

# MISSOURI COURTHOUSES

## SCOTT COUNTY

Marian M. Ohman  
Coordinator, Art History Programs

County records from Scott County were destroyed during the Civil War. Goodspeed's 1888 *History of Southeast Missouri* provided the basic information for the county's early history, which has been used in subsequent histories.

The first log courthouse in Benton, built on the square soon after the town was laid out in 1820, quickly became inadequate and was razed. A brick building replaced it in 1844, but, poorly constructed in the first place, it soon became unsafe and was condemned. The third courthouse in Benton, a frame structure built in 1855, lasted less than 10 years. According to *Laws of Missouri*, 1863, the State Legislature ordered the county seat moved to Commerce in 1863 to escape Civil War raids of armed rebels, which had prevented the court from holding any session for several months. Previous county records were moved to the military post at Cape Girardeau.

In Commerce the court built the fourth courthouse, a plain, substantial, two-story, brick courthouse (Fig. 1). But Commerce proved to be an unacceptable site, and the people voted to move back to more centrally located Benton in 1878.

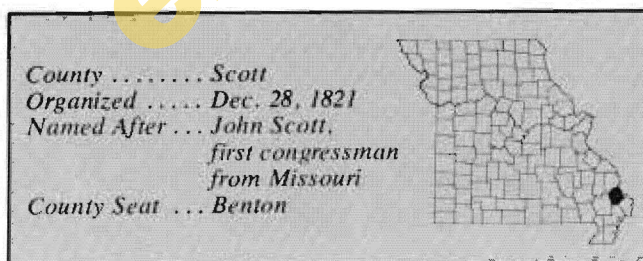
The fifth courthouse, completed in 1883, was a brick, two-story building about 40 by 70 feet with a cupola (Fig. 2). The costs came to about \$11,000. Thirty years later the community had outgrown the building. It was not well heated or lighted, and renovation would have been costly, so county officials decided to build a new one. The 1883 building was demolished in 1912, making way for the new and present courthouse.



Fig. 1. Scott County Courthouse, 1864-1878, Photo ca. 1886.  
(From: *Benton, Missouri Centennial, 1860-1960*)



Fig. 2. Scott County Courthouse, 1883-1912.  
(From: *Benton, Missouri Centennial 1860-1960*)



The fire that destroyed the capitol in Jefferson City in February 1911 prompted Scott County to build a more secure repository for county records. Inspired by Greene County financing a courthouse from general revenue funds, Scott County chose a similar method and set aside \$50,000.

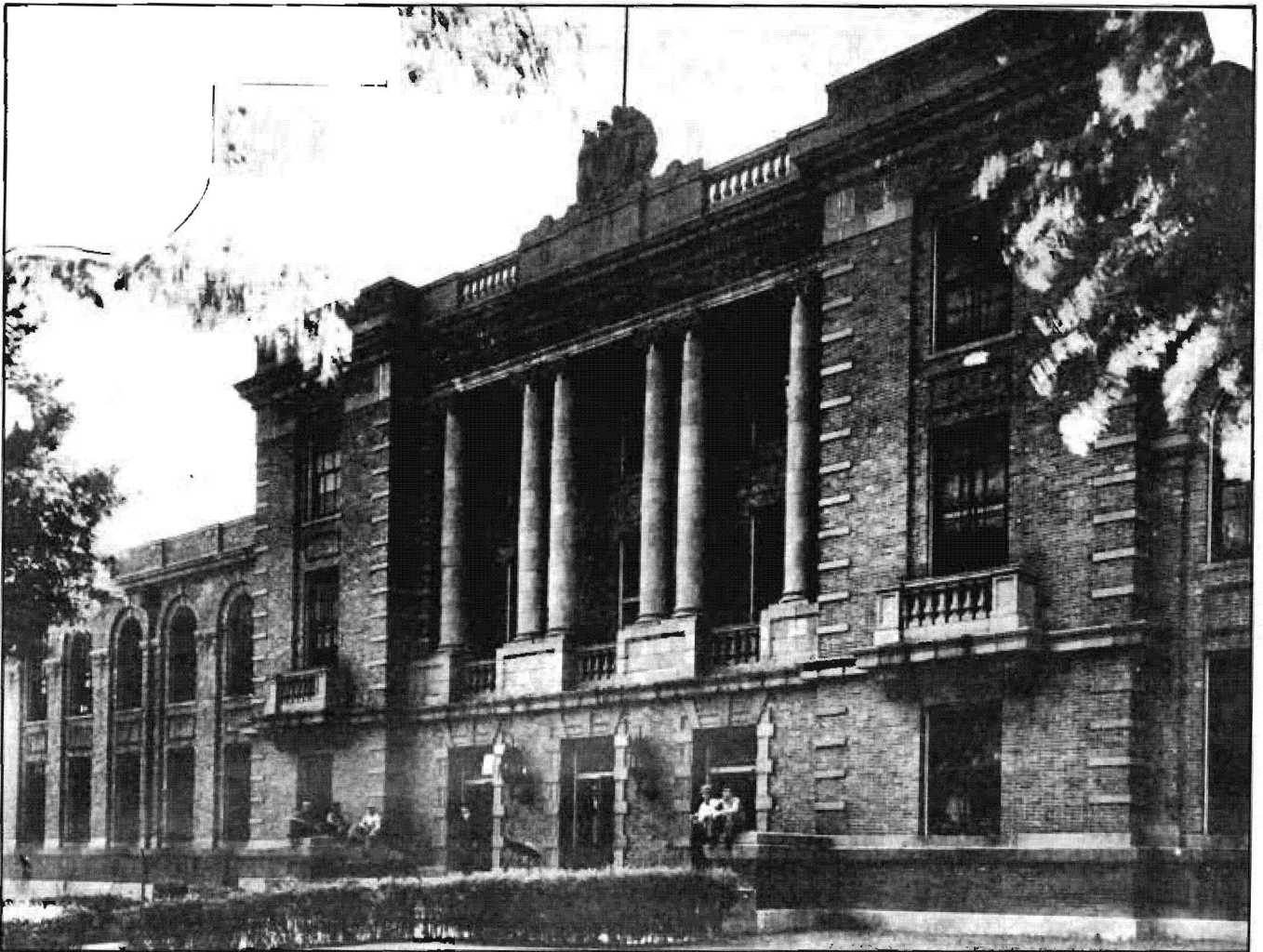


Fig. 3. Scott County Courthouse, 1912-. Architect: Henry H. Hohenschild (Courtesy: State Historical Society of Missouri, From: *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*)

First, the court commissioned architect Henry H. Hohenschild in April 1911; in June 1911, the county approved plans submitted by Hohenschild. Construction proceeded in stages; the court gave the contract for the shell of the building to J. W. McCarthy in October 1912.

Proponents of a new courthouse, anxious to push on and finish the project, kept a stream of publicity going. They even involved young people under 21 by sponsoring a 500-word-or-less essay contest. First prize was \$10. The topic: "Why a \$40,000 bond issue should be voted to complete the new courthouse of Scott County, Missouri." March 20, 1913, proponents of the new courthouse announced winners of the contest. The following week voters, perhaps properly inspired, approved the \$40,000 bond issue to complete the interior. Final costs of the project have been estimated between \$100,000 and \$140,000; work was completed in December 1913.

Hohenschild's plan called for a T-shaped building of reinforced concrete, with brick facing and terra cotta trim. The main stem of the T-shape was three stories,

56 by 122 feet; wings measured 52 by 55 feet. There were four entrances, one on each side. Six large columns distinguished the principal facade (Fig. 3).

Hohenschild was a prolific architect of Missouri courthouses. Other Hohenschild designs that are similar to Scott County's include: Barry County, 1911; Christian County, 1913; and Pemiscot, 1924. The well-maintained building continues to function as the seat of justice for Scott County.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

##### Books

- Benton, Missouri Centennial 1860-1960.*  
 Ford, Royal E. *History of Scott County, Missouri.* Privately published by the author, 1939.  
*History of Southeast Missouri.* Chicago: Goodspeed Publishing Co., 1888.  
*Laws of Missouri.* Regular Session, 22nd General Assembly, 1863. pp. 151, 152.

##### Newspapers

- Scott County Democrat,* Feb. 8, 22, May 9, 1912; Feb. 6-27, March 6-27, April 24, Dec. 11, 1913.  
*Scott County Missouri Newsboy,* August 20, 1900.