

MISSOURI COURTHOUSES

JOHNSON COUNTY

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Warrensburg, the county seat of Johnson County, was laid out on a high ridge with a commanding scenic view. Until they built their first courthouse, courts met in various places.

The initial appropriation of \$2,500 for Johnson County's first courthouse came in March 1838. The court accepted plans presented by Harvey Dyer, supervisor of construction, and awarded the building contract to William N. Wade.

Originally, the plans called for a 44-by-36-foot, two-story, brick building, with three doors, but this was later modified to a 36 foot square. Although a cupola was anticipated in the original design, the lack of funds prevented it ever being built.

A subsequent appropriation brought the total cost to \$2,800. The court accepted the building July 28, 1842, after a prolonged construction period (Fig. 1). The courtroom on the first story had a brick floor; the second story, with offices, was laid with random-width boards.

This is the only surviving example of one of the most popular Missouri 19th century courthouse designs. It was used for county business until 1878, when the commercial emphasis moved several blocks east toward the railroad. The building continued in use as a private residence until 1965, when the Johnson County Historical Society bought it and began restoration.

Exterior additions had been made, the brick stuccoed, and the first-floor courtroom, which originally occupied the entire first floor, had been divided into several rooms. Restoration has been guided by the original specifications and has proceeded as funds became available through voluntary contribution. Now fur-

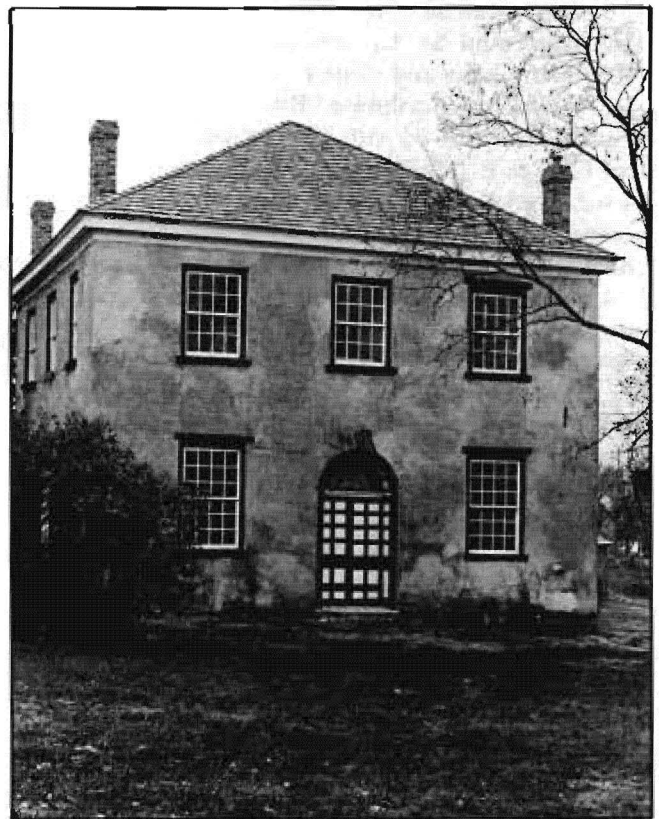


Fig. 1. Johnson County Courthouse, 1838-1878. restoration began 1965.

(Courtesy: State Historical Society of Missouri)

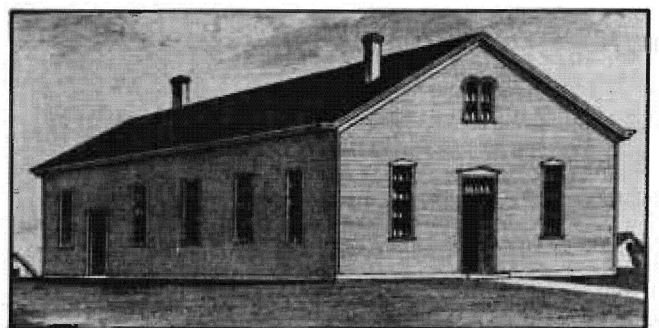
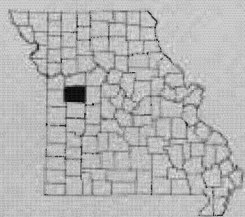


Fig. 2. Johnson County Courthouse, 1875-1890s.
(From: *Atlas Map of Johnson County, Missouri, 1877*)

County Johnson
Organized Dec. 13, 1834
Named After . . . Richard M.
Johnson of
Kentucky
County Seat . . . Warrensburg



nished as a courthouse, a few original items are supplemented by appropriate period pieces. It is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Johnson County's second courthouse, located on the square several blocks east of the old square, came as a result of a business population shift to the new railroad depot. Citizens of Warrensburg donated a courthouse in 1875 after the county rejected bond proposals to provide facilities. The simple frame building on the west side of the square measured about 30 by 50 feet (Fig. 2). It was used for part of the county's business activities until the 1890s.

After Johnson County citizens approved a \$50,000 bond issue for a new courthouse, the court began considering plans. Among the architects submitting proposals for the 1896 courthouse were St. Louis architect J. B. Legg, who designed courthouses for Gasconade, Mississippi and St. Charles counties between 1896-1900, and Gunn and Curtis, who planned the 1891 Henry County courthouse. But the Johnson County Court was impressed with a design submitted by architect George E. McDonald for their anticipated courthouse (Fig. 3). They met with him and then traveled to several cities in Nebraska to examine his work and check references on his reliability and trustworthiness.

Apparently satisfied with what they found, they awarded him the commission in March 1896 and approved his plans for an 84-by-104-foot, two-story building, constructed of Warrensburg sandstone. In May, J.M. Anderson, Emporia, Kansas, received the building contract for about \$50,000.

Problems arose immediately with the public; there was dissatisfaction about the choice of the architect and the fact that McDonald instead of a county man was appointed supervisor. Some Johnson Countians doubted that the building could be erected for \$50,000; further irritation erupted when the court did not require bond from McDonald.

Cornerstone ceremonies took place August 25, 1896, but the project was beset with problems. It became

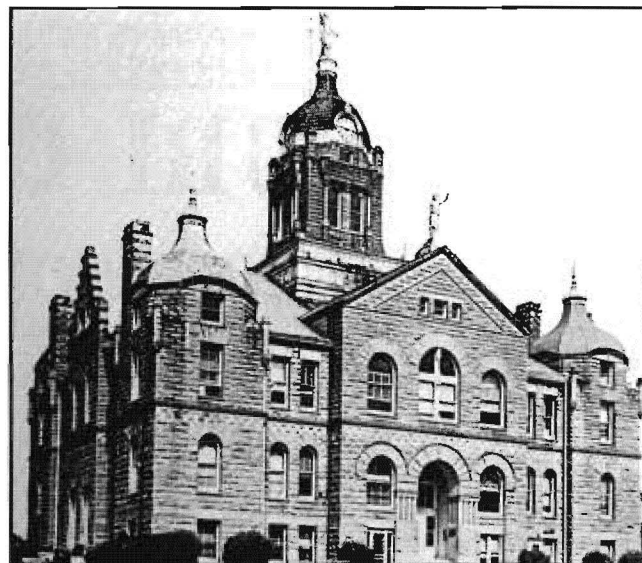


Fig. 3. Johnson County Courthouse, 1896.
Architect: George E. McDonald
(Courtesy: State Historical Society of Missouri)

obvious that the construction would not be finished by the estimated date in December 1896, nor was it completed a year later. Not until January 1898 did the court accept the building, but costs ran only \$585 above the \$50,000 appropriation.

As soon as county officials moved in, the probate judge, who, much to his annoyance, had been assigned space in the basement, itemized 11 protests. He claimed the courthouse was an unfit place to keep records; sandstone had been a poor choice of building material since it admitted moisture; there was inadequate ventilation; his rooms were in inaccessible quarters; the rooms were poorly lighted, et al.

In spite of the judge's objections, Johnson County continues to use this courthouse. Three other Missouri examples of McDonald's courthouse design are in Andrew, Bates and Lawrence counties, all built within a 5-year period. This courthouse, along with the first Johnson County courthouse, is included on the National Register of Historic Places.

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