

Courthouse Information - The Story Of The Present DeKalb County Courthouse 1904-2004:

By the late 1890's, there were many in DeKalb County who felt it was time for a change when it came to the Courthouse. Almost without exception, every surrounding county had replaced their earlier Courthouse buildings with new facilities during either the 1880's or 90's. At the turn of the 20th century, the DeKalb County Courthouse was 50 years old, and it had been 35 years since any improvements were made to the structure.

Proponents of a new Courthouse pointed to its inadequacy for transaction of county business, its age, and that the county was out of debt, as reasons for erecting a new courthouse. A resolution was passed unanimously by the Board of Supervisors in the fall of 1901, authorizing construction of a new Courthouse, with an appropriation of \$100,000 for the job. Almost immediately a hitch developed.

DeKalb wanted the Courthouse, and DeKalb industrialists, Jacob Haish and Isaac Ellwood, pledged \$20,000 each, plus an additional \$20,000 from the people of DeKalb themselves for the construction of the new Courthouse in DeKalb. Sycamore residents subsequently raised \$70,000 to retain the courthouse in their town. DeKalb's adherents filed suit, calling for an injunction to prevent construction, charging that no provisions had been made to care for the records of the county during demolition of the old building and a building of the new. A petition drive was then launched by the DeKalb contingent, calling for a referendum on relocating the county seat to DeKalb. Because of the improper notification of the proposed election, the issue failed to come to a vote. All of these actions transpired during the year 1902.

In May of 1903, the controversy was renewed. DeKalb attempted to work out a compromise with Sycamore, whereby the county seat would remain in Sycamore on the provision that an old people's home, costing \$150,000, be built in DeKalb, with \$50,000 provided by the people of Sycamore. All previous pledges to the courthouse fund were to be withdrawn. Haish and Ellwood were the driving forces behind this effort. The Board of Supervisors again overwhelmingly approved a resolution to put up a new Courthouse, this time in conjunction with an appropriation of 140,000. The Haish-Ellwood proposal was rejected by DeKalb, and Sycamore was not required to donate to the old people's home, and instead, put \$55,000 into the Courthouse fund. Legal action continued during the summer of 1903, both in the form of another injunction to prevent construction from getting underway, and in another petition drive, fueled in part by Jacob Haish putting up \$103,000 of his own money to build the Courthouse in DeKalb.

Even after the cornerstone was laid on October 29, 1903, DeKalb supporters continued to oppose the inevitable. Rallies were held across the County by both sides to drum up support for their cause. Each side had its delegation of speakers out on the stump, accompanied by musical quartets.

Work on the courthouse proceeded rapidly during 1904, despite the legal threats from DeKalb. The final ruling against DeKalb was handed down by the State Supreme Court in January, 1905. Later that year the building was completed and dedicated with great fanfare.

Not long after the passage of the original resolution authorizing construction of a new Courthouse, the Board of Supervisors agreed to have the structure designed using the Lee County Courthouse at Dixon as the model. That seat of justice was brand new at the time itself, having had Charles E. Brush of Chicago as its architect, and William J. McAlpine of Dixon as contractor. Both men were already well known in the DeKalb-Sycamore area for other public and private commissions. Although McAlpine was given the contracting work, the design contract was awarded to the architectural firm of Watson & Hazleton of Chicago. The reason for not retaining Brush as architect is not known.