

MISSOURI COURTHOUSES

RALLS COUNTY

Marian M. Ohman
Coordinator, Art History Programs

The first courthouse for Ralls County, completed in 1822 and located west of the present courthouse site, was a two-story, log structure, 24 by 18 feet. The first floor contained the jail and a dungeon; the courtroom occupied the second floor.

For the second seat of justice the court moved to the present site because it had better drainage and roads. The second courthouse was built in 1835 by Samuel Mayhall and Richard S. Howard with funds from private subscription. The courtroom, with a brick floor, occupied the first floor of the two-story, 50-foot-square courthouse. Offices were on the second floor.

As the third and present courthouse went up in 1858, the court ordered the former courthouse sold. Mayhall bought the structure for \$175 and received instructions to move it within eight months.

In March 1857 Ralls County judges appointed a building committee and requested a plan, cost estimate and list of suggested material for the new courthouse. The county attorney, Henry C. Wellman, drew the plans and specifications; Nathan S. Dimmitt shared responsibility for the specifications. Two handbooks were consulted: Thomas Tredgold, *Principles of Carpentry*, first published in 1820, and Minard LaFever, *Modern Builders Guide*, 1833.¹ Both authors wrote several books that contained practical reference material designed to assist builders in basic skills.

The court first appropriated \$8,000. Final costs amounted to about \$18,000. The court awarded the building contract for \$16,400 to Francis Kidwell, who then subcontracted. Three building superintendents were appointed; one resigned, and the court dismissed another. The court accepted the building in 1859 from

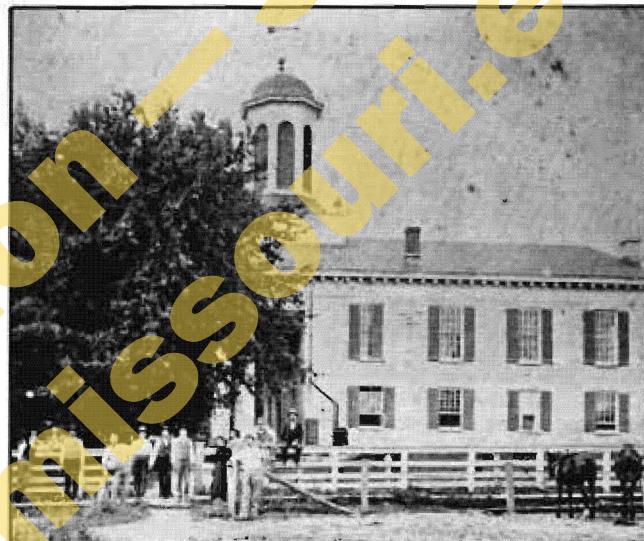


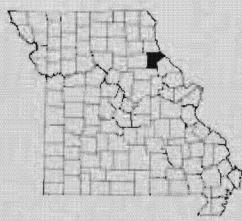
Fig. 1. Ralls County Courthouse, 1858.
Designed by Henry C. Wellman, attorney.
(Courtesy: State Historical Society of Missouri)

contractor Kidwell, although interior finishing continued for several months (Figs. 1 and 2).

Walls of the courthouse are made from locally quarried limestone; the columns are plastered, and the pediment and cornice are of wood. Interior woodwork is handcrafted. The courtroom, noted for its acoustical quality, is on the second floor. Because of relatively few alterations the interior maintains the integrity of the original design.

To accommodate needs of the growing county, Arthur Hogg designed an addition in 1935, funded in part by the federal Public Works Administration project. The two-story addition, 104 by 42 feet, was made of stone that had come from the abutments and middle pier of an old toll bridge over the Salt River. Total cost of the project was about \$25,000; federal funds

County Ralls
Organized Nov. 16, 1820
Named After ... Daniel Ralls, a
member of the
state legislature
County Seat ... New London



¹ Mrs. Oliver Howard, *Ralls County, Missouri* (Privately printed, 1958), p. 2. This work contains the most complete history of Ralls County courthouses.

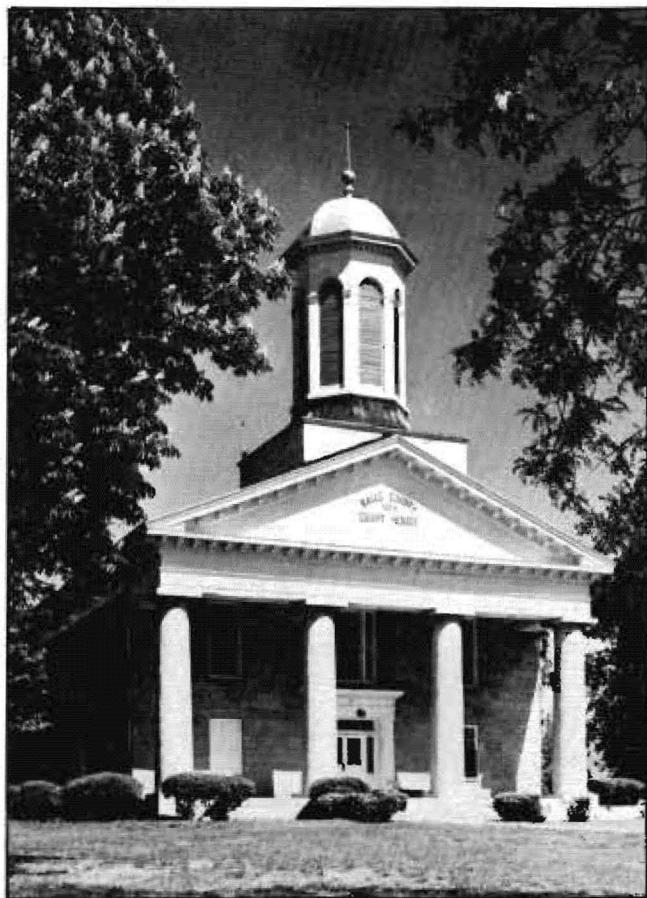


Fig. 2. Ralls County Courthouse, 1858-, front view.
(Courtesy: State Historical Society of Missouri)

amounted to \$15,490.

In 1938 James P. Jamieson and George Spearl, St. Louis architects, re-created the facade of the courthouse for the entrance of the Missouri buildings at the New York World's Fair and the Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco, both in 1939 (Fig. 3). According to one commentator, it was the only exhibition of states' buildings at the New York fair that challenged the imagination without great expenditure or extensive grounds.

Ralls County's courthouse, now listed on the National Register of Historic Places, is one of two 19th century Missouri temple-type courthouses still in use as the official county building. The other, in Lafayette County, dates from 1847.



Fig. 3. Replica of Ralls County Courthouse at New York World's Fair, 1938.

Architects: James P. Jamieson and George Spearl.
(From: *Missouriana*, September 1939)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Articles and Essays

- Burnett, Joe. "History of Ralls County [1900]." *A Brief History of Ralls County, Missouri*. 1936.
- Howard, Mrs. Oliver. "Court House Annex Twenty Years Old." *Ralls County Record*, Aug. 24, 1956.
- _____. "Ralls County - Historic Past . . . Prosperous Present." 1954.
- _____. *Ralls County Missouri*. Privately printed, 1958.
- "Historic Missouri Courthouses: Ralls County Courthouse." *Missouri Historical Review* 58 (1964): verso, back cover.
- "Missouri Building at the World's Fair." *Missouri Historical Review* 34 (1939-40): 101-02, 270, 296-97.
- "Views From the Past." *Missouri Historical Review* 64 (1969-70): 474.

Newspapers

- Kansas City Times*, Oct. 13, 1952.
- Monroe City Semi-Weekly News*, Nov. 25, 1927.
- (New London) *Ralls County Record* April 5, Oct. 25, Nov. 15, 22, 1935; Ralls County Courthouse Centennial edition, July 17, 1958.
- St. Louis Globe Democrat*, March 26, 27, 1938.
- St. Louis Post Dispatch*, July 10, 1958.

Atlas

- An Illustrated Historical Atlas of Ralls County*. Philadelphia: Edwards Brothers, 1878.