

Harrisonburg's Town Clock, and Some Issues with the Fifth Courthouse

by
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2015

A Town Clock

As early as 1868 the editor of the *Rockingham Register* had urged that a town clock be installed in the Courthouse. He mentioned that the only sound indicating time in the town was the steam whistle at a factory that sounded three times a day. When the fourth Courthouse was built in 1874 this building had a cupola that was suitable for housing a clock. Town Council ordered a tower clock from E. Howard & Company of Boston. The clock arrived in Harrisonburg in mid-February 1875 and was installed without delay. The *Register* touted it as the finest clock in the Shenandoah Valley.

Excluding its bell, the tower clock weighed 3,700 lbs. The bell was an additional 814 lbs. It had a 12-foot pendulum weighing 75 lbs., a striking weight of 1,800 lbs., and a running weight of 400 lbs. The weight cord was 130 feet long. The clock's four dials were 5 feet 9 inches in diameter with faces painted black and numerals and hands gilded with gold. The hour hand was 2 feet long, and the minute hand was 2 feet 9 inches. The works installation was supervised by William H. Ritenour, Harrisonburg watch repairman and clock maker, who had ordered the clock mechanism from the Boston company. The clock was wound using a windlass, a hand-cranked mechanism that raised the running weight.

The massive weights for the clock broke free from their cords at least twice. The more dangerous incident occurred in February 1888 when two of the heavy weights separated from their ropes and plunged through all the floors of the Courthouse, one of them lodging in the earth. Fortunately, no one was injured in the accident.

Plans for a New Courthouse

By the 1890s the Rockingham Board of Supervisors understood they needed to replace the Courthouse. A report from a Town Council meeting in May 1896 mentioned that the Town Clock would be removed from the tower of the 1874 Courthouse before it was torn down. Plans included using the old

clock in the new Courthouse. It was to be taken out of the old Courthouse by early June. Thomas A. Grim agreed to move and store the clock for the labor cost to get it down and hauled away. He would require no further payment from the town. Grim removed it from the tower on June 18 and charged \$3 for his work.

By the middle of May 1896, about a dozen bids had been received from companies desiring to tear down and clear away the old Courthouse and the separate Clerk's Office building on the northwest corner of the courtyard. The bids ranged from \$650 to \$1,175. William C. McAllister, a prominent Harrisonburg builder, was awarded the contract for the low bid. The iron fence and plank walk surrounding the courtyard and the brick pavement at the Courthouse also needed to be cleared away. These tasks were done the same day the clock was taken down. Emanuel Royer chopped down a dozen or so large trees that required removal from around the Courthouse as well.

The two clerks were relocated to Town Council Chambers until the new Courthouse was in place and open. The county clerk would use the ground floor, and the Circuit clerk would occupy the second floor. It was suggested that other county offices could use the old jail building, but objections due to sanitary concerns made this plan inappropriate. W. L. Dechert offered to let the County Treasurer use his office in the Kent or Offutt Building rent free for one year, an alternative that Council accepted. The old Courthouse was to be vacant and ready for demolition by June 2, 1896. Board of Supervisors members Dechert, Shipp, and Moore were given the responsibility to supervise the demolition. It was estimated the old Courthouse contained about 575,000 bricks and perhaps some could be used in the new construction. Harrisonburg's Town Council had responsibility to care for the Town Clock during the demolition and construction.

Workers found some old books stored in the attic of the Courthouse, some of which were more than 50 years old. They were account ledgers used by local businesses before mid-century. There was also a

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book that listed 1842 subscribers to the *Rockingham Register*, Harrisonburg's most prominent newspaper.

One reason a new Courthouse was much needed was the poor condition of the brick walls. In fact, when the building was being taken down, the north wall inadvertently fell into the interior when roof timbers had been removed, showing that the roof structure was the only thing holding that wall in place. Fortunately, no workers were near the wall when it collapsed. In reality, there were several other reasons for needing a new Courthouse. The old one was too small from the beginning. And in the 1890s the county judge ordered that larger vaults were needed to secure county records. It was estimated that installing larger vaults would be very costly. The Board of Supervisors decided it made financial sense to build a new building to take care of all the needs.

The Town Clock in the fourth Courthouse had black faces and gold hands and numerals. When it was installed in the new Courthouse the faces were replaced. They were changed to semi-transparent white faces with black numerals. New hands were also added. Thomas E. Grim, who had been storing the clock, installed it in the new Courthouse tower in mid-June. It was his responsibility to take care of it. He had been the official "keeper of the clock," a position that was continued for 1897 in the new Courthouse. The *Rockingham Register* praised Grim's work in tuning up the clock during its year in storage and in adjusting the striker to make the hourly bell strike produce a more mellow sound.

The Town Council's Committee on Lights and Safety recommended that the new clock faces be illuminated for nighttime. A 25-candle power lamp was installed behind the dials at a cost of \$15. If that intensity of light proved inadequate, they would replace it with a 50-candle-power lamp costing \$30.

The first problem with the tower clock in the new Courthouse occurred in January 1900 when the cable holding the striking weight broke and the weight crashed through the tower and lodged against a steel beam above the lobby of Assembly Hall on the second floor. Some other wooden joists were splintered and plaster knocked off the ceiling. The repair required some modifications to the clock, and additional pulleys were installed to allow the striking mechanism to be activated by a 600-lb. weight instead of the troublesome 1,800 lbs. one.

Fifth Courthouse Issues

Since the cost of upgrading the unsafe 1874 Courthouse was so expensive, the Board hoped to build a replacement for about \$30,000, an estimated amount that was then increased to \$40,000. When bids were solicited, six construction companies

submitted bids. They ranged from \$45,000 to \$68,765.

Original plans called for the new Courthouse to be brick. The initial architectural plans were drawn for this. T. J. Collins submitted drawings of a proposed courthouse for consideration. He was asked to produce full architectural plans for a building that would not exceed a cost of \$40,000. The Board of Supervisors declared that such a building should be designed to last for at least a century. They were already requiring that it be the only building in the courtyard and face south. It would be equidistant from the east, south, and west sides of the square but much nearer the northern side, as was the previous Courthouse. This would necessitate the removal of the old, brick telegraph building from the southeast corner of the yard and the separate, two-story Clerk's Office from the northwest corner.

The architect T. J. Collins had been a Union soldier during the Civil War and began his architectural career in Washington, DC. In 1890 he moved to Staunton, VA. The *Wikipedia* entry for Collins includes that he designed the Rockingham County Courthouse, as well as the Augusta County Courthouse, and many other significant buildings.

Although the Board was not pleased with the contract bid amounts, they decided to accept the \$45,000 low bid submitted by the Withrow Lumber Company of Charleston, WV, provided they post a required bond of one-fourth the contract price, in this case \$11,250. When A. F. Withrow came to Harrisonburg to complete the contract, he objected to the mandatory bond. He considered his word as his bond. He refused to give the necessary guarantee.

Although the second lowest bid was more than \$7,000 higher, the Board decided to then accept the bid of W. E. Spier, a contractor from Washington, DC. When Spier came to town, he immediately offered a required bond of \$13,175, and the contract was formerly signed.

As construction on the new Courthouse proceeded, W. E. Spier, the contractor, proposed to substitute Indiana limestone for the brick for an additional \$15,700. It seems that Spier had wanted to use limestone from the beginning. The original county plan was to use brick with terra cotta trimmings. The County Board knew limestone would be more durable and of finer appearance but were concerned about the extra cost at a time of "general business depression." Some members did not like the idea of less durable terra cotta on such an important building. With one lone dissent, the Board voted in early August to accept Spier's contract including the upgrade to Indiana limestone. In anticipation of the switch to limestone, Spier had already placed an order for the Indiana stone. October 15 was set as the

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date of the formal cornerstone laying as part of an impressive Masonic ceremony with major speeches by Harrisonburg Judge John Paul and Judge R. T. W. Duke of Charlottesville.

A.M. Valz from Staunton was awarded the contract to do excavation for the foundation. Chauncey & Horrigan had the contract to lay the huge blocks of Indiana limestone.

The formal dedication of the Courthouse was September 28, 1897. With furnishings included, the new building cost much more than the Board expected. Its total cost was \$96,826.24, including a sum of \$1,120 to settle a suit brought by A. F. Withrow, who still claimed he should have been awarded the contract.

The Clock Is Rebuilt

On December 12, 1931, the Town Clock was put back into operation following a complete rebuild of the working mechanism. New works were installed, and the winding and striking apparatus was converted to electrical operation. City Council had appropriated \$1,300 for the upgrade. The changes made the

winding of the clock automatic. All moving parts were replaced with new ones, and the massive weights were eliminated by automatic electric controls. No longer were heavy weights on long ropes necessary to make the clock run. Only the striker and bell remained unchanged. Additional lights were placed behind the four faces to illuminate them better. The faces were also cleaned and painted.

The original makers, the E. Howard & Company, guaranteed the refurbished clock would not vary by more than a minute in a month. W. R. Cadmus, the manager from the E. Howard & Company, was in Harrisonburg to supervise the work. Cadmus said the upgraded clock should function properly for a century. The original had lasted for over 55 years. Company advertisements boasted that they made the finest tower clocks in the world—a claim Harrisonburg and Rockingham County would surely endorse.

References:

Rockingham Register and Daily News-Record
accounts of the Courthouses and Town Clock.