

City Hall

414 East 12th Street
completed 1937

by Ann McFerrin

Kansas City, Missouri's City Hall is located between 11th and 12th streets and Oak and Locust in the downtown area. This building is the third city hall that Kansas City has had since the incorporation of the City of Kansas in 1853. The first City Hall was built in 1857 between Fourth and Fifth Streets and Main and Walnut on what had been the city's "public square." The second one, built on the same land, opened in 1892. The city's market area was located next to it. By the mid-1920s, there was discussion about building a new city hall. The 1892 City Hall was still functional but proponents of a new building cited aging of the 1892 structure and deterioration of the neighborhood surrounding it.

Following the end of World War I, local businessmen started a movement for change in the city to encourage civic growth. In 1928, representatives from the Chamber of Commerce worked with Mayor Albert Beach, City Manager Henry F. McElroy, and others to encourage the passage of several bond proposals, including ones to raise money for a new city hall, a municipal auditorium, an airport, and other structural improvements. A two-thirds majority was needed for passage and the bond proposals for the municipal buildings failed at the polls. A county bond for building a new Jackson County Courthouse in the city of Kansas City passed.

By 1931, the nation was experiencing a depression and there was a great deal of unemployment. Many of the poor were given aid through City Manager McElroy's program of providing jobs through the city government. He believed that people would rather work for money than be given charity and, through a loan of one million dollars arranged for by McElroy and the City Council, people were given part-time city jobs. McElroy's great friend, political boss Tom Pendergast, helped him distribute the jobs. Pendergast was not in an elective office but had great influence in the city.



Pendergast helped McElroy become city manager in 1926, following the city charter change to a mayor/city manager form of government in 1925. McElroy, who had previously been a real estate developer and a county judge, became the second most powerful man in the city behind Pendergast, even more powerful than Mayors Albert Beach and his successor, Bryce Smith. Through Pendergast's influence with the City Council, the mayoral office lost powers that McElroy acquired. McElroy was Pendergast's voice at City Hall. Pendergast's various construction-related businesses including cement, pipes, and asphalt got many of the city's contracts. The city government looked the other way from Pendergast's influence on the city with corruptness, bootlegging, and vote fraud. McElroy was known for his creative accounting methods, juggling city monies, which he called "country bookkeeping."

Following the defeat of the 1928 bonds, city departments were asked to report on improvement needs for the next ten years. Mayor Beach and City Manager McElroy appointed the "Civic Improvement Committee," which studied and drafted a plan for public improvements. Called the "Ten Year Plan," it supported and encouraged the passage of bonds for building projects and city development. A committee of a thousand people, headed by Chamber of Commerce President Conrad Mann, was organized to promote a bond drive to raise over \$30 million. In May of 1931, the bonds passed by a four-to-one margin.

Some people who voted for the bonds desired changes for the city, and a number of residents grateful for McElroy's city employment program also supported the proposals. Playing a large role in the passage of the bonds was the Pendergast political machine and its vote tampering. One of the successful bonds was for a new Municipal Auditorium and another was for a new city hall. City Manager McElroy began the task of distributing the monies for the various projects. First built was the Auditorium.

In 1934 plans were drawn for the new City Hall. City Manager McElroy gave a great deal of input into the design developed by Kansas City architectural firm Wight and Wight. The Wight and Wight firm also worked on the design for the Jackson County Courthouse across the street. The City Hall design is Art Deco, popular during the time period. The exterior is of Indiana limestone. It is 30 stories tall. The observation deck on the 30th floor offers one of the finest views of Kansas City. A parking garage underneath the building extends under the south lawn of City Hall. The building opened in 1937.

Several types of marble were used to enhance the building's interior design and beauty, including Pyrenees marble from southwestern France, travertine marble from Tivoli, Italy, and verde antique marble from Vermont, among others. Some of the woods used were oak and walnut. Many brass decorative items are throughout the building.

The costs for the new building totaled about \$6 million. This exceeded the almost \$4 million bond monies allotted for the project. Additional costs were paid for by monies obtained from the Public Works Administration and general city funds.

A quote from Councilman A. N. Gossett, a councilman at the time City Hall was built, is engraved in the main lobby:

The greatness of a city depends not alone upon great boundaries or a multitude of inhabitants but upon the probity and industry of its citizens.

Some highlights of Kansas City history are carved in stone on the exterior of the building. Names of the sculptors who worked on the project were C. P. Jennewein, who did the south façade panels, Ulric H. Ellerhusen, the east and west wall panels, and Walker Hancock sculpted the north wall. Notable people and places included in the panels were Senator Thomas Hart Benton, Benoist Troost, Kersey Coates, Lewis and Clark, the Chouteau trading post, and the Santa Fe Trail, among others.

On the south side of the building, are fountains with two ornamental sea horses, dolphins, and seashells. The fountains, designed by sculptor Paul Jennewein and architects Wight and Wight, were installed in 1938. The sea horses acquired the names of "Lug" (on the west side) and "Cut" (on the east side) soon after the fountain's dedication, given to them by city employees. They were named for "Lugs" of the political machine and "Cuts" in pay experienced by city workers in the 1930s.

Also on the south side of City Hall are two stone lions which were a bicentennial gift to Kansas City by the Republic of China (Taiwan). They were dedicated in 1976. In addition, on the south there is a statue of Abraham Lincoln and his son, Tad, sculpted by Lorenzo Ghiglieri. Orville W. Anderson donated it to the city of Kansas City in 1986.

City Hall, the Jackson County Courthouse located across the street from City Hall to the south, and the Municipal Courts building

across the street on the east of City Hall, form a civic center for local governmental offices. In 1998, a federal court building, named for former Supreme Court Judge Charles Whittaker, was built three blocks to the north of City Hall. A civic mall between the federal courthouse and City Hall is being developed. It will be named for former Mayor and Councilman of Kansas City, Ilius Davis.

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