



Old Red, Former Dallas County Courthouse

"Old Red," the iconic Dallas County Courthouse, served in that role from the late 19th century until the mid-20th century. Completed in 1892, it stands today as a proud survivor of the Golden Age of Texas Courthouses.

Construction contracts were issued around 1890. Robert L. James won the bid with a \$365,000 proposal. Original plans called for Little Rock granite and a two-year build.

Earlier Courthouses

Dallas County's first courthouse was a modest 10' × 10' log cabin used by John Neely Bryan from 1846 to 1848. A second wooden plank structure (16' × 32') with a mud chimney followed in 1850. The third, a two-story brick building (50' × 50'), opened in 1855 and served about 17 years. A domed sandstone courthouse completed in 1872 burned in 1880. Its replacement, finished in 1881, also burned in 1890, clearing the way for Old Red.

Design and Construction

Old Red exemplifies Romanesque Revival architecture. The primary architect was Max A. Orlopp, Jr., who maintained an office in Dallas. Born in Brooklyn in 1859, Orlopp graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1881, worked initially as a railroad surveyor, and entered architecture in 1885. He designed multiple buildings in Dallas and other courthouses in Missouri and Arkansas.

The structure features red Pecos limestone on the upper floors and Arkansas blue granite on the lower level. Cubic stone was chosen partly to reduce fire risk after previous wooden and earlier stone buildings were lost to flames.

Construction began in 1890. During the project, contractor James was replaced and Orlopp took on supervisory duties. A prominent original feature was a tower housing a 4,500-pound bell and a large clock. Though the tower remained visually dominant for years, structural concerns led to its removal in 1919. The building then had a flat roof for much of the following century.

Cornerstone Ceremony

The cornerstone was laid on November 13, 1890, in a Masonic ceremony conducted by the Tannehill Lodge. The massive 5,760-pound blue granite block (2 × 3 × 3 feet) came from Fouché Mountain in Little Rock, Arkansas.

It contained artifacts from the previous courthouse's cornerstone—including a greenback dollar, lodge documents, a Bible, Confederate money, and other items—plus new additions: lodge bylaws, relics donated by Mrs. Sarah Cockerell (Dallas's oldest resident at the time), samples of wheat and corn, flour from Todd Milling Company, local newspapers, a coin from John Neely Bryan, Jr. (considered the first child born in Dallas County), and railroad switch keys from the MKT and Santa Fe lines.

Restoration

In 2007, a major renovation restored the building's historic appearance, including reconstruction of the tower using modern engineering for stability. Although original quarries were unavailable, close-matching stone was sourced. The project required an estimated 5,500 cubic feet of sandstone and granite.

Old Red remains a landmark, illustrating both Dallas County's early history and the architectural ambitions of late-19th-century Texas. Its survival and restoration preserve an important chapter in the region's development from frontier days through the modern era.



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