

MISSOURI COURTHOUSES

TANEY COUNTY

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Taney County officially organized in 1837, but most of the official records were destroyed in a courthouse fire during 1885. The tumultuous years during and following the Civil War add further obstacles to documenting the history of all Taney County courthouses. There were at least five and perhaps six. The sixth might more appropriately be called repair work on an already existing courthouse. Chapter 2 of *The Land of Taney* by Elmo Ingenthron provides the most complete history of Taney County courthouses.

First courts met in private homes until a temporary courthouse site was established at the mouth of Swan Creek, later the town of Forsyth. But commissioners appointed by the state chose to move the county seat to a site at the mouth of Bull Creek. County residents felt slighted by the commissioners' decision, and in 1841 they succeeded in getting legislation authorizing the election of county commissioners by county residents. In 1845 elected county commissioners returned the county seat to Swan Creek.

Apparently, log courthouses were built at each location. In 1941 Work Projects Administration recorders interviewed Judge W. A. Keithley, who remembered that when he was a boy his father showed him the old "peeled cedar" log structure at Bull Creek. Another eyewitness for the W.P.A. report recalled that it was still standing in the 1930s.

According to Ingenthron, in about 1855 the county got permission from the state to borrow from the internal improvement fund to build a three-story, brick courthouse at Forsyth; it came to be regarded as one of the finest buildings in the White River region. Charles H. Groom, interviewed for the W.P.A. project in 1940,

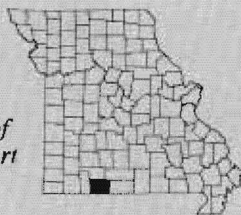
said it was about 50 feet square and built by Larkin W. Selsor for \$3,600. There are no known illustrations, but if Ingenthron's and Groom's information is correct, this building dating from 1855 would have been a rare example of a three-story courthouse.

During the Civil War, both Confederate and Union troops occupied this courthouse, with possession changing hands more than once. It was severely damaged in a skirmish April 22, 1863. At one time a stockade was built around the courthouse. After the war, workers repaired the courthouse, apparently within existing walls. More evidence is needed to determine whether this should be counted as the fourth courthouse or merely as repair work. Fire destroyed the courthouse and most records December 19, 1885; The remains were razed in 1887.

After the fire in 1885 left the county without an operable courthouse, county residents could not agree on what to do next. In 1886 a petition to move the courthouse to Kissee Mills was defeated. The following year a bond proposal to authorize courthouse funds was not approved. In 1889 a proposal to move the county seat to Taney City also met defeat. Finally, in 1889 plans for building a new courthouse in Forsyth were confirmed after Governor David Francis made a state appropriation of \$5,000 to build a new courthouse. A. D. Prather, courthouse superintendent, presented plans and specifications prepared by architect James A. Barton of Springfield. The court accepted bids through December 2, 1889. The day after bids were due Prather modified, or had the architect modify, the original plans by removing a vestibule from the north and reducing the size of the tower.

Prather failed to comply with the court's orders regarding some matter with the courthouse; in a special session December 28 of the same year, the court dismissed him, appointing John H. Parrish in his place. L. W. Selsor, probably the same Larkin W. Selsor associated with the previous courthouse, contracted the

County Taney
Organized Jan. 6, 1837
Named After . . . Chief Justice
 Roger B. Taney of
 the Supreme Court
County Seat . . . Forsyth



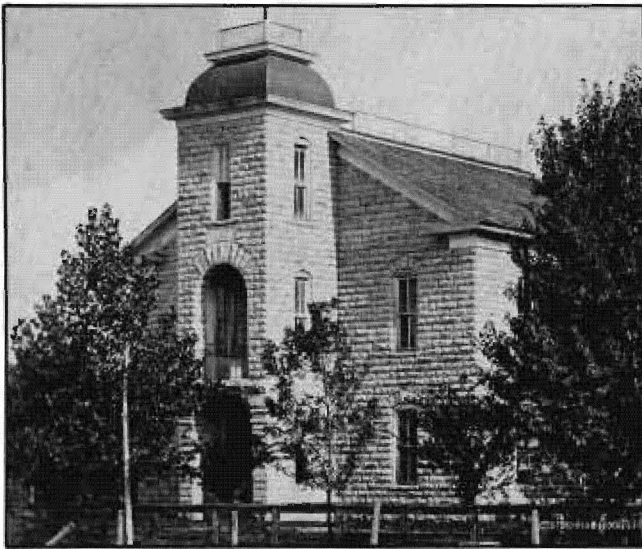


Fig. 1. Taney County Courthouse, 1890-1950.
(From: postcard, Trenton Boyd collection)

building. Built upon part of the foundation of the preceding building, the courthouse measured 40 by 50 feet, with a 10-by-12-foot tower (Fig.1). The courtroom occupied the second floor, offices the first. The building was completed in January 1891. An addition was made to both stories in 1914.

The lake formed by Bull Shoals Dam inundated the area in 1951. The School of the Ozarks purchased the courthouse for \$2,000, disassembled it and reused the stone in School of the Ozarks construction. Taney County was compensated \$75,000 for the courthouse loss.

On January 20, 1950, the court selected a new site on a bend in the highway that ran through Forsyth. Commissioners first considered building a two-story, 50-by-100-foot, brick-faced building, but all the bids that came

in were above the figure the county was willing to commit. The cost of labor was rising, jobs were plentiful, and large Springfield firms were not interested in contracting small projects. So, in April the court turned to local resources for a new plan and labor force. This decision produced one of the most unusual courthouse designs in Missouri.

An engineer, Volney A. Poulson, inspired by South American architecture, conceived the plan for a stuccoed building, planned around an open courtyard. The design called for a 116-foot-square structure, with 10-foot walks around the perimeter. The building, which still functions as the Taney County courthouse, has 24 rooms, including the jail and a 28-by-40-foot courtroom. Central passageways through the building lead to a 42-foot-square open courtyard (Fig. 2). Built of cinder blocks, stuccoed and painted off-white, the building is heated by hot water carried through copper tubing. The court contracted with George Brown to build it for \$66,912.50. A few months later Brown defaulted. A controversy arose with Paulson, who resigned, and work stopped for a time. Construction which began in July 1950, was completed August 6, 1951. Planners considered future landscaping and a fountain to enhance the effect of the courtyard.

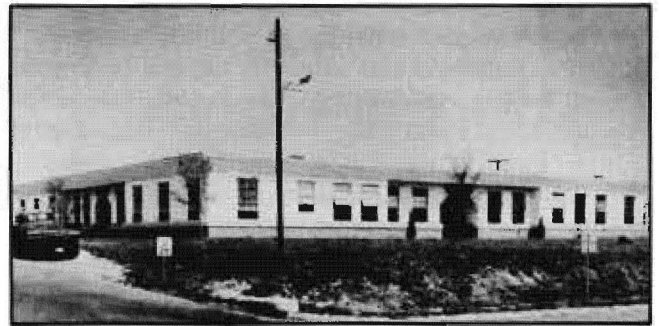


Fig. 2. Taney County Courthouse, 1951-.
Architect: Volney A. Poulson
(From: Elmo Ingenthron, *The Land of Taney*)

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