

The Washoe County Courthouse



Presented by the
Second Judicial District Court



The Washoe County Court House

The History

The Architect



**The Washoe County Court House
RESTORATION PROJECT**

The Restoration

The Preservation

[EXIT](#)

Our Heritage

- A non-profit organization, The Washoe County Court House Historical and Preservation Society, is dedicated to preserving and restoring Reno's most historic building. Along with the building, original documents, artifacts and art are preserved and restored so that one day they can be displayed and enjoyed as part of our history. Through these efforts, we promote awareness, appreciation and enjoyment of our courthouse by the public.

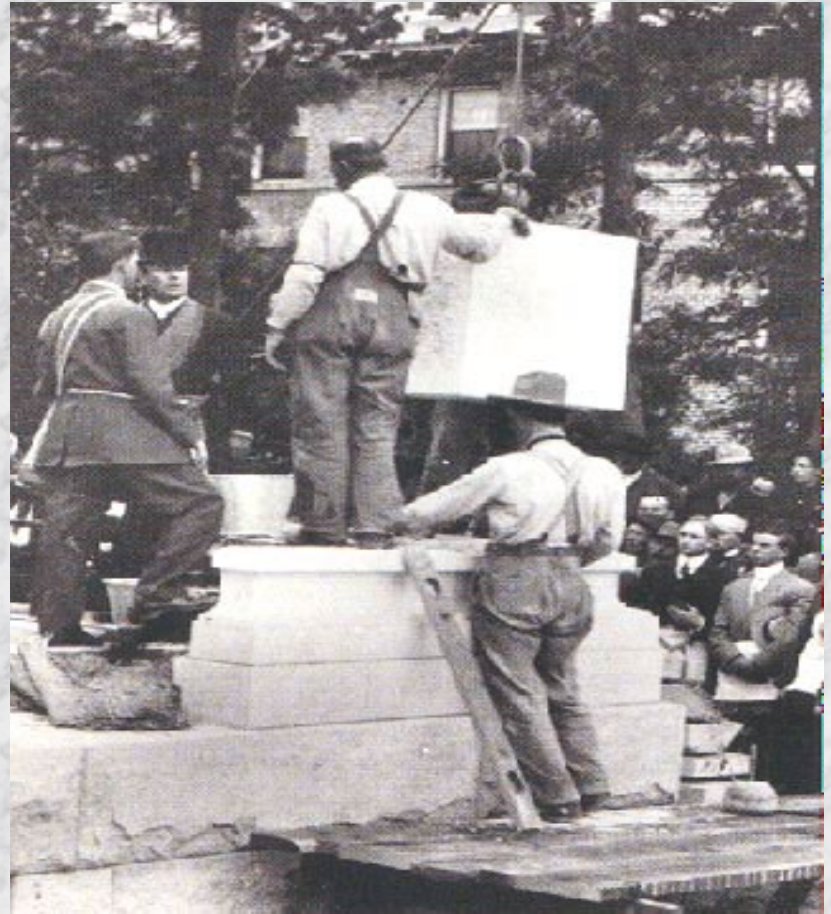


Washoe County Court House, c1950

*A view of the courthouse in late afternoon.
As seen from the east and the dome is the highest point
of the building in the lower right hand side of the picture.
The car in the middle of the same view of the courthouse today.*

The History

- Long before the penny was part of the nation's mint and the Model T could be seen idling around our city's streets a courthouse cornerstone was laid on the south bank of the Truckee River on June 22, 1872. The Washoe County Court House was constructed and downtown Reno was born.



The History

- Reno sprang from the coming of the transcontinental railroad in 1868 and started out as a small town with miners, rail workers and entrepreneurs for citizens. One of Reno's first and foremost entrepreneurs was Myron Lake. He owned property south of the Truckee River and the toll bridge that crossed it. He acquired the bridge in 1862 and was granted an exclusive franchise by the legislature.
- Making an average of \$300 a day, a healthy sum of money even by today's standards, Myron Lake soon became a very wealthy and infamous citizen in town. Soon people started to complaining about "Lake's Crossing" and the county commissioners ruled against Myron Lake declaring "Lake's Crossing" a public road. Today the road is known as Virginia Street.

The History



Lake's Crossing, c1904

▼

Lake's Crossing would become Virginia Street after
county commissioners ruled against
Myron Lake's private toll road.

The History

- A shrewd businessman, Myron Lake made an offer of a one-acre parcel of land just south of the Truckee River and \$1,500 for the building of the Washoe County Court House.
- Lake is also credited with owning and operating the original Riverside Hotel and for establishing what is now Virginia Street.



Myron Charles Lake

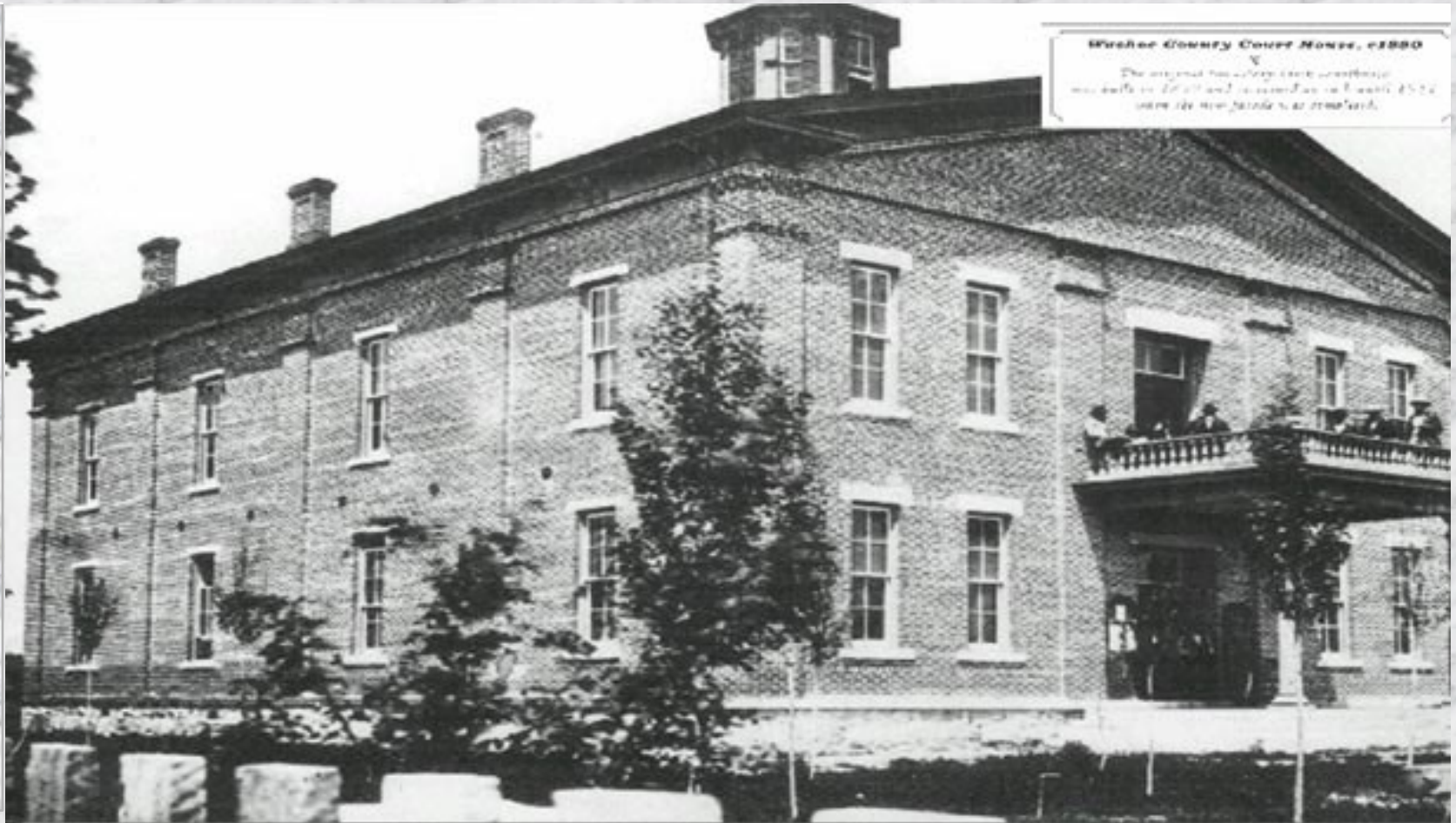
1828 - 1884



The History

- The first courthouse was built in Washoe City. When the county seat was moved from there to Reno by the people's vote in 1871, Myron Lake made an offer of land and money for the building of a Washoe County Court House that could not be refused. The Washoe County Commissioners accepted, and the county soon paid \$20,000 to Septimus F. Hoole for the construction of a new, two-story brick courthouse. Hoole had already sold his courthouse plans to the county for \$150.
- The new courthouse was a simple, red brick, Italianate structure. It had a balcony above the main entrance, interior side chimneys and a tin-covered cupola with windows. The lower floor housed offices for the clerk, recorder, treasurer and sheriff, and also included the jail. The courtroom and district attorney's offices were located on the second floor.

The History



The History

Thirty-six years later, Reno had grown tremendously, and the Washoe County Commissioners thought their courthouse needed a change. They held a design contest for a new courthouse. It was won in 1909 by a promising young architect, Frederic DeLongchamps. The new courthouse incorporated the walls of the old one. The cornerstone of the building was laid on June 15, 1910. Construction was completed almost a full year later on June 1, 1911.

The building was neo-classical in design with Beaux Arts influence and decorative elements in terracotta. The two-story stone structure was faced with limestone. Corinthian columns supported the massive portico capped by a cornice. There was a raised basement, and a flat roof with a large, ribbed copper dome.

The inside of the building had marble columns in the entrance hall, gray marble wainscoting, pilasters with black marble bases and mosaic tiled floors. An ornate, iron balustrade girded the stairway leading to the second floor. Beneath the dome on the second floor, there was a leaded, colored glass ceiling. Marble and scagliola were used in Courtroom 1 on the second floor.



The History

In the 1930's, Nevada's liberal divorce laws brought many people to Reno. Divorce became the city's primary industry with revenues of \$5,000,000 annually. During this decade, nearly 33,000 divorces were granted in the Washoe County Courthouse.

Famous *Life Magazine* photographer Alfred Eisenstadt took a posed photograph of a young woman kissing one of the courthouse's pillars. The picture appeared on the front cover of the June 31, 1937 edition of *Life*. Tradition has it that divorced women, after leaving the courthouse, would throw their wedding rings into the Truckee River from the Virginia Street Bridge.

The History

District Court Judge Thomas “Barney” Moran was “famous during the thirties as the jurist who granted more divorces than any other judge in the U.S.-- 27,000.” Nevada also had liberal laws regarding marriage. Judge Moran prided himself more on the 40,000 couples that he married in his years on the bench.



The History

- By the 1940's the courthouse was cramped for space due to the demands of the quickly growing county.
- Frederic DeLongchamps once more was contracted to design additions to the courthouse along with his partner, George O'Brien. A north wing was completed in 1946 followed by a south wing in 1949.
- By the 1960's, the county was once again growing larger than its courthouse, so DeLongchamps and O'Brien went to work to design the west annex. Completed in 1963, the annex differed greatly from the original 1910 design.

The History

Unadorned in the international style of architecture, the massive, west annex is of simpler design than the courthouse built in 1911.

Five stories high, it towers over the original two story structure. The west annex entrance on Court Street today serves as the main public entrance to the courthouse.



The History

The courthouse of Second Judicial District has been the locale of notable events. Among them, in 1952 Judge John S. Belford presided over “the petticoat trial” in which two women lawyers were on opposite sides of a case for the first time in Nevada history. The courthouse was seen in the movie, *The Misfits*. In 1963, it was the scene for the trial of Thomas Lee Bean for the murder of Olympic skier, Sonja McCaskie.

The trial of Priscilla Ford, who drove her car down a sidewalk in Reno on Thanksgiving Day 1980, was held in the courthouse. Judas Priest was a defendant in a case where the parents of two young men attempting suicide claimed this was caused by subliminal messages in the band’s album. Chaz Higgs was convicted in 2007 of the murder of his wife, Kathy Augustine, the Nevada state controller.

The Architect

Frederic DeLongchamps

- Frederic Joseph DeLongchamps was born in Reno on June 2, 1882 of French-Canadian parents. His father, Felix, came to this region in the 1860s and earned his living in the construction business. Frederic worked for his father up until he graduated from Reno High School in 1900. He went on to college and attended the University of Nevada, graduating from the School of Mines in 1904.



***Frederic Joseph
DeLongchamps
1882 - 1969***



The Architect

□ Soon after he graduated, he moved to San Francisco and became an apprentice in an architectural firm. He returned to Reno in 1907 starting his own architectural office, which remained there until his retirement in 1965.

□ The Washoe County Court House was his first major work in Nevada. He went on to design and oversee the Reno main post office, the original Riverside Hotel, the MacKay Science Hall at the University of Nevada and six other county courthouses in Nevada and California. In 1919, DeLongchamps was named the Nevada State Architect. He would supervise the design and construction of the Heroes Memorial Building, the Supreme Court Building and the State Library Building all in Carson City.

□ DeLongchamps maintained his private practice from 1909 to 1938 by himself. In 1939 George L.F. O'Brien became a partner and in 1962, Hewitt C. Wells joined as well. The DeLongchamps, O'Brien and Wells firm continued to design buildings well into the 1960s, and was responsible for designing every part of the courthouse that now stands from 1910 to the present. Frederic DeLongchamps died in Reno in 1969.

The Architect

During his 60 years as an architect, Frederic DeLongchamps is credited with designing over 500 buildings. Among them were the Reno Main Post Office across from the courthouse, the original Riverside Hotel, the Supreme Court Building in Carson City and eight other courthouses in Nevada and California.

DeLongchamps was known to have changed his name early in his career to the French spelling “Delonchant.” Shortly after, he changed it back to the original spelling. The French spelling is noted on the original proposal (pictured right) and can be seen on the 1910 cornerstone.



DeLongchamps Proposal, c1910

This original proposal for the construction costs of the first major renovation of the Washoe County Court House was found recently in the County Clerk's office. Note the earlier spelling of his name in the above documents.

The Restoration



The Restoration

In 1986, the Washoe County Court House was formally listed in the National Register of Historic Places. In 1999, The Washoe County Court House Historical and Preservation Society was formed to help return the historic structure to its original beauty.

The steps, entrance and columns facing Virginia Street were cleaned to reveal the original limestone finish. Exterior air-conditioning ducts and other intrusive items added to the structure for practical purposes were removed. The outside of the dome was cleaned. Missing dome pieces were custom made and installed. In the interior, the stained glass skylight was removed and shipped to San Francisco for restoration. The original interior color scheme was revived based on the colors in the mosaic tile on the second floor. The dome, grand staircase, columns, molding, chandeliers, light fixtures and ornate plaster look now as DeLongchamps intended at the turn of the century. The restoration was completed in the early 2000's.

Assistance was provided from the National Park Service's Historic Preservation Fund grants.

Courtroom 1 where many of Reno's divorces were granted was also restored to its original state.

The Preservation

- As part of restoration and maintenance, the ornate leaded glass that adorns the second story dome of the courthouse needs to be cleaned regularly by an expert.



PHOTO BY DONALD H. JAMES AND WILLIAM H. HARTLEY
STATE HISTORICAL PRESERVATION ARCHIVE

The Preservation

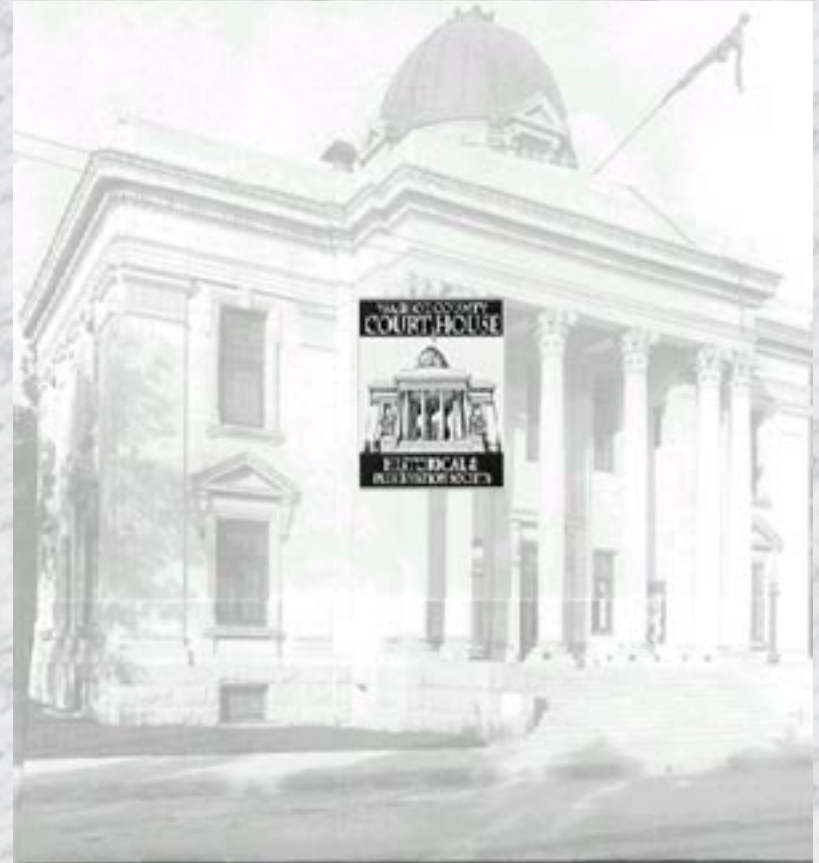
Perhaps more than any other public building, the county courthouses that are scattered across the great expanse of our state have come to stand as symbols of the yearning of Nevada's early settlers to build not just towns but communities. Today, almost one third of the more than thirty Nevada courthouses built over the last 30 years have been destroyed. This destruction of these buildings marks a great historical loss for our state. Washoe County is fortunate that its courthouse still remains.

The Preservation

- Over the last 125 years, we have maintained our courthouse through foresight and respect for our heritage.
- The cornerstone that was laid on the banks of the Truckee River on June 22, 1872 would soon become the new Washoe County Court House. Today, that cornerstone still exists under the limestone of the DeLongchamps structure, helping secure the common thread that binds our forbearers to ourselves and future generations yet to come.

The Preservation

- THE WASHOE COUNTY COURT HOUSE, c 1923. "If the wayfarer passing by the courthouse tonight shall notice the extra illumination, he need not speculate that the bondage has suddenly been removed from the eyes of justice, for it will mean but that the grand opening of the Washoe County Court House has arrived." - Nevada State Journal, June 1, 1911.



Timeline

- ❑ 1848 The California Gold Rush Begins
- ❑ 1860 Abraham Lincoln elected President of the United States
- ❑ 1861 Nevada Territory established
- ❑ 1862 Washoe County established
- ❑ 1863 County courthouse is build in Washoe City
- ❑ 1864 State of Nevada admitted to the Union
- ❑ 1868 Transcontinental railroad reaches Truckee Meadows and Reno is established
- ❑ 1871 Election - County Seat moved from Washoe City to Reno
- ❑ 1872 Cornerstone for new courthouse laid in Reno

Timeline

- ❑ 1873 Washoe County Court House completed
- ❑ 1882 Reno Electric Light and Power Company begins service
- ❑ 1903 First motion picture house is built in Nevada, The Vitagraph Theater in Reno
- ❑ 1904 Carnegie Library opens northeast of the courthouse, First Municipal Railroad streetcar in Reno is built
- ❑ 1907 New Riverside Hotel opens
- ❑ 1910 Johnson-Jeffries boxing match is held in Reno
- ❑ 1911 DeLongchamps courthouse completed; Theodore Roosevelt visits Reno

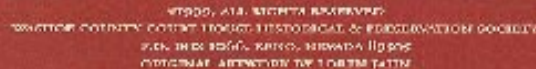
Timeline

- ❑ 1920 First airfield in Reno is built
- ❑ 1927 Reno Arch built to help promote the Transcontinental Highway Exposition
- ❑ 1931 Legislation on gaming and six-week divorce law in Nevada is passed
- ❑ 1936 Harold's Club opens
- ❑ 1942 Harrah's Club opens
- ❑ 1945 Mapes Hotel-Casino opens
- ❑ 1946 North Wing added to courthouse
- ❑ 1949 South Wing added to courthouse

Timeline

- ❑ 1960 Winter Olympics held at Squaw Valley, USA, building used for publicity still stands across from the courthouse
- ❑ 1963 West Annex added to courthouse
- ❑ 1964 Interstate 80 opens as an all-weather highway between Reno and Sacramento
- ❑ 1973 Eldorado Hotel-Casino is built
- ❑ 1998 Restoration begins on the Washoe County Court House
- ❑ 1999 Harold's Club is torn down
- ❑ 2000 Mapes-Hotel Casino is torn down
- ❑ 2000's Restoration of courthouse is complete

Washoe County Courthouse.



Dated
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