

Edwin L. Tyson
Historical Research
March 29, 1996

The Sierra County Vault

Part I. Historical Background

The Sierra County Board of Supervisors met on March 3, 1882, and received bids for a vault to be built in the county building housing the office of the County Clerk. The meeting was adjourned until the following day when the bid of H. K. Turner was accepted.¹

The Turner bid was for a brick building sixteen by twenty feet inside with walls a minimum of two feet thick, ten feet from floor to girders, an arched two feet crowning, and a ceiling one and two-thirds feet thick. The interior surface was to be plastered, and doors and windows were furnished by the county.

The accepted bid was for \$1,500, and the vault was to be completed by September 1, 1882.²

According to the *Mountain Messenger*, rainstorms in May delayed building actually getting underway. It reported on May 27, that when the rains began three days earlier, H. K. Turner had about 3,000 bricks drying in his yard but that he did not anticipate much damage as a result.³

The paper for July 8, 1882, carried the item that "H. K. Turner lighted his kiln on Thursday," and on July 17, "Mr. Turner finished burning his brick kilns Wednesday morning. It will take a week to cool."

Additional *Mountain Messenger* items indicate that Turner had begun laying the vault foundation by August 5, and by August 12, the walls were about half up. By August 26, the walls were completed, but Turner had to wait for iron girders before putting on the arch.⁴

¹ Supervisors Minutes, vol. C, March 4, 1882, p. 188.

² *Mountain Messenger*, vol. XXVIII, no. 42, March 11, 1882.

³ *Ibid.*, vol. XXIX, no. 1, May 27, 1882, p. 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. XXIX, no. 14, August 26, 1882.

planning, area revitalization, etc.

Ideally, there exist historic district ordinances administered by a board or commission, in this case perhaps the County Planning Department, whose responsibility is to protect and develop the area so that it can continue to be an asset to the community.

It is, therefore, in the power of the administrative body to guide exterior alterations and new construction and to review and act upon recommendations which include new construction, reconstruction, alteration, restoration, color change, signs, moving, demolition, etc.

The County vault has a number of plus factors going for it. It is 114 years old: it is made of locally produced brick: it was constructed by a prominent citizen of Sierra County: it has served its purpose well. It would be interesting to know if there are any similar structures in any of the other county seats in California at the present time.

One obvious recommendation for future use of the vault is to incorporate it into the design of a new building. If this were done, however, it would still function as a vault and would probably remain as unknown as it is today and would make no architectural contribution to the County Courthouse area.

Another suggestion would be to dismantle the vault and use the brick to line the walls of a spacious entry lobby in a new building. There could be suitable photographic displays of the original structure, of the builder, perhaps even of the site where the bricks were made.

Another possibility would be to use the brick for an outdoor brick patio with a low brick fence and with brick fireplaces. This could be located in a local public park or the brick might be made available to some organization such as the Sierra County Historical Society and the picnic area could be used to enhance the one currently located at the Old Kentucky Mine or some similar site in the county. Again, proper identification of the historical source

By September 2, the roof was being installed, and on September 9, "the walls of the County vault are all finished, and all that remains to be done is to plaster the insides."⁵

The Supervisors Minutes for August 9, 1882, show that "upon approval and acceptance of the vault by D. J. Cole the auditor is authorized to draw his warrant on the General Fund for \$1,100."⁶ Later minutes dated November 10 indicate that the vault was accepted and a warrant ordered drawn for \$1,100 for balance due.⁷

NOTE: The difference between the \$1,100 final payment and the original contract for \$1,500 is explained by payments to workers while construction was in progress. An example is to be found in the Supervisors Minutes for August 8, 1882, where a warrant is recorded "to F. Schmidt, work on vault, \$28.33."

The building where the vault is located housed for many years the offices of the county Clerk, Auditor and Recorder and th District Attorner. For that reason, when the Courthouse burned in September of 1947 most of the current valuable records were in the vault and so escaped the flames. Later the safe from the County Treasurer's office was temporarily located there along with the accounts from the Tax Collectors office.

At a meeting of the Downieville Lions Club in November, 1947, County Clerk F. H. Turner proposed that instead of a new courhouse building for all county offices that construction on a unit basis be utilized so that existing housing would continue to accommodate some offices as had been the case in the past.

Part II. The Vault's Future

The basic philosophy of historic presevation is no longer the sentimental saving of an old structure simply because of age. Rather it is now a broad concept involving building codes, land use, planning, tax laws, open space

⁵ Ibid., vol. XXIX, no. 16, August 26, 1882.

⁶ Op. Cit., August 9, 1882, p. 200.

⁷ Ibid. November 11, 1882, pp. 205-6.

of the brick would be prominently displayed.

Whatever decision is reached concerning the vault, it is important to keep in mind that historic preservation does not mean that no old structure is ever torn down and no new building ever built. What is important is that any new structure enhances the features of the immediate area and of the historic town of Downieville, and that the historic materials of which the vault is constructed are preserved in some fashion for future citizens of Sierra County who may be interested in their history.