

MISSOURI COURTHOUSES

TEXAS COUNTY

Marian M. Ohman
Coordinator, Art History Programs

Texas County was first known as Ashley County; the name was changed in 1845 when the county was officially organized. Texas County's eight courthouses have a complicated history.

First commissioners appointed by the governor to locate the county seat of Texas County failed to act; a second group likewise failed, so early courts convened at the home of David Lynch on the banks of Big Piney River. In June 1845 another group of commissioners was appointed. They originally selected 40 acres for the county seat and later added an adjoining 40 acres. A year later, Houston was chosen as the name of the county seat.

In September 1846 the commissioners ordered construction of a courthouse and sought bids, but specified that they would accept no bid of more than \$150. A plan was filed in the clerk's office and advertisements placed in public places. Apparently, the appropriation was inadequate, for at its March meeting in 1847, the court levied an additional tax of 1/6 of 1 percent and authorized contractor James G. Sweeny (or Sweany) to proceed with construction. James R. Gardner served as superintendent. The adjusted amount prescribed by the court for construction was not to exceed \$500.

The court then ordered County and Circuit courts to meet in Houston at the seat of justice after September 1847. The contract established the date of completion as October 1, 1847. Apparently, this courthouse was either burned or badly damaged in about 1850. Court met in December 1850 at the home of Richard Y. Smiley (Smyley), where the plan for a new courthouse was shown.

The new courthouse was to be a brick, one-story,

building, 45 by 30 feet with two chimneys. It would be divided into three rooms, one room thirty feet square, the other two rooms, 15 feet square, with a fireplace against the brick partition wall of each room.

In April 1851 the court contracted with Allen Hamer to build the courthouse for \$550. R. W. Rogers acted as superintendent. Ten years later, as a new courthouse neared completion, the court ordered this courthouse to be sold in August 1860.

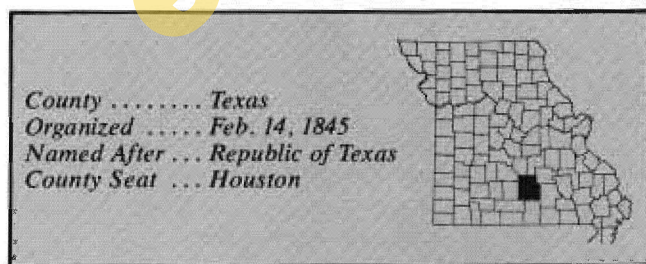
R. Y. Smiley had presented a plan for a new courthouse in March 1858. The County Court Record clearly indicates that construction was anticipated. But, due to some problem that arose, construction was postponed a year. The plans in the December 1858 County Court Record called for a two-story, brick, 44-foot-square building. The plan underwent only minor modifications before the court appropriated \$5,000. A Jefferson City paper carried the description and notice to contractors. E. Y. Mitchell acted as superintendent. The court ordered it to be built in the center of the public square. In March 1859 a contract for construction was given to George W. Read (Reed) for \$4,650. William Van Winkle appears to have been a subcontractor. A final payment on May 11, 1860, indicated construction had been completed.

Twice Houston was destroyed during the Civil War, and, according to Goodspeed's *History* of 1889, when peace came there was not a single inhabitant. Some court sessions were held in Licking while resettlement of Houston gradually took place.

In November 1865 the court ordered construction of a temporary courthouse on the northeast corner of the public square. M. C. Keeth (Keith), commissioner, reported an expenditure of \$361.96 in construction costs.

During May 1868 the court ordered a tax levy of 40¢ per \$100 for building a courthouse on the old foundation on the public square. August 8, 1868, Ira Martin was appointed superintendent and ordered to bring a plan to the court, the cost not to exceed \$6,500.

Martin's plan called for a building 44 feet square



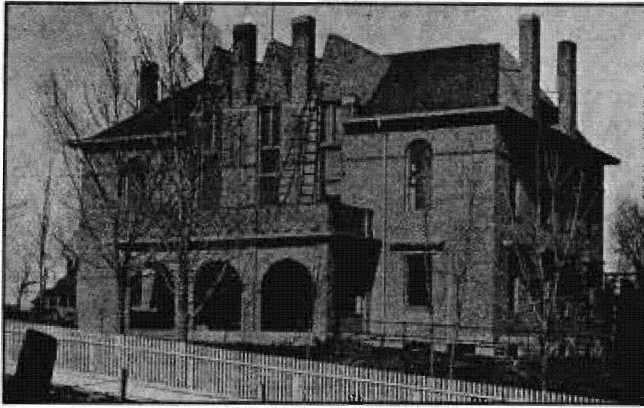


Fig. 1. Texas County Courthouse 1881-1930, after 1901 alteration.
Architect of remodeling: Henry H. Hohenschild
(From: postcard, Virginia Botts collection)

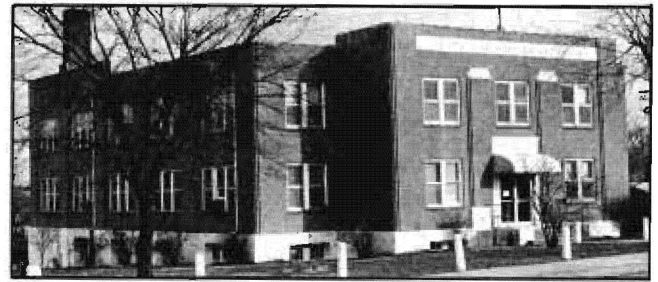


Fig. 2. Texas County Courthouse, 1932.
Architects: Johnson and Maack
(From: State Historical Society of Missouri)

with two stories. Double doors with stone steps would provide entry on the north and south. Four offices, a library and hall were on the first floor, separated by a north-south center hall; on the north end of the second floor was a courtroom, 44 by 32 feet. A jury room was on the southwest corner. A ridge roof covered the building, with a brick cornice under the eaves. A conical tin roof covered an 8-by-8-by-8-foot cupola on the south end and carried a 12-foot flagpole. A stairway from the jury room provided access to the cupola.

A complete description of the building and its furnishings are in the County Court Record, August 8, 1868. R. Y. Smiley submitted the low bid of \$6,000, which the court accepted February 8, 1869. Valentine Sutton became the superintendent. The building appears to have been completed, fenced and landscaped in 1871.

The court ordered R. Y. Smiley and Joseph Parson, who had bought the old temporary courthouse, to remove it in February 1871.

Ten years later, February 12, 1881, fire damaged the 1871 courthouse, but the court ordered brick construction upon the remaining foundation in August 1881. This, too, was a square building with a similar plan, but this time the court chose a hip roof with walnut shingles and a central cupola containing four windows. The court entered a contract with Arthur Bate in July 1881 for construction in the amount of \$4,270. The court ordered Bate to complete the work by May 1882, but Jackson Cobble, superintendent, reported the building

completed in March 1882, two months early and in a "manner highly honorable to the contractor." No known photographs exist of any 19th century Texas county courthouses.

In 1901 the court authorized Henry H. Hohenschild to make plans for extensive alterations and additions to the 1882 project. In July 1901 George E. Mathews offered the only bid for \$5,873, which the court accepted. Mathews completed the work in 1902 (Fig. 1). On December 14, 1930, fire destroyed this building, which was insured for \$23,000.

Texas County residents could not agree on how deeply to go into debt for a new courthouse. Some opted for \$75,000; others thought \$40,000 was more realistic. The court compromised with a \$60,000 proposal. Architect E. S. Johnson of Johnson and Maack, St. Louis, showed plans of Osage and Christian counties' courthouses, but the cost was more than \$100,000. The court asked Johnson to submit other plans.

In February 1931 Johnson submitted a plan for a native rubblestone building with face brick and art stone or terra cotta trim. As election time drew near and passage seemed unlikely, the court called off the election. Taking the fire insurance money, they immediately began restoring and rebuilding on the remaining fire-damaged foundation, accepting George H. Gassman Co.'s bid of \$20,148 in May 1931. Only enough funds were available to complete the first floor. Voters approved \$25,000 in bonds in September 1931 to finish construction on the second story. On April 7, 1932, builders finished the new brick and stone, 95-by-70-foot courthouse, which continues in use today (Fig. 2).

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Personal Correspondence

Correspondence with M. McKinney of Houston, Missouri.