

DALLAS COUNTY  
HISTORICAL COMMISSION

# THE DALLAS COUNTY CHRONICLE

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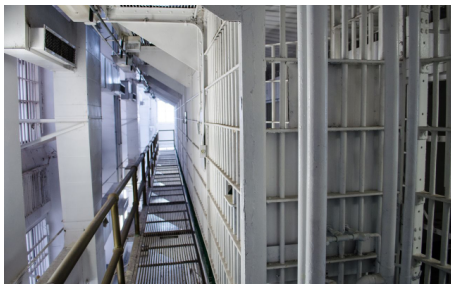
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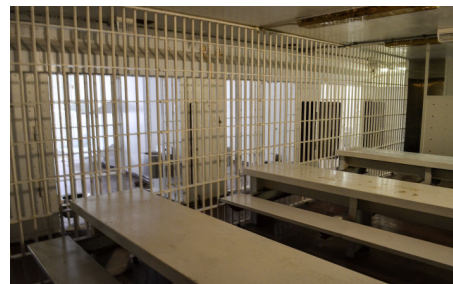
## A Short History of The Dallas County Criminal Courts Building

By Don Baynham, photos by Charles Stokes

**T**he Dallas County Criminal Courts building opened in 1915 at the corner of Main and Houston Streets with a jail, sheriff's office, district attorney's office, hospital, operating room, court rooms, barber shop, and jailer's quarters. And, if the County Commissioners hadn't balked, it might have had a pipe organ.



Cell Block featuring brass railing, said to be from the Battleship Texas.



Dining hall

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**Double cell where Jack Ruby briefly stayed**

He designed the building with the jail on the top (beginning on the fifth floor) in an attempt to make it escape proof. It wasn't; over the years, many prisoners escaped. (In 1931, Gene Autry released "The Dallas County Jail Blues" describing the jail as the "High Five.")

On Sunday, November 4, 1963, as Lee Harvey Oswald, alleged assassin of President John F. Kennedy, was being transferred from the City Jail to County jail, he was shot and killed by Dallas night club owner Jack Ruby. Ruby was then incarcerated in the jail atop the Criminal Courts Building. In 1964, he was



**Death row baptism room with inmate painted murals.**

The architect was H.A. Overbeck of Dallas, who also designed the MKT Building, which still stands at 701 Commerce. His goal was to create a humane jail; hence the hospital, barber shop, etc. But he also wanted to furnish the prisoners with organ music; popular tunes during the day, religious music at night. He tried to raise the funds for it himself, but World War I stopped him.



**One of the murals painted by inmates for the death row baptism room**

Kennedy and Oswald had died. The court room in which Ruby was tried was eventually remodeled into a storage area. The second court room in this building is still in use, and has been restored to its original condition. Probate cases are still tried there.

In addition to Jack Ruby, this jail has housed other famous criminals, including 1930s gangster Binny Binion, Clyde Barrow of Bonnie and Clyde fame, and Raymond Hamilton, who was a member of the Barrow Gang. In fact, after Bonnie and Clyde were killed in 1934, both of their mothers were imprisoned



**Death Row Cells, a remnant of the former jail from before 1923**

Hangings ended in 1923, when Texas changed its laws to require that executions only be performed in Huntsville, and only using the electric chair.

In 1925 the jail was besieged by a mob of over 5,000 people, seeking to lynch Frank and Lorenzo Noel, two black men accused of killing a white man and assaulting a white women. The rioters fired upon the jail; return fire from Sheriff's deputies killed one of the mob and wounded six others. The National Guard was called out, and the following week the Noel brothers were tried and convicted in two and one half hours. They were transported to Huntsville on May 31 and executed in the electric chair on July 3.

The jail was "depopulated" (in Sheriff's department lingo) for good in the mid 1990s, but Probate Court #1 continues to function in the remaining court room.

for one month in the jail, having been convicted of aiding and abetting their offspring.

Before 1915, Dallas County's condemned prisoners were executed on gallows erected near the old county jail (where Union Terminal is today). After the construction of the Criminal Courts Building, hangings moved to the top floor of the jail. Three "death cells" still exist on that floor, as does a "baptism room" containing an old claw-foot tub surrounded by prisoner-created religious artwork. Legend holds that the condemned were offered a chance at redemption through baptism. Those who took it were doused in the tub before being hanged.



**One of the murals painted by inmates for the death row baptism room**

The Dallas County Criminal Courts building, now virtually empty, is said to be haunted by a tall, dark shadow wearing a white jumper, who, when sighted, appears to be working in the kitchen and storeroom area. And every now and then, some say, a lady ghost appears. And though it would be a natural fit, no one has ever reported hearing organ music.



View of the Old Red Courthouse from the Old Dallas County Jail

## J.D. Tippit Historical Marker Dedication

On November 20, 2012, a formal ceremony was held dedicating a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark marker honoring Officer J.D. Tippit. Officer Tippit was shot and killed by Lee Harvey Oswald on November 22, 1963, shortly after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. The Marker is located at the corner of 10th and Patton Streets, where the shooting occurred.



Mrs. Tippit with her husband's marker



Chief Brown at the J.D. Tippit Marker Dedication

## Historical Origins of the Name Addison

The Town of Addison is located in part of an area once called “Peters Colony”, the name often applied to an empresario grant made in 1841 by the Republic of Texas. The area was settled in 1846 when Preston Witt built a house on White Rock Creek. In 1888 S.S. Noell and others donated right-of-way to the St. Louis, Arkansas, and Texas Railway, known later as Noell Junction. A post office opened at the junction in 1904. Since a town in Leon County was already called Noell, the post office was named Addison after Addison Roberts, the community’s second post master. The City of Addison was incorporated on June 15, 1953, as an attempt to avoid annexation into Dallas. The name was changed to “Town of Addison” in 1982.

## Featured Member Profile Charles Stokes

Charles Stokes is starting his second term as a member of the Historical Commission. Charles lives in Rowlett and was appointed by Commissioner Mike Cantrell. Charles is a third generation member of the Commission. His Father, Judge Charles Stokes, and Grandmother, Winifred Stokes were both members of the Commission. He has taken an active role in the Commission producing the newsletter as well as photography. Charles has an interest in history and preservation. He believes in environmental conservation via re-using and preserving historical buildings. Charles is a Computer Science Major at Baylor Univeristy.

## The Dallas County Chronicle

The Dallas County Historical Commission is a County board appointed by the Dallas County Commissioners Court. The Dallas County Chronicle is a publication of the DCHC for historical groups in Dallas County and the general public. This issue was edited by Charles Stokes, Don Baynham, and Rick Loessberg and was published with the assistance of The Sixth Floor Museum. Articles should be sent to:

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