

# IOWA SITE INVENTORY

Division of Historic Preservation  
Iowa State Historical Department  
26 E. Market St., Iowa City, Iowa 52240

MAY 29 1981

JUL 42 1981

Site Number 21-022-001  
District Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Map Reference # 21-022-001  
Topo Map Spencer 1:24,000

## IDENTIFICATION

1. Site Name Clay County Courthouse
2. Village/Town/City Spencer Township \_\_\_\_\_ County Clay
3. Street Address West 4th Street and 3rd Avenue West
4. Legal Location Chi, Milw. St. P & Pac. RR Aldu, Block 35  
Urban: subdivision block parcel  
Rural: township range section  
subparcel 1/4 section-1/4 section
5. UTM Location: zone 15 easting 325330 northing 4778600; Acreage less than 1 acre
6. Owner(s) Name Clay County Board of Supervisors
7. Owner(s) Address \_\_\_\_\_ 51301  
(Street address) (City) (State) (Zip)
8. Use: present Courthouse original Courthouse

## DESCRIPTION

9. Date of Construction 1901 Architect/Builder \_\_\_\_\_
10. Building Type:  single family dwelling  multiple family dwelling  commercial  
 industrial  educational  other institutional  public  religious  agricultural
11. Exterior Walls:  clapboard  stone  brick  board & batten  shingles  stucco  
 other sandstone
12. Structural System:  wood frame with interlocking joints  
 wood frame with light members (balloon frame)  masonry load-bearing walls  
 iron frame  steel frame with curtain walls  reinforced concrete  
 other \_\_\_\_\_
13. Condition:  excellent  good  fair  deteriorated
14. Integrity:  original site  moved-if so, when? \_\_\_\_\_  
Notes on alterations, additions (with dates and architect, if known) and any other notable features of building and site:  
Aluminum sash windows and main doors.
15. Related Outbuildings and Property:  barn  other farm structures  
 carriage house  garage  privy  other \_\_\_\_\_
16. Is the building endangered?  no  yes-if so, why? \_\_\_\_\_
17. Surroundings of the building:  open land  woodland  scattered outbuildings  
 densely built-up  commercial  industrial  residential  other \_\_\_\_\_
18. Map \_\_\_\_\_
19. Photo  
Roll \_\_\_\_\_ Frame \_\_\_\_\_ View \_\_\_\_\_

**SIGNIFICANCE** (Indicate sources of information for all statements)

**20. Architectural Significance**

- a. Key structure/individually may qualify for the National Register
- b. Contributing structure  c. Not eligible/intrusion

A well-preserved courthouse in a neoclassical style, with largely intact interior mainspaces (tile floors, main staircase). Clock tower and giant portico are impressive exterior features.

**21. Historical Significance**

Theme(s) Politics/Government

- a. Key structure/individually may qualify for the National Register
- b. Contributing structure  c. Not eligible/intrusion

This courthouse is locally significant as the historical focus of county government, and of the political power and prestige derived from the community's status as the county seat. As center of county government, an Iowa town was reasonably assured of economic and population growth, and a prominent role in local social and political life. The county courthouse represents a significant public investment in a structure built not simply for utilitarian purposes, but also as a monument associated with the historical importance of county organization and development.

See Continuation Sheet

**22. Sources** (for primary and secondary sources, give complete facts of publication: author, title, place of publication, date, etc.):

Andreas, A.T. Illustrated Historical Atlas of Iowa. Chicago: Andreas Atlas Co., 1875.

Pratt, LeRoy G. The Counties and Courthouses of Iowa. Mason City, Iowa: Klipto Printing and Office Supply Co., 1977.

Stanek, Edward and Jacqueline. Iowa's Magnificent County Courthouses. Des Moines: Wallace-Homestead Book Co., 1976.

Prepared by \_\_\_\_\_ Date January, 1980  
 Address 26 E. Market St., Iowa City, Iowa 52240 Telephone 353-6949  
 Organization \_\_\_\_\_

**FOR DIVISION OF HISTORIC PRESERVATION USE ONLY**

**1. OFFICE INFORMATION SOURCES ON THIS PROPERTY**

COUNTY RESOURCE FILE

WINDSHIELD SURVEY

NATIONAL REGISTER

GRANTS-IN-AID: \_\_\_\_\_

DETERMINATION OF ELIGIBILITY

REVIEW AND COMPLIANCE PROJECT: \_\_\_\_\_

OTHER \_\_\_\_\_

OTHER \_\_\_\_\_

OTHER \_\_\_\_\_

**2. SUBJECT TRACES**

a. \_\_\_\_\_

b. \_\_\_\_\_

c. \_\_\_\_\_

d. \_\_\_\_\_

e. \_\_\_\_\_

**3. PHOTO IMAGES**

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**CONTINUATION SHEET**

Item Number(s) \_\_\_\_\_

**CLAY COUNTY**

On June 7, 1859, Judge A. W. Hubbard appointed a commission to locate the county seat of Clay County. On July 16, 1859, the commissioners cited a location in what was then called Spencer Township, as their choice. They did make it perfectly clear, however, that the people had a right to accept or reject their selection. As things would have it, the people did reject their selection and asked the following year that Peterson be chosen as the site. A special election was held and ten votes were cast, thus picking Peterson to be the seat of government. The ten voters also authorized the construction of public buildings for a maximum cost of \$6,000. The courthouse was promptly erected. The bill presented by the contractor for the courthouse totaled \$7,500 but he was only paid \$6,900.

Even as the courthouse in Peterson was being constructed, the population of northern Clay County was rapidly growing. In 1871 the county seat was relocated to Spencer. A stock company was organized to build a courthouse. Those who were unable to buy a share with hard cash substituted a day's labor. Upon completion of the building it was sold to the county for \$1,333. By 1882 this courthouse had become too small for the expanding county offices. A new two-story brick courthouse was built for \$4,435 on a lot donated by private citizens in 1884. A Clay County citizen purchased the first courthouse at Spencer to use for a barn. It was then turned into a cement block factory, and in 1908, was cut in half and remade into two houses.

Members of the public voiced complaints that the 1884 courthouse was too plain and unpretentious. By 1900 this sentiment had spread and the beautiful present-day courthouse was constructed and opened in September, 1901. It is a fabulous red stone structure employing pillars capped with terra cotta and domes capped with bronze, that had a final price tag of \$60,000.

--from Stanek, Edward, and Jacqueline Stanek,  
Iowa's Magnificent County Courthouses. Des  
Moines: Wallace-Homestead Book Co., 1976.