

# DENTON 1927 CITY HALL

*Historical Narrative researched and written by Chuck Voellinger for  
Texas Historical Commission marker application, Denton County*

## I. CONTEXT

Denton, Texas is the seat for Denton County, located north of Dallas and Tarrant Counties in North Texas. In the late Nineteenth Century, Denton had a primarily agriculturally-based economy and with the arrival of the railroad in 1881, grew from a very small town to a regional center for trade and education. The near-simultaneous establishment of two colleges in Denton, the Texas Normal College in 1890 and the College of Industrial Arts in 1903, signified more growth. At the time the 1927 City Hall was constructed, the following statistics give a picture of the kind of growth Denton was experiencing.

Population growth of 114% between 1890 and 1899 was measured for the city, and from 1900 to 1950, the population increased 409% from 4,187 to 28,318.<sup>i</sup> In the decade when the new city hall was built, Denton experienced 25% growth becoming the 38<sup>th</sup> largest city in Texas.<sup>ii</sup> With this steady growth, it was decided by government officials that a newer city hall was needed based upon the needs of a growing community, the evidence of deterioration, and cost of maintenance. Interestingly, we will see that the City decided to continue the practice of combining a fire station with other city departments in the new building. According to the *Denton Record-Chronicle*, the 1877 building was constructed of red brick at the corner of Oak and Bolivar Streets.<sup>iii</sup> Until 1894, when it was sold by G. H. Kimbrough to the City for \$1,500.00, it was occupied by private business. The structure was beginning to show signs of deterioration and finally a bond election in 1926 helped secure funding for the new facility.<sup>iv</sup> The 1877 building was demolished in July of 1931 after being used for several years by the City's united charities.<sup>v</sup>

## II. OVERVIEW

By the 1920s, it had become apparent to the City of Denton that a newer, more spacious municipal building was needed to replace the structure built in 1877 and used since 1894 as both city hall and the main fire station. A bond election for the new structure for the amount of \$100,000.00 was held on November 9, 1926 and passed with a vote of 527 to 429. The breakdown of the bond by building component was as follows: J.F. Johnson, Contractor: \$87,015.00; Electrical Shop, Denton for wiring: \$2,580.00; W.T. Monroe of Greenville for heating and plumbing: \$8,775.00. Construction was begun on March 21, 1927 with an expected completion date of January 1, 1928. The prominent Fort Worth architectural firm of Van Slyke and Woodruff was retained to design the building. <sup>vi</sup>

Elmer Van Slyke was a New York native who moved to Fort Worth in 1913 from Oklahoma City. He began his architectural career in Friendship, N.Y in 1885 after studying under the Button Bros. of New York City. Other notable buildings designed by the firm of Van Slyke and Woodruff in the Dallas-Fort Worth area include: The Ross Avenue Baptist Church and the Oak Cliff Christian Church in Dallas; the TCU Church and gymnasium and The First Christian Church in Fort Worth. <sup>vii</sup> Several of these structures have received national, state and local historic designation. <sup>viii</sup>

The 1927 Denton Municipal building has elements of Spanish Colonial style as evidenced by its tiled roof and embellishments that recall similar details in Spanish Missions as found in South Texas. <sup>ix</sup> From a *Dallas Morning News* article, “The new building of white brick with ornamental stone trim, consists of two stories and a basement and is of a modified Spanish type of architecture with varicolored tile roof.” <sup>x</sup> The description of the architectural styles employed for its design in the City of Denton 1982 historic designation ordinance states that, “it was

considered necessary that any buildings of any pretention to importance be designed in some recognizable historical style. The Denton city hall maintained its place in the mainstream of urban culture by adopting the style of the Spanish Renaissance, which had considerable vogue in the Twenties, especially in the Southwest.”<sup>xi</sup> The exterior of the building is unchanged to date with the exception of window construction, as would be expected for a building of its age. The façade has an “elaborate cast-stone ornament or Spanish Renaissance derivation extending up through the second floor to the open belfry.”<sup>xii</sup> This belfry was constructed as part of the original plan to include the fire alarm bell that had been used in the prior structure and for the same purpose. The building is a “T” shape with the main city offices located in the side facing Elm Street ( top of the “T”) and the a fire station located in the rear area (the leg of the “T”). This arrangement lasted through the 1970s until a new fire station was built right behind this structure. The fire engine bays were then bricked up. Information from the cornerstone is as follows: E. W. Van Slyke and W. L. Bradshaw, Architects; E. Ross Chamblin, Structural Engineers; J. F. Johnson, General Contractor. Cornerstone laid by: Stanfield Lodge, #217, AM & FM, May 14, 1927.<sup>xiii</sup>

The location of the new building was to be on the lot formerly occupied by the Lyon & Gray Lumber Co. at 215 North Elm Street.<sup>xiv</sup> The new address became 221 N. Elm St and remains so to this day. It is situated on the southwest corner of the intersection of North Elm and McKinney Streets and is located on the original Puchalski land survey for Denton County.

The opening ceremonies for the new city hall building occurred on October 8, 1927 with Texas’ governor Dan Moody in attendance and making the dedicating speech. Said Gov. Moody, “Business prosperity, peace at home and social order depend on good government. The responsibility of a citizen toward his government is an individual thing. He owes to his city, town

or country or state to give of his best thought and voice to the problems of government. You need not doubt that your influence is felt, regardless of the station you occupy.”<sup>xv</sup> City officials at the time of the dedication included Mayor B.W. McKenzie and the following six commissioners: W.S. Miller, L. Bailey, G. Tom Turner, W. R. Lakey, Claude Castleberry and Francis M. Craddock.<sup>xvi</sup> Additional festivities included a concert by the Denton Municipal Band and a procession of fire fighting equipment paraded around the square on their way to take up their new quarters complete with sirens blaring.<sup>xvii</sup> Other dignitaries present included State Senator Margie Neal of Carthage, Dallas County Representative Ray Holder of Lancaster and State Representative Fred Minor of Denton.<sup>xviii</sup>

During the intervening years, the building was regularly decorated for Christmas and often mentioned in local news.<sup>xix</sup> Once again, due to the phenomenal growth of Denton since its construction in 1927, the location of City Hall was slated to be relocated to a new building, this time in the form of the current O’Neil Ford-designed Municipal Complex that includes the Civic Center, Municipal Pool, Library renovation and City Hall located several blocks away in the city park on McKinney Street. After city offices moved into their new location in 1969, The Denton Community Theatre (DCT) moved into the main building in 1970 for their offices and used the auditorium for performances. The Fire Department continued to utilize the rear area where they had been since 1927. The new DCT facility was called the “Firehouse Theatre” in honor of the fire department. The first production in the Firehouse Theatre was “The Skin Of Our Teeth” on April 21-25, 1970 with the final one being “The Sound of Music from July 29 to August 8, 1981, as the DCT had to evacuate the building by Sept. 1 of that year.”<sup>xx</sup>

The City decided to move the Police Department into the vacated space and interior renovation was begun in September 1982 at a cost of \$1,150,000.00 with the Department occupying the

building in January of 1984.<sup>xxi</sup> Currently the building houses the Planning Department, Building Inspections and the Consumer Health Division.<sup>xxii</sup>

In the early 1980s the City took inventory of buildings that met requirements for historic recognition. In 1982 Ordinance No. 80-30 was passed designating this building as an historic landmark under Article 28A of the Comprehensive Zoning Ordinance of the City of Denton, Texas.<sup>xxiii</sup>

### III. SIGNIFICANCE

The 1927 Municipal Building has been in constant use by the City of Denton since its opening. The exterior of the structure has been well maintained in the intervening 85 years. This building is significant for what it represents about where Denton viewed itself in the Dallas/Ft. Worth area in the early part of the twentieth century. The City hired a prominent regional architect in the person of Mr. Van Slyke to design a municipal building to signify Denton's "arrival" as a major regional center for education and industry. Being located across Elm Street from the Denton County Courthouse Square National Historic District, with its 26 contributing buildings and many fine examples of late nineteenth through early twentieth century architecture, places the 1927 City Hall within the larger commercial and governmental history of Denton. It is also notable for its representation of Spanish Renaissance architecture in the North Texas area. No doubt conscious of the beauty of the 1896 Denton County Courthouse a few blocks away on the square, the city fathers wanted a structure that would have the same level of architectural and physical gravity, as well as carrying on the multi-use capability that the former city hall had.

### VI. DOCUMENTATION

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<sup>i</sup> C.A. Bridges, *History of Denton Texas From Its Beginning to 1960*, (Texian Press, Waco, Texas, 1978), p. 250.

<sup>ii</sup> Bridges, p. 327.

<sup>iii</sup> “Denton Opens New City Hall.” *Dallas Morning News*, Vol. 43, No. 9; October 9, 1927.

<sup>iv</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, October 9, 1927.

<sup>v</sup> “Denton’s Old City Hall Is Being Demolished”, *Denton Record Chronicle*, July, 7 1931.

<sup>vi</sup> *Denton Record Chronicle*, October 9, 1927.

<sup>vii</sup> Ellis Arthur Davis and Edwin H. Grobe, editors. *The Encyclopedia of Texas, Vol. 1, Book*, 1922, <http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph41244/> (accessed July 27, 2012).

<sup>viii</sup> City of Fort Worth, Texas. *Historic Schools Survey Report*, [http://fortworthtexas.gov/uploadedFiles/Planning/Historic\\_Preservation/Historic%20Schools%20Survey%20report%20web.pdf](http://fortworthtexas.gov/uploadedFiles/Planning/Historic_Preservation/Historic%20Schools%20Survey%20report%20web.pdf) p. 8, (Accessed July, 2012).

<sup>ix</sup> Texas Historical Commission, Texas Main Street Program, *Design Journal*, p. 1.

<sup>x</sup> “Denton Opens New City Hall.” *Dallas Morning News*, Vol. 43, No. 9; October 9, 1927.

<sup>xi</sup> Historic Landmark Ordinance, City of Denton, Texas, Pro Ordinance 82-69 (1982).

<sup>xii</sup> Historic Landmark Ordinance.

<sup>xiii</sup> Historic Landmark Ordinance.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Denton City Directory* (Retail Merchants Association 1923) p. 101.

<sup>xv</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, Vol. 43, No. 9; October 9, 1927.

<sup>xvi</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, October 9, 1927.

<sup>xvii</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, October 9, 1927.

<sup>xviii</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, October 9, 1927.

<sup>xix</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, 12/11/38; *Denton Record-Chronicle*, 12/5/68.

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<sup>xx</sup> Donna L. Clevinger, PhD, *Denton Community Theatre: To The Firehouse And Beyond*. (Terrill Wheeler Printing, Inc. Denton, Texas. 1986). p. 13, 14, 108.

<sup>xxi</sup> “Denton’s Finest to Hold Open House Sunday”, *Denton Record-Chronicle*. 1/13/84. p. 7A

<sup>xxii</sup> City of Denton, Texas. <http://www.cityofdenton.com/departments-services/departments-a-f/consumer-health>, (accessed Feb 7, 2013).

<sup>xxiii</sup> Historic Landmark Ordinance, City of Denton, Tx, Pro Ordinance 82-69 (1982).