

History of the Morgan County Courthouse

Morgan County built their first county courthouse, a frame building, in 1825; Judge John S. Sawyer was the presiding Circuit Judge. Prior to this, court proceedings were held at various log cabins outside of Jacksonville-in fact, Jacksonville had not yet been founded. The first proceedings of the Circuit Court were held at Dr. George Cadwell's log cabin, with Justice John Reynolds (later Governor) presiding, in April of 1823. Court proceedings were also held at James G. Swinerton's log cabin. Court proceedings were officially held at "Olmstead's Mound", the temporary seat of county government, situated eight miles west of Jacksonville, until 1825. In 1825 county proceedings were moved to Jacksonville, and Jacksonville became the county seat. The first county courthouse was destroyed in a fire in December of 1827.

In 1828 the county built its second courthouse; it was completed in 1830. It was constructed out of brick, the first in the county. The second courthouse was built on the square in Jacksonville, and was of a "coffee-mill" design. The second courthouse was torn down in 1868, and the town square was left open.

Abraham Lincoln argued the case, *Selby v. Dunlap*, at the second county courthouse in 1854. Selby was suing Dunlap for assault. Lincoln, and Dunlap's other attorneys, argued that Selby had prejudiced potential jurors by publishing false accounts of the assault. While Selby won his case, he was awarded \$300, he had originally demanded \$10,000.

The current courthouse was built in 1867, and completed in 1869. It was designed by G.B. Randal, a Chicago architect. It was constructed in the Victorian style, and made out of stone and iron. The stone came from the quarry in Joliet. Randal also designed the Montgomery County Courthouse in 1868.



“In 1868 G.P. Randall described his courthouse design for Morgan County, Illinois, as “irregular in its outline...about one hundred and thirty feet long by seventy wide...The principal offices in the lower story, or those wherein records are to be kept, are to be fire-proof, being built with fire-proof floors and ceilings, and iron shutters to doors and windows...The arrangement of the courtroom and its appendages, is as complete as could be desired. It is well lighted and ventilated. Besides the courtroom, there are rooms for supervisors, grand and petit jurors, judge’s retiring room, law library, etc. Its cost when completed, will be about \$160,000.”[1]

“Two of G. P. Randall’s Illinois courthouses represent the early phases of the Second Empire style in America. They are at Hillsboro in Montgomery County, (1869-72), and Jacksonville in Morgan County, (1868-69). The courthouse at Jacksonville was specifically designed for a corner lot. Randall promised a savings of at least \$50,000 by avoiding a four façade design in the center of the public square. [2] He did not hesitate, however, to sell an almost identical plan for placement at the center of the public square in Hillsboro. Each building has slightly irregular asymmetric massing with a tower at the left front, a large pavilion at the right and an arched porch between. Mansard roofs rise above heavy modillion cornices; there is even a mansard roof capping a chimney-like ventilating shaft at the rear corner. A feature of each plan is a door from the porch to the tower where broad stairs go directly up to the courtroom. This is little used now but must once have encouraged the use of the courtroom for public meetings at hours when the rest of the courthouse was closed. All windows have round arches including the dormers.” [3]

Sources:

[1] G.P. Randall, *A Handbook of Designs* (Chicago, 1868), pg. 32, cited in, *Temples of Justice*, pg. 18.

[2] G.P. Randall, *A Handbook of Designs* (Chicago, 1868), pg. 32, cited in, *Temples of Justice*, pg. 186.

[2] Cited in, *Temples of Justice*, pg. 186.

See, *Illinois Courthouses: An Illustrated History*, by Dennis Weiser, 2009.

See, *From Log Cabins to Temples of Justice: Courthouses in Lincoln's Illinois*, by Susan Krause, 2009, pgs. 58-59.

See, *History of Morgan County, Illinois: Its Past and Present*, Donnelley, Loyd, & Co., 1878, available online at, <http://www.archive.org/details/historyofmorganc00chic>

See, *Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois, and History of Morgan County*, ed. by Newton Bateman and Paul Selby, 1906.

See, *Temples of Justice: Nineteenth Century Courthouses in the Midwest and Texas*, by Paul Goeldner, Columbia University, 1970, pg. 18, 186.