

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

For NPS use only

**National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form**

received DEC 10 1986

date entered JAN 7 1987

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*  
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

**1. Name**

historic Watonwan County Courthouse

and/or common N/A

**2. Location**

street & number 7th St. S. and 2nd Ave. S.

N/A not for publication

city, town St. James

N/A vicinity of

state Minnesota

code 22

county Watonwan

code 165

**3. Classification**

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use	
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> museum
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial	<input type="checkbox"/> park
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational	<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
<input type="checkbox"/> site	<b>Public Acquisition</b>	<b>Accessible</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment	<input type="checkbox"/> religious
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> government	<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> other:

**4. Owner of Property**

name Watonwan County

street & number 7th St. S. and 2nd Ave. S.

city, town St. James

N/A vicinity of

state Minnesota 56081

**5. Location of Legal Description**

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Watonwan County Courthouse

street & number 7th St. S. and 2nd Ave. S.

city, town St. James

state Minnesota 56081

**6. Representation in Existing Surveys**

title Minnesota Statewide Historic Sites Survey

has this property been determined eligible?  yes  no

date 1985-86

federal  state  county  local

depository for survey records State Historic Preservation Office, Fort Snelling History Center

city, town St. Paul

state Minnesota 55111

## 7. Description

<b>Condition</b>		<b>Check one</b>	<b>Check one</b>	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site	N/A
<input type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> altered	<input type="checkbox"/> moved	
<input type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed		date _____	

### Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

The Watonwan County Courthouse is located at Second Avenue S. and Seventh Street S. in St. James, a city of 4,000 people in central Watonwan County. The courthouse and attached sheriff's department share a full city block with parking lots and two small circa 1890 houses which stand north of the courthouse. The courthouse is located one block south of St. James' central business district, and is surrounded by commercial structures to the north and west and houses and churches to the south and east.

Watonwan County's courthouse is an elegant Romanesque Revival building designed by Mankato architect H. C. Gerlach and constructed in 1895-96 by contractor Otto Kleinschmidt of Mankato. The 60' by 120' building was constructed with a rockfaced buff colored Kasota limestone foundation and is faced with light brown St. Louis mottled pressed brick and Kasota stone trim.

The courthouse is two stories tall with a hipped roof. The assymetrical design is dominated by two towers which flank the main facade: a square three story tower with a hipped roof at the northwest corner of the building and a round two story tower with a conical roof at the northeast corner. The taller, northwest tower was originally 4 1/2 stories in height and had four clock faces at the fourth story level topped by an open arcaded belfry. The tower was shortened because of structural instability circa 1930. The tower retains a series of rounded arched windows in the third story and a stone plaque reading "Watonwan Co. Court House" between the second and third stories.

The north facade of the courthouse has a main entrance (located to the right of center) marked by a series of three buff colored limestone arches supported by short polished granite columns with stone bases and heavy, foliated limestone capitals. Recessed behind the arches is a new glass and metal entrance door and two double hung windows. Above the main entrance is a large rounded arch with foliated stone spandrels which contains a semi-circular window.

The side and rear walls of the courthouse have handsome smooth brick wall surfaces with horizontal bands of simple limestone trim. The window openings are both rectangular and rounded arched. The west facade has a wide two story rounded bay and the south (rear) facade has slightly projecting, square tower massing at each corner and in the central bay. The interior of the building is largely intact. It has fireplaces in some offices, tile floors in the corridors, and red oak wainscoting, trim, stairways, counters, and furniture.

The second floor of the courthouse, including the county courtroom, was remodelled in 1950 from plans drawn by Oscar Dyrstad. The basement, which once contained county jail cells, has also been remodelled. Alterations to the exterior of the building have included shortening the northwest tower circa 1930, installing a new roof in 1970, and installing new windows and doors. A new office addition designed by Richard Rice of Mankato was constructed on the southeast corner of the building in 1971. The new addition was enlarged in 1981 with a sheriff's department and jail portion designed by Group II of Marshall. Both of the one story, red brick additions were designed so they would not obscure any of the courthouse's principal facades. Both the historic courthouse and its more recent additions are in excellent condition.

This nomination includes one contributing building.

# 8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> humanitarian
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)

**Specific dates** 1895-96      **Builder/Architect** H. C. Gerlach, Architect  
 Otto Kleinschmidt, Contractor

**Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)**

The Watonwan County Courthouse in St. James, built in 1895-96, is historically and architecturally significant as an excellent example of Victorian Romanesque Revival architecture, as one of Minnesota's finite number of extant, monumental Victorian courthouses, as an architectural landmark in the city of St. James, and as the historical seat of Watonwan County government.

Watonwan County was created by the Minnesota Legislature in 1860. The town of Madelia was named the first county seat and a woodframe courthouse was erected there circa 1861. After it was destroyed by fire, the courthouse was replaced in 1872 by leased space in a new brick building in downtown Madelia which was built for owner Joseph Flanders. Space in the Flanders Block was leased to both the county (for offices, a courtroom, and a jail) and to the Watonwan County Bank. The Flanders Block (which is now on the National Register) was constructed amidst a heated county seat battle between Madelia and the city of St. James, a town more centrally located which had been platted in 1871 as an Omaha Railroad Division Headquarters. Finally in 1874 county voters approved moving the county seat to St. James and a woodframe courthouse was built there on a site donated by the Omaha Railroad.

Like courthouses built near the turn of the century in many of Minnesota's county seats, the Watonwan County Courthouse was monumental in size and design, providing an obvious show of strength in government and traditional values in a community which was only twenty-five years old. The courthouse was completed in 1896 by Mankato contractor Otto Kleinschmidt from plans by Mankato architect H. C. Gerlach. Gerlach, who began practicing in Mankato in 1885, is credited with the design of a number of houses, commercial buildings, schools, and public buildings throughout the state.

Since 1895 the courthouse has housed all legal records, a variety of county offices, the sheriff's department, and an early county jail. The second story courtroom has been the scene of dramatic court trials as well as serving as a community meeting room. In addition, the courthouse has been the focal point of a number of important political events in the county's history, ranging from angry Farmers' Holiday demonstrations in the 1930's to enthusiastic rallies for state election candidates.

The Watonwan County Courthouse was included in a recent historic sites survey of Watonwan County conducted by the State Historic Preservation Office in which it was identified as one of the most architecturally significant Victorian buildings in the county. Built when St. James was a booming frontier town with an economy based heavily on the railroad, the courthouse falls within the Preservation Office's historic context entitled "Agricultural Development and Railroad Construction" and can provide information on the governmental and political facets of railroad-era development in rural Minnesota.

## 9. Major Bibliographical References

- Eppeland, Ruth. "Courts and the Courthouse of Watonwan County." Unpublished manuscript, ca. 1982.  
 The First 100 Years. Minnesota State Bar Association, 1983.  
 "H. C. Gerlach." Mankato Free Press, Special Illustrated Edition, December, 1985.

## 10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of nominated property Less than one acre.

Quadrangle name St. James West Quad

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

### UTM References

A	<u>15</u>	<u>361961215</u>	<u>41871081610</u>	B			
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
C				D			
E				F			
G				H			

### Verbal boundary description and justification

The nominated property is located on all of lots 3 - 12, Block 25, in the Original Plat of the City of St. James.

### List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state	<u>N/A</u>	code	<u>N/A</u>	county	<u>N/A</u>	code	<u>N/A</u>
state	<u>N/A</u>	code	<u>N/A</u>	county	<u>N/A</u>	code	<u>N/A</u>

## 11. Form Prepared By

name/title Susan Granger/Contract Historian  
State Historic Preservation Office  
 organization Minnesota Historical Society date February 1986  
 street & number Fort Snelling History Center telephone (612) 726-1171  
 city or town St. Paul state Minnesota 55111

## 12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national  state  local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature Russell W. Fridley  
 title State Historic Preservation Officer date 12/3/86

### For NPS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

Entered in the  
National Register

date 1-7-87

Keoper of the National Register

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration