



## **Bexar County Commissioners Court**

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### **Commissioners Court celebrates two historic moments**

Bexar County Commissioners Court and the community on Tuesday celebrated the swearing-in of the county's first African-American commissioner, Tommy Calvert, Jr., in the newly restored 1897 double-height courtroom.

"I didn't run for office to make history," Commissioner Calvert said. "I ran to be a humble public servant to the people of Precinct 4."

Precinct 2 Commissioner Paul Elizondo and County Judge Nelson Wolff also were sworn in during the ceremony. The swearing-in was Commissioner Elizondo's ninth; he recalled former County Judge Blair Reeves, who swore him in the first two times and is responsible for leading the Court's vote to create the Bexar County Hospital District in 1955, despite public opposition.

"If I would give advice to our newest member, it's this: it's always easy to do the popular thing, but it takes something special in you to get done what you know is right," Commissioner Elizondo said.

Judge Wolff drew parallels between himself and Bryan V. Callaghan, who served as mayor of San Antonio in 1885 and County Judge in 1892. City Hall was constructed during Callaghan's mayoral term, and the building was restored and City Council Chambers built during Judge Wolff's mayoral term.

"In 1892 he was elected County Judge and on December 17th of that same year he laid the cornerstone for the Bexar County Courthouse," Judge Wolff said. "I followed him in 2001 and began work on a multi-year program to restore this courthouse to original glory. Today we open the restored original double-height courtroom that opened in 1896."

The double-height courtroom served the 37th Civil District Court, Probate Court and Commissioners Court after the Courthouse opened in 1896. Throughout the years, it also served as a favorite gathering place for many community organizations, including the local and state Democrat and Republican groups, the Telephone Users Association, State Taxpayers Association and the San Antonio Bar Association. Judge Blair Reeves led rare joint meetings in

the courtroom between the city, county and hospital managers to create the Bexar County Hospital District, now University Health System.

In the mid-1960s the courtroom was reconfigured to add an intermediate floor and divide the two-story room into two separate one-story rooms. The restoration removed that floor and reopened the two-story space.

Forensic investigations uncovered 15 “rose windows,” gold leaf column capitals, hand detailed plaster coffers, balcony attachments and placement of light fixtures that were powered by both gas and electricity. Hand-written specifications of the courthouse architect, J. Riely Gordon, revealed the part numbers of fixtures, described long-leaf pine floors, paint colors and other details.

The original metal work firm is still in business and produced replicas of the original fixtures. The long leaf pine flooring was salvaged from the floor joists of the old Joske’s Department Store in Downtown. Stone carvers, paint and gold-leaf experts and terra cotta manufacturers re-created very specific details of the courtroom.

“Using the results of these forensic investigations and the written specifications, we were able to restore this courtroom to its original grandeur,” Judge Wolff said. “This is the crown jewel where justice was administered and the governance of our county took place.”

During the ceremony the Marise McDermott, President and CEO of the Witte Museum, returned paintings of several views of Main Plaza painted by William Giles Martin Samuel, a County Commissioner in 1877. The paintings were loaned to the Witte in 1945, where they have remained since. WGM Samuel also served as a Deputy Sheriff and City Marshal in the late 1800s.

The Texas Historical Commission contributed \$2,536,147 to the courtroom and courthouse exterior restoration projects. The total project cost \$8,069,975 and which includes new emergency exit stairs from the 5th floor through the basement, restoration of the courtroom and restoration of the 2nd floor corridor.

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