



METRO NASHVILLE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

DISCOVER NASHVILLE

THE
**DAVIDSON
COUNTY
COURTHOUSE**



**“A CITY
WITHOUT
OLD BUILDINGS
IS LIKE A MAN
WITHOUT A
MEMORY.”**

— Graeme Shankland



HISTORY

THE HISTORY of Davidson County's first courthouse begins with an eighteen-square foot log cabin built on the Public Square in 1783, before Tennessee became a state. Three more substantial buildings followed in the nineteenth century. The first, constructed in 1802-03, was replaced by a three-story stone and brick building in 1830. This building burned in 1856. Francis Strickland designed Davidson County's third courthouse, which was built in 1857 and enlarged and remodeled in 1909-1910. The Strickland Courthouse was demolished in 1935 to make room for the present-day Courthouse.



Plans for the present building began in 1934 with the approval of a \$400,000 bond issue to finance its construction. The new building, called the Davidson County Courthouse and Public Building, would accommodate Nashville's city hall, the county courthouse and jail all in a single building. An architectural competition was held in conjunction



with the Public Works Administration (PWA) in 1935 to select the design. Emmons H. Woolwine of Nashville, working in association with Frederic C. Hirons of New York, won the competition. Their design was an elegant classical adaptation of the fashionable Art Deco style and was quite up-to-date. The new courthouse was the first building in Davidson County to have central air conditioning.

The cornerstone contains a box filled with photographs, courthouse records, and newspaper clippings, and was laid in August 1936. The courthouse officially opened on December 8, 1937, with an open house and public speaking. Construction costs slightly exceeded \$2 million, an expensive sum in the mid-1930s. J.A. Jones Construction Company completed the building, built of steel, concrete, Indiana limestone, and granite, in March 1938.

During the decades following its construction, the Courthouse witnessed the destruction of the many nineteenth-century commercial buildings that surrounded the Public Square, the paving of the Public Square for parking, and some unwise remodeling in the Council Chambers and several courtrooms. In 2002, Mayor Bill Purcell announced a major restoration effort for the Courthouse and reclamation of the Public Square space. The Public Square was rededicated in October 2006, and the Courthouse in May 2007.



STYLE

The Davidson County Public Building and Courthouse is a superb example of the PWA Modern style, combining stripped Classicism with Art Deco detailing to create a thoroughly modern building. The exterior of the building features twelve giant Doric fluted columns, creating a symbolic visual link with earlier governmental buildings such as the Tennessee State Capitol, and connecting to Nashville's classical reputation as "Athens of the South." These columns support a cornice with three alternating sculpted figures, a lioness's head, a snake, and a bison's head, symbolizing Protection, Wisdom, and Strength. Sculptures on the massive bronze doors, created by Rene Chambellan, represent Courage, Loyalty, Law, Justice, Security, and Wisdom. Above these doors are three windows, carved by David Harriton, featuring the faces of the three great lawgivers, King John of England, Moses, and Justinian of Rome.

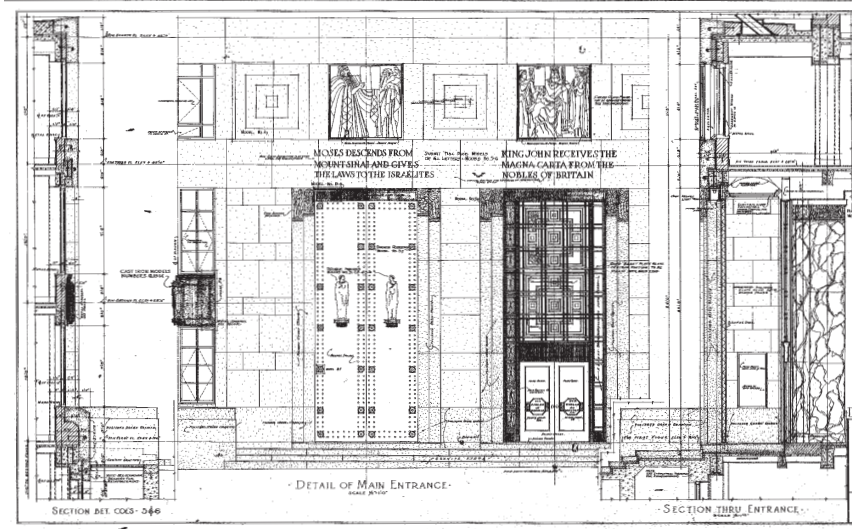


SYMBOLISM

Art Deco detailing abounds throughout the building. On the exterior, the Indiana limestone façade contrasts with the bronze doors, etched glass, and gold leaf. The interior combines red-brown Tennessee marble on the walls, green and grey terrazzo floors, and colorful painted ceilings and murals. The lobby murals, painted by Dean Cornwell as part of the Public Works of Art project, center around four heroic figures representing Industry, Agriculture, Commerce, and Statesmanship (an idealized figure of Andrew Jackson). Behind Industry and Agriculture is a map of Davidson County, and behind Commerce and Statesmanship, a map of Nashville in 1937. Lighting the lobby is a large bronze and glass chandelier; with twelve large panels etched with the twelve zodiac symbols.



The 2005-2006 rehabilitation of the Courthouse building included restoration of stenciling, woodwork finishes, and light fixtures; exterior work included restoration of the limestone, steel frame windows, and bronze doors. The Founders' Building, southeast of the Courthouse, sits on the site of an original planned structure that was never built, and houses the elevators to the underground parking garage. The upper level provides a magnificent view of the Cumberland River and downtown Nashville, along with interpretive panels explaining the history of the Courthouse and Public Square. The Public Square itself has been reclaimed from its use as a surface parking lot and returned to an inviting public green-space, complete with reflecting pools. A highlight of the Public Square is the restoration of the two original fountains on the site.



Architectural rendering of Courthouse entrance, c1935. Woolwine & Hiron, architects.

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