



The Downtowner

The Newsletter of Friends of Historic Downtown Louisville

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A Clock Tower Tour with Burles Johnson

Friends board member Robert Yonchak called me one bright, breezy December morning as I was hard at work to invite me to come meet Burles Johnson, the contractor managing restoration of the Courthouse roof. We made a date to meet at one o'clock by the cherry picker on the Courthouse lawn.

After Robert introduced us, Burles launched into the story of his Courthouse project. Blond, sunburned, and trim, he talks and gestures at a fast, spirited pace – but for his native east Georgia accent, I might have mistaken him for a fellow Yankee. He explained that he'd been hired by the County to repair the Courthouse roof, but once on the job discovered the roof wasn't all that needed attention. The entire clock tower, he found, was perilously compromised by decades of neglect and slapdash repairs.

His initial examination of the clock tower surface had revealed that, beneath peeling layers of paint, the structure had been repeatedly coated in tar to prevent and repair leaks. From his extensive experience repairing roofs of historic buildings, Burles knew well the result of such treatment – that the crust of tar, once weather worn, admits the water it was intended to shed and traps it against the

structure envelope, causing rot or, in the case of metal surfaces, corrosion. He tested the tar, chipping and scraping it away in places, and his suspicions were confirmed. Once he'd started, he simply couldn't stop.

Before climbing up to the clock tower, Burles led Robert and me to his truck in the lot across Green Street. There he produced a stamped sheet metal foliate ornament about a yard long that he'd taken down from the clock tower exterior. Turning it in his hands, he showed us the remnants of tar clinging in its crevices and the tell-tale pitting and rust holes caused by water that had seeped through the tar. "Before we removed this and cleaned it up," he said, "it was coated so thick in tar you could hardly see it. All of the detail was lost."

Burles explained that the clock tower is a steel-supported wood structure entirely enveloped in a sheath fashioned of stamped sheet metal and decorated with stamped metal pediments, columns, entablatures, finials, festoons, and foliate ornaments like the one he held in his hand. Left to corrode another decade – perhaps less – under the tar crust, the entire metal sheath, with all its fine Beaux Arts adornment, would be destroyed. Burles

and his crew had arrived in the nick of time. Burles' enthusiasm for his task shone as he detailed his restoration strategy. To replace the corroded members would be prohibitively expensive – molds would have to be created, then stamps, to reproduce them. Instead, he ingeniously contrived to apply the very same technology he was using to repair the Courthouse roof.

Burles is a licensed contractor for HydroStop, Inc.'s PremiumCoat System, an elastomeric product designed to restore and waterproof metal and other roofing surfaces. It is applied in layers – first, a liquid prime coat, then a thin, tough fabric layer, followed by a liquid green top coat. Properly applied, the system creates a waterproof barrier without obscuring the roof's decorative detail. Burles has restored many historic roofs with this product, including the vast roof of the federal building in Savannah, and his plan was to use it to restore the long-lost detail of the Courthouse clock tower.

With that explanation under our belts, it was time to go have a look. Rather than take a quick tour of the exterior in the cherry picker, Burles took us up to the tower by way of the interior of the Courthouse. We climbed up the inside stairs to the second story, then climbed a ladder through a trap door in the stairwell ceiling onto the roof, where we found ourselves standing at the base of the clock tower under its west-facing pediment.

The day was brilliantly sunny and what had seemed a pleasant breeze on the ground buffeted us without mercy on the roof. I eyed the series of ladders leading upward from there, wishing I'd worn more sensible shoes. From above came the sounds of workers chiseling tar off sheet metal.

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Contractor Burles Johnson and the Courthouse Clockworks

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A Photo Gallery of

Clock Tower Restoration Photos



Foliate Ornament Midway through Restoration



Foliate Ornament Still Encrusted in Tar and Paint



Stripped Finial with Partly Restored Standing Seam Roof in Background



Steel Struts Supporting Heart Pine Beams in Belfry

Before climbing farther, Burles showed off the work done so far on the roof. Like the clock tower's metal sheath, the standing seam roof had been tarred and more recently coated in urethane foam that completely obscured the roof's detail while providing only short-term water protection. By now the foam was badly degraded. Burles showed us how his crew had removed foam and tar and applied the layered HydroStop membrane technology to restore the original form of the roof, which was now an unappealing green. He assured us the green top coat was only a base for the painting that would come.

The next ladder took us to the octagonal platform that sits atop the four tower pediments, each point of the octagon adorned with a large, urn-like finial. Sure-footed as a mountain goat and undaunted by the wind, Burles made a full circuit of the

platform, pointing out the evidence of corrosion in the newly stripped finials, as I hung close to the tower walls. The finials would soon be getting their prime coat and then would be tightly layered in fabric and painted in green top coat like the already-restored portions of the standing seam roof.

Completing that part of the tour, Burles hopped up another four feet to the narrow ledge between the western pair of columns and offered his hand to pull me up. On each of the four sides of the clock tower, the columns bracket arched and louvered, shutter-like panels directly beneath the four clock faces. One of the west panels had been removed to give access into the tower's interior. Burles guided us through the opening into the tower belfry.

Concealed behind the louvered panels, amid exposed heart pine beams and steel

struts, hangs a formidable bronze bell with its striker poised above. Scrawled on one heart pine timber beam is the year "1904," date of the construction of the Courthouse. Another bears the date 1913, and we guessed what might be the significance of that date.

Burles pointed out that the courtroom was directly below us, and indeed, gaps in around the edge of the belfry floor allowed us to look directly down onto the top surface of the courthouse ceiling. "The judges won't let us work when court's in session," Burles advised. "They won't put up with the noise."

Against the far wall, narrow planks nailed horizontally across joists made a ladder to yet another chamber above. One at a time, Burles, Robert, and I climbed to the next level. Emerging through the opening, we

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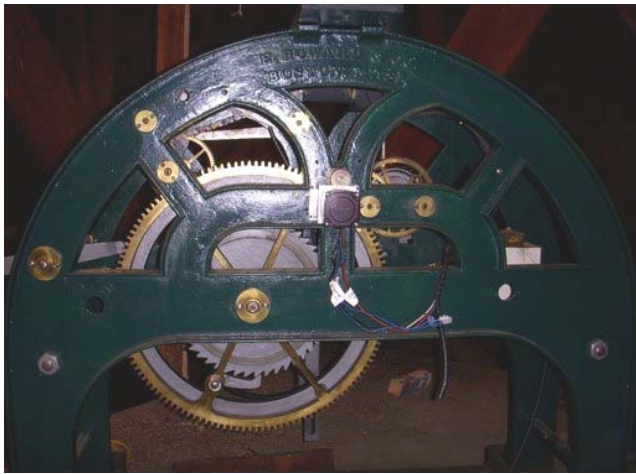
More Courthouse Restoration Photos



Heart Pine Beam Scrawled with Courthouse Construction Date



Burles Johnson and Robert Yonchak in the Belfry



The Courthouse Clockworks



Heart Pine Beam and Joists Supporting the Clock Tower Dome

found ourselves in the compact space of the actual clock room, illuminated by bright sunshine streaming through the four white, translucent clock faces. The center of the room was occupied by the clockworks themselves – antique though gleaming as if brand new. Thin metal shafts emanating from the clockwork gears linked up to gears behind the four faces to turn the clock hands. Old, discarded clock faces lay broken and abandoned at the edges of the room.

“Look up,” Burles said.

Over our heads, curved heart pine joists rose and gracefully converged to support the very apex of the Courthouse – the clock tower dome.

East Georgia is strewn with county courthouses, and surely every county is proud of its own, but few can possibly make

the same claim our does to being unique. It is the only courthouse ever designed by Louisville’s famous native son architect, Willis Denny. Navigating back down the belfry ladder and out again into the blustery December afternoon, I began to understand that our Courthouse is as lovely on the inside as it is – as Burles Johnson will *make* it again – on the outside.

Out on the roof again, we saw Burles’ crew chipping and scraping away – no court in session that day.

“Is all this in your contract?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Not yet,” he said.

“So you’re doing all this work at risk?”

Burles laughed. “Everything except the roof, but I’m not worried about it.”

We looked down at little Louisville laid out so like a movie set – the old oil mill, the Queensborough complex, Pansy’s, City Hall

– once Dr. Pilcher’s hospital – the roof tops of Seventh, Eighth, Green, Mulberry, and Walnut Streets, the old fire house – now our Gallery – the charming cupola of the Abbot and Stone building, the Market House, and all of Broad Street, busy as a Breughel with the work of streetscaping, the graceful steeple of the Methodist Church – a fragile, durable town, unique like its Courthouse.

Incidentally, it’s interesting and not too surprising that Burles Johnson had the metal spire from the Methodist Church steeple in the back of his truck that afternoon. As he’d explained back in the parking lot, the wind had blown it down, and he’d told the Methodists he’d do what he could to make it right.

Helen Aikman

The Downtowner's Image of the Month



Burles Johnson explains restoration techniques to Helen Aikman during tour of the Courthouse clock tower restoration. Photo by Robert Yonchak.

News From

The Fire House Gallery



Gallery to Show Work by JCHS AP Art Students

On Thursday, January 31, Gallery co-executive director Helen Aikman and Jefferson County High School art teacher Linda Merritt held a landmark meeting to lay the foundation for a new joint venture between the Gallery and JCHS. The result? This spring the Gallery will host a two-weeks-long exhibit of the artwork of students in Ms. Merritt's advance placement art program.

The new agreement between the two institutions is a direct outgrowth of important art-related developments at JCHS. During the 2006-2007 academic year – Ms. Merritt's first year as JCHS art teacher – Dr. Molly Howard, JCHS principal, encouraged Ms. Merritt to embark on a training program that would qualify her to inaugurate an AP art program at JCHS. Last summer Ms. Merritt took the required training, and this fall, for the first time, JCHS was able to offer its young artists the opportunity to explore their talents at a whole new level.

Ms. Merritt hit on the idea of a Gallery show for her AP students as “a way to grow the AP program” and to give her students a chance to feel the excitement of putting their work before the public in a formal gallery setting. For the Gallery, the show represents an opportunity to reach out to

Jefferson County youth and their families, with the ultimate benefit of attracting new patrons who might otherwise never visit the Gallery.

Ms. Merritt and Gallery management are putting their heads together to enhance the instructional potential of the event. In addition to the creative activity of developing artwork for the exhibit, the students will go through a months-long process of planning and executing the exhibit. The students will work together to choose a name for their show. Each student participant will be presented with a draft exhibition contract and, with the help of Gallery staff, will have his or her first experience in contract negotiation and execution. Professional artist and Gallery graphic designer Bridget Conn of Swainsboro will work with the group of young artists to help them design a promotional poster and postcard to promote the show. The students will work under a real-world deadline to complete their work and mount and frame it in a manner suitable for hanging. Finally, they will all assist Gallery staff in hanging the show.

And then ... the fun part! Together, the Gallery and the students will host a full-blown Gallery opening reception the night of Saturday, May 3.

“I am just so pleased,” says Ms. Merritt. “And the kids are really excited. This is a unique opportunity for them.”

Says Ms. Aikman, “Coming right on the heels of the Arts Guild's Spring Exhibit, this event will add a new dimension to the Gallery's long-term commitment to enhancing the artistic experience for the citizens of Louisville and Jefferson County.”

The student show is just the beginning of good news about JCHS-Gallery cooperation. Going forward, whenever possible professional exhibitors at the Gallery will give instructional presentations to Ms. Merritt's class to enrich their study of art. The Gallery's next exhibitor, artist Blake Hurt of Charlottesville, Virginia, has agreed to do just that on Friday, March 7.

“Most of our artists would rather talk about their work than eat,” Ms. Aikman notes. “They'll be delighted to share their artistic experiences with these eager young artists.” The Gallery commends JCHS and Ms. Merritt for their special commitment to the arts in Jefferson County!

Search for 2008 Gallery Intern Manager under Way

After months of shameless denial, the Gallery's executive management is reluctantly coming to terms with a sad fact – Maiben Beard will be leaving Louisville at the end of May. We've tried all the tricks we know to change her mind – even the ones that worked last year – but nothing doing! So ...

Our search is under way for a new Intern Manager. Candidates should be college graduates with an interest in art, hard work, and small town life. Some business experience will be helpful, but we are willing to train the right candidate.

If you know anyone who may be interested – preferably someone just like Maiben! – have him or her call us at 478.625.0387 or download the position description from the Gallery website at www.galleryafire.com.

Friends of Historic Downtown Louisville is committed to nondiscriminatory hiring practices and will not discriminate on the basis of age, race, religion, gender, religion, nationality, or sexual preference.

Charlottesville Artist Blake Hurt to Exhibit in March

The Gallery is delighted to announce an exhibit of the intriguing digital portraits of Charlottesville, Virginia artist Blake Hurt from March 6 through April 11. Formally complex, Mr. Hurt's large portraits are constructed through the technique of ink collage, which he describes as “using a series of drawings as metaphorical wire frames ... to form an irregular mosaic of openings” through which he digitally squeezes color from an underlying photograph. Using this process he generates fascinating images that reflect character and personal history as much as facial appearance.

Mr. Hurt is a graduate of MIT and studied painting under Richard Crozier at the University of Virginia. His work has been widely exhibited throughout the United States. You can explore his work further at www.blakehurt.com.



Hurt's Digital Print “Northfields”

Friends of Historic Downtown Louisville



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Friends, Gallery Kick Off 2008 Fundraising Drive

This month, Friends of Historic Downtown Louisville and The Fire House Gallery launched our 2008 annual fundraising campaign. Many of you have received a direct appeal for financial support through the mail, but for those who have not, we place our request here as well.

We know that you all receive fundraising pleas from many worthy organizations, some local and some national, during the course of the year. We hope you will include Friends and its flagship program The Fire House Gallery in the list of causes you choose to support.

When making this important decision, we'd like you to remember –

➤ Friends and the Gallery exist for one purpose and one purpose only – to enrich the lives of people living in Louisville and Jefferson County. That means that your support is 100% dedicated to free arts and community development programs that benefit you and your family and your neighbors' families.

➤ Friends enjoys cost-free, volunteer professional executive management as well as rent-free occupancy of Louisville's historic fire station, so none of your donation will melt away to fund vague overhead expenses.

➤ Friends is an IRS-qualified tax exempt,

educational nonprofit organization, which means that your donation is fully tax deductible.

To donate, mail your check to –

**Friends of Historic Downtown Louisville
P.O. Box 587
Louisville, GA 30434**

or contribute by credit card over the phone by calling Maiben at 478.625.0387.

To those of you who generously supported Friends' and the Gallery's enriching programs in 2007, we cannot thank you enough. To all of you, whether you gave in 2007 or not, we thank you in advance for your generous support in 2008.

This Month

At The Pal . . .

The Pal's offerings for February were not available when this issue of *The Downtowner* went to print. For up-to-date information, call The Pal at 478.625.9998.

Show Times – Friday, Saturday, Monday, and Tuesday at 7 p.m.

. . . and The Bistro

- Saturday, Feb. 2 – High Lonesome, classic rock
 - Saturday, Feb. 9 – Tawana Jackson, folk music
 - Valentine's, Feb. 14 and 15, Kyle Veasy, original acoustic guitar
 - Saturday, Feb. 26 – Joshua Gay, Christian favorites and originals
 - Saturday, Feb. 23 – Faith Pilots, contemporary Christian band from Dublin
- All Shows at 7 p.m.**