

“EARLY COURTHOUSES OF WINONA COUNTY” *

IN

THE HISTORY

OF

WINONA COUNTY

MINNESOTA

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EARLY COURTHOUSES OF WINONA COUNTY

Courthouse and Jail. As early as March 1, 1854, the county commissioners took action on the matter of securing county buildings by voting to purchase land for that purpose. The location selected was practically the present site of the courthouse and jail, it being voted to secure lots 3, 4, and 5, in block 19. July 8, 1856, J. S. Denman, then a member of the board, was authorized to build a county jail of logs 12 by 16, 12 feet high. In November, 1856, he was authorized to procure stone and timber for the erection of a county courthouse and jail. January 6, 1857, the plans were accepted. This matter was the subject of extensive investigation at a later date. It seems that the county had plenty of money in the treasury, but for some reason the county buildings were not erected. The recriminations which followed the affair are outside of the scope of this work. One incident in connection with the building has an important bearing on the present status of Winona, according to Dr. L. H. Bunnell. The Mississippi river in 1857 seemed to be changing its channel. Instead of following its present course, that unruly river, which already had abandoned its ancient channel through what is now Lake Winona, tried to plow its main channel north of Island No. 72, so called. The steamboat "Dr. Franklin," whose officers were none too friendly to Winona, began to follow the new course of the river north of the island, without passing the landings at Winona. Eventually, according to Dr. Bunnell, J. S. Denman began bringing stone from the Wisconsin bluffs for the erection of the new courthouse. On one of these trips, whether by accident or design has never been determined, the barge and a large load of stone were sunk at the entrance to the channel leading north of Island No. 72, and since then the steamboats have all passed the landings at Winona. According to the records, the contract was let to Mr. Denman in November, 1856, and cancelled in January, 1857. He was given a certain sum of money to requite him for the work which had been done when the contract was cancelled. This indemnity was the matter of bitter

correspondence in the newspapers for some time afterward. In the meantime, the county business was transacted in rented buildings. The officers usually had separate places of business, and the courts were held in halls. Various places were used for a jail, the long-term prisoners being sent to the jail at Wabasha. In 1859 the Bennett building, on Second street, was secured for county headquarters. This was long pointed out to newcomers as the original city hall. In 1862 county building was erected near the site of the present court house. It was first occupied in the fall of 1862. In 1871 the substantial jail, which is still standing, was erected.

On July 26, 1882, the initiatory steps were taken toward building the new courthouse by a resolution of the county board levying a tax of five-tenths of a mill for a courthouse sinking fund. The cost of the building, exclusive of the site, was about \$120,000. It was dedicated September 17, 1889.

In 1913 the county commissioners voted to erect a new jail on the corner of Washington and Fourth streets. ■

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