

Jackson County Courthouse

415 East 12th Street
completed 1934

by Susan Jezak Ford

In the midst of the Great Depression, Kansas City experienced a building boom that produced buildings and improvements across the city, as well as a civic plaza in the heart of downtown. The Jackson County Courthouse was one of several public-use buildings that kept Kansas City architects and construction workers employed while jobs elsewhere were impossible to find.

Dedicated in 1934, the limestone-faced courthouse embodied the hope of Kansas City's future in its solidity, rich ornament, and placement. Acquiring the city block of 12th to 13th and Oak to Locust streets added more than \$1 million to \$2.1 million to construction costs. Upon completion, the building had at least two floors of unused space. "Nothing short of a gold rush could fill this country fast enough to get ahead of the courthouse in less than fifty years," proclaimed a writer for *The Kansas City Times*.

Funds for construction were made available through federal WPA assistance and a voter-approved 1931 bond program fully backed by the political machine of Tom Pendergast. The joint effort between Kansas City and Jackson County was basically a re-vote on a bond plan that failed to pass in 1928. The issue was labeled the "Ten-Year Plan" and was seen as a way to decrease the effects of the Depression, despite its connections to corrupt politics. A very large voter turnout assured the two-thirds vote needed to the development of numerous civic improvements, including the replacement for previous county courthouses.

In 1872, a county courthouse for the Kansas City area was located in a building at 2nd and Main streets. The elaborate Second Empire building was destroyed by a tornado in 1886. A second courthouse was built in the Richardsonian Romanesque style in 1892, filling the block north of Missouri Avenue, Oak to Locust streets. By the late 1920s, the building was considered too small, outdated in design, and too flammable to safely store county documents.



Prior to drawing the plans for the new courthouse, the team of architects from the firms of Wight & Wight, Keene & Simpson, and Frederick C. Gunn toured the country's newest courthouses for design inspiration with Presiding Judge Harry S. Truman. The result of the team's research was a modern edifice of 225,000 square feet of floor space built with 90,000 cubic feet of limestone. The structure rose 28 stories in height, but contained only 14 floors. A two-story ground floor lobby and two-story circuit courtrooms contributed to the building's lofty dimensions.

The design allowed easy access to the offices used most often by the public. The first two stories were devoted to administrative offices, with the County Collector, Assessor, and Recorder located in spacious quarters on the first floor. Courts and county government offices occupied the third to eleventh stories. The county jail and an execution chamber filled the 13th and 14th floors; this part of the building could be reached by a separate set of elevators. Prominent exterior setbacks provide visual support for the tower and show the tripartite division of the interior space.

One entered the building's main entrance after passing under one of four richly detailed panels sculpted by Charles Keck and bronze and white metal plaques designed by Jorgen Dreyer. Keck's exterior friezes were intended to reveal the conquering spirits of Contentment, Law, Peace and Mercy, the attainments of the spirit of Plenty and products of Industry and Power as controlled by Man. Dreyer's medallions, representing Faith, Authority, Justice, Aspiration, and Progress are part of the richly ornamented lobby.

Most ornament on the courthouse was of an Art Deco styling but featured Neo-Classic figures appropriate for a civic building. Interior details included marble columns and walls in the lobby and marble counters in the offices of the County Assessor and County Collector. Seventy percent of the courthouse's marble came from Missouri quarries. All furniture was designed specifically for the building and 800 new spittoons were placed throughout as indispensable items.

Circuit courtrooms were built two stories tall in order to accommodate mezzanine balconies that held offices. The courtrooms were paneled in walnut or oak and contained custom-made walnut benches, chairs, and tables. Up-to-date heating and cooling systems provided modern comfort, and acoustical ceilings allowed every courtroom observer to hear the proceedings. The innovative courtroom layouts placed the judge's bench in one

corner of the room, the witness chair centered on the rear wall, and the jury box so that jurors were allowed a clear view of the witness and the judge. Accommodations for jurors included meal service from the jail kitchen and lodging facilities for overnight sequestrations.

As the courthouse was finished, the final touch—a statue of Andrew Jackson—was placed in front of the building. The statue was sited atop a large pedestal of Swedish granite just north of the building. The general, for whom the county was named, was the seventh president of the United States and a hero in the 1812 Battle of New Orleans. His life-size likeness sits astride his horse and holds a telescope in his right hand. The bronze sculpture was created by Charles L. Keck.

The Jackson County Courthouse was the first of three public structures built within the downtown civic center. The City Hall, completed in 1937 at 414 East 12th Street, and the Municipal Courts Building, completed in 1938 at 1101 Locust Street, were both designed by the architectural firm of Wight & Wight. The three buildings all feature a vertical contrast of light façade materials combined with recessed darker accents several stories tall. Well-known landscape architects Hare & Hare were also affiliated with the creation of the plaza. Together, the three buildings of similar design form an imposing and classic arrangement of public space. This was one of the earliest planned uses of public space in Kansas City. A broad green space accented by sculpture, plantings, and fountains link the three facing entrance plazas, even though 12th Street separates the expanse.

The courthouse was dedicated on December 27, 1934—17 months after construction had begun. A crowd of more than 2,500 filled the first floor while an orchestra played. Prominent members of the bench and bar from across the country, politicians and dignitaries were on hand to participate in the ceremonies. Judge and Senator-elect Harry S. Truman dedicated the new structure amid many speeches, blessings, and patriotic songs.

For its time, the Jackson County Courthouse was a combination of the latest design and technology. It also provided day-to-day wages for ordinary Kansas Citians. When it was built, Kansas City was facing the worst economic crisis in its history and badly needed to believe in a bright future. The construction of this thoroughly modern building was one of many massive projects planned to provide the economic and emotional incentive for citizens to look forward. It stands today, not just as an excellent example of

functional Art Deco architecture, but as a remembrance of city and county leaders—by hook or crook—ensuring the future of the metropolitan area.

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