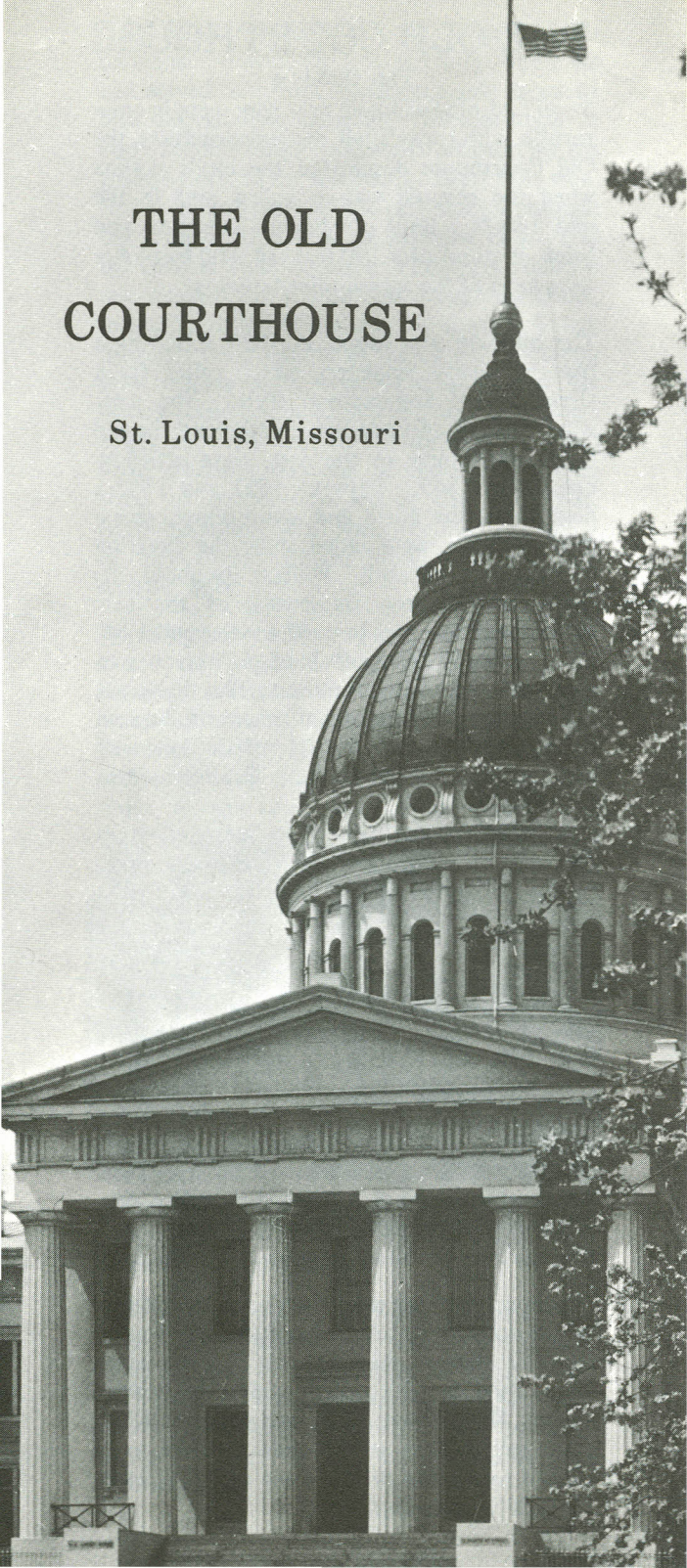


# THE OLD COURTHOUSE

St. Louis, Missouri





# THE OLD COURTHOUSE

## The Building

Small and old-fashioned as it may seem in comparison with today's tall, massive structures, the Old Courthouse dominated the city's skyline when the covered wagons rolled west in the mid 1800's. Built of Missouri limestone and brick, it stood over 190 feet tall, 100 feet taller than most of the surrounding buildings.

The building was begun in 1839 following a plan by Henry Singleton, which called for a Greek revival architectural style. The west wing and the rotunda, which adjoined the old brick courthouse to the east, were officially opened in 1845. Between 1851 and 1862 a new dome, the north and south wings, plus a new east wing, were added under the direction of Robert S. Mitchell. William Rumbold, designer of the iron framework of the new Italianate dome, had to build a scale model and load it with 13,000 pounds of pig iron to convince skeptics of its soundness. This dome was the forerunner of many similar ones to be seen on capitol buildings throughout the land and predates that of the Nation's Capitol by two years.



The Old Courthouse as it appeared in its first stage of construction between 1845 and 1851.

Courtesy Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.

The court ordered mural work for the interior of the dome to match the beauty of its exterior. The four crescent shaped panels, called lunettes, were done by the noted painter of western scenes, Karl Wimar. The artist was suffering from tuberculosis at the time and had to be carried to the top of the dome to do his work. Wimar's lunettes depict:

- North - The British-Indian attack on St. Louis, 1780
- East - Pierre Laclède selecting the site of St. Louis, 1763
- South - DeSoto discovering the Mississippi River, 1541
- West - Cochetopa Pass in the Colorado Rockies

In 1880 an Italian artist, Ettore Miragoli, painted the other murals depicting allegorical figures and historical personages. Miragoli had no respect for American artists and was about to paint out Wimar's work when stopped by city authorities. Of Wimar's four lunettes only the ones on the east and south show his original work, the others having been extensively restored. The west lunette had been damaged by fire in 1936; a wooden beam charred in that blaze can still be seen on the third floor in the north wing. Fortunately, the fire did not injure the plaster Missouri State seals at the base of the dome.

## A Public Forum

During its early days the Courthouse was one of the largest buildings in the city and was frequently used as a public meeting place. The rotunda was well suited for such a use. Originally, the lower balcony extended in towards the center further that it does today, and was supported by four large stone pillars instead of the present iron ones. The large, square base stones for these columns can still be seen in the rotunda floor. An iron spiral staircase rose from the center of the floor, branching in two directions to the first balcony. It was said that a speaker standing on the staircase could speak and be heard clearly by the crowds on the third balcony. The rotunda's final alteration to its present appearance took place in 1870.

The first event held here was the building's formal opening ceremony which took place on Washington's Birthday, 1845. A few days later commencement exercises were held for graduates of Kemper Medical College, the first medical school west of the Mississippi. In 1846 public spirited citizens held meetings to raise troops for the Mexican War, and the following year they met to welcome them home. In the years 1846-47, meetings were conducted to

discuss relief for victims of the Irish famine, while others at the same time urged the stemming of the wave of immigration caused by the famine. In 1849 Senator Thomas Hart Benton, one of the great political figures and orators of his day, made his "Westward the Course of Empire" speech calling for a railroad to the Pacific linking East and West. Meetings were held in the 1840's and 1850's to consider the slavery issue and the rising tensions between North and South, and, following the assassination of Lincoln, a bust of him was placed on top of an empty tomb in the rotunda to honor the slain President. Towards the end of the century St. Louis did not lack for meeting places, and the Old Courthouse saw fewer large gatherings. One of the last events was a public reception held for President Grover Cleveland in 1887.



The Old Courthouse in 1868.

## Courts of Law

The cases tried in the Courthouse made their impact felt far beyond St. Louis. The courts operated here from 1843, when the building was still only partially completed, to 1930. Lawyers argued here over cases involving slavery, the fur trade, steamboating and controversies over the construction of Eads Bridge.

The first trials of the Dred Scott Case were held in this building. Scott, a Negro slave, brought suit for his freedom against his mis-



tress, Mrs. John Emerson, on the grounds of previous residence in free territory where he had served with Mrs. Emerson's now deceased husband, an army surgeon. The case began in 1847 in a no longer existing courtroom on the ground floor of the west wing. Scott lost, won, and then lost again as the case moved through the local court, the State Supreme Court, and the District Federal Court. Finally, in 1856 his case reached the United States Supreme Court. In March of 1857 Chief Justice Roger B. Taney delivered the "opinion of the Court", declaring that Negroes could never be citizens, and that slavery could not be excluded from the Nation's newly acquired western territories. The Dred Scott Decision was one of the last in a long series of events that led to the Civil War. After the ruling, Scott was given his freedom by his new owner, Taylor Blow. He died 15½ months later.

Other legal proceedings of interest that occurred here were Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis' admission to the bar in 1878, and General Ulysses S. Grant's freeing of his only slave in 1859. Slaves were, on occasion, auctioned from the Courthouse steps by court order in the same manner as property of that time that had been claimed in lieu of taxes or debts. Contrary to popular belief, there were no jail cells in the building.

### The Courthouse Today

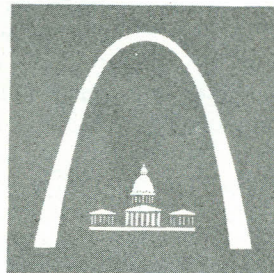
The Old Courthouse deteriorated during the 1930's after it was vacated by the Courts. The National Park Service acquired the site in 1940, established its offices here in 1941, and began restoration. The building will continue as headquarters for the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, and will contain museum exhibits dealing with local history and certain phases of the expansion story which will not be covered in the Museum of Westward Expansion beneath the Gateway Arch.

The Old Courthouse is still imposing as a state-ly monument to the past, and to the future. When standing in the shadowy rotunda, if you listen closely you can hear the echoes from yesterday speaking for values we still are striving for - justice, beauty, human dignity, and understanding.

## FOR YOUR SAFETY!

You are entering an historic old building with varying floor levels throughout. Remain alert and exercise caution on stairs.

Publication courtesy Jefferson National Expansion Historical Association, Inc.



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