

News Release

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Early 20th Century Rehabilitated Classical Revival Style Courthouse Distinctive for Its Use of Modern Materials

*Demolition of Non-historic Building Modifications
Results in Recapture of the Courtroom's Original Beauty*

*Damage to the Clock Tower Beyond Expectations,
but Tower's Copper Replication Process Has Already Won an Award*

NEWNAN, Ga., Nov. 15, 2010 – It is Coweta County, Georgia's most iconic symbol and the site of filming for screenplays and television movies.* It was added to the [National Register of Historic Places](#) in 1980. And now, the 106-year-old Coweta County Courthouse has undergone a rehabilitation in keeping with its historic character.

Built in 1904, the Classical Revival style courthouse was designed by James Wingfield Golucke, who designed 25 courthouses in Georgia. The approximately 25,000-square-foot structure is said by "[The New Georgia Encyclopedia](#)" to be the "most ambitious" of Golucke's works due to its building mass, porticos and the strong vertical projection of its clock tower.

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The \$7.5 million restoration project, funded by a special-purpose local-option sales tax (SPLOST) approved by Coweta County citizens, was led by the Historic Preservation Studio of architecture firm [Lord, Aeck & Sargent](#). It comprised the selective demolition of non-historic building features, exterior restoration, and interior rehabilitation that included the restoration of historically important features. Although the project was just completed in late September, elements of the exterior restoration have already won the courthouse a [2010 North American Copper in Architecture Award](#) from the Copper Development Association.

“In addition to ensuring that the courthouse rehabilitation would be as much as possible in keeping with the building’s historic past, another of our goals was for the building to house meaningful county functions,” said Eddie Whitlock, Coweta County assistant administrator, who served throughout the project as the owner’s representative.

To that end, the building, located in downtown Newnan’s commercial historic district (also on the [National Register of Historic Places](#)), is now home to Coweta County Probate Court (serving the County and its eight municipalities), and to the Coweta County Convention & Visitor’s Bureau (CVB). Probate Court moved back to the courthouse after a 22-year absence, and the CVB moved from a nearby suburban recreational park.

“While there are many Classical Revival style courthouses across Georgia and the U.S., the courthouses of the early 20th century are significant and distinctive for several reasons,” said Jack Pyburn, head of Lord, Aeck & Sargent’s Historic Preservation Studio and principal in charge of the project. “The Coweta County Courthouse has two very interesting modern features clad in its classicism. Four very large built-up steel girders in the attic that support the clock tower represent an early use of structural steel in an otherwise traditional load-bearing masonry building. Another example of modernity in this outwardly traditional structure was the use of cork, a material just coming into general use at the time.”

Selective demolition and interior work

During the selective demolition phase of the project, the Lord, Aeck & Sargent team identified and removed materials added through a cumulative series of 20th century “modernizations.”

“We removed concrete ceilings and walls that had been intrusively added to expand Courthouse vault storage. This and other similar reversals facilitated the restoration of the courtroom’s original pressed metal ceiling, plaster detailing and the stunning wood molding and transoms over the doorways and windows,” said Courtney Swann, who served as project manager and project architect for Lord, Aeck & Sargent. “Following the demolition we engaged a paint conservator to determine the historic paint colors and faux wood graining used so that they could be replicated.”

The outmoded HVAC system was replaced with a modern, energy-efficient system for the three-story building. Heating and cooling for the first floor is supplied from the building’s basement and crawl space, and for the second and partial third floors from the attic. In addition, the building was sensitively fitted out with a state-of-the-art fire suppression system to avoid damage to historic features.

The second-floor courtroom is the building’s crown jewel, and it yielded a couple of big surprises during the rehabilitation. First, the team removed carpeting, expecting to find a wood floor underneath. Instead, it found remnants of cork flooring. Although the floor had to be replaced with new cork, two of the original pieces were left in place and covered with Plexiglas.

Another courtroom surprise was the seating. “Although we had several historic postcards of the courthouse exterior, we didn’t have any interior photographs of the courtroom, at least not until much later in the project when the daughter-in-law of a contractor who had made modifications to the courtroom interior in the 1970s brought in before and after photos,” Swann

said. “We had assumed that courtroom spectators sat on benches, as was typical in courtrooms from this era, but the photo showed theater-style wooden chairs. So we designed the seatbacks to match those in the historic photo.”

In addition to the courtroom floor and gallery seating, the walls were painted historically accurate colors, the millwork is now an authentic faux oak graining, the pressed metal ceiling was restored to its original appearance, and four new chandeliers were placed in their historic positions in the ceiling.

To make the courthouse ADA-compliant, improvements included the structure's first elevator and restrooms. The courthouse originally had eight individual bathrooms, each about 12 square feet in size. One of the bathrooms was retained for historical interpretation, but there are now four ADA-compliant bathrooms, two on each of the main floors discretely placed behind the elevator.

A third-floor modification includes a catering kitchen with elevator access for special events.

Damage to the clock tower beyond expectation

A particularly challenging aspect of project was the restoration of the building's distinctive and ornate copper clad clock tower, both outside and in. The project, carried out by [Steinrock Roofing & Sheet Metal](#), began with the removal of every piece of copper from the tower walls, ceiling and roofing.

“Over the years, the original copper had suffered from less than ideal waterproofing details, hail damage and stray bullet holes,” Swann said. “It also suffered from corroded attachments made of incompatible metals. As much as we would have liked to salvage the original copper, it just wasn't an option.”

Nevertheless, each piece of the ornamental copper was carefully removed, catalogued and sent to Steinrock's sheet metal shop, where wooden forms were constructed and thousands of new, hand-cut 20-ounce copper pieces then fabricated to replicate the original decorative details.

As if that project weren't enough of a challenge, no one anticipated the extent of the structural damage to the clock tower.

"We knew there would be damage, but once we removed the copper cladding and got to the exterior sheathing there was a lot more water damage and wood rot than anyone had envisioned," Whitlock said. "The structure itself was slightly racked on its axis from hurricane-force winds that came through the county, and the sill plates had collapsed so that the tower actually lost some of its elevation."

New shoring and wood framing were required to stabilize the clock tower before the new copper cladding could be installed, so it was stabilized in place. "The tower still leans slightly, but it's hardly noticeable, and then only when the building is approached from the south," Whitlock said.

During the process of repairing and restoring the clock tower, Whitlock said, "I lost sleep worrying that the entire structure would fall in the street when the scaffolding was fully erected and loaded with materials and workers, but I am comfortable with the stabilization steps that were taken."

Other exterior restoration

Although the clock tower may have been the largest challenge for the project team, numerous other steps were taken to restore the courthouse exterior. Some of these included:

- Patching and repairing much of the copper ornamentation and banding on the symmetrical porticoed exterior elevations to address more than a century of accumulated oxidation, staining and debris
- Replacing the shingles on the roof gables, and installing new modified bitumen low slope roofing to produce a watertight building
- Cleaning the brick and limestone masonry along with some repointing and minor patching on the limestone base
- Rehabilitating all of the windows, including the removal, repair and reinstallation of the sashes, while making the weights and pulleys operable
- Removing overgrown ornamental trees that had no relationship to the historic square, and recreating lawns surrounding the building to produce the historical openness of the square
- Restoring the brick perimeter walls, whose perpendicular corners had been altered
- Rehabilitating the four main building entries, including doorway refinements and hand railings

The historic Coweta County Courthouse is now positioned for another century of service.

The project team

The Coweta County Courthouse rehabilitation project team included:

- Coweta County Citizens Advisory Committee
- Lord, Aeck & Sargent (Atlanta office) – architect
- Willett Engineering Co. (Tucker, Ga.) – structural engineer
- NBP Engineers (Macon, Ga.) – MEP/FP engineer
- The Jaeger Co. (Gainesville, Ga.) – landscape architect
- Headley Construction Corp. (Newnan, Ga.) – general contractor
- Steinrock Roofing & Sheet Metal (Louisville, Ky.) – sheet metal contractor

About Lord, Aeck & Sargent

Lord, Aeck & Sargent is an award-winning architectural firm serving clients in scientific, academic, historic preservation, arts and cultural, and multi-family housing and mixed-use markets. The firm's core values are responsive design, technological expertise and exceptional service. Lord, Aeck & Sargent has offices in Ann Arbor, Michigan; Atlanta, Georgia; and Chapel Hill, North Carolina. For more information, visit the firm at www.lordaecksargent.com.

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* Some of the screenplays and television movies filmed at the Coweta County Courthouse include "Murder in Coweta County" (TV 1983), "Grass Roots" (TV 1992), "Fluke" (screenplay 1995), and "The Simple Life of Noah Dearborn" (TV 1999).