

MISSOURI COURTHOUSES

DOUGLAS COUNTY

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Different accounts conflict concerning the history of Douglas County's courthouses. In addition to the published histories, a manuscript by Herbert Garton, based upon 1937-38 Work Projects Administration interviews with early settlers and county officials, provided more information about Douglas County's history.

After bitter quarreling over location of the county seat, Vera Cruz became the compromise choice. The first courthouse, made of logs by volunteer labor, was completed in six weeks. It had a puncheon floor and hand-crafted furnishings. County officials occupied the building December 27, 1857.

The county seat moved to Rome after a Civil War incident in which the courthouse in Vera Cruz was fired upon, but continued war activity in Rome prompted a return to Vera Cruz.

Beginning in 1866 a series of elections were held attempting to move the county seat to Arno. The elections failed but contributed to intensified rivalry between east and west. The struggle culminated with Arno advocates "stealing the courthouse" (i.e. county records) and moving them to the home of the circuit clerk in Arno on February 24, 1872. For two weeks no one knew where the records were.

Retaliation came when citizens of Militia Springs (called Ava since 1881) built a \$350 courthouse in 1872, retrieved the records and placed them in a log vault. Vandals burned the Militia Springs courthouse, destroying many records in July 1872, according to the *Jefferson City People's Tribune*. The paper's account carried a taste of cynicism:



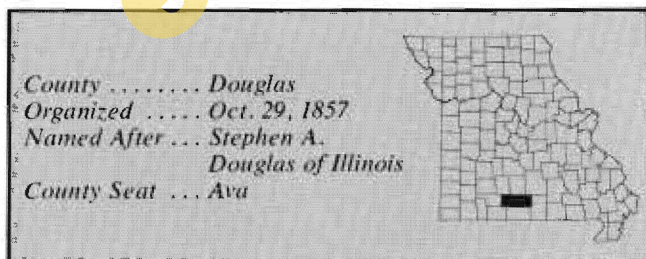
Fig. 1. Douglas County Courthouse, 1888-1937.
(From: *Douglas County Herald*, March 26, 1976)

"... who he is will probably never be found out, or if so, he would never be punished, as no crime committed in that county has been punished since the war, at least so far as we know."

Curry's *A Reminiscent History of Douglas County* mentioned an 1870 fire, which may have been a separate incident.

After the fire citizens promptly began to rebuild a courthouse of hand-hewn lumber (the first not of logs) in Militia Springs, which was completed and occupied January 22, 1873. Precise location of this courthouse is not certain; it may have been in the center of the square, as Garton claims, or on a corner lot northwest of the central square, as another account reports.

Strong antagonism continued with repeated petitions presented to move the county seat. Again the courthouse was burned, this time by the county assessor-treasurer, destroying incriminating evidence of embezzlement. The court convicted him of arson and sentenced him to five years in prison. Date of the fire was about April 26 or 27, 1886. According to the *Jefferson*



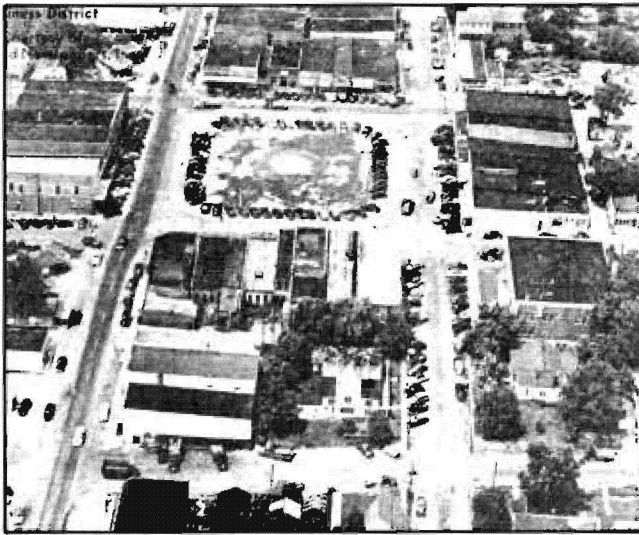


Fig. 2. Ava city square without courthouse.
(From: *Early Settlers of Douglas County, Missouri*, 1952)

City Daily Tribune, it was May 2, 1886. Persistent attempts to move the county seat continued stirring disension between sections of the county well into the 20th century.

A schoolhouse provided space for the courts to meet until a two-story, 40-by-70-foot, clapboard building with hip roof was built in 1888 on the square (Fig. 1). This courthouse continued in use until 1937 when it was sold for \$350.

Government talk of possibly funding about 50 percent of construction costs for a new courthouse prompted the Douglas County Planning Commission to assess needs. Their existing courthouse was a fire hazard and structurally weak; the building swayed, and doors could not be closed because of sagging timbers. The court hired Dan R. Sanford, who had experience with similar projects and government grants. The plan-

ning board recommended that the old site be turned over to the city and used as a park. Public opinion was divided, but the decision was made to move from the original square.

In September 1935 citizens voted a \$50,000 bond issue, to be supplemented by a government grant of \$33,545. Specifications that Sanford submitted included a \$3,000 sum for purchase of a new site. The 185-foot square was too small to accommodate the new building. Then, too, a highway had been routed through the center of town in 1923; the noise from increased automobile traffic interfered with court business. An open central square in a county seat is rarely found in Missouri (Fig. 2).

Contracts for building the new courthouse were awarded in December 1935 to Week's Construction Co., Kansas City. The red brick building is trimmed with "cast" stone, made with Carthage stone chips, crushed, mixed with cement, cast into blocks and polished to give the appearance of quarried stone (Fig. 3). Work began in March 1936, and county officials moved into the completed building in January 1937.



Fig. 3. Douglas County Courthouse, 1936.
Architect: Dan R. Sanford
(From: postcard, Trenton Boyd collection)

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