The Court Archive:
The Courthouse

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September 2024

The courthouse has long stood as one of the most important buildings in any county. As the seat of justice, it provides residents with vital services and symbolizes the authority and stability of local government. It also houses the records of the county: land records, birth and death certificates, marriage licenses, and a host of others. In this sense, courthouses play a similar role as churches in Europe, which is fitting given that the United States was created with a separation of church and state.

In many county seats, the courthouse is the tallest building in the city, towering above two- and three-story buildings along Main Street or the town square. Courthouses often feature a tower, dome, or cupola, and many have clocks, which, in addition to the simple function of telling time, also serve to regulate the lives of the people living there. Built from heavy stone, these buildings convey an impression of permanence, reinforcing their role in safeguarding our republican form of government.

In Illinois, there are 102 principal courthouses, with larger cities sometimes having a branch or annex facilities. These courthouses range in age from 190 years to just a few months old, and their architectural styles reflect the period in which they were built. The 1898 Coles County courthouse is an excellent representation of Richardsonian Romanesque architecture, while the 1936 Bureau County courthouse reflects the WPA Art-Deco style. The 1998 Kendall County courthouse is a great example of post-modern architecture, combining traditional elements with modern construction.

County seats and courthouses have often been the focal point of intense local rivalries. For example, Logan County moved its seat from Postville to Mt. Pulaski in 1847 and then sold the Postville courthouse lot for $300. The original donors of that lot sued the county to recover the $300, but the Illinois Supreme Court ruled against them in *Adams et al. v. County of Logan*, 11 Ill. 336 (1849). When Logan County moved its seat again from Mt. Pulaski to the newly built town of Lincoln in 1853, large landowners near Mt. Pulaski contested the move, but the Court upheld its constitutionality in *Turley et al. v. County of Logan*, 17 Ill. 151 (1855).

Perhaps the most bitter county seat battle occurred in Cass County, where Virginia allegedly "stole" the seat from Beardstown. Virginia had been the first county seat for four years, but Beardstown held the title for almost 30 years. During that time, Virginia repeatedly tried to reclaim its status. A vote in 1872 favored the relocation to Virginia by 128 votes, but Beardstown residents claimed the vote was fraudulent, resulting in multiple lawsuits, *Beardstown v. Virginia*, 76 Ill. 34 (1874), *People ex rel. Brackett v. McGowan*, 77 Ill. 644 (1875), and *Beardstown v. Virginia*, 81 Ill. 541 (1875). Ultimately, the Illinois Supreme Court upheld the 1872 vote, restoring Virginia as the county seat.

Modern technology and the COVID pandemic changed how the courthouse operates. Today, citizens have fewer reasons to visit courthouses in person, as taxpayers can make real estate tax payments online and many courtrooms have transitioned to virtual hearings via Zoom. Nonetheless, the imposing structure of the county courthouse still stands as a vital institution, symbolizing both the democratic process and access to the judicial system.