

“JAIL and COURTHOUSE”
IN
TWO
HISTORIES OF
WRIGHT COUNTY
MINNESOTA

Two histories of the jails and courthouses of Wright County follow. The first is taken from Daniel Ross Farnham’s *History of Wright County* published in 1880. It describes the construction of the jail in Monticello in 1859. At that time Monticello was the county seat, but in November 1867, voters approved the removal of the county seat to Buffalo. As a result the first jail was abandoned, and reverted to its original owners. The county’s first courthouse was built in Buffalo in late 1877, and it was occupied on January 1, 1878.

The second is taken from the first volume of Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge’s *History of Wright County, Minnesota* published in 1915. He covers much of the same ground but in more detail than Farnham.

These excerpts have been reformatted. The authors’ spelling and punctuation are not changed.

I. DANIEL ROSS FARNHAM
(1880)

COUNTY JAIL

At a meeting of the board of county commissioners held July 15, 1859, it was voted that a county jail be erected at a cost of not more than \$1,500, and that the county building committee have full power to make contracts and build said jail, to be paid in Wright county bonds, bearing interest at 12 percent.

September 15th, 1859, the board of county commissioners voted to issue the jail bonds, to be left in the hands of the county auditor, except three hundred dollars to be paid to the contractor at present. Although the contract price for the jail was \$1,500, before it was finished it cost very near \$2,500. The jail was built a few rods northwest of the Academy building in the village of Monticello on the land deeded to the county by Smith and Brown, who were proprietors in part of the village property, with the proviso, in the deed, that the land should belong to the county only as long as the same was used for county purposes. Accordingly, when in after years the county seat was moved to Buffalo, the county jail fell into the hands of the original owners of the land. The jail was about 20 x 24 feet and built of hewed tamarack logs, sided on the outside and lathed and plastered inside with six cells and a hall running through the center. Very few prisoners were ever confined in the jail. At the present time it stands out there alone, a monument of money wasted, and has never been used for other purposes since it fell into the hands of the original owners of the land thirteen years ago.

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THE COURT HOUSE

In 1873 the contract with the citizens of Buffalo for a free court house for five years expired, and not having made any other arrangements, the county was obliged to purchase the building of Jackson Taylor for the use of the county at one thousand dollars, and began to make arrangements to build a new court house. The legislature having passed an act allowing the county to issue bonds for the purpose of erecting county buildings, the matter was submitted to the people at the general election in 1875 and was adopted a Committees were sent by the board of county

commissioners into different parts of the state to examine county buildings and report the best that could be built for \$30,000 to \$50,000. The committee reported that a brick court house with stone basement and large enough for all county purposes, with rooms for all county offices, court room and jury rooms would cost about \$35,000. Mr. J. V. Daniels drew up the plans and specifications and the county advertised for bids. Bids were received as high as \$41,000; and several between \$35,000 and \$40,000. The bid of Bisbee & Bardwell of Minneapolis for \$26,640 was accepted and a contract made with them to build the court house. It was supposed that as there were no building stone in the county, and very few brick had been made that it would be a rather hard bargain for the contractors. But by using the stone found around Buffalo lake for a part of the basement and hauling the balance from Minneapolis, and by burning brick in the vicinity of the building, the contract was fulfilled to the satisfaction of all, and at the contract price without any extras.

The mason work was under the supervision of Joseph Nelson then nearly 80 years of age. The out buildings and grading, fencing and ornamenting the grounds has cost about \$3,000; so that the whole cost is about \$30,000, and Wright county has one of the best, neatest and most comfortable court houses in the state. The county officers moved into the new court house on the first day of January 1878, and the county has a home. The location is central and unless some unlooked for circumstance should change the boundries of the county, the county seat will remain at Buffalo. □

II. FRANKLYN CURTISS-WEDGE (1915)

COUNTY PROPERTY.

Jail. As early as October 15, 1858, the commissioners took up the matter of building a court house and jail. The supervisors inherited the problem. July 15, 1859, the matter was definitely decided and the building of a jail placed in the hands of a committee. The cost of the jail was to be \$1,500 and county bonds were to be issued bearing interest at 12 per cent. During the discussion it was suggested that as Wright

county was on the frontier, surrounded by more sparsely settled counties, considerable money might be made by keeping prisoners for other counties. On September 15, 1859, the board voted to issue the bonds, placing them in the hands of the county auditor, except three hundred dollars advance payment to the contractor. The building was of hewed tamarack logs, clap-boarded outside and lathed and plastered inside. It was furnished with six cells, situated on either side of a hall running through the center. The size of the jail was about 20 by 24, and was built on land a few rods northwest of the Academy building, deeded for that purpose by Smith & Brown so long as used for county purposes. When the building was completed it had cost the county \$2,500, instead of the sum before named, and when, in later years, the county seat was removed to Buffalo, the land reverted to the original owners, and with it the old jail, in which few prisoners had ever been confined.

The county has now no jail. There are cells in the basement of the court house for temporary detention, but prisoners who are subject to imprisonment in a county jail are taken to Hennepin county and incarcerated there. This has proven a satisfactory arrangement, the cost being less than the expense of maintaining a jail.

Court House. In territorial days the county seat of Wright county was located at Monticello. When the state was admitted in 1858, there were several candidates for county seat honors, but Monticello was still the metropolis of the county, and the people of that village won an easy victory.

As time passed and the county paid its outstanding debts, the propriety of building a court house was discussed. The county offices were kept in several places. The auditor and treasurer occupied a room together. The other officials had no offices, and the records were scattered throughout private homes. Before a court house was built, a permanent location of the seat of government must be fixed upon.

September 3, 1861, Jackson Taylor, of Buffalo, presented a petition asking that the county seat be transferred to Buffalo.

The vote came up in the fall, the ballots being marked "For Removal of County Seat to Buffalo," and "Against Removal of County Seat to Buffalo." The proposition was defeated.

With the now more general distribution of settlers throughout the county, the question of removing the county seat from Monticello to some more central point was more vigorously agitated, and in the legislature of 1867 a bill was passed submitting the matter to a vote of the people at the fall election of that year. As a result of this measure, the location was fixed at Buffalo. The last meeting of the county commissioner at Monticello was held March 12, 1868, and the first at Buffalo, March 23, 1868. January 10, 1868, the legislature was asked to rescind an action which it had taken authorizing the people of Wright county to issue bonds for the court house, such an issue having been made unnecessary by the generosity of the citizens of Buffalo.

In accordance with a previous agreement, the citizens of Buffalo erected a building for court room and offices, which was furnished the county free of rent for a term of five years. This building was 24 by 36 feet, and two stories high. It was later owned by C. E. Oakley, the upper room being known as Oakley's Hall, and used for society and public meetings. A brick vault was also built adjoining the old court house on the east, during the construction of which a partial collapse gave Mr. Gardner, the builder, a temporary burial, from which, however, he was resurrected with slight injuries.

In 1873 the five years' lease of the temporary court house expired and the building was purchased from Jackson Taylor, James Sturges and O. L. Dudley for \$900. But it was inadequate, and in the same year the legislature authorized the county to issue court house bonds. The proposition was submitted to the people at the township elections that spring, but the measure was defeated. In 1875 the legislature passed an act authorizing the board of county commissioners to issue the necessary bonds without submitting the matter to a vote of the people.

Accordingly a committee was appointed, who, after examining several public buildings in different parts of the state, reported that a suitable and convenient building, with heavy brick walls and stone foundations, could be erected at a maximum cost of \$35,000. Plans and specifications were furnished by C. N. Daniels, and bids solicited. The contract was awarded to Bisbee, Bardwell & Moses, of Minneapolis, for \$26,640. A portion of the stone used in the foundation was obtained near Buffalo lake, the remainder being brought from Minneapolis. The bricks were burned near by, thus lessening the otherwise heavy expense of building. The mason work was carried on under the supervision of Joseph Nelson, then nearly eighty years old.

On January 1, 1878, the new court house was occupied by the county officers. The additional expenditure of some \$3,000 in fencing, erecting outbuildings and ornamenting the grounds, added much to its original appearance. Viewed from the margin of the lake on the south, with its terraced grounds, slight walks and greenwood background, its imposing structure affords a perspective such as artists admire, and of which the citizens of Wright county are justly proud.

After the legislature had authorized the board to issue the bonds without the vote of the people, there was still much opposition to the building of the court house. When the matter came to a vote before the county commissioners, those who voted for the project were Jonas Johnson, Odilion Berthiaume and K. O. Moisterteigen, and to these men the county owes the fact that it has a court house today. Thomas C. Porter and Frank Weigel voted against it. The building committee consisted of Frank Weigel, Jonas Johnson and Odilion Berthiaume. ■

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