

MISSOURI COURTHOUSES

COLE COUNTY

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The home of John English, in Marion, served for Cole County's first court meeting. Three commissioners were appointed to supervise construction of a courthouse built there in 1825 for \$748. A portion of the County Court Record is destroyed, but a partial description in the record indicates at least three rooms with brick floors, two outside doors and four shuttered windows. The last session of court in Marion was in February 1829. The courthouse sold for \$450.

In Jefferson City, the permanent county seat site, the court first occupied a log house owned by John Gordon. They took temporary quarters in the state capitol in February 1831, then rented the old post office for \$50 per year until the courthouse, which was begun in 1836, was completed in 1838 (Fig. 1).

An appropriation of between \$4,000-\$5,000 made in February 1836 provided funds for a building reported to be 54 by 54 feet, with hip roof, two stories, the foundation of stone and the front wall of hammered stone. The building was to be similar to the warden's house, a contemporary account noted.

James Dunnica acted as first superintendent. He was later replaced by Henry Robinson. Builders were Thomas L. Ferguson and the contracting firm of Griffith and Crump. The building faced west, 40 feet from the street. The entrance hall was 15 by 25 feet; to the left was the county clerk's office and vault. The courtroom was at the rear of the first floor, and near the entrance to the courtroom was a spiral stairway. The second floor remained unfinished for years; it was rented for special occasions before it was partitioned into county offices. The 1885 Sanborn Map shows a 15-foot frame cupola,



Fig. 1. Cole County Courthouse, 1836-1896.
(From: Robyn's engraving of Cole County, 1859)

but it is missing in the 1892 map.

The building was condemned in 1891, but voters defeated a proposition for a new courthouse. In 1892 the grand jury reported it unsafe and dangerous. Finally, in 1895, voters approved a \$60,000 bond issue, providing the means for a new courthouse.

After the state capitol burned in 1837, the Cole County courthouse provided space for the state government. In spite of the historical significance of this courthouse, and the fact that it existed until 1896, illustrations are rare. The building was razed in 1896 and part of the stone (locally called "cotton rock") was used in the new courthouse.

When Cole County prepared to build a new courthouse in 1896, the court received 22 proposals; a reporter for the *Daily Tribune* briefly described all entries. Two proposed designs were modeled after the state capitol, located only two blocks away. One called for a 130-foot replica of the capitol dome on an Indiana stone building with 32-foot stone columns supporting a 16-foot porticoed entry.

After several days of agonizing deliberations, the

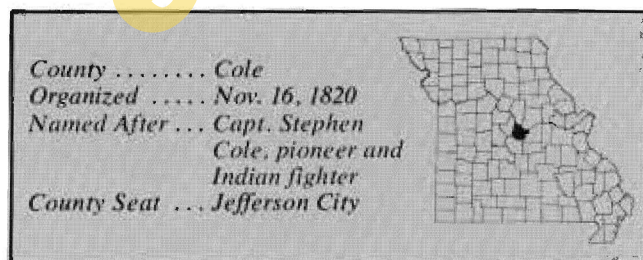




Fig. 2. Cole County Courthouse, 1896-.
 Architect: Frank B. Miller
 (From: *Illustrated Sketchbook and Directory of Jefferson City and Cole County*, 1900)

court adopted the plans of a local architect, Frank B. Miller (Fig. 2). Miller and A. W. Elsner, both Jefferson City architects, enjoyed the status of favorite sons.

Elsner's plan showed more massive proportions. When contractors submitted bids on Miller's plan, they offered two figures based on the use of either Warrensburg or Carthage stone. H. J. Wallau's bid of \$47,750, using Carthage stone, was accepted in March 1896. Cornerstone ceremonies were held in July.

The first story was of stone; the second story was of pressed gray brick with copper and stone trim. The tower rose 126 feet from the ground and featured four dials for the clock and an observation platform. County offices were on the first floor. The Circuit Court room, measuring 45 by 63 feet, with a seating capacity of 500, was on the second floor. Total costs came to approximately \$60,000.

While vaults provided fire protection for records, 19th century courthouses were often destroyed or damaged by fire. Finding methods of building fireproof courthouses was of increasing concern to county officials. Miller's courthouse plan for Cole County was presented as "practically fireproof," an apt, but unfortunate, description. The building suffered extensive fire damage March 14, 1918. Once again, Miller acted as architect of the repaired building. This courthouse has now been placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

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