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Local History Sketches

The 1880 Macomb County Courthouse

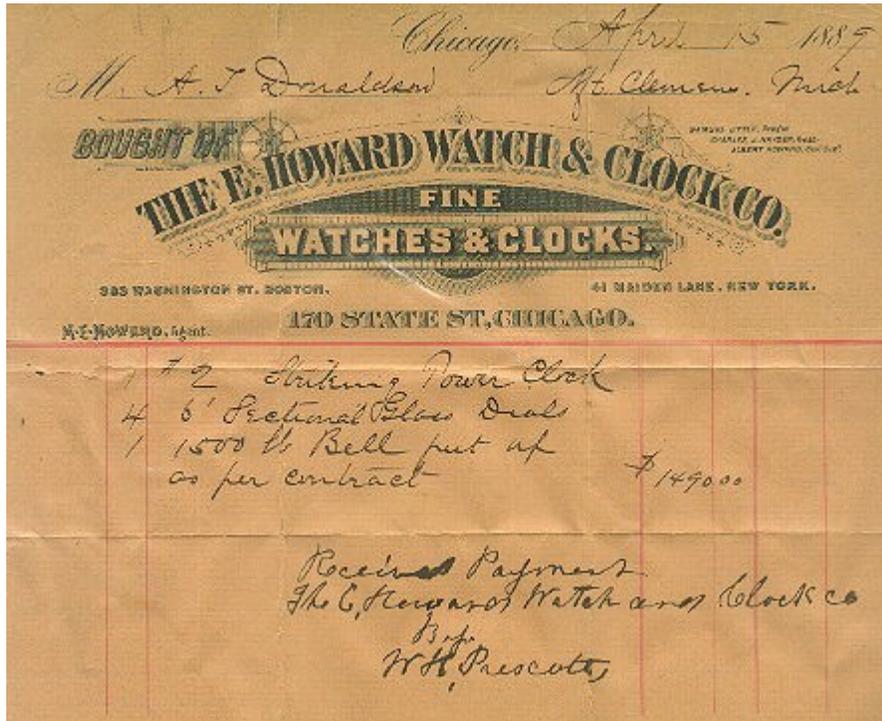
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On February 26, 1879, the Macomb County Board of Supervisors received a petition from 127 citizens of Romeo, proposing that the county seat be moved to Romeo in exchange for a \$30,000 outright gift to the county government from the citizens of the village. A bitter controversy sprang up between Mount Clemens and Romeo over the location of the county seat, and ended when the city of Mount Clemens bonded itself for \$20,000 and solicited another \$5,000 in private donations to create a fund for the construction of a new county courthouse within its borders.

At the time, the Macomb County Courthouse was a small, two-story brick structure which had been built in 1840. Serving as both courthouse and jail, it no longer provided sufficient space to accommodate all of the offices necessary to the efficient conduct of county business. In the spring of 1880, with funds furnished by the city of Mount Clemens, the courthouse building committee of Charles Ullrich, John Otto, E.W. Lewis, James Ayres, L.H. Canfield and Thomas Dawson solicited designs for the proposed new building. The winning concept was submitted by Mount Clemens architect Northrup J. Gibbs, whose proposal envisioned a specimen of Norman architecture, featuring a clock tower with a height of 148 feet. The three-story structure would include offices for the county departments, offices for the city of Mount Clemens, and one large, elaborate courtroom on the third floor.

The 1840 courthouse was razed in early August, 1880. The contractors were able to salvage 200,000 bricks from the old building. The cornerstone laid forty years before was rescued from the debris and was found to contain water-soaked newspapers that were little more than pulp, and an eighteenth-century coin that was later transferred to the new cornerstone. Construction of the new building began as soon as debris from the old had been cleared away. The new cornerstone was laid under the auspices of the Masonic lodge on October 21, 1880. The ceremonies included a stirring address by Mayor George M. Crocker, and music furnished by the Port Huron Band. Following the program the celebrants removed to the Avery Hotel for a grand reception.



The building welcomed its occupants in time for the November, 1881 session of circuit court. Among the ornaments that graced the new structure were a figure of Justice, poised above the entrance, and a striking tower clock which was added in 1889. A clock committee headed by local financier and industrialist A.T. Donaldson raised funds to purchase the clock, and it was supplied by the E. Howard Watch & Clock Co. of Chicago for the princely sum of \$1,490.00. It was started in 1889 and held its place until removed for "safekeeping" when the courthouse was eventually razed in November,

1930. During World War II, it was consigned to the scrap iron drive, along with the Civil War-era cannon that had defended the courthouse square since 1901.

1880 Courthouse

Year built: 1880-81

Cost: \$52,000 for building and furnishings

Architect: Northrup J. Gibbs of Mount Clemens, Michigan

Height: 148 ft. to the top of the clock tower

Razed: November, 1930

For further information about the 1880 Macomb County Courthouse, we recommend:

- *History of Macomb County, Michigan.* Chicago : M.A. Leeson, 1882, pp.450-460.
- Eldredge, Robert F. *Past and Present of Macomb County, Michigan.* Chicago : S.J. Clarke,

1905, p.583.

- "The new court house, according to the plans of Mr. N.J. Gibbs....," *Utica Sentinel*, July 3, 1880, p.4.
- "Ring of Hammer is Death Knell for Courthouse," *Mount Clemens Monitor*, November 14, 1930, p.8.
- "Two Old Guns Shoved in Background By Whirl of Courthouse Construction," *Mount Clemens Monitor*, July 24, 1931.
- Arnsby, Desmond A. "Origin of Old Courthouse Clock Ticks Off Memories of the Past," *Mount Clemens Monitor-Leader*, July 6, 1950.