

The Clark County Courthouse

By Adam Kraemer, Steve Poorman, Jeremy Shotts, and Darrick Wilson

The Clark County courthouse is a valuable asset to the city of Marshall as well as a precious piece of history. The courthouses of Clark County have taken many shapes and been located in several different locations. Through time they have evolved from one room log cabins into massive brick and stone icons. There is much we can learn and discover about our county and ourselves through the courthouse.

In 1819, when Clark County was founded its boundaries stretched north to Wisconsin. It was decided that the center of government would be located in the small village of Aurora along the Wabash River. A small town building was constructed that would serve as the first courthouse for the County of Clark. As time passed another town was erected only two miles south and was growing with great speed. This was the village of Darwin. As Aurora slowly increased in population, Darwin boomed. Its size and river trade rivaled with that of Terre Haute. Lots in Darwin town were more expensive at this time than those of Chicago. Therefore, it is no surprise that county officials elected to move the seat of government to Darwin. Colonel William B. Archer, who would later found Marshall, constructed the new courthouse. Darwin continued to thrive and prosper into the 1830's until the National Road, a new source of trade moved business north. Darwin was threatened with losing all of its trade business to Terre Haute. It was decided that the center of politics and business for Clark County should be re-located to the new community of Marshall. This was where the county seat has resided.

There have been three courthouses set on the same site in Marshall. The courthouse we will focus on is the current building which has served its citizens since the turn of the century. Construction on the newest courthouse in Clark County began in 1903 as a direct result of a disastrous fire which nearly leveled the previous courthouse. Built in only a year, the construction was very efficient for the times.



Used mainly, of course, as the location for trials and legal matters concerning county business and government, the courthouse encompasses several offices and a large amount of history. Contained inside the courthouse to this day are deeds and mortgages dating back to 1818 when Illinois first achieved statehood. There are also birth and death certificates on file dating back to around 1877. Among other contents are marriage licenses dating as far back as 1818. As with most courthouses, Clark County's courthouse has its share of court records dating from the 1850's. Within the last few years, research efforts located some very key documents that contained the name and signature of Abraham Lincoln. Those documents have now been relocated to a museum.

The Clark County courthouse has entertained its share of political guests. These guests have

included in past years, the late Secretary of State, John Lewis, and more recently, the Governor of Illinois, Jim Edgar. The most recent has been candidate for Governor, Glen Poshard, and Representative Judy Myers.

As far as punishments for crimes, there have never been any public hangings or whippings at the current courthouse location. However, when the county seat was located in Aurora, a whipping post was located on the court lawn, which was used once to punish a man who was caught stealing pigs. Some more recent and famous trials in Clark County include the Fred Grabbe murder trial in the 1980's. Mr. Grabbe was convicted of murdering his wife and incinerating the body in a trash barrel and disposing of it in the Wabash River. In the 1990's two murder trials of significance come to mind. The first was a double murder at the Mariah Pork Palace in Casey, Illinois (town west of Marshall, also in Clark County). This trial gained coverage on news channels all around. Two employees of the farm and a female accomplice attempted the perfect crime. Instead, all were convicted and sent to prison. Also even more recent was an assisted-suicide case in which a Mr. Moreno killed his elderly wife to end her suffering. This crime actually took place directly east across Sixth Street from our high school. Mr. Moreno was also found guilty of his crime.



The courthouse of today is a far sight from the one located along the banks of the Wabash in Aurora, or even the one in Darwin. Although it is nearly a century old, it has been modernized greatly. Along with relics of the past like the coal burning boilers and the old clock tower are computers and modern office equipment. All of the six offices in the courthouse contain multiple computers and a staff of trained professionals. County employees are sent, courtesy of Clark County, to classes and seminars to help them better use these benefits of technology to their fullest potential.

Many renovations have also been made to the courthouse. As can be expected, there is the almost annual repainting process and near constant grounds grooming. In recent years a new roof has also been installed.



The clock tower which is original to the building still serves as a time keeper for the community providing accurate readings at a cost of about five thousand dollars a year.

In the late eighties and early nineties it was required that all public properties be brought up to the standards outlined in the Americans with Disabilities Act. This required that an elevator be installed which ran to the upstairs courtroom and a wheel chair ramp and lift be installed to make first floor access possible. The most recent and most significant change has been the relocation of the restroom facilities at the courthouse. Until recently, office employees had to use facilities located outside and down stairs to the old facilities. Now both men's and women's lavatories are located inside, a perk for all who visit or work in the courthouse. Currently new benches are being installed in the main courtroom, but in the past all offices have received new carpet, paint or wallpaper, wiring, and fixtures, all of which are standard improvements.

There is a very important and special blend of history and technology at work in the Clark County Courthouse. A far sight from the old log courthouse of Aurora, our current courthouse, with its towering clock face and computerized offices, is a superior facility. This courthouse has served its citizens well and will continue to do so well into the twenty-first century.