



The Court House and jail are clearly seen in center of this photo, c. 1908.

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The Story of a Court House, a Jail and Vermont Granite

Tara Weber

This story begins with the formation of Vermont granite. Vermont granite was formed during the Devonian Age approximately 330-380 million years ago. Vermont granite, and all granite for that matter, forms from the slow crystallization of magma below the Earth's surface and is the most common igneous rock found at Earth's surface. It is composed of feldspar, quartz and mica.

Many of the well-known granite monoliths found in nature, such as those in Yosemite (CA), Pikes Peak (CO), Stone Mountain (GA),

Mount Rushmore (SD), and the White Mountains (NH), were formed over 50- 125 million years ago, making Vermont granite some of our country's oldest granite. It was also considered some of our country's finest.

Fast forward a few hundred millions years to the 1800's. By the 1830's, the State of Vermont began using this granite for a few of its buildings, starting with the state capitol in Montpelier. According to Vermont Magazine, "advertising certainly increased business for Vermont's small emerging granite companies, but the construction of the state capitol building in Montpelier (1832-1836), the first commercial building in Vermont constructed of granite brought the greatest amount of attention to the industry."

By the late 1800's, Vermont granite was given a national spotlight with the growing popularity of the beaux-arts building style. Several eastern cities (Chicago, Harrisburg, New York, Washington DC) chose this style and used Vermont granite to build many of their public and civic buildings.

So what does Vermont granite have to do with Contra Costa County history?

Naturally, it all began in 1850, when the newly established Contra Costa County rented its first structure - a house - to host the court. At that time, this was a Court of Sessions. With the Act to create a Board of Supervisors, the County undertook the Act's eleventh charge, "To cause to be erected and furnished, a Court-house, jail, and such other public buildings as may be necessary, and to keep the same in repair".

And so it was.

The very first jail in Contra Costa County was housed in the basement of the first Court House, completed in 1855. The Court House was built at a cost of \$27,000 and while it lasted until the early 1900's, it was badly damaged in the earthquake of 1868. As reported in the Contra Costa Gazette, "in Martinez, the most serious damage was that sustained by the Court House, a portion of the top and rear walls were thrown down and the structure otherwise much damaged".

In the years following the repair work, the building became unsafe, dilapidated and falling short of the county's growing needs. The jail in the basement was reported as having unsanitary conditions due to the damp, cold environment and lack of ventilation. So, on August 7, 1899, and after five years of Grand Jury reports of deteriorating conditions, the Board adopted a resolution to erect a new Courthouse and jail.

"It appearing to the satisfaction of the Board that, owing to the unsafe condition of the building, the want of sufficient room and vaults for the proper storage and safe keeping of the records and documents of the County, a new Court House is a public necessity and that the public good and necessity so require - "

In comes Vermont granite...

On July 8, 1901, after much planning, three rounds of bidding, and public consultation, the Board awarded the Courthouse and jail project to Pacific Construction Co. at a proposed bid of \$177,383. Architects Havens & Topeke were hired to design the Courthouse in what would be a very early example of the Classical Revival architectural style. This factor was an important element in the County Historical Society's successful bid to gain recognition of the courthouse block on the National Register of Historic Places, in 1989. As stated in the application, by then executive director, Betty Maffei:

NPS Form 10-800a
(2-89)

OMB Approval No. 1024-0018

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Section number _____ Page _____

SUPPLEMENTARY LISTING RECORD

NRIS Reference Number: <u>89002113</u>	Date Listed: <u>12/28/89</u>
<u>Contra Costa County Courthouse Block</u>	<u>Contra Costa</u> CA
Property Name	County State

N/A
Multiple Name

This property is listed in the National Register of Historic Places in accordance with the attached nomination documentation subject to the following exceptions, exclusions, or amendments, notwithstanding the National Park Service certification included in the nomination documentation.

Amy Federman 12/28/89
Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

The county courthouse and jail were very early examples of the Classical Revival in Contra Costa County, and they illustrate the important associative qualities of stylistic revivals. In the late 19th and early 20th century, classical styles were chosen because they were easily recognizable and understandable. Roman architecture stood for justice and Greek architecture for government. Classical buildings told a story and upheld a moral and were, therefore, ideal for representing the growing confidence of the county seat.

The Board of Supervisors visited many other courthouses. Eventually, the Board decided on an expensive Classical Revival structure with a prominent dome, giving it a Beaux Arts feeling. This was in keeping with the style of other buildings of the period. The sheriff toured all jails in the state and determined his should be the most modern and the finest. For structural reasons, it was not possible for the jail to be on the top of the courthouse as originally planned. Instead, it was built close to the courthouse in a design that harmonized with it.

The Vermont granite was, with permission from the Martinez Town Trustees, transported to the building site by rail via a specially-laid spur tract over Pine Street. All of the rock was dressed at the site and twenty stonemasons were kept busy until June 1902. The two matching buildings would soon become the pride and envy of many in the County and throughout the State.

The new jail would be a 2-story structure with a basement. The entire Sheriff's Department was housed on the main floor. There were a few cells on the top floor, a few on the main floor (along with the Sheriff's offices) and a few cells in the basement (along with the kitchen). The jail was built to house 38 inmates and was designed to match the larger Courthouse building that it sits immediately behind.

Finally, in March 1903 the courthouse and jail were ready for occupancy. The county's supervisors and officials were moved in with plans for a celebration in May.

And so it was. On May 29, 1903, downtown Martinez was host to the dedication ceremonies of the historic Courthouse and Jail complex. It was estimated that as many as 8,000 - 10,000 people attended the events and travelled from all parts of the State. The festivities were kicked off by a grand parade which featured bands, fire departments, the Fire Queen, and more. "The parade was the finest ever seen here," asserted the Contra Costa Gazette. It was a day for the history books.



CCCHS Collection. The electrical lines tell us that this photo was taken several years after the first image in this article, probably around 1915. The jail is clearly seen in the foreground.

As with the first Courthouse and jail, the 1903 structures eventually became outdated and too small for the growing county. In 1933, a new Hall of Records was built to provide additional space for the county records and in 1966 the Hall of Records was repurposed for the court system and renamed the Wakefield Taylor Courthouse, after the Honorable Wakefield Taylor from East County.

With this change, the vacant 1903 Courthouse was repurposed to house the County Treasurer, Tax Collector and other related offices and renamed the County Finance Building. Today, the County Finance Building glistens in its granite glory after a 2 year and \$12-15 million dollar refurbishment project that replaced the metal roof, reconditioned the ornamental roof components, upgraded the exterior masonry and façade and provided additional seismic improvements.

The 1903 granite jail (along with its 1944 annex) was shuttered in 1981 when the new County jail opened a few blocks away on Court Street. As a result of lack of funds and/or creative thinking, the 1903 granite jail has remained shuttered and neglected.

The early 1980s was a time of many serious, and oftentimes contentious, conversations between the County, CCCHS (Contra Costa County Historical Society) and CCAFTA (Contra Costa Alliance for the Arts) as to how the 1903 granite jail could be preserved and repurposed. Conversations lead to contract negotiations and it seemed the County would have a new history museum and arts center. Sadly, those plans did not materialize.

So why the focus on the 1903 jail in this article?

Back in 2015, the County decided it was time to demolish the 1903 granite jail (and the 1944 Annex) for additional parking spaces. It was deemed a serious threat as the County had already completed and paid for much of the preparation (i.e. CEQA, NOD, DEIR, etc). Naturally, the County Historical Society and other preservation groups were concerned about the potential demolition of an historic part of our county's past. Let's remember, were it not for the County Historical Society, the historic block, of which the jail is a part, would not be on the National Register of Historic Places.

After a public comment period, the Board provided a 2 year stay and asked for a "viable plan". The APFCCC (Architectural Preservation Foundation of Contra Costa County) was formed and work began to secure a viable plan and save the jail once and for all.

In late 2018, the Board approved an additional two year stay in order for the County to continue discussions about transferring the property to the City (part of the viable plan). Negotiations continued, but by 2020, the pandemic understandably restricted communications and meetings until late in the year.



During the Board Retreat on January 26, 2021, the Board reviewed artist renderings of a new office building at 651 Pine Street and in those plans was the 1903 granite jail with an adjacent community park.

Why the Board suddenly changed their mind by February 2nd is unknown.

Where are we today?

We are once again faced with the prospect of the historic 1903 granite jail being torn down. The Board voted unanimously on February 9, 2021 to demolish the structure. The reasons have not been given. The plans for the site have not been stated or published. All we know is there is "one sticking point" in the negotiations between the County and the City that cannot be resolved.

It seems so unimaginative to demolish a unique piece of history because of "one sticking point". Surely there is a solution to this problem. It may require a little more ingenuity and a little more time, but don't we want to preserve this granite jail for the future generations? Architectural gems like the 1903 *Photo by author* ply **cannot** be replaced.

So, as we think about the unthinkable prospect of losing this piece of history, let's also ponder the

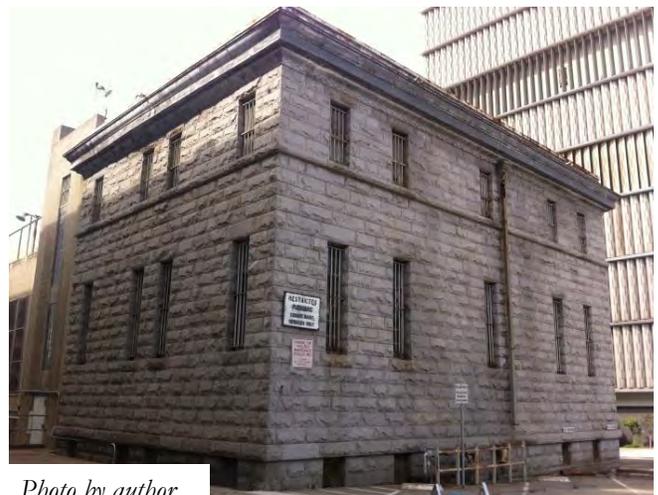


Photo by author

question of what will become of all that Vermont granite. The same Vermont granite that traversed the country by rail, gave pride to Sheriff Veale and his deputies, housed wayward individuals and adorned the bustling streets of the County seat for a century.

That's a lot of granite.

To voice your opinion on this matter, please call or email the County Supervisor for your district.

Sources:

Contra Costa County Historical Society archives
Geology.com, Vermont Magazine

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Thank you again. You make all the difference!

Speaking of Making a Difference!



The Contra Costa County Historical Society is looking for a few good men or women to join our Board of Directors, or to join our band of dedicated volunteers. We are particularly in need of someone with technical computer skills to

help us out with our computer network and website. Other than the monthly board meeting, the time you donate is pretty much up to you. So if you love local history and want to be a creative member of the largest historical archive in the County, give us a call or email our Executive Director, Michael McCarron, at: director@cohistory.org

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Remembering Mary-Ellen Jones

August 30, 1927 – March 28, 2021



We were saddened to learn of the passing of Mary-Ellen Jones, who served on our board of directors for almost 30 years, from 1983 until 2012. She served as president from 1997 until 1999, and was our newsletter editor for 11 years.

The following information comes from Traci Parent, former board member and president, who had a long and fruitful association with Mary-Ellen. At the time of Mary-Ellen's retirement, Traci wrote a piece detailing that association.

Early in her career, Mary-Ellen was an archivist at the Bancroft Library. As a charter member of the Conference of California Historical Societies, she served as Regional Vice-President for Region 11 of the organization, exceptional representative for the historical societies in Contra Costa County, Committee Chairperson for Publications, and Editor of the *California Historian*, a periodical of the society.

Quoting directly from Traci's article, "*Mary-Ellen has been a recipient of several awards. In 2001, she received the Harriette Merrifield Forbes Award from the Association for Gravestone Studies for her outstanding contribution to the field of gravestone studies. Additionally she received the Regional Vice President of the Year award for outstanding achievements during 2003-2004, and the President's Award for 2010 from the Conference of California Historical Societies.*"

Mary-Ellen also was of tremendous assistance with Traci's publication of her 1200-page book on the history of Rose Hill Cemetery. Traci ends her article with the following:

"It would take volumes to document all that Mary-Ellen has contributed to the history of Contra Costa County and California. As a CCCHS board director she kept us on track at our monthly meetings and wasn't afraid to speak what was on her mind. Without a doubt we are all fortunate to witness her contributions and dedication to the Contra Costa County Historical Society and the History Center."

Well said.

From the Executive Director:



Looking Ahead

I am quickly approaching six months in this position and I'm simply amazed how quickly the time has passed. *Tempus fugit.*

On my desk are two different "to do" lists. One is a list of day-to-day items that pop up and need to be addressed sooner, rather than later, and most can be taken care of with a phone or an email. The other list has long-range goals and projects that I want to initiate by year's end and will take some time to complete and come to fruition.

At the top of my long-range "to do" list is the creation and implementation of a three-year strategic plan. Under normal circumstances, the creation of a strategic plan for any organization is a challenging undertaking. To attempt to do this during a pandemic, well, that's a whole other story.

It appears that situation is improving, both state-wide and locally. Hopefully, more restrictions will be eased, and public contact will once again become permissible. With that in mind, my current goal is to start the strategic planning process in June or July of this year. My plan is to have three members of the Board of the CCCHS, three active volunteers of the CCCHS, and three other people (perhaps members of the CCCHS, local community officials, or public officials) form the nine-member planning team. We will need to meet at least once a month, preferably in person, for at least six months, to flesh out ideas, goals, and objectives, and eventually create a three-year road map, with measurable and obtainable milestones, for the growth and development of the Contra Costa County Historical Society.

Clearly, this process can only move forward as the pandemic abates and it may have to be delayed if the situation warrants. Nonetheless, I still want to have plan in place to begin once we have the green light to do so.

I have several other projects on my long-range "to do" list, including upgrading and expanding our IT system, and updating our website, as well. I've already taken steps to start both of these projects and I believe they can run concurrently with the strategic planning process.

With spring weather now here, I anxious to start moving forward. I'm sure there'll be lots to discuss about these projects (and others on the horizon) in future newsletters.

Thank you, as always, for your continued support of the Contra Costa County Historical Society.

Michael McCarron

From the President:



The changing of the guard occurred last month and as John Greitzer has stepped out of the President's seat, the board has selected me as the next president.

It seems like I was just in the position recently, and that is actually quite true. John took over after my term, but when it came time for board members to step forward this time, it turns out that our lives are anything but simple and placid. There were several members who I was hoping to see occupy the position of President, but family and work obligations precluded their stepped-up involvement right now. And because I have served quite recently as president, John Burgh has agreed to split the term with me, so that we each will be serving for just one year. Thank you, John Burgh, for offering a big helping hand in this leadership position. And thank you John Greitzer for your two years of dedicated service. So, I think it is safe to assume that for the first time in the Society's history we will have a "John" three-peat!

I want to use some of this precious Bulletin space to express my great pleasure in having our (almost) new executive director, Michael McCarron on board. His great fit with our organization is not a surprise to me, though, since I had the opportunity to serve on the recruitment committee. He certainly rose above the many good candidates that we interviewed, and his long service in the private, public and non-profit sectors will serve us well. And while none of the board has been infected with Covid, I think we have all become infected with his enthusiasm and new ideas!

John Mercurio

