

HANCOCK COUNTY COURTHOUSE

Hancock County, located on the Mississippi River, near the center of the state, was designated as a county in 1825, but due to a shortage of population was attached to Adams County for jurisdictional purposes. By June 15, 1829, the population had reached the required 350 and on August 3, the first county election was held at Fort Edwards (Warsaw). For the next few years county business was conducted in many places, mostly in homes along the river where the majority of the population was located. They knew that the county seat needed a permanent location, but the officials could not agree where — would it be Fort Edwards, Sonora or Commerce (Nauvoo)? All were settlements along the river. In 1833, the State of Illinois, disgusted with the indecision of the local people, sent three men here from Morgan County to select a location for the courthouse and to name it. They selected a quarter section in what they believed to be the exact center of the county and called it "Carthage". Some speculated that one of the men might have been from Carthage, Tennessee, but others suggested that one of the three might have recently become interested in ancient history. The local officials selected the location of the courthouse on that quarter section. This was done and a surveyor was hired to lay out the city of Carthage into lots which were put on sale immediately.

On June 3, 1833, the board voted to hire some suitable person to erect a temporary courthouse to be completed by August 25. The September term of court was held in the new log courthouse which was located near the center of the block on the south side of the present courthouse square. There had been a misunderstanding on the courthouse and by October it still didn't have a roof. By the December meeting, it had a clapboard roof, a puncheon floor and slab benches. The entrance was on the north end with a platform at the south end for the use of the judge, two glass windows provided light during the day. This 16 by 24 foot log cabin was also used for church services, public meetings and some of the time, as a school house.

Following the end of the Black Hawk War in 1832, the white population increased rapidly and soon the log structure was totally inadequate. The next courthouse, a two story brick structure, 50 by 50 feet in size, costing \$3,700, was accepted by the board of supervisors on June 7, 1839. The first case to be tried in the new courthouse was on April 25 of that year. William Fraim was charged with murder as a result of a drunken brawl and his case was brought to Hancock County on a change of venue. His attorney, a tall, lanky, not very handsome man from Springfield, IL by the name of Abraham Lincoln, lost the case and Fraim has been the only person legally executed by hanging in Hancock County.

In 1868 a fireproof addition was built on the east side of the courthouse. It had a tin dome on it, alongside the tall cupola on the original building. This caught Mark Twain's attention. In his book, "Roughing It", he wrote about the Mormons in Hancock County. "They prospered there (Nauvoo) and built a temple which made some pretensions to architectural grace and achieved some celebrity in a section of county where a brick courthouse with a tin dome and cupola on it was contemplated with reverential awe."

Around the turn of the century there was some talk of the need of a new courthouse and this time Warsaw, still smarting over the loss of the county seat, agreed with Carthage about the need, but they insisted it should be built in Warsaw. At the November 11, 1902 election, 4152 voted in favor of moving the county seat to Warsaw and 3610 voted against it. A vote of 60 percent was required.

With the old argument about the location being temporarily settled, the town of Carthage came up with \$10,000 to apply toward the cost of a new courthouse built in Carthage. A small majority of the 1906 voters approved the issuing of \$125,000 in bonds. Records and offices were quickly moved to empty buildings and scattered empty rooms around the square and bonds were issued. The old building was razed and in July of 1907, only eight months after the election, the cornerstone of the new structure was laid with great ceremony.

On October 20, 1908, the new courthouse, constructed on the same location as the previous one, was dedicated. It is a beautiful building, built of white Bedford stone from Indiana and topped with a roof of red Spanish tiles. On the interior, a four-foot wainscoting of Tennessee marble lined the walls of the corridors. The steps and risers were also marble and the floors of mosaic marble. The dome over the rotunda and the courtroom was of fish scale art glass. Above the staircase leading to the third floor was an art glass window depicting "Justice". This one window is today valued at several times the original cost of the completed building. The structure had all the modern conveniences of 1908 including more than 700 light bulbs and "all the principle rooms had toilet rooms", this at a time when few homes in the area had electricity or running water. The new courthouse was built for \$117,828.30, more than \$7,000 under estimate and still there was talk that such a pretentious building would bankrupt the county.

In 1866 a jail and sheriff's residence were built on the site of the log courthouse. An electric generating plant and heating system were added to the grounds of the jail and they were to supply heat and electricity to the sheriff's residence, jail and the new courthouse. It was the duty of the janitor and the sheriff or a deputy to take care of the boiler and electric plant. A nearly block-long tunnel from the jail to the courthouse provided an avenue for the hot water pipes for heating, the water supply, sewer, electric and telephone wires to the courthouse.

Today it has its own heating and air conditioning system and the tile roof has been replaced with regular shingles. Just under the dome were four seven foot circles, one facing each of the four directions where clocks were to be installed soon after construction. In spite of several attempts, they were not installed until 79 years later when the Kiwanis Club of Carthage promoted a successful fund-raising program and put them in place in 1987, complete with chimes. An elevator has also been added but that did not require a major change because, due to a far-sighted building committee — space was provided for it at the time of construction.

On top of the dome, on a five foot pedestal is another Miss Justice, indicating the hope that justice will prevail in the rooms below.

The contractor was from the Chicago area and he sublet contracts for the art glass and the metal lady on top. We have no record as to where they were made or who the artist or artists were. It has been noted recently that the lady on top and the lady in the window are so much alike, especially facial features, the hair and the clothes that more likely the same artist or artists did both.

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