

# Daviess County Courthouse

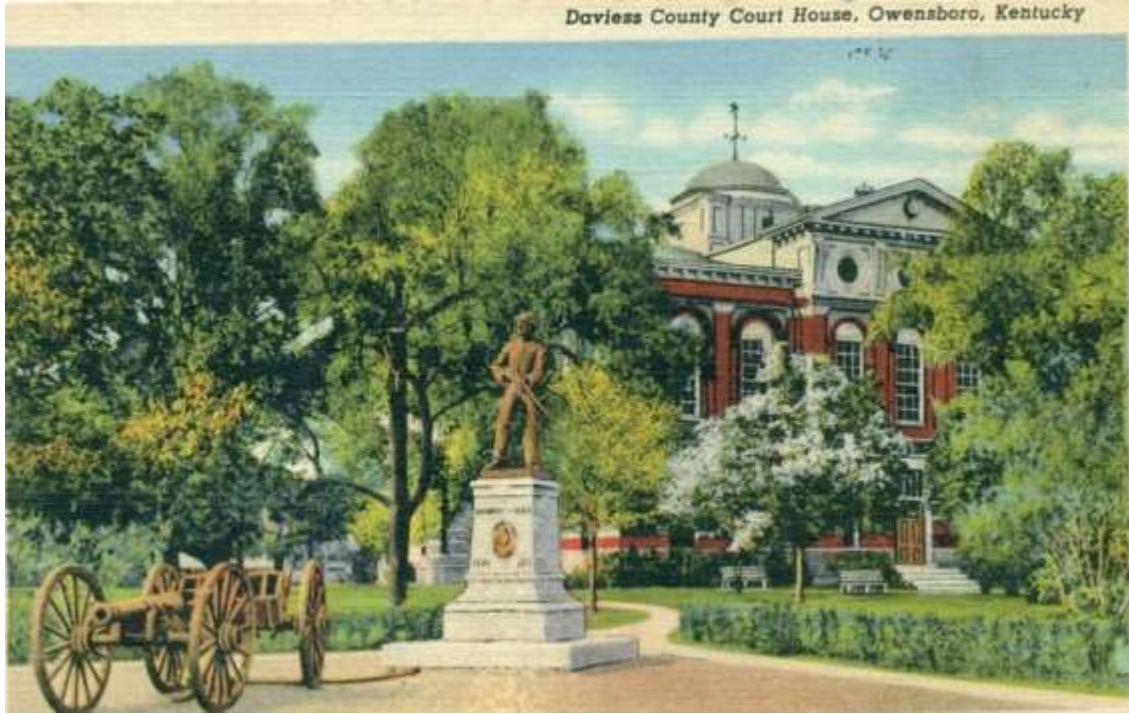
By Jerry Long



Daviess County Courthouse (1858-1865) photograph from the History of Owensboro, KY Facebook site.



Daviess County Courthouse (1868-1964) from An Illustrated Historical Atlas Map of Daviess County, KY., 1876, p.19



Daviess County Courthouse (1868-1964)



Daviess County Courthouse (1868-1964)



Daviess County Courthouse (1964 – to present)



**History of Daviess County, Kentucky,  
Inter-State Publishing, Co., Chicago, IL, 1883, p.295:**

The first court was held in a log building, — probably a dwelling. The first regular court-house was a brick structure, erected about 1819-'20. By the year 1855 the county had so grown that a new building was needed; and accordingly a contract was let for erecting a new court-house, the work to be finished by Oct. 1, 1857; but it was not completed until 1858 or '9. It was partly occupied, however, in the winter preceding. Its size was 60 x 80 feet, and two stories high above the basement. This building was burned Jan. 6, 1865, as described in Chapter VI., the "Civil War."

Present Court-House. — This was built 1866-'8, on the old foundation, and of the same dimensions as the previous structure, only somewhat higher and differently ornamented. The original contract, with B. Tribble and W. McLoyd, was for \$55,000; but the building, with all the finishings and heavy furniture, including bell and clock, actually did cost about \$63,000. The new building was occupied July 6, 1868. In October and November following the clock was built, by a man from Boston, Mass., and the bell, weighing 1,100 pounds, was put up Nov. 27, the same fall. The iron fence around the public square was completed June 26, 1869, and the court-house, in all its furnishings and surroundings, was finished in the fall of 1869.



**History of Owensboro and Daviess County, Kentucky, Hugh O. Potter, Herff  
Jones-Paragon Publishing, Montgomery, AL & Louisville, KY, 1974, p.240.**

The court house is the county's temple of justice, providing facilities for the two circuit courts assigned to Daviess county, the commonwealth's attorney, the county attorney, grand juries, the sheriff (who is also the tax collector), the circuit and county court clerks. It also houses the tax assessing unit, the agriculture extension service and civil defense office.

The first court house was built in Owensboro about 1816 and was probably a log structure. The second court house was built about 1819 or 1820 after the first is said to have burned.

A third, and larger court building, was built between 1858 and 1859. It was of brick, had two stories and a basement. This building was burned on January 4, 1865 by guerrillas, or Confederate soldiers, because it had been used to quarter Negro Union soldiers. Most records were moved before Captain Davidson (or Davisson) put the torch to it.

Daviess county's fourth court house replaced the burned building and continued in use nearly 96 years, from July 6, 1868 to late March, 1964. By April 1, 1964 it had been abandoned and soon afterward a wrecking crew did its work.

The fifth, and present (1973) court house, was built at a contract price of \$597,000. The contract was let on March 22, 1963. Subcontracts for the elevator, equipment, furnishings, landscaping, plus engineering and other fees, increased the total cost to approximately \$750,000. The new court building was formally dedicated by Kentucky Second District Congressman William H. Natcher on September 5, 1964.



**Owensboro Monitor, Owensboro, KY, 19 July 1865, p.3:**

Court House to be Rebuilt.

At the last term of the Daviess County Court, a quorum of magistrates being present, a tax was voted of 15 per cent, *ad valorem* on all property of the county heretofore listed for taxation for revenue purposes, to rebuild the Court House in I this city that was so nearly destroyed by the guerrillas in January last.

A commission, consisting of James Wilhoyte and Broadus Brown, was appointed to examine the walls of the building, and to return a report at the October term of said court, as to whether the walls were sufficiently sound to build upon, and what would be the probable cost.

We learn that the work will begin next spring, and that the house and grounds are to be more complete than they were before.

The yard will have an iron fence instead of a plank one, and many other improvements over the old building, which was considered to surpass any other edifice of the kind in the State outside of Louisville.

We sincerely trust the work will be put through in good style and promptly, and that the grounds will be placed in such a condition that they will be a pride and ornament to our little city.



**Owensboro Monitor, Owensboro, KY, 28 November 1866, p.3:**

A Good Move !

A Word to our Citizens and Representative.

It has been suggested by several of our most prominent and public-spirited citizens, that the new Court House, soon to be erected, be removed from its present public and contracted

locality to one of more eligibility and privacy, and with it that city disfiguring eye-sore, the county bastille.

We learn that Hon. J. L. Johnson proposes to devote a beautiful plot of ground of some four acres to that purpose, if the proposed change can be consummated. – A little effort on the part of our citizens in petitioning the Legislature to enact such legislation as is necessary to effect the sale of the present grounds (and which can be readily disposed of for some hundred thousand dollars,) would insure the success of the proposed movement.

The sum accruing from the sale of the present grounds would be ample to construct one of the finest temples of justice in the State, besides leaving a considerable sum toward relieving our county of debt.

As all are interested in this matter, let us have an expression of their wishes. – No time is to be lost, as the lettings for the rebuilding of the Court House will soon be made. For our part, we heartily endorse the suggestion, believing the princely offer of Mr. Johnson's beautifully embellished lot is too inviting not to be duly considered and acted on.

In this connection we hope that our able representative, Hon. Josiah Veech, will introduce a bill in the next Legislature to the effect that a portion at least of the taxes of those counties that have suffered the losses of their Court Houses by the incidents of the war, be applied to their reconstruction, or, what amounts to the same in effect, the State's taxes of those counties be remitted for a year or two. As the State derives her proportionate benefit from the counties, she should at least share her portion of the burden of the counties in reconstructing the necessary public buildings.

Our county, as well as others, is already burdened to an onerous degree, and it is but right and just that the Commonwealth should relieve us to a fair extent.

We have consulted with several of our contemporaries of the press in other parts of the State, and they have heartily endorsed this matter. We hope others of our conferes will aid us in calling the attention and action of the Legislature to what we deem a most commendable object : to relieve, to a just degree, those counties who have suffered the most sorely in public losses by the war.



**Owensboro Monitor, Owensboro, KY, 6 March 1867, p.3:**

That old eye-sore, the court house ruins, is rapidly undergoing demolition. A large force is now at work removing the debris preparatory to rebuilding.



**Owensboro Monitor, Owensboro, KY, 13 March 1867, p.3:**

The contract for rebuilding the court house of this county was awarded by the commissioners appointed for that purpose to Messrs. Tribble & McLoyd, of this city, for \$36,050.



**Owensboro Monitor, Owensboro, KY, 28 August 1867, p.3:**

City Clock. – We are pleased to record that a number of our enterprising and public-spirited citizens are making an effort to secure a fund of sufficient size to purchase a first-class city clock, to be placed on our handsome Court House, which is rapidly approaching completion. We wish the movement every success, and feel assured that our citizens will contribute liberally to this important movement. Aside from the ornamental consideration and the utility as an unerring time-piece, it will be of great service in case of fire in this or any other part of the city.



**Owensboro Monitor, Owensboro, KY, 25 September 1867, p.3:**

The new Court-house (one of the finest in the State,) is now ready for the roof. We are glad to learn sufficient funds have been subscribed to secure a public clock – the want of which has long been felt by our citizens.



**Owensboro Monitor, Owensboro, KY, 30 October 1867, p.3:**

The Court House has been covered with a very fine tin roof, and the finishing of its interior will be rapidly completed. – Messrs. Tribble & Loyd deserve great praise for the satisfactory manner in which they have built this grand structure. The design, material and workmanship, do alike credit to their reputation of architects and builders. It will be second to none in the State. In fact, it looks so grand and imposing that we should not object to be the holder of the balances of justice ourself, or to awaken the echo of its walls in pleading mercy for some "poor devil" that has been delinquent in his subscription for years. Only earthly grace can do them any good.



**Owensboro Monitor, Owensboro, KY, 20 November 1867, p.3:**

The tin roofing of our court house and dome is completed, and is one of the finest jobs ever done in the State. Mr. Charles Watts, formerly of this city, superintended the job, and he has acquitted his task most creditably. Messrs. Al. Bourlier & Brother, of Louisville, were the contractors. These gentlemen have ample reason to congratulate themselves in having so efficient a workman and clever gentleman as Mr. Watts as foreman of their extensive establishment.



**Owensboro Monitor, Owensboro, KY, 27 November 1867, p.3:**

Since the scaffolding has been removed from around the Court House, its grand and stately appearance is the subject of comments of approval from all. Our citizens are justly proud of this fine architectural feature of our city.



**Owensboro Examiner, Owensboro, KY, 28 April 1875, p.5:**

There is a big work of transformation going on about the court-house, and soon the now dingy old temple will stand out in all the beauty and freshness of paint. From the ground to the spire, roof and all, the building will be coated. The jail and fencing are also to be subjected to similar treatment, and when done, things about court square will look as they should in a live, progressive town. The new bell for the town-clock will be in position in a few days, recording the flight of time in tones of such melody as to make us forget that we are being hurled through the world with the velocity of the wind, and growing older at the rate of sixty minutes an hour.



**Owensboro Examiner, Owensboro, KY, 22 October 1875, p.1:**

Death of Hon. Mason J. Howell, a Pioneer Citizen of Kentucky and Indiana.

Hon. Mason J. Howell died at the residence of his grand-son, in Spencer county, Indiana, Sunday night, October 17, 1875, in the eighty-first year of his age. As this distinguished gentleman was born in Daviess county, and has a large number of friends and relatives in this and Henderson county, we deem it proper to give a short sketch of his life.

Mason J. Howell was born in Daviess county, Kentucky, August 1, 1794. While he was quite young his father died. Afterwards his mother married Col. Hugh McGary, of Henderson. Mason J. Howell, however, lived with his grandfather, Mason Jones. While yet a boy he assisted in opening a farm, a part of which extended over the present site of the Daviess county courthouse. In 1812 he joined Capt. [Philip] Thompson's company of volunteers, and was mustered into the service regularly, though he never participated in any engagement.

In May, 1816, he moved to Spencer county, Indiana, and in October, following was married to Miss Nellie Rodgers. In February following he and his wife joined the Baptist church. In 1820 he was appointed Colonel of the Indiana militia, and held that office until the militia was disbanded. In 1825 he was elected Justice of the Peace, and served in that capacity till 1831 – also, as associate County Judge during the time. In 1831, and for six consecutive years, he was elected to the Indiana Legislature. In 1838 he was commissioned Register of the Land-Office for Indiana, by Martin Van Buren. In 1842 he was elected to the State Senate from the counties of Warrick, Spencer and Perry, and re-elected in 1843 or '44. After that time he was never in public life, though always took a deep interest in the political questions of the country. He was a man above the mediocrity. His wife died about four years ago, leaving him alone in the world, and he often expressed his desire to be taken from earth to meet his companion in heaven. Peace to his ashes.



**Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, 11 October 1888, pp.1 & 9 April 1889 p.1:**



Daviess County Courthouse (1868-1964)



**Owensboro Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 29 January 1899, p.9B:**



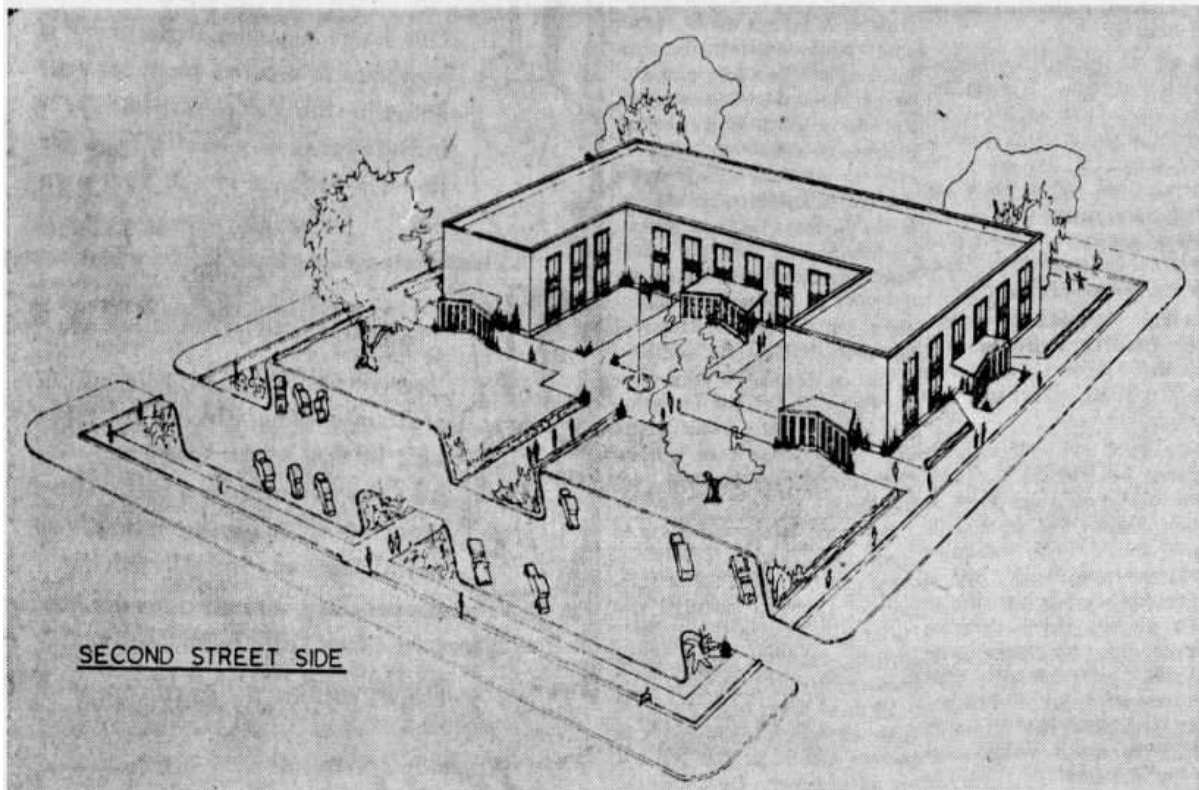
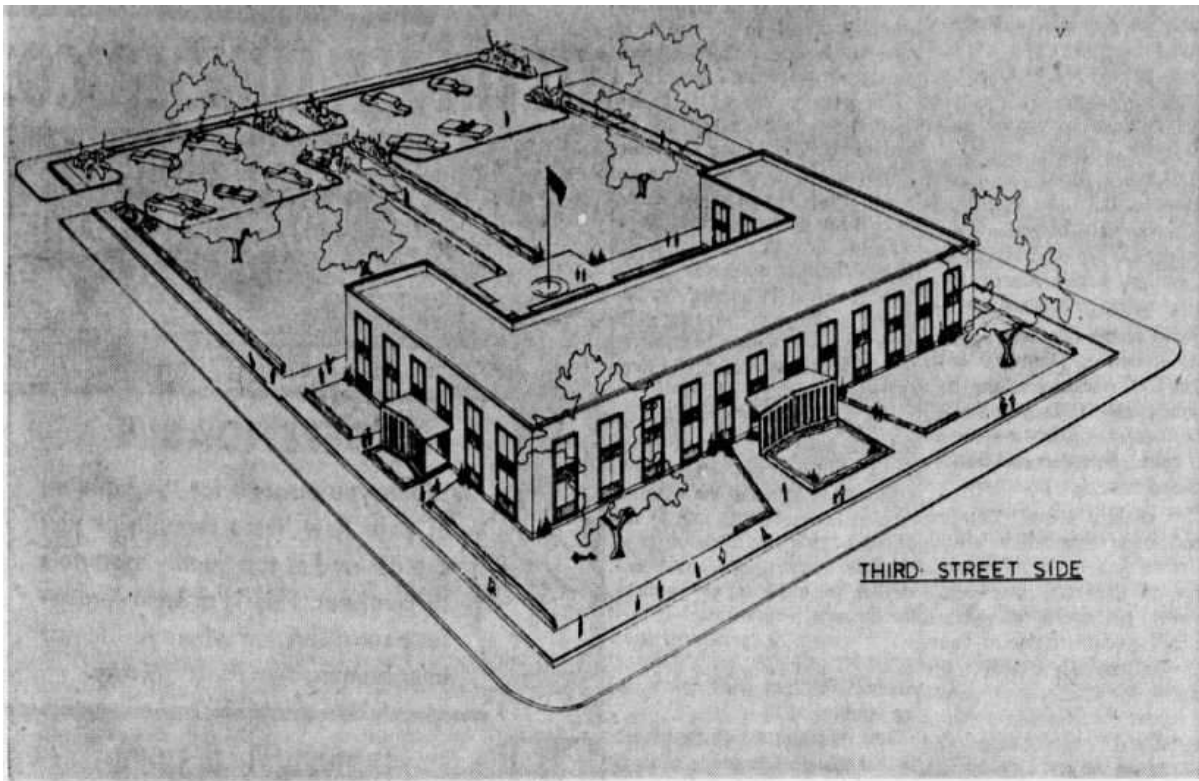
Daviess County Courthouse (1868-1964)





Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 13 January 1963 p.1B:

Architect's Drawing of Daviess County Courthouse



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 5 September 1964, p.12B:**



RECENT COURTHOUSE BUILT IN 1868—After Captain Davidson burned the Courthouse in 1865, it was three years before a new, less ambitious building could be completed on the public square. The county's population was then only 20,000. Although it lacked the dignity and grace of the burned-out structure, the new \$65,000 courthouse was at least clean, neat, and ample for a number of years. Until shortly after World War I, the structure was crowned with a regal spire which housed a town clock and a 1,200-pound bell. The clock was manufactured by a Boston, Mass., craftsman for a price of \$500, the weights were cast locally, and the entire mechanism was put in place atop the building late in 1868, a short time after construction work on the courthouse was finished. The bell was purchased from William Kaye, a Louisville man. Several alterations had to be executed upon the tower before the clock spire, apparently an afterthought, could be added. The clock tower was condemned and taken down in 1927.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 5 September 1964, p.1B:**

New Daviess County Courthouse Dedication Set Today

Attractive, Efficient Owensboro Edition

An Indiana limestone Courthouse, economically and beautifully designed, stands on the public square where its deteriorating predecessor was just weeks ago.

Scheduled for dedication today, the new stone building is constructed in a U-shape with the bottom of the "U" facing 3rd Street. It measures 203 feet by 107 feet, with north wings 42 feet by 52 feet, and comprises 46,500 square feet of floor space.

Unlike the smaller building which went before it, the new Daviess County Courthouse can be expanded readily. Additional space will be secured in the future by extending the "U" northward, or by constructing an entirely new building, elevated to as many stories as needed, in the hollow of the "U".

While under construction, the building surrounded the old structure on three sides, making possible the continued use of the 1868 Courthouse while work was progressing on the new one.

#### Attractive, Efficient

As attractive as it is efficient, the recently completed structure has a limestone exterior which provides a clean, dignified appearance, while dark-tone window panel slots of ceramic tile add a note of contrast. Four entrances, one on each side of the building, have canopies of limestone with decorative sun-screening tile.

Although landscaping has not been completed, the south lawn is already established. Magnolia, pink dogwood, myrtle, and other trees will be planted soon to blend with the several old trees which have been preserved. Seeding of the north, east, and west lawns will take place soon.

The open court area on the 2nd Street side of the Courthouse will take on a park atmosphere with the extensive planting of greenery.

#### Durable Interior

Finishes inside the building are simple, but attractive and chosen for durability. Included are acoustical plaster ceilings, vinyl asbestos tile floors, and colorful quarry tile floors in corridors, rest rooms, and on stairways. Ceramic tile walls are used in several areas for easier maintenance and a colorful effect. Most office walls are painted pale green.

The Courthouse is air-conditioned, and air changes are continuous. Although lighting is fluorescent, recessed ceiling lights are installed in some areas for the sake of appearance.

Many fixtures from the old building now are used in the new one, but it was necessary to purchase some furniture, particularly for the courtrooms.

The three court areas, measuring about 50 feet by 40 feet, are furnished with comfortable self-aligning courtroom chairs. The seats have arm rests topped with long-wearing plastic that requires a minimum of maintenance.

Jurors are provided with seats similar to those installed for the courtroom audience. The judges chairs are high-back up holstered constructions with padded arms and thick foam rubber cushioning.

#### New Equipment

In addition, there is a considerable amount of new counter equipment, including several cabinets with roller shelves for storage of old records.

The fireproof structure comprises two floors and a full basement used as an office of the Daviess County Extension Agent, Civil Defense and for storage of records. Equipment rooms for boilers and electrical apparatus are also located in the basement.

Situated on the first level are the county courtroom, the juvenile courtroom, and offices for the county judge, juvenile judge, county treasurer, building inspector, sheriff, county court clerk, and the tax commissioner. Also on the first floor are the auto license department, the probate office, and a detention room.

The second level comprises two circuit courtrooms, offices for the two circuit judges, circuit court clerk, commonwealth's attorney, county attorney, county assessor, and probation officers. A law library, a conference room, two petit jury rooms, a grand jury room, two witness rooms, and a detention room fill out the remainder of the top floor.

### Spacious Corridors

Upper levels contain spacious corridors, with a foyer on the bottom floor, public and private rest rooms, a concession area, and an elevator for passengers and freight.

The building was designed by the Owensboro architectural firm of Max W. Bisson & Associates. Structural engineering was done by John R. Wilkie, Evansville, and Waldron, Batey and Wade, Inc., was responsible for mechanical and electrical engineering. Leroy Watkins Nursery is the landscaper. The prime contractor was Clark Construction Co.

A first step toward this impressive new Courthouse was taken in June, 1962, when the fiscal court declared the dilapidated old building would finally have to go.

The court's first move was to disallow further patchwork on the 1868 structure until plans could be agreed upon for a new one.

Meanwhile the problem at the public square was becoming more acute. Daniel M. Griffith had been appointed a second circuit judge for Daviess County few weeks earlier, but there was no room in the old Courthouse to accommodate either him or the members of his court.

As a temporary solution, the judges shared the circuit court room and Judge Griffith took over the area once used by the county assessor's office.

### Tax Commissioner

Tax Commissioner Lyman Head and his staff were moved from the Courthouse into rented rooms on 3rd Street. Tax officials thereby joined the growing number of county employees who were forced to rent space outside the county building.

Widespread concern throughout the county became evident. One resident, former state Senator E. W. Richmond, suggested the construction of a combined City Hall-Courthouse-commercial building which would be financed by a bond issue.

The bonds would be retired, Richmond said, by renting part of the proposed building to commercial interests over a span of 20 years.

Supporters of this plan envisioned a \$2 million structure which would comprise one mammoth department store, several smaller shops, and city and county offices. A department store front would be presented to 2nd Street, while a Court house facade would face 3rd Street.

### Plan Proposed

As described by Richmond and a St. Louis, Mo., architect, the complex would occupy nearly all the land on the square and would contain a parking area in the basement, commercial

spaces on the first floor, government offices on the second level, and an essentially separate building on the north side of the square for department store use. A mall was suggested to run east and west through the middle of the square.

But a number of difficulties, particularly of a legal nature, surrounded this proposal, and it ultimately died still in an embryonic stage.

In October another plan was pursued, this one destined to be more fruitful. Judge T. B. Birkhead, under the provisions of a new federal public works act, requested \$375,000 from the U.S. Community Facilities Administration for the Courthouse whose anticipated cost of \$750,000 had been pared to the bone.

#### County's Share

The remaining \$375,000 would be furnished by the county through the sale of revenue bonds, an action which would not require approval at the polls. Six referendums, the first in 1938 and the last in 1961, had failed to produce the two-thirds majority needed to replace the old Courthouse.

By November, 1962, the fiscal court, comprising Judge Birkhead and the county commissioners, wrote an order to set up a non profit corporation "to enter agreements with the fiscal court for the purpose of building a Courthouse and financing one-half of the total expenditure."

The nonprofit organization was to be responsible for regular payments on the bonded indebtedness for approximately the next 25 years, with funds being drawn from county revenues.

#### Estimated Cost

Although the cost of \$750,000 was a significant reduction from the \$1,150,000 asked in the last (1961) referendum, County Commissioner Pat Tanner believed the price should come down to about \$600,000.

Commissioners Jacob Gerteisen and Joe Paul Warren, together with Judge Birkhead, were solidly in favor of the \$750,000 structure, insisting it was the lowest price for which a reasonably efficient and attractive building could be raised.

With the dissident commissioner outmanned, plans continued to move ahead, and in the last days of December, 1962, the Community Facilities Administration approved the \$375,000 grant to the county.

#### Bids Unsealed

Bids were unsealed and contracts awarded in March, 1963. Clark Construction Co., Owensboro, was given the contract for building work with a bid of \$597,000. Gant & Butterfield, Owensboro, won the contract for built-in furniture and fixtures for a price of \$27,696.11, and Murphy Elevator Co., Louisville, was low bidder on the elevator at \$12,167.

Other costs included soil tests, \$425; lot survey, \$297; printing, \$880; interest during construction, \$7,500; architect's and engineers' fees, \$39,700, and fiscal agent's fee, \$3,700.

Venetian blinds, \$3,000; walks and curbs, \$7,020; demolition of the old Courthouse, including filling and grading, \$5,000; flag-pole, \$1,000; miscellaneous furniture for courtrooms, \$2,500; plaque, \$250, and seeding and shrubbery, \$1,000.

#### Construction Starts

Early in April Clark Construction Co., moved onto the Courthouse yard and erected a temporary construction office on the south side of the square. Tree-trimming and dirt-moving started almost immediately.

Finally on Monday, April 15, actual construction of a new Courthouse began in Daviess County for the first time in nearly 100 years. Two draglines and other heavy equipment started clearing the building site and excavating the planned basement area.

A few days later bonds were sold in \$1,000 denominations by J. J. B. Hilliard & Son, fiscal agent for the project. About \$325,000 of the issue was snapped up the first day, with the rest being sold quickly thereafter.

Anyone buying a bond would collect at its maturity in 1988 not only his original investment of \$1,000, but also \$875 in interest, all tax-free.

#### Accident Occurs

Construction progressed favorably until July 8, 1963, when two outside masonry columns and a section of the second floor in the west wing crashed to the ground as concrete was being poured over two beams on the second floor. Two workmen were hurt, and building activity was suspended.

The mishap was caused by the fresh concrete which, while being poured, exerted a horizontal force on the supporting concrete block columns, pushing outward with enough strength to collapse them.

A Lexington firm, Porter J. White & Associates, recommended that new plans be drawn with stronger beams and more secure connections to relieve the walls of "rotational" forces, with walls and columns anchored both at the top and bottom. The firm recommended also that block supporting columns be reinforced with hollow mortar-filled metal supports.

#### Work Resumes

At last, on Aug. 1, 1963, work was resumed on the Courthouse, with the suggested changes incorporated into the plans. Construction was completed early in 1964, and office equipment began to be moved into the new building March 18. First Courthouse occupant to make the move was Circuit Clerk James W. Clayton, who had to transport a mountain of records and old documents dating as far back as 1815, the year the county was founded.

Within a matter of days, nearly all the material and people from the old building had been transferred, and on March 24, Circuit Judge Griffith presided over the first court session to be held in the new Daviess County Courthouse.

In April the Building and Wrecking Co., Evansville, started razing the persistent 1868 Courthouse, which still stood out like a sore thumb, surrounded by the "U" of the modern new structure.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 5 September 1964, p.24B:**

### 1858 Courthouse Chronology

County court order books reveal the following chronology of events leading up to the completion of the second known Daviess County Courthouse, which was begun in 1854, completed in 1858, and burned to the ground by Confederate guerillas in 1865:

OCTOBER, 1852 – The sum of \$12,000 is appropriated for the construction of a new Courthouse to replace the original structure, which had served the county since 1819.

OCTOBER 11, 1853 – Daviess County court requests county senators and representatives in the General Assembly to agitate for passage of an act which would allow the sale of bonds to help finance the erection of a new public building.

APRIL 10, 1854 – A new property tax is added to help defray the cost of building a Courthouse.

JUNE 12, 1854 – William M. Bell, Nicholas G. Bosley, and Elijah Comstock are appointed to find a suitable site for the new building, and to settle on a design and cost.

JUNE 10, 1854 – The general plan, submitted by Bell, Bosley, and Comstock, is approved by the county court. The three now are ordered to advertise for and accept sealed bids for the architectural and construction work. It is decided that the Courthouse will have a tin or zinc roof, fireproof, vaults and safes, and a brick foundation.

OCTOBER 13, 1854 – County court rents quarters in an unidentified downtown building for use while the new Courthouse is under construction at the public square.

OCTOBER 30, 1854 – Barnett Tribble's bid of \$17,500 for the design and construction of a new Courthouse is judged "best and lowest" by Bell, Bosley, and Comstock, and approved by the court.

APRIL 9, 1855 – Proceeds of a new revenue tax will be channeled into the Courthouse fund.

OCTOBER 8, 1855 – It is announced that gutters in the new Courthouse will be made of copper.

OCTOBER 26, 1857 – A lightning rod is ordered to be purchased for the Courthouse.

OCTOBER 26, 1857 – County court orders that steps be erected up to the Courthouse door, and that the cost be paid by still another new tax.

JUNE 14, 1858 – The sum of \$100 is set aside for the purchase of carpets to be used in the Courthouse.

JUNE 14, 1858 – John R. Sharp is hired to repair the gates and fences around the completed Courthouse, to be paid for by another tax increase.

The painstaking research of Miss Mary Barnett, who closely studied the voluminous entries in county court order books F and H, has made the preceding listing possible.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 5 September 1964, p.24B:**

### Chronology of 1868 Courthouse

The Daviess County Courthouse was burned Jan. 4, 1865, by Confederate guerillas. But no mention of the fire is recorded in county court order books until Feb. 4, 1865. Thereafter there are incomplete references to the progress toward constructing a new Courthouse. The references available are the following:

FEBRUARY 4, 1865 – "The Courthouse of Daviess County having been burned down, it is therefore ordered that the circuit courts, quarterly courts, and county courts be hereafter held in the room in Owensboro commonly called and known as Court Hall, but the county courts may when convenient be held in the county court clerk's office." It is not known where Court Hall was located.

JULY 15, 1865 – A property tax of 15 cents per \$100 is ordered to be appropriated for a new Courthouse. James A. Wilhite and Broadas Brown are appointed to examine the walls of the burned - out Courthouse and report on their condition to the court.

OCTOBER 10, 1865 – A. G. Botts and John O'Brien are appointed to urge the General Assembly to authorize a special tax for the construction of a new public building.

APRIL 9, 1866 – M. D. Loyd, Barnett Triple, and Larkin Field are appointed a committee to draft a plan for the Courthouse.

OCTOBER 16, 1866 – A report on the Courthouse walls is received by the court. It is ordered that the walls be protected through the winter with an adequate covering of planks, obviously with an eye toward using these same walls in the construction of new Courthouse.

OCTOBER 30, 1866 – Plans are adopted for the new public building. George Brown, Broadas Brown, and Ed C. Berry are appointed to award contracts to the lowest and best bidders for the work. The plans, notes the order writer, were submitted by Barnett Triple and his associates.

DECEMBER 10, 1866 – Judge George W. Triplett and A. R. Taylor are appointed to purchase furniture for Court Hall, to be used while the Courthouse is under construction. The total price is not to exceed \$200.

JUNE 10, 1867 – Courthouse building committee is authorized to borrow any amount of money necessary for the completion of the Courthouse.

AUGUST 12, 1867 – Building committee borrows \$14,250 from the old Owensboro Deposit Bank.

OCTOBER 15, 1867 – Court provides for the alteration of Courthouse plans to include a town clock in the spire.

APRIL 13, 1868 – The City of Owensboro is granted the "privilege" of constructing two public cisterns on the Courthouse square. One other cistern is ordered built. Provisions are made for constructing an iron fence around the public square, together with a 14-foot-wide pavement along the outside border of the fence.

JULY 13, 1868 – On this day the first recorded session of court takes place in the new Courthouse.

OCTOBER 20, 1868 – The sum of \$6 is set aside to purchase a ladder for the Courthouse. H. P. Hart is awarded \$35 for his efforts in saving county records when the preceding Courthouse was gutted by fire. A proposal to heavily insure the new Courthouse is defeated. Judge Triplett and Camden Riley are instructed, to purchase a bell for the Courthouse and superintend its placement and the construction of all necessary framework.

The above references were discovered through a careful search of Daviess County court order books by Miss Mary Barnett.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 5 October 1965, pp.1E & 12E:**

### History of Courthouse In Daviess County



## Covers Three Major Structures, 1858-1964

A tavern owned by Thomas Moseley Sr. was the site of the first court of Daviess County, according to an affidavit signed in 1925 by Col. J. M. Holmes, then nearly 100 years old.

Exactly how long court continued to convene in privately owned buildings is not clear. Despite the fact that the first known courthouse was constructed in 1819, court order books of 1816, 1817 and 1818 name the "courthouse of the County of Daviess" as the scene of judicial proceedings.

This could mean that a log structure was erected to serve as a temporary courthouse. On the other hand, private homes may have been referred to as "courthouses" for the sake of convenience in keeping records.

In any event, Daviess County's first permanent courthouse was finally completed and occupied in 1819 or 1820, four or five years after the formation of the county.

The new building was constructed of brick and located on what is still the public square. Land had been set aside for the project in a deed signed Oct. 24, 1817, by John L. May and Daniel Eppes.

Aside from these scant facts, scarcely any information about the first courthouse exists. It is known only that the building was too small to satisfy the needs of the rapidly growing county, whose population swelled from 3,800 in 1820 to more than 12,000 in 1850.

### Second Courthouse Built

The journal of Joseph Thomas, an Owensboro resident of the 19th century, reveals that the courthouse was demolished in September 1853, only 34 years after its construction, to make way for a larger building.

In July 1855, according to Thomas, the cornerstone was laid for a new courthouse, and sometime in 1858 construction was completed.

The building was distinguished by its stately Doric columns and traditional tower. It was a two-story structure, measuring 60 by 80 feet, with a brick exterior and an elegant hardwood interior.

Undoubtedly the most romanticized building in the history of Daviess County, this edifice earned its fame during the War Between the States.

Whenever blue or gray troops moved into the city, the soldiers usually installed themselves and their equipment in the public square. Before long the courthouse looked more like a fortress than a temple of justice.

Doors were perforated with openings to fire muskets through, and heavy oak timbers were nailed on the inner side of the doors to make them bulletproof. The windows were barricaded with planks.

Capt. Jacob Bennett, a Confederate who led a band of more than 20 guerrillas, was the first to bring the war to the courthouse.

He corralled a large number of prominent citizens on the public square and, backed by his troops, demanded their money or their lives. Later he burned a wharf boat anchored about a block away on the Ohio River. A number of people were reported to have perished, among them some Negro soldiers. Two of the nine said to be on the boat were shot and thrown overboard after they had fired at the guerrillas. One was burned and the rest apparently escaped.

### Union Reacts Swiftly

The Union reacted swiftly, sending a substantial force into town to sweep out the Southerners. Then a biracial force of blue-clad soldiers was stationed in the courthouse itself.

The presence of Negro troops in the courthouse so enraged Capt. William Davidson, a Southern guerrilla, that he marched into Owensboro at the head of 300 henchmen and easily captured the building. Without hesitation, Captain Davidson declared he would burn the courthouse to the ground.

Accordingly, a short time after sunset on the winter evening of Jan. 4, 1865, Daviess Countians gathered at the square and watched as their new courthouse was swallowed up by flame. Records and documents, however, were safe, having been hurried to niches in nearby buildings shortly before the blaze was started.

The fire," said a local writer, "made a brilliant spectacle. No one who witnessed the collapse of the tower, as the flames and sparks shot high in the air, will ever forget the sight."

Not only the tower, but the columns, the attractive wood interior, and everything but the bare brick shell of the structure were destroyed.

### Third Courthouse Begun

Construction of a new court house was not started until sometime after the end of the war, and not finished until 1868.

When completed, the new courthouse was supported by at least part of the walls of the burned-out building. It measured, like its predecessor, 60 by 80 feet, but was somewhat higher and differently ornamented.

It was constructed of brick comprised two stories and a basement area, and had many characteristics of the federal period of architecture – a dome, a spire with a clock, arched lintels over the windows, and decorative pediments.

Stone trim was utilized around the base of the building. Huge bridge-trusses of timber in the dome region lent stability to the building. Wood double-hung windows were installed.

Private subscriptions bore the expense of a town clock, although the courthouse tower had not been constructed with provisions for one.

In addition, a 1,200-pound bell for the tower was installed, and iron fence was erected around the public square in 1869.

As years passed, the county grew at a faster pace than before, and demands on the courthouse became greater and greater. The building soon was seriously overcrowded, increasing the wear and tear on the declining structure.

A majority of Daviess Countians recognized the problem and took steps to solve it.

### Referendums Fail

They were able to put on the ballot in 1938 a proposal calling for the construction of an entirely new county government building, Daviess County would pay half the comparatively modest cost, while the Works Progress Administration would supply the remaining sum.

The proposition, however, did not obtain the necessary two-thirds majority at the polls, and was turned down again the next year.

Then the issue lapsed until the 1950s, when the need was even more urgent, and the opposition even stronger.

Only in 1955, after a stunning defeat in 1951, did the new-courthouse advocates come close to a victory at the polls. That year they fell but 300 votes short of the required two-thirds margin.

In 1957 backers of a new courthouse met with fresh defeat and waited four years, until 1961, to reopen the issue. That year they absorbed their final electoral beating, obtaining a majority of only 134, far short of a two-thirds margin.

Finally, on Jan. 9. 1963, the U. S. Community Facilities Administration announced it had approved a grant of \$375,000 to pay half the cost of a two a \$750,000 courthouse for Daviess County. Bonds were issued without a referendum.

#### Fourth Courthouse

Finally opened for business in March 1964, the fourth Daviess County courthouse is U-shaped with the open end if acing 2nd Street. The exterior is simple and formal in appearance, utilizing Indiana limestone and colorful window panel slots.

"The general idea," stated architect Max Bisson, "was to construct a building that has dignity and is efficient." He explained there was no expenditure for "frills."

The new courthouse has two stories and a basement for storage, boilers, and electrical equipment. Finishes throughout the building are unelaborate, but adequate and designed for long life with a minimum of maintenance.

These include acoustical plaster ceilings, vinyl asbestos tile floors, and colorful quarry tile in public areas such as corridors, stairs, and rest rooms.

The fireproof, air-conditioned building has corridor walls done in tan and brown ceramic tiles. with office walls painted a pale green.



### **Mistake on the labeling of the Daviess County Courthouse that was burned in 1865**

By Jerry Long

A major remodeling of the Courthouse (1868-1964) was done in September 1893. The Owensboro Messenger, of Friday, 8 September 1893, p1, carried the article "A New Court-House, Rather the Old One to Be Remodeled and Added to Right Away". It announced the remodeling of the Courthouse to begin on the following Monday. Among the additions and changes to the Courthouse it stated that "an outer coating or veneering of St. Louis pressed brick and stone over the entire building" and a new tower will be added. And "the principal entrance will be on the south or Third-street side and will have no pillars as at present, but very massive stone steps." Originally the building had four massive Roman columns on the south entrance. These were removed during the 1893 remodeling. The following item appeared in the Owensboro Messenger of 20 September 1893 p8:

—The four Roman columns on the south side of the court-house were torn down yesterday. They were undermined with picks and allowed to topple over. The work took about two hours. A large crowd witnessed the operation.

A picture of the 1868-1964 Daviess County Courthouse with the four Roman columns was published in the 1876 book, An Illustrated Historical Atlas Map of Daviess County, KY., Leo McDonough & Co., 1876, p.19), see second picture on page 1 of this article. Several published pictures of the same 1868-1964 Courthouse with the four columns have been mislabeled as being the Courthouse that was burned in 1865. The confusion no doubt has occurred due to the removal of the original four Roman columns that subsequent to 1893 were no longer on the building and their existence was no longer apparent. The following are examples of the mislabeling:

- “This Courthouse Burned By Rebels In 1865”, Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer, 5 October 1965 p.1E.
- Postcard History Series: Owensboro, Terry Blake and David Edds, Jr., Arcadia Publishing, Charleston, SC, et al, 2007, p.80.

On the History of Owensboro, KY Facebook website the following picture of the Daviess County Courthouse (1868-1964), with four columns, is correctly identified as “the Courthouse that replaced the one burned in the Civil War.” The picture was identified as being made by C. Cain. C. Cain was Cornelius T. Cain (1853-1906), an Owensboro professional photographer, who the History of Daviess County, Kentucky (p868) states located in Owensboro in December 1873.



### See also:

- Owensboro Monitor, 19 July 1865 p3: courthouse to be rebuilt
- Owensboro Monitor, 28 November 1866 p3: proposal to move location of new courthouse; see also 5 December 1866 p3, 12 December 1865 p3
- Owensboro Monitor, 6 March 1867 p3: new Daviess County Courthouse under construction; see also 13 March 1867 p3, 30 October 1867 p3,
- Owensboro Monitor, 20 November 1867 p3: roof of new courthouse is completed; see also 27 November 1867 p3
- Owensboro Monitor, 28 August 1867 p3: money being raised for city clock for courthouse; see also 25 September 1867 p3
- Owensboro Examiner, 22 October 1875, p1: Mason J. Howell (1794-1875), while a boy helped open a farm, a part of which extended over the site of the Daviess County Courthouse
- Owensboro Examiner, 28 April 1876 p5: new bell for town clock at courthouse
- Owensboro Semi Weekly Messenger & Examiner, 26 November 1880 p3: G. V. Triplett advocates fire-proof vaults for courthouse
- Owensboro Weekly Messenger & Examiner, 11 May 1881 p3: furniture at courthouse being defaced
- Owensboro Semi-Weekly Messenger, 5 December 1882 p4: first electric lights installed at the courthouse; see also 15 December 1882 p3
- Owensboro Messenger, 11 October 1888 p1: drawing of courthouse
- Owensboro Messenger, 9 April 1889 p1: drawing of courthouse
- Owensboro Messenger, 11 April 1889 p4: public park will be on courthouse block; see also 12 April 1889 p1, 13 April 1889 p1, 16 April 1889 p1
- Owensboro Messenger, 12 April 1889 p1: deed titles to Daviess County Courthouse; see also 13 April 1889 p1
- Owensboro Weekly Messenger, 1 May 1890 p3: index of deeds at courthouse ordered
- Owensboro Inquirer, 3 July 1890 p4: some old deed books at courthouse have been rebound
- Owensboro Messenger, 11 December 1892 p1: Confederate Veterans Association propose to erect monument to Confederate dead at Courthouse; see also 14 December 1892 p1, 12 March 1893 p1, 5 April 1893 p1, 5 September 1893 p1
- Owensboro Messenger, 6 April 1893 p2: editorial for new courthouse
- Owensboro Messenger, 8 September 1893 p1: old courthouse to be remodeled; see also 19 September 1893 p1: work begins on new addition to the courthouse; 20 September 1893 p8: four Roman columns on courthouse taken down yesterday
- Owensboro Messenger, 27 January 1894 p4: town clock in Courthouse tower is taken down after 27 years; see also 21 July 1894 p1: town clock lighted
- Owensboro Messenger, 27 May 1896 p5: courthouse hanging tree referred to
- Owensboro Inquirer, 29 January 1899 p9B: picture of courthouse
- Owensboro Messenger, 14 April 1899 p2: hanging tree in courthouse yard discussed
- Owensboro Inquirer, 16 May 1900 p4: fountain of courthouse square being moved
- Owensboro Messenger, 19 August 1900 p3: old cannon at courthouse made at Yelvington before Civil War

- Owensboro Messenger, 25 August 1901 p5: brass cannon given to the city to be placed in courthouse yard; see also 29 August 1901 p8
- Owensboro Inquirer, 29 August 1901 p.8: Civil War canon placed at courthouse
- Owensboro Inquirer, 4 October 1901 p1: walk to be installed at courthouse
- Owensboro Messenger, 15 November 1901 p2: elm tree in courthouse yard cut down, illegal hanging there recalled
- Owensboro Messenger, 18 May 1902 p3: story of the improvement of the courthouse yard
- Owensboro Messenger, 30 October 1904 p9: story of burning of Daviess County courthouse by Bill Davison
- Owensboro Messenger, 17 January 1908 p2: vaults at Daviess County courthouse are not fireproof
- Owensboro Messenger, 28 October 1914 p2: drinking fountains to be placed in courthouse yard, two for whites and one for blacks
- Owensboro Messenger, 29 November 1914 p10A: new courthouse park with fountains
- Owensboro Messenger, 25 September 1921 p1B: Mrs. Worden Riddle remembers three Daviess County courthouses
- Owensboro Inquirer, 21 August 1923 p1: Klu Klux Klan request for use of the Courthouse lawn turned down
- Owensboro Inquirer, 18 July 1927 p10: “Court House Tower, Long Landmark In Owensboro Now Being Torn Down”
- Owensboro Messenger, 1 November 1942 p1A: Civil War cannon at Courthouse donated to scrap metal drive
- Owensboro Messenger, 2 May 1944 p1: memorial to WWII dead given to city-county and placed on northeast corner of the courthouse square
- Owensboro Messenger, 29 May 1949 p5A: drinking fountain monument to county servicemen erected near courthouse
- Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer, 10 January 1963 p1A: “New Courthouse Is Step Closer With \$375,000 Federal Grant: County Must Now Equal That Figure”
- Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer, 13 January 1963 p1B: “Architect’s Drawing of Daviess County Courthouse”
- Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer, 15 April 1963 p1A: “Work Begins On New Daviess Courthouse”
- Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer, 18 March 1964 p1A: “Occupation Of New Courthouse Begins”
- Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer, 5 September 1964 p1A & p1B - 24B: dedication of new Daviess County Courthouse is today, special 24 page edition
- Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer, 5 September 1864 p13B: “Search Is On For Origin of Courthouse Bell; Historical Society Saves It For the Future”
- Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer, 28 October 1964 p1A: historical markers dedicated yesterday, commemorating burning of Daviess County Courthouse
- Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer, 5 October 1965 p1E: “This Courthouse Burned By Rebels In 1865” [note – the picture that accompanies this article is mistakenly identified as the courthouse that was burned in 1865; it is the building that served as the county’s courthouse during 1868-1964 and is pictured in the 1876 book, An Illustrated Historical Atlas Map of Daviess County, KY., p.19]

- Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer, 5 October 1965, p1E & 12E: “History of Courthouse In Daviess County Covers Three Major Structures, 1858-1964”
- Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer, 28 August 2014 p1B: “Courthouse turning 50 on Sept. 5”



**Pictures by Jerry Long**



Daviess County Courthouse dedicated on 5 September 1964



Bell that hung in the Daviess County Courthouse until the bell tower was removed in 1927; erected in 1964 at the northwest corner of the courthouse

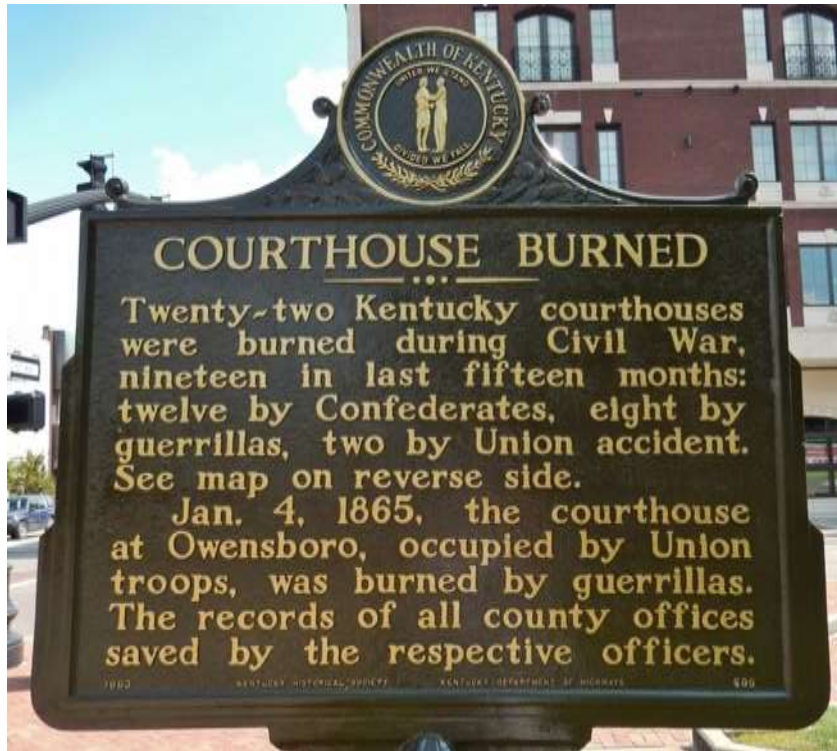


Confederate Statue that stood at the southwest corner of the Daviess County Courthouse from 1900 until 2022



Bust of Wendell H. Ford that was erected in 1979 at the southeast corner of the Daviess County Courthouse





Historical marker erected in 1963 at the northeast corner of the Daviess County Courthouse



Morton J. Holbrook, Jr. Judicial Center, 100 East Second Street opened in 1990

