

*Houston County Courthouses*

Houston County has had five courthouses, including the present one, and their stories have a proper place in this history. Two of these were destroyed by fire and two were removed to make place for new ones. Much of Houston County's history clusters around these buildings.

It is not definitely known just when the first courthouse was erected, but there is good reason to believe that it was built as early as January or February 1838, for the county government was functioning then, and deeds and other legal documents were being recorded by Jacob Allbright, the first county clerk. The author has in his possession an original certificate of record showing that a certain instrument was recorded by Jacob Allbright in March, 1838, and that it was recorded in Book "A" of the Deed Records of Houston County. The author also has in his possession an old surveyor's record, containing the genuine signature of George Aldrich, the first county surveyor of Houston County, showing that surveys were made by him as early as February 26, 1838 and his official signature appears thereto as county surveyor of Houston County, and that Wm. S. McDonald was his deputy.

The first courthouse was constructed of logs and the author has a letter from Wm. Erwin, a son of John Erwin, a pioneer, who says that his father told him he worked upon the first courthouse when it was erected. Mrs. Bella Romain, who still lives in Crockett at the age of 94 years, is a daughter of L. E. Downes, who came to Houston County in 1839, and she says that when her father first came to Crockett that a log courthouse stood on the public square where the present courthouse now stands. Adolphus Sterne of Nacogdoches wrote a diary giving an account of a trip that he made through Crockett in 1850, and that he was in the courthouse at that time. That was prior to the erection of the courthouse in 1851, which was a brick structure.

The history of this second courthouse is an interesting and colorful one. The need for a new courthouse, and the inadequacy of the old log courthouse, became evident as early as 1850, and the citizens of Houston County petitioned the legislature for authority to levy a special tax in order to raise a fund for the erection of a new courthouse. As this old document contains the names of so many pioneers we believe that it has a proper place in this history and it is as follows:

"To the Senate and House of Representatives of the State of Texas:

"The undersigned citizens of Houston County respectfully petition your Honorable bodies for the passage of a special law authorizing the county court of said county to levy for the year 1851, and as often thereafter as may be necessary, an extra tax, not to exceed the county tax upon all property within the limits of said county subject to taxation, for the purpose of raising a fund for the construction of a courthouse of suitable plan and dimensions to be determined on by said court:

John Long	B. C. Vaughan	Wm. M. Peck
John McConnell	C. W. Bracken	A. T. Monroe
J. H. Collard	James R. Kimberly	Moses Warden
E. Collard	Clinton Allen	Geo. E. W. Bennick
M. McDonald	Thomas B. Hender-	Solomon Allbright
Chas. Wood	son	A. Morley
Cyrus H. Randolph	John P. Smith	O. C. Aldrich
S. R. Mayfield	John L. Hall	John G. Pettitt
Jno. A. Clark	S. A. Miller, whose	James C. Dupree
William Vaughan	name is followed	John Montgomery
John I. Burton	by a rubric	F. D. Bodenhamer
W. H. L. Burton	J. H. Gillespie	J. T. Heflin
D. L. Burton	C. Nevills	S. E. Kennedy
John Platt	John R. Hayes	Thos. P. Collins
John Wortham	Jos. F. Edmiston	Geo. F. Moore
Sam'l J. W. Long	B. B. Smith	Isaac Adair
J. H. Kirchoffer	A. C. King	D. L. Burton
Daniel Dailey	James English	W. M. James
J. W. Bodenhamer	Jesse David	Jacob H. Burton
W. F. Wall	George Ramsdale	Nathaniel W. Burton
John Lee	Maurice Townsend	J. R. Evans
Wm. Taylor	E. Pollard	John Smith
John Jones	L. E. Downes	Stilwell Box
F. H. Hill	Mat J. Edmiston	
	Benj. G. Hardwick	

This document is endorsed as follows: "Petition of Citizens of Houston Co. asking taxes to be levied to build a courthouse, ets. Referred to Committee on Finance, November 28, 1850."

The following proceedings were had in the Legislature upon the foregoing petition:

"Thursday, November 28, 1850

"Mr. Parker presented the petition of the citizens of Houston County, asking tax to be levied to build a courthouse, etc. referred to Committee on Finance."

Journals of the Senate of the State of Texas, Third Legislature. Third Session, P. 50.

"Friday, November 29, 1850.

"Mr. Grimes, chairman of the Committee on Finance, to whom was referred the petitions of the citizens of Houston County reported a bill to authorize the County Court of Houston County to levy a special tax for county purposes. Read first time.

"On motion of Mr. Parker, the rule was suspended; bill read second time and ordered to be engrossed.

"On motion of Mr. Parker, the rule was further suspended; bill read third time and passed."

Journals of the Senate of the State of Texas, Third Legislature, Third session, p. 57.

"Austin, November 29, 1850

"A message was received from the senate, through their secretary, Mr. Raymond, informing the House that the Senate had passed a bill to be entitled an Act to Authorize the County Court of Houston County to levy a special tax for county purposes."

"Austin, November 30, 1850.

"Senate's bill to be entitled 'An Act to Authorize the County Court of Houston County to levy a Special Tax for County Taxes. Read first time."

"Austin, December 2, 1850

"Senate's bill to be entitled 'An Act to Authorize the County Court to levy a Special Tax for County Purposes,' read second time and passed to third reading."

As a result of the Act of the Legislature in 1850, authorizing the Commissioners Court of Houston County to levy a special tax for the year, 1851, a courthouse was erected during the year 1851, being a brick courthouse erected on the public square to replace the old log courthouse that had remained there ever

since 1837. The bricks for the courthouse were burned and made here in Crockett and the author is of the opinion that the brick yard was located about where the residence of Dr. W. C. Lipscomb stands, as he had seen at that place evidences of an old brick yard.

The courthouse was a substantial structure and sufficient to accommodate the various offices from the year 1851 until it was destroyed by fire on February 2, 1865. The cause of the fire that destroyed the courthouse was never solved, but a prominent citizen of Crockett was suspected of having caused the fire in order to destroy some records.

After the destruction of the brick courthouse in 1865, the county was without a courthouse for about four years. The courts were held in a building owned by L. E. Downes situated on the Southwest corner of the public square where the building erected by W. M. Patton and now owned by Mrs. O'Bannon, stands at this time. It is occupied by Morrow's Grocery Store, known as the Red & White. The various officers occupied temporary quarters until a new courthouse of lumber was erected about 1869. This was a large two-story, wooden building, the upper story being used for a courtroom, and was used as a courthouse until it was destroyed by fire in November, 1882.

The burning of this courthouse resulted in a great tragedy as a jail was located in said building when the fire originated in a room occupied by the jailor and near the only door giving entrance to the jail. The scene of that fire is a dreadful memory to the people who were awakened out of their sleep by the fire alarm. Every possible effort was made to break through the wall of the jail and release the prisoners but all in vain. At least two prisoners burned in the jail, and their charred bodies presented a horrible picture on the morning following the destructive fire. The wooden structure was built by John H. Burnett.

While this wooden structure was in course of construction a petition was presented to the legislature for a remission of the State Tax levied in Houston County, so that the citizens could raise funds for the erection of a new courthouse. We believe that this petition is a historic document and has a proper place in this history. It is signed by a large number of Crockett and Houston County citizens and their names will recall many prominent citizens of that day. The petition is as follows:

"TO THE HONORABLE, THE TEXAS LEGISLATURE OF  
THE STATE OF TEXAS, NOW IN SESSION AT AUSTIN:

"Your petitioners, the citizens of the County of Houston, said State, would respectfully represent that in 1864 the town of Crockett was almost entirely consumed by fire, in 1865, the courthouse thereof was destroyed by fire; in April 1871, the jail and a large portion of the town was consumed by fire, on the first day of October the entire portion of the town remaining was destroyed.

"Before this last fire the county and police court had made provision for the erection of a new courthouse and jail, and the same is now in process of construction. In view of this series of untoward and calamitous misfortunes and the further fact that our crop for 1871 has been set off to less than one-half of a crop by the protracted drouth of last summer and the consequent prostration of our financial prosperity, and pecuniary embarrassment, and the great difficulty we experienced to raise the funds necessary to meet the demands of the government in the way of general and special taxes including the levies for building the courthouse and jail we would respectfully ask of the legislature a remission of the State Tax levied and collected in this county to the county to aid us in building the aforesaid public buildings:

H. W. McNeill	S. C. Haile
C. W. Hall	James Burch
Thos. J. Calhoun	S. A. Miller
Wm. V. Tunstall	H. W. Moore
Jas. C. Wootters	W. H. B. Lacy
W. P. Hayes	John Delong
Edw. Haupt	Frank E. Downes
F. H. Bayne	Jas. D. English
D. M. Murchison	T. J. Cook
F. H. Wagner	Clinton Allen
S. C. Arledge	John De Long
G. W. Leaverton	C. M. Monday
William Johnson	D. A. Nunn
Wm. B. Beavers	John H. Drake
O. P. Millican	Sydney Dailey
J. H. Burnett	David Fryar
W. E. Hail	John Blair,
S. J. Jones	J. P. Pre. 1.

A. M. Race
Thomas Harrison
Martin Reed
J. A. Janes
T. J. Stubblefield
J. H. Lee
Louis Loeske
J. R. Simpson
W. E. Burnett
Isaac Zillig
E. L. Simpson
Robt. Furlow
Geo. W. Roberts
W. H. Riggs
Z. Stidham
R. S. Pridgen
Joseph Beavers
Kenneth Murchison

W. H. Berry	H. G. Foot	A. E. Gossett
John I. Burton	B. W. Neal	John Rose
John B. Smith	M. M. Murchison	John Allen
James Collins	Wm. Worth	H. R. Jordan
John McConnell	Robert Flynn	J. T. Kent
A. P. Howel	J. F. Arledge	J. J. Woodson
John McGill	John Douglass	James Hyde
E. Curie	C. C. Guytor	S. V. Hyde"
J. E. Downes	J. C. Lacy	
W. H. Cundiff	E. M. Oliver	

Another petition was sent up to the legislature in connection with the building of the wooden courthouse in 1871, and will be found of interest to our citizens which is as follows (copy uncorrected):

"TO THE HONORABLE SENATE AND HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF TEXAS:

"The undersigned would most respectfully memorelize you honorable boddies & State that in the year 1864 the most of our Town, Crockett the county site of Houston County was consumed by fire that is to say 22-buildings business houses including the principal Hotell in the place, and again in the month of Sept. 1865 The Court House inc(1)uding the office of both the District Clerk & County Clerk and all the Books papers & records were consumed by fire and now on the 22nd day of April 1871, we are again visited with an other Severe fire consuming one entire Square including our county jail which was nearly new and one that we had build at great expense for a county so low in funds as we.

"We therefor— most respectfully state that today we are without either jail or courthouse. We are compelled to Hold our Dist. Courts in a Room over a Store House whis is of great inconvenienc, our courts of necessary holding fifteen weeks in the year. We wold futher state that over one-half of our voting population are of the newly infranshied & have no property, consequently no tax that the people can possible bear— (deleted) —will for years to come be sufficient to erect a court House & jail. In fact it will take all the Tax, raised for purposes of that character to pay for Rents, for court House Room, Jury Rooms &c & the expense of boarding prisoners in the jail of other

counties and other expenses attending conveying prisoners to & from the county.

"We therefor most earnestly Memorialize & Pray You Honorable Boddies to pass a law permitting the County of Houston to retain the State taxes for Two years to enable her to erect the Public building we so much need & cannot erect without the relief here prayed for.

"John Blair, Presiding Justice.

"S. D. Sullivan, J. P. Prct. No. 3

"C. B. Keel, J. P. Pres. No. 4

"John Kirkpatrick, No. 5

"I do hope the Legislatur-- will grant the Relief here Sought. there is but one jail in my Judicial district & that a very inferior one—(deleted)—but one Court House in the Dist & that a frame hall.

"Leroy W. Cooper, Judge 3rd Dist."

Another petition or memorial that was presented to the legislature in connection with the old wooden courthouse is of sufficient interest to deserve a place here. It is as follows (copy uncorrected):

"TO THE HONORABLE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF TEXAS:

"We the under signer Members of the County Court of Houston County would respectfully represent to your Honorable body that we are Justly indepted (sic) to John H. Burnett in the Sume of about five thousand dollars in Money ballance due to him for building & completing according to the Contract & specifications formerly Entered into by the County Court of said County with the said Jno H. Burnett a Court House & jail in the town of Crockett for the use & benefit of the state & county and that the same was done in due time and according to the Contract & specifications and was received by us about one year ago which building was to have been paid for by us according to contract & specifications when completed in cash at that time and Ever since there was & has not been any money in the treasury of said county to pay said dept, we therefore respectfully ask the passage of a bill—(Deleted)—authorising

said Court to levey a special Tax to pay the said ballance due on the said Court House & jail to be collected as soon as practiable. Very Respectfully Your obt. Servants.

"We further respectfully represent that the amount due said Burnett is drawing interest at the rate of twelve per centum per annum, which is gradually augmenting the amount of our county indebtedness.

Very Respectfully,

"John Blair, Presiding Justice Prec. No. 1, H. Co.

"C. D. Skidmore, J. P. Prec. No. 2

"C. G. Oliver, J. P. prec. No. 3, H. Co.

"C. B. Keel, J. P. prec. 4

"Sam H. Sharp, J. P. Prec. No. 5, H. Co."

Immediately after the destruction of the wooden courthouse in 1882, the Commissioners Court began preparations for the erection of another courthouse. A contract was made to build a brick courthouse and the brick were burned at a place immediately south of the present residence of Congressman Nat Patton. The courthouse was finished during the year 1883, and its erection was supervised by O. Peterson, who came to Crockett from Jefferson, Texas, for that purpose. Judge W. B. Wall was the county judge at that time and a bond issue of \$20,000.00 was ordered by the Commissioners Court to provide funds to cover both the costs of the building and furnishing the same. Col. Thos. H. Nelms of Pennington purchased all or a greater part of the bonds. This was the fourth courthouse and was used as such until the contract was made for the present splendid building that constitutes the chief ornament of our City.

The campaign that was made in favor of a bond issue for the erection of this courthouse is familiar to our people today. In addition to a bond issue, a PWA grant of \$90,000.00 was first obtained and later an additional amount was added to this. The people of Crockett will remember the dedication exercises when this building was completed. It will probably last for almost another century.