

“ Courthouse and Jail ” *

IN

HISTORY OF

**FREEBORN COUNTY
MINNESOTA**

COMPILED BY

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William A. Morin, Lesley S. Whitcomb, Harwood
G. Day, Clarence Wedge and many others.**

ILLUSTRATED

H. C. COOPER, JR., & CO.

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FREEBORN COUNTY COURT HOUSE, JAIL AND FARM.

Court House and Jail. The first board of county commissioners met at the home of George S. Ruble, 522 Bridge street, Albert Lea, March 3, 1857, and in spite of several contests, as related elsewhere, the seat of county government has always remained in Albert Lea. In the earliest days most of the county business was transacted near the corner of Clark street and Broadway. Dr. A. C. Wedge and William Morin, the latter the register of deeds, occupied an office on the west side of Broadway between Clark and William streets. Here the board meetings were held. Augustus Armstrong occupied a building just north of the Wedge-Morin office. E. C. Stacy occupied an office in a building on the southwest corner of Clark and Broadway. Other officers in the early days looked after county affairs in their own place of business at their residences. The supervisors, being a large body, met in the upper floor of the old Webber house. Court was also held there, and the attic at times was used as a jail.

In 1856, when the village of Albert Lea was platted, the present court house square was set aside for county purposes. In 1883, George S. Ruble attempted to regain possession of this square, but the courts held that so long as the square shall be used for county purposes, the title remains vested in the county, reverting to the heirs in case its use as a court house square shall be abandoned.

The matter of providing a county court house was considered at a very early date. The first official mention of the matter was made in September, 1857, when the people of St. Nicholas filed a \$10,000 bond to provide the county with a \$5,000 court house if that village was accepted as the county seat. A tract known as Washington Park, platted as a public square, was also to be donated as the site of the proposed buildings.

While the county seat question was being agitated, in 1860, the leading citizens of Itasca, to secure, if possible, the county seat there, executed a bond in the penal sum of *6,000, pledging themselves to build a court

house according to certain plans and specifications, within two years, and also to furnish suitable offices for county purposes. The plan was a good one, giving good, large sized offices, jail room, and a court room twenty-four by twenty-eight feet, with suitable jury rooms. The parties who executed this bond were: A. M. Burnham, C. C. Colby, J. G. Sanborn, R. J. Franklin, E. D. Hopkins, Samuel Batchelder, Charles Dunbar, J. Dunbar, J. Colby, John Adams and J. S. Longworth. This was signed in the presence of Isaac Botsford and Hanibal Bickford, and certified to by Ole I. Ellingson, clerk, per Samuel Eaton, deputy.

The citizens of Albert Lea were not to be outdone. June 4, 1860, there was presented to the county board an offer from several citizens, agreeing to furnish free of charge, offices for the several county officials, a court room, a meeting place for the county board, and a jail, until better should be provided. This offer was signed by A. C. Wedge, George S. Ruble, Augustus Armstrong, Samuel Eaton and H. D. Brown. September 8, of the same year, a bond was executed making the same agreement, but specifying a time limit of three years. The signers were A. B. Webber, A. C. Wedge, A. Armstrong, William Morin, George S. Ruble, James A. Robson, H. D. Brown and John Brownsill.

In accordance with this agreement, the people of Albert Lea furnished court room, jail offices and suitable meeting places for county officials not only for three years, but until the fall of 1866, when the court house was completed. The men of Albert Lea, in 1860, started to build a log jail on court house square, but it was never completed and the logs were moved away.

Toward the close of the war the court house proposition began to be seriously considered. In March, 1864, a committee consisting of William Morin, Frank Hall, and Augustus Armstrong submitted plans and estimates for the construction of a fireproof building for offices and court room, as follows: Brick at \$6, \$1,320.00; fireproof roof, \$300.00; laying brick and furnishing lime, \$550.00; eight thousand feet of lumber at \$20, \$160.00; doors, nails, sash, glass and putty, \$400.00; carpenter work, \$300.00; plastering and lime, \$300.00; total, \$3,330.00. Various petitions were presented against the issue of bonds for county buildings. A resolution, however, was

adopted to issue and appropriate bonds to the amount of \$2,000.00 toward erecting fireproof buildings for the county offices, with the understanding that Albert Lea should appropriate \$1,000.00 to add a suitable hall for court purposes. Messrs. Hall, Morin, and Armstrong were appointed commissioners to sell the bonds and to erect the building. The first bond of \$1,500 was issued and cashed by Joseph Hall. It bore 10 per cent interest and was dated March 16, 1864. In July, 1864, the county board passed a resolution locating the county buildings on the west side of Broadway, north of William and south of Clark street, providing a title to the land could be secured without cost to the county. Later the commissioners decided to build on court house square. In June, 1865, James F. Jones, Asa Walker and E. P. Skinner were added to the building committee.

After many delays, the building was completed, being ready for occupancy in the fall of 1866. The building was located on the corner of Broadway and College street, the entrance being on the former street. The upper story which was used as a court room was completed at an expense of \$1,000 by the people of Albert Lea. The main floor contained the county offices, and the jail. The stairs to the court room lead from the hall in the back part of the building. Within a short time it was found that the brick of the upper story was crumbling. Considerable repairing was consequently done, and the entrance was placed on the outside of the building, leading from Broadway, to a portico which was built in front of the court room on the second story.

In 1875 a jail was erected on the corner of College and Newton street, on the same square. A sheriff's residence was later added, and improvements were made from time to time until the jail and residence assumed their present form.

In 1887 plans were set on foot for the building of a new court house, and after the completion of the present beautiful edifice, the old court building was torn down. At the completion of the new structure, the "Freeborn County Standard" published the following article:

"The contract for the building, after considerable competition, was let March 22, 1887, to Alexander

McNeill, of this city, at \$55,785 and although he has made little, if any profit, he has done his work faithfully, skillfully and well. He sublet the stone and brick work to the late Thomas F. McCormick at \$35,500, and his share of the job, while under his control, was equally well done, and his sureties have in good faith completed it. He lost nearly \$10,000 on his contract, and this, together with exposure while engaged in the work, caused his death. The architect was A. C. Dunham, of Burlington, Iowa, and that his work is a conception of highest genius is evident and acknowledged by all familiar with it. The cost of the completed structure to the county, including steam heating, furniture, architect's commission, expenses of meetings of county board, and all extras, is \$67,110.68. In addition is the loss to Mr. McCormick and his sureties, which brings the actual cost to a round sum of \$75,000, and it could not be duplicated for this sum. There has been no jobbery connected with this work, it has been honestly done, and many public buildings have been erected in the Northwest not nearly as good, which have cost a quarter or one-third more. The building was taken possession of by the county officers October 1, 1888, or a year and a half after work was begun on it."

When it was known that McCormick's bondsmen were to lose a considerable sum of money, a majority of the voters of the county petitioned the commissioners to reimburse them. Accordingly, D. R. P. Hibbs, representing the bondsmen received a check for \$7,000, which was used to repay the various sums which these gentlemen had expended in completing the building.

County Poor Farm. The county poor farm consists of 100 acres of good land, with suitable buildings in section 21, Bancroft township. The farm occupies the site of the old village of Bancroft. When that village was abandoned the county gradually acquired possession of the lots and blocks by reason of unpaid taxes. Some of the land thus acquired was sold, leaving the present 100 acres.■

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