

MAY 29 1981

IOWA SITE INVENTORY

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

Site Number 27-014-001
District Name _____
Map Reference # 27-014-001
Topo Map Leon 1:24,000

IDENTIFICATION

- 1. Site Name Decatur County Courthouse
- 2. Village/Town/City Leon Township _____ County Decatur
- 3. Street Address 9th Street between Main and Idaho
- 4. Legal Location OT CH Square
Urban: subdivision block parcel
Rural: township range section 1/4 section-1/4 section
- 5. UTM Location: zone 15 easting 437000 northing 4510020; Acreage less than 1 acre
- 6. Owner(s) Name Decatur County Board of Supervisors
- 7. Owner(s) Address _____
(Street address) (City) (State) (Zip)
Leon Iowa 50144
- 8. Use: present Courthouse original Courthouse

DESCRIPTION

- 9. Date of Construction 1908 Architect/Builder Smith, Wetherell and Gage, Des Moines, Architects
- 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 Stone trim
- 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:
Corinthian-type pilasters and very wide cornice with lentils and egg-and-tart molding on first and second floors.
Extensive use of dropped ceiling.
- 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

This courthouse is a variation on the Renaissance Revival. Clock tower is a prominent feature, as are the modified Gibbs surrounds on second and third story windows.

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 _____
 Address _____ Telephone _____
 Organization DHP

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) _____

DECATUR COUNTY

Decatur County's first courthouse was erected in Leon in 1851 for a total expenditure of \$375. Made of logs, it was 20 by 22 feet and 14 feet high. After only a few years, the crude log structure was outgrown and a new courthouse built to replace it. The old courthouse was turned into a hotel.

The buildings which followed this old log courthouse, until the one which stands today, seemed to exist under a streak of bad luck. The first was a small frame building which was soon declared unusable. A new one was begun but a windstorm destroyed it before it could be finished. The next was razed by a fire on March 31, 1874. Because of a lack of fireproof vaults in which to store the valuable county records, they were all burned in the fire except for two books which were rescued. Fortunately, \$33,000 in cash was kept safely in the Treasurer's vault.

After the misfortune of the previous courthouses, the people of the county were determined to build one which would be more resistant to fire and wind. Consequently, in 1875, at an approximate cost of \$20,000, a brick courthouse was completed. However, as it happened, it was not burglar-proof. Two thieves decided to crack the Treasurer's safe. They broke in during the night and worked under the theory that if they set off a large explosion under the safe, the door would spring open. However, instead of blowing open the door of the safe, they blew up the entire side of the building. The safe was later found under the rubble and intact. It was the same one that survived the previous courthouse fire. Because the day on which this occurred was April 1, 1877, many people who heard the explosion thought only that someone was playing an April Fool joke. The two-year-old courthouse was rebuilt at great expense and served the county until 1908 when the next courthouse was completed. This time the courthouse was built of "iron, steel, stone, tile, brick, marble, and granite"—completely fireproof and a safe place to keep valuable records. This must have been a desirable combination, as this excellent structure is still standing today.

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