

MISSOURI COURTHOUSES

LAFAYETTE COUNTY

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Fig. 1. Lafayette County Courthouse, 1825. (From: postcard, Trenton Boyd collection)

Lillard County came into existence along with seven other counties in 1820. Mount Vernon was the temporary county seat for Lillard County, which was named Lafayette in 1825. At that time the permanent county seat was in "Old Town" of Lexington, and as at Mount

Vernon, courts first met in homes.

Henry Renick, who was also justice of the peace, built the first courthouse in 1824-25 on the square. The record is unclear about how much Renick was paid. One payment of \$875.15 was made June 27, 1825; another of \$467.41¼ appeared on November 23, 1825, for construction of the courthouse. Apparently, the court accepted the building November 23, 1825, and continued using it until 1832.

William Chiles delivered an address July 4, 1876, and claimed that young "bucks" celebrated the 4th of July in 1831 by tearing down the walls and blowing up the foundation of the courthouse. This story has been often repeated. The following year the county declared the building unsafe and ordered James Fletcher to sell

County Lafayette
Organized Nov. 16, 1820
Named After French General
and statesman
Lafayette, who
served in
American
Revolution
County Seat Lexington



the brick and timber from the courthouse except for the foundation materials. William Young, in *History of Lafayette County*, claims it was sold August 1, 1832.

The second courthouse, which was also on the square in "Old Town," was built in 1835. It was a three-story building, regarded as perhaps the finest, most classic public building in Missouri. Three-story buildings were very rare in Missouri during the early 19th century. Mr. Rollins did the masonry and Charles Thomas, the carpentry. This brick building continued in use until 1849, when the present courthouse was occupied. The Baptist Female College bought the 1835 courthouse on March 25, 1849. During the Civil War it became a hospital, subsequently an isolation hospital for smallpox. Finally abandoned, it was sold for the brick.

No known illustrations exist, but a description, written in 1853, called the building (which by that time was the Female Seminary)

. . . one of the noblest structures of art.

The passing stranger would suppose at a glance that it was the legislative hall of some proud nation, instead of an institution for the improvement of the human mind. Both external and internal the building is superb in every sense of the word.

The principal business district of Lexington moved about one mile west after the town incorporated in 1845; the courthouse site moved to a new, central location.

The old courthouse was inconvenient, and, according to the *Lexington Weekly Express*, there was ". . . nothing to do while whiling away the time waiting to be called." The *Express* called for a large elegant building, a fine specimen of architecture, one of which the county need not be ashamed.

The court appropriated funds for the third and present courthouse in March 1847. It is the oldest Missouri courthouse that has continued in use as a courthouse. In April 1847 the court paid William Daugherty, a 30-year-old carpenter, \$40 for his plans and specifications; a number of contractors completed the building: William Hunter and John Alford did the brick work; James A. Crump did the stone work. Completed in 1849, the costs were about \$12,000. Ray and Caldwell counties had courthouses built upon the same plan with minor variations in trim. During the 1861 Civil War battle of Lexington, the courthouse was fired upon; a cannon ball embedded in one of the columns remains an object of great curiosity.

A small annex was built in 1854 for the clerk's office, and a two-story annex was constructed in the 1880s (Fig. 1). The Lafayette County courthouse has been included on the National Register of Historic Places. This courthouse and the Ralls County courthouse, 1858, are the only two temple-type courthouses from the 19th century that are still used as Missouri courthouses.

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