

Dunklin County Courthouse - A WPA Project - Built 1939

100 North Court Square/North Main St.

Wood frame construction formed many of the buildings built in Kennett during the late 1800s. This made them particularly susceptible to fire and the city's history has many examples of buildings in the business district around the square burning only to rise again. The Dunklin County Courthouse is an example of a building that has burned not only once, but twice, once in the 1860s, and again in 1872. Since 1846 Kennett has been home to five courthouses, and all but one in the center of the square.

1939 - Present

Built between 1937 and 1939 for a cost of \$178,000, the current building is a Works Project Administration (WPA) project. WPA projects were part of the New Deal, a series of federal programs that helped the nation emerge from the Great Depression. WPA projects formed a national work relief program that replaced direct financial assistance.

The building is designed in the Art Deco style which represents a transitional period between traditional and modern approaches to building and peaked between 1925 and 1940.

This is the fourth courthouse to occupy the square, and the fifth building to serve Dunklin County. It features rock accents and columns on the front façade, and multi-colored abstract decorated tiles adorn the entryways and windows. The courtroom, located on the second story, is finished in black walnut with walnut wainscoting. A map of the county is executed in the terrazzo floor on the main floor.



Dunklin County Courthouse 1942



Dunklin County Courthouse 1907

1892 - 1937

Built in 1892 at a cost of \$15,000, the city's third courthouse to be built on this site was razed in 1937 to make way for the current courthouse. The brick building measured 56' x 80'; it was 40' high and 96' to the top of the tower. In 1937 the courthouse was reported to be in dangerous condition. The dome had sunk several inches; ceiling joists were pulled completely out of the walls, and the circuit court room was in danger of collapsing. The Dunklin Democrat claimed it was the worst courthouse in southeast Missouri.

1872 - 1892

There was no dedicated court building for 20 years as the local towns battled to establish the court in their own city. Court was held in an old, rented frame building on the south side of the square. In 1891 a bond was passed to build a new courthouse and construction began in March 1892.

1870 - 1872

The second courthouse on the square was a 50' x 60' two-story frame structure begun in 1870 and finished in 1872. It fell victim to fire on April 9, just months after completion, and destroyed all records. It was widely believed that the fire was intentionally set by individuals to destroy records related to a financial matter and thus avoid prosecution.

1847 - 1863

In 1847 the first courthouse was built in the center of the square. The building was made of hewn gum logs, was 40 feet square and 1½ stories in height. Fire destroyed the building and its contents during the Civil War.

1846 - 1847

Dunklin County was organized on February 14, 1845. Hiram Langdon built the first circuit court building in 1846 and it was far different than its successors. The judge, jury, and spectators met under the shade of a large oak tree and a small 10' x 12' round pole hut, scarcely high enough for the judge and jury to stand in. The benches were hewn log seats with wooden peg legs. The building also served as the town's first school and church.

Early records report the wind whistled through the logs so much that the occupants lined them with cotton so that the wind wouldn't blow the papers off their desks.



On the 22nd of January, 1896, the last bond was called in and the debt was paid in full. We have a courthouse that we are all proud of... I think any people who are keeping their records in wooden buildings should realize the risk they are running and build a courthouse with fireproof vaults and thus protect their records. We owe no one and have \$10,000 in our treasury to the credit of the revenue fund.

Virgil McKay, Clerk of the County Court, January 30, 1896



Special thanks to the Dunklin County Genealogical Society.

Sources: Goodspeed's History of Southeast Missouri, 1888; Dunklin County Courthouse, University of Missouri Extension, 2002; History of Dunklin County, Mo., Mary F. Smyth-Davis, 1896.

