Texas Courthouses
by J. Riely Gordon
Each Different - Each the Same
Texas architect, J. Riely Gordon, designed fifteen Texas courthouses which were completed between 1889 and 1901. His specialty was constructing public buildings mainly in the “Romanesque Revival” style. Reilly’s most successful plan was that of a Greek cross with a square central stairwell and quarter-circular entrance porches in each corner. He built a dozen courthouses of this type in Texas between 1891 and 1900.

Among his other notable buildings was the Arizona State Capitol at Phoenix, and the Texas Pavilion at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Although Gordon is best known for public buildings, he did also design a few notable houses for wealthy clients in both Gonzales and San Antonio.

Riely's courthouse work can still be found in Bexar, Comal, Ellis, Erath, Fayette, Gonzalez, Hopkins, Lee, McLennan, Victoria, and Wise Counties. The courthouses he designed for Aransas County and Brazoria County are long gone, while the courthouses he designed for Harrison and Van Zandt Counties no longer function as the county courthouse, having been replaced by more “modern” courthouses.

**Fifteen Texas Courthouses Designed by J. Riely Gordon**

**Aransas County** was created out of the coastal portion of Refugio County in 1871. The current courthouse, a “classic example of 1950s architecture,” was built in 1953. The 1899 Aransas County Courthouse in Lockport, was designed by Gordon in the “Renaissance” and “Moorish” revival architectural styles. Architects, particularly those from the eastern U.S., somehow associated palm trees and severe humidity with north Africa and southern Spain. Most of Gordon's designs took climates into consideration, providing ventilation through placement of doors with a central tower.

The 1899 courthouse was razed in the 1960s. Gordon also designed the two-story brick jail house, which was used until 1955.
Bexar County has been under the political rule of several countries since its creation as a part of “New Spain” - Spain, Mexico, the Republic of Texas, the Confederate States of America, and the United States. Gordon moved to Bexar County as a child with his mother and his father, a civil engineer. As a young San Antonian architect his first major design job was to supervise the construction of the San Antonio Federal Courthouse & Post Office in 1869.

The current Bexar County Courthouse is the largest and oldest continuously operated courthouse in Texas. Each of the previous buildings (1837, 1850 and 1882) was located within two blocks of the existing historic courthouse. Gordon’s 1892 Courthouse has been the subject of four major additions (1914, 1927, 1963 and 1972).

Brazoria County was organized in 1836 and a wooden building was the first courthouse at the (then) county seat, the town of Brazoria. The current county seat, Angleton, was Brazoria's rival for the county seat and Angleton had the advantage of having a railroad. The citizens of Brazoria hired Gordon to build a courthouse (which cost a reported $90,000), the idea being that, with such a fine, attention-getting courthouse, Brazoria would retain its status as county seat. The efforts were all in vain, however, as an election was head in 1896, and the county seat moved to its current location in Angleton. The local myth that the courthouse was moved after the records were stolen and moved to Angleton is just that -- a myth. The records were moved when Gordon’s courthouse was razed, in 1941.
Comal County was formed in 1846 and New Braunfels was designated as the county seat. The first courthouse was built in 1849. That building was used until 1860, when it replaced with a larger (two-story) courthouse. Gordon was hired to design the current courthouse in 1896.

Originally meant to be placed in the center of the plaza, the courthouse plan was based upon a “Greek Cross” and features an entrance on each of the four sides. When the site was moved to a lot on the northwest corner of the plaza, the plans were not changed and the entrances remained.

Recently, in an effort to restore the building to its original design, a number of additions to the exterior of the building were removed, including the jail addition, the one story first floor addition, and the sky bridge on the north side of the building. An Austin company was hired to restore and/or replicate all of the original wood windows, many of which had been replaced by aluminum windows. On the interior, the original geometric tan and blue tiles that had been removed from the first and second floors were replicated and replaced. Two of the original entry porticos which had been enclosed have been fully restored. Colors and wallpaper now match the originals which grace the walls of this historic building, and the courthouse was rededicated last month.

Ellis County was created out of Navarro County, and Waxahachie became the county seat the following year. Hired to plan the new County Courthouse, Gordon used a floor-plan different from many other county courthouses in Texas of the same vintage.

Many county courthouses built in this time period had intersecting halls on the first floor that created the rigidity required to support the weight of the district courtroom positioned near the middle of the building on the second floor. Gordon used a floor plan that provided an open space at the center of the building first surrounded by a staircase then surrounded by a gallery that provided access to offices and courtrooms. Gordon’s design also features turrets containing spiral stairways and balconies which incorporate readily with the circular form. The building is further enhanced by the use of stone of contrasting colors. From the building’s base first gray and then pink granite are used. Built primarily with Texas granite, limestone, and marble, red Pecos sandstone is used for accent, and cream colored sandstone is also used sparingly on a few string courses.
Erath County was formed from Bosque and Coryell counties in 1856. The original 1866 wooden courthouse burned to the ground, destroying county documents along with it. A second stone courthouse was built in 1877 but eventually razed.

The cornerstone for the current courthouse, another designed by Gordon, showcases Victorian era architecture. The building was completed in 1893, with limestone from the Leon River and red sandstone from Pecos County.

The building’s centralized 95-foot tower has a bell tower and creates a chandelied atrium from the first floor to the third. The interior is east Texas pine, with cast and wrought-iron stairways, and tessellated imported marble floors. It was renovated in 1988, then again in 2002-2003.

Fayette County’s first “hall of justice” was a house-grocery store which was purchased for $250.00 and moved to the public square. It served its purpose from 1838, the year the county was organized, until 1848 when the second courthouse was built. This wooden structure was two stories tall and sported a bell.

The third courthouse was built in 1855 and stood until the county erected the fourth and final courthouse in 1890. The three story Gordon designed building is built of masonry and stone in the Romanesque Revival structure.

All offices and the courtroom are arranged around a 30-foot square central courtyard. The exterior walls are built from blue sandstone and trimmed with red Pecos sandstone, Burnet granite, and Belton white limestone. In the tower front a bald eagle is carved on a 5-foot by 14-foot slab of stone.

There is a clock tower which rises 100 feet from the ground. On the corners of the tower and above the side entrances are dragons carved out of the eight ridge points.
Gonzales County was established in 1836 and organized in 1837 as one of the original counties in the Republic of Texas. It occupied the same area as impresario, Green C. DeWitt’s colony -- a territory which was some sixty miles long and twenty-five miles wide. Subsequently, before and after annexation of Texas to the U.S., in 1845, portions of Gonzales County were detached to form what are now the counties of Caldwell, Comal, DeWitt, Fayette, Guadalupe, Jackson, Lavaca, and Victoria.

There have been four courthouses at Gonzales since it was created. The third one, built in 1857, had a cistern in the middle of the courthouse that could hold more than three hundred barrels of water. It didn't hold enough because on December 3, 1893, the courthouse burned down.

The current Gordon designed courthouse was completed in 1896. It features Romanesque Revival style and was built with red brick (from Missouri) and a white limestone from a nearby quarry.

Harrison County was established in 1839. The “old” county courthouse, designed by J. Riely Gordon, is located in the center of Whetstone Square in Marshall, and is one of the most famous courthouses in Texas. It was replaced by a more “modern” courthouse in 1964 and was home of the county historical society for many years. The courthouse is reported to have been the sight of Texas’ first “sit in,” and is well known for its overt illumination during the Christmas season.

The old building’s dome is its most distinctive feature and stands above a four-level rotunda. A belfry, reminiscent of the lantern on top of the U.S. Capitol, is located on top of the outer dome. On the top of the belfry is a 6-foot tall statue of Lady Justitia, which has the typical features of any Lady Justice: a blindfold, scales, and raised sword; as well as the rather atypical feature of a set of wings.
Hopkins County was created from land formerly in Lamar and Nacogdoches counties in March of 1846. An 1895 Gordon designed courthouse sits on the northeast corner of the town square in Sulphur Springs, the county seat. The previous courthouse, built on the east side of the original town square, burned down in 1894.

The courthouse in Hopkins County is similar in many ways to all the other county courthouses J. Riely Gordon designed for nearby Texas counties. One notable difference is the omission of a clock in the central tower. According to local legend, citizens did ask for a clock to be placed in the courthouse tower.

County officials agreed on having a clock in the tower, but wouldn’t provide funding for it. County Commissioner R. Carpenter had his own opinion about the clock and he let it be known: “Get up at sunup; go to bed at dark, and eat when you are hungry, and you don’t need no damn clock.”

Lee County, was created in 1874, from Burleson, Washington, Bastrop, and Fayette counties. An election to determine the county seat was held in 1874 after a heated and bitter campaign. Although Lexington was the older town and was surrounded by better farmland, Giddings won, primarily because it was a railroad town. A two-story courthouse with a mansard roof was completed in 1878. After the first courthouse burned in 1897, a new Gordon designed courthouse was built in 1899.

According to a plaque placed in 1968, the Lee County Courthouse (which is still in use today) was designed “along lines similar to New York State Capitol and several buildings at Harvard University. Classified as a Richardsonian Romanesque style, after the famous Louisiana-born architect Henry B. Richardson, the courthouse was built by Sonnefield, Emmins and Abright of San Antonio, in 1899, and replaced the first courthouse, which burned 1897, which was located on crest of divide separating the Colorado and Brazos River Basins.
McLennan County was created from portions of Robertson and Milam counties in 1850. A two-story log court building was completed in August 1851. The county seat, Waco, had been founded originally as an outpost of the Texas Rangers, laid out by George Erath, and was known by 1850 as "Waco Village." A brick courthouse was built in 1856, but, because of problems with that structure, including two fatalities due to faulty second floor doors, the county built a new courthouse and jail in the mid-1870s. By 1900, this third county courthouse was too small for the county’s needs, and a Gordon designed courthouse was built during 1901-1902. Gordon used plans from an unsuccessful bid on the Missouri state capitol as the basis for the plans for McLennan County.

The “Beaux-Arts” style building is said to have been inspired by St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome. According to the Waco Tribune, Gordon’s courthouse emerged as one of his last and most impressive creations before he packed off to begin an eminent career in New York.

The Gordon designed courthouse cost $210,000 and included three courtrooms. It had Georgia marble inside, Texas pink granite and limestone outside, and stained-glass skylights in the rotunda. The roof includes classical statues of Themis, Justicia and Liberty and a flock of eagles, notably untraditional in one regard: They originally were wired so their eyes would glow red at night.

On top of the courthouse’s dome is a small lantern, crowned by a statue of Themis, the Greek goddess of divine law and justice. The statue is holding the scales of Justice in her left hand and the hilt of a sword in her right. According to a Texas courthouse historian, Terry Jeanson, the blade of the sword fell off after a storm and was never replaced.
Van Zandt County was organized in 1848 with Jordan’s Saline as the county seat. The county’s first courthouse, a building with a square floor plan, possibly in the Greek Revival style, was built there the same year. In 1850, Wood County was cut from land belonging to Van Zandt County, leaving the county seat in the northeastern part of the county. The centrally located town of Canton was selected as the new county seat in 1850. A log cabin was built in Canton to serve as the county’s second courthouse, but it was only meant to be temporary, and a third courthouse, a brick structure with a square floor plan, was built in 1859. In 1873, the citizens of Canton built a fourth courthouse, a fifty foot square two-story wood frame building, replacing the 1859 courthouse which had been condemned.

The county’s fifth courthouse, designed by J. Riely Gordon and built of brick in the “Richardsonian Romanesque” style on a Greek cross plan, was built between 1894 and 1896. The building had a three-story main section with a six-story tower with a copper eagle on top of a pyramidal roof. The building contained corner entrances, dormers, chimneys and turrets with patterns in the brick at the roof line, and served the county until it was demolished in 1935 for the building of a sixth courthouse, but the cornerstone and copper eagle survive and are displayed on the south lawn of the current courthouse grounds. The county’s sixth, and current courthouse, was built between 1936 and 1937, with funds from the Public Works Administration.

Victoria County’s first Commissioners Court met in a hand-hewn log church. A petition was presented to the court to procure a courthouse other than church which was built for the purpose of religious worship, and, in 1849 an official courthouse was built. When the county outgrew the small structure, the site was cleared and the Gordon designed was completed in 1892. Gordon also designed the current courthouse in Romanesque Revival style. Interestingly, he was fired as builder/architect when he failed to live up to his contract, which required him to be present every day of construction.
Wise County was officially established by Legislature in 1856, with land drawn mostly from Cooke County, and was named in honor of Henry Wise, a U.S. Congressman from Virginia who had supported the annexation of Texas. The location of the county seat of Wise County was selected by a county election and, although the town was originally named Taylorsville, but was soon changed to Decatur, which remains the seat of Wise County government to the present.

The present courthouse is the fourth constructed in the county. The third courthouse was destroyed by fire on January 8, 1895. The burning of the third courthouse set off a controversy over the location of the county seat. An election was held in November of 1895 to see if the new courthouse should be constructed at a new location. Voters confirmed by a wide margin that Decatur was to remain the county seat.

Plans for a courthouse were accepted from several architects, but on May 10, 1895 the contract was awarded to Gordon, who also agreed to superintend the project. Construction began in June of 1895, and, in January of 1897, the building was completed. The Wise County Courthouse is one of several designed by Gordon in Texas in the last years of the nineteenth century. Compared to the Ellis County Courthouse in Waxahachie, the Wise County Courthouse is based on the cruciform plan and the Romanesque Revival architectural style which were both used with great success by Gordon in Texas.

**Fifteen Courthouses -- All Different -- All the Same**

Many commentators have noticed the significant similarities between many of Gordon’s courthouse designs. Texas Escapes On-Line Magazine (www.texasescapes.com), in fact, pointed out that there are similarities in the Victoria County and Fayette County Courthouses. A visual comparison supports this theory.
Texas Escapes has also noted that the Comal County and Lee County Courthouses are almost identical, and opine that Gordon “saved money on the blueprints.” A visual comparison also supports their theory. Given our knowledge of Texas’ politics, this is clearly a possibility.

![Comal County Courthouse and Lee County Courthouse](image)

Obviously, as the Comal County structure is native limestone and the Lee County building is red brick, it can be sometimes impossible to recognize the similar. Add to this that, in the late 19th Century, nobody could do the type of easy Internet research utilized to create this article, recognizing the similarities would have been difficult, to say the least.

**The Legacy of Gordon’s Courthouses**

When people use these historical buildings, they rarely reflect on how they came to be. That our ancestors built them to last is obvious in their choice of materials. They were intended to be a transition from the frontier, typified by wooden courthouses and log cabins, to the more settled promise of the coming twentieth century. These were buildings built by people looking forward.

Gordon’s work is still in use today, from Lee County’s beautiful courthouse, to Erath and to Gonzales County, and beyond, for over a hundred years, serving as a symbol of justice in the county seat. Citizens for all of that time, from before the Spanish American War, have judged and been judged, have paid their taxes, and registered their life events, all in the courthouse, the focus of the legal aspects of life in the county. Those imposing halls of justice anchored downtowns throughout Texas, as well as the memories of generations of Texans. J. Riely Gordon helped define those memories, and they live on all around us. There are similarities in his work worthy of remark but those similarities are almost iconic. Those similarities are comfortable and, for many, helped to define The Texas Courthouse.