

The Texas Courthouse Renaissance

Celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program.

WRITTEN BY JAMES MCKINNIS

This is my fifth opportunity to appear here celebrating Texas county courthouses in my own way. The first (February 1994) preceded the establishment of the Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program, or THCPP, and the succeeding three focused on the evolving success of that program. I appear here now to joyously applaud the silver anniversary of the THCPP.

Thirty-one years ago on the first day of 1993, a fire ravaged the Hill County Courthouse, considered one of the state's most beautiful historic monuments. Stan Graves, who became the first project coordinator of what would six years later become the THCPP, told me recently that he visited the site of the destructive fire the following day while the ashes were still hot. He recognized that the fire underscored the fragile condition of many of the state's historic courthouses and the need for a major preservation program but acknowledged such a program would require substantial funding and political support. He also knew that without it, the state would experience the inevitable loss of numerous other historic courthouses that needed immediate attention. However, the times they were a-changin', as Bob Dylan noted. A new law had been passed mandating that historic properties could no longer be razed without a consensus among community leaders. This law helped those in Hill County who resisted the call for bulldozing the ruins and constructing a modern courthouse. But finding the funds beyond what the Hill County residents could provide would still be an uphill task. Graves knew that while there might be various possible sources for piecemeal funding to rebuild the Hill County Courthouse, there was no comprehensive plan in place within the Texas government to deal with the endangered conditions of numerous other courthouses among our 254 counties.

In an article Graves wrote five years later for the Texas Historical Foundation's quarterly issue of *Texas Heritage*, he expressed restrained optimism resulting from then-Gov. George W. Bush's announcement that he would include a



ABOVE: Handcolored photograph of the restored Donley County Courthouse in Clarendon taken October 2023. HANDCOLORED PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF JAMES MCKINNIS

program to preserve our courthouses within his campaign for reelection. The National Trust for Historic Preservation had cited Texas county courthouses among the nation's 11 most endangered historical places, giving the governor's announcement more gravitas and attention.

In Graves' article, he included a brief historical synopsis of the evolution of the county courthouses as Texas grew into statehood and beyond. As he pointed out, the early courthouses might be nothing more than a log cabin, or even a rented space in a standing building. However primitive, they reflected the community's requirement for establishing "law and order," a fundamental underpinning of a civil society.

The role of the county was defined in the earliest state constitution, recognizing its important position in self-governing. While the federal system is three-tiered—national, state, and local—the reality is that within the state, the county serves both those in rural and urban areas. Courthouses were intentionally positioned in a county seat, ideally within a day's traveling distance (horseback, wagon, or on foot at the time) of the residents. Its functions were basically to serve the practical needs of its citizens. Maintenance of roads, record keeping for births, marriages, deaths, ownership of property, law enforcement, and of course, a court to settle disputes were vital needs to both rural and urban citizens. A friend traveling with me on a courthouse photography trip remarked that the county courthouse to Americans was what the cathedral was in many earlier Western societies.

As communities grew, the courthouses became more elaborate in their placement and architecture, symbolic of their status and importance. So too have the functions as society has become far more complex and the well-being of its most vulnerable receiving more institutional attention.

The role of the courthouse is also symbolic of its importance. The architecture of the structures reflects history and society at the time of their construction. The golden age of courthouses in Texas occurred during the last 20 years of

the 19th century, featuring many robust structures with intricate embellishments and elaborate designs. Twelve J. Riely Gordon courthouses and six originally constructed W. C. Dodson designs remain standing, and their restorations reflect that magnificent epoch. They should be on the bucket list of all who appreciate not only history and beautiful architecture, but also simply imagining those times. We must never forget the past nor fear re-examining from whence we came.

Former Bexar County Judge Nelson Wolff and his wife, Tracy, published a book on the restoration of the Bexar County Courthouse and other historic properties adjacent to the Main Plaza in San Antonio. Following his appointment to the court, Wolff and his wife immediately noticed the condition of the courthouse, its exterior and interior both. There was one telling description reflecting his vision of the courthouse's symbolic role and how he sought to restore the main courtroom's space and appearance to reflect its status to the Bexar County community. As with any collective action, there was no universal agreement to change the existing space(s), but vision and determination triumphed. In her role as first lady as an advocate of addressing the needs of children and families, especially among the neediest, Tracy was instrumental in expanding space to meet those needs. New courtrooms were created for that purpose. Wolff also understood that his vision might not initially coincide with other powerful groups within the courthouse. However, through political compromises, give and take, and resolute vision, he achieved his goals and the restored Bexar County Courthouse reflects that vision.

I graduated from the University of Texas with a bachelor's degree in government but never considered law school. I favored international relations, and I served as a Peace Corps volunteer and an ESL instructor, supervisor, and adviser within the Defense Language Institute English Language School. Seven of my 10 years in government service were spent overseas. I am also self-taught as both a photo artist and author of four books, recognized for handcoloring photographs. I see the courthouses from a different perspective. I want my handcolored photographs to convey my vision through their uniqueness.

I have known many lawyers—some longtime friends—and suggest the courthouse to an attorney is similar to an art gallery to me. I appreciate how the gallery connects to my career in a way different from the average visitor. I feel a sublime pleasure when I visit a new space that caters to the art I appreciate. I know that the relationship of the courthouse to one who practices law is far more extensive than to me or the average citizen. History as well is very often a passion among the attorneys I have known.

Importantly, the THCPP requires that the community initiate the request for its courthouse restoration. Some grants are for emergency needs while most others are to accomplish a full restoration. Plans must be submitted and details worked out with experts experienced in the intricacies of restoration to achieve the desired goal. To date, there are 77 restorations that are either recommissioned or approaching completion.

Another important consequence of the restoration is the revitalization of the surrounding buildings and businesses. The economic consequences are significant, and a visitor can

sense the renewed vitality of the community. The people who work in building and construction, artisans and crafts people engaged in important labor in trades that had lagged and almost vanished in our time, are once again in demand. The courthouses also draw visitors who can gain an appreciation for Texas.

I am in the final stages of creating a coffee table book featuring 120 handcolored courthouse images, including 76 of the recommissioned courthouses as well as personal favorites. I include brief essays, descriptions of the THCPP and its origins, opinions and Texas tales, and legends. I also include personal memories to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the THCPP. I plan to have it available in time for that anniversary in June.

If anyone wonders why I choose to do this without official sanction or commissioning, I reply, "Because the Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program demonstrates we can work together at the individual, community, county, state, and national levels successfully to achieve a noble and important goal, the preservation of our history and heritage." **TBJ**



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is a native Texan who has served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Bolivia and has worked for the Defense Language Institute English Language School at Lackland AFB and in Morocco, Vietnam, and Korea. He began his career in photography in 1976 and is the author of *Handcoloring Photographs* (Amphoto, 1994) and *Photopainting* (Amphoto, 2022). McKinnis is a lover of Texas, courthouses, and traveling around the Lone Star State.



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