

DOUGLAS COUNTY MUSEUM OF
HISTORY AND ART
THE OLD COURTHOUSE MUSEUM

6754 Broad Street
Douglasville, Georgia 30134
(770) 949-4090



April Wright

THE OLD COURTHOUSE MUSEUM



Walk through the Broad Street entrance to the Old Douglas County Courthouse Museum. The white marble of the foyer walls reflect the light streaming through the floor to ceiling glass wall along the front façade. The halls are quiet now and one might think that the courthouse is closed for the day. Although the county has moved its operations to a new courthouse building and court is no longer in session here, history is kept alive by the Douglas County Museum of History and Art, also known as the Old Courthouse Museum.

The front façade of the old courthouse building faces Broad Street. The building is long and low, especially compared to adjacent buildings on Broad Street. The courthouse is a two story building, but only one story is visible on the front façade. The steeple of the old First Baptist Church towers high above the courthouse. The exterior of the building was constructed with white and black glazed brick, black granite, aluminum, and glass. At the front left is a tall section which contained the main courtroom. To the right of the front entrance is an expanse of glass wall which makes up most of the length of the building. The glass wall admits light to the foyer and the hallway which runs across the entire front of the building. On the far right of the building is a clock constructed of metal installed directly on the brick façade. Although this feature was in keeping with the tradition of a courthouse clock, the clock was designed in the style of the building, and there is only one clock instead of the four on the tower of the previous courthouse building (Cooper, 2014; Moffson, 2002).

The courthouse building was designed in the International Style by Harry E. Roos, Jr. of Southern Engineering. It is one of only a few courthouses built in that style during the period and remains a site of interest for architects who travel to Douglas County for the sole purpose of visiting the old courthouse (Moffson, 2002; B. Woodell, personal communication, February 5, 2015). The old courthouse retains traces of southern segregation in the restroom on the lower level, which was intended for African Americans only (Moffson, 2002). The building houses two authentic built-in wooden telephone booths which are still in working order (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Original telephone booths near the main courtroom.

There have been four courthouses on the original courthouse square in downtown Douglasville, the county seat of Douglasville, Georgia. The 1896 Romanesque style courthouse burned in 1956 (Cooper, 2014). The current building on the site was completed in 1958 in the International Style. The future of the old courthouse building was uncertain in the late 1990s when a new courthouse was built on a separate site. The historic courthouse was scheduled for demolition until a group of concerned citizens united to preserve the building. It was this group who formed the Douglas County Museum of History and Art ("Museum of History and Art," n.d.). The building was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2002 (Moffson, 2002).

The mission of the Douglas County Museum of History and Art is to "bring to life the history of Douglas County by collecting, preserving and displaying articles that show a broad view of the social, cultural and historic aspects of this area through the promotion and awareness of historical and artistic programs" (*Museum Mission Statement*, 2013). Although some pieces of art are included in the museum's collection, the museum focuses primarily on historical and cultural artifacts of relevance to Douglas County. Included in the museum's collection are antique furniture and household furnishings, medical equipment, farm implements, and original military uniforms. Special collections include the lunchbox and record player collections of Mrs. Louise Robinson, a Coca-Cola room, and a collection of television lamps. The museum hosts a Hall of Fame which

includes Douglas County residents who have made notable national achievements ("Museum of History and Art," n.d.).

The Douglas County Museum of History and Art was established in 1999. The current chair of the board of directors is Joe Phillips. Suzanne Hudson is the chair of the Douglas County Tourism and History Commission, whose members are appointed by the Douglas County Board of Commissioners. The museum is staffed primarily by volunteers. There is one paid staff member who handles administrative functions. The museum is open on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. and by appointment. Funding for the museum is generated through fundraising, donations, and the county hotel/motel tax (B. Woodell, personal communication, February 5, 2015).

The museum offers tours for groups of visitors such as home school associations, Scout troops, and other interested parties. Temporary exhibitions are held throughout the year, such as a Christmas exhibit and a recent exhibit of African American inventions. The Penny McHenry Hydrangea Festival, an annual event held each June, is a project of the museum and generates tourism for Douglas County as well as funding for the museum. At Christmas the glass curtain wall of the courthouse is lit with a minimalist holiday display in keeping with the architectural style of the building.

The museum has many capital and ongoing needs. Because the museum relies on volunteers, it is only open two afternoons per week. Funding and staffing are needed in order to offer more open hours. Glass display cases and security cameras are a pressing need. Currently the museum exhibits are kept behind locked doors and a docent must escort visitors from room to room. Museum display cases and security cameras would protect the articles on display and allow visitors to take self-guided tours, although docents will always be available. The museum continues to search for local historical artifacts and welcomes donations from residents (B. Woodell, personal communication, February 5, 2015).

Museum leaders have planned a revamp of all exhibits. Plans are in place to update tags and signage and refresh all exhibits. Currently the museum occupies only the western half of the old courthouse. Expansion of the museum is a possibility as the collection grows.

The Douglas County Museum of History and Art makes a vital contribution to the history and culture of Douglas County. The International Style of the building connects Douglas County with the history of other communities worldwide through the shared identity of the International Style. It continues to draw visitors who wish to study the architecture of the building. Hometown visitors are drawn to the Old Courthouse to celebrate and learn about the history of our town and its place in the world.

References

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