

MISSOURI COURTHOUSES

BENTON COUNTY

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After Benton County organized in 1835, legislators appointed three commissioners to select the county seat. However, the commissioners failed to act, and in January 1837 three new commissioners were instructed to locate the county seat at a site as near the center of the county and the Osage River as could be found. After strong competition from vying communities, the commissioners selected the Warsaw site. Robert Wyatt laid out the town into lots in November 1837.

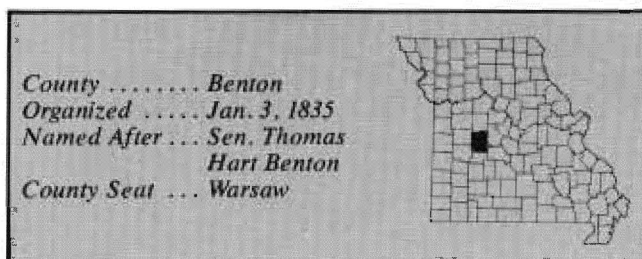
The first courts met in homes. In March 1838 the court appointed Adamson Cornwall building superintendent of a temporary courthouse. The court had reserved a site for the courthouse that fronted 20 feet on Washington Street and extended back 24 feet on Van Buren. Appropriation of \$250 came from the sale of lots. An additional \$50 appropriation later raised the total to \$300, but deductions later were made because of poor work. Glover and Davis contracted to build the plan approved by the court. Lay's *History of Benton County* identified it as a log house.

In June 1841, after the building served as courthouse for three years, commissioners authorized the sale of the lot where the temporary courthouse stood, providing the lot not be sold for less than \$800. They also held the right to use and occupy the old courthouse for county business until they could move into the new one. The unsold courthouse became available for rent in December 1841.

The same year the first courthouse came into being, 1838, the court began planning for a permanent courthouse. The copy of the plan described in the contract indicated a two-story, square building with hipped roof and central cupola. Rolla M. Griffith contracted for the



Fig. 1. Benton County Courthouse, 1887-.
Architect: George A. Masters
(From: W.P.A., Historical Records Survey)



building and began the foundation, but was replaced by four contractors, Bartholomew Keown, William Hurt, Joel Shepard and James Donald, in July 1840, and the plan was changed to a rectangular design measuring 40 by 52 feet.

The two-story brick structure, a better building, had a main entry door in the gable end 6 feet wide with

narrow windows at the sides. On the second floor, decorative windows corresponded to the width of door openings. The opposite gable end featured similar windows, one on each floor. Ten windows on each side, five per story, provided light for offices and the courtroom. The door frame and all window frames except crescent windows in the gable were made from black walnut. A contract for \$2,925 was filed June 5, 1840, but final costs brought the total to \$4,500. County officials began occupying the building in 1842.

A defective foundation caused the courthouse to be condemned in 1881, and the court ordered the building sold to Waldo P. Johnson for \$275 in December 1881.

In May 1886 the court contracted for the third and present courthouse. James H. Lay superintended the building and employed architect George A. Masters to submit plans in June. One contract for building the foundations, walls, and roof was awarded Maurice Barrett, Sedalia, Missouri, for \$6,620. The court received this portion of the building Dec. 28, 1886 (Fig. 1).

In April 1887 L. C. Steavenson, superintendent, accepted bids to finish the courthouse. The court authorized him to accept the low bid of Fred Busche, Lincoln, Missouri, in the amount of \$2,469. This contract included plastering and adding cresting (ornamental ridging on walls or roofs) and finials (decorative tips of spires and gables). Busche completed his work in August 1887. Total cost was \$9,089.

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Manuscript Collections

Work Projects Administration, Historical Records Survey, Missouri, 1935-1942, Benton County. Located in Joint Collection: University of Missouri, Western Historical Manuscript Collection-Columbia and State Historical Society of Missouri Manuscripts.