

Sanilac County Courthouse 100th Anniversary

Brief History of the Fire and Rebuilding

1915-1916

The Fire

Fire completely destroyed the Sanilac County Courthouse on Sunday, January 17, 1915. The fire broke out during the night in the boiler room in the northeast corner of the building. A back stairs, near the boiler room, made a flue for the flames to spread rapidly through the building. The woodwork was consumed before the fire department could get a stream of water directed on the blazing building. Faulty wiring was later blamed.



Built in 1879, the courthouse (pictured) was constructed in the days when roads were next to impassable and the contractor was said to have lost heavily on the work because of the great inconvenience in getting material on the ground. The brick used was made by hand, sun burned and from clay excavated within 100 feet of the site of the building. The lumber was mostly Sanilac County white pine of a grade which was almost extinct by the time of the fire. The financial loss to the county was projected to be \$40,000 to \$50,000 with insurance of \$21,500.

The walls were still standing after the fire but the interior was ruined. Fortunately, all the records and valuable documents were saved as most were stored in vaults. The School Commissioner's Office and the Drain Commissioner's Office had no vault but Drain Commissioner Nicol being one of the first on the scene, got into his office and threw all his records out of the window. School Commissioner W. J. Musselman lost everything in his office.

Monday morning found the officials making arrangements and by Tuesday the offices were back to business. Probate Judge Richard Pearson was holding Court in the rear of the State Bank Building while Register of Deeds Warner, Treasurer Loree, Clerk Utley and the Prosecuting Attorney established themselves in the Roberts Block. Drain Commissioner Nicol established an office over the Truman Moss Bank. Circuit Court was being held in the City Hall.

Sources: Croswell Jeffersonian and Marlette Leader, January, 1915

The Decision to Rebuild

The twenty-nine member Board of Supervisors, made up of representatives of each township and city, met for three days, January 28 to 30th, in the North building of the Roberts Block building, to consider ways for housing the County officers and records and to consider the question of rebuilding the destroyed courthouse. The first day, only ten supervisors were able to be in attendance on account of the train being delayed.



A committee was quickly appointed to work with the Prosecuting Attorney on drafting a bond resolution for building a new courthouse. Other committees were charged with securing temporary offices, purchasing necessary furniture and disposing of the courthouse ruins.

Arrangements were made to rent the Roberts store (pictured) for \$50 per month for the Clerk, Register, Treasurer, Drain Commissioner and School Commissioner. Mr. Roberts agreed to build a fireproof vault for all the County's documents which would also serve as the office of the Register of Deeds. For the vault, the county agreed to pay rent of \$65 per month for 1 year and \$25 per month thereafter. For the safety of the records a night watchman was hired for \$1.50 per night.

Arrangements were made with the Sandusky Bank to furnish a room for the Office of Judge of Probate, including heat, light, furniture and access to the vaults for safe keeping of documents for \$30 per month. Once the vault was completed in the Roberts building, the Judge of Probate was to move over and occupy the space vacated by the Register of Deeds.

Within two weeks, the Board of Supervisors adopted a resolution for a new County Courthouse with fire proof offices to be erected upon the present site in the City of Sandusky. The Board authorized a bonding proposal be placed on the April ballot, asking, "Shall the County of Sanilac raise by loan and issue its bonds therefore, through its Board of Supervisors the sum of eighty thousand dollars for the term of ten years for the purpose of constructing a Courthouse with fire proof offices?" For this proposal, ladies were allowed to vote on the same terms as men. The Board approved adding \$21,500 of insurance money to the construction budget.

Sources: Board of Supervisors Official Minutes of 1915 and Marlette Leader February 12, 1915

Demolition

Register of Deeds L.E. Warner's written account of the tearing down of the ruins of the courthouse, "The past few days have been noisy ones for Sandusky. The committee appointed for the purpose by the board of supervisors have razed the ruins of the Courthouse to the ground, using for the purpose a liberal supply of dynamite. They have men and teams working to remove the debris, the good brick and other building material of any value are to be saved and disposed of for what it will bring and the balance used for repairing or improving roads. They figure on about 30 days for this part of the work."

"The box in the corner stone contained several copies of the Marlette Index of that time, a copy of the Lexington Jeffersonian dated 1878, a copy of the by-laws of Marlette Masonic lodge, and also one of the Oddfellows lodge. The papers were in a poor state of preservation owing to the heat. There was also contained in the box a copper cent dated 1812 and a dime dated 1877, which latter were appropriated by supervisors Carroll and Alexander."

Source: Marlette Leader, March 12, 1915

The broken brick, mortar and other debris were hauled away and deposited on streets and roads throughout the county. The expenses for clearing away the ruins, including labor and tools, totaled \$765.96. After selling salvaged materials, the county was left with a "trifle over \$100 for clearing away the ruins".

Source: Board of Supervisors official minutes of 1915

Bids and Bonding

Election results for the April 5, 1915, bonding proposal was Yes 3,800 and No 3,336 with the proposal passing by a majority of 464.

The Board of Supervisors immediately appointed a building committee composed of Circuit Court Judge Beach, Chairman of the Board of Supervisors and three others.

Ten sealed bids were received on the sale of the bonds. The first motion to accept the bid of John F. McLean & Co was amended to accept the bid of Otis & Co. at par for 4 ½% with a premium of \$1,200. This bid was later withdrawn, as Otis & Co.'s attorney was unable to give their approving opinion relative to the legality of the Sanilac County bonds.

The Board again solicited bids for the sale of bonds. Two bids were received and the Board rejected both. The Board solicited bids a third time and on May 19, 1915, the Board accepted the bid of Sidney Spitzer & Co., for bonds of \$80,000, issued for 10 years with semi-annual interest of 5%.

The Supervisors were also soliciting architect design services. On May 19, 1915, the Board approved an agreement with architect Joseph E. Mills & Son of Detroit, MI. A memorandum detailed the kinds of building materials to be used: "Exterior of lower story, front columns, cornice and all trimmings will be first class Bedford stone. Exterior of building above lower story will be faced with first class vitrious [sic] pressed bricks. Floors, ceilings and roof will be constructed of reinforced concrete of equal construction. Roof to be covered with first class roofing slate with tile ridge and hip coverings. Polished plate glass of first quality will be used for all exterior windows and doors and Florentine glass for interior partitions and doors. Clear oak is to be used for all interior woodwork, finished with 3 coats of varnish. Steel fire proof stairs are to be used throughout. Granolithic or Terraza [sic] floor finish will be used in all corridors and finished concrete floors with 2 coats of enamel in remainder of building. First class plumbing fixtures are to be used throughout. Building is to be heated with first class gravity steam heating apparatus, using 2 cast iron boilers of Ideal manufacture. Hard wall plaster will be used throughout. All electric wiring is to be run in conducts according to latest rules of National Board of Fire underwriters. All walls and footings below grade line will be constructed of concrete, all other walls and partitions will be of brick or tile and no frame petitions are to be used anywhere."

On June 28, 1915, the Clerk opened sealed bids for construction. Twelve bids were received with the Board of Supervisors accepting the lowest bid of \$74,528 from Covell Const. Co. of Ionia, MI. Because the contract was let below expectations there was sufficient money to add installation of a self-regulating heating apparatus for \$1,352.40 and marble wainscoting in corridors for \$2,820.

Source: Official proceedings of the Board of Supervisors 1915

Construction

August 6, 1915, was set for the big event in Sandusky, witnessing the corner stone (pictured) being laid. Special trains on both railroads brought guests to town. Upward of 7,000 visitors were in attendance. The morning was taken up with parades and drilling by the Knights and Soldier boys. A huge parade formed at 2:30 p.m. in which Sandusky school children, the Granger, Gleaner Odd Fellows, Masonic and other organizations participated. At the conclusion, when the new Courthouse building was reached, James Curry, chairman of the County Board of Supervisors, instructed the Knights Templar in charge to proceed with the laying of the cornerstone followed by a program of addresses by state and local officials. Three bands, Amsden's Thirty-Third Regiment band from Saginaw, Sandusky and Caro bands furnished music. On the shady lawns, tables were arranged so that people who brought their lunches had a suitable place to prepare it. Homeowners kept their coffee pot full and hot for the many guests. The evening brought a grand display of expensive fireworks, costing several hundred dollars. This was described as an event that is history, an event our children should talk about, the biggest event that has happened in this county in years.



Construction progressed rapidly. One serious injury occurred when placing the steel columns. A falling column permanently disabled worker K. Hale. He was later awarded \$5.77 per week for 500 weeks or \$2,875 by the insurance company.

By early December 1915, the work of riveting the steel beams was complete and slate for the roof was already on the ground. The stone workers were finishing up the work on the front entrance of the building. A stone slab weighing eight tons was swung in place on top of the two large columns in the front. It was necessary to get a traction engine to drag the stone from the railroad to the grounds. County Clerk Utley and Supervisors Curry and Green were in Detroit purchasing furniture for the courthouse.

By the end of 1915, Covell & Company stated they would easily have the new building complete by the first of March, although at present they were slightly behind their building schedule. The concrete was all laid on the roof, and their men were now placing the slate shingles and tile. Two cars of plaster had arrived, and masons were working on applying the same. The steam plant was completed; and the boilers had been properly tested. The firm expected to begin the mill work the first of the year, and as a whole was satisfied with the progress made on the job.

On January 14, 1916, it was reported the plasterers were busy working on the first floor and they figured on having the entire building plastered by January 25th. The terrazzo floor in the first story was being laid. All the marble and other material had been ordered far in advance so that as soon as the building was ready for the finishing touches there would be no delay in getting materials. The roof that was being placed was guaranteed for five years.

By the end of January, it was reported the contractors had a large force of plasterers and others employed in getting the building ready for the inside carpenters. The contractors expected the tile and slate roof to be completed by the end of the week. The plasterers were about two thirds done, and after the plaster was dry the mill workers would begin. Much of the mill work, such as base boards, doors and other wood trim for the interior was manufactured in a factory in Bay City and shipped as needed. Several painters were now on the job and a larger number were to be added as the work progressed. Floors in the corridors were about complete.

The marble workers arrived the middle of February to commence the marble work on the interior of the new Courthouse. The job was let to the Eckhardt Company of Toledo, Ohio. It was to take until the first of March to complete this work. The marble used for the wainscoting in the offices, corridors, toilets and on the staircases cost \$4,000.

The building committee met early February to select lighting fixtures and the contract for the fixtures was awarded to the Champion people of Coldwater.

Sources: Official Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors 1915/1916, Sandusky Republican, Sandusky Farmer, Marlette Leader newspapers.

Completion

In a remarkable construction feat, the Courthouse was completed in nine months. Judge Richard Pearson moved the furniture and records of the probate office (now the County Drain Commissioner Office) on Thursday, March 10, 1916, from the temporary offices in



the Roberts block. He was the first of the local officials to move into the new building, however, the circuit court had started occupying the still unfinished court room two weeks prior. Judge Pearson's room was the first to be completely finished and it was reported visitors to his office would find him comfortably located, quite "high toned" at present, but as usual, always glad to meet them. Other offices were to be occupied as rapidly as completed and it was anticipated that before April 1st all officials would be happily ensconced in their new quarters.

The Offices of the Drain Commissioner, Surveyor, Associated Charities and School Commissioner were located on the first floor. The County Clerk, Treasurer, Probate Judge and Records Business Office (now known as the Register of Deeds) were on the second floor. The Circuit Court, Law Library, Jury Room,

Witness Room, County Attorney (Prosecuting Attorney), and Board of Supervisors were on the third floor.

The Board of Supervisors formally accepted the new fire proof courthouse on April 14, 1916, their first meeting in the new courthouse. Final change orders were approved, including the addition of a central vacuum cleaning system, bringing the construction contract to a total of \$80,478.73. At the meeting, the Board adopted Resolutions of appreciation and recommendation for Contractor Charles E. Covell, Covell Construction Company, and his foreman Roy E. Pickett and for Architect Joseph E. Mills and Son.

Sources: Official Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors 1916, Marlette Leader 1915-16

Changes through the years

After 100 years of continuous service the Courthouse remains a grand structure with many years of building life left. Several changes have taken place over the years, however, it should be noted the following offices remain in their original locations: Register of Deeds, County Clerk and County Treasurer on the second floor and the Jury Room, Circuit Courtroom and Circuit Court Offices on the third floor.

In May, 1922, the World War I Soldier's and Sailor's Memorial was added to the front of the Courthouse. The World War II monument, the 12 foot tall, 6 ½ ton granite stone monument located in front of the Gazebo, was added in 1950.

A twenty-nine member Board of Supervisors guided County government until 1968. Beginning with 1969, the County changed to a five member Board of Commissioners, with each elected County Commissioner representing a district. The number of County Commissioner districts has changed through the decades, increasing to a high of 8, and now returned to 5 districts. After each census, new Commissioner districts are drawn and the number of Commissioners established for the following decade. The former Board of Supervisors Chambers now serves as a District Courtroom.

The Courthouse retains its designation as a federally approved fallout shelter, a designation established in May 1966, during the cold war years when the country feared nuclear attack.

A major renovation occurred in 1973, when the electrical service was upgraded, lighting was replaced and drop ceilings were added throughout the building.

Another major renovation occurred in 1994, when a \$1,480,000 Annex was added to the Courthouse following an August 1991, fire which destroyed County offices located across the street from the Courthouse. It was at this time the 2nd and 3rd floor marble staircases were removed and replaced with handicap accessible corridors connecting the two buildings.

The "old" Courthouse now houses the Offices of Administrator/Controller, Public Guardian, Equalization, Board of Commissioners Chambers, County Clerk, Treasurer, Drain Commissioner, Register of Deeds, Circuit Court, District Court and Jury Rooms.

The Annex contains the Offices of Friend of the Court, Construction and Land Use, Juvenile Court, Probate Court, Magistrate, Community Corrections, Prosecuting Attorney, Information Technology, Building and Grounds, Security Screening and the Michigan Department of Corrections Probation and Parole.

Pictured below are the 2016 Sanilac County elected officials.



Front Row: Daniel Dean, Commissioner District 1, Donald A. Hunt, Commissioner District 5, Justin K. Faber, Commissioner District 2, John Hoffmann, Commissioner District 3 and James Ruby, Commissioner District 4

Second Row: Sheriff Garry Biniecki, Probate Court Judge Gregory S. Ross, Register of Deeds Michele VanNorman, Treasurer Trudy Nicol, Clerk Denise McGuire, Circuit Court Judge Donald A. Teeple, Prosecuting Attorney James V. Young and Drain Commissioner Gregory Alexander

Thank you for celebrating this milestone with us.

Compiled by Kathleen Dorman
Administrator/Controller
April, 2016

Special Thanks

100th Anniversary Committee

Kathleen Dorman

Roger Ballard

Justin K. Faber

Trudy Nicol

Jeff Pollock

Heather Zang

Courthouse Employee Recognition and Special Events Board

Pam Burger

Kathleen Dorman

Marcia Matson

Suzie Palmer

Michele VanNorman

Heather Zang

Staff Volunteers

Kristy Bender, Kelly Gerstenberger, Jody Morris, Tina Willis, Roger Ballard, Anna Varney, Deb Darling, Lucy Higgins, Connie Bainbridge, Doug Sweet, Eric Bowerman and others who stepped in to lend a hand where needed.

Sanilac County Historical Village & Museum

Jeff Pollock, Director

Sandusky District Library

Librarian Gail Nartker and staff