

Codington County Historical Society

Historical Renovation Considerations for the Codington County Courthouse

As Codington County assesses its need for court space, many different options will need to be considered to address the need for more court space. Some of the options may propose to modify the current historic courthouse. This report is to provide a brief background and recommend factors to consider in order to preserve the historic character of the courthouse, while working to make it usable well into the future.

History and Architectural Overview

A Short history of the Codington County Courthouse

- L.V. Sybrant built the first courthouse by June 1884 and county officers occupied the building the following month. This same site would later be home to the current courthouse. The courthouse acted as a buffer between the commercial and residential districts. The building became outdated as Watertown, Codington County and the state grew.¹



- The county commission in 1917 began budgeting for the purpose of constructing a new courthouse. In the spring of 1927 the county commission called a special election for the issuance for bonds to construct the new building. This motion was approved and in the fall of 1927 it was torn down and on October 11, excavation began for the new building. During the two-year building process, the courthouse records and offices were located on the second floor of the Lincoln Hotel. The courtroom was set up on the fifth floor of the hotel.
- Architectural firm of Freed, Perkins, and McWayne designed the present day courthouse while Gray Construction built the property. The building was dedicated June 19, 1929, with festivals that lasted two days. Built at a cost of

¹ Codington County officials were “homeless” for just more than five years after the county was organized in 1878. Needed office space was rented in various buildings around town. County commissioners met wherever they could find an empty meeting room. Court was held under similar circumstances. Watertown’s leading newspaper, *The Dakota News*, editorialized that the county was paying \$870 a year in rent for offices and that did not include extra money spent for renting space for courtrooms and jury rooms to hold the occasional trial. Beginning in 1883 an issuance of bonds for construction of a county courthouse was ordered. On May 1, county voters approved a \$25,000 bond issue for its construction plus a jail.

Codington County Historical Society

Historical Renovation Considerations for the Codington County Courthouse

around \$375,000, the building is considered to be one of the most artistic courthouses in the state and is currently on the National Register of Historic Buildings.

- The present courthouse was entered into the National Register of Historic Places in 1978. The application paper notes that the exterior of the courthouse is “the best example of neo-classic architecture in Watertown and one of the most ornate courthouse interiors in the state.” The National Register paperwork is attached to this report.

Architectural Overview

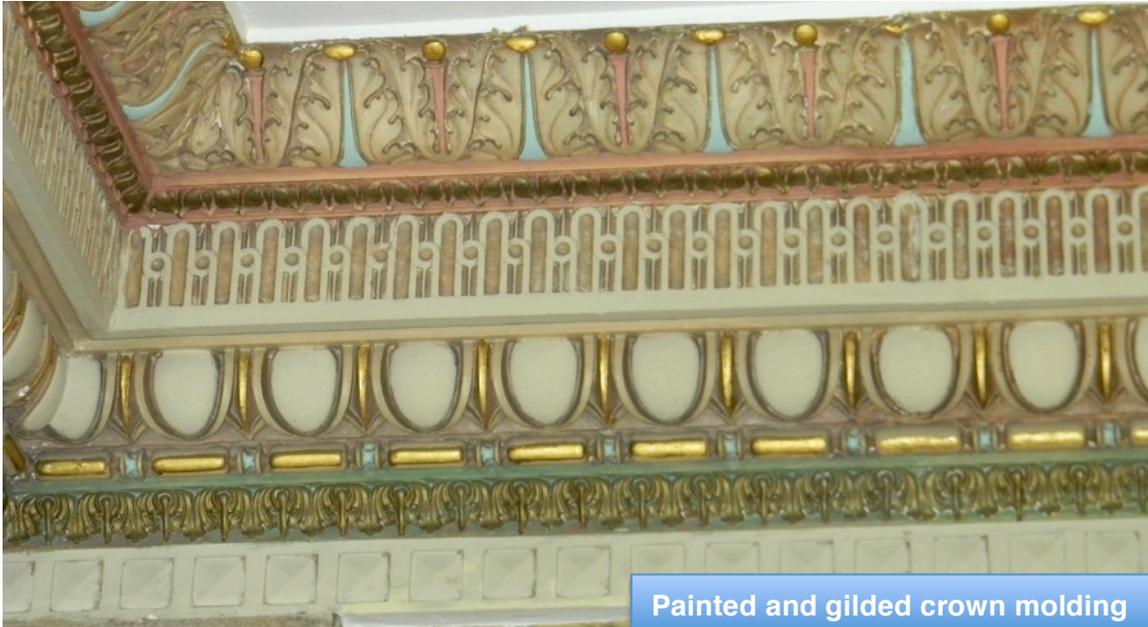
- The current Codington County Courthouse was constructed in the Neo-Classical, or “New-Classic” style of architecture, which was widely popular from 1900 into the 1920s and used elements of ancient Greek and Roman architecture on modern structures to produce symmetrical and imposing public buildings.
- Defining characteristics of neoclassical buildings: clean elegant lines, an uncluttered appearance, flat roof, simple, no towers, building’s façade is flat and long, minimum outside decorations, and are massive buildings.
- A significant design feature that is notable of the Neo-classical style is the large columns done in a Greek style called “Ionic” and modeled after those first used in the Aegean islands and western coastal region of ancient Turkey. Columns were used to carry the weight of the building’s structure. Later they were used as a graphical element. The courthouses columns show traditional Ionic columns with fluting on the shaft. Other businesses in Watertown today like the Old Post Office and the Codington County Heritage Museum make use of the Neo-Classical style.



Codington County Historical Society

Historical Renovation Considerations for the Codington County Courthouse

- Much of the crown moldings are painted plaster molds utilizing two repetitive designs: Guilloche, a running ornament of interlaced bands forming a pattern of circles, and Anthemia, a running mold design that is continuous and repetitive. After painting the plaster, gold leaf was used to enhance the decorative moldings. At time the courthouse was built, this was \$700 worth of gold leaf. Today this would cost around \$9,500.



Painted and gilded crown molding

- Materials used to construct the courthouse.
 - The exterior stone of the courthouse is white oolitic Indiana limestone. The sedimentary stone was formed from the remains of tiny animals living in relatively warm and shallow seas. Most Indiana limestone tends to be an off white or grayish color and is a superb building stone that has been quarried commercially since the 1820s. Some well known examples include the Empire State Building and the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C.
 - The floors throughout the court house are Tennessee marble and terrazzo. Terrazzo is a composite material, poured in place or precast, and is used for floor and wall treatments.



Terrazzo floor



Codington County Historical Society

Historical Renovation Considerations for the Codington County Courthouse

- The marble on this building's walls consists of precision cut slabs of 1-inch thick marble from the Appalachian in the eastern part of Tennessee. Some well known examples include the Lincoln Memorial and New York's Grand Central Station.

Historical Renovation Considerations for the Codington County Courthouse

Preservation Needs

The Rotunda. The rotunda is the central and most striking decorative feature of the building. Reaching from the ground floor to the dome it is practically all cased in marble except for the spaces occupied by two large mural paintings. Vincent Adoratti, from New York City, was commissioned to create two murals, one representing “justice and power” and the other “wisdom and mercy”.



Chandelier: Cathedral glass admits light at the dome in a manner best suited for the proper illumination of the rotunda, while a huge hanging chandelier and a series of concealed lights in the dome itself, provide a beautiful effect at night. Once a year or so, the chandelier is lowered using a windlass in the attic to clean and/or change burned out bulbs.

Consistent decoration: A lot of hard work went into the design and implementation of that design when building the Codington County Courthouse in 1929. The way in which the decorative features throughout the courthouse compliment each other show much deliberate effort to make this courthouse beautiful.

The Façade: As noted above, the exterior of the building is a good example of neo-classic architecture. The façade for the front (north side) of the building contains all of the key neo-classical features noted above.



Consistent Decoration - Matching finials: in the Commissioners' Chamber and on a brass rail on the third floor



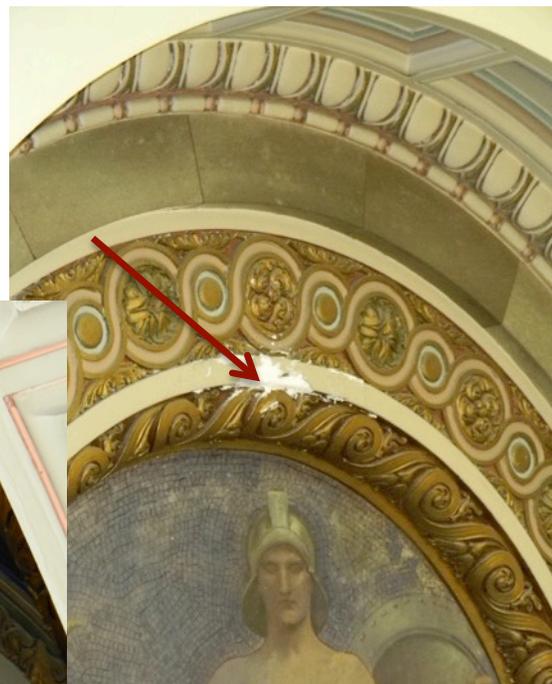
Codington County Historical Society

Historical Renovation Considerations for the Codington County Courthouse

Problematic features

Repair and restoration needs

- Detail deterioration:
 - Near the top of the rotunda and on the ceiling of the main courtroom, several areas at the top need minor painting touch ups. Heat, humidity and weather in general in a public building are difficult to control and all of these effect the plaster and paint.



Deteriorating paint: Left - peeling paint on top of plaster arch
Right - plaster deterioration at the top of the arch molding framing the painting

- Many of the doors, trim and original built in furniture in the courthouse are made of metal. The painted faux wood grain finish is chipped on many of these features.
- In the largest courtroom, some of the glass in the stained glass ceiling is broken.





Codington County Historical Society

Historical Renovation Considerations for the Codington County Courthouse

- Non-historical repairs:
 - In several places damaged woodwork has been fixed with drywall screws. This should be repaired in a historically appropriate way.
 - Drop ceilings cover the cracks and increase the heating efficiency in rooms with high ceilings. However, the plaster ceilings concealed by the drop ceilings often deteriorate.
 - Some of the lighting in the courtroom appears to have been changed. Perhaps replicas of the original lights could be added back into the room.



Outdated features that affect function

- Handicapped Access (ADA Compliance)
 - Restrooms. The entries to most of the restrooms in the courthouse have a large step or stairs.
 - Courtroom features. In the large courtroom, the bench, witness stand and jury box are not handicapped accessible.
- Fire protection. There are no sprinklers throughout the courthouse.

Codington County Historical Society

Historical Renovation Considerations for the Codington County Courthouse

Recommendations

Use the following Criteria to assess options for future courthouse construction projects:

- Viable court facility construction options must preserve the following features:
 - The rotunda (to include the ceiling, chandelier, stairs and surrounding balconies)
 - The north exterior façade
- Court facility construction options should be comparatively evaluated based upon:
 - A rehabilitative approach. How well does the option make needed updates while preserving the character of the building?²
 - Consistency in decoration and style with the original structure.

Address key functionality issues:

- Lack of handicapped access
- Lack of fire safety equipment.

Restore details:³

- Where practical, repair details that have deteriorated through use or time.
- Where practical, correct repairs that don't align aesthetically.

Establish an exhibit of significant features (that would otherwise be lost as a result of modifications), using a display case and/or photos.

² *Rehabilitation* attempts to bring the building up to modern functional standards through minor alterations without changing the original fabric of the building. From NCSC's publication *THE COURTHOUSE: A Planning and Design Guide*, p.36

³ Some of these repairs may be beyond the scope of current task of the Codington County Justice Advisory Committee.