

# MISSOURI COURTHOUSES

## WASHINGTON COUNTY

Marian M. Ohman  
Coordinator, Art History Programs

Washington County, one of Missouri's earliest, organized in 1813. The commissioners located the seat of justice at the village of Mine à Breton, which later became Potosi, and accepted donations of 50 acres for the county seat.

Moses Austin donated 40 of the 50 acres; his partner, John Rice Jones, who was also one of the county judges, donated the other 10 acres. Austin, an immigrant to Missouri from Connecticut, Virginia and Pennsylvania, came to Washington County for business opportunities in lead mining. He is known to have had an interest in architecture and undoubtedly provided the courthouse plan.

In the summer of 1814 an advertisement appeared in the *St. Louis Missouri Gazette* asking for bids on the proposed courthouse which was described in detail. The plan for a three-story courthouse with two-story wings was ambitious. As Missouri progressed toward statehood, Washington County hoped that a building suitable to function as a statehouse might entice legislators to locate the first state capital at Potosi. But this, like so many of Moses Austin's elaborate schemes, was overly ambitious and never came to full fruition.

County commissioners sold 79 lots in Potosi for \$5,080 to finance the courthouse construction. Nehemiah Cravens received the building contract for \$5,595. The court accepted bond with securities for completion by December 1, 1815. Cravens was unable to fulfill his contract, even though alterations reduced the three-story center building to a two-story frame on stone foundation with brick columns and one-story wings (Fig. 1).

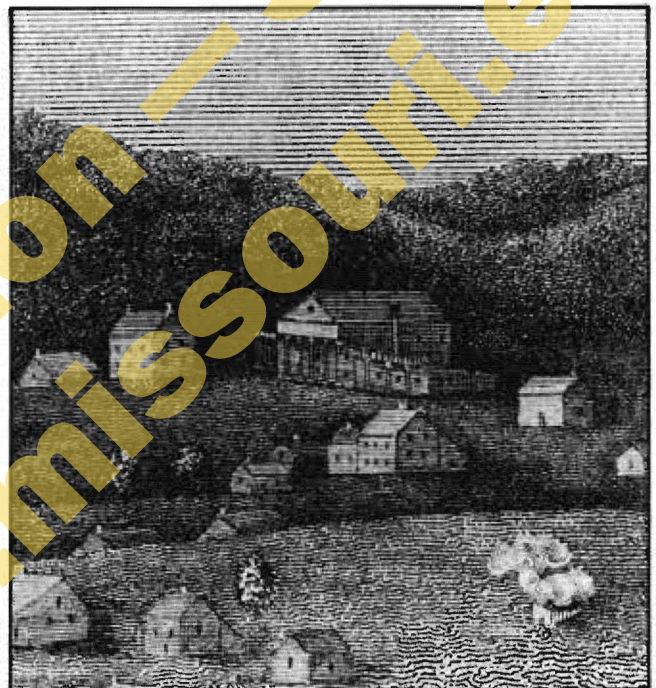


Fig. 1. Washington County Courthouse, 1814-1849.  
Architect: Moses Austin, presumably  
(From: *A View of the Lead Mines of Missouri*, 1819)

Austin was appointed courthouse commissioner when the original commissioner resigned after Cravens forfeited. Sureties on the contractor's bond later funded construction on wings which were used for county offices. The first story of the main building became the courtroom; the second story was never finished. In 1849 the courthouse was razed, and salvage material was used in construction of the second courthouse.

County officials moved the site of the second courthouse south of the original location on a tract of land purchased for \$750. The court appointed Matthew Webber superintendent and accepted the building contract from Henry Wright for \$10,000. Other Missouri courthouses by Wright include Franklin, 1847, St. Francois, 1848, and Iron, 1858.

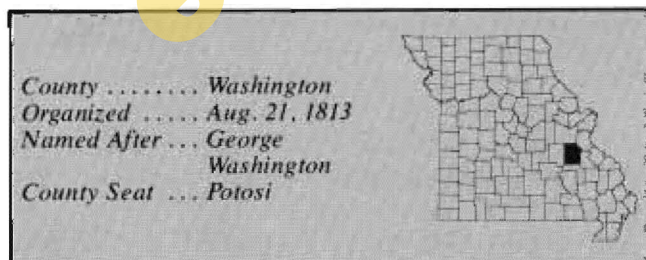




Fig. 2. Washington County Courthouse, 1849-1907, after remodeling in 1895.  
Architect: Henry H. Wright  
(From: *Potosi 200 Years: 1763-1963*)

The two-story building with cupola and slate roof had a stone foundation. It was painted red, with the mortar joints delineated in a process called penciling. The plan called for offices on the first floor, a courtroom and two jury rooms on the second.

Wright completed his work in 1850, and the court accepted the courthouse April 29 even though they considered some of the work unsatisfactory.

In April 1897 A. H. Mitchell presented plans and specifications to the court for repairing, reroofing and painting the courthouse. The mansard roof dates from this time. Part of the earlier cupola seems to have been incorporated in the remodeled tower.

D. N. Porter and Son received the contract for remodeling for about \$1,500 in August and had completed most of the work in December 1897 (Fig. 2). Fire consumed the building January 9, 1907.

Immediately, Washington Countians thought of building. After petitioners called for an election, voters

expressed their willingness in March 1907 to incur a \$30,000 indebtedness to build their third and present courthouse. Pictures of Mississippi and Perry County courthouses appeared in the newspapers for consideration. From several plans which had been submitted, the court selected the proposal from Henry H. Hohenschild, a prolific architect of Missouri courthouses.

The court awarded the building contract to W. R. Oder of Canton, Missouri, for about \$30,000. I. F. Plank was appointed superintendent. Cornerstone ceremonies took place March 25, 1908 (Fig. 3).

Washington County's red brick courthouse, with a tall, square, bracketed tower rising from an entry porch, is comparable to neighboring Madison County's courthouse, 1899, designed by St. Louis architect Theodore C. Link.



Fig. 3. Washington County Courthouse, 1907-  
Architect: Henry H. Hohenschild  
(From: postcard, Trenton Boyd collection)

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