
5. Classification

Ownership of Property: Public-local

Number of Resources within Property:
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Category of Property: Building

Contributing	Noncontributing
1	buildings sites structures objects
1	Total

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)
NA

**Number of contributing resources previously listed
in the National Register** None

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions: Government-courthouse

Current Functions: Government-courthouse

7. Description

Architectural Classification(s): Late Victorian, Richardsonian Romanesque

Materials:

foundation: stone
roof: asphalt shingle
walls: brick
other

Narrative Description:

See Continuation Sheets

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

- X **A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- X **C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Areas of Significance

Politics/Government; Ethnic Heritage/Black; Architecture

Period of Significance

1910-1956

Significant Dates

1955

Criteria Considerations:

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or a grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property.
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Significant Person(s)**Cultural Affiliation(s)****Architect/Builder**

Hull, W. S., architect ; F. B. Hull Construction Company, builder

Narrative Statement of Significance:

See continuation sheets.

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

See continuation sheet.

Previous documentation on file (NPS)

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey

- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record

Primary Location of Additional Data

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other
- Name of repository: _____
-

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property: Less than one

UTM References:	Zone	Easting	Northing	Zone	Easting	Northing
A	15	743040	3761800	C		
B				D		

___ See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description See continuation sheet.

Boundary Justification: See continuation sheet.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title: William M. Gatlin, Architectural Historian

organization: Mississippi Department of Archives and History

street & number: P.O. Box 571

city or town: Jackson

state: MS

date: December 31, 2006

telephone: 601-576-6940

zip code: 39201

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional items (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner(s)

name: Tallahatchie County Board of Supervisors

street & number: P.O. Box 180

city or town: Sumner

state: MS

telephone:

zip code: 38957

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES CONTINUATION SHEET

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Tallahatchie County Second District Courthouse
Tallahatchie County, MS

Summary

The Tallahatchie County Second District Courthouse occupies the block in downtown Sumner, Mississippi, bounded by N. Court Street, E. Court Street, S. Court Street and W. Court Street. Built in 1910 in the Richardsonian Romanesque style, the two-story rectangular brick structure has a four story tower on the northwest corner capped by a pyramidal roof and two story towers on the remaining three corners, also capped by pyramidal roofs. The main structure has a hipped roof. There are rounded arched windows on the second floor and trabiated windows on the first floor on all facades. Decorative brick and concrete work is present in the form of corbelled arches, window surrounds, arched openings, and band courses.

Exterior

The building faces north with the main entrance centered in the main pavilion of the building. A four story tower is located on the west side of the building. The tower has a pyramidal roof capped with a metal pinnacle over a plain brick face occupied by a clock. A wide wooden cornice with dentils runs around the four faces of the tower, over an open rounded arch with a concrete keystone and brick molding. Concrete band courses visually divide the floors of the tower. A line of corbelled arches constructed of brick and outlined in concrete run over the second floor which contains a Palladian-influenced window that sits on a stone lintel over three rectangular windows, while there are two rounded arched windows with decorative brick mouldings on the first floor. The glass has been replaced on all windows with single sheets of tinted glass. The ground floor of the tower presents a plain brick face over a foundation of rusticated stones.

The face of the main pavilion of the building slightly projects from the corner towers. A massive wall gable is broken by a small arched window over a concrete band course with brick dentils. Four arched windows are evenly spaced along the second floor, each with decorative brick mouldings. Concrete band courses visually divide the floors. The main entrance is under a rounded brick arch flanked by trabiated windows with concrete keystones and concrete sills. The building sits on a foundation of rusticated stones. Brick stairs provide access to the recessed entry which is guarded by cast iron gates. The floor of the entry is brick. To the left, a simple wooden door provides access to the chancery clerk's office. The right is open to a dogleg stair in the tower with boxed newel posts capped with balls. Entry to the first floor is provided by double half-glazed wood doors with a transom and sidelights that appear to be original to the building.

A two-story tower sits on the east end of the main façade. The wooden cornice runs below a pyramidal roof with a metal pinnacle. There are two round arched windows with decorative molding on the second floor, which is separated from the first floor by a concrete band course. The first floor has two trabiated windows with concrete keystones and a concrete sill, over a plain brick wall resting on the ashlar stone foundation.

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Tallahatchie County Second District Courthouse
Tallahatchie County, MS

The east façade is symmetrical, with slightly projecting two-story towers on either end. The towers are similar to the north face with pyramidal roofs, cornice, rounded arched windows on the second floor and rectangular windows on the first floor. The foundation stones are not visible. The main pavilion is capped with a hipped roof over the wide cornice. There are five rounded arch windows on the second floor and five rectangular windows on the first floor, with the floors distinguished by a concrete band course. Three of the first floor windows have metal shutters.

The south is also symmetrical with slightly projecting two-story towers on either end. There is an intersecting gable on the roof. The wide cornice line continues on the façade. There are three round arched windows on the second floor. An arched opening leads to a recessed entry, but the doors have been replaced by a solid wall with a rectangular window. The towers are similar to those previously described.

The west façade has a two-story tower on the south end and the four story tower on the north end. Both towers are similar to those described above. The main pavilion is similar to the east façade except in place of the southernmost windows there are half-glazed wood double doors with a transom that opens onto a handicapped ramp.

Interior

The north doors open to a wide hallway with brick floors and high ceilings. The walls are plaster over a bead board wainscoting. A door to the right opens to the circuit clerk's office. A decorated metal door, believed to be a fireproof door, opens to the chancery clerk's office. The south end of the hall contains an elevator. There is a short hallway leading to the west entrance containing a door to the sheriff's office and another fireproof door leading to the circuit clerk's office. The chancery clerk's office occupies the north tower and part the first floor adjacent to the main hall and has interior metal shutters. The tax collector's office occupies the southeast tower.

The second floor is accessed by the stairs in the four-story tower which open to a second floor lobby. Double doors lead into the courtroom, while a single door opens to a large conference room. Stairs in the northwest corner of the lobby lead to the third floor tower room which contains a permanent ladder allowing access to the clockworks and stairs to the attic.

The attic has been converted to office space, storage and two restrooms.

The courtroom occupies the major part of the second floor. There are side walls with round arches that create an arcade on the east and west sides of the court room. The bench, jury box, witness box and clerk's desk are on the south end of the room and the original bar separates the well of the courtroom from the audience benches. A hall runs from east to west behind the courtroom and can be accessed by the elevator or a narrow stair that goes up to the attic and down to the first floor. There is jury room with a rest room, two conference rooms and public restrooms off the hall.

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Tallahatchie County Second District Courthouse
Tallahatchie County, MS.

There is a small basement which has historically been used for storage. The basement is reached by a stairway in the southwest corner of the building.

Integrity

The exterior of the Tallahatchie County Second District Courthouse retains a high degree of integrity. The only substantial change in the exterior is replacement glass in the windows. The stairs and rooms of the four story tower retain a high degree of integrity. Original bead board wainscoting, stair treads and risers and baluster and stiles all remain. The first floor hall retains original bead board wainscoting and fire proof doors. The elevator was added c. 1980. Although the second floor courtroom was redesigned in the 1980s, the original bar and well-outline remain. Plans call for restoration of the courtroom to its 1955 appearance. The jury room, public restrooms and rear stair configuration are thought to be original. The third floor offices, although not historic, can be closed off to public access and do not diminish the integrity of the structure since the attic was never open to the public.

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Tallahatchie County Second District Court House
Tallahatchie County, MS

Summary

The Tallahatchie County Courthouse in Sumner, Mississippi is eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places for local significance under Criteria A for Politics/Government since it has been the site of local government offices and courts in western Tallahatchie County for ninety-eight years. It is also nationally significant under the category of Ethnic Heritage/Black as the site of the trial for the Emmett Till murder case in 1955, which made international headlines and was a pivotal moment in the Civil Rights era. The Courthouse is also locally significant under Criteria C for architecture as an excellent local example of Richardsonian Romanesque architecture.

History of Court House

Tallahatchie County was established by an act of the Mississippi legislature on December 23, 1833. It was one of several counties formed from the Choctaw Cession following the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek. By an election of 1838, the county seat was set at Charleston, where court houses were constructed in 1838, 1845, 1900 and 1975.¹

The Tallahatchie River divides the county in half. In the 19th century, especially in flood, the river presented a barrier to residents in the western half of the county who needed access to county offices and courts. Therefore, in 1902, the Mississippi legislature divided the county into two judicial districts. The First Judicial District remained in Charleston. Voters chose Sumner as the site of the Second Judicial District in an election that was described as "hotly contested."²

The Board of Supervisors contracted with F. B. and W.S. Hull to build a courthouse in Sumner for the sum of \$22,000.00.³ The cornerstone was laid July 3, 1903, and the building was completed later that year. However, a large fire struck downtown Sumner in September 1908 and the courthouse, among other buildings, was destroyed.

County officials had the foresight to insure the building and received \$22,500 in insurance proceeds, which were dedicated to the construction of a new courthouse. William S. Hull was the only architect to submit plans and specifications and was awarded the contract and designated as supervising architect. Hull's design was almost a complete replica of the original courthouse, with only some minor changes on

¹ Bill Gurney. *Mississippi's Courthouses, Then and Now*. (Ripley, MS: Old Timer Press, 1987), 146.

² Frances Fielder, "History of Tallahatchie County Since Its Creation December 23, 1833," in *A History of Tallahatchie County*, Lillie Neal Henry, ed. (Charleston, MS: Tallahatchie Chapter Daughters of the American Revolution, 1960), 26.

³ *The* (Charleston, MS) *Democratic Herald*, September 18, 1902.

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Tallahatchie County Second District Courthouse
Tallahatchie County, MS

the interior layout.⁴ The Board of Supervisors awarded the construction contract to F. B. Hull Construction Company, the contractors on the original courthouse. The contract price was \$13,500.00.⁵

After another massive fire in downtown Sumner in June 1909, the Board of Supervisors modified the contract with F. B. Hull to include fireproofing. This change resulted in litigation over the Board's authority to modify the contract, which delayed the construction. However, on March 4, 1910, the supervising architect, William S. Hull, wrote the Board of Supervisors to advise them the building was complete, met the specifications, and was "a good, safe piece of construction."⁶ The Board accepted the building and ordered county offices to occupy the courthouse.

Emmett Till Murder Trial⁷

The September 1955 trial of J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant for the murder of Emmett Till attracted international attention and brought over a hundred journalists to Sumner. Till, a 14 year old African American youth from Chicago, was visiting relatives in Mississippi in the summer of 1955. On August 24, Till and several others went to Money, Mississippi where Bryant and his wife operated a store. Although the exact nature of what happened between Till and Carolyn Bryant may never be known, it was alleged that Till spoke to Mrs. Bryant in a familiar manner and whistled at her. In that time and place, it was not behavior an African-American male was expected to display toward a white woman.

Bryant's husband, Roy, was out of town at the time. When he returned and learned of the incident, he was angered. In the early morning hours of August 28, he and his half-brother, J. W. Milam, went to the home of Mose Wright, Till's great uncle. They took Till from the house and he was never seen alive again. Both Bryant and Milam admitted kidnapping Till in order to teach him a lesson, but claimed they later released him unharmed. After relatives reported the young man missing, Bryant and Milam were arrested for kidnapping and held in the Greenwood jail. After authorities in LeFlore County declined to prosecute, Tallahatchie County, where the youth's body was found, charged the defendants. Both men would later admit their guilt.

Emmett Till's badly decomposed body was found in the Tallahatchie River on August 31. Mose Wright identified the body by a ring with the initials "LT." Just before he left Chicago, Till's mother gave him a ring that belonged to his deceased father, Louis Till, inscribed with the initials "LT." The young man had

⁴ *The (Sumner, MS) Herald-Progress*, December 10, 1908.

⁵ *The Herald-Progress*, February 9, 1909.

⁶ *The Tallahatchie Herald*,

⁷ This section is based on information contained in Christopher Metress, ed. *The Lynching of Emmet Till*. (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2002) and Stephen J. Whitfield, *A Death in the Delta, The Story of Emmet Till*. (New York: The Free Press, 1988).

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Tallahatchie County Second District Courthouse
Tallahatchie County, MS

been severely beaten, shot in the head and bound in barbed wire before being dumped in the river with a fan from a cotton gin tied around his neck.

Till's body was shipped back to Chicago where his mother, Mamie Bradley, decided on an open coffin. Thousands of mourners viewed the mutilated remains. Millions more across the country saw photographs of the body published in *Jet* magazine.

The trial of the accused killers began on September 19, 1955, in the Tallahatchie County Second District Courthouse in Sumner. Over one hundred journalists were in attendance, and the details of the trial made daily headlines in papers across the county. The major television networks arranged to have film flown to New York nightly from a makeshift airfield in Tutwiler.

Although there were some eye witnesses, including the testimony of Mose Wright identifying Milam and Bryant as the men who kidnapped Till from his home, much of the prosecution case was based on circumstantial evidence. No one would testify that they had seen Milam and Bryant torture or murder the youth. It took the all male, all white jury a mere one hour and seven minutes to return a verdict acquitting both men.

Many historians cite the Emmett Till murder and the exoneration of his killers as the beginning of the civil rights era. The verdict received international coverage, with most of the European press surprised and shocked at the verdict. Till's story inspired poets Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks, as well as songwriter Bob Dylan, who all produced works about the incident. Many people active in the civil rights movement were inspired by Till's death. John Lewis later said the murder of Emmett Till "galvanized the country. A lot of young black students in the South later on, we weren't just sitting in for ourselves – we were sitting in for Emmett Till. We went on Freedom Rides for Emmett Till."⁸

Journalist David Halberstam called the Emmett Till murder trial "the first great media event of the civil rights movement."⁹

Richardsonian Romanesque Architecture in Mississippi

Henry Hobson Richardson is credited with a style of architecture loosely based on principles of the Romanesque style. Richardson took the round arched openings of the Romanesque and placed them in wide, low openings. Most Richardsonian Romanesque buildings are composed of masonry and have broad proportions and convey a sense of massiveness, often derived from the use of different stone to outline structural features. Windows may be arched or straight, but are often divided by stone mullions. Corner towers, wall dormers and turrets are common features. Hobson introduced the style with his Trinity Church in Boston, 1873-1877. It was widely copied and popular into the 1890s.

⁸ Metress, 3.

⁹ Metress, 3.

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Tallahatchie County Second District Courthouse
Tallahatchie County, MS

However, Richardsonian Romanesque was never a widely used style in Mississippi. Although the reasons may vary, the state has never had much of a tradition of building in stone. The earliest Richardsonian buildings in Mississippi are the Aberdeen post office (NR, 1976) built in 1885-1887 and the Oxford post office (NR, 1980) built in 1887. The Aberdeen building now houses the chancery court and clerk, while the Oxford building hosts the city hall. The oldest courthouse in the style is the Washington County Courthouse in Greenville, built in 1890.

The Tallahatchie County Courthouse possesses the major stylistic characteristics of the Richardsonian Romanesque building when executed in brick. These include the broad low arch over the main entrance, round arches on the upper windows, and the pyramidal-roofed towers. It is one of only two surviving Richardsonian Romanesque courthouses in Mississippi and the only remaining brick Richardsonian courthouse in this state.

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Tallahatchie County Second District Courthouse
Tallahatchie County, MS

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Metress, Christopher, ed. *The Lynching of Emmett Till.* Charlottesville and London, University of Virginia Press, 2002.

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Section: 10, Photography Log Page: 9

Tallahatchie County Second District Courthouse
Tallahatchie County, MS

Verbal Boundary Description

All of Block E in the Town of Sumner, Tallahatchie County, Mississippi, Section 2, Township 24, Range 2W.

Boundary Justification

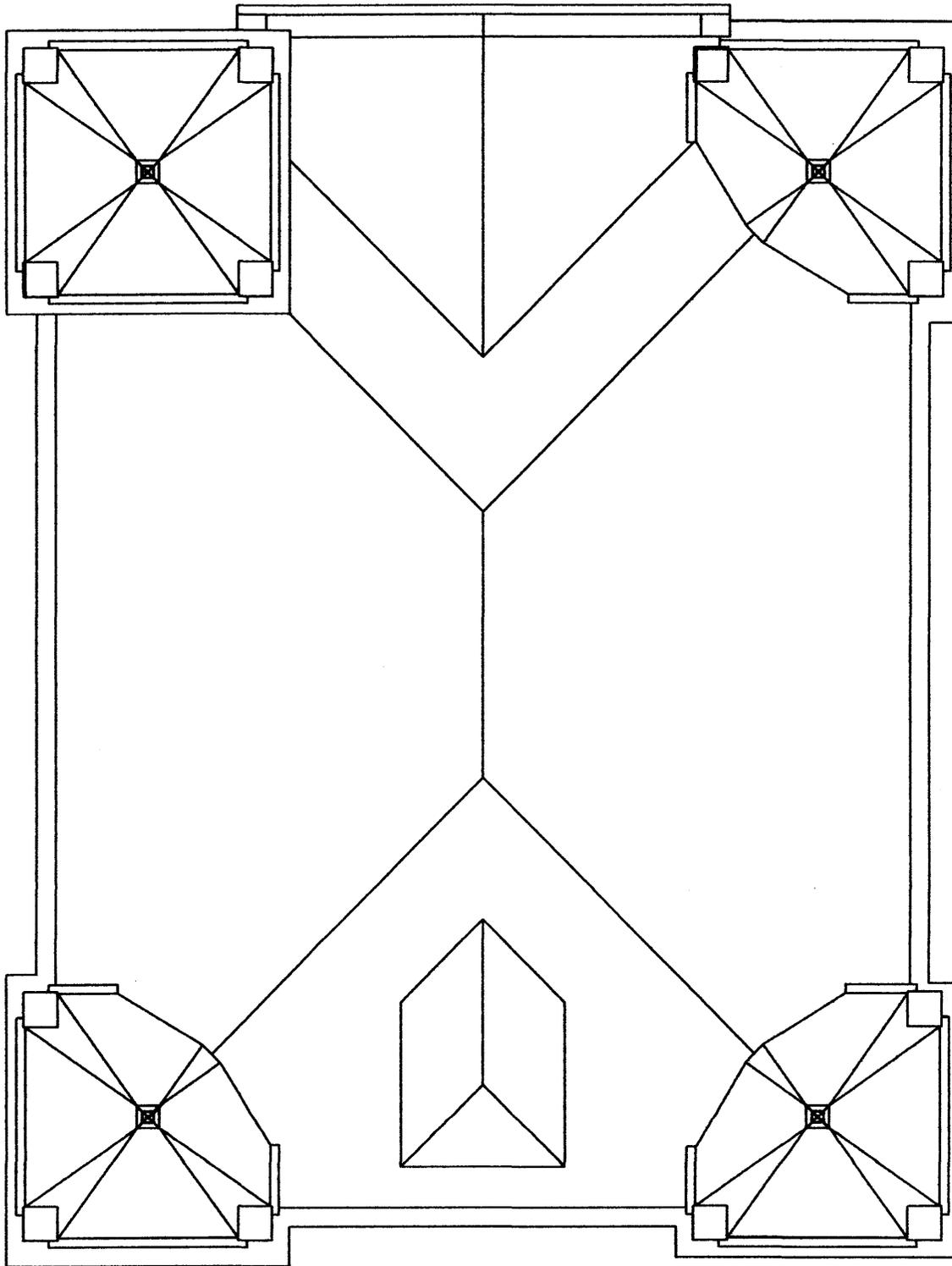
This is the property historically occupied by the Tallahatchie County Second District Courthouse.

Photography Log

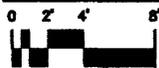
For all photographs:

1. Tallahatchie County Second District Courthouse, Sumner, MS
2. Tallahatchie County, MS
3. William M. Gatlin, MDAH
4. 29 November 2006
5. Mississippi Department of Archives and History

- | | |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Photograph No. 1: | Exterior, north façade, camera facing south |
| Photograph No. 2: | Exterior, east façade, camera facing west |
| Photograph No. 3: | Exterior, south façade, camera facing north |
| Photograph No. 4: | Exterior, west façade, camera facing east |
| Photograph No. 5: | Exterior, north entrance, camera facing south |
| Photograph No. 6: | Interior, first floor, fire door, main hall, camera facing east |
| Photograph No. 7: | Interior, first floor, tower stairs, camera facing west |
| Photograph No. 8: | Interior, second floor, tower stairs, camera facing west |
| Photograph No. 9: | Interior, second loor, courtroom, camera facing southwest |
| Photograph No. 10: | Interior, second floor, tower stairs, camera facing west |



ROOF PLAN



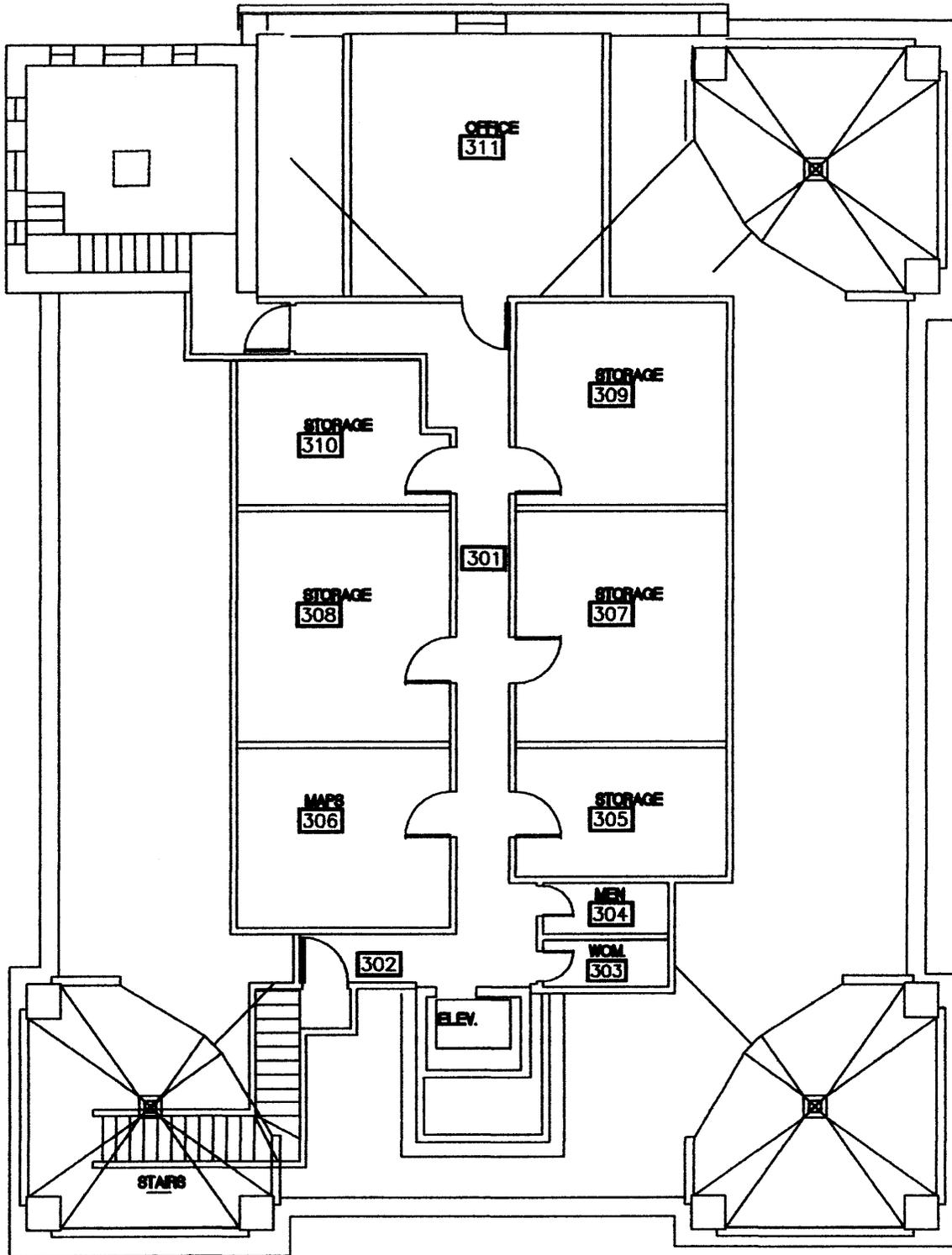
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**TALLAHATCHIE COUNTY COURTHOUSE
SUMNER, MISSISSIPPI**

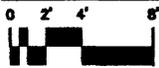
RICHARD M. DICKSON, ARCHITECT

1418 SHADY LANE * CLARKSDALE, MISSISSIPPI 38614

662-627-7931



ATTIC FLOOR PLAN



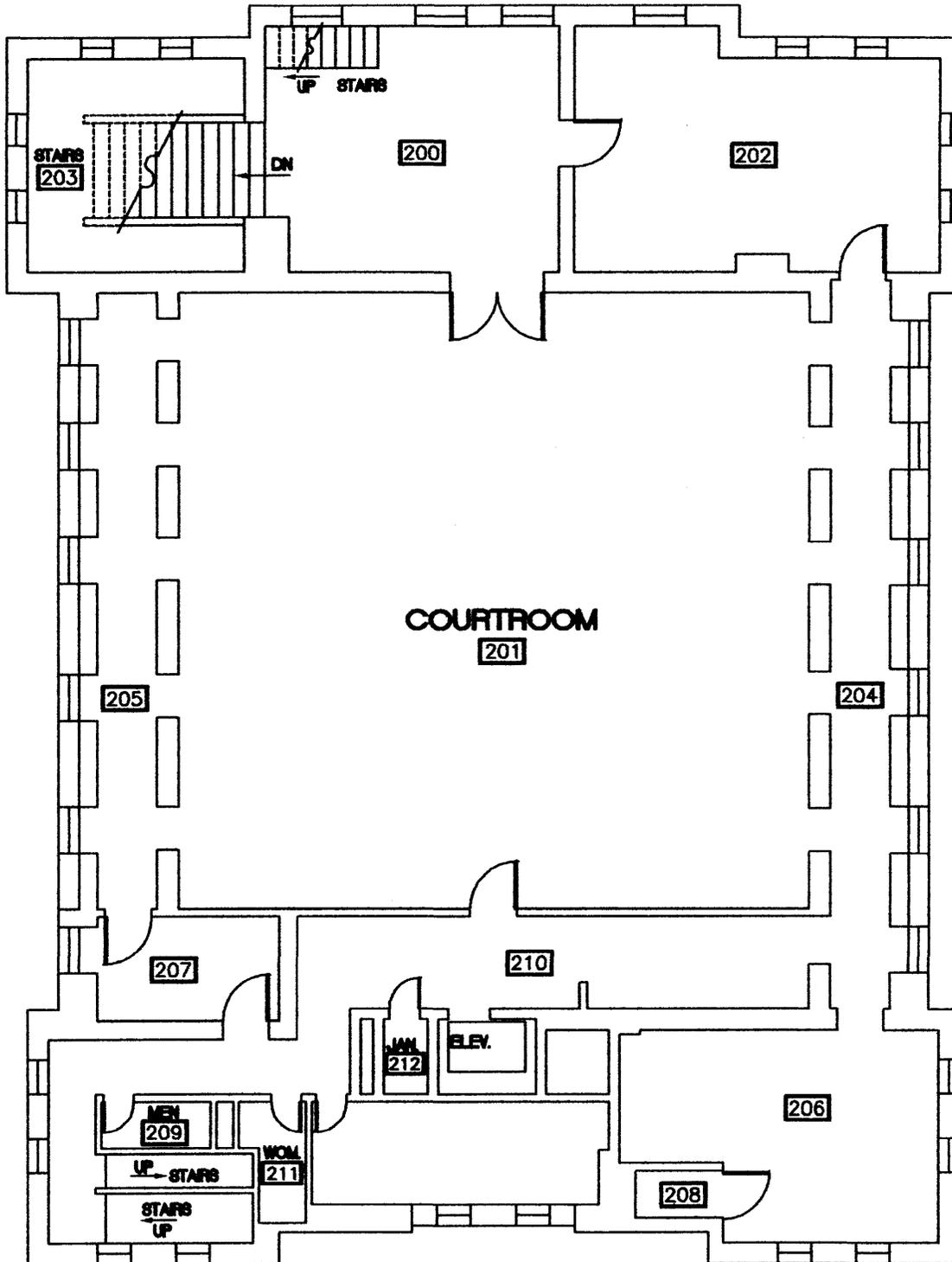
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**TALLAHATCHIE COUNTY COURTHOUSE
SUMNER, MISSISSIPPI**

RICHARD M. DICKSON, ARCHITECT

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662-627-7931



SECOND FLOOR PLAN



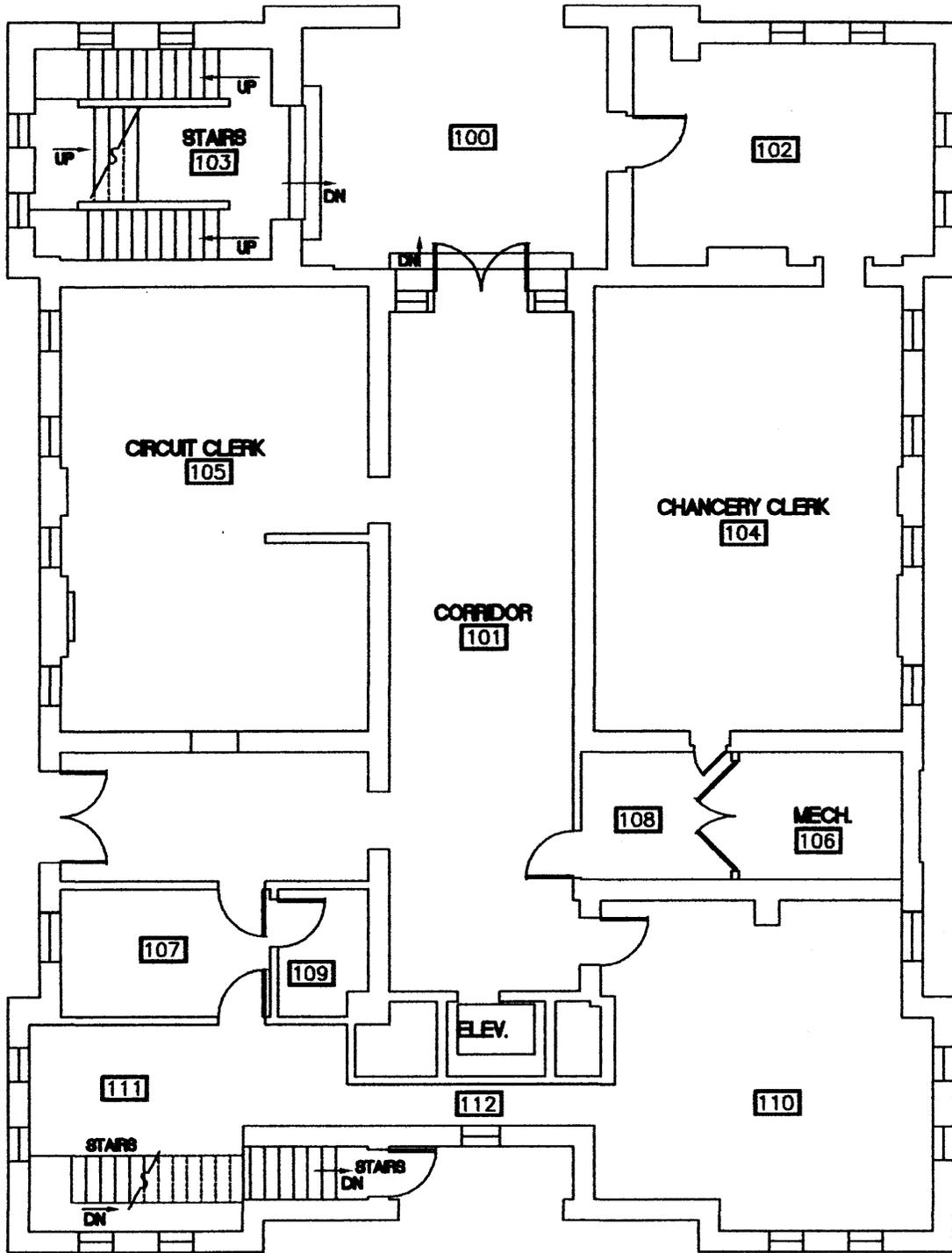
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**TALLAHATCHIE COUNTY COURTHOUSE
SUMNER, MISSISSIPPI**

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FIRST FLOOR PLAN



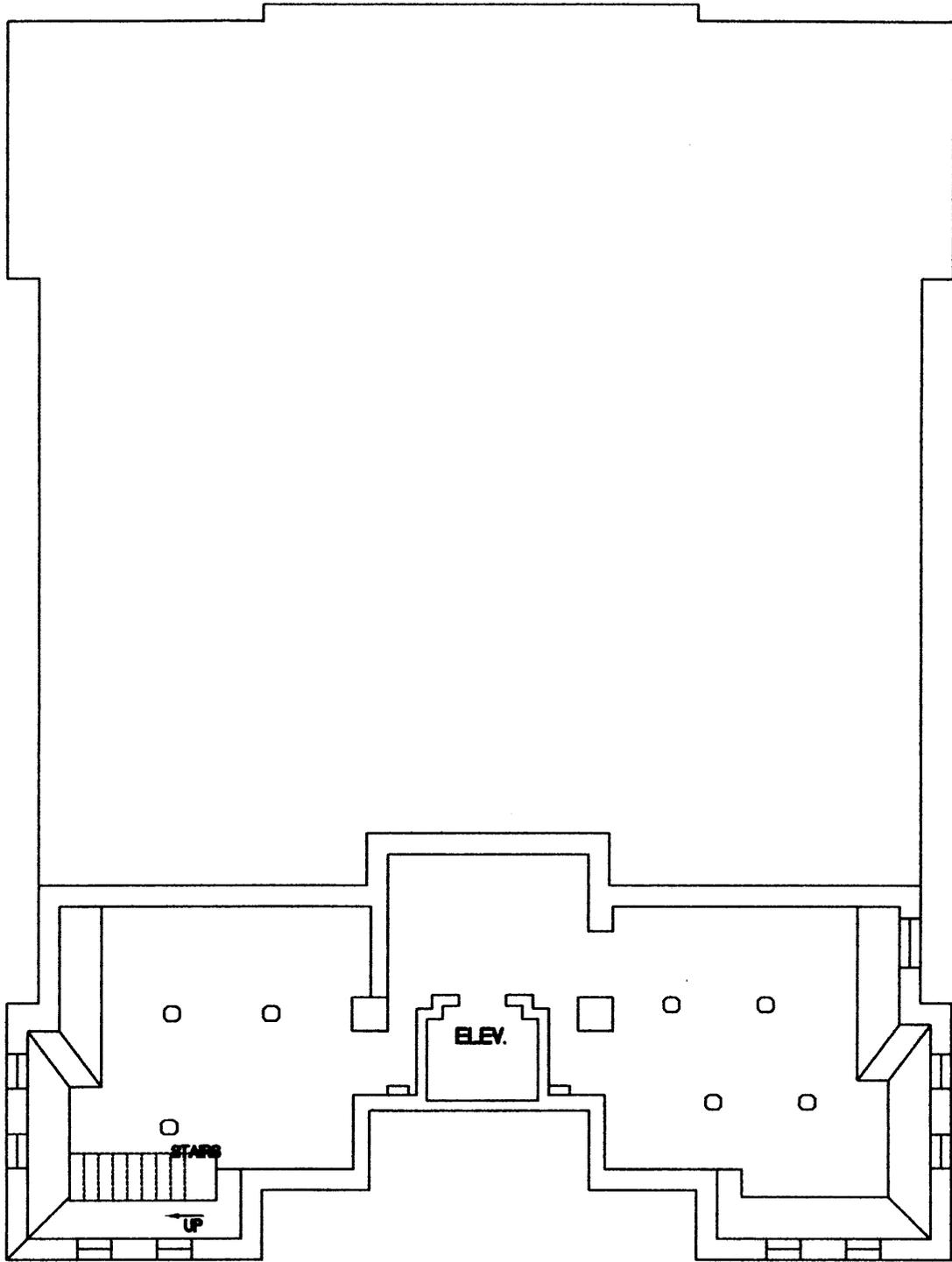
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**TALLAHATCHIE COUNTY COURTHOUSE
SUMNER, MISSISSIPPI**

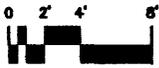
RICHARD M. DICKSON, ARCHITECT

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662-627-7931



BASEMENT PLAN



SCALE : 3/32" = 1'-0"

**TALLAHATCHIE COUNTY COURTHOUSE
SUMNER, MISSISSIPPI**

RICHARD M. DICKSON, ARCHITECT _____

1418 SHADY LANE * CLARKSDALE, MISSISSIPPI 38614

662-627-7931



Photograph No. 1

1. Tallachie County Second District Courthouse
2. Tallachie County, MS
3. William M. Grattin, MD AH
4. 29 November 2006
5. Mississippi Department of Archives and History
6. Exterior, north facade, facing south



Photograph No 2

1. Tallahatchie County Second District Courthouse
2. Tallahatchie County, MS
3. William M Gathin, MDAH
4. 29 November 2006
5. Mississippi Department of Archives and History
6. Exterior, east façade, facing west



Photograph No 3

1. Tallahatchie County second District Courthouse
2. Tallahatchie County, MS
3. William M. Gattlin, MDAH
4. 29 November 2006
5. Mississippi Department of Archives and History
6. Exterior, south facade, facing north



Photograph No 4

1. Tallahatchie County Second District Courthouse
2. Tallahatchie County, MS
3. William M. Gattin MDAH
4. 29 November 2006
5. Mississippi Department of Archives and History
6. Exterior, West facade, Camera facing east



Photograph No 5

1. Tallahatchie County, Second District Courthouse
2. Tallahatchie County, MS
3. William M Gattin, MDAH
4. 29 November 2006
5. Mississippi, Department of Archives and History
6. Extern, North entrance, facing south

Photograph No 6

1. Tallahatchie County Second District Courthouse
2. Tallahatchie County, MS
3. William M. Gattin MOAH
4. 29 November 2006
5. Mississippi Department of Archives and History
6. Interior, first floor, facing east



CAREFUL
STEP
DOWN

CAREFUL
STEP
UP

Photograph No. 7

1. Tallahatchie County Second District Courthouse
2. Tallahatchie County, MS
3. William M. Gatlin MDAH
4. 29 November 2006
5. Mississippi Department of Archives and History
6. Intern, first floor, facing west



Photograph No 8

1. Tallahatchie County Second District Courthouse
2. Tallahatchie County, MS
3. William M Gattlin, MOAH
4. 29 November 2006
5. Mississippi Department of Archives and History
6. Interim, second floor, camera facing west



Photograph No 9

1. Tallahatchie County Second District Courthouse
2. Tallahatchie County, MS
3. William M. Gattlin MDAH
4. 29 November 2006
5. Mississippi Department of Archives and History
6. Interior, courtroom, facing southwest



Photograph No 10

1. Tallahatchie County Second District Courthouse
2. Tallahatchie County, MS
3. William M. Gattlin MDAH
4. 29 November 2006
5. Mississippi Department of Archives and History
6. Interior, Beaf Floor, far west

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Tallahatchie County Second District Courthouse
Tallahatchie County, MS

**Amendment to National Register Of Historic Places Nomination
Tallahatchie County Second District Courthouse
Tallahatchie County, MS**

The Tallahatchie County Second District Courthouse, located in Sumner, Tallahatchie County, Mississippi was listed on the National Register of Historic Places on March 6, 2007. The building is significant under Criteria C as a good statewide example of Richardsonian Romanesque architecture executed in brick. It is also significant under Criteria A because of its association with politics and government in Tallahatchie County. Finally, the courthouse is significant under Criteria A in the area of Ethnic Heritage/Black in the context of the civil rights movement as the site of the Emmett Till murder trial in September 1955.

The purpose of this amendment is to submit additional documentation to establish the national significance of the Tallahatchie County Second District Courthouse. The brutal murder of the fourteen-year old Till and the exoneration of the two white men accused of his murder were critical elements in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. The broad context of the civil rights movement is amply documented but the following sources provide succinct information and help to define the role the Till murder played in the movement:

Taylor Branch. *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988).

Juan Williams. *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Right Years, 1954-1965*. (New York: Viking, 1987).

We Shall Overcome, Historic Places of the Civil Rights Movement. National Park Service. <http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/travel/civilrights/text.htm#cost>.

The Till case has been the subject of numerous articles and books. Among those are the following:

Christopher Metress, ed. *The Lynching of Emmett Till*. (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2002).

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Stephen J. Whitfield. *A Death in the Delta, The Story of Emmett Till*. (New York, The Free Press, 1988.)

Emmett Till Murder Trial¹

The September 1955 trial of J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant for the murder of Emmett Till attracted international attention and brought over a hundred journalists to Sumner. Till, a 14-year-old African American youth from Chicago, was visiting relatives in Mississippi in the summer of 1955. On August 24, Till and several others went to Money, Mississippi where Bryant and his wife operated a store. Although the exact nature of what happened between Till and Carolyn Bryant may never be known, it was alleged that Till spoke to Mrs. Bryant in a familiar manner and whistled at her. In that time and place, this was not behavior an African-American male was expected to display toward a white woman.

Bryant's husband, Roy, was out of town at the time. When he returned and learned of the incident, he became angry. In the early morning hours of August 28, he and his half-brother, J. W. Milam, went to the home of Mose Wright, Till's great uncle. They took Till from the house and he was never seen alive again. Both Bryant and Milam admitted kidnapping Till in order to teach him a lesson, but claimed they later released him unharmed. After relatives reported the young man missing, Bryant and Milam were arrested for kidnapping and held in the Greenwood jail. After authorities in LeFlore County declined to prosecute, Tallahatchie County, where the youth's body was found, charged the defendants. After the trial, both men admitted their guilt in.

Emmett Till's badly decomposed body was found in the Tallahatchie River on August 31. Mose Wright identified the body by a ring with the initials "LT." Just before he left Chicago, Till's mother gave him a ring that belonged to his deceased father, Louis Till, inscribed with the initials "LT." The young man had been severely beaten, shot in the head and bound in barbed wire before being dumped in the river with a fan from a cotton gin tied around his neck.

¹ The information about the murder and trial in this section is based on information contained in Christopher Metress, ed. *The Lynching of Emmett Till*. (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2002) and Stephen J. Whitfield, *A Death in the Delta, The Story of Emmett Till*. (New York: The Free Press, 1988).

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Till's body was shipped back to Chicago where his mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, decided on an open coffin. Thousands of mourners viewed Till's mutilated remains. Millions more across the country saw photographs of the body published in *Jet* magazine.

The trial of the accused killers began on September 19, 1955, in the Tallahatchie County Second District Courthouse in Sumner. Over one hundred journalists were in attendance, and the details of the trial made daily headlines in papers across the county. The major television networks arranged to have film flown to New York nightly from a makeshift airfield in Tutwiler.

Although there were some eye witnesses, including the testimony of Till's great uncle, Mose Wright, identifying Milam and Bryant as the men who kidnapped Till from his home, much of the prosecution case was based on circumstantial evidence. No one would testify that they had seen Milam and Bryant torture or murder the youth. It took the all-male, all-white jury a mere one hour and seven minutes to return a verdict acquitting both men.

The public response to the verdict was intense. Hundreds of newspapers, at least outside of Mississippi, denounced the verdict. The American Jewish Committee surveyed press and public reaction in Europe and found that the exoneration of the killers "has seriously damaged American prestige..."² There were public demonstrations of support for Till and his family, including one in Paris led by Josephine Baker.³

Americans reacted also. In cities across the country, public meetings and demonstrations protested the injustice in Mississippi. *The New York Times* reported that "100,000 Across the Nation Protest Till Lynching," describing large gatherings in Detroit, Baltimore, New York and Chicago.⁴ Civil rights activists cited the case as evidence of the evils of segregation and the denial of voting rights. Louis Burnham, the editor of *FREEDOM*, a black monthly, wrote

The murder of young Till and the freeing of his killers were made possible by the absolute and long-standing rape of political democracy in Mississippi.

² Whitfield, 46.

³ Mamie Till-Mobley and Christopher Benson. *Death of Innocence*. (New York: Random House, 2003), 191.

⁴ Clenora Frances Hudson, "Emmett Till: The Impetus for the Modern Civil Rights Movement" (Ph. D. diss., University of Iowa, 1988), 53.

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That's why the fight for equal rights in the South must include the political as well as the economic roots of oppression.⁵

Civil rights organizations saw the Till case as more than a simple murder. The case illustrated the system that kept blacks from participating in the larger economic and civic society. Lynching was not a new threat for Southern blacks. Till was not the only victim in Mississippi that summer of 1955. Dr. George Lee was murdered in Belzoni in May and Lamar Smith was shot in Brookhaven in August. But the Till case resonated with the public in a way the other killings did not. Writing for the Mississippi Regional Council of Negro Leadership, Olive Arnold Adams stated

A year or so ago the sign reading "Money-10 miles" might have elicited a smile. *Then* you might have thought, "What a funny name for a town!" But *now* "Money, Mississippi" rings a bell...or, more aptly, *tolls* a bell...⁶

Among the organizations that worked to bring the Till story to the public was the National Association of Colored People. On both the state and local level, the NAACP made sure the story of Emmett Till was heard around the country. Mississippi NAACP Field Secretary, Medgar Evers, struggled to get the true story of Till and the Sumner trial to as wide an audience as possible. Myrlie Evers, the slain civil rights leader's widow, noted "the murder of this fourteen-year-old out-of-state visitor touched off the world-wide clamor and cast the glare of a world spotlight on Mississippi racism."⁷ The national NAACP also played a role. It sponsored speaking engagements around the country for Mamie Till, Emmett's mother. In the months after the Till trial, the NAACP gained hundreds of new members and raised large amounts of donations.⁸

The Till murder deeply effected a generation of Americans, but particularly resonated among African-Americans. Anne Moody, in her memoir *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, recalled

Before Emmett Till's murder, I had known the fear of hunger, hell and the Devil. But now there was a new fear known to me-the fear of being killed just because I was black. This was the worst of my fears. I knew that once I got food, the fear of starving to death would leave. I also was told if I were a good

⁵ Louis Burnham. *Behind the Lynching of Emmett Till*. (New York: Freedom Associates, 1955), 9.

⁶ Olive Arnold Adams. *Time Bomb, Mississippi Exposed and the Full Story of Emmett Till*. (New York: Mississippi Regional Council of Negro Leadership, 1956), 11.

⁷ Myrlie Evers and William Peters. *For Us, the Living*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 173.

⁸ Hudson, 15.

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girl, I wouldn't have to fear the Devil or hell. But I didn't know what I had to do as a Negro not to be killed. Probably just being a Negro period was enough, I thought.⁹

Myrlie Evers wrote of the Till case,¹⁰

It was proof that even youth was no defense against the ultimate terror, that lynching was still the final means by which white supremacy would be upheld, that whites could still murder with impunity and that the upper- and middle-class white people of the state would uphold such killings through their police and newspapers and courts of law.

Olive Arnold Adams called the matter "a story with the impact of a Pearl Harbor."¹¹

About two months after the Till trial, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus. The boycott that resulted from Parks' arrest is widely recognized as the beginning of the civil rights movement. But the murder of Emmett Till was fresh in the minds of many Americans, including Rosa Parks. She was later to remember that Emmett Till and the unjust acquittal of his killers were on her mind as she sat on that bus on that fateful day.¹² Parks is not the only civil rights figure who acted with Till in mind. John Lewis, congressman and Freedom Rider, said that Till's lynching "galvanized the country. A lot of us young black students in the South later on, we weren't sitting in just for ourselves—we were sitting in for Emmett Till. We went on Freedom Rides for Emmett Till."¹³ Rev. Jesse Jackson, Jr., writing in the forward of a Mamie Till-Mobley's memoir, *Death of Innocence*, said of the Till case,

It shocked the consciousness of a nation. It touched our bone marrow, the DNA of our dignity... Montgomery, Alabama in 1955; Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957; Greensboro, North Carolina in 1960 are all aftershocks of the murder of Emmett Till... There is a scientific theory that the earth was born through a big bang. One could make the case that Emmett Till was "the big bang," the Tallahatchie River was the "big bang" of the civil rights movement.¹⁴

⁹ Anne Moody, "Coming of Age in Mississippi." In *The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader*, Clayborne Carson, et al. eds. (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 43.

¹⁰ Evers, 174.

¹¹ Adams, 12.

¹² Paul Hendrickson, "Mississippi Haunting," *The Washington Post Magazine*, February 27, 2000, 14.

¹³ Metress, 3.

¹⁴ Till-Mobley, xii.

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Historians and observers have offered several explanations why the Emmett Till murder had such an widespread effect, more than the lynchings of many other blacks across the South or even the two Mississippi killings that summer. Till's age, fourteen, is cited as a factor. Children, such as Anne Moody, were able to put themselves in Till's place. Adults, like Myrlie Evers realized that the case "said even a child was not safe from racism, bigotry and death."¹⁵

The intense media coverage of the trial also played a role. For the week it lasted, the trial made national headlines. For many northern reporters, the murder, the trial, the verdict and the callous treatment of Mamie Till first introduced them to the daily injustices suffered by African-Americans in the south. Television, a new media, covered the trial and the aftermath and brought the struggle for civil rights into homes across America. Before Bull Connor's fire hoses and police dogs in Birmingham, Americans viewed the events in the Tallahatchie County Second District Courthouse. David Halberstam, aptly, called the Till trial "the first great media event of the civil rights movement."¹⁶

National organizations, such as the NAACP, also saw the trial as an opportunity to educate the public about the social conditions of blacks in the south. Labor unions, including the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and the Transportation Services Employees (former Red Caps) 'embraced the case from the onset, obtruding it upon the American society for public censure."¹⁷

American artists also embraced the case, inspired by the atrocity. Poets Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks wrote poems about the case and Bob Dylan wrote a song, Toni Morrison a play. James Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charley* was based on the Till story. Novels based on the incident include *Wolf Whistle* by Louis Nordan and *Mississippi Trial, 1955* by Chris Crowe. As early as 1956, Eve Merriam wrote *Money, Mississippi* which ends with the verses,

Raise up the body of Emmett Till
From that muddy river town;
Raise up the body of Justice
In that bloody Moneytown.

Bring home the body of Emmett Till
From that terrible Moneytown.

¹⁵ Whitfield, 60.

¹⁶ Metress, 3.

¹⁷ Hudson, 64-65.

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Bring home the body of Justice
With her blood-stained shining crown.¹⁸

The Till story still inspires artists and writers today. In a recent Call For Papers, *The Southern Quarterly* solicited papers, interviews, poetry, art and photographs on Emmett Till's continuing presence in literature, history and as inspiration in the world of the arts.

One observer describing the Tallahatchie County Second District Courthouse said that "because of its large belfry and twin cupolas on the back side, [it] oddly resembles a church."¹⁹ However, it remains a house of justice. Ironically its most famous moment marks it as a place of injustice. The brutal murder of Emmett Till and the not guilty verdict of two men, who shortly after admitted their guilt, had national consequences. The events of September 1955 "helped awaken a generation of future young black activists to what would soon, in the next decade, be called the Movement. That's the true legacy of the lynching of Emmett Till-it put so many eyes on the eventual prize."²⁰

The Tallahatchie County Second District Courthouse is the most intact site in Mississippi related to the Emmett Till murder and trial. The intense media attention given the trial makes the courthouse the most recognizable place associated with the incident. Although the Bryant Grocery building in Money still stands, it is in very poor condition and unlikely to survive absent intervention. However, the courthouse is well maintained and will remain a landmark in the Mississippi Delta for many years. It will serve as tangible link to a dark episode in our past, but one that sparked progress toward equal rights for all Americans.

¹⁸ Eve Merriam, *Montgomery, Alabama, Money, Mississippi and Other Places*. (New York: Cameron Associates, 1956).

¹⁹ Hendrickson, 18.

²⁰ Hendrickson, 14.

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