



Photo by Gregory L. Crockett

The Bonneville County Courthouse creates a noble landmark for the community, a building residents easily take pride in.

100 YEARS AGO, A GROWING COMMUNITY BECAME A COUNTY

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Bonneville County is created

After bickering for years over the boundary line, officials divided Bingham County creating the current Bonneville County in 1911. Idaho Falls was then a growing, vibrant community of 8,000 and was logically chosen as the county seat. This year Bonneville County is celebrating its Centennial in a year-long celebration including exhibitions, presentations, commemorations and entertainments of all kinds. In recognition of the Centennial, the Bonneville County Courthouse was chosen as the subject matter of this article.



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The original structure

The building is sited on the east bank

of the Snake River in Historic Downtown Idaho Falls. When constructed, the building looked straight down the four block expanse of C Street (now Constitution) at the railroad depot facing west. While the courthouse was built in the country, city planners envisioned a wide, tree-lined boulevard with the courthouse on one end and the railroad station on the other. Their vision was soon realized. Six to eight passenger trains arrived and departed daily and the area was soon a hub of economic vitality. When formally dedicated March 16, 1921, the Commissioners declared "This building should be good for 50 years," (which was quite prophetic since the building was substantially expanded in the 1970s.) The railroad station didn't last that long.

The building opened to great fanfare with an orchestra playing throughout the day in the basement level and Idaho Falls observing its first annual Spring Festival. Crowds toured the building and applauded the rotunda with its stained glass dome, the lofty ceilings and marble pillars, polished doors, mosaic floors and artistic detail. It was a building the public could be proud of and stood as a prominent landmark to

the expanding civilization on the banks of the Snake River at Eagle Rock. The Bonneville County Courthouse is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The 1978 courthouse annex

The original building housed both the county jail and the Sheriff's Department and by the earlier 1970s was inadequate for the needs of the court system. Federal grant money became available for law enforcement facilities and the county took the opportunity to upgrade, expand and modernize the courthouse facility. As a result the law enforcement annex was appended to the south end of the original structure. While the annex more than doubled the usable space, regrettably no attempt was made to harmonize the architectural styles of old and new. The first level and basement of the annex now house both the Sheriff's Department and the Idaho Falls City Police. The second floor includes six courtrooms (of inadequate size), judges' chambers and offices for clerks, reporters, bailiffs and court personnel. While the annex is connected by a passage way to the original courthouse, it is best to con-

sider them two separate buildings, lest the original architecture be compromised. Soon thereafter, the county built a new jail facility at an offsite location.

Chief Magistrate William Black was primarily involved in pursuing federal grand funds and was hands-on in the layout and design of the court system's new space. He was dogged in his efforts to expand and enhance court facilities and it is truly unfortunate that his considerable efforts went mostly unappreciated with the luke warm reception of the final product. In the 1970s, public officials were less interested in public architecture and more interested in saving money than the visionaries of the 1920s.

The future

Like every courthouse in every county, Bonneville County continues to struggle to keep up with parking demands. The Sheriff's Department and City Police continue to share facilities but they have long since outgrown their space. The recession has delayed efforts to build a separate city police headquarters and the crowded conditions continue.

Starting spring 2012, the City of Idaho Falls and the Idaho Falls Redevelopment Agency will undertake a total reconstruction of Memorial Drive which runs behind the courthouse and separates it from the Snake River. Substantial county parking will be displaced and relocated to other nearby parking areas now under construction. Bonneville County will provide additional onsite parking with the vacation of a city street (Legion Drive) and the demolition of the Stucki Building; both located within the courthouse campus. These improvements will reconnect the courthouse to its historical river frontage on the Snake and substantially beautify the entire neighborhood. The project is a product of good planning and inter-governmental cooperation.

About the Author

Gregory L. Crockett is senior partner at Hopkins Roden in Idaho Falls. His practice includes civil and commercial litigation, insurance defense, negligence, real estate contracts, business associations and banking.

Mr. Crockett earned his Juris Doctorate from the University of Idaho in 1974. He currently serves as president of the Idaho Falls Historic Downtown Foundation, Inc. Greg and his wife, Tricia, are the parents of one son and enjoy golf, cross-country and downhill skiing, white water rafting and Idaho's great outdoors.

Bonneville County Courthouse

Construction Start: December 1, 1919

Construction Finish: March 16, 1921

Building Cost: \$268,880

Architect: Fisher & Aitkins

Architectural Style: Neo-classical

Key People:

Captain B.L.E. Bonneville (April 14, 1796 – June 12, 1878) A French-born officer in the United States Army, fur trapper, and explorer in the American West. The expedition that would be known as the most notable accomplishment of his life began in May 1832, when Bonneville left Missouri with 110 men. In the spring of 1833 Bonneville explored along the Snake River in present-day Idaho, drifting into the head of the Salmon River and eventually into Fort Nez Perce. Bonneville County is included among many of his namesake places.

S.K. and George Mittry (owners of North Pacific Construction Co.). The construction contractor went broke after Bonneville County declined to pay over \$18,000.00 of construction costs.

Justice McCarthy of the Idaho Supreme Court who authored the unanimous opinion of the court upholding Bonneville County's refusal to pay the Mittry brothers on constitutional grounds.

Commissioner Wylie Snarr (1977 – 1991). Self appointed caretaker of the courthouse and its grounds throughout his tenure in office. Most responsible for the centennial revitalization and upgrade of the courtroom facilities. Commissioner Snarr was often observed hand-weeding the flower beds.

The Lawsuit: A Balance Due

In 1919, Bonneville County and Idaho Falls were bustling. Business was good and officials were brimming with optimism. The \$250,000 bond to build the courthouse with a basement jail passed easily. Unfortunately, the bond proceeds fell \$18,880 short of paying the Mittry brothers (North Pacific Construction Co.) for the construction and they sued. The District Court awarded the balance due and the county appealed. In a unanimous decision, the Supreme Court reversed.

In a holding that is certainly a precursor to *City of Boise vs. Frazier*, the Supreme Court held "When an indebtedness is forbidden by the Constitution and statutes of this state without the authority of a bond election and the people at such election authorize the commissioners to incur indebtedness in a certain amount, the Commissioners cannot incur a valid indebtedness above such amount." *Mittry vs. Bonneville County*, 38 Idaho 306, 312, 222 P.292 (1923). Word has it that the Mittry Brothers were soon out of the construction business.

The Swastika

In conformity with its neo-classical design, the flooring is three-color mosaic tile in a Romanesque pattern. The flooring pattern

incorporates a swastika. Of course in 1920 the swastika was just an ancient religious symbol (common to Native Americans, Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism) representing good luck or good fortune.

In the 1990s some community members asked "Why was the symbol of Nazism, fascism, and white supremacy so prominently displayed in the halls of justice?" Not to worry. A simple version of "white out" rendered the sign of evil a crossroads intersection. Tacky but effective.

The Centennial Facelift

In conjunction with the State Centennial in 1990, the county undertook the rehabilitation of the original courthouse rotunda and what is now referred to as the Centennial Courtroom. The original stained glass dome was weatherproofed and restored after being covered up for decades due to water damage. The original courtroom was remodeled and will now accommodate sessions with all five Justices of the Idaho Supreme Court. The rotunda itself serves as a museum of Bonneville County history with photographs of past judges, commissioners, sheriffs, prosecutors, clerk-recorders and other dignitaries.