

MISSOURI COURTHOUSES

BUTLER COUNTY

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Butler County was created in 1849, and commissioners selected Poplar Bluff, a wilderness at that time, for the county seat. The court appropriated \$200 for the first courthouse and ordered Jesse T. Gilley to secure a plan. Gilley presented a plan in November 1850, and the court ordered it let to the lowest bidder on December 1, 1850.

For some reason Gilley presented a second plan December 16, 1850, which the court accepted in place of the first one. Phillip L. Varner superintended construction of the courthouse.

In May 1851 the court appropriated an additional \$54.50 for weatherboarding the exterior and finishing the interior. An entry in the County Court Record on February 10, 1852, to build a partition in the south room suggests at least a two-room building. G.R. Loughead, Butler County historian, provided information to indicate the courthouse was on the southeast corner of the square.

In 1867 the court sold the courthouse. Richard Metcalfe's history of Poplar Bluff claims the material from the courthouse was used in the construction of a frame residence which was still standing in 1884.

The court authorized funds for the second courthouse from the sale of 10,000 acres of swampland (at not less than \$1.00 per acre), which was the only source of income to finance such a project. Commissioners also had the option of trading swampland to the contractor as compensation. The court appointed three commissioners in April 1858 who were to furnish plans and superintend construction. After serving for some time, one commissioner resigned, and finally all three



Fig. 1. Butler County Courthouse, 1858-1886.
(Courtesy: G. R. Loughead, from the collection of Ott Heacock)

were discharged in May 1860. John Yarber was appointed and authorized to make alterations in plans and specifications as necessary.

Contractors of the courthouse are not positively identified, but Solomon G. Kitchen appears to be one of the principals. Others mentioned include: D. B. Miller, William N. Ringer and Charles T. Arthur. Construction dragged on for years and then came to a standstill during the Civil War. After the war, building resumed, but then again faltered. The court took action to prosecute contractors Arthur and Kitchen or recover 10,000 acres of land conveyed to them.

Sometime in 1866 the contract was awarded to W. F. Mitchell and Park H. Peters, who presented bond for \$8,500 to do work on the new courthouse. Additional appropriations of \$3,100 were required to finish construction. In February 1867 Simmons R. Horwill was appointed commissioner; after settling with the contractors for \$4,245, he recommended the court receive the building (Fig. 1).

The square, brick building probably had transverse halls; offices were on the first floor with the courtroom

County	Butler
Organized	Feb. 27, 1849
Named After . . .	William O. Butler from Kentucky
County Seat . . .	Poplar Bluff

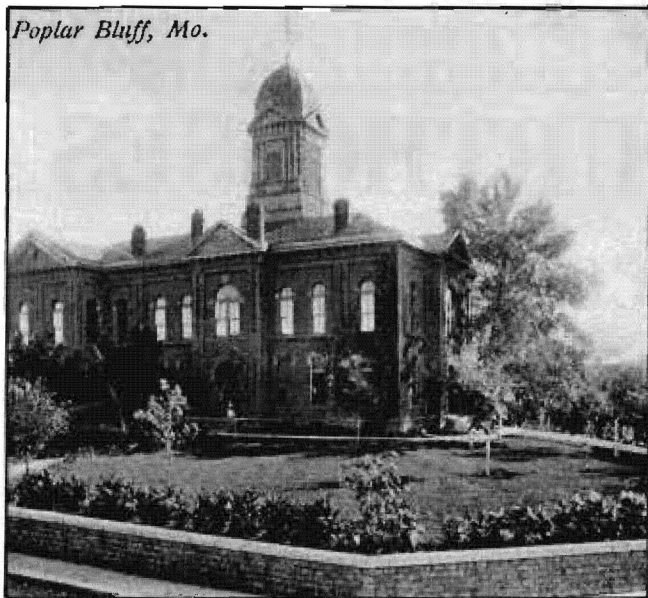


Fig. 2. Butler County Courthouse, 1887-1927.
(From: postcard, Trenton Boyd collection)

and jury rooms on the second. A small octagonal cupola topped the hipped roof. Fire destroyed the building December 14, 1886.

Little is known about the third courthouse, which was built by L. B. Walker and Co. in 1887 at a cost of \$11,475 (Fig. 2). A disastrous tornado ripped through Poplar Bluff May 9, 1927, and damaged the courthouse beyond repair (Fig. 3).

An advisory committee was appointed in June 1927, and they invited proposals for a new courthouse to be considered in July. Architects submitting plans included: Martin Laubis, Poplar Bluff; M. B. Howard, St. Louis; Earl Hawkins, Springfield; Gill and Jackson, St. Louis. The court awarded the commission to N. S. Spencer and Sons, Chicago. Bedford stone was the recommended material for the three-story, 100-foot-square building.

A successful bond issue authorized expenditure of \$250,000 in November 1927. George Gassman received



Fig. 3. Butler County Courthouse, after 1927 tornado.
(Courtesy: G.R. Loughead, from the collection of Ott Heacock)

the contract in March 1928, and work began immediately.

The cornerstone ceremony was conducted June 26, 1928. The following May the courthouse was dedicated (Fig. 4). Final costs amounted to \$265,000. There are four entries, all alike so as to show no partiality to any adjacent properties. The Circuit Court room on the third floor, which seats 300, had elevator service in the original plan. Butler County government continues to operate from this 20th century courthouse.

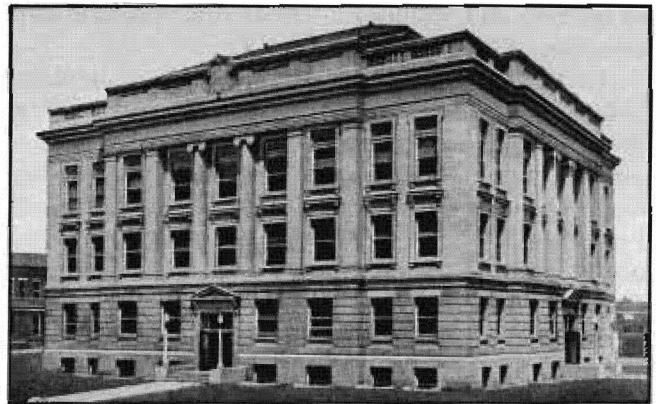


Fig. 4. Butler County Courthouse, 1927-.
Architect: N.S. Spencer and Sons
(From: postcard, Trenton Boyd collection)

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