

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

2246

NOV 28 1989

# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

## 1. Name of Property

historic name Johnson County Courthouse

other names/site number JO07-1

## 2. Location

street & number Courthouse Square

N/A not for publication

city, town Tecumseh

N/A vicinity

state Nebraska code NE county Johnson

code 097 zip code 68450

## 3. Classification

Ownership of Property	Category of Property
<input type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> building(s)
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public-local	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> district
<input type="checkbox"/> public-state	<input type="checkbox"/> site
<input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal	<input type="checkbox"/> structure
	<input type="checkbox"/> object

Number of Resources within Property	
Contributing	Noncontributing
<u>2</u>	<u>2</u> buildings
<u>        </u>	<u>        </u> sites
<u>4</u>	<u>        </u> structures
<u>6</u>	<u>1</u> objects
	<u>3</u> Total

Name of related multiple property listing:  
County Courthouses of Nebraska

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 1

## 4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination  request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria.  See continuation sheet.

James A. Hanson  
Signature of certifying official

November 17, 1989  
Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria.  See cont. sheet.

Signature of commenting or other official

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

## 5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:

entered in the National Register.

See continuation sheet

determined eligible for the National Register.  See continuation sheet.

determined not eligible for the National Register.

removed from the National Register.

other, (explain:)

Patrick Andrus

1/10/90

for Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

**6. Function or Use**

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)  
Government/courthouse

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)  
Government/courthouse

**7. Description**

Architectural Classification  
(enter categories from instructions)

Romanesque  
Classical Revival

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation stone  
walls brick  
roof asphalt  
other stone  
wood

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

[X] See continuation sheet, section 7, page 1.

**8. Statement of Significance**

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:  
 nationally  statewide  locally

Applicable National Register Criteria  A  B  C  D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions)  A  B  C  D  E  F  G

Areas of Significance  
(Enter categories from instructions)

Architecture  
Politics/government

Period of Significance

1888-1939

Significant Dates

1888-89  
N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Significant Person  
N/A

Architect/Builder  
Gray, William

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

[X] See continuation sheet, section 8, page 1.

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

[X] See continuation sheet, section 9, page 1.

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

- Primary location of additional data:
- State historic preservation office
  - Other state agency
  - Federal agency
  - Local government
  - University
  - Other
- Specify repository: \_\_\_\_\_

**10. Geographical Data**

Acreege of property 2.5 acres

UTM References

A	<u>11</u> <u>4</u>	<u>171</u> <u>382</u> <u>101</u> <u>0</u>	<u>4</u> <u>14</u> <u>72</u> <u>1</u> <u>10</u> <u>1</u>	B	<u>  </u> <u>  </u> <u>  </u> <u>  </u> <u>  </u> <u>  </u>	<u>  </u> <u>  </u> <u>  </u> <u>  </u> <u>  </u> <u>  </u>	<u>  </u> <u>  </u> <u>  </u> <u>  </u> <u>  </u> <u>  </u>
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
C	<u>  </u> <u>  </u>	<u>  </u> <u>  </u> <u>  </u> <u>  </u> <u>  </u> <u>  </u>	<u>  </u> <u>  </u> <u>  </u> <u>  </u> <u>  </u> <u>  </u>	D	<u>  </u> <u>  </u> <u>  </u> <u>  </u> <u>  </u> <u>  </u>	<u>  </u> <u>  </u> <u>  </u> <u>  </u> <u>  </u> <u>  </u>	<u>  </u> <u>  </u> <u>  </u> <u>  </u> <u>  </u> <u>  </u>
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing

[ ] See continuation sheet, section 10, page 1.

Verbal Boundary Description

[X] See continuation sheet, section 10, page 1.

Boundary Justification

[X] See continuation sheet, section 10, page 1.

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title Barbara Beving Long, consultant  
organization Four Mile Research Co. date November 8, 1989  
street & number 3140 Easton Boulevard telephone (515) 266-4964  
city or town Des Moines state Iowa zip code 50317

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Built in 1888-89, The Johnson County Courthouse is an excellent, largely unaltered example of the Property Type, County Capitol. It is the oldest among 18 extant examples in Nebraska, five of which are individually listed on the National Register. Identifying features include: corner towers and central dome, permanent costly materials, elaborate ornamentation, Romanesque Revival stylistic influence, four entrances, and impression of a government building of permanence and solidity. The courthouse is a good example of an important Nebraska architect, William Gray. It is part of the Tecumseh Historic District.

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The two-story courthouse rests on a very high raised basement. The 91x68' building is essentially rectangular, but prominent corner towers topped with curving hipped roofs and four two-story pediments at the projecting entrances vary that shape. A remarkable two-tiered dome--layers of radiating voussoirs, round-arched windows, Corinthian capitals, elaborate bull's-eye windows, lantern, weathervane--rises a total of 110' from the center of the building.

A variety of materials adorn the courthouse. Cherry red St. Joseph brick contrasts well with the Nemaha County limestone, which is variously rough cut, smooth, and also carved. Particularly effective is the rough stone of the raised basement, which is repeated on the bands of the entry columns and on the continuous round arches of the second story windows. Smooth stone is used for the water table and for sills. Fine organic carvings form the capitals of the entry columns. Pressed brick squares using a floral pattern provide further textural interest. Based on analysis of a building supply catalog, experts who studied the courthouse when the copper lantern was replaced in 1977 believe that the metal ornamentation of columns, cornices, towers, and the dome was ordered from the firm of Friedley and Voschardt of Chicago.

Romanesque Revival stylistic elements enrich the surface and constitute the dominant stylistic influence. These include the massing, polychrome effect, semi-circular arches, various textures through the use of various materials, and foliated forms. Classical motifs are also present and include Adamesque swags, pediments, dentils, and smooth slender columns.

The matching entrances on each facade are noteworthy combinations of Romanesque on the first story with classical elements above. At the recessed entry doors are three squared columns with three matching pilasters behind them. Alternating bands of brick and stone provide a dramatic polychrome effect. The capitals have carved organic shapes. Above them is a small balcony having three sets of paired slender smooth

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round columns of metal painted white. They rest on moulded rectangular bases and have a shallow openwork balustrade between them. A large pediment with dentils and other prominent classical detail tops the balcony. The triangular pediment shape is repeated with good effect on the corner towers as well as the dome.

Steep steps outside, and also inside, provide access on all four sides of the building. The regular arrangement of towers and entrances reflects a similarly balanced floorplan. Hallways cross beneath the dome, and county offices occupy all four corners of the first floor. Large (8x10') vaults are placed at three of the four corners of the hall intersection, with the fourth, or southeast, corner, used as the commissioners' meeting room. Stairs to the second floor are only at the south end of the building. The large (37x64') district courtroom on the second floor occupies the entire north portion beyond the center of the building. Partitions between the rooms are brick in an effort to make the building "as near fireproof as possible," according to the chairman of the board of construction, county commissioner Dighton Hotaling.

Interior details are notably unaltered and offer an important glimpse into the past. Original features include: pressed metal ceilings in offices, some fireplaces, wood floors in halls, oak counters, woodwork with bull's-eyes and other carving, 14' and 16' ceilings, large single pane transoms over doors to offices (with the office name painted on in curly script), and some decorated door hinges. Wainscoting is used below double-hung wood frame windows and in halls, where it is painted. Relatively simple stairs have turned balusters and heavy, squat decorated newels of painted wood.

Alterations are minor and expected on a building of this age. Some offices have new flooring and new counter tops. Hallway ceilings are not original. The corner tower roofs were covered with asphalt shingle in 1981 after being damaged in a hailstorm. A replacement copper lantern was installed on the dome using a helicopter in the late 1970s; the original had been removed c. 1900 after a fire. Some stonework is deteriorating.

Commercial and municipal buildings ring the courthouse square, and the streets of Tecumseh around the courthouse are paved with brick. The courthouse square contains a collection of commemorative objects, small buildings, and around 35 evergreen and deciduous trees. On the grounds are a tank, stone Grand Army of the Republic statue erected in 1903, World War I "honor roll" metal plaque on a concrete base, a granite shaft "dedicated to all who served," and a cannon dating from the Spanish-American War era. A concrete bandshell, c. 1945, is located at the

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extreme southeast corner. A gazebo built c. 1986 for a movie filmed on the site ("Amerika"), and an attractive small reddish brick outbuilding with round windows in its gable ends, c. 1890, are also on the square.

Because of their recent construction dates, the bandshell, gazebo, and tank are noncontributing elements. Objects other than the tank contribute to the public appearance of the courthouse square as does the brick outbuilding.

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The Johnson County Courthouse is architecturally significant (Criterion C) and also historically significant (Criterion A) for its association with politics and local government. The property derives its historic significance as the focal point for the administration of local government and institutions in Johnson County. It is a notable example of public architecture in the community and contains good examples of design features and facilities distinctive to its design and use as a courthouse. The courthouse square has a number of attractive commemorative objects and mature trees which contribute strongly to its appearance and set the square apart as a public space of importance.

In addition, the courthouse is a fine example of the work of an important Nebraska architect, William Gray. With its standing as the earliest extant example of the County Capitol in the state and as one of five courthouse designs by Gray, the Johnson County Courthouse is of Statewide Significance.

As an important example of the County Capitol, the courthouse contains design features and facilities distinctive to its design and use (such as fireproof vaults), has corner towers and a dome, costly materials, Romanesque and Classical Revival stylistic influences, and elaborate ornamentation. Elements of the design combine to convey an impression of a government building of permanence and solidity, another feature of the County Capitol. The Period of Significance is 1888, when construction began, to 1939, when the "fifty year rule" takes effect. The Johnson County Courthouse is being nominated as an example of the Property Type, County Courthouses of Nebraska (County Capitol) of the Context, County Government in Nebraska, 1854-1941, from the Multiple Property Submission, County Courthouses of Nebraska.

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Established in 1857, Johnson County is among the early counties in Nebraska. Tecumseh, which was designated the county seat, is even earlier, for it was platted in 1856. Its site on the Big Nemaha River afforded it a good mill site, an important consideration before railroads delivered food and building materials. The townsite was also a few miles west of the junction of two important early trails.

Apparently the only assault on Tecumseh's county seat standing occurred in 1858 when 76 voters petitioned for a county seat election. With 46 votes, Tecumseh retained the position, since neither Kingston with 47 nor Centerville with 3 received three-fifths of the vote.

Development was slow until the railroad arrived in Tecumseh in 1872, with

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a second line coming the next decade. In the 1880s more substantial brick buildings replaced wood frame storefronts. A fire in 1875 accelerated this replacement process. Population reach 1,268 in 1880.

The present courthouse also dated from the 1880s period of prosperity and replaced two earlier courthouses built on the square in the fall of 1857 and in 1868, respectively. In the campaign to build the present courthouse, the newspaper characterized the 1868 building as "the present obsolete pile dignified by the name courthouse" and backed the proposed \$40,000 bond issue. On March 13, 1888, Johnson County voters agreed and the bond issue passed.

Between April 3 and 9, 1888, the county board examined plans and specifications for the courthouse and then selected William Gray as the architect. According to the chairman of the board of construction for the courthouse, it was "intended [to be] a duplicate of the York County Court House," with "four porticos 18 feet square of massive stone and iron" at the four entrances. Built from 1885 to 1888, the York County Courthouse has been demolished. Like the Johnson County example, it had prominent corner towers, a towering central dome, four projecting entry porches, a rough high basement, and Romanesque Revival and classical stylistic influences.

William Gray (1851-1927) practiced as an architect in Lincoln from 1886 until 1898 and is known to have submitted plans in a total of nine Nebraska courthouse competitions between 1887 and 1894 and also one in Iowa. He was selected in five counties (Johnson, Cass, Hamilton, Butler, and York).<sup>1</sup> His designs, which featured prominent corner towers and a massive center dome, place his courthouses firmly in the manner of the County Capitol and represent some of the best examples of this type of courthouse in Nebraska. Gray is listed among a list of "Prairie Richardsonian" architects in a recent book on the Richardsonian Romanesque in the Midwest.

With Gray selected, the county board moved to choose a general contractor. As the low bidder, W.P. Schmucker of Falls City was named to that post. Schmucker, who was contractor for other Nebraska courthouses as well, opened a brickyard to provide the nonface brick and a sandpit for sand and also had a rail spur constructed from a limestone quarry (probably in adjacent Nemaha County). Schmucker reportedly had a special mortar mix imported from Germany.

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<sup>1</sup>The York County Courthouse was designed with O.H. Placey.



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The courthouse was built 1888-89. The cornerstone was laid the summer of 1888, and elaborate dedication ceremonies were held July 4, 1889. Commissioner's records show that bills were paid in July 1889 for thresholds for the courthouse and in September 1889 for keys for the building.

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- Nebraska State Historical Society. Photo Collection. #M281-75.
- Johnson County. Commissioners' Records. Book D.
- Tecumseh, Nebraska. Sanborn Fire Insurance Map. 1885, 1889.
- Works Progress Administration. Survey of County Courthouse Records. 1936. NeSHS Archives. Johnson County.
- Johnson County Centennial. 1856-1956. n.p., 1956.
- "The Johnson County Courthouse." Typed transcription of newspaper articles and other sources. Clerk's office.
- Portrait and Biographical Album of Johnson and Pawnee Counties. Chicago: Chapman Bros., 1889. Quoting chairman of board of construction, p. 388.
- "Dedication of the New Court House." Johnson County Journal. July 11, 1889.
- "Courthouse Restoration." Tecumseh Chieftain. March 10, 1977. Also July 23, 1981.
- "Copper 'Lantern' tops off Johnson County Courthouse." Lincoln Star. November 9, 1978.
- Tecumseh Historic District. National Register nomination.
- Goeldner, Paul. "Temples of Justice: 19th Century Courthouses in the Midwest and Texas." Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1971.
- Larson, Paul C., ed. The Spirit of H.H. Richardson on the Midland Prairies. Ames: ISU Press, 1988.

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Verbal Boundary Description

The nominated property occupies the Courthouse Square (also termed the Public Square) of the Original Plat for Tecumseh.

Boundary Justification

The boundary includes the entire city block that has historically been associated with the property.

