The Court Archive:
Cairo's Courtship of the Court

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Cairo, Illinois is strategically located at the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. Throughout the nineteenth century, boosters dreamed of transforming the town into a major river hub. Their hopes gained momentum in the 1850s with the arrival of the Illinois Central Railroad, which made Cairo the southern terminus of a line linking directly to Chicago.

During the Civil War, Cairo's importance soared. The Union army turned the town into a vital command post, supply depot, and launching point for campaigns in the western theater. The population surged, and the federal government invested heavily in local infrastructure. Even before the war ended, local leaders saw a new opportunity to raise Cairo's standing in the state: by becoming home to a branch of the Illinois Supreme Court.

The judiciary had been restructured under the Illinois Constitution of 1848, which divided the Supreme Court into three geographic "Grand Divisions": Ottawa (Northern), Springfield (Central), and Mount Vernon (Southern). Reflecting Jacksonian ideals, the new system called for justices to be elected by the people and by decentralizing the Illinois Supreme Court across three locations, justice would be more accessible to the people.

At the time, Mount Vernon had been a practical choice for the Southern Grand Division, due to its central location and established roadways. However, by the 1860s, the town lacked direct rail service. To reach Mount Vernon, travelers had to take a train to Ashley, then endure a rough 16-mile wagon ride to the courthouse.

In January 1865, Cairo boosters lobbied members of the Illinois General Assembly to introduce legislation to relocate the Southern Grand Division from Mount Vernon to Cairo. However, other towns, most notably Centralia, which was also on the Illinois Central line, entered the fray with their own petitions to host the court.

After intense debate, lawmakers passed a compromise bill in February 1865. Cairo would become the new court site but only if it donated land and constructed a courthouse equal in quality to Mount Vernon's. If Cairo failed to do so within one year, Centralia would receive the same opportunity.

Cairo launched a spirited campaign, promising civic improvements like new plank roads, gas streetlights, and a new post office. The local newspaper even sent a reporter to Mount Vernon to cover court proceedings. He estimated Cairo could build a similar courthouse for far less than expected and noted that Cairo attorneys participated in more than half the cases on the docket. Despite the enthusiasm, the city failed to meet the one-year deadline.

Meanwhile, Mount Vernon redoubled its efforts. In 1867, voters approved funding to build a railroad link to Ashley. Completed in 1869, the new depot was located just steps from the courthouse, solidifying Mount Vernon's status for the time being.

But the larger question—whether the Illinois Supreme Court should remain divided across three cities—continued to surface throughout the ensuing decades. The Illinois State Bar Association and even sitting Chief Justice Benjamin Magruder advocated consolidation to reduce costs and increase efficiency.

By 1897, the question was no longer whether to consolidate, but where to place the court. Cities including Bloomington, Chicago, Ottawa, Peoria, and Springfield lobbied the legislature to host the court. Ultimately, Springfield prevailed. On April 2, 1897, Governor John Tanner signed legislation consolidating the Illinois Supreme Court in Springfield, ending the court's fifty-year itinerant era.

Though Mount Vernon no longer hosted the Illinois Supreme Court after 1897, it remained a critical part of the state's judicial system as the site of the Illinois Appellate Court.