

# Courthouse rebuilding crew goes shopping at the old Joske's



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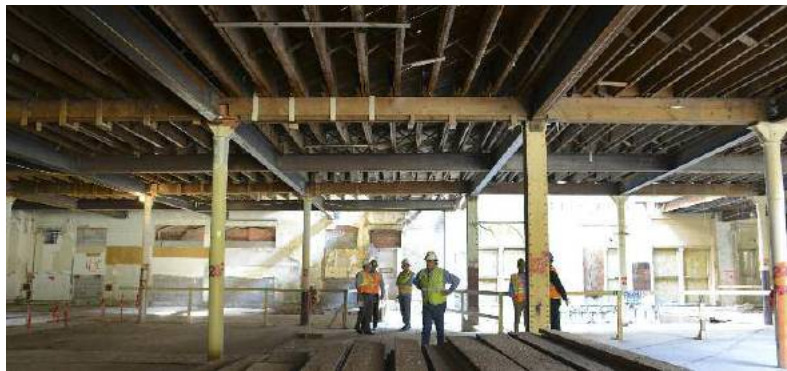
Remodeling work continues at the old Joske's site, which will be used by H&M and other retailers.

## Building's joists will be flooring

By Steve Bennett  
STAFF WRITER

During renovations on the old Joske's department store at Rivercenter mall to make way for H&M and other retailers, crews from Guido Brothers Construction discovered a true treasure from the past: longleaf pine joists from trees likely harvested near Lake Charles, La., around 1880 that will be transformed into hardwood flooring for the Bexar County Courthouse, which is getting its own restoration.

"When we heard the wood was being salvaged, we got very excited," said Betty Bueché, Bexar County facilities manag-



er. "We were interested in it because the timeframe of both buildings is the same, so we thought it would be a good fit. This old-growth pine is simply not harvested anymore. When it was installed in Joske's, we believe it was from trees that were centuries old."

Joske's, whose first store was on Main Plaza, opened the

Alfred Giles-designed flagship on Alamo Plaza in 1888. The courthouse, considered a masterpiece of native Texan granite and red sandstone, was completed in 1897.

As demolition continued this week amid piles of worthless decking debris, giant stacks of valuable old lumber were scat-

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The joists are supports for ceilings and floors.

### Photos

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## JOSKE'S

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tered about the site.

"It's organic gold," said Christian Oviatt, general manager of Rivercenter mall. "It's in very high demand, especially in historic restoration projects."

The joists — supports for ceilings and floors that run between layers of walls and foundations — are only the latest treasures being rediscovered as the Joske's renovation, which began in November, continues.

Crews also found an old filing cabinet with records of former customers' credit history. The accounts represented countless realized dreams.

The \$11 million courthouse restoration, set to be completed by the end of the year, has uncovered treasures of its own.

County Judge Nelson Wolff said that in the original "dou-

ble-height" courtroom — which is being brought back to its 1927 glory — workers discovered 14 baroque rose windows that had been plastered over during the distinctive Romanesque Revival-style building's somewhat checkered renovation history.

Designed by renowned courthouse architect James Riely Gordon, the Bexar courthouse has undergone four extensive remodelings and additions, in 1914, 1927, 1963 and 1972.

"There are a lot of exciting things happening that we didn't foresee when we started," Wolff said.

The Joske's hardwood, he said, is another of those "hidden gems."

The county is paying Woodco \$136,000 for the 5,000 square feet of flooring.

Longleaf pine is an evergreen conifer that got its name because it has the longest leaves of

eastern pine species. The needlelike leaves come in bundles of three and can grow up to 18 inches long, according to the National Wildlife Federation.

Mature trees — up to 500 years old — stand 80 to 100 feet tall, nearly perfectly straight because the trees naturally prune their lower branches. A single trunk, covered in thick, scaly bark, can reach up to 3 feet in diameter.

"It's a very dense wood," said Peter George of Woodco Millwork in San Antonio, the company that's salvaging the old wood from the Joske's project.

"It was widely used in what are now historic buildings, and people want it now to re-create that old look."

Adds George's son Warwick, who works with him at Woodco, "Weight for weight, longleaf pine is stronger than steel. That's why they used it so much."

The Joske's job is interesting, said Peter George, because the 3 1/4-inch by 3/4-inch flooring planks are being milled from floor joists in the building, many of which are 15 inches wide, 2 1/2 inches thick and 22 feet long.

Some still are marked with the original source of the wood. A recently collected board had "Tom Beitel Lumber Co." handwritten on its broadside in what looked like charcoal, along with the company's slogan, "There's a reason." It must have been written around 125 years ago.

The large pine boards weigh between 300 and 400 pounds each and are being removed from the building primarily by hand, loaded onto a truck and transported to Woodco's northeast San Antonio lumberyard.

There, numerous old nails are removed, and then the boards are checked with a metal wand for hidden or broken

nails.

"If you run it through the machine and hit a nail, it could ruin the machine or even ignite a fire with all the dust around," George said.

The milled flooring is a luminous color, with a vertical grain and very few knots.

"They wanted no knots bigger than a dime," George said.

The Joske's site is set for completion in May 2015. Then retailers can start building out their spaces.

In the next 30 to 45 days, Bob Wexler's company, Advanced Wood Floors of San Antonio, will begin installing the flooring in the courthouse.

"It's a beautiful, rich, deep, red pine color," said Wexler, who recently worked on the restoration of the 1898 Comal County Courthouse. "It's as hard as oak and it's gorgeous."

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