

University of North Carolina at Asheville

'Kickers, Soreheads and Cocked Hats': Mayor
John H. Cathey's Fight for Asheville's new City Hall

A Senior Thesis Submitted In Partial Fulfillment
Of The Requirements For The Degree of
Bachelor of Arts With Major In History
At The University of North Carolina at Asheville

By
Boyce McDougald

HIST 452
Senior Research Seminar
Dr. Uldricks

21 November 2006

'Kickers, Soreheads and Cocked Hats': Mayor John H.
Cathey's Fight for Asheville's new City Hall

Boyce McDougald

The traditional architectural design of the Buncombe County Courthouse reflected a sharp contrast to Asheville's Art-Deco City Hall. The two buildings, constructed in the late 1920s, were supposed to be part of a magnificent Civic Center. Asheville's mayor, John H. Cathey, was a determined man who had a progressive improvement plan for Asheville. The city had already decided on an architect and adopted a plan for their new city hall when they entered into a contract with the county. The contract stated that the Civic Center would be a joint project between the two government entities. Outlined by the contract, the two parties were to erect twin buildings. The turmoil that developed around the differences in architectural designs would be the most heated political battle in Asheville's history. Despite his efforts, the county failed to uphold its part of the contract and the outcome of the Civic Center was not what Cathey had intended. Cathey's role in the controversy that surrounded the project defined not only his personality but also his mayoral administration. Cathey laid blame for the outcome of the Civic Center at the feet of the county commission and its supporters.

"Nothing that I have accomplished in my life, has given me the satisfaction, the sense of tremendous task successfully accomplished, that the completion and opening of the New City Building has done," stated John H. Cathey the former mayor of Asheville two days prior to the dedication of the new building. It was under his administration, May 24, 1923 - May 24, 1927, that the new building was planned and work begun.¹ The ceremony on March 19, 1928 marked the formal opening of the new building. The City Commissioners made plans for 15,000 to 20,000 visitors to attend the event.² The actual number of visitors was unknown. Stanley H. Wright, Asheville's city engineer, however, furnished an estimate of more than 12,000 to *The Asheville Times** Construction of the extraordinary Art-Deco edifice had been fraught with controversy, yet the only comments made pertaining to the storm, which had surrounded the building of the new City Hall would come from Cathey himself during the dedication ceremony. In his speech, Cathey stated, "Your Mayor referred to the battles there have been in the past and declared that weathering them makes for good citizenship. Judging by the battles that I came through to get this building started then, I ought to be the best citizen in Asheville."⁴

The comments made by John Cathey during the dedication ceremony of the new City Hall were a result of the obstacles and challenges he faced in trying to turn the dream of a "Civic Center Project" into reality. The dream Cathey envisioned never materialized due to the differences in architectural styles used for the construction of the City Hall and a new County

¹ " His Building Ready For Use; Cathey Happy", *The Asheville Times*, March 18, 1928.

² "Eager Throng Views New City Hall; Gala Reception At Opening", *The Asheville Times*, March 19, 1928.

³ "City Officials Down To Real Work After Day Of Receptions", *The Asheville Times*, March 20, 1928.

⁴ "Throng Sees Dedication Ceremonies Of City Hall", *The Asheville Citizen*, March 20, 1928.

Courthouse. From the day the idea for a new city hall was proposed to the ribbon cutting ceremony, Cathey led a controversial battle the effects of which were felt for years in city and county politics. In the end Cathey lost his fight to have the county's courthouse match the city hall, but he did build "his" city hall. While much has been made over the architectural styles of the two buildings, the real story lies with Cathey himself. His role in the controversy defined not only his personality but also his mayoral administration. To his dying day, Cathey refused to take any blame for the controversy and instead, laid blame at the feet of the county commission and its supporters.

The City Hall building in Asheville has received much attention for its architectural design in historical works, few scholarly works, however, have focused on the political controversy that erupted nor have they examined the central player in this controversy, John Cathey. Most works on Asheville that have referenced the 1920s only mention the civic center project's architectural debate and avoid digging into the political battles.

The "battles" referred to by Cathey in his speech began soon after the decision was made by his administration to build a new City Hall in 1925. At the same time the city's administration was addressing the need for a new municipal building, the County Commissioners were seeking to build a new courthouse. While the city's needs were aimed more toward future growth, the county's needs were more immediate. County offices were not centrally located at the time and the courthouse in use was "inadequate for the amount of business which was being transacted by

⁵ David C. Bailey, *Fashionable Asheville Two* (North Charleston, SC: Booksurge, 2004), 128. See also Robert S. Brunk, ed., *May We All Remember Well Vol. II: A Journal of the History & Cultures of Western North Carolina* (Asheville, NC: Robert S. Brunk Auction Services Inc., 2001), 95. See also Lou Harshaw, *Asheville Places of Discovery* (Asheville, NC: Bright Mountain Books, 1980), 21. See also Milton Ready, *Asheville: Land of The Sky: An Illustrated History* (Northridge, CA: Windsor Publications, 1986), 86; idem, *Remembering Asheville: An Illustrated History* (Lynn, NC: EveryReady Publications, 2005), 86,91. See also Douglas Swain, ed., *Cabins And Castles: The History & Architecture of Buncombe County, North Carolina* (Asheville, NC: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 1981), 93-94. See also Bob Terrell, *Historic Asheville* (Alexander, NC: WorldComm, 1997), 241. See also Mitzi Schaden Tessier, *The State of Buncombe* (Virginia Beach, VA: The Donning Company, 1992), 124.

the county."⁶ The idea of a joint project, which came to be known as the Civic Center would prove to be an ongoing "battle" for Mayor Cathey.

Inspiration for the Civic Center came from the work of John Nolen who was employed during the early 1920s by the city to provide a modern city plan. Kevan D. Frazier's dissertation, *Big Dreams, Small Cities: John Nolen, the New South, and the City Planning Movement in Asheville, Roanoke, and Johnson City, 1907-1937*, examines the atmosphere present in Asheville in the early twentieth century and the eagerness to plan with future growth in mind. Planning was an issue during Cathey's mayoral campaign in 1923, but it would be July 1925, before Nolen's plan would be published and the table would be set for implementation.⁷

One of the central features of Nolen's comprehensive plan for Asheville was for a "Civic Center." A central part of most of Nolen's city plans, the Civic Center would be a collection of public buildings grouped together in one location. This grouping would not only be the anchor for the city center, but would also provide convenience and aesthetic appeal. The proposal submitted in Nolen's plan, called for the area to include a library, a community building with an auditorium, and a post office. Although Nolen's plan recommended that the project be located between Spruce and Oak streets, a donation of land by an anonymous donor changed Mayor Cathey's mind. Nolen argued that using the donated land would undermine his plan for eliminating the congestion that existed around Pack Square. Despite Nolen's efforts, Cathey refused to change locations. Cathey did not want any delays to interfere with the construction of his building.⁸

⁶ George A. Digges, Jr, *Historical Facts Concerning Buncombe County Government 1935* (Asheville, NC: Biltmore Press, 1935), 228.

⁷ Kevan D. Frazier, "Big Dreams, Small Cities: John Nolen, the New South, And the City Planning Movement in Asheville, Roanoke, and Johnson City, 1907-1937" (PhD diss., West Virginia University, 2000), 59-79.

⁸ Frazier, 161-175.

Mayor Cathey's vision for the future of Asheville was exemplified in the many accomplishments of his administration. Labeled "A Golden Administration" in *Asheville's City Development Plan 2025* published in 2004, Mayor Cathey was credited with "Farsighted City Investment."⁹ An impressive list of over 30 public works projects transpired in the city of Asheville during Cathey's service as mayor. These projects included the construction of McCormick Field, Recreation Park, Pack Library, Detention Hospital, and the Municipal Golf Course. Cathey regarded himself as simply acting in "civic stewardship" in respect to his administration's accomplishments. Reflecting on his contribution, Cathey stated, "And if these measures shall, as time goes on, prove beneficial to Asheville, the men who instituted them believe Asheville worthy of every good that may thereby be gained."¹⁰ Because of Cathey's dogged determination, Nolen noted toward the end of his life that of all the cities he planned, Asheville implemented more of his suggestions than any other. The implementation, in fact, was so aggressive that it bankrupted the city.¹¹ Mayor Cathey was determined to make everyone realize Asheville's potential by implementing as much of the plan as possible during his time in office.

On November 19, 1925, the Asheville City Commissioners requested a committee to be formed of the City Planning Commission whose purpose would be to study sites for the location of a new City Hall. This committee reported its findings to the City Commissioners on December 4, 1925 in a formal report. In its recommendation, the committee suggested a site that would allow "sufficient land for a municipal group instead of for one building" and "opportunity for

⁹ The Official Government Site for the City of Asheville. "City Development Plan 2025." www.ashevillenc.gov/planning/plan2025/plan2025.htm.

¹⁰ John H. Cathey, "Four Years in Review and Recommendations Upon Asheville's Civic Development of the Future" (n.p. 1927).
"Frazier,220.

cooperation between city and county in a uniform architectural and landscape design." The committee obviously wanted to follow the recommendation of Nolen's plan for "the development of an appropriate civic center and other municipal improvements making for convenience, beauty and pleasure."^{1^}

Wasting no time, Cathey's administration began work on building the new City Hall. The City Commissioners selected Douglas Ellington as the architect for the project in early 1926. Ellington had designed the new home of the First Baptist Church in Asheville, which was already under construction. Ellington, a native of North Carolina, was a highly regarded architect. He had studied at Drexel Institute, the University of Pennsylvania, and the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. After receiving his education, Ellington taught architecture at Columbia University and the Carnegie Institute of Technology.¹⁴ The opportunity to study at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris was granted to him by having won the Paris Prize in 1913. During his studies in Paris, Ellington also won the Rougevin Prize, the "top honor for decorative competitions at the Ecole."¹⁵ When Ellington was selected as the architect for the new City Hall, he was the only American to be awarded the Rougevin Prize and the only Southerner by birth who had received the Paris Prize in Architecture.¹⁶ Revisions were made to Ellington's original plans for the City Hall including the addition of a bell tower that could accommodate chimes, which would serve as a memorial to the fallen soldiers in the World War. City Commissioners approved the revised plans on June 14, 1926. Mayor Cathey declared that the structure was to be completed for

² "Committee Recommends That New City Hall Be Located Opposite the Court House", *The Asheville Citizen*, December 4, 1925.

^B John Nolen, "Asheville City Plan 1922". Special Collections. University of North Carolina at Asheville. NA9127.A8 N6 1925.

^H Catherine W. Bishir, *North Carolina Architecture* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 412.

⁵ Rudy Abramson and Jean Haskell, eds.. *Encyclopedia of Appalachia* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 2006), 745.

"To Design City Hall", *The Asheville Citizen*, January 17, 1926.

occupancy within a year.¹⁷ The plans would be revised again in July as bids on construction

152

came in above the city's estimated costs for construction.

At the same time the City of Asheville and the County of Buncombe officially entered into a contract on July 6, 1926 to build a Civic Center. In a joint meeting between the County and City Commissioners the details of the project were outlined. The contract stated that the county and city would erect "twin buildings" and that the city would proceed as soon as possible with the construction of its building. The county also agreed to "carry out its part of this agreement with all possible dispatch." The agreement was made with "all members of both Boards voting in the affirmative."¹⁹ This agreement for a joint project received approval from citizens as well as professionals. The Architects Association of Western North Carolina congratulated Cathey and E.M. Lyda, Chairman of the Board of County Commissioners, in a letter. The letter referred to the Civic Center as "an excellent opportunity for harmonious grouping of city and county buildings with chance for growth." The letter also mentioned Nolen with "this step towards the realization of Dr. Nolen's plan is highly commendable."²⁰ Although the contract was for a joint project between the city and county, the city had already hired Ellington and adopted his architectural plan. The county officials were fully aware of what Cathey and his administration had in mind for the Civic Center.

The final contract for the construction of the new City Hall was awarded to the Miller Engineering Company of Asheville on August 3, 1926. This was the second time a contract had been awarded. The first contract was made with the Buchholz Construction Company who provided the lowest bid on the original plans. However, the city changed its mind on the type of

¹⁷ "Officials Give Plans Approval", *The Asheville Citizen*, June 15, 1926.

¹⁸ "City Hall Bids Held Too High", *The Asheville Citizen*, July 9, 1926.

¹⁹ Buncombe County Register of Deeds. *County Commissioners Minutes 1925-1928*, Page 1 Book 14 thru Page 200 Book 16, [Microfilm Roll # 10-1225], 305.

²⁰ "City Hall Bids Held Too High", *The Asheville Citizen*, July 9, 1926.

construction materials that were to be used and asked for revised bids to be placed. While the initial bids called for the structure to have a concrete frame and limestone facade, the city decided that a steel frame with marble facade would be "more practicable and safer." It was with the revised bids that the contract was awarded to the Miller Engineering Company and work was to proceed at once.²¹ On August 16, 1926, ground was broken and Mayor Cathey announced, "The work will be pushed without delay."²²

Considering the financial impact the creation of the Civic Center would have on Asheville, local business leaders wanted to make certain that the joint project would be a success. The Asheville Chamber of Commerce hosted a meeting of the city and county officials "for the purpose of determining definitely that everybody understands everybody else" on August 19, 1926. Present at this meeting were Mayor Cathey, the City Commissioners, E.M. Lyda, the County Commissioners, and the city's architect Douglas Ellington. Reportedly, "a spirit of harmony prevailed throughout the meeting." After discussing in length the details of the project the members visited the construction site, where the city had already broken ground. It was also reported that, "although no definite time has been fixed for the county to make plans for its building, it is understood that it will be substantially like the city building in outward appearance, although different inside." The County Commissioners were not able to say when they would begin their part of the project.²³

Seven short days after the meeting hosted by the Chamber of Commerce the controversy unfolded. The headlines read "C. of C. Fears 'Utter Ruin' Of Civic Center" in the August 26, 1926 edition of *The Asheville Times*. The article described the opinion of a separate Civic Center committee of the Chamber of Commerce that asserted that the city should stop all work until a

²¹ "Contract For Building City Hall Given Miller", *The Asheville Citizen*, August 4, 1926.

²² "Work Begun On City Hall, Will Rival South's Best", *The Asheville Citizen*, August 17, 1926.

²³ "Officials Meet in joint Body On Civic Plans", *The Asheville Citizen*, August 20, 1926.

final agreement could be made between the city and county as to the type of buildings they planned to erect. The committee cited a letter from John Nolen, the city planner, as evidence to the importance of "excellence in architecture and site planning." They continued building their case by referring to their original report, which stated, "there is danger, however, that the whole plan may be spoiled by undue haste in erection of one or the other building on the site agreed upon."²⁴

The report submitted to Holmes Bryson, President of the Asheville Chamber of Commerce, by the Civic Center committee stated:

That under no circumstances should the plans for City Hall be accepted nor a step be taken towards its erection until plans for both the City Hall and the Court House shall have been drawn, as for a joint project; and further until the plans for the landscaping of the grounds about both buildings shall have been drawn as for a joint project; and until both City and County Commissioners shall have agreed upon and adopted such joint project as the final plan to be executed.

The editorial entitled "Why Mutilate The Civic Center" printed in the same edition of *The Asheville Times* laid blame on Mayor Cathey in regards to the haste with which the city was moving forward on the project. It stated that the county was acting "wisely" in taking time to "give the matter the searching and matured consideration which its magnitude deserves" and the City Commissioners "should not permit personal pride to usurp the functions of civic judgment." Mayor Cathey responded to both the news story and the editorial with the statement, "There's no reason in the world why the city should wait for the county in building the civic center." He continued by referring to the agreement reached previously between the city and county regarding the city going ahead with its part of the project. Mayor Cathey also elaborated on the "misconception of the plans for this civic center" by describing the meaning of "twin" buildings.

²⁴ "C. Of C. Fears 'Utter Ruin' Of Civic Center", *The Asheville Times*, August 26, 1926.

²⁵ Civic Center committee. Letter to the President of the Chamber of Commerce. August 25, 1926. jfT.M. *Lyda Papers*. Special Collections. University of North Carolina at Asheville. Box M79.9.1.

He stated, "They are not to be designed exactly alike by any means."²⁶ Cathey saw no reason for concern over the project since the County Commissioners had entered into a contract with the City Commissioners just a few months before. Furthermore, the County Commissioners had not raised any objections to the mayor or City Commissioners moving forward with construction of the new City Hall.

On the following morning, August 27, 1926, readers of *The Asheville Citizen* found "Mayor Cathey Defies, Denounces Committee" in bold letters across the front page of the paper. Focusing on the headline "Calls Them 'Kickers' And 'Soreheads', And Cusses Them Roundly" the mayor's reaction to the Chamber of Commerce's committee was presented without censorship. Referring to the members of the committee as "kickers and soreheads," Cathey asked "what in the hell this so-called citizens committee wants?" In an interview the mayor stated, "The Civic Center isn't in any grave peril, as some people insinuate." He explained to the reporter the history of the project starting with the July 6, 1926 contract between the city and county. He outlined the financial obligations the city had made thus far in the project and what it would take to get out of those obligations. The mayor estimated a "municipal loss of not less than \$150,000" would occur if the project were to be stopped. The estimate included the cost of materials that had already been ordered and the architect's fees. On the subject of the buildings being twins, Mayor Cathey was asked, "isn't there some danger that the county might put up on its piece of land over there a building entirely out of keeping with harmony of the situation?" "Not a bit of it. The county entered into that agreement like gentlemen and with honest motives. We knew when we signed it that the two buildings would not be absolute twins," replied Mayor Cathey. He then referred to the people who took the word "twins" literally as "a few jackasses." Mayor Cathey explained that he thought the committee's sole purpose was to scare the county

²⁶ "Why Mutilate The Civic Center", *The Asheville Times*, August 26, 1926.

and get them to quit the project. He also promised to throw the committee a bombshell "that will kick their Civic Center project into a cocked hat." Furthermore, the mayor said that he had not and would not meet with the Chamber of Commerce committee. In closing, Cathey said:

That city hall is going up, - going up if we have to lay the foundations so deep that they will hinge on hell. I told Holmes Bryson so when he called me on the phone about the matter the other day, and I will tell you so, and the committee so, and the whole blooming damned city so. I intend to see it go up if I loose every friend I have in the city and forfeit forever the chance of making any more. I simply refuse to be bullied off a thing that is for the best interest of the city.⁷

Little did Mayor Cathey know at the time that the concerns brought to attention by the committee would prove to be justified when the county released their architectural plans only a few months later.

The same day that Cathey responded to the committee in the interview, an article appeared in *The Asheville Times* on the County Commissioners' perspective of the situation. E.M. Lyda, Chairman of the Board of County Commissioners, was quoted saying "there is no disagreement between the city and county over this proposition, so far as I know." The county had made no definite plans on the type of structure it would build and would proceed cautiously. Lyda explained that his interpretation of the city-county contract "did not provide that the city and county wings of the proposed structure must be exact duplicates." He also felt that "if the county decides to erect a larger structure than the one the city is building there seems no reason why this could not be done."²

Another article in the same edition of *The Asheville Times* discussed the "facts outstanding" over the project. It reaffirmed Mayor Cathey's stance that work would continue on the city's building regardless of any opposition. The article stated that while the county was ready to carry out its part, "the county has no plans for it's wing of the proposed building" and

²⁷ "Calls Them 'Kickers' And 'Soreheads', And Cusses Them Roundly", *The Asheville Citizen*, August 27, 1926.

²⁸ "County Has No Plans Yet For Twin Building", *The Asheville Times*, August 27, 1926.

"has employed no architect, has let no contracts, and does not know just when it will do so." The Civic Center committee maintained their view that "a grave mistake is being made in rushing plans for the civic center and city hall."²⁹ Based on the fact that the County Commissioners had not informed Cathey that they might choose a different architect than Ellington for the courthouse, Cathey appeared to be justified in allowing the construction to continue.

An editorial in *The Asheville Times* concluded the paper's coverage of the events. Entitled "Really Does It Occur To The Mayor?" the paper's response to the mayor's actions was just as strong as his colorful comments towards the Civic Center committee and its members. Referring to Mayor Cathey's tactics as "Fascist" the writer challenged the mayor's authority and disregard for public opinion. Critical of the references Cathey made toward the committee and its members, the writer stated Cathey's choice of words were "more befitting a fishwife than the mayor of a city."³

Holmes Bryson, President of the Asheville Chamber of Commerce attempted to settle the tension during an interview with *The Asheville Times* on August 28, 1926. Choosing his words carefully, Bryson managed not to criticize the mayor personally while agreeing with the committee's opinion on the importance of a unified plan for the Civic Center. He stated, "I believe the whole thing can be ironed out satisfactorily, and without serious difficulty." In defending the committee's report he explained that it was not their intention to block plans made by the city and county, but they wanted to ensure that cooperation was used in the planning of the Civic Center. The newspaper article also addressed the fact that the building permit was issued the previous day by the city for construction to begin. The mayor was said to have

²⁹ "Opposition Claiming 'Utter Ruin' In Prospect Fails to Alter Plan", *The Asheville Times*, August 27, 1926.

³⁰ "Really Does It Occur To The Mayor?", *The Asheville Times*, August 27, 1926.

announced, "that the city will in no way alter its present plans and will continue in spite of all opposition with the erection of the building."³

In agreement with the Civic Center committee, the Western North Carolina Architectural Association released a statement from a called meeting held on August 28, 1926. Voicing its concerns on the matter, the association expressed itself stating:

The association does not wish to be put in the position of criticizing plans and designs submitted, but does feel, the problem is of such prime importance to the city and county as to warrant the employment of competent and disinterested architectural advice to clarify the situation, before proceeding one step further.

The association detailed its involvement during the early stages of the project and encouraged the mayor and the city to reconsider its position of "rushing ahead".³²

Defining *The Asheville Times* interpretation on the issue, an editorial titled "Be Sure We Are Right, Then Go Ahead" was released the same day as the statement from the architectural association. Likewise, the editorial supported the Civic Center committee's suggestion that the city should wait on the county's decision on what type of building they wanted before proceeding any further. It encouraged the mayor to change his position. "He still has time ... to place himself more in line with public sentiment." While portraying the Civic Center committee as having everyone's best interests in mind, the decision on what to do was placed with Mayor Cathey.³³

In a special meeting called by Holmes Bryson, the Board of Directors for the Chamber of Commerce met on August 31, 1926 to formally receive a revised report from their committee on the Civic Center project. Surprisingly, the mayor made plans to attend the meeting "in his capacity as an ex officio member of the board of directors" and said "he would participate

³ "Bryson Sees Agreement On Civic Center", *The Asheville Times*, August 28, 1926.

³² "Caution Urged By Architects On Civic Center", *The Asheville Times*, August 29, 1926.

³³ "Be Sure We Are Right, Then Go Ahead", *The Asheville Times*, August 29, 1926.

actively in the meeting."³⁴ The report issued at the meeting attempted to place the Chamber of Commerce beyond reproach on the entire matter of the Civic Center. Complementing the city and county for their "spirit of cooperation and care for the future appearance of the city" the committee made two recommendations. First, the county should "proceed at once" in hiring an architect to prevent any future delays and secondly, the city should instruct their architect and engineer to "cooperate" with the county's architect in planning. The Civic Center committee was "highly commended" by the Chamber of Commerce directors for their efforts in successfully "effecting an agreement between the city and county." Bryson also received praise from the directors for his efforts and for the "tact" he used in disposing of "certain controversial matters" that had arisen.³⁵ In a hearty round of patting itself on the back the Chamber of Commerce would slide out of the spotlight and wash its hands of the issue. Mayor Cathey's unwavering determination to move forward with the construction of City Hall had a definite affect on the willingness of Chamber of Commerce to continue its fight on the matter.

One citizen of Asheville exemplified Mayor Cathey's opinion, on the Chamber of Commerce's involvement in the Civic Center project, in a letter to the *Asheville Citizen* newspaper. In the September 2, 1926 issue, Chas H. Neal stated "It seems, however, to have been nothing more than a fence-straddling, issue-dodging confab that got us nowhere." Describing the committee's previous position against haste and now advising the county to "hurry up and employ an architect" Neal pointed out inconsistencies. Critical of the essence of the Chamber's intentions Neal continued, "that may be wonderful strategy on the part of the Chamber of Commerce to work itself out of an unpleasant hole but it is at the same time little

³⁴ "Cathey Will Attend Civic Center Meet", *The Asheville Times*, August 31, 1926.

³⁵ "Accord In Sight On Civic Center After Meeting", *The Asheville Times*, September 1, 1926.

short of treason to the public who has looked to Chamber of Commerce for leadership in this civic crisis. ³⁶

With the Chamber of Commerce removing itself from the controversy, the task of successfully creating a harmonious Civic Center rested between the city and county governmental boards. Both parties would now have to rely on the agreement made between them back in July. The county would find itself in an awkward position having to plan its building around the design adopted by the city. In a joint meeting on September 7, 1926 the city and county governments came together to discuss the status of the project. Both Mayor Cathey and Chairman Lyda "expressed pleasure" at the manner in which problems were handled. The county stated that the city's structure would be completed before they were ready to begin. The city provided the county with copies of its plans at the meeting to allow "the officials to follow closely the exterior design of the city building" while allowing the needs of the county to be meet.³⁷

A few days later Lyda gave a detailed report of the county's progress to a reporter from *The Asheville Citizen*. In his first formal interview dealing with the county's progress toward their part of the Civic Center, Lyda began by rationalizing the fact that there would be no financial benefit to the city and county in erecting their buildings at the same time. The cost of the new courthouse was projected to be "between \$800,000 and \$1,000,000." The County Commissioners planned on inspecting several newly built courthouses in the South during the upcoming months that were similar in size and cost of the courthouse they had in mind. The issue of choosing an architect was addressed in a statement from Lyda, "There are no rules about employing an architect for the courthouse." He commented that they had received overtures from

³⁶ "PEOPLES FORUM: The City-County Building", *The Asheville Citizen*, September!, 1926.

³⁷ "Officials Meet To Talk Joint Building Plans", *The Asheville Citizen*, September 8, 1926.

several architects, but there were more important steps that needed to be taken before making a decision. However, he did say "if plans are submitted, they will be received, filed and considered in due time," Despite the city and county having different architectural needs, assurance was given by Lyda that although "it is obviously impossible to erect buildings similar in detail ... the same style of architecture will predominate in both structures."³

A bold move was made by Douglas Ellington, the architect employed by the city, when he released a sketch of his plan for the courthouse to *The Asheville Citizen*. The drawing was published on September 26, 1926, with the headline "New Plan Showing Changes in County Building."³⁹ At this time the county had yet to hire an architect and had focused its attention on other matters. Was Ellington justified in thinking that he would also be employed by the county to design their building or was this simply an attempt to curry their favor? If the county had intended to solicit Ellington's services, would they have not already done so? Furthermore, if the county had made the decision to use the same architect as the city at the beginning of the project all the controversy over conflicting designs would have been null. The citizens of Asheville and Buncombe County had to ask themselves these same questions when they looked at this drawing. Interestingly, no follow-ups or comments were published in the newspaper in respect to Ellington's proposal.

A model of the new City Hall was placed on public display in the window of Hursey and Company at the corner of Patton Avenue and Church Street. The hand carved model attracted "considerable attention" from the public according to the newspaper.⁴⁰ As the public viewed the model, work on the actual building continued. Contrary to rumors that the construction "was not

³⁸ "Board To Take Extended Trip Of Inspection", *The Asheville Citizen*, September 12, 1926.

³⁹ "New Plan Showing Changes In County Building", *The Asheville Citizen*, September 26, 1926.

⁴⁰ "New City Hall Model On View", *The Asheville Citizen*, November 3, 1926.

advancing as rapidly as it ought to," Ellington maintained that everything was advancing on schedule.⁴¹

The mystery that surrounded the county's lack of a decision on an architect and design for its new courthouse was answered on January 1, 1927. The events, which transpired on this day, sparked a renewed fight from Mayor Cathey. Not only had the county finally chosen an architect but also announced they had adopted a design for the courthouse. The architect would not be Douglas Ellington. The architectural firm of Milburn, Heister & Company from Washington, DC was awarded the contract "after the commissioners had conferred with at least a dozen architectural concerns and had studied numerous sketches and drawings." While adopting a different style of building from that of the City Hall the County Commissioners stated, "it will not be out of harmony" with the city's municipal building.⁴² Although *The Asheville Times* reported that the contract was awarded to Milburn, Heister & Company, the commissioners had only signed an agreement with the architectural firm on December 30, 1926. The actual contract was recorded in the *County Commissioners Minutes* on January 17, 1927.⁴³ The county's decision to use a different architect than Ellington would be questioned on both a personal and professional level.

Douglas Ellington, having not received the contract, voiced his concerns to the Buncombe County Commissioners in a four-page letter dated January 18, 1927. In his letter Ellington outlined the events from July 6, 1926 when the city and county had signed an agreement up to the newspaper article on January 2, 1927 announcing the county's decision to hire a different architect. The general tone of the letter was professional in nature although he

⁴¹ "New City Hall Goes Ahead On Schedule Time", *The Asheville Citizen*, December 12, 1926.

⁴² "County Adopts Drawings For Courthouse", *The Asheville Times*, January 2, 1927.

⁴³ Buncombe County Register of Deeds. *County Commissioners Minutes 1925-1928*, Page 1 Book 14 thru Page 200 Book 16, [Microfilm Roll # 10-1225], 380,390.

mentioned that he "became aware of the fact that influences undisclosed to me were at work striving to bring about discord and unfriendliness between you gentlemen and me." Ellington's use of the word "influences" was not elaborated on in the remainder of the letter. He continued to build his case that he should have been awarded the contract by discussing his involvement in the project from the beginning. Expressing his eagerness to work for the county he stated, "I was always at your service." According to his account, the county accepted his suggestions and proposals with excitement. Using comments made by the County Commissioners themselves, Ellington defended his position that he was misled into thinking he would be their choice. In referring to his plans and drawings the County Commissioners were quoted in his saying, "There they are! They Harmonize absolutely - and yet they are not absolute twins." Along with, "Your design is the building I want. Don't worry. We'll call you."⁴⁴ The next thing Ellington would hear would be through the newspaper.

Understandably, Ellington felt he had been insulted both personally and professionally. There is no record of an explanation or rebuttal from the County Commissioners regarding this matter. A question arises with this development as to whether or not Ellington was merely the victim in a rift between the city and county governments. He had submitted his proposal for the courthouse in November 1926 to the commissioners, which was before the county had entered into any agreements with other architects.⁴⁵ How could any architectural firm design a building that would mirror another architect's design? And if they could, why would they want too? It would have been in the best interest of the entire project for the county to choose Ellington. The

⁴⁴ Douglas Ellington. Letter to Commissioners of Buncombe County. 18 January 1927. *EM. Lyda Papers*. Special Collections. University of North Carolina at Asheville. Box M79.9.1.

⁴⁵ Douglas Ellington. Letter to Commissioners of Buncombe County. 4 November 1926. *EM. Lyda Papers*. Special Collections. University of North Carolina at Asheville. Box M79.9.1.

city's continued confidence in Ellington's abilities would be evident with the announcement that he would design Asheville's new city schools.

Having emerged as the victor in his battle with the Chamber of Commerce over the design of the new City Hall building, Mayor Cathey entered into a new war with the County Commissioners over their courthouse design. Proceeding with no regard to the initial concerns from the Chamber of Commerce's Civic Center committee, Cathey found himself in a difficult situation. Had he taken their advice, waiting until the county had contracted an architect and adopted a design for the courthouse, before proceeding with construction of the City Hall this problem would not have come into existence. Reviewing Douglas Ellington's reaction to the county's decisions on the courthouse, the mayor may have been of the same mindset as the architect. Regardless, the hopes and aspirations that the Civic Center would be as grand as envisioned by the mayor were in peril.

Cathey launched his attack on the County Commissioners during a meeting of the Asheville Civitan Club. During his address, the mayor discussed the agreement made between the city and county that called for "twin buildings." The failure of the county to uphold its part of the contract had resulted in the adoption of a plan that would make the entire Civic Center project "unsightly."⁴⁷ The mayor's use of the Civitan Club's meeting as a platform to announce his position was a ploy to bolster public support. Disgusted with the county's architectural plans for the courthouse, Cathey decided to look outside of Asheville for help. The need for higher authority turned his efforts toward the Fine Arts Commission in Washington D.C. Founded in 1910, the charge of the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts was to provide "a permanent body to advise the government on matters pertaining to the arts; and particularly, to guide the

⁴⁶ "Ellington Is Architect For City's New Schools", *The Asheville Citizen*, January 19, 1927.

⁴⁷ "Cathey Opposes Courthouse Plan", *The Asheville Citizen*, February 24, 1927.

architectural development of Washington."⁴⁸ The Commission was also believed to be charged with "seeing that municipalities within the nation maintain standards of architecture that will be keeping with the highest artistic knowledge of the age."⁴⁹ Although the Commission had no real jurisdiction in the dispute, Cathey hoped that their opinion would help him win his battle.

The public no longer seemed as concerned with the "utter ruin" of the Civic Center as they once had. The Chamber of Commerce maintained its distance from the issue thus managing to keep their hands clean. However, the opportunity existed for a "We warned you!" to the mayor. No public outrage can be found in the pages of the city's newspapers and they also lacked any editorials on the subject. A greater question than that of the Civic Center was on the minds of Asheville and Buncombe county residents. The public was anxiously awaiting the definite answer of Mayor Cathey in regards to his intentions for not seeking re-election.

The mayor had gone on record at the beginning of the year with "repeated utterances ... to effect of that he would not run under any conditions." After some of his friends told him that they would back his campaign financially he replied, "There isn't enough money in the bank vaults of Asheville to draw him into the race."⁵⁰ Now amidst his fight with the county over the Civic Center, his political supporters seemed determined to convince him to seek re-election. In an appeal to Cathey his supporters said that: "the only man who can transfer Asheville's policy from the broad expansion and sustained progress of the past four years to that of sane conservatism and sensible frugality, as distinguished from grasping stinginess, is Mr. Cathey himself"⁵¹

⁴⁸ The U.S. Commission of Fine Arts. "About the Commission of Fine Arts." www.cfa.gov/about/index.html

⁴⁹ "Cathey Angry Over County's New Building", *The Asheville Citizen*, March 16, 1927.

⁵⁰ "Election Only Four Months Away Ring Shy Hats", *The Asheville Citizen*, January 23, 1927.

⁵¹ "Pressure On Cathey to Run Again Is Strong", *The Asheville Citizen*, March 10, 1927.

After he sat in his office all day listening to accolades and the pleas of citizens calling on him to succeed himself he responded, "But why did not more come to me when the battles were hottest and the need for strengthening encouragement was greatest?" His supporters argued that although he wanted to return to the life of a private citizen, "there are many unfinished projects which are as much a part of his life as his own home, and that he ought to finish them."⁵² Cathey's mind was made up that no matter what, he would not seek another term as Asheville's mayor. Appreciative of the show of support, he took time to address "all who were kind enough to take time to call upon him." In an interview with a reporter the mayor said smilingly, "that if the bombardment keeps up he will develop a sore arm from shaking hands, lose his voice from talking, and get a stiff neck from shaking his head in an effort to say 'No'."

c-a

Dedicated to the issue at hand, Cathey attempted to return the public's attention to the problems with the Civic Center. While preparing to go to Washington, D.C. for a meeting with the Fine Arts Commission, Mayor Cathey responded to a reporter:

I wonder, if the people of Asheville are sincere when they seem so vitally interested in who should be Mayor and yet they seem not one bit concerned whether or not the sum of \$3,000,000 is properly expended toward securing a civic center that would be the pride of the South?

The Commission was unable to honor Mayor Cathey's request for a visit to Asheville to discuss the problems that had arisen surrounding the county's courthouse plans. They did, however, welcome him to Washington. The Commission issued a statement regarding their feelings on the proposed plan, "Asheville will be made a laughing stock among American cities" if the county is allowed to erect the building as planned. The previous week, the county had refused to submit their plans to the Fine Arts Commission during a joint meeting of the city and county officials and their respective architects. Cathey commented that he thought the only reason they objected,

⁵² "Ovation Given Mayor Cathey Spontaneous", *The Asheville Citizen*, March 11, 1927.

⁵³ "Cathey Besieged Another Day To Cast Hat In The Ring", *The Asheville Citizen*, March 12, 1927

was because they "are so damned ashamed of it that they don't want anybody to see |what it looks like until the contract is let and it is forever too late to save the city of Asheville from a monstrosity." The mayor's comment prompted the reporter to ask him if the city was not to blame as well, since they had insisted on a certain style of architecture for their building. The mayor explained that the county knew exactly what the city had planned when they entered into the agreement to erect a "twin" building. Elaborating on the county's design, Mayor Cathey described it as "a jumble of architectural designs" and "a plain mess."⁵⁴ Having obtained a drawing of the county's building from Cathey, the newspaper was able to get the county to make public a drawing provided by the architect. These two drawings were printed in the newspaper the following day with the caption "Read 'Em And Weep — With Mayor Cathey.""

Upon his return from Washington, the mayor was ready for a fight. The opinion of the Fine Arts Commission on the county's design as told by Cathey was, "so obviously wrong and at variance with what a Civic Group should be" that they did not need to travel to Asheville to view the grounds personally. The Commission was also noted to have said, "The whole scheme is evidently being wrecked by local politics, and it is not the desire or the policy of an^ Federal Commission to mix in or meddle with purely local political differences." Cathey had also provided the Commission with what the city's architect, Douglas Ellington, had proposed as a Civic Center when the city and county entered into their contract. According to the mayor, the Commission gave its "unqualified endorsement" of the city's original proposed plan. When approached by a reporter about the Commission's statement, County Commissioner Lyda stated, that he "was not ready to make any statement." Another Commissioner, Emory McLean, made the comment, "I cannot see that anybody in Asheville or Buncombe County is excited over the

⁵⁴ "Cathey Angry Over County's New Building", *The Asheville Citizen*, March 16, 1927.

⁵⁵ "Read' Em And Weep — With Mayor Cathey", *The Asheville Citizen*, March 17, 1927.

civic center except Mayor Cathey." Both Commissioners refused to say whether or not they would consider making changes in their plans to suit the city.⁵⁶ Lyda received a telegram dated March 17, 1927 that eased his mind on the involvement of the Fine Arts Commission over the design of the courthouse. The county's architects had also held a meeting with the commission and reported to Lyda that the commission would take no further action.

In an editorial, titled "What Will We Get?", public sentiments over the latest developments were reflected. Steering clear of the personalities involved, the focus was kept on the issues. Retracing both the city and county's actions before and after signing the contract for a joint Civic Center, blame was cast onto the county for not keeping its word.

SS4

Cathey hoped that by taking the lead and putting the County Commissioners on the defense he would be able to save Asheville from a "monstrosity." He continued to reiterate the fact that the county entered into a contract for "twin buildings." He explained that the entire reason for the city and county to erect their structures on the same site was to create a harmonious civic group. The city had changed its original plan, which was to build | on a different site than originally proposed, to meet the needs of the county and then followed through with a joint plan for centrally located municipal buildings. Adamant that now the county refused to adhere to the contract, Cathey stated:

It was understood by Commissioner Lyda and his board that they could build any old building that they wanted to and the city would build on the old location. This the Commissioners did not want.

The previous summer, Lyda made the comment that the county's building would probably have to be larger than the city's in order to meet their needs but the purpose of keeping the building in

⁵⁶ "Courthouse Declared To Be Disgrace", *The Asheville Citizen*, March 18, 1927.

⁵⁷ Milburn, Heister & Company. Telegram to E.M. Lyda. 17 March 1927. *EM. Lyda Papers*. Special Collections. University of North Carolina at Asheville. Box M79.9.1.

⁵⁸ "What Will We Get", *The Asheville Citizen*, March 19, 1927.

harmony with the city's would remain. Cathey had no objection to this comment at the time because, "he never thought of the structures being like two peas in a pod." The mayor's opinions of the county's current plans are that they "have adopted a design that is no more like our building than the Bank of England building."⁵

In the end, an agreement over the county's plans was reached in a meeting between Mayor Cathey and Commissioner Lyda on March 25, 1927. Cathey announced, "Although it was impossible to make modifications to the extent that the new courthouse will conform absolutely in style of architecture, sufficient changes have been made." In a surprising change, the mayor lost interest in the entire affair. Justifying his actions, the mayor explained that he "realized that when the county makes an honest effort to change their building so as to render the civic center reasonably appealing it was the proper thing to place the community welfare above all selfish plans and dreams and ambitions." Lyda commented that he felt there would be "no more trouble" provided that the architects are able to make the changes agreed upon during the meeting. In reference to the general style of architecture not matching the City Hall building, Lyda stated that it would be possible to change "without re-designing the whole structure." Inevitably, however, this would not be done. Coverage of the meeting concluded with Lyda expressing that this agreement would be very beneficial to both the city and county.⁶⁰ The county's architectural firm submitted the revised design to the County Commissioners on March 29, 1927. Cathey gave his approval for the revisions and the county moved forward in building their courthouse.⁶¹

⁵ "Cathey Says County Signed With Open Eye", *TheAsheville Citizen*, March 20, 1927.

⁶⁰ "Reach Agreement On Court House Controversy", *TheAsheville Citizen*, March 26, 1927.

⁶¹ Buncombe County Register of Deeds. *County Commissioners Minutes 1925-1928*, Page 1 Book 14 thru Page 200 Book 16, [Microfilm Roll # 10-1225], 454.

With the election less than two months away, Mayor Cathey remained steadfast in his decision not to run.⁶² A newspaper article, which appeared to be politically motivated, detailed a land deal surrounding the mayor's involvement in the acquisition of land for the Civic Center project. The newspaper was allegedly inspired to investigate the event from an unbiased view in order to settle "ugly rumors of the present campaign." The broken spirit of the mayor is evident in his remarks, "To begin with, let me say that the biggest mistake of my administration is the civic center expansion according to present plans."⁶³ Cathey's careful choice of words in using "present plans" appeared to lay blame on the County Commissioners for the failure of the Civic Center as envisioned by Ellington and himself, rather than any error on the city's behalf.

The reasons for Cathey giving up his fight for a truly unique Civic Center are not evident. In preparation for the fiftieth anniversary and rededication ceremony of the courthouse, *The Asheville Citizen-Times* published an article on the history of the courthouse on November 26, 1978. In discussing the outcome of the Civic Center controversy, responsibility was attributed to a combination of strong personalities and a "natural rivalry between the city and county government."⁶⁴ Cathey had faced a lot of opposition during his term in office, but he had never backed down from a fight he believed in. Referred to as having "the tenacity of a bulldog" and his refusal "to desert any fight because of expediency" was contrary to his actions in this case.

Describing the mayor, "Many elements contribute to his power but chief among
765 them is his courage.'

The mayor's comments regarding the agreement he made with Commissioner Lyda, which ended the Civic Center controversy, reflected a radical change in his character. True to his

⁶² "April 16 Last Day Derby May Land In Ring", *The Asheville Citizen*, April 10, 1927.

⁶³ "Mayor Cathey Not Ashamed Of Land Deal", *The Asheville Citizen*, April 23, 1927.

⁶⁴ "Courthouse Will Mark 50th Birthday Dec. 1", *The Asheville Citizen-Times*, November 26, 1978.

⁶⁵ "Pressure On Cathey To Run Again is Strong", *The Asheville Citizen*, March 10, 1927.

old self, however, now former Mayor Cathey would have the last word on the Civic Center during the dedication ceremonies a year after leaving office:

And now: Just to keep the record straight. I may just as well say here and now that this building is not on the site we chose for it. I am still convinced that it should be standing where the old City Hall stood. But I guess I ought to be glad to have gotten it at all.⁶⁶

Regardless of John Cathey's best efforts, the County Commissioners had chosen an altogether different style of architecture for their courthouse. The new buildings resulted in exactly what the Chamber of Commerce committee thought would happen if the city did not delay construction until the county decided on its plans. As historian Milton Ready stated in his work, *Remembering Asheville*, "Nothing contrasts the differences between the city of Asheville and Buncombe County more than the City Hall... and Buncombe County Courthouse."⁶⁷ The city's choice of a colorful Art Deco design for their City Hall symbolized the bold progressive vision held by the leaders of Asheville for the city's future. The county's choice of a more traditional design for the courthouse appeared as a revolt against the rapid growth and progressive leadership in Asheville. Cathey masterfully redirected blame from himself and the city to the county and its commissioners. Inevitably, John Cathey did not get his Civic Center, but he did get "his" City Hall.

⁶⁶ "Throng See Dedication Ceremonies Of City Hall", *The Asheville Citizen*, March 20, 1928.

⁶⁷ Milton Ready, *Remembering Asheville: An Illustrated History* (Lynn, NC: EverReady Publications, 2005), 91.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

- Cathey, John H. "Four Years in Review and Recommendations Upon Asheville's Civic Development of the Future" (n.p. 1927).
- Digges Jr., George A. *Historical Facts Concerning Buncombe County Government 1935*. Asheville, NC: Biltmore Press, 1925.
- Nolen, John. "Asheville City Plan 1922". Special Collections. University of North Carolina at Asheville. NA9127.A8N6 1925.
- The Asheville Citizen*, January 1926 - March 1928.
- The Asheville Times*, August 1926-March 1928.
- Buncombe County Register of Deeds. *County Commissioners Minutes 1925-1928*. Microfilm Roll #10-1225.
- Civic Center committee. Letter to the President of the Chamber of Commerce. August 25, 1926. *E.M. Lyda Papers*. Special Collections. University of North Carolina at Asheville. Box M79.9.1.
- Douglas Ellington. Letter to Commissioners of Buncombe County. 18 January 1927. *E.M. Lyda Papers*. Special Collections. University of North Carolina at Asheville. Box M79.9.1.
- Douglas Ellington. Letter to Commissioners of Buncombe County. 4 November 1926. *E.M. Lyda Papers*. Special Collections. University of North Carolina at Asheville. Box M79.9.1.
- Milburn, Heister & Company. Telegram to E.M. Lyda. 17 March 1927. *E.M. Lyda Papers*. Special Collections. University of North Carolina at Asheville. Box M79.9.1.

Secondary Sources

- Abramson, Rudy, and Jean Haskell, eds. *Encyclopedia of Appalachia*. Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 2006.
- Bailey, David C. *Fashionable Asheville Two*. North Charleston, SC: Booksurge, 2004.
- Bishir, Catherine W. *North Carolina Architecture*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990.
- Brunk, Robert S., ed. *May We All Remember Well Vol. II: A Journal of the History & Cultures of Western North Carolina*. Asheville, NC: Robert S. Brunk Auction Services Inc., 2001.
- Harshaw, Lou. *Asheville Places of Discovery*. Asheville, NC: Bright Mountain Books, 1980.
- Frazier, Kevan D. "Big Dreams, Small Cities: John Nolen, the New South, And the City Planning Movement in Asheville, Roanoke, and Johnson City, 1907-1937" (PhD diss., West Virginia University, 2000).
- Ready, Milton. *Asheville: Land of The Sky: An Illustrated History*. Northridge, CA: Windsor Publications, 1986.
- Ready, Milton. *Remembering Asheville: An Illustrated History*. Lynn, NC: EverReady Publications, 2005.
- Swain, Douglas, ed. *Cabins And Castles: The History & Architecture of Buncombe County, North Carolina*. Asheville, NC: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 1981.
- Terrell, Bob. *Historic Asheville*. Alexander, NC: WorldComm, 1997.
- Tessier, Mitzi Schaden. *The State of Buncombe*. Virginia Beach, VA: The Donning Company, 1992.
- The Asheville Citizen-Times*, November 26, 1978.
- The Official Government Site for the City of Asheville. "City Development Plan 2025" www.ashevollenc.gov/planning/plan2Q25/plan2025.htm.
- The U.S. Commission of Fine Arts. "About the Commission of Fine Arts." www.cfa.gov/about/index.html.