

HISTORIC COURTHOUSE



Daily Courier, File

The Josephine County Courthouse, at 500 N.W. Sixth St. in Grants Pass, was built in 1916. The building also serves as the seat of county government and includes a marble staircase, large pillars and porticoes.

Inside the historic halls of Josephine County's century-old courthouse

For more than 100 years, important decisions that have influenced lives and affected commerce in Josephine County have been made inside the marbled halls of the county courthouse, located in downtown Grants Pass.

The neoclassical building celebrated its 100th birthday in 2016. A coastal redwood tree was planted out front, and a time capsule was put into storage, not to be opened until 2116.

The heart of local democracy didn't always look so stately. The first county courthouse was a log cabin in an Illinois Valley mining town called Sailor Diggings. It cost the princely sum of \$100 to construct in 1856.

In 1858, Kerbyville became the new county seat, and commissioners ordered the sheriff to sell the cabin in Sailor Diggings. Court records were kept in various offices and buildings throughout the town until 1886, when the county seat was relocated again, this time to its present-day location at 500 N.W. Sixth St. in Grants Pass.

In 1916, county officials decided the local government needed more elbow room — and something more imposing. After knocking the old structure down, the new courthouse was built on its footprint. The three-story building, which remains the courthouse to this day, was designed by Portland architect E.E. McClaren and includes a marble staircase, large pillars and porticoes.

According to the March 5, 1919, edition of the Daily Courier, the county treasurer announced the new building, which cost more than \$100,000, had been paid off.

"The new courthouse, which is of the Class A type, is one of

the best in the state," the paper said at the time.

Over the years, the courthouse has undergone several facelifts. In 1963, Grants Pass resident Hans Juergen-Grun gussied the place up by painting a mural above the glass doors leading to the courthouse balcony. Juergen-Grun was a draftsman in the shared city and county planning office and an accomplished artist, according to historical society records. The mural depicts different methods of gold mining.

The most recent addition to the building, known simply as the annex, was finished in 1974. Law enforcement and the district attorney's office filled the annex, but the sheriff's office moved out years ago for new digs at the county jail (on Northeast F Street behind the Grants Pass Walmart store), and the Grants Pass Department of Public Safety is about to relocate to an office building a couple blocks away.

The county is legally obligated to provide space for a courthouse, and about 30% of the courthouse is used for Circuit Court operations, which covers everything from traffic tickets and small claims to major lawsuits and murder trials. The rest is used for general county government purposes.

In 2009, the Oregon Legislature determined that 48 county courthouses and other government buildings statewide need repairs and additions to meet seismic and safety regulations. At that time, county officials estimated it would cost about \$27 million for Josephine County to build a new courthouse.

In 2011 the state and federal governments ponied up about \$2 million to upgrade sprinkler and fire alarm systems, improve ceilings and outfit courtrooms with "e-court" technology.