Morrow County Courthouse

The Morrow County Courthouse is one of the oldest continuously operating courthouses in Oregon. Named for pioneer merchant and legislator Jackson L. Morrow, Morrow County was created on February 16, 1885. Heppner was named the county seat in an election held the following June, and local citizens paid for a two-story wooden structure which became the first county courthouse.

By 1902, residents wanted a more substantial courthouse, and they offered $2,000 toward its construction if it was built on the same site—up a hill away from the center of town on Court Street. Although other sites were considered, the original location was chosen. Heppner's earliest residents would have remembered the flood of 1883 when Willow Creek overflowed its banks and destroyed much of the town; pressure from citizens may have influenced the decision to keep the courthouse on high ground.

Edgar M. Lazarus (1868-1939), a native of Baltimore, Maryland, who later designed Vista House (1916-1918) in the Columbia River Gorge, was selected as the architect. The design of the new courthouse is primarily in the American Renaissance tradition popular between 1876 and 1917. Classical features include the cornice around the top of the building and the two draped female statues on columns that flank the building’s entrance. Brothers Laurence and Louis Monterastelli created the statues for the building and cut and trimmed the dark blue basalt for the exterior. The basalt came from A.W. Osmin’s quarry, about three miles from Heppner. The light-colored trim stone was probably from eastern Oregon.

The baroque elements of the building include the imposing round dormers and domed cupola on the central clock tower. The tower divides the façade into halves, each side with two bays and two windows on two floors. The clock has faces on three sides, and the entrance to the building is in the clock tower. The cupola contains a bell that still strikes regularly on the hour. The service elements, including the furnace chimney, coal chute, basement stairs, and jail annex, were located at the back of the building, where there are no decorative features. The interior has a large main hall and a wide oak staircase with turned balusters and square newel posts.

The building was constructed quickly at a cost of $56,900. Excavation began in early May 1902, the foundation was laid during the first week of June, and framing and stonework were nearly finished by the end of September. Heating equipment installation and interior plastering were completed in December, and the clock and bell were installed in February 1903. The *Heppner Gazette* reported on March 12, 1903, that the building was finished and county officers had moved in. Just two months later, the courthouse provided temporary shelter to people who had been left homeless by the devastating Heppner flood of 1903.

Except for the basement, which has been remodeled, the courthouse has not been modified since it was completed. The Morrow County Courthouse was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1985.

Written by Sarah Munro

Further Reading:

Byrd, Joann Green. *Calamity: The Heppner Flood of 1903.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009.

Lynch, James E. and Patrick M. Derickson, Morrow County Courthouse, National Register of Historic Places, Nomination Form. February 1, 1985.

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