

BAYTOWN POST OFFICE FEDERAL BUILDING

by Jean L. Epperson

The Baytown, Texas Post Office Federal Building at 220 West Defee was designed and built during 1936-1937. It is significant because it is representative of the 1930's depression era federal buildings architecture and because it contains a fresco wall mural reported to be one of only two of its kind in Texas.¹

The original building site was acquired by the Post Office Department on May 7, 1936 from Dr. G. A. and Elizabeth Lilly. The lot was 200 feet by 100 feet or 20,000 square feet, facing south on Defee street, bounded to the west by Gilliard street and to the north by Sterling street.² In 1952 an additional tract of land, 205 feet by 100 feet or 20,500 square feet, was purchased for a major building expansion. A strip of land was acquired from the west side of the site by the city for right-of-way,³ leaving a total of 38,900 square feet of land.

Construction began on the original post office building in 1936 and was completed by March 1937 when the dedication ceremony was described as a "coming out" party for the eighteen year old community of Goose Creek, now Baytown.⁴ The structure cost \$70,000 and was designed by architect Louis A. Simon. The supervising and construction engineers were Neal A. Melick and G. W. Kays and the construction contractor was Lundberg-Richter Company.⁵ For the original floor plans see appendix #1.

Two major expansion projects, in 1952 and 1960, more than doubled the size of the building. The first project added

additional work-room space to the north side of the ground floor. Air conditioning and a new lighting system were installed at this time. In 1960 a new two-story Federal Building area was constructed on the east side of the original structure. See Appendix #2. The present building now contains 17,659 net square feet of space. The building is masonry with a yellow brick face, built up tar and gravel roof, and plaster interior walls. The original Post Office section of the building has poured terrazo floors in the lobby, a wooden floor in the old workroom area, and tile floors in the expansion area of the workroom.⁶

A fresco wall mural, entitled "Texas Progress" was completed in January of 1938 by a California artist, Barse Miller. The mural decorates the east wall in the lobby of the Post Office. It was commissioned in 1937 by the Painting and Sculpture Division of the United States Treasury Department as part of the Works Progress Administration, Federal Arts Program. Eleven feet long and six feet wide, the scene depicts the advance of an idealized Texas pioneer. In his left hand he holds a 1938 model of a modern luxury aircraft. His right hand reaches out to grasp the Lone Star of Texas. A covered wagon and an early Southern Pacific locomotive are sketched across the baseline of the mural, suggesting the importance of transportation to the development of Texas. Miller received \$610.00 for the commission.⁷

Austin art historian, Buie Harwood, was interviewed in 1984 about the mural. She said, " Although about 65 Federal Art Project murals were completed in Texas, all but two were painted

on canvas." The other fresco is in the downtown San Antonio post office on East Houston Street and was done by artist Howard⁸ Cook. Harwood continued, "The (Baytown) mural is important because it documents a certain time period in art history. The painting and the period are unique because they represent the federal governments most successful attempt to assist large⁹ numbers of individual American artists." The mural is in need of repair and plans are being made to conserve and restore it.

The discovery of oil on Tabbs Bay near the mouth and on the east bank of Goose Creek caused an influx of people into the area and the first Post Office was established in 1914 and named "Goose Creek". The oil town which mushroomed on the spot was called "Old Town" and the Post Office building was located in a store building near the water front. The first Postmaster was¹⁰ Edward C. Slaughter. The hurricane of 1915 caused much damage to the little oil settlement. This disaster, along with the bringing in of gushers which drenched everything nearby with oil, forced the business men to move inland and establish a second community. Another group of citizens moved still further into the prairie and built a third town. Thus by the early 1900's there were three communities in the area; Old Town, now non existant; Middle Town, later Pelly; and New Town, later Goose Creek.

The Post Office was relocated by Postmaster Slaughter from Tabbs Bay up the hill to Middle Town in February 1917. The new wooden building fronted on the county road, was eight foot square and contained 600 lock boxes for the convenience of the public. Then on January 18, 1919 the building was loaded on a flat wagon

and hauled by mule team to Defee Street in New Town to sit beside the rail road track. Tradition says that the little Post Office was stolen by the residents of New Town so that their town could be incorporated but the unromantic truth is, it was moved for accessibility to the railroad for mail delivery. Sometime later, the Goose Creek Post Office was moved to the Guaranty State Bank building on Texas Avenue.¹¹

In the years that followed Pelly was given a Post Office of its own. Still later after the establishment of the Humble refinery and residential development in that vicinity, a third Post Office was granted and named "Baytown."

Consolidation of the Tri-Cities, Goose Creek, Pelly and Baytown, took place on February 15, 1947 and the new city was called Baytown. The Post Office department designated the Goose Creek Office as the main Post Office and the Baytown and Pelly offices were made sub-stations. The main post office was then called the Baytown Post Office.¹²

The United States Postal Service in Baytown moved into new facilities at 601 West Baker Road and sold the property and building at 220 West Defee to the City of Baytown in 1985.¹³ The City has successfully employed adaptive reuse of the historic building, leasing the Post Office portion to the Bay Area Heritage Society to be utilized for the Baytown Museum and making a City Hall Annex of the balance.¹⁴

The City of Baytown, by ordinance, has designated a Building Conservation District in the down-town area to encourage the preservation and restoration of the structures.¹⁵ The old Post

United States Post Office Building because of its unique
architecture and age.¹⁶

NOTES

1
United States Post Office Department Report, "Historic Significance Survey Report - Federal Building and United States Post Office, Baytown, Texas 77520." Dallas Field Real Estate and Buildings Office, P.O. Drawer 239, Dallas, Texas 75221-0239. Hereafter cited as Postal Report; Baytown Sun Newspaper, August 20, 1984.

2
Deed from Gordon A. Lilly and Elizabeth V. Lilly to the United States of America, May 14, 1936, Vol. 1018, p. 99, Harris County Deed Records. Dr. Lilly was a local physician.

3
Ibid. Postal Report.

4
Tri-Cities Newspaper March 27, 1937.

5
Ibid. Postal Report.

6
Ibid. Postal Report.

7
Baytown Sun August 20, 1984.

7
Baytown Sun August 20, 1984.

8
Personal communication Jean Shepherd, Director Baytown
Historical Museum and I. Elizondo, Manager of United States Post
Office Buildings of San Antonio, February 18, 1987.

9
Ibid. Baytown Sun, August 20, 1984.

10
Margaret S. Henson, The History of Baytown (Baytown: Bay
Area Heritage Society, 1986), 82; Postal Report.

11
Ibid. Henson, 85-92; Baytown Sun August 20, 1984.

12
Baytown Sun, January 22, 1981; Henson, 130-133.

13
Deed from United States Postal Department to the City of
Baytown, November 15, 1985, film code K306449, Harris County Deed
Records.

14
Lease agreement City of Baytown with Bay Area Heritage Society,
November 14, 1986 for use of the Post Office section of the
building for museum purposes. Office of the Baytown City Clerk.

15
Baytown City Ordinance #4132, June 27, 1985.

16
Baytown City Resolution, March 12, 1987.