WHAT A CLASSIC!

Who says a courthouse is just another building where courts of law are held? The Adair County Courthouse proves that a courthouse can have a surprising factual history as well as magnificent architecture. Even though the courthouse is a prominent building of Adair County, even listed on the National Register of Historical Places, most people do not realize the many changes from the 1800's.

Construction on the first Adair County Courthouse began in 1843, two years after Adair County was organized and Kirksville was selected as the county seat. This one-story, brick structure was built on the northwest corner of the town's square, where the First National Bank now stands. The cost was $1,000 and Mr. John B. Earhart was hired as the builder. Mr. John D. Callison was employed as the carpenter and Mr. Caleb Barnett was superintendent. The first court met July 3, 1843, and during this time the building was also often used to hold church services, since there were no churches in the new city.

Construction began in 1852 on the second Adair County Courthouse. William H. Parcells was appointed superintendent and was sent to Knox City, just east of Adair County, to get the plan of the recently completed courthouse in Edina. It was then decided by Adair County that the courthouse would be located in the middle of the town square. On March 8, 1852, the contract was awarded to Gaylon and Douglas who completed the work in 1853 at the cost of $2,250. The brick, two-story structure contained offices, a few additional rooms, and a small courtroom. This building served a very important part in the Battle of Kirksville. It was occupied by Confederate recruits in an effort to withstand the attack of Union soldiers. It is reported that the Confederates shot from windows and doors of the building before some of the Confederates fled, and the others were killed or surrendered. On April 12, 1865, just three days after the Confederate army under General Robert E. Lee surrendered in Lynchburg, Virginia, at the Appomattox Courthouse, this second Adair County Courthouse burned to the ground. Land and marriage records were saved, but the county court records were destroyed.

The third and present Adair County Courthouse stands tall and prominent in the middle of Kirksville’s town square. (Photo courtesy of KTVO)
Adair County did without a courthouse for the next 33 years. Upstairs rooms were rented in the 1890's along North Elson Street, a half-block from the square. They contained the Circuit Court and all the county offices. These rented rooms also served as the meeting place of the Masonic Lodge.

A bond issue was necessary to build a new courthouse. Four separate times the county court proposed that the county issue bonds to build a new courthouse, but each time the bond failed. It is believed that these bonds were defeated mainly due to the poor economic state of the county. Finally in 1897, the required two-thirds majority affirmative vote was given to a $50,000 county bond issue to erect the present courthouse and a jail. The County Court, after considering a number of plans, hired Kirsch and Company, an architectural firm with headquarters in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. They were to design a three-story building, with the ground floor being an above-ground basement.

The laying of the cornerstone for the third Adair County Courthouse attracted a crowd estimated at 15,000, despite intermittent rainfall. The town was decorated with Cuban and American flags, and largest parade ever was held on dedication day, May 2, 1898. Mr. Charles H. Lee, a Kirksville resident, had prepared the cornerstone, and the Masonic ceremony was conducted by Mr. Andrew Fisher of La Belle, Missouri, who was acting for the Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Missouri.

This three-story structure was built at a cost of $50,000. One of the main attractions of this building was a square tower which contained a lookout platform, a clock with four faces, and a pyramid surmounted by the Statue of Justice. This tower was removed 50 years later, in 1949, due to the fear that its weight was endangering the stability of the roof. The removal cost of this tower was $20,000. The Statue of Justice was placed at the center point of the roof, and one of the clock dials is now in the Adair County Historical Society's Museum.

The building, a rural courthouse style of architecture, features a square design with ornamentation on the corners and an arched entranceway on all sides. This design, referred to as Richardsonian Romanesque, features Aegon dart molding, Greek faces on the entranceway columns, and leaf motifs. These patterns are repeated on the building facades. The structure has blue sandstone walls, but due to the sandblasting a few years ago, the blue sandstone now has a
Top: Adair County officials who occupied the third courthouse in 1907. Bottom: The third Adair County Courthouse, shown here before the removal of the square tower, was referred to as the “gem of all courthouses in northeast Missouri” at the time of its construction. (Photo courtesy of the Adair County Historical Society)
yellowish tint. At the time of its construction, this third courthouse was referred to as the "gem of all courthouses in northeast Missouri."

The building is considered fireproof with a steel staircase and two fireproof vaults. It is heated by steam and lighted by electricity. The main purpose of the courthouse today is to house the county offices such as the Probate and Associate Judge and courtroom, the Circuit Clerk and courtroom, the Collector, the Assessor, the Treasurer, the County Clerk and court, the Drivers' License Bureau, and the Adair County Historical Society's Museum.

"A true definition of history is that you are what you live in," said Linda Harper, historical preservationist for the Northeast Missouri Regional Planning Commission. Adair County can be proud of the interesting history of its courthouses. In taking a final look at these three buildings, much can be learned about the past; we are able to see troubled times accompanied by memorable events. The World Book Dictionary sums up these Adair County Courthouses best with its definition of classic: "likely to remain in style for a long time." We, the writers, are sure that the present Adair County Courthouse will never have to worry about losing its style!

Top: This view shows one of the bosses found on the base of the tower. The faces give an interesting and grotesque relief to the courthouse. Bottom: Did you know that this female head is on the third floor of the courthouse? This plaster work is painted with enamel and ties together the interior and the exterior of the building.

This view of the circuit courtroom shows the elaborate judge's bench made of golden oak. The courtroom has an organized division of space, with a balastrade spindle dividing the audience from the court proceedings.