Down at the Court House: A Photographic Essay

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**Recommended Citation**
Driscoll, Mark and Lane, Margaret Anne (1980) "Down at the Court House: A Photographic Essay," *Tampa Bay History*. Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.
Available at: https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/tampabayhistory/vol2/iss1/6

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Florida’s court houses are much like those found elsewhere throughout the United States. They are halls of justice, meeting and bargaining places, political headquarters, centers where human events take place officially.

This photographic essay is adapted from Down At The Court House: Photographs and Stories of Florida’s County Court Houses, a traveling exhibit sponsored by the Florida Department of State. It was produced by the Museum of Florida History (Division of Archives, History and Records Management, Department of State), in cooperation with the Florida Photographic Archives, and with the help of the Bureau of Historic Sites and Properties, the Bureau of Publications, the Florida State Archives, the State Library of Florida, and the many Florida citizens who responded with photographs and stories about court houses in their individual counties.

The photographs in the exhibit constitute a family album of Florida court house pictures. The stories are like entries in the state’s diary – some significant, some quite ordinary – full of things that happened, people encountered, decisions made. They reflect the community's view of the past, its local pride, its ability to laugh at itself, and its collective hopes for the future.

The Museum of Florida History developed the exhibit from the photographs and stories received in response to a state-wide request for material about Florida’s court houses. Just as a court house takes on the character of its community, this exhibit reflects the state’s citizens. It is not a scientific survey of court houses, but rather a selection – from the material received – of those stories and photographs that show the court house on a human scale.

The exhibit evokes some of the flavor of local politics and law. It also provides insights into social and architectural changes through the years. The first organizers of Florida’s counties were citizens of vision but little wealth. They built simply, caring more for what was to happen inside than for external appearances. More recently, many of the early structures have been replaced by new buildings that meet current needs and reflect contemporary styles.

Through the years, court house structures have been built and razed, fought-over, altered – electrified, air-conditioned, enlarged – and replaced. The idea of the court house, however, has remained constant. Court houses have never been simply symbols of law and order – they are expressions of public faith. Centers of ordinary business and infrequent drama, they are sites of acute pain, accidental humor, numbing boredom, nasty fights, and occasional justice. Since the court house plays a vital role in local society, this exhibit is a visual record of buildings that are reflections of Florida life, substantiating Faulkner’s observation that “. . . there was no town until there was a court house.”
HILLSBOROUGH (Tampa)

Hillsborough County Court House, circa 1885
(courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough Public Library System)

Judge White’s Court House in the Hillsborough County Court House, 1920.
(courtesy of Florida Photographic Archives)
HERNANDO (Brooksville)

It was a Halloween tradition in Brooksville during the 1930s that someone’s Model T Ford ended up sandwiched at the intersection of the halls inside the court house. (Story source: Neil Kinnear)

(Illustration by Ed Jones)

MANATEE (Bradenton)

Palmetto, Manatee and Sarasota were all struggling to become the county seat. Just before the election, a new tactic was tried. In an effort to offset Sarasota’s bid – insuring a victory for either Palmetto or Manatee – the unincorporated community of “Braidenton” was placed on the ballot to siphon off votes. The plan boomeranged. “Braidenton” was the surprise winner by a 39-vote plurality. (Story source: The Islander and The Banner, November 23, 1978)
POLK (Bartow)

Like several others in Florida, the cupola of Polk County’s Court House was used as a civil defense aircraft spotter station after Pearl Harbor. At 9:00 p.m. one evening, among the occupants of the building were the spotters in the cupola and a couple of people working late in
the tax assessor’s office. About a mile away, people heard the clock chime three, not nine, times. In the court house they heard the comforting bong, bong, bong . . . then crash! They thought a plane had come in low and bombed the court house. Actually, the counterweight from the court house clock had fallen from its hook, plunged through the glass ceiling of the dome, and smashed the railing of the rotunda magazine. The clock was replaced by an electric model after the war. (Story source: Loyal Frisbee)

Postcard. Polk County Court House, 1914.

(courtesy of Vernon Peeples/Florida Photographic Archives)
When W. H. “Wild Bill” Towles was chairman of the Lee County Commission, he dreamed of replacing the old wooden court house with a more modern structure. Towles, a southwestern Florida cattle baron, had a lot of political clout, but conservatives in the area had power, too. They had consistently blocked any move that would tear down the existing building. When the construction contract for a new court house was awarded in 1915, Towles acted fast. Sensing an impending injunction against demolition of the old structure, he and the commission pushed through a resolution to have the building razed during the night. By next morning only memories were left of the old court house . . . although its wood was later used to build the Fort Myers Hospital. (Story source: Marian B. Godown)
DESONO (Arcadia)

Postcard, 1909. Desoto County Court House.
(courtesy of Vernon Peeples)

HARDEE (Wauchula)

Office of the Hardee County Commission, 1927.
(courtesy of Hardee County Commissioners)
It is customary for a session of a Court of Record to be preceded by a formal announcement by the judge’s bailiff that the court is in session. In Pasco County in the early part of the century, the sheriff or one of his deputies customarily acted as bailiff and made the announcement in the
traditional language of the English courts, not merely to those present in the court room but to the public at large. The sheriff would stick his head out of the second floor window, calling to whomever was within hearing distance, “Oyez, oyez, the Circuit Court of the Sixth Judicial Circuit is now in session. All persons having business before this honorable court draw nigh and ye shall be heard.” (Story source: William G. Dayton)

PINELLAS (Clearwater)

![Officials on the steps of the Pinellas County Court House, 1910.](image)

(courtesy of Kendrick T. Ford, Heritage Park)
Judge John V. Bird enjoyed the view from his offices in the court house overlooking the oak tree that graces the building’s entrance. One day in the 1960s the judge arrived for work only to find a crew starting to trim and cut back the oak. With booming authority he pronounced to the crew, “Anybody touching that tree will be going to Raiford.” The oak still stands. (Story source: Judge Harry W. Fogle)

HIGHLANDS (Sebring)

Before the Highlands County Court House was built in 1925, judges conducted business not in a court but on a court – a basketball court. Since there was no room in town large enough to hold the sessions when judge, jury, prosecution, defense, and witnesses all had to be on hand, legal proceedings were carried on in a large, open basketball court in Sebring. (Story source: Allen C. Altvater, Sr.)
CHARLOTTE (Punta Gorda)

Some good wines get better with age. What about moonshine? Officials in Punta Gorda might have the answer. Recently, when the Elections Supervisor cleaned out the records vault, he found not only some old checks dating back to the 1920s, but also a forgotten cache of confiscated moonshine. (Story source: Supervisor of Elections’ Office, Punta Gorda)

Postcard. Charlotte County Court House.

(courtesy of Florida Photographic Archives)
GLADES (Moore Haven)

In these days of snail’s-pace justice, it’s refreshing to recall a news article in the 1927 *Glades County Democrat* that chronicled a whirlwind cycle of crime and punishment. A service station at Ortona was broken into and robbed about 2:00 in the morning. At 10:00 the same morning two men were arrested and charged with the robbery. Before noon the Grand Jury had been presented the evidence and had returned an indictment. The suspects were arraigned almost immediately. They pleaded guilty, and by 3:00 were on their way toward serving two-year prison terms handed out by the Circuit Court Judge. (Story source: Mrs. Beryl Bowden)
SARASOTA (Sarasota)

Rented space in the Arcade Building was used as the Sarasota County Court House until 1927 when the permanent Court House was occupied.

(courtesy of Sarasota County Archives and Research Center)

Sarasota County Court House, built in 1926-27.

(courtesy of Sarasota County Archives and Research Center)
COLLIER (East Naples)

Former Collier County Court House in Everglades City, 1928.

(Bureau of Historic Sites and Properties)

Seminole Indians at the Collier County Court House in Everglades City

(courtesy of William J. Reagan)
In Collier County they tell of Judge Harrison and his dedication to his work. In the early 1950s, when Everglades City housed the court house, the streets were awash in ankle-deep water. While others wondered what to do about the water in the one-foot-above-sea-level town, Judge Harrison arrived for the day's proceedings . . . barefoot and with his pants rolled up. (Story source: M. Scott)

HENDRY (LaBelle)

Clock tower of the Hendry County Court House

(courtesy of Florida Photographic Archives)
For years, the 70-foot clock tower at the Hendry County Court House housed no clock at all, just four 6-foot clock faces without hands. A lightning storm in 1929 – just a year after the clock had been installed – caused severe damage. Repaired four years later, it soon went out of commission again. Finally, in 1949, the cost of the needed repairs exceeded the value of the clock and it was sold for $10.00, leaving only the half-ton bell hanging in its place. Even that remnant of times past was eventually donated to a local church. As their Bicentennial Project, however, the LaBelle Jaycees – taking pity on the clockless tower – installed a replacement clock system and dedicated it during the 1976 Swamp Cabbage Festival. (Story source: Mrs. Beryl Bowden)