

The early years



The stately three-story marble edifice that houses Biloxi City Hall has a history that is as storied as the city itself.

The building was originally constructed to be a U.S. Post Office, federal courthouse and Customs House.

It was built on land purchased for \$8,000 from William Armstrong in 1902.

Although construction began in 1904, the job was not finished until some four years later, owing to delays caused by a hurricane, a yellow fever epidemic, supply failures, and, according to reports from the time, “incompetent contractors.”

Despite those issues, the planned \$125,000 building was completed for \$99,146, and federal inspector Victor DeProse, despite documented attempts of bribery, made sure the government got everything it paid for.

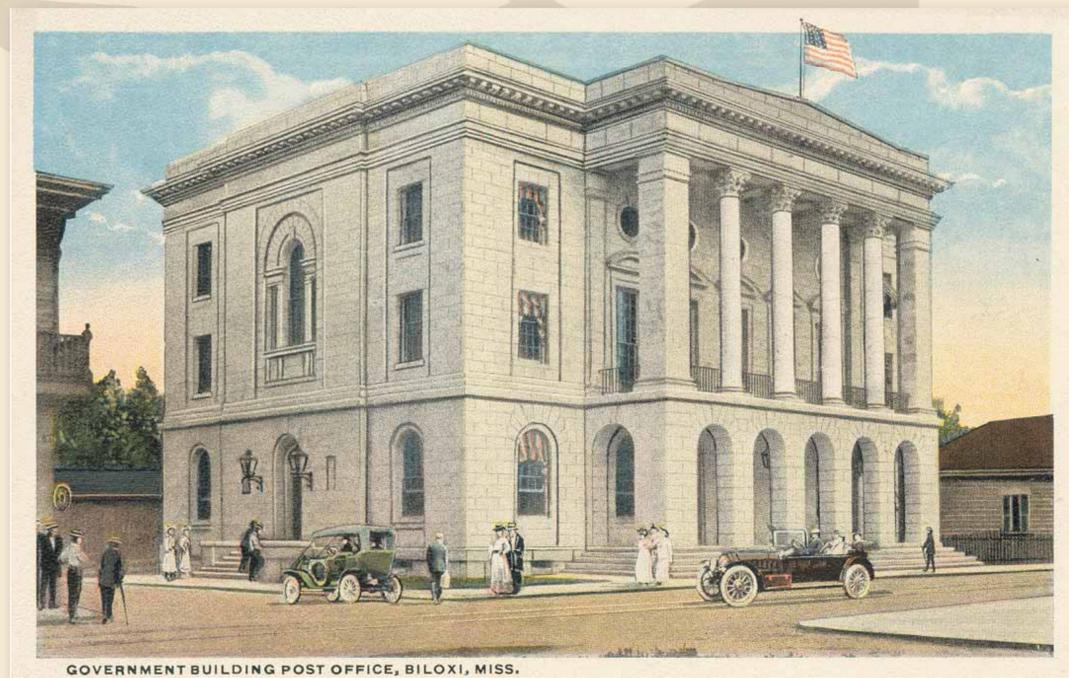
The building was “substantially completed” on June 30, 1908 and was dedicated in August 1908 in a ceremony that was said to be one of the greatest occasions ever celebrated in the city. Dignitaries from the local, state and federal levels gathered at 9 a.m. for the dedication while Ott’s Point Cadet Orchestra “discoursed fine music.” The gathering was so big, in fact, speechmaking was moved to the nearby Dukate Theater on Howard Avenue. The band led the crowd to the theater.

1908 turned out to be a banner year for the city. That year, Biloxi got free mail delivery, with employment of four regular carriers and one extra carrier. Visitors to the federal building dedication took rides around the city on the new electric trolleys before departing on a fleet of power boats for a trip to Ship Island. They returned that night for a big banquet at the Firemen’s Hall and more speeches and music from Ott’s Orchestra. The party finally ended at 1 in the morning.

In the early 1950s, plans were afoot to demolish the structure to make way for a larger federal building. However, the Biloxi school board in 1953 agreed to give up the Howard I school, which was located at what is now the U.S. Post Office on Main Street. A swap was made: The federal government paid \$84,000 for the school, and the city paid the feds \$16,000 to make up the \$100,000 appraised value of what would become City Hall.

The building was dedicated as City Hall on April 2, 1960, and within four years city leaders had installed such modern conveniences as an elevator and air conditioning.

In 1978, the building joined the National Register of History Places and was hailed by National Register representatives as “the finest documented building in the state of Mississippi.”



GOVERNMENT BUILDING POST OFFICE, BILOXI, MISS.



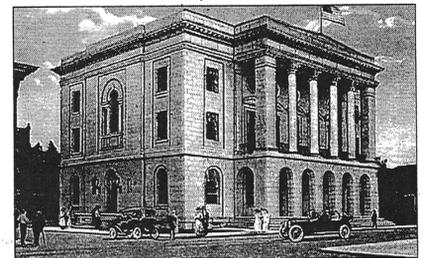
U. S. P. O., C. T. A. & C. U. H., BILOXI, MISS., MAR. 1, 1908. FROM N. Y.



POST OFFICE BILOXI, MISS. B. 46



H. J. ROBERTS & CO.



POSTCARD COURTESY OF RANDY RANDAZZO

According to newspaper accounts, “certain influential citizens” cooperated in securing the Harrison County courthouse in Gulfport, and then in turn supported the federal courthouse in Biloxi.

A marble masterpiece

This building familiar to Biloxians as City Hall opened in 1908 as the U.S. post office, federal court and custom house. On March 31, Postmaster James Tyler moved from the old post on West Howard to the lower floor of the new building on Laneuse Street.



by Murella Powell

According to a March 30, 1908, Daily Herald article, the building, which took six years to complete, is so compact and solid that it “should stand for a thousand years, and withstand the assault of storms or even earthquakes.”

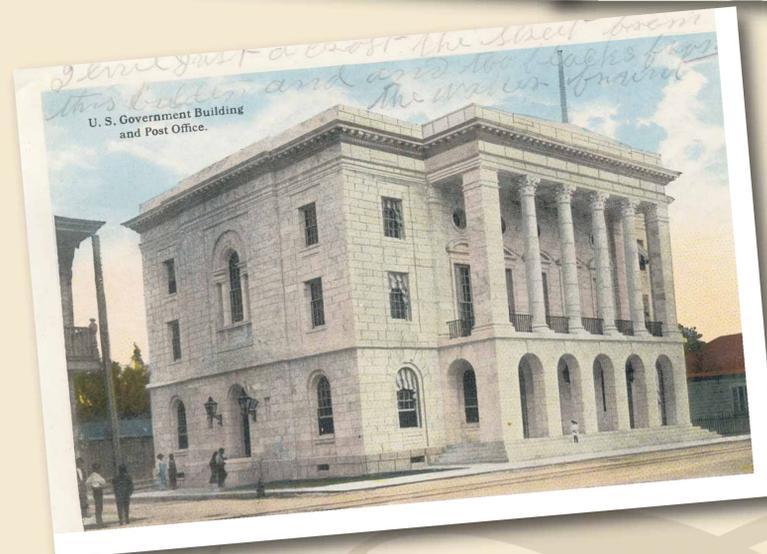
More than 1,200 tons of marble, over 1,600 cubic feet, were used in the exterior walls, with each stone attached to the inner brick wall by strong clamps of galvanized iron incorporated with cement. It was predicted that removed from its foundation

it would stand alone. Reportedly, the \$100,000 Biloxi structure was the last that government architects expected to build of marble. A hundred years of storms have pounded the beautiful marble edifice, which the city of Biloxi obtained in 1960. It still has 900 years to go.

Flashback
Murella H. Powell is a local historian who writes the weekly Flashback column. Do you have a local photograph to submit to Flashback? It can be of any subject or event in the Coast’s distant or recent past. Please send a description with your name, address and daytime phone to Flashback, The Sun Herald, P.O. Box 4567, Biloxi, MS 39535; or call 896-2424; or e-mail living@sunherald.com. Photographs will be returned.

Feb. 10, 2008

THE SUN HERALD



U. S. Government Building and Post Office.

