historic edifices serve other roles, such as the Dallas County Courthouse that is now the Old Red Museum and the 1910 Harris County Courthouse, which is a cultural center. Most of the restorations, though,



Harris County, Houston (est. 1910)

Rededicated Aug. 23, 2011
 Photographed March 10, 2014



Trinity County, Groveton (est. 1914)

Rededicated July 22, 2011
 Photographed March 10, 2014



Kenedy County, Sarita (cir. 1917)

Restoration completed May 2010 • Photographed March 9, 2014

One of the artist's personal favorites—even more so when he discovered that the approximately \$4 million restoration was paid for by the county and not through the state's courthouse restoration program.

serve in their original duty. To date, more than 60 have been re-commissioned, beginning with the Shackelford County Courthouse in Albany on June 30, 2001.

While there is much to celebrate over the course of 15 years, there is also considerable cause for concern. Today I fear the THCPP is on life support. Budget constraints have strangled operations, and unless this trend is reversed, the program might become extinct—a disaster, in my opinion, because we are at a time when history seems less relevant. The task for which the THCPP was instituted is barely one-third completed, with more than 100 historic Texas courthouses still unrestored. These buildings are cultural assets that reflect the heritage of our towns and cities and, once restored, provide a jumping-off point for commercial growth and revitalization in many small communities. We need to understand and

appreciate the past to grow and build for the future.

On my most recent trip, I revisited one of my favorite courthouses—the simple, yet classic Newton County structure, which was completed in 1903. Ironically, a fire gutted the building after its restoration plan had been approved in 2000. As a result, the restoration took far longer, and was considerably more costly, but was completed in 2012. Once again, the courthouse assumes its honored role within the small community.

My collection, which has grown to more than 300 pieces, includes every Texas courthouse that has been restored to date. I simply hope that my renditions pay tribute to the efforts to save history. **TBJ**

For more information about James McKinnis and his work or to inquire about originals or prints, contact him at jamckinnis@sbcglobal.net.