

MISSOURI COURTHOUSES

PETTIS COUNTY

Marian M. Ohman
Coordinator, Art History Programs

Pettis County Courts met first in St. Helena (also known as Pin Hook), 1833-37, at the home of James Ramey. The county seat moved in 1837 to Georgetown, where the county built a \$4,000, square courthouse with cupola. They used this courthouse until the county seat moved to Sedalia in 1865. The Georgetown courthouse was destroyed by fire June 22, 1920.

It was agreed that Sedalia should be responsible for building the next courthouse. Citizens cleared almost enough money from an elaborate 4th of July celebration to finance the new building.

In 1865 they built a large, frame building near Ohio Street between Main and Second streets for about \$900. No known photographs exist of either building.

It was a common practice for attorneys' offices to be in the courthouse. This provided the court additional revenue from rent. But, in 1882 a group of disgruntled attorneys considered the facilities in the Pettis County courthouse so unsatisfactory that they removed their offices and initiated the movement for a new courthouse. After a year of arduous campaigning, which appealed to public pride, citizens of Pettis County generously and overwhelmingly voted \$100,000 for their new courthouse in December 1883. This strong support inspired a tribute:

Praise God, from whom all blessings flow
that Pettis County is not swayed nor likely to
be by old fogey notions and antedeluvian ideas
as to expenditures of public funds for the public
good.

The committee responsible for selecting a plan went to Nodaway and Buchanan counties to view their

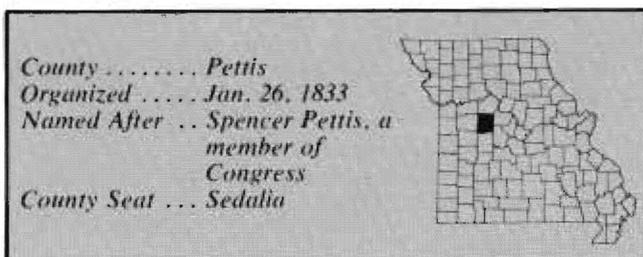


Fig. 1. Pettis County Courthouse, 1884-1920.
Architects: J. G. Cairnes and J. S. McKean
(Courtesy: State Historical Society of Missouri, from *Sedalia of Today*)

recently built courthouses, then crossed over the state line to see Leavenworth County in Kansas. They stopped at the Jackson County courthouse in Kansas City, Missouri, on the way back.

Architects came to Sedalia, bringing their courthouse plans. Among them were J. Oliver Hogg, Hannibal; Lynch and Masters, Sedalia; Mr. McPherson, Omaha, Nebraska; Mr. Nichols, Atchison, Kansas; George Mann, of the firm Eckel and Mann, St. Joseph; and Parsons and Son, probably a Topeka, Kansas, firm. The court selected the proposal from J. G. Cairnes and J. S. McKean of St. Louis in May 1884 (Fig. 1).

W. B. Larkworthy, who built and was credited as architect for the courthouse in Clark County, Missouri, and who constructed the Quincy and Adams counties' courthouse in Quincy, Illinois, received the \$100,000



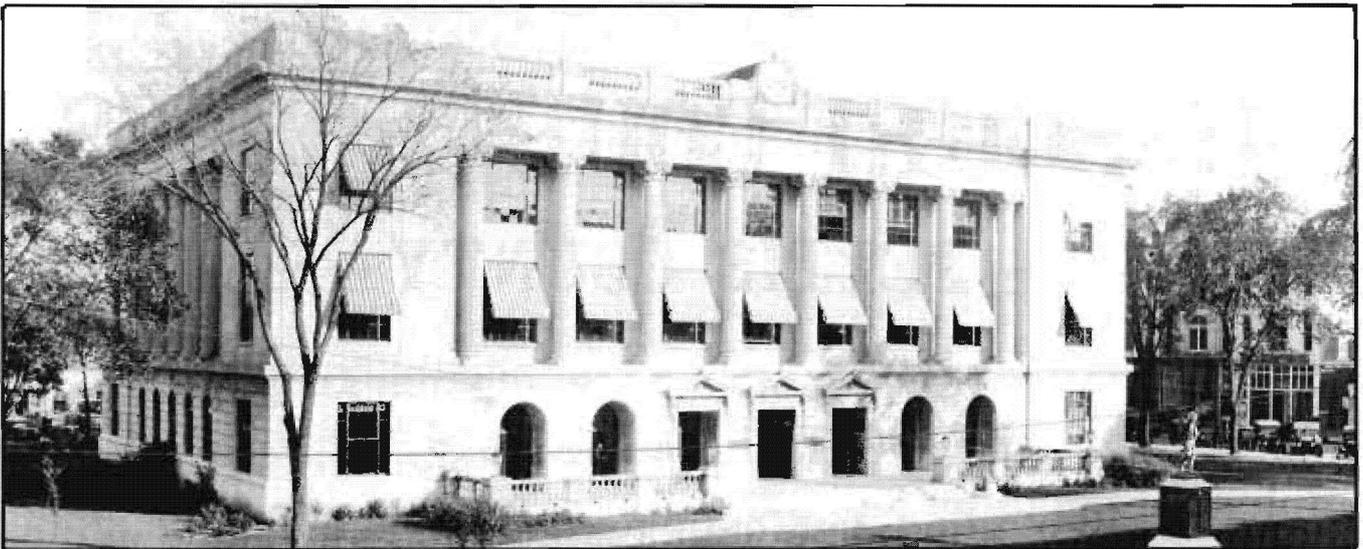


Fig. 2. Pettis County Courthouse. 1923-. Architect: W. E. Hulse (From: W. P. A., Historical Records Survey)

contract. A local reporter regarded the \$248,000 courthouse at Quincy, designed by architect McKean, as one of the finest public buildings in the west, and described the Pettis County version as a smaller scale counterpart. McKean, who was from Quincy, collaborated with Cairns on this project.

The dimensions were 100 by 145 feet, with a 22-foot tower. This basic form, a high tower decorated with classical motifs and topped by a lantern, rising from the center of a base featuring four corner pavilions, remained a popular design to the end of the century. Carthage stone was used for the base; the upper portion had stone veneering. Crossing halls and public offices were tiled; two courtrooms occupied the second floor. Walls of the courtrooms were frescoed, and the ceilings were painted with allegorical scenes by Italian artists. The oak furniture was hand carved. This fine courthouse of the 1880s was destroyed by fire June 16, 1920.

After rejecting three bond issues, voters authorized \$350,000 in April 1923 for constructing a new court-

house. Above public protests, the court accepted plans of William E. Hulse, Hutchinson, Kansas, who was associated with a firm specializing in public buildings. Objections were raised because: the court made an arrangement with the architect before the committee or superintendent had been appointed, raising a question of legal procedure; the architect catered to the court; and the architect did not provide an appropriate plan with conveniently arranged space. Attorneys criticized the third-floor location of the Circuit Court room without elevator service; others questioned placing the most important county offices on the second floor, rather than the more convenient first floor.

Western Construction Co., of Des Moines, Iowa, received a contract in October 1923 for \$285,500, which did not include heating, ventilating, plumbing or electrical work. The three-story building measures 136 feet long, 96 feet wide and 55 feet high (Fig. 2). The building was completed in 1925. Open house was held in April, and the courthouse was formally dedicated in May 1925.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books

- The First One Hundred Years, A History of the City of Sedalia, Missouri, 1860-1960.* Sedalia: Centennial History Committee [1960].
- The Handbook of Sedalia, Including Its History and Business Directory.* [n.p.] F. A. North, 1882.
- Harding, Samuel Bannister. *Life of George R. Smith.* Indianapolis: Hallenbeck Press, 1904.
- Historical and Descriptive View of Missouri, vol. 1.* Kansas City: Jno. Lethem, 1891.
- The History of Pettis County, Missouri Including an Authentic History of Sedalia.* [n.p.] F. A. North, 1882.
- Lang, Hazel N. *Life in Pettis County, 1815-1875.* Privately published by the author, 1975.
- McGruder, Mark A. *History of Pettis County.* Topeka: Historical Publishing Company, 1919.
- Scotten, Clyde Foster. *A History of the Pettis County Historical Society and Museum.* Sedalia, 1970.

Newspapers

- La Monte Record,* April 13, May 25, June 15, 1923.
- Sedalia Bazaar,* Dec. 12, 1883; Feb. 22, May 3, 24, June 29, Oct. 24, 1884.
- Sedalia Democrat,* April 30, Oct. 26, 1884; June 16, 17, 1920; May 20, 25, 27, June 8, 27, Oct. 4, 5, 1923; Feb. 2, April 29, May 5, 1925.

Manuscript Collections

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

Maps, Atlases, Gazetteers

- Plat Book of Pettis County, Missouri.* Philadelphia: North West Publishing Company, 1896.
- Plat Book of Pettis County, Missouri.* Philadelphia: A. R. Stinson, 1916.