

# Bethinking of Old Orleans

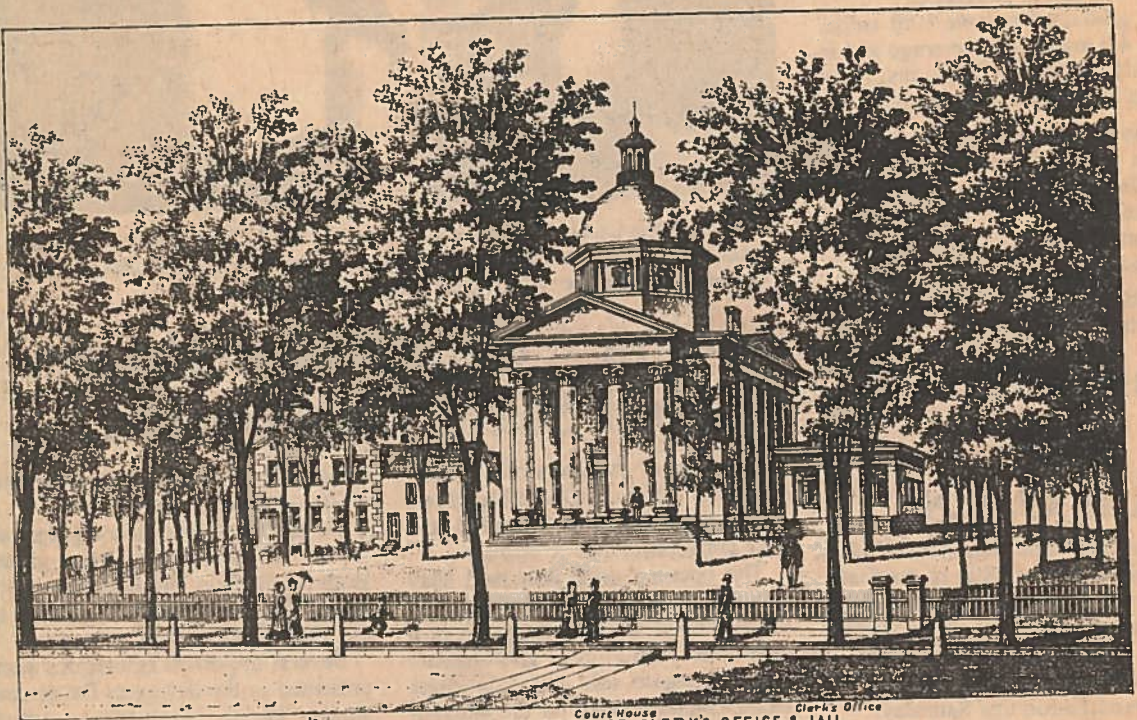
C.W.Lattin County Historian

Vol. XII

6-7-90

No. 23

## THE COUNTY COURT HOUSE DOME



Jail Court House Clerk's Office  
ORLEANS COUNTY COURT HOUSE, CLERK'S OFFICE & JAIL.

With the new roof now being installed on the County Court House, our attention is focused on the dome. Since the Court House is on the National Register of Historic Places, it qualified for the 1986 Environmental Quality Bond Act for roof replacement. This project is administered through the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historical Preservation. The lithograph shown here of the County Court House is taken from the "Illustrated Historical Album of Orleans County" which was printed in 1879. The illustration not only depicts the Court House which was built in 1857-58, but also to the left, a jail built in 1838 which was razed in 1903, and at the right of the Court House, a County Clerk's Office which was built in 1836 and razed in 1884. The entire view here gives a sense of harmony and refinement as one sees ladies and gentlemen strolling along the tree lined sidewalk. A young boy darts ahead of two ladies, one with a parasol. Three gentlemen also appear either on the Court House porch or sidewalk. Innumerable hitching posts line the street which is not yet paved in this view and a picket fence surrounds the Court House lawn.

One is given to wonder if this isn't a pleasant Sunday afternoon in June well over a century ago. We do know that people on Sunday afternoons often visited the Court House to climb up into the dome for a birds-eye view of the surrounding village and countryside. Inside, encircling the dome's eight sides, is a walkway or observation deck raised about four feet above the attic floor. This allowed visitors to encircle the dome so that they might look out the windows on all sides. A narrow angular wooden stairway also leads to the cupola which the more daring traversed. A bell is also found mounted upon a small framework. This

was used during the last century to call Supreme Court.

I suppose this all gives reason and purpose for building such a structure, but not so. Actually, the sole reason for building the dome was simply an aesthetic one. The fact that it lent itself as an observation tower, was only secondary. The floor of the dome is a good four stories up. To get there one has to follow a labyrinth of stairways, catwalks and yes, duck under several beams which are too low. Indeed, the dome was never meant to be anything except a beautiful external architectural focal point. The construction of the dome is most interesting as it is made up of all light members or seemingly small dimensional timbers. Eighty-eight rafters encircle the dome for carrying the cupola and roof boards. Each rafter is made up of several pieces of wood cut on a curve to form the dome's contour.

Indeed, this is one of our outstanding landmarks in Orleans County, one in which all our residents can identify. That too, gives it purpose with its aesthetic value. The entire visual effect is one of dignity, suggesting law, order and justice. Done in the Greek Revival Style it indicated that our county forefathers knew something about ancient Greek history where democracy had its roots. The Court House and its magnificent dome, more than anything else, characterizes the very precepts upon which our country was founded. And foremost on the lips of our founders was the word Liberty. Yes, the dome was built for aesthetic reasons, but what it characterises runs deep into the marrow of Americans. Thanks to Legislator George Bower for prompting me to write about this unique landmark.