



MANITOWOC COUNTY COURTHOUSE DOME RESTORATION PROJECT

History

THE FIRST COURTHOUSE

Manitowoc County was created by an act of the Wisconsin Territorial Legislature on December 7, 1836. One of the first orders for the county commissioners was the construction of a Court House (often referred to as the "County House" or "Town House" in historical sources).

Manitowoc County's first Courthouse was built and completed during the summer of 1840 on the public square in Manitowoc Rapids by Jacob W. Conroe at a cost of \$650. The one-story frame house, 24 by 30 feet in dimension and 14 feet in height, was built on a hill, or high river terrace, north of the Manitowoc River. The population of Manitowoc County at this time was 240. In the fall of 1849, a jail was built next to the Courthouse, at a cost of \$235.

The Courthouse in Manitowoc Rapids remained the seat of county government for 12 years. On April 30, 1852 the Courthouse and jail were destroyed by fire.



THE SECOND COURTHOUSE

When the county buildings burned down, local residents lobbied to have the county seat moved to the growing port and village of Manitowoc at the mouth of the Manitowoc River on Lake Michigan. On April 14, 1853, by a vote of 498 to 60, the county seat was removed from Manitowoc Rapids to Manitowoc. The population of Manitowoc County in 1850 was 3,702 with 1,300 people residing in Manitowoc. By 1860, 22,416 resided in the county and 3,065 in the city.

In November 1853, a contract was let to Franz Goetzler, who laid a foundation. Disagreements with the owners of the property and contractors, and no clear deed to the property by the county, delayed the work. A gaping hole in the ground remained during 1854 and 1855. In 1856, a new contract was awarded to John Meyer who completed the building in eight months. The cost of the Courthouse was \$10,000.

This second Courthouse was a three-story brick structure with a cupola. The sheriff's quarters, office, and jail were on the first floor. County offices were on the second floor. The "hall of justice" courtroom was on the third floor. A board fence enclosed the south side of the building to prevent inmates from escaping the jail.

The new Courthouse was "a solid, substantial building of brick" and served the needs of the county for 50 years.





MANITOWOC COUNTY COURTHOUSE DOME RESTORATION PROJECT

THE THIRD AND PRESENT COURTHOUSE

On November 20, 1902, a resolution to build a new Courthouse was passed by the County Board. Unfortunately the process did not move forward smoothly. After a few years of false starts and recalculations, by the late summer of 1904, plans for a new \$150,000 Courthouse on the site of the old Courthouse seemed a certainty. The County Board issued a prospectus to architects requesting plans for “a convenient and modern” fireproof three-story Courthouse on the Courthouse square complete with plumbing, heating and lighting.

By early November, the Courthouse Committee had reviewed and examined proposals and drawings from 21 architects and had selected plans for “an imposing structure.” On November 15, 1904, the County Board unanimously approved the Committee’s report and a resolution for Courthouse plans presented by C. H. Tegen, a local architect from Manitowoc. The construction of the new Courthouse was continued through the summer of 1907. By fall, construction was nearing completion. Following the dedication ceremony, The Manitowoc Citizen boasted, “There is no more modern or handsome County Courthouse in Wisconsin, if indeed one can be found in the whole Northwest.”

When the County Board convened in annual session on November 20, the Courthouse Committee filed its final report, stating that “Through every hour of the afternoon and evening the building was visited and inspected by large crowds of people from the whole county, and from the expressions of approval from all visitors, the new building has fully realized the fondest hopes of the people of this county. Everybody seemed satisfied that the money invested in the [new building] by your honorable body was wisely, safely, and permanently invested where it will be a pride, comfort, and convenience to the orderly discharge of business of the county for many years to come.” On November 20, 1907, the County Board formally accepted the new Courthouse at a cost of \$238,348.71 from the contractor George Rickman & Sons Co.



REMODELING AND REPAIR

Since its completion in 1907, the Manitowoc County Courthouse has undergone several remodeling and repair projects.

On May 5, 1950, the base of the dome and several glass panels were broken and shattered in a devastating wind and hail storm that swept the county and the upper Midwest. Following an assessment of the damage and the condition of the dome, the County Board approved a recommendation for the Public Property Committee to rebuild and repair the Courthouse dome at an estimated cost of \$40,000.

As part of the repairs, stainless steel replaced the glass lites and copper mullion caps in the dome, an interior flat roof was installed inside the base of the dome, and the structural steel supporting the dome, cupola, and flagpole were repaired. The interior of the rotunda was then repainted in 1952.

The U.S. Department of the Interior listed the Manitowoc County Courthouse on the National Register of Historic Places on April 16, 1981.

Through the years, County government — ensuring the continued use of the landmark Manitowoc County Courthouse as an administrative and judicial center — has completed on-going maintenance, repair, and remodeling projects. Thanks to the diligence and appreciation of the citizens of Manitowoc County, the 100-year old Courthouse is one of the few buildings of its era still in use today for the purpose it was built.