

MISSOURI COURTHOUSES

CLAY COUNTY

Marian M. Ohman
Coordinator, Art History Programs

"This court having viewed with regret the inconvenience the citizens of the county labor under, as well as the great inconvenience the courts encountered for want of suitable buildings for the accommodations of the different courts, deem it necessary to make an effort to construct a courthouse upon the public square in the town of Liberty."

Although Clay County organized in 1822 and Liberty was chosen as the county seat, it was not until the May term of court in 1828 that this proclamation gave authority for building the first courthouse. Several plans or drafts were submitted for the court's consideration, but commissioners accepted the one Judge George Burnett submitted.

No known illustrations exist, but there is a complete description in the County Court Record for June 1829 which indicates a 44-foot-4-inch, square, brick courthouse, five bays wide with doors on the south, east and west, featuring decorative semicircular fanlights. The courtroom occupied the north part of the building, apparently on the first floor. A hip roof was first planned, but in 1829 changed to a square roof.

Joseph Bright was contractor for the building, but progress was slow. The brick floor on the first story was laid in 1831, so some of the rooms could be occupied; final work was not completed until 1833. Costs of approximately \$1,770 came from the sale of county lots and public subscription. Subsequently enlarged by additions on the east and west, it was described as being in



Fig. 1. Clay County Courthouse, 1857-1934.
Architect: Peter Mc Duff
(From: *Missouri's Contribution to American Architecture*, 1928)

poor condition by 1847-48. Fire destroyed this courthouse March 27, 1857.

A *Liberty Weekly Tribune* editorial reported the advantages of relocating the courthouse off the square, but tradition prevailed, and in May 1857 the court authorized construction of the second courthouse on the site of the first. The court appropriated \$35,000 for the new building and paid Peter Mc Duff \$100 for one of two plans he submitted (Fig. 1).

Mc Duff resided at Weston, Missouri, but was born in Scotland in 1813. Little is known of his background, training or interest that might have inspired either this unique design or the one for Clinton County in 1859. In 1866 Mc Duff designed the Platte County courthouse, which is the only surviving example of his courthouse work.

The court also appointed Mc Duff superintendent. Crump and Thompson were the contractors. The build-

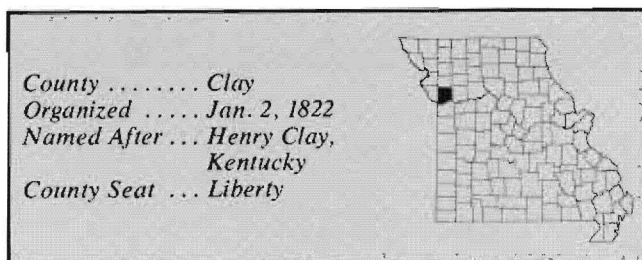




Fig. 2. Proposed Clay County Courthouse, 1931.
Architects: David Fredrick Wallace and M. Dwight Brown
(From: *Liberty Advance*, March 26, 1934)

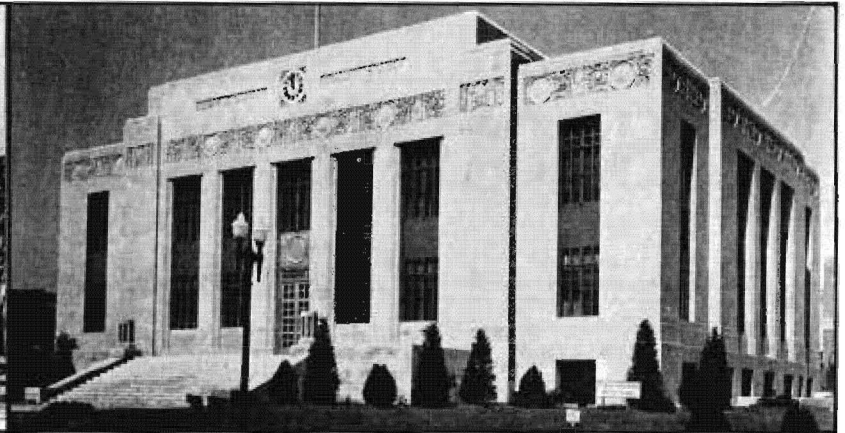


Fig. 3. Clay County Courthouse, 1935-.
Architect: Wight and Wight
(From: *Public Buildings*, 1939)

ing was received by the court November 9, 1859, and the *Tribune* boasted, "Clay County now has the best courthouse in the state." This courthouse was sold to a St. Joseph wrecking firm for \$330 and razed in 1934, as the square was prepared for the next and present courthouse.

By 1934 Clay County considered its courthouse 75 years behind the time. During the 1930s Public Works Administration projects encouraged public building applications, and after Clay County approved bonds in the amount of \$200,000, P.W.A. approved a \$75,500 grant.

Thomas and Edward Drewin Wight, of the Kansas City firm, served as architects. When a sketch of their proposed modern design appeared, an uproar ensued by those who favored a traditional design, which they had thought the court intended to build. However, the

traditional design which had accompanied the grant application (Fig. 2) was the action of a courthouse committee, rather than the County Court.

The court retained Wight and Wight, who designed a white limestone building 117 by 87 feet and 60 feet high (Fig. 3). The architects needed to rework their original plans to bring costs within the acceptable range. Bliss and Duncan, Kansas City, received the contract for \$192,330; construction began March 27, 1935. The cornerstone ceremony was conducted September 19, 1935, and, in spite of labor problems, the building was completed in June 1936. Construction costs ultimately reached \$263,410.

Acute space problems developed in the 1970s. An annex was built and several ideas for additions and enlargements have been considered since. This is an outstanding example of a government project of this period.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books

- Bryan, John. *Missouri's Contribution to American Architecture*. 1928.
Clay County, Missouri Centennial Souvenir 1822-1922. compiled by Alexander Doniphan Chapter, D. A. R. Liberty: *Liberty Tribune*, 1922.
Dedication of the Clay County Courthouse. Liberty, June 6, 1936.
History of Clay and Platte Counties. St. Louis: National Historical Company, 1885.
 Jackson, Don M. *The Heritage of Liberty*. Liberty: R. C. Printing Service, 1976.
 Short C. W. and Stanley-Brown, R. *Public Buildings*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Printing Office, 1939.
 Woodson, W. H. *History of Clay County, Missouri*. Indianapolis: Historical Publishing Company, 1920.

Newspapers

- Kansas City Times* Sept. 29, 1976.
Liberty Advance, March 26, 1934.
Liberty Chronicle, Feb. 8, 15, 22, March 22, 29, June 28, July 5, Aug. 23, 30, Sept. 6, 13, 20, 27, 1934; Jan. 3, 10, Feb. 21, March 28, July 4, Aug. 8, Sept. 19, 1935; June 4, 1936.
Liberty Tribune, Sept. 22, Nov. 24, 1976.
Liberty Weekly Tribune, March 30, 1847; April 21, 28, 1848; June 6, 1851; March 27, April 17, May 22, June 10, July 10, 1857; May 28, 1858; Nov. 11, 1859; April 10, 1863; May 25, 1866.

Atlases

- Illustrated Atlas of Clay County, Missouri*. Philadelphia: Edwards Brothers of Missouri, 1877.