

MISSOURI COURTHOUSES

ST. FRANCOIS COUNTY

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The sale of lots from 52 acres of land donated for the county seat by David Murphy provided funds for the first courthouse in St. Francois County. An announcement soliciting bids for construction appeared in a St. Louis paper April 2, 1823. George Taylor received the contract for the shell of a two-story, brick, thirty-foot-square courthouse. Additional work was completed when funds became available.

An illustration drawn in 1826 by a French traveling artist shows the courthouse in the midst of a clearing (Fig. 1). Records indicate that there were two rather tall chimneys, shuttered windows and a fan light over the door. Floors were of grooved pine plank; the walls were plastered. The courtroom occupied the first floor. John Andrews superintended the work for the county.

In 1845 the public square was enclosed by a five-foot-high plank fence with stiles in the center of each side to keep out livestock. At one time locust trees were planted in even rows that were 20 feet apart. Toward midcentury when preparations for a new courthouse began, the first courthouse was ordered razed.

The court ordered a new courthouse November 24, 1848, but the treasury contained insufficient funds to finance an \$8,000 project. The county solved the problem by borrowing from the canal and road fund to finance the \$8,000 building.

Architect-builder of the courthouse was Henry H. Wright, originally from New York but residing in St. Louis in 1850. Wright is known to have planned three other Missouri courthouses: Franklin, 1847; Washington, 1849; and Iron, 1858.

His design for St. Francois County called for a two-story, rectangular, brick and stone building with



Fig. 1. St. Francois County Courthouse, 1823-1848.
(Courtesy: State Historical Society of Missouri, from Charles A. Lesueur sketch, 1826)

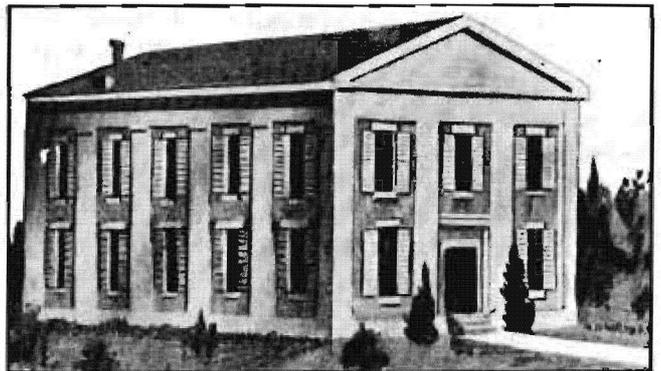
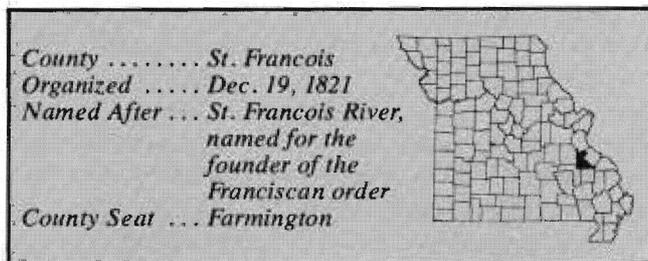


Fig. 2. St. Francois County Courthouse, 1848-1885.
Architect-Builder: Henry H. Wright
(From: *Financial Statement of 1909*)

gable roof. No photographs or contemporary drawings are known, but a drawing, probably from memory, was reproduced in 1910 (Fig. 2). The county offices moved into the completed building in 1850. Unused space in the courthouse was leased, furnishing the county with additional revenue.

Twenty years later, in 1870, William F. Story, a St. Louis architect, examined the building and reported it in poor structural condition. A grand jury condemned it in 1877 and recommended the Circuit Court rent space elsewhere. The court moved for a brief period but then returned to the courthouse despite great concern about the unsafe condition of the building. It was not until



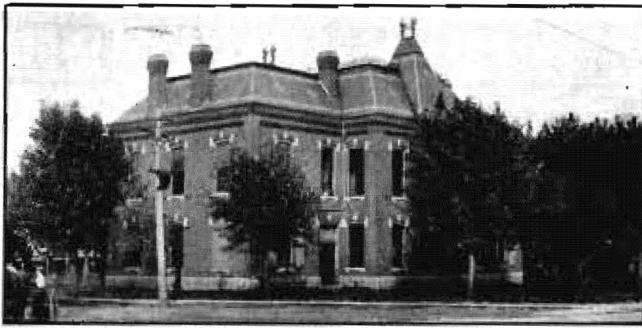


Fig. 3. St. Francois County Courthouse, 1885-1925.
Architect: Jerome B. Legg
(From: postcard, Trenton Boyd collection)

1885, after the third courthouse had begun to take form, that the building was razed.

A petition presented to the court asked for a special election March 21, 1885, to authorize funds for a new courthouse. The voters rejected the proposal, so the County Court turned to surplus funds to finance construction.

Architect Jerome B. Legg, St. Louis, designed the third courthouse for St. Francois county in 1885 (Fig. 3). James P. Gillick submitted a bid of about \$14,000 for construction. The court accepted the completed courthouse, which was built with much of the material from the previous courthouse, in October 1886. Final costs amounted to about \$15,500.

The decorated mansard roof with cresting such as this courthouse had characterized popular taste during the 1870s and 1880s. This courthouse design is very similar to that of the remodeled Ste. Genevieve courthouse, which Legg also did at about the same time, a building which is still in use. St. Francois County officials used their courthouse for about 40 years, until November 1925.

For the 20th century courthouse, voters overwhelmingly agreed to authorize a \$250,000 bond issue in August 1925. Several architects requested a hearing with the court to present their ideas. The court met with them, discussing plans and examining sketches. Eighteen ballots were cast before they selected Norman B. Howard as architect, from the St. Louis firm of Bonsack and Pearce. Howard first proposed a design similar to that of the nearby Franklin County courthouse,



Fig. 4. St. Francois County Courthouse, 1926-
Architect: Norman B. Howard
(From: *Missouriana*, November 1938)

which he had worked on. Howard was immediately subjected to criticism because of the lack of originality in his design and because it seemed out of proportion.

The building contract was awarded McCarthy Construction Co. in May 1926 (Fig. 4). Strong sentiment called for using St. Francois County red granite, but when bids were accepted, they were for Carthage marble and Bedford limestone on the exterior. Floors, wainscoting (paneling on the lower part of walls) and steps on the interior were of marble. The four entrances, one on each side of the courthouse, were similar with loggias (open porches) and Corinthian columns. The elevator that led up to the third-floor courtroom attracted particular interest; the precision of its operation was likened to human intelligence.

Architect Howard continued having problems in the county. Innuendos about fraud led to a grand jury investigation; the solution to the architect's questionable procedure apparently was resolved by closer supervision. More trouble followed when the cornerstone provided by the architect was unacceptable to the court, and the ceremony was so far behind schedule that the court cancelled it.

Finally, the building was completed and accepted by the court during September 1927; dedication ceremonies took place October 13, 1927. Costs apparently were close to the quarter of a million dollar appropriation. St. Francois County officials still conduct their business out of the 1926 courthouse.

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