The Carrollton Courthouse

The author shares some of his knowledge of Henry Howard with us with this review of the Carrollton Courthouse when it was a courthouse.

By Victor McGee

The Carrollton Courthouse is one of the few remaining ante-bellum courthouses remaining in the state. Even after 110 years it is an imposing building. David Crozier, a local school principal (presently Benjamin Franklin High School) it remains as an archtype of what the Southern country courthouse was supposed to be.

The civic center of the town of Carrollton had originally been centered around the Dublin Market, but by the early 1850's it was obvious that the growth of the popular resort community demanded a more opulent building, suitable to the prestige always connected with the parish of Jefferson, one of the wealthiest in the State. In January of 1854 the parish council approved the construction of a new court house and jail and the contract for the design was awarded to Henry Howard, of Anglo-Irish background, who had been practicing as an architect in New Orleans since 1844 and that time had been responsible for a large number of buildings, many of them major commissions. The Pontalba Buildings were under construction as early as 1849 and at the time of the courthouse commission he was in the midst of his most ambitious project to date, Belle Grove Plantation. This enormous house had been begun in late 1852 or early 1853 and was still in the course of construction. Its completion was slated for 1855. During this period Howard's commissions are comparatively few as he devoted all of his energies to what he realized was to be one of his major buildings. His taking the Carrollton commission was certainly tied to the prestige always connected with a public building of importance.

Early Municipal Projects

Howard was not a stranger to civic projects. Early in his career (1846) while working on Madewood and Woodlawn plantations, he had designed courthouses at Donaldsonville (destroyed during the war) and Plaquemine (still standing). Both buildings are multi-storyed in the classical mode showing a distinct Natchez influence. Interestingly enough the contractors for both buildings were the Weldon brothers of Natchez.

With the Carrollton commission Howard was able to expand his architectural concepts to a full-fledged parish seat underwritten by a flourishing community that could afford the best.

The specifications for the courthouse and jail are still in the public records and meticulous penmanship characteristic throughout his career. The Pontalba Buildings were eventually to become the centerpiece to that prosperous parish seat. After the war Howard designed at least two more courthouses: Yazoo, Mississippi, still standing, and a fine example of a Louisiana style building for Talledega, Alabama which burned two years after its completion. After the town of Carrollton was absorbed by the expanding city of New Orleans Jefferson's parish courthouse was moved to Gretna and the old building, which was one of his major buildings, his taking the Carrollton commission was certainly tied to the prestige always connected with a public building of importance.

Contractors

Contractors for the buildings were Crozier and Wing. Also signing the documents were Jamison and McIntosh, another firm of well-known New Orleans contractors, who might have acted as sub-contractors on the buildings. Howard used both firms extensively in his ante-bellum work and both Wing and Jamison were eventually to become practicing architects in their own right, but only after the conclusion of the Civil War.

The courthouse is cast in the Greek Revival mode, a style already disestablished by the mid-1850's. Large Ionic columns rise up, unimportant by galleries to form the imposing façade. The capitals are modeled after the Ionic order. "From the Temple of Erechtheus", a design Howard had favored at both Madewood and Woodlawn marble, those of the courthouse are cast iron, an indication of the growing technology of the builder's world. The placement of the four monumental columns in the center of a fairly narrow façade gives a certain verticality to the building, different in feeling from that of Madewood or the earlier courthouses, and a harbinger of the increasing verticality to be found in Howard's work, i.e. Nottaway Plantation, Belmont, Cyprien Dufour house etc.

Specifications

The specifications are quite specific as to the quality of materials to be used in the building. Its design was radically different from the classical courthouse. A two story building of extremely geometrical design, it can only be described as Regency in its inspiration. It vanished many years ago and apparently only one photograph of the building is known to exist.

Howard was to go on to at least three more courthouses. The imposing Thibodeaux courthouse much altered during the war dates from 1859. In a neo-Roman style probably influenced by the writings of Joseph Gwilt, the building originally faced the Bayou and was an imposing centerpiece to that prosperous parish seat. After the war Howard designed at least two more courthouses: Yazoo, Mississippi, still standing, and a fine example of the typical courthouse.

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employed on this important building and from those specifications some idea of the original floor plan can be recovered. The court room was on the first floor and contained the judge's chambers with judges' chambers and jury rooms adjacent to the central chamber. Swing ing, louvered basins separated the court room from the hall. Ceiling cornices, medallions, and Woodlawn marble, described in some detail and the staircases are to be relied with Santo Domingo mahogany.
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Jailhouse

The jailhouse was placed behind the pre- 

scarce twenty years old, was converted to use as a public school. At that time the elaborate interior was dismantled but the building itself remains as a proud reminder of Carrollton's important past and a splendid example of the "typical" country courthouse.

Victor McGee is an architectural historian and researcher for the Historic New Orleans Collection, and an authority on 19th century architecture in New Orleans, specifically the work of Henry Howard.

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