The Court Archive:
Forgotten Supreme Court Home

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The Illinois Supreme Court has held oral arguments at its own building since 1908. Prior to that, oral arguments took place at the Illinois State Capitol, where the Supreme Court had a courtroom (now Senate Hearing Room 212, which is still decorated with judicial motifs), from 1878 to 1907. Prior to that, the Old State Capitol hosted terms of court from 1841 to 1871. There's a 5-year gap between 1872 and 1877, when the Court in Springfield met somewhere other than a capitol building or a court building.

The legislature appropriated funds to build a new state house in Springfield and construction began in 1868. The state would give the old state house to Sangamon County to use as its courthouse. The Supreme Court remained in the old capitol building until 1871, but needed a new home until the new capitol was completed.

Heavy winds and a fire helped contribute to the Court's home for those gap years. There was a large building on the east side on South Fifth Street between Adams and Monroe called the Foster Building. In 1871, gale force winds ripped the roof off of the Foster Building. Shortly thereafter, the Masonic Hall immediately to the south caught fire. The fire spread and destroyed the Foster Building. John Williams and George Black purchased the lot, tore down what was left of structure and built a new building: the Williams & Black Building.

The Supreme Court and Williams and Black agreed that Court could utilize the new building until the new capitol was open for business. The Williams & Black Building was a three-story building with a mansard roof. The first story could accommodate three street-level stores. The second floor could be reached by a wide staircase and housed the offices of the Illinois Supreme Court. At the right was a 20 x 60 room for the Supreme Court Library. On the left were two rooms for the Supreme Court Clerk, Emanuel Hamburgher and his staff. Additionally, there were three rooms for the justices, one of which served as their conference room.

From the second-floor hallway, there was another set of stairs to access the third floor, which housed the Supreme Court courtroom. This large room—40 x 46 feet with a 15-foot ceiling—had a glass dome with a transom to let heat out in the summer. The entire building was steam

heated with radiators for the winter. The Court's bench ran along the south wall, with full windows behind them. The bench stood about 2 ½ feet off of the floor.

The Supreme Court was supposed to convene in January 1872, but the Williams & Black Building was not quite finished, and the justices postponed the beginning of term until March. The Court met in this building each January term until 1877, when the Court finally moved into the still-not-finished new capitol building, but the Supreme Court rooms were finished, allowing the Court to begin operations there.