

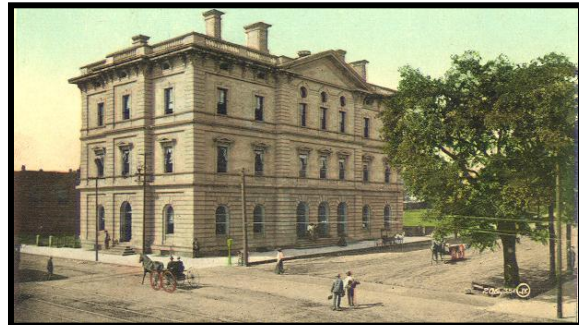
**United States Court House/J. Bratton Davis Bankruptcy Court House  
1100 Laurel Street**



**Historical Overview**

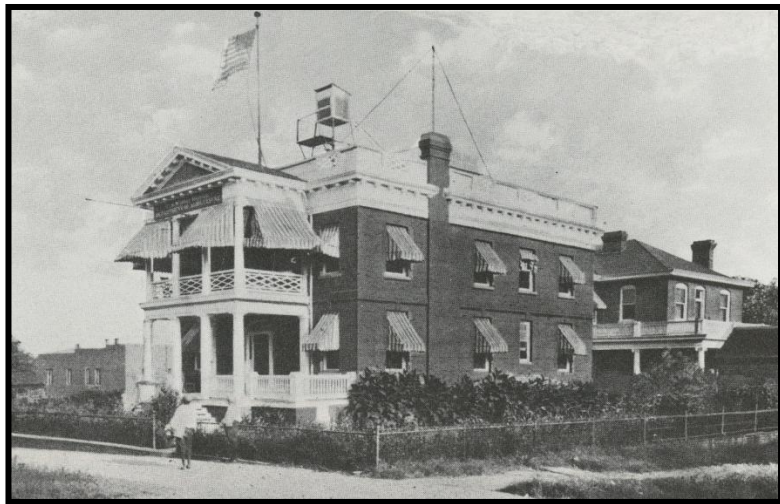
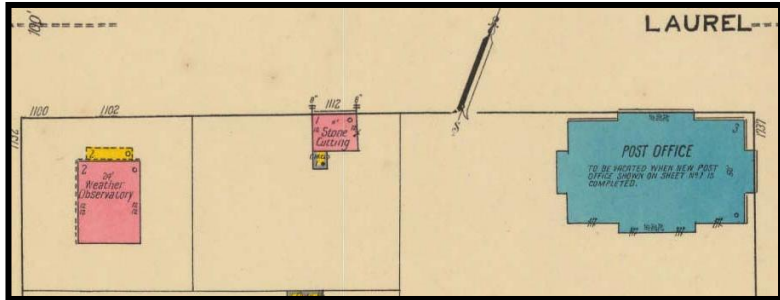
Located at 1100 Laurel Street, the Columbia landmark today called the J. Bratton Davis Bankruptcy Court House is a notable interpretation of Renaissance Revival architecture. Plans to erect this facility were laid during the summer of 1932, at which time the United States Postmaster General and Secretary of the Treasury authorized \$550,000 (later reduced to \$500,000) for the construction of a new federal district courthouse and office building as a replacement for the circa-1876 federal building located at 1737 Main Street, which housed the United States Court System, Internal Revenue Service and Post Office.

After learning of the federal government's pending endeavor, Lawrence B. Owens, mayor of Columbia, arranged a swap of the city-owned plot on which the new courthouse would come to stand in exchange for ownership of the earlier federal building [pictured at right] standing immediately to the east.<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Colorized postcard, circa-1910. Historic Columbia Foundation collection.

The land offered by Mayor Owens featured included a two-story, wood frame former residence within which the United States Weather Bureau operated. To that structure's east stood a one-story, wood frame building used as a stone cutting shop, as illustrated in the Sanborn Fire Insurance Company's map of Columbia from 1919 and period photographs.<sup>2</sup> The proposed swap was met favorably and the exchange was made so that the City of Columbia could own and occupy the Reconstruction-era former federal courthouse for its city hall.



Harold Tatum, a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania's School of Architecture and one of Columbia's few university-trained architects rendered plans for the new United States courthouse in 1935. Tatum's professional work in the capital city had begun fifteen years earlier, in 1920, when he opened an office with James E. Hunter. Prior to moving to Columbia, Tatum designed the Harkness Memorial Dormitory at Yale, the freshman dining hall and dormitories at Princeton and buildings at the University of Colorado. In 1926, with nationally recognized architect Milton Medary as consultant, Tatum designed the John C. Calhoun State Office Building, an important example of Italian Renaissance Revival architecture. After completing the Calhoun Building, Tatum shared an office with Charles Coker Wilson in Columbia until Wilson's death in 1932. In 1934, Tatum moved to Charleston, where he worked with R.L. Boinset for two years until opening his own office. Tatum's work in South Carolina includes residences in Columbia (1921-1932), the Sumter County Jail (1927), the Industrial School in Sumter (1927), the

<sup>2</sup> June 1919 Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, Map of Columbia, SC, (New York: Sanborn Map and Publishing Co., Ltd.), South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC, <http://www.sc.edu/library/digital/collections/sanborn.html>. Image reproduced from Russell Maxey, *South Carolina's Historic Columbia: Yesterday and Today in Photographs*, (Columbia, SC: The R.L. Bryan Company, 1980), 60.

Monarch Mills School in Union (1923), a Methodist Church in Lockhart (1924) and the Greek Orthodox Church of the Holy Trinity in Charleston (1950), among others.

Construction of the new United States Courthouse began in 1936 under the supervision of Archibald Brown (possibly representing the Federal Government), who served as the project's Construction Engineer. James Barnes of Springfield, Ohio was awarded the contract to construct the building, and Miller Electrical Company of Columbia and Jacksonville, Florida, performed its original electric work. Columbia's Concrete Construction and Supply Company performed all concrete work, which involved poured monolithic concrete as a major building component – the first example of such construction in Columbia and among the first in the United States. Sargeant's Studios of Columbia supplied the original construction photographs that today adorn the building's main floor lobby. When completed, the property housed the United States District Court, the Internal Revenue Service, the Justice Department and the District Attorney's Office.

The building's dedication occurred on 18 January 1937 amid great fanfare. Interested spectators who joined twenty-four judges representing five courts and members of the bar from all sections of South Carolina overflowed the facility's courtroom for a ceremony that included presentations by distinguished members of the bench and bar. Although the Court convened at 10:00 a.m., it was not until 3 p.m. that over 100 members of the bar were admitted to practice before the United States Circuit Court of Appeals and dedicatory addresses were given.<sup>3</sup>

The first speaker, Judge John J. Parker, senior member of the Circuit Court of Appeals, stated that the beautiful building was committed to the administration of justice. Other speakers reiterated that theme, with Clint T. Graydon of the Richland Bar Association declaring the concrete building “a Temple of Justice, not a monument.” Judge Arthur L. Gaston of the Sixth District explained the relationship between state and federal courts, while Millege L. Bonham of the South Carolina Supreme Court extolled the virtues of a legal system free of corruption and violence, both substantive and objective, and abreast of the times. Attorney General John M. Daniel concluded the courtroom events with gratitude for those attending and “this building represents perfection in architecture, but more than that, a hall of great decisions which will protect the human rights of the people.”

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<sup>3</sup> “Circuit Court of Appeals Sits Here as Federal Courthouse Dedicated,” *The State* newspaper, 18 January 1937.

That evening a brilliant banquet attended by four hundred members of the bench and bar was held at the Jefferson Hotel [pictured at right], that formerly stood on the northwest corner of Main and Laurel streets, diagonally across from the courthouse.<sup>4</sup> The hotel's ballroom was the scene of a three-course dinner accompanied by music played by the WPA orchestra. Alva M Lumpkin presided as toastmaster with speakers including the three jurists from the Court of Appeals and others relating briefly on legal instances in a light vein. Christie Benet, Chairman of the Bar Association's Committee on Arrangements, introduced a number of guests, including William E. Gonzales, editor of *The State* newspaper; George A. Buchanan, editor of the *Columbia Record*; and J. Rion McKissick, President of the University of South Carolina.<sup>5</sup>



The WPA-era structure served as the United States District Court for the Eastern District of South Carolina from 1936 to 1965 and from 1965 to 1979 as the United States District Court for the District of South Carolina. Today, the venerable building is known as the J. Bratton Davis Federal Bankruptcy Courthouse, named in honor of World War II veteran and 1940 graduate of the University of South Carolina's School of Law, Judge J. Bratton Davis (1917-2004). Following WWII, Bratton practiced with the law firm of Bratton, Davis, and Suber until 1969. Appointed Referee in Bankruptcy for the District of South Carolina, he was made a bankruptcy judge nine years later. Later, he became Chief Judge of the U.S. Bankruptcy Court for the District of South Carolina where he served until his retirement in 2000.

### **Architectural Overview**

The J. Bratton Davis Bankruptcy Court House stands on the southeast corner of Assembly and Laurel streets, overlooking the city's Arsenal Hill neighborhood to its northeast. As such the Renaissance Revival style building is a conspicuous landmark structure situated atop one of Columbia's tallest areas. This historic property is valued for

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<sup>4</sup> Colorized postcard, circa-1940. Historic Columbia Foundation collection.

<sup>5</sup> "Courthouse is Dedicated Justice Hall," *The State* newspaper, 19 January 1937.

its contributions to the city's architectural heritage and for construction methodology rare for a building of its complex styling.<sup>6</sup>

Featuring 36,202 square feet, this visually imposing building consists of multiple stories, including a basement, first, second and third floors and a partial, rectangular-shaped fourth floor on its east and west elevations. A partial, octagonal-shaped, fifth story rises from the



building's rectangular-shaped center. This section once contained a weather station and a small observatory tower, or mirador. The north, or front, façade consists of five bays, a pattern repeated on the south elevation. The central bay, projecting from elevation's plane, is adorned with six ionic fluted pilasters and capped with a pediment. This bay divides the structure into east and west wings and contains the structure's entrance within its first floor. Here, three recessed, arched doorways feature semi-circular decorative fanlights and steel doors, later replacements for the building's original wood doors. As with other classically-inspired buildings, the courthouse features a heavily rusticated primary floor, which serves as the visual foundation of the structure, as well as heavy quoining, or blocks, accentuating its corners.

The courthouse's east and west facades also are divided into five bays with their central bays defined by engaged pilasters rendered in the Tuscan order. Unlike those of the north and south elevations, here the window heads are more pronounced. Each floor features differing fenestration. Windows at the ground level are comprised of eight-over-eight lite, double hung sashes set within a rusticated facade featuring radiating rusticated arches. Meanwhile, window openings within the second level feature simple molded surrounds with plain pediments within the first, second, fourth and fifth bays. The center opening within the central pavilion features a broken scroll pediment. The center window openings of each end pavilion are detailed with segmented arched pediments and ancons. At the third level, the windows are eight over eight double hung except for the central pavilion where they are twelve over twelve. Fenestration on the rear (south) facade of the

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<sup>6</sup> The following architectural description was built upon both the site's National Register of Historic Places nomination as well as material found with the United States General Services Administration website, <http://www.gsa.gov/portal/ext/html/site/hb/category/25431/actionParameter/exploreByBuilding/buildingId/009>, accessed in August 2012 and on 10 December 2012.

structure repeats that of its front with the exception of the third level. Here, windows have been blocked-in for courtroom's south elevation.

The importance of the J. Bratton Davis Bankruptcy Court House has been recognized on both the federal and local level. The Department of the Interior formally recognized the United States Court House's importance by listing it in the National Register of Historic Places in 1978 for its architectural value and its method of construction, which involves poured monolithic concrete. It was the first building in South Carolina and one of the first in the country to be constructed in this manner. The structure is protected from alteration or demolition by the City of Columbia as a Grade I Local Landmark.