

## History of the Old Maricopa County Courthouse

The construction of courthouses in America represents the maturation of city and county governments. Today, there are over 6,000 state and local courthouses in the United States, not including federal court buildings. From humble beginnings, city and county courthouses grew to meet the burgeoning needs of exploding populations. This Old Courthouse actually is two courthouses under one roof, the Maricopa County Courthouse encompasses two-thirds of the building, and an early Phoenix City Hall, opened at the same time in 1929, comprises a third of the structure.

Arizona became a territory through an act of the U.S. Congress on December 29, 1863. A small territorial legislature was established by a vote of those residing in the territory and it met for the first time in September, 1864 in Prescott, the designated capitol of the territory at the time. The territory was initially divided into four counties (Yavapai, Pima, Gila, and Cochise) to function as administrative arms of the Territorial Legislature and oversee the laws of the land. Maricopa County was created on February 14, 1871. That same year, the Territorial Legislature required the establishment of county courthouses and a jail in each county to ensure law and order prevailed in what was a turbulent era.

At first, most county operations were housed in temporary quarters. Later, as the counties became more prosperous, permanent facilities were constructed. Concerns about permanent, dedicated county facilities culminated shortly after the turn of the century. By 1909, the five initial counties had been subdivided into fourteen (a fifteenth was created on January 1, 1983). In the years between 1895 and 1918, ten Arizona counties erected courthouses to provide expanded facilities and replace earlier, temporary quarters. This initial phase of construction attests to the expanding population of the territory and state, and to the increasing importance and stability of local government.

The Old Maricopa County Courthouse represents this later era. Completed in 1929, the building is indicative of the rapid growth of Phoenix as an urban area. By the late 1920s, Phoenix and Tucson were well established as centers of population and political control in the central and southern regions of the state. Maricopa County purchased its first courthouse building in 1875, from Michael and Morris Goldwater. Known as the Clementia property, it was an adobe building located on the south side of Washington Street between what is now Central Avenue and First Street. The building, formerly a store, housed the offices of the board of supervisors, county clerk, probate judge, recorder, treasurer, and sheriff. The one-story building contained a central courtroom that was surrounded by offices. The jail consisted of a row of adobe cells set into a high adobe wall at the rear of the building. Prior to the construction of the jail, prisoners were chained to a heavy rock while awaiting trial.

The county board began plans for a larger, permanent county building in 1879 by directing the county clerk to advertise for drawings and specifications for a new building to cost no more than \$28,000. Unfortunately, the board could not agree on plans and costs for a new courthouse until 1883. The first designed and built courthouse was completed in 1884. It was a two-story brick building containing a courtroom, jail, offices of the district judge, district attorney, clerk of the district court, and board of supervisors. It became a dominant landmark in Phoenix for the next forty-four years.

Soon after the county courthouse was built, Phoenix city government decided to build a city hall in 1887 for a fixed price of \$15,580. Located on a full block in the heart of the city, bounded by Washington, Jefferson, First and Second Avenues. Known as “the Plaza,” it was completed in 1888. Interestingly, the building also housed the offices of the territorial government from 1889 to 1901. The new state capitol building in Phoenix was completed in 1901.

Phoenix and Maricopa County experienced steady growth from the 1880s until the second decade of the twentieth century. In 1911, Roosevelt Dam was completed on the Salt River, regulating the flow of water into the Valley of the Sun, assuring a stable water supply for urban development and agricultural growth. In 1912, Arizona achieved statehood. These two events ushered in an expansive period of prosperity and growth for central Arizona. From a sleepy town with a population of 11,134 in 1910, Phoenix grew to 48,118 residents by 1930.

This twenty-year period also saw the architectural evolution of Greater Phoenix, as many new buildings were constructed. The town changed from a small agricultural village to the dominant urban center of Arizona. The central business district witnessed an increase in the size and height of commercial office buildings and hotels. Eight high-rise buildings (six stories or more) were constructed in the downtown core during the 1920s and early 1930s. Many smaller buildings filled in the fabric of the urban streetscape. Dominant commercial buildings constructed during this era include the Westward Ho Hotel (1929), the Luhr’s Building (1924), the Luhr’s Tower (1929), and the Title and Trust Building (1931).

By this time, both the county and city administration buildings were overcrowded. In April 1927, the board of supervisors passed a resolution stating that the current courthouse and jail were inadequate, that additional space was needed for county departments, and that additions to the 1884 courthouse would be wasteful and create fire hazards. The board called for an election on May 21, 1927, for the purpose of issuing bonds in the amount of \$750,000 for the construction of a new courthouse on the same site as the 1884 courthouse. The citizens of Maricopa County approved the measure by a vote of 3,489 to 780.

The city of Phoenix was also interested in expanding its facilities and saw the proposal to build a new courthouse as an opportunity to construct a new city hall. The idea for a joint county-city building began to develop. On March 16, 1927, Superior Court Judge Frank O. Smith spoke to

the city commission and the county board on behalf of the Phoenix Chamber of Commerce in support of a joint building. In May, the board of supervisors sent the city a letter expressing a desire and intent to cooperate on such a project. The board of supervisors accepted an appraisal report that valued the land occupied by the western third of the county courthouse property at \$150,000 and accepted an option from the city to buy that property for the construction of a new city hall joined to the county courthouse. Subsequently, city officials called for a special city bond election in the amount of \$450,000 to purchase the land from the county, construct a new adjoining city hall, and buy fixtures, furniture and equipment for the city building. It passed with a vote of 460 to 164 in favor.

Early on, both sides began scouting architects. The board of supervisors traveled to various eastern and southern states in the summer of 1927 to evaluate the latest in new courthouses. They consulted other boards and commissions, and in September, they began to analyze bids that had been received. They settled on the firm of Edward Neild, a Louisiana architect who designed the Caddo Parish Courthouse in Shreveport. However, the decision did not sit well with city of Phoenix leaders, who backed Lescher & Mahoney, a Phoenix-based architectural firm. Board and city officials worked to reach a compromise, and both sides expressed a desire to put their differences behind them. It was decided that Neild would control the overall design of both county and city exterior portions of the building and Lescher & Mahoney would oversee the city hall section of the building. Lescher & Mahoney did add several elements to the exterior of the City Hall area and was largely in control of the design of its interiors. A Los Angeles firm was chosen as the general contractor.

In a rush to dedicate the joint courthouse-city hall, the board of supervisors and city commission hosted a dedication ceremony on November 11, 1928, when the building was only half completed. The building was finished and certified for occupancy seven months later in June 1929. The total cost for both the city and county portions was \$1,200,000. The city section housed all municipal offices and the county portion was home to county offices, the courts, and a jail on the fifth and sixth floors. The sixth floor held up to 200 male prisoners; the fifth floor was reserved for up to 23 female and juvenile detainees. The design features largely followed the Caddo Parish Courthouse in Shreveport, Louisiana. Both these public buildings are done in a Spanish Colonial Revival style which was quite unique at the time. The only other public building in Arizona in this style is the downtown United States Post Office, also listed on the National Register of Historic Places as is the Maricopa County Old Courthouse. In 2029, the Old Courthouse will celebrate 100 years of service to the people of Maricopa County.

The Superior Court still uses the building as an active courthouse. Today, the Offices of the Presiding Judge and Court Administrator for the Arizona Judicial Branch in Maricopa County are located on the fifth floor. Probate Court, Probate Court Administration, and related Clerk of Court functions, along with Lower Court Appeals (superior courts in Arizona's fifteen counties act

as appellate courts for justice of the peace and municipal courts) are also housed in the building. In 1987, a county bond election provided funds to remodel and update many of the areas in the Old Courthouse to its 1929 grandeur.