

Photo: Christopher Stangland

## HISTORY

Travis County was established by the Republic of Texas Congress in January 1840, days after the community of Waterloo had been renamed Austin and designated the capital city. The county, with a population of 854, was named after William Barret Travis, a hero of the Texas revolution who died at the battle of the Alamo. The first election of county officials was held in February 1840 and the first order of business was to find a suitable place to administer justice for the new county.

## 1855 COURTHOUSE



The only known photograph of the 1855 Courthouse: PICA 08956, Austin History Center

Several buildings, including a log cabin, served as courthouse prior to 1855, but the first building constructed specifically for the purpose was a simple, two-story stone structure at

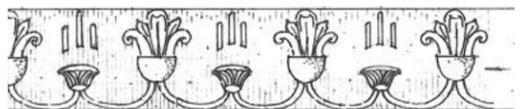
4th and Guadalupe streets, near what is now Republic Park. This remained in use as courthouse and jail until 1876 when a larger building was erected.



Photo: C00177, Austin History Center

## 1876 COURTHOUSE

Where the old Courthouse had been small and simple, the new Courthouse was monumental, elegant, and ornate. The 1876 Courthouse was a breathtaking example of "Second Empire" architecture. Resplendent with ironwork cresting, decorative dormers, and Mansard roofs, the 1876 Courthouse stood proudly on the southwest corner of 11th Street and Congress Avenue, but by 1927 it was so infested with rats, bats, pigeons, and other vermin that it, too, needed to be replaced.



## 1931 COURTHOUSE

In 1930 a site for the new Courthouse was selected adjacent to the north end of Wooldridge Park, on 10th and Guadalupe Streets. Wooldridge Park was the first park in the city of Austin and one of the four town squares designated in the original 1839 town plans. The cornerstone was laid in 1930 and the Courthouse was completed the following year.

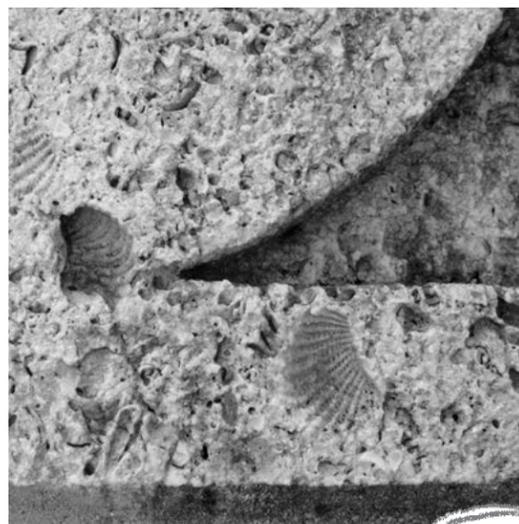


Photo: Christopher Stangland

Designed in the "Moderne" style by Page Bros Architects, and built by H.E. Wattinger Contractors, the Heman Marion Sweatt Courthouse breaks with the classical design elements of the past in many ways. Notice the monumental pilasters, which sweep dramatically from the original entrance porch up to their sculptured caps at the top of the building. See also the geometric ornamental details of the stone band above the first floor windows, and the metal panel between the windows. With its clean lines and geometric ornamentation this building is an expression of optimism and focus on the future.

Not all of the details are modern, though. A connection to the past is maintained by the presence of the carved stone pediment above the main entrance. This pediment depicts an ancient scene of a judge on a throne, dispensing justice to chained prisoners.

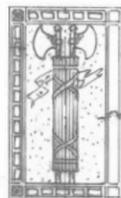
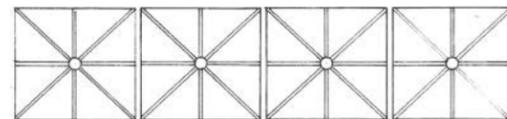


Photo: Judge John K. Dietz

## EXTERIOR

Even the basic exterior materials of the Courthouse bridge through time. The beautiful "Cordova Shell" limestone, quarried just east of Austin on Manor Road, shows the fossil forms of the prehistoric sea-life in this area from the Cretaceous Period, 75 to 136 million years ago. Contrasting and complementing the stone, cast metal panels give a futuristic accent to the design, reflecting the modern "machine age."



## INTERIOR

The Courthouse interior has many beautiful elements, including an elegant central marble staircase with wrought-iron railings, plaster relief panels with symbols of justice, and a reprise of the classical justice scene found above the main entrance.

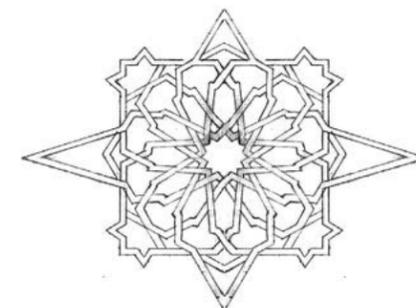


Photo: PICA 25400, Austin History Center

## MODIFICATIONS

As originally designed and built, the Courthouse was a refined, symmetrical building, with bronze entrance doors on all four sides. More space was needed, so in 1957 and again in 1962 significant additions were constructed. The grand main entrance at the east end of the second floor has been closed due to security needs, as has the entrance facing Wooldridge Park.

As more courtrooms have been crowded into the building, one of the original main courtrooms has lost its high ceiling, but the hope remains to preserve and restore the Courthouse as a significant piece of architecture and as a focal point for the life of the community.



Detail of the terrazzo floor taken from the 1930 blueprints



**Heman Marion Sweatt**  
1912 - 1982  
*Courage - Perseverance - Sacrifice*

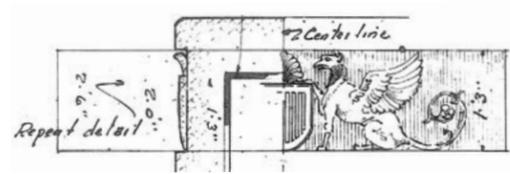
### SWEATT VS. PAINTER

The most important way in which this Courthouse bridges the past and the future is by the person in whose honor it is named: Heman Marion Sweatt.

On February 26, 1946, Heman Marion Sweatt, an American of African descent, was denied admission to the University of Texas School of Law, as state law required segregation by race. The Court of Civil Appeals would later write that “he possessed every essential qualification for admission, except that of race, upon which ground alone his application was denied.”

Mr. Sweatt filed a lawsuit against UT President T.S. Painter on May 16th, 1946. Judge Roy C. Archer of the 126th District Court, recognizing that the State had no “separate but equal” facility for a law school, gave the State of Texas six months to “establish a law school for Negroes substantially equivalent” to the University of Texas School of Law and officials of the

University of Texas complied. Judge Archer concluded that the new school offered the petitioner “privileges, advantages, and opportunities for the study of law substantially equivalent to those offered to white students at the University of Texas.”



### VICTORY

Ultimately, in 1950, the Supreme Court of the United States disagreed. While not yet denouncing “separate but equal” as the constitutional policy of the United States, the Court wisely saw beyond the bricks and books that make a school and concluded that separate professional schools are inherently unequal. Sweatt laid the groundwork for the Court’s decision in 1954’s *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. In *Brown*, the Court finally concluded that, although the physical facilities may be equal, segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race deprives the children of equal education opportunities. Sweatt gave the court the logic that enabled it to strike down segregation as the law of the land by providing an interim step in the process of legal analysis. It is not an overstatement to say that *Sweatt v. Painter* began the process of desegregating America’s schools.

The corridors of the Heman Marion Sweatt Travis County Courthouse, like its predecessors, echo with the significance of the individual’s sacrifice for pursuit of justice and the collective dedication to the value of justice for all.



Thurgood Marshall, 1908 - 1993, who would go on to become the first African-American Justice of the United States Supreme Court (1967 - 1991), was a key member of Mr. Sweatt’s legal team.  
Photo: Library of Congress



# The Heman Marion Sweatt Travis County Courthouse Austin, Texas

### TRAVIS COUNTY COMMISSIONERS COURT

County Judge - Samuel T. Biscoe  
Commissioner, Precinct 1 - Ron Davis  
Commissioner, Precinct 2 - Sarah Eckhardt  
Commissioner, Precinct 3 - Gerald Daugherty  
Commissioner, Precinct 4 - Margaret Gómez

### BROCHURE COMMITTEE

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Kimberley Jamail, Special Projects, Facilities Management  
Christopher Stangland, Editing and Layout, Webmaster, Travis County ITS

Photographs courtesy of the Austin History Center unless otherwise credited  
Illustrations from the original 1930 construction blueprints by Page Bros Architects

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<http://www.co.travis.tx.us>

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*A  
Historical  
Perspective*