

Black Hawk County Courthouse History

By Grant Veeder, County Auditor

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Three courthouses have served Black Hawk County since its creation. The first was built in 1857, but other buildings served the purpose of a courthouse before its erection. The county was founded in 1843, and had sufficient population to set up its own administration in 1853, at which time a commission of local citizens chose Cedar Falls, then the largest town in the county, as the county seat. John Overman, who platted the town, donated a block of land (now known as Overman Park) for a courthouse. In the meantime, court was held at Andrew Mullarky's store and county records were stored in the building's loft.

However, Waterloo was growing quickly, and its residents grumbled that Cedar Falls wasn't as centrally located as their town. State law gave the legislature the authority to site the county seat, but the Waterloo boosters somehow convinced legislators to let Black Hawk County voters decide. At an election held April 2, 1855, Waterloo was chosen by a vote of 388 to 260. After some legal wrangling, court proceedings and county records were moved to Judge Julius Hubbard's brick store (originally his home) in Waterloo on Commercial Street between 5th and 6th, the site currently occupied by the Russell Lamson building.

The building of the first courthouse now became a struggle between Waterloo interests on the east and west sides of the Cedar River. Another vote was held on December 10, 1855, with the ballot giving an odd choice:

Voters could either select the east side or the side that would pay the most money for the location and erection of county buildings. Because it was west side business



First Black Hawk County Courthouse, 9th and Water Streets

interests that petitioned the legislature to allow a county seat election,

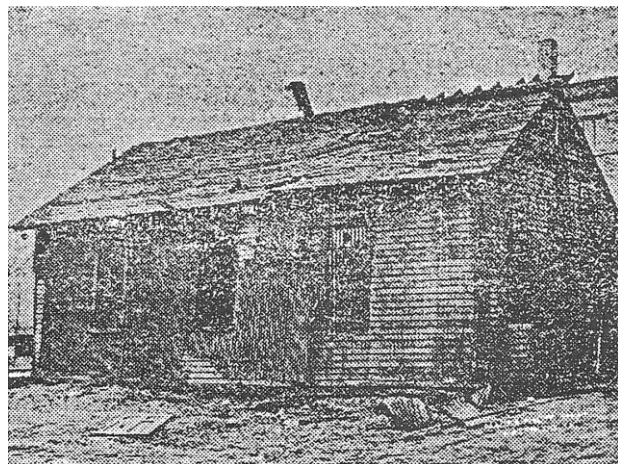
Cedar Falls voters supported the east side almost unanimously, and by a 467-264 vote the east side got the courthouse.

At this time in Iowa, county government power was almost solely in the hands of an elected county judge. Black Hawk County Judge John Randall devised a scheme whereby city land owned by his late predecessor, Judge Jonathan Pratt, would be sold at auction with the understanding that the courthouse would be built in that part of town. Randall then quietly solicited bribes from the bidders. The result was his decision to locate the courthouse between 9th and 10th on Water Street, on property now owned by Crystal Distributing Services. Judge Randall signed a contract with Giles Tinker to construct the building for \$12,746.61. Various changes in plan occurred before government officials moved in on May 24, 1857, and the final cost was \$27,000! The high cost, the relatively remote location, and the suspicions of shady dealings led to Randall's sound defeat in his 1857 bid for re-election, and he soon left the state. In 1860 the Iowa Legislature reduced the authority of county judges and instituted a board of supervisors with representatives from each township.

Despite the costly changes, the courthouse still had no jail facilities, and the county was incurring significant costs to house prisoners in other counties. When the initial board of supervisors was seated in January, 1861, its first action was to make appropriation for a jail to be located in a basement room of the courthouse, "originally contemplated for that purpose," according to a Board committee report. With the spectacular cost overruns of the courthouse in mind, expenditure was limited to \$600. Two cells and an outer room were installed by September 2; final cost \$391.48. This basement accommodation soon gained the reputation of a dungeon, being dimly lighted, damp and unsanitary. The county built a replacement in the early 1870s on the downriver side of the courthouse grounds. It was a wooden, one-story structure, about 22 by 32 feet in dimension.

Within was a steel cage with four cells. Later, the supervisors ordered the jail covered with corrugated sheet metal after angry citizens tried to burn it down with a Cedar Falls banker inside.

The Water Street courthouse stood throughout the rest of the century, and saw many



uses beyond county court and administrative functions. It was the site of festive celebrations and entertainments; it held church services and county fairs. Governor Samuel Kirkwood spoke there during the Civil War and a memorial service was held in the courtroom upon the death of President Lincoln.

Meantime, the county was growing rapidly. The population increased from about 3,000 in 1855 to about 32,000 in 1900, and residents saw the need for a larger courthouse. However, an 1898 referendum on a new building failed to pass, mustering only 953 yes votes to 2,909 in opposition. According to the *Waterloo Courier*, "The fact that the supervisors refused to declare for a location for the building aided materially in swamping the proposition."

The measure came to a vote again at the 1900 general election. The supervisors specified a site on the north corner of East Park and Sycamore and proposed \$80,000 in bonds for the courthouse, \$10,000 for a jail and sheriff's residence and \$25,000 for the purchase of the full city block. East/west rivalries were if anything more pronounced by this time, and it was only through the explicit understanding that a federal building would be requested for the west side (a petition supporting this was signed by 1,300 business leaders) that the referendum passed. (The bargain finally became a reality when the new post office and federal building was built on Commercial Street in 1937.)

Construction on the second courthouse was completed in 1902. The final cost rose to \$110,463, while the jail/sheriff's house across the alley on the Park Avenue side of the block cost \$13,669. The steel



cage with four cells was moved to this jail from its predecessor. The site's most prominent feature was the group of statues that took up residence on the courthouse roof. Sculptor Robert DeGlass was paid \$800 to create six bronze

Second Black Hawk County Courthouse, Park and Sycamore "allegorical figures." The statues, which became famous as the "Green Ladies," gazed out over the front entrance to the

building, four seated and two standing.

The county's population continued to grow, topping 100,000 by the 1950 census. Along with its increasingly inadequate space, the courthouse developed structural difficulties, and the county supervisors began planning a replacement. A referendum held November 6, 1956 proposed a city-county building in downtown's Lincoln Park. It failed, "probably because of the Lincoln Park location," according to a commemorative booklet published in 1964. The supervisors tried again in November of 1958, suggesting a courthouse only, with the site to be determined. This measure also failed.

A more specific plan went on the ballot on June 6, 1960. Architects planned an "L"-shaped building to be built around the standing courthouse, at a cost of \$2,000,000. This referendum passed, barely topping the 60% requirement for bond approvals. However, opposition to the proposed design and site developed after the election, and the supervisors heeded the proposition of a civic committee led by Carl Bluedorn to purchase about 80% of the block bounded by Mulberry, East Fifth, Lafayette, and East Sixth Streets. The County held another bond referendum on June 29, 1961, in which the voters approved bonds of \$450,000 to buy the property.

The county board was dismayed when the construction bids opened in June of 1962 all exceeded the \$2,000,000 approved for the building. Supervisors adjusted to the unpleasant reality by temporarily eliminating the jail from the plan. The jail returned to the contract after voters approved another referendum, held in April of 1963, authorizing the expenditure of \$200,000 from the county's General Fund.

One more round of voting was necessary. The \$450,000 approved for buying land was found wanting when authorities decided to purchase the whole block. Voters approved another \$150,000 on June 1, 1964, anticipating the funds from the sale of the old courthouse. Construction had begun in the meantime, and officials moved into the new building in August of 1964. Final cost for the building and grounds was \$2,850,000.

A list of the initial occupants reveals some changes in county government structure from that time to this:

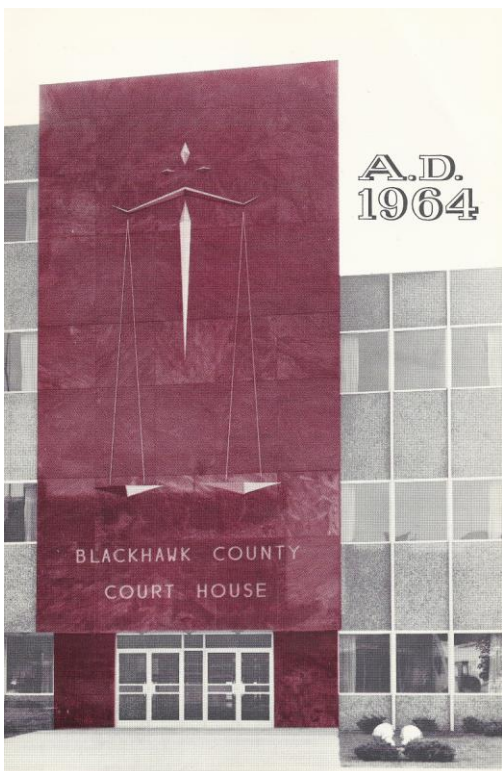
Board of Supervisors: Clark Lichty, Don F. Sage, Carl R. Davis, Wm. J. Beck, Vincent Driscoll, Sr.

Judges: George C. Heath, Blair Wood, Peter Van Metre, Carroll Engelkes

Court Reporters: Roy H. Jensen, Joe Kurtenbach, Dwight Van Wyngarden

Auditor: Howard F. Gibbs

Treasurer: Dewey S. Butterfield
Clerk of Court: Eugene J. Perry
Sheriff: Elmer L. Hightower
Recorder: Ramona Williams
Attorney: William C. Ball
Superintendent of Schools: Perry H. Grier
Engineer: Joe H. Scheel
Probation Officer: Clara S. Hinde
Public Health Nurse: Leatha M. Primrose
Relief Director: Lucy R. Jurging
Welfare Director: Ruth B. McKinnis
County Assessor: J.J. Dempster
Waterloo Assessor: Earl Jago, Jr.
Secretary Zoning Commission: Clarence W. Baldwin
Secretary Soldiers Relief: Edward G. Miller
Welfare Attorney: Fred Liffing
Building Maintenance Superintendent: Paul Stahlhut
Collector Institutional Accounts: Guy W. VanFleet

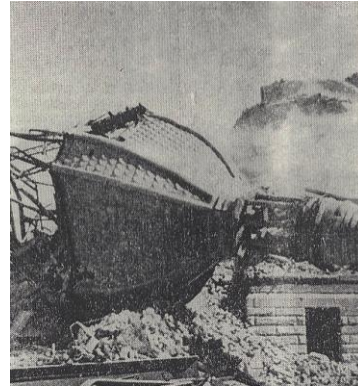


The 1964 booklet commemorating the opening of the current structure (and including a courthouse history to which this author is indebted) promised that "Your new Court House will endure for generations as a thing of simple beauty." It endures to be sure, although it has undergone numerous internal rearrangements of offices and space. Most notably, the jail that once occupied most of the fourth floor is gone, having moved across Lafayette Street to a new building (with a larger footprint than the courthouse) that was completed in 1995 after a 1990 referendum approved construction for \$14,500,000. Judges and courtrooms have multiplied and have taken up most of the space vacated by the jail

and the first floor Sheriff's Office.

How long the current building will stand is a matter for conjecture, but we know the fates of its predecessors. The first courthouse on Water Street was used as an ice house after it was

vacated, and was demolished in 1907. The Waterloo Urban Renewal Commission purchased the Park Avenue courthouse, and in 1966 razed the building and replaced it with a parking lot, now owned by the neighboring Northwestern Bell Telephone Company. The sale price of \$280,000 was well above the \$150,000 needed to cover the land purchase approved in the 1964 referendum. It is comforting to know that for once the county had more money than it needed for a courthouse project.



Second Courthouse Demolished, 1966

Postscript: The Green Ladies

The Green Ladies on Park Avenue escaped the wrecking ball, having decamped before the sale of the second courthouse. Four of them sit atop the River Plaza building (originally the YMCA), facing the river from the west side, in plain view of an observer standing in the parking lot where the courthouse once stood. One of the standing statues went to Upper Iowa University in Fayette. If you know the whereabouts of the sixth Green Lady, please contact county authorities.

