

# MISSOURI COURTHOUSES

## DUNKLIN COUNTY

Marian M. Ohman  
Coordinator, Art History Programs

Goodspeed's *History of Southeast Missouri* of 1888 provides the history of Dunklin County courthouses, since county records were destroyed by fire.

Hiram Langdon built Dunklin County's first courthouse in 1847 on the square. The 40-foot-square, 1½-story building was made of hewn gum logs. The courtroom was on the lower floor; an outdoor stairway led to the second-story offices. Fire destroyed this courthouse during the Civil War.

A large, two-story, frame courthouse, 50 by 60 feet, built in 1870, also fell to flames in April 1872; this was the fire that destroyed all records. From April 1872 until 1892, courts rented a frame building on the south side of the square.

Dunklin County residents did not authorize construction of a new courthouse until almost 20 years later on September 19, 1891, when they approved bonds for \$15,000. Several architects contacted the court. Henry H. Hohenschild, architect of numerous Missouri courthouses, presented two designs. The *Kennett Clipper* reported that a proposal by Mr. Harding, from Little Rock, Arkansas, had the finest appearance, but the arrangement of offices, vaults and courtroom was not appropriate. The court accepted the design of Louis Miller on March 10, 1892 (Fig. 1). The brick building measured 56 by 80 feet; it was 40 feet high, 96 feet to the top of the tower.

When they contemplated building, some expressed the opinion that the square was too small. Then, after construction began, it was apparent to some that the building was too small for the square. Even before construction was completed, there were those who



Fig. 1. Dunklin County Courthouse, 1892-1937.  
Architect: Louis Miller  
(Courtesy: State Historical Society of Missouri)

maintained that the courthouse was not large enough to serve the needs of Dunklin County. Nevertheless, one attorney praised the acoustics as the best he had encountered.

A St. Louis construction company, Shinnick and Robinson, submitted the low bid of slightly less than \$15,000 and received the contract for building the courthouse. On August 9, 1892, the county held a cornerstone day picnic at the fairgrounds.

In 1937 the courthouse was reported in dangerous condition. The dome had sunk several inches; ceiling joists were pulled completely out of the walls, and the Circuit Court room was in danger of collapsing. The *Dunklin Democrat* claimed it was the worst courthouse in southeast Missouri. The building was razed in 1937. Louis Miller's drawing was found in the cornerstone.

For the new courthouse, the Work Projects Administration offered to assist with a \$150,000 building if the county would contribute one-third. The county

County . . . . . Dunklin  
Organized . . . Feb. 14, 1845  
Named After . Daniel Dunklin,  
governor of  
Missouri  
County Seat . . Kennett



placated local concern by agreeing not to move the site; in addition the court selected a committee of six upstanding citizens to act in an advisory capacity, representing different sections of the county. In April 1937 a bond issue was passed for \$50,000 to be used in conjunction with the Work Projects Administration courthouse. The committee interviewed architects and visited courthouses in neighboring counties as well as those in Ripley, Tennessee and Jonesboro and Blytheville, Arkansas.

**T**hey selected Ernest T. Friton, St. Louis, as architect and instructed him to go to Jonesboro, Arkan-

sas, and Ripley, Tennessee, to examine courthouses that particularly impressed them. Friton's plan for a two-story, brick building with skeleton-type concrete construction, 116 by 75 feet, was approved. Excavation began in December 1937. The building was completed in February 1940. A special feature is a map of Dunklin County executed in the terrazzo floor. The Circuit Court room was finished in black walnut with walnut wainscoting. The cost, including furnishings, came to approximately \$178,000 (Fig. 2).

Architect Friton also designed Montgomery County's courthouse in 1953. Both buildings are still used for county business.



Fig. 2. Dunklin County Courthouse, 1937-. Architect: Ernest T. Friton (From: postcard, Trenton Boyd collection)

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

##### Books

- Douglas, Robert Sidney. *History of Southeast Missouri*. Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1912.  
*History of Southeast Missouri*. Chicago: The Goodspeed Publishing Company, 1888.  
 Smyth-Davis, Mary F. *History of Dunklin County, Missouri 1845-1895*. St. Louis: Nixon-Jones Printing Company, 1896. Reprinted in *Dunklin County Historical Society*, vol. II,

Kennett: Thrower Printing Company, 1962.

##### Newspapers

- (Cape Girardeau) *Southeast Missourian*, May 16, 17, 1969.  
*Kennett Clipper*, March 10, April 7, 14, June 2, July 21, Aug. 11, 1892.  
 (Kennett) *Dunklin Democrat*, March 23, April 2, 9, 13, 20, July 23, Sept. 24, Oct. 15, 1937; Feb. 8, 1938; April 26, 1940.