

Kankakee County's First Courthouse

When Kankakee County was formed in 1853, an election was held to choose between Momence and Kankakee Depot as the location of the county seat. Momence was a community established almost 20 years earlier, with a population numbered in the hundreds, while Kankakee Depot existed mostly on paper — a map of streets to be built and lots to be sold, with only a handful of actual buildings clustered near the new Illinois Central Railroad right-of-way.



Kankakee County's First Courthouse, built 1855.

The company developing the Kankakee Depot town site announced it would donate a square block of land and \$5,000 toward the building of a courthouse if voters chose their town as the county seat. The offer was apparently sufficient to swing the balance to Kankakee Depot.

When the county's first Board of Supervisors met in August, 1853, they paid \$1 for the new courthouse site in what would soon become downtown Kankakee. The square block was bounded by Court Street, Indiana Avenue, Merchant Street, and Harrison Avenue. On the original town plat map, it bore the note, "Donated to the county to be kept forever free of buildings, except a courthouse which is to be placed in the center of the block."



Architect William W. Boyington

By April, 1854, a set of plans were ready for the new building. They had been drawn by one of Chicago's earliest architects, William W. Boyington. He would later go on to design many important structures, including the water tower that became a city icon when it survived the Great Chicago Fire of 1871.

Boyington's Chicago Water Tower and Pumping Station, shown in this 1869 drawing, both survived the 1871 Chicago Fire.



Boyington's courthouse plans show a simple but classic structure 55 feet wide by 75 feet deep, built of locally-quarried limestone. The ground floor contained jail cells and jailer's quarters. Broad stairways on the narrower north and south sides gave access to the raised first floor, where county offices lined each side of a central hallway. The second floor was devoted strictly to court purposes, consisting of a single large courtroom with amphitheater seating, a witness waiting room, and a room for jury deliberations. The building was crowned by an octagonal cupola topped by a dome.



Kankakee County's Second Courthouse, built 1873.

In May, contractor Robert J. Cunningham won the project with a low bid of \$19,282.50; work began within a month. Stone for the building's walls was quarried near Wiley Creek in Limestone Township, about five miles northwest of Kankakee. Just over one year later, in the late summer of 1855, work was substantially completed on the building. The first term of the Circuit Court to be held in the new building was begun in September of that year.

The building underwent some internal remodeling in 1867, although no record survives of what changes were made. Five years later, on October 5, 1872, a fire that started in the cupola destroyed the building's interior, leaving only the stone walls standing. Fortunately, there was time to rescue prisoners in the county jail on the ground floor and to salvage the county records.

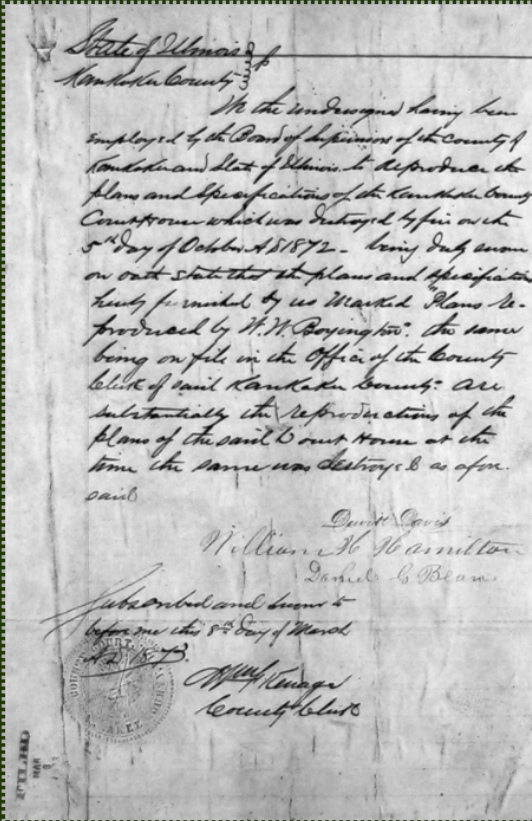
Since the building was insured and the stone walls were still sound, the Board of Supervisors decided to rebuild using the same plans as the 1855 courthouse. They contacted Architect W.W. Boyington in Chicago and had him reproduce the original plans from his files.

Copies of those plans are the drawings displayed in this exhibit.

The second Kankakee County Courthouse took just a year to build, and served until 1909, when it was demolished and replaced by the current building.

Building Plans

1. Certificate establishing the authenticity of the plans. It reads:



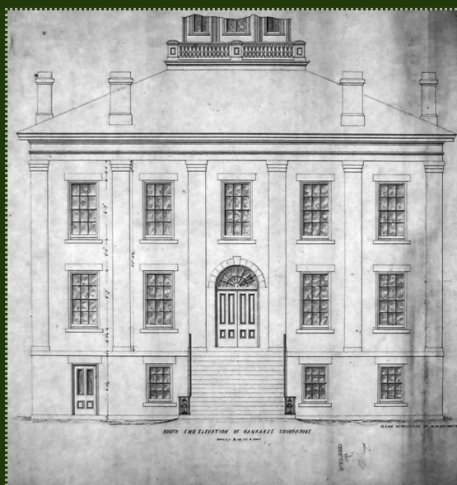
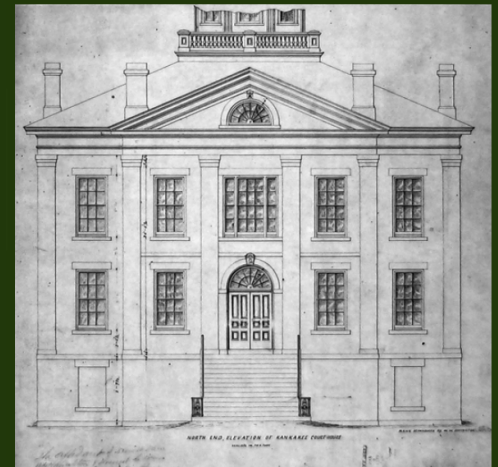
State of Illinois
Kankakee County

We the undersigned having been employed by the Board of Supervisors of the County of Kankakee and State of Illinois to reproduce the plans and specifications of the Kankakee County Court House which was destroyed by fire on the 5th day of October AD 1872 – being duly sworn on oath state that the plans and specifications hereby furnished by us marked “Plans reproduced by W.W. Boyington” the same being on file in the Office of the County Clerk of said Kankakee County – are substantially the reproductions of the plans of said Court House at the time the same was destroyed as aforesaid.

Dewitt Davis
William H. Hamilton
Daniel G. Beam

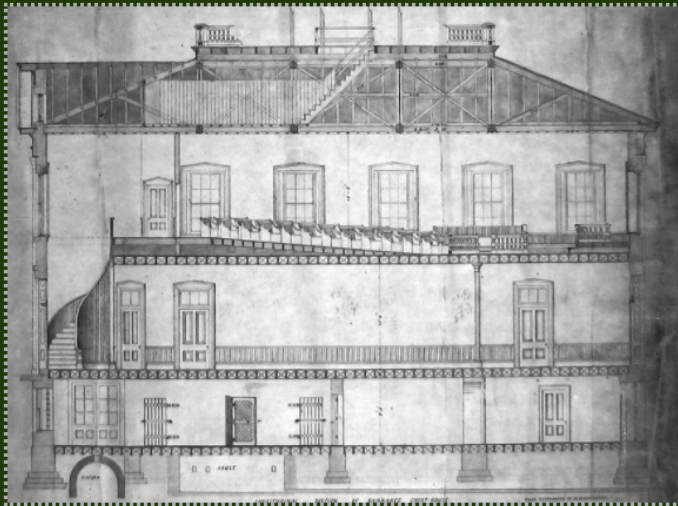
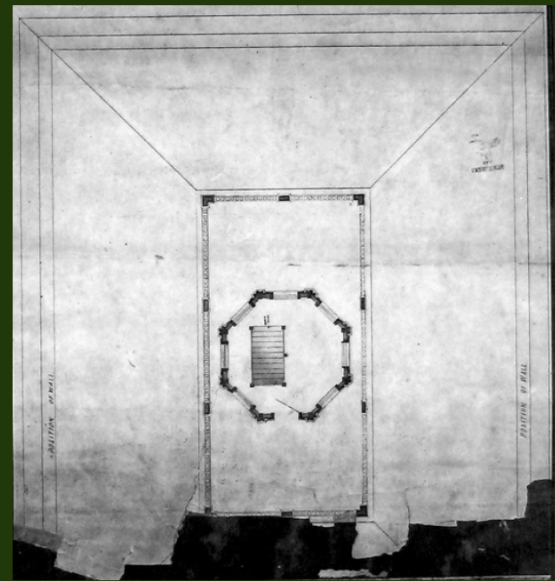
Subscribed and sworn to
before me this 8th day of March AD 1873
William F. Kenaga

2. North elevation. This is the front entrance of the Courthouse, facing Court Street. As shown, the building had a tall ground floor, and a broad staircase leading up to the first floor, where the county offices were located.



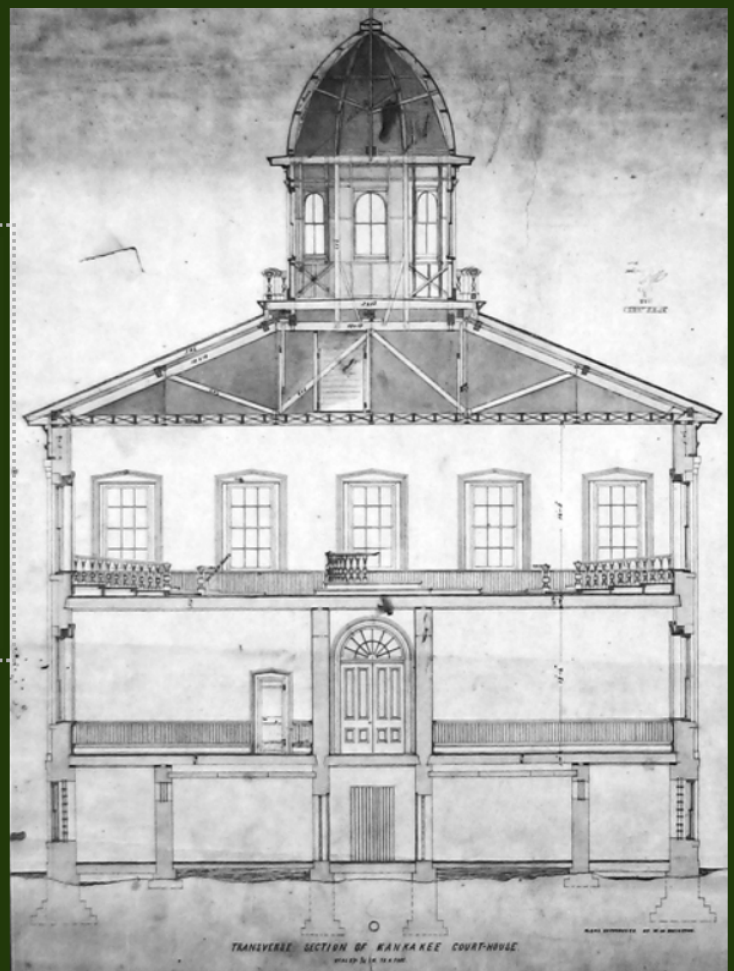
3. South elevation. This is the rear entrance of the Courthouse, facing Merchant Street. Note the ground floor door at lower left. This door probably gave outside access to the jailer's quarters and jail cells on the ground floor (there was also internal access from the first floor, where the Sheriff's office was located).. The jail cells served the county until 1899, when a new Sheriff's residence and County Jail was built on the north side of Court Street, directly across from the courthouse.

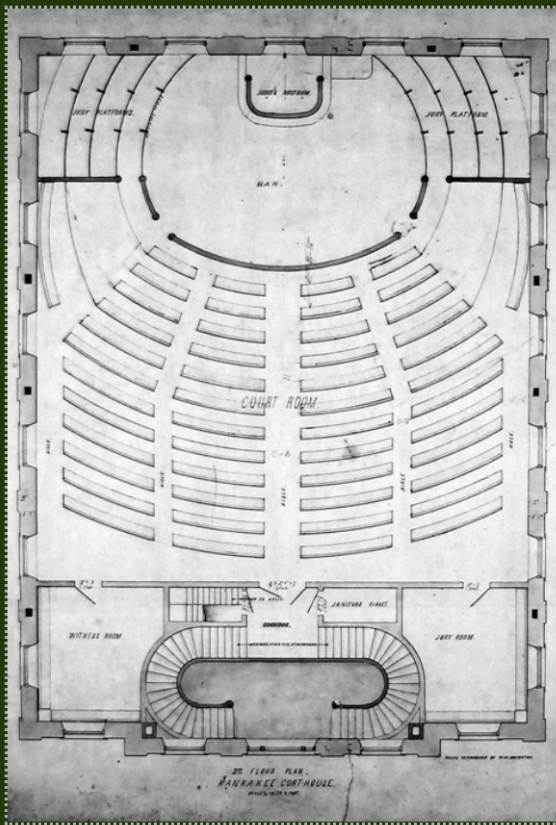
4. Birdseye view. Although this sheet is somewhat damaged, the view looking straight down at the top of the building shows the eight-sided shape of the cupola and the stairway giving access to it from the second floor. The cupola was set on a flat rectangular portion of the roof surrounded by a railing.



6. Longitudinal section. This "slice" is through the center of the building midway between the East and West walls. It shows many interesting details of the building: the barred doors of the jail cells on the ground floor, one of the two curving staircases leading from the first to the second floor, the sloping theater-type seating for spectators in the second floor courtroom, and the access stairway in the attic leading to the cupola.

5. Transverse section. This view is a "slice" through the center of the building, midway between the North and South walls. It shows construction details of the roof and cupola.





7. Second Floor plan. The single court room occupied most of the building's second floor. It featured a large, sloped spectator area, and tiered jury seating on either side of the judge's bench (labeled "Judge's Rostrum"). The open area labeled "Bar" provided space for attorneys, plaintiffs, and defendants. Rooms on either side of the curving staircases were for witnesses and for jury deliberations. Interestingly enough, the building plan does not indicate any area set aside for a judge's chambers.

8. First Floor plan. At this time in the county's history, all the offices of Kankakee County government were contained in one fairly small building. Along the right (west) side of the building are the offices of the sheriff, county attorney, and county treasurer, as well as the Board of Supervisors' meeting room, which also served as needed for Grand Jury proceedings. Across the central hall on the building's east side, are the offices of the county school superintendent and the county clerk, the thick-walled records vault, and the combined office of the circuit clerk and recorder of deeds. Either the first floor vault or the basement vault (shown in the Longitudinal section) may have been added in the 1867 remodeling project, which was partly made necessary by the need for additional records storage space. Note the "coal box" shown in many of the offices — the building almost certainly was heated with individual coal stoves, rather than a central heating system (there were 11 chimneys sprouting from the roof).

