

# MISSOURI COURTHOUSES

## BUCHANAN COUNTY

Marian M. Ohman  
Coordinator, Art History Programs

After organization of Buchanan County in 1839, first courts met in St. Joseph. When appointed commissioners selected the county seat for Buchanan County, they chose a quarter section about seven miles south of St. Joseph, where the court convened in 1840 in a private home. The county seat was named Benton first, in honor of Sen. Thomas Hart Benton, but this did not meet with popular approval, so the court changed the name to Sparta.

On January 4, 1841, the court ordered construction of a building to be used as a courthouse and clerk's office until a more suitable building could be provided. The county clerk recorded explicit plans and specifications for the two-room, 18-by-36-foot, log structure in the County Court Record. John Sampson acted as superintendent. Guilford Moultray, the builder, completed the work in July 1841 for approximately \$300. This structure remained standing as late as 1898 or 1899, used as a granary.

Although Sparta was located near the geographical center of the county, the trading center development arose in St. Joseph. Citizens petitioned for removal of the county seat to that city in 1843. After several legal complications regarding rights to the section and a challenged election, citizens voted on February 28, 1846, to remove the seat to St. Joseph. Joseph Robidoux donated land for use as the public square.

For this commanding site overlooking the growing settlement below, the County Court accepted a temple-type courthouse design submitted by Lewis Stigers, originally from Delaware, and William J. Taylor, born in Pennsylvania (Fig. 1). The court appropriated \$10,000

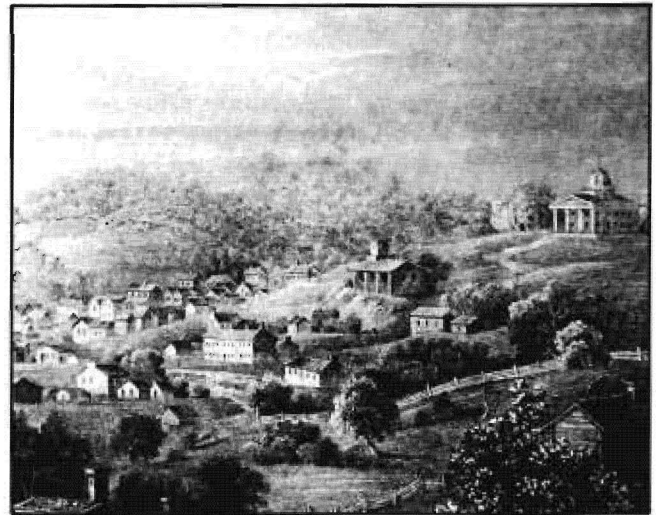


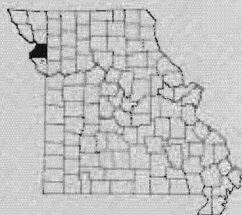
Fig. 1. Buchanan County Courthouse in St. Joseph, 1846-1871 (far right), ca. 1850.  
Architect-builders: Lewis Stigers and William J. Taylor  
(From: *The United States Illustrated*, ca. 1854)

in April 1846. On June 5 the contract was given to Stigers and Taylor for \$6,280. John Carby superintended the beginning work and was succeeded by James Anthony, who reported the work completed in October 1847.

The two-story, nine-room building measured 50 by 75 feet, including the portico. The contemporary drawing shows a central dome with a much larger base diameter than typical cupolas on other temple-type Missouri examples, and resembles the courthouse dome in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, ca. 1843, a possible source of influence.

Less than 25 years later, the same architect-builder, Stigers, had the unfortunate task of submitting a report on the condition of the building in August 1871. He concluded, ". . . the building in its present condition is dangerous and unsafe and unfit for the purpose for which it is used." County officials vacated the building in October 1871.

County . . . . . Buchanan  
Organized . . . . . Dec. 31, 1838  
Named After . . . . . President James  
  Buchanan  
County Seat . . . . . St. Joseph



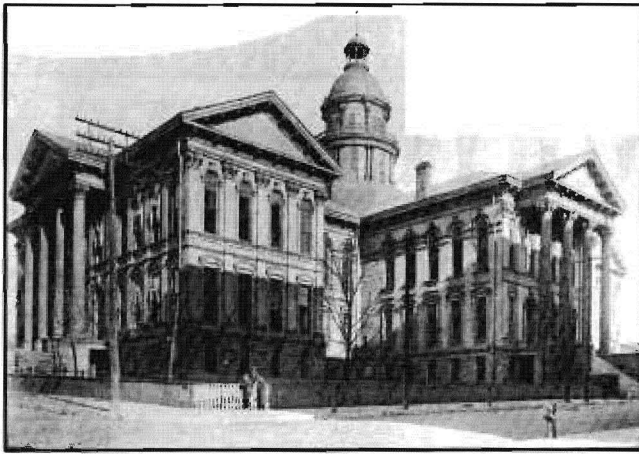


Fig. 2. Buchanan County Courthouse, 1873-.  
Architect: P. F. Meagher  
(Courtesy: State Historical Society of Missouri)

County government grew rapidly from the 1840s until 1870, and even before the architects examined the deteriorating courthouse, citizens called for a new and larger one. John C. Cochrane from Chicago, Illinois, who designed the Saline County courthouse in 1881, submitted a proposal for the court's consideration, but the court accepted the preferred design of P. F. Meagher on March 28, 1873. A complete description of Meagher's plans was published in the *St. Joseph Weekly Gazette*, April 2, 1873.

County Court officials signed a building contract with John DeClue in July 1873 for about \$175,000 to build on the same site after grading the hill 35 feet.

Cornerstone ceremonies took place August 20, 1873, and contractors completed the building in August 1876, although it had been occupied in part since the beginning of that year (Fig. 2). The brick building is trimmed with cut stone. Three porticoes project from facades which measure 235 feet and face east, west and south. The original Greek cross plan measured 235 by 205 feet and featured a dome 40 feet in circumference. The dome rose at the crossing 145 feet from the first floor and 60 feet from the roof. The effect suggests a county capitol image. A fire on March 28, 1885, destroyed the dome and gutted the interior.

The building was covered by insurance, but a settlement proved difficult because county officials demanded cash for the amount of the policies so they might begin on a new building. The insurance companies refused, attempting to reach a partial settlement, since they did not regard the building as a total loss. The court reached an agreement with the insurers when they obligated themselves to place the building in the same condition it was before the fire.

R. K. Allen, architect of the reconstruction, altered the dome design. After minor interior changes, there were 41 rooms in the two upper stories, with an additional 11 rooms in the basement. The Circuit Court room is on the second floor. For a number of years the building was painted white, but then restored to the natural red brick color during extensive restoration in 1979. This is an important and rare example of courthouse design from this period of Missouri's architectural history; it has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

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