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Home News The Old Hendry County Courthouse – then and now

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# The Old Hendry County Courthouse – then and now

Jan 13th, 2017 · by Amanda Nelson · Comments: 0

**That was then:** The Old Hendry County Courthouse was completed and ready for business in 1927. Designed in the Mediterranean Revival-Mission Revival style by noted Lakeland, FL architect Edward Columbus Hosford, the structure was added to the U.S. National Register of Historic Places on November 8, 1990.

During the planning stages, concepts and designs for the new courthouse were bounced around for many months. At one time, it was suggested that the clock tower be removed from the blueprint in an effort to save money. This idea was removed from the table rather quickly as most people felt it would leave the building looking too ordinary.

After several months of talks and planning, the Hendry County Commissioners accepted Hosford's plans for the new courthouse in LaBelle on June 5, 1925. The editor of the News of Hendry County described the design as "something of beauty, with a 70-foot tower and 1,000 pound bell that would toll the passing hours in the Big Ben clock." Even then, the clock tower was a conversation starter.

As the county officials pressed on and made their way through several obstacles and setbacks, the Hendry County Courthouse was finally completed. The commissioners were able to move in and work out of the new building on May 3, 1927. Everyone was delighted to see the new \$3,000 Seth Thomas electrically-regulated clock installed in the tower as well.

Unfortunately, the clock tended to lose time and would be in frequent need of winding. As a young man, the late Ray C. Hull, Sr. would scramble up the inside of the tower to wind the clock. His widow, Rosa Lee Hull, stated that "they chose him because he was so thin and could move easily up the steps." Sadly, no amount of winding would save this clock from its eventual impending destiny of doom.

Over the years, questions have been raised about the story behind the broken clock and the missing bell that once sat in the expansive tower of the Old Hendry County Courthouse. Tales have been told about the clock and the reason that time seemed to stand still.

Some believe that the corrupt trial, lynching and eventual murder of an innocent man on June 3, 1926 lead to the wrath of God against the town. For nearly three years following the horrifying incident, each time lightning struck the clock, commissioners would promptly have it repaired. However, as soon as the clock was fixed, lightning

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would strike it again and again. This prompted many to believe that the tower was cursed from above. Was this God's way of telling the people of LaBelle of His displeasure with their actions?

Perhaps the most telling sign came on July 4, 1929 when a vicious lightning storm passed through the small town of LaBelle. After lightening struck the tower, a large section of the cornice stone from the top of the structure crashed down through the roof and fell almost on top of the judge's bench. Interestingly enough, this also just happened to be in the same courtroom where the previously noted corrupt trial had been held. Many believed that this was indeed "divine retribution".

Following this incident, the editor for News of Hendry County wrote that the clock was hit "in the solar plexus and it was at that time the bell went down for the count and tolled no more." Time stood still in LaBelle for many years to come. Some chose to believe in the legend surrounding the clock's demise while others believed it was simply due to a cruel act of Mother Nature.

Shortly thereafter and not wanting to chance any further destruction, Commissioners frantically disassembled the clock and stored its parts in the courthouse basement. They even removed the hands from the four faces of the clock, rendering it useless. According to Martha Rae Humphries, the bell was eventually removed and donated to the First Baptist Church of LaBelle.

After some time and no further lightening strikes to the dismantled clock tower, many folks believed that perhaps God was now appeased. With the old clock no longer ticking and the bell being displayed at a church, it was believable that it was time for new beginnings. It appeared that LaBelle's cursed clock tower might have finally hit a new turning point allowing it to escape from its turbulent past.

Many decades later, efforts were once again made to restore the clock tower on the Old Hendry County Courthouse. On February 22, 1975 at 3 p.m., a new clock was installed in the tower. It is reported that folks held their breath as time once again started in LaBelle – leaving time to no longer stand still. Interestingly enough, there have been no further incidents of the clock being struck by lightening since the installation.

Since 1975, the clock has still had its share of functioning issues. Funding to make repairs delayed any hopes of having a working timepiece atop the tower. As of today, the clock is no longer working. The hands simply sit still.

Fortunately for the small town of LaBelle, it seems that there may be changes coming in the near future.

**This is now:** According to Janet Papinaw, Office of Budgets and Grants Director, "the Florida Department of State Division of Historical Resources provides state funds for

historic preservation. The purpose of the program is to provide funding to preserve significant historic structures and archaeological sites, assist major archaeological excavations, and assist in the development and fabrication of major museum exhibits that will promote knowledge and appreciation of the history of Florida.”



The hands on the clock may soon start moving again.  
(Submitted photo/Waddy Thompson)

She went on to note that “the state funds are appropriated by the Florida Legislature. Applications are ranked by a committee, and Hendry County scored in the top 10 in the entire state. We have been fortunate to receive two Special Category Grants to rehabilitate, restore and preserve the Old Hendry County Courthouse. The first grant was for \$350,000 to rehabilitate the foundation.”

Papinaw explained that “there are 37 poured-in-place beams on pillars, each 55’ long. When the courthouse was constructed in 1926, the concrete was poured into corrugated metal pans that were supported by the pillars. The beams have deteriorated over the years and most of the damage was done over 70 years ago. Flood waters from the Caloosahatchee River flooded LaBelle six times (4 hurricanes, 2 rain events) from 1928 – 1960 and the bottom of the metal pans have rusted away, exposing the concrete and rebar, which expands as it corrodes, popping off chunks of concrete (“spalling”). In the 4’ crawl space under the courthouse, the contractor is sandblasting and/or replacing the rusted rebar, sealing it and encapsulating the beams in epoxy. This project will be done by April 2017.”

According to Papinaw, “the next phase is the Façade Preservation (\$500,000) which includes activities to eliminate the water intrusion issues with the roof, rotten downspouts and fascia, deteriorated mortar joints, cracks in the yellow brick façade, and 98 leaky windows. The water intrusion is causing extensive damage to the ceilings, walls and around windows on the interior. All preservation activities must be done in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior’s Standard for Rehabilitation and Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings. For example, the replacing of the mortar joints must all be done by hand (no power tools), mortar is matched with color and consistency as the original and broken bricks are replaced with color matched brick. The brick tuck and repointing will be done in several phases.”

Once the foundation grant is closed, Papinaw can then apply for an additional \$500,000 to continue the brickwork and restore the original face and hands of the clock face as well as install new digital clock works. She noted that, “I have a proposal from the Verdin Company who has restored more than 1,000 clocks, bells, and carillons in Florida and over 50,000 worldwide. Their clocks are built to be waterproof, windproof, and built to withstand extreme climate conditions. The price for the timepiece, clock hands, back lighting, clock dial refurbishment, delivery, installation, and a 3-year warranty is \$42,260.”

If bells and chimes are desired, an additional \$10,790 would have to be spent on the digital carillon Sonata that provides a large music package. This package includes liturgical bells, Westminster chime & clock strike, and hundreds of hymns and songs including Christmas and Patriotic.

Papinaw noted that “the application is due to the State by June 30th, 2017. The funding would be approved by the 2018 Legislative and funds would be made available after

July 1, 2018. It would be a two-year project timeline.”

Most visitors who pass through LaBelle will never know the history behind this beautiful piece of architecture. Choose what you want to believe. Either way, it’s nice to know that soon time in this small town will no longer stand still thanks to the Old Hendry County Courthouse’s new clock.

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