

THE FOUR COURTS BUILDING: WALSH AT THE CROSSROADS OF HIS CAREER

by David J. Simmons



The Four Courts Building, 1871-1916, viewed along the south side of Clark from Eleventh toward Twelfth (now Tucker). Drawn by Pat Hays Baer for Landmarks Association, Landmarks Letter, January 1982.

The Four Courts Building remained St. Louis' number one tourist attraction for more than thirty years, from its opening in 1871 until the eve of the St. Louis World's Fair. Its unique design, especially the jail area, coupled with its criminal associations accounted for this popularity. Thomas Walsh, its architect, wanted to fashion a magnificent structure in order to bring himself fame and fortune. Instead, the building's construction evolved into a major scandal negatively affecting the rest of Walsh's architectural career. During the building's forty-five years of existence, constant public criticism reminded everyone of its high cost and substandard construction. Prior to the Four Courts Building, Walsh's method of architectural operation existed outside the public eye, but news reporters carefully monitored his association with this project. They reported on his deviations from the truth, questionable business

practices, and suspicious financial dealings. A court-ordered investigation accused Walsh and his contractors of inflating building costs by more than \$100,000. Lacking evidence connecting these excessive billings to criminal intent, the court ignored the findings and exonerated Walsh's team of any wrongdoing. But public opinion and several local newspapers believed that the Walsh team had looted the county treasury. This scandal caught the attention of many Eastern newspapers, which relished reporting its details. A Chicago reporter described the issue:

Boss Tweedism of Tammany Hall, New York fame has come to St. Louis in the person of one Thomas Walsh, architect, and his cronies who defrauded the county treasury of more than \$100,000 in bogus charges for the construction of the Four Courts Building.

Scandal at the Four Courts damaged Walsh's architectural career, leading to the loss of prestige, position, and client base. His reputation never recovered from its consequences.

Need for a new St. Louis county prison surfaced during the Civil War when prisoner escapes from the Sixth Street prison became commonplace. In 1816, Theodore Hunt built St. Louis' first county jail at Sixth and Chestnut Streets. Equipped with four cells on a single floor, the brick and stone building measured 20 by 40 feet and cost \$1,200. At the same location, Henry Singleton, architect, erected the second county jail in 1842 at a cost of \$40,000 (See "Henry Singleton's Architectural Legacy in St. Louis," *Newsletter*, Vol. XIV, No. 1B, Spring 2008, p.8). Situated on four levels, his jail (40 by 60 feet) with stone exterior, furnished the county with 36 cells. At the behest of the county court, William Rumbold just prior to his death in 1867 prepared plans for a new jail at the same location. Conceived in the Venetian architectural style with a Joliet limestone exterior, his four-story jail (111 by 135 feet) would have cost an estimated \$367,000. Each of its 306 cells occupied a space measuring 8.5 by 6.5 feet, rising 8 feet high.

After rejecting Rumbold's plan, the Court decided to build a criminal justice center containing the police department, court system, and jail together at one location. Since the current location was too small for this undertaking, the court looked further west for a large lot. On September 3, 1868, it purchased the Greek Revival mansion of Clemence

Coursault Chouteau for \$125,000. She had died in 1859. The lot (380 by 280 feet) occupied the area between Eleventh and Twelfth Streets, from Spruce to Clark. It had previously been the site of the Greek Revival house built for Clemence's husband, Henry Pierre Chouteau, who had died in the railroad disaster at the Gasconade River in 1855.

After almost twenty years of local architectural practice, Walsh was still seeking an opportunity to assert his claim to be St. Louis' pre-eminent architect. Three previous attempts had ended in failure. The first came in 1856 when he had succeeded George I. Barnett as supervising architect of St. Louis' first United States Custom House, located at Third and Olive. A group of local Federal officials orchestrated by Walsh falsely charged Barnett with certain improprieties and political intrigue, leading to his forced resignation. Barnett served as the principal architect of the building's beautiful exterior and completed part of its construction. Walsh finished the construction, designing the building's interior. At first this appointment brought Walsh prestige and new clients, but then his efforts turned into the nightmare on Third Street. His main contribution to the building was a poorly arranged interior plagued by inadequate lighting, uneven heating, lack of proper ventilation, and bad plumbing.

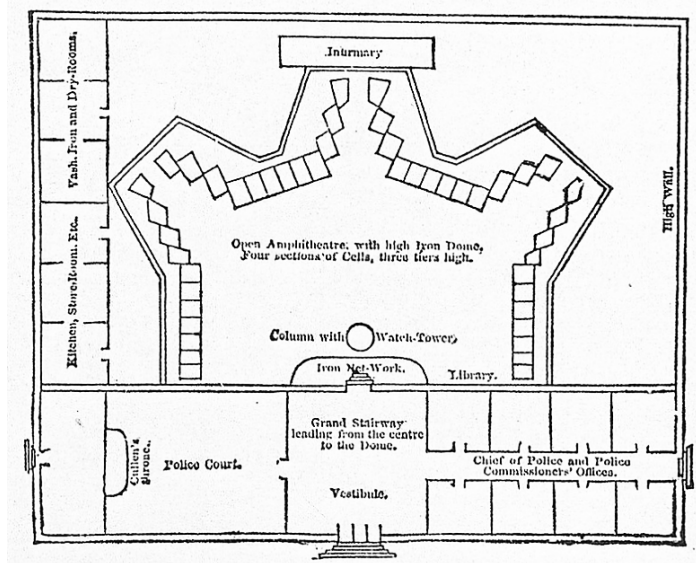
A second attempt arrived with the opening of his 530-room Lindell Hotel at Sixth and Washington in the fall of 1863. Occupying most of a city block and rising six floors above the basement, the Lindell made Walsh a household name. For two years the Lindell reigned as St. Louis' top hotel until Barnett's Southern Hotel at Fourth and Walnut opened to challenge its supremacy. Smaller in size, with a simpler exterior design, the Southern enticed its guests with a pedestrian-friendly arrangement, superior location, improved mechanical systems, and emphasis on comfort. Locals soon favored the Southern for large-scale events. Prior to its fourth birthday, the Lindell burned, leaving the Southern to reign as the top city hotel. Barnett rebuilt the Lindell and later the Southern after it too burned in 1877.

Completed in 1867, the O'Fallon Polytechnic Building at Seventh and Chestnut represented Walsh's third attempt. At first its lavish appointments drew public praise, but then its owner Washington University branded it a "white elephant" completely unsuited for its purpose. Under constant modification to fit its ever-changing program, this building added nothing to Walsh's architectural reputation (See "The Life and Times of the St. Louis Polytechnic Building," *Newsletter*, Vol. XIV, No. 1A, Spring 2008).

A new building for the county criminal justice system offered Walsh another opportunity to achieve his dream. Without being asked, he made plans for this building and sent them to the county court. The court approved them for

construction on February 11, 1869 at a cost estimated between \$300,000 and \$320,000. Work on the project commenced a month later. Over two years passed before the building was completed. Walsh's plan was in two parts, with the police department and court system housed in the north or front unit and the jail in the south or rear unit. Fronting on the south side of Clark for 330 feet, with a depth of 53 feet, the three-story north unit, with basement and attic levels, used a five-part pavilion style front facade reflecting French Renaissance ideas, complete with mansard and dome roofing. Building height varied from 60 to 90 feet. Originally the front was to be a combination of brick and stone, but later it was changed to all limestone, to be obtained from DeSoto, Missouri. After the original stone company defaulted on its contract, Athens limestone from LaMont Valley, Illinois was substituted at a much higher cost. The front's most striking feature was the large central convex dome crowned with a four-face clock tower and cupola. A central two-story portico framed the main entrance. Porticos also framed the Eleventh Street entrance to the court system and the Twelfth Street entrance to the Police Department.

The building's main entrance opened into a large lobby (32 by 24 feet), featuring a marble-tiled floor and a cast iron staircase twelve feet wide. Police offices filled the west wing, and the police court rooms, plus the jailor's office occupied its east wing. On the second floor, the Criminal Court of Corrections had the west wing, and the Criminal Court plus the sheriff's office the east wing. On the third level and the attic, St. Louis City government claimed all 28 rooms for various city departments. The basement provided space for the police armory and drill room, furnace room, and coal vaults. Ash vaults extended under Twelfth Street.

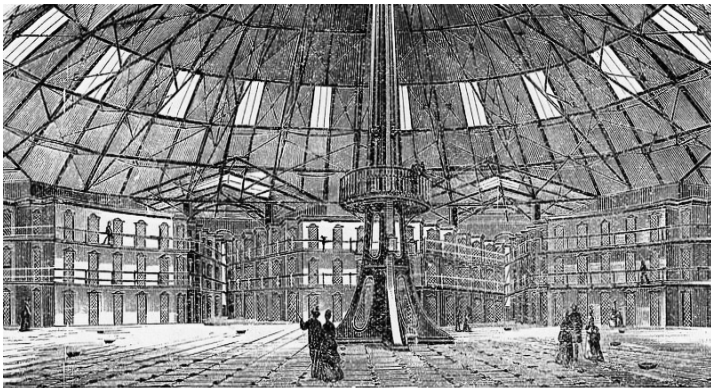


Ground plan of jail, from *St. Louis Illustrated*, 1876, p. 24

Viewed by the local public as something of a modern engineering marvel, the jail relied on a single interior support in the form of a cast iron pole tower upholding a

massive half-domed cast iron roof. Twelve iron trusses carried the roof from the top of the jail wall to the top of the pole tower. This arrangement allowed the interior of the jail to have a large open space measuring 220 feet wide by 170 feet deep. Attached to the south wall of the front section for 330 feet, the jail assumed the rough shape of an inverted coffee cup without the handle, modified by three projected areas at the bottom of its ellipse. Except for the attached wall, the jail walls rose 45 feet, framed for the most part with large windows 40 feet tall and 20 feet wide, covered with iron bars. The domed roof contained eleven large skylights and each projected area had a skylight embedded in its hipped roof. Six entrances gained access to the jail, three on the south side and three connecting with the North unit. The central connecting entrance was 20 feet wide. Marble tiles paved the jail floor, and the jail arrangement placed the medical dispensary and the jailors' quarters at the back of the building. Located between the two sections of the building, twin brick smokestacks 72 feet high completed the building's heating arrangements driven by steam.

Using half-inch cast-iron bar, the jail cells numbered 152, accommodating from 450 to 500 prisoners. Cells were separated into four groups, each with three levels accessible by iron galleries and circular staircases. Measuring 8 by 10 feet and 9 feet high, each cell furnished the prisoner with a bed, toilet, sink with running water, heat source, ventilation, table, and chair. Enclosing the jail and its surrounding courtyard was a brick wall sixteen feet high. On the east side of the courtyard two buildings housed the laundry and kitchen. Built by the county in 1875 at the southwest corner of the wall, a \$25,000 four-room brick morgue was designed by architect James McGrath.



THE JAIL—Entrance through and to the rear of Four Courts.

The Jail, seen through and to the rear of the Four Courts, from St. Louis Illustrated, 1876, p. 24

Prior to the court's approval of Walsh's plan for the criminal justice building, he assured the justices of its reasonable cost, estimated to be \$325,000. After the court approved Walsh's plan, local newspapers published a description of his proposed building. In response, several local architects questioned Walsh's cost estimates. They all agreed that the project's cost would be far above Walsh's estimate. After

project construction started, costs escalated rapidly as the local media reported:

<i>Missouri Republican</i>	2-14-1869	\$310,000
<i>St. Louis Times</i>	8-3-1869	\$500,000
<i>St. Louis Democrat</i>	7-8-1871	\$650,000
<i>St. Louis Times</i>	10-22-1872	\$760,000

To finance this project, the county court initially levied a property tax on June 10, 1869, raising \$95,000. At the same time the court authorized the sale of county jail bonds in the amount of \$345,000, bearing an annual interest rate of 8%. These bonds were sold to the banking house of Taussig & Gimpp at a 7% discount. The court's share was \$320,850. In the fall of 1869, the court offered to sell five thousand shares they owned in the Iron Mountain and Southern Railroad. Prior to the Civil War the county had bought the stock at face value of \$100 per share. During the war, the tracks and rolling stock of the Iron Mountain and Southern had sustained serious damage. Local railroad financier Hudson E. Bridge submitted the winning stock bid of fifty cents on the dollar at \$250,000. Later millionaire George Taylor offered a higher bid of sixty cents on the dollar, or \$300,000, but the court rejected his bid because it had been received after the court-imposed deadline. Over the objections of Justice Dailey and the County Auditor, the court accepted Bridge's proposition on November 16, 1869. Then on June 22, 1871, the court sold the old jail property at Sixth and Chestnut for \$105,641. Two county contracts outlined Walsh's compensation package to build this project. One contract, dated May 21, 1869, paid him \$10,000 to supervise the building's construction. The second contract, dated November 26, 1870, allowed Walsh two percent of \$325,000 for the building's plans, specifications, and drawings, resulting in the additional payment of \$6,500.

Once construction began the project faced many challenges. One major source of trouble related to contractors offering unrealistically low bids for project work. They knew their bids would not cover the total costs of the job. Having obtained the job by fraudulent means, they would manipulate their contract with the aid of the supervising architect to turn a handsome profit. Sometimes they substituted cheaper or inferior materials which did not meet contract specifications in order to increase profits. For example, project specifications demanded cast iron bars for the jail cells to be one half inch in diameter, but contractors substituted bars only three-eighths of an inch thick, weakening the structure. Cement mortar was to be used to bond all brick work. In some cases contractors used common mortar, bringing into question the building's ability to hold together.

A second area of profit-making was poor workmanship.

Improper installation of window and skylight frames in the jail, smokestacks pulling away from their support walls, sagging foundation on the west end of the court area, cracked and crumbling plaster, deficient interior drains, hollow interior walls, and a dome that leaked are examples of a sub-standard construction effort.

The most lucrative means of making large profits was to contract extra work not covered in the original contract. This became the contractors' method of choice. Vaguely written contracts carefully manipulated could produce a large amount of extra work payable at the daily rate. Since most contracts failed to limit the price of extra work, the contractor could charge whatever he could negotiate with the architect. With Walsh's collusion, the daily rate extra work at the project often proved to be very high in contrast to the contract price. Contractors seeking Walsh's favor usually found him very accommodating, for a price. Walsh's failure to enforce some provisions of certain contracts produced large profits shared by him with the contractors involved. Walsh called the system the "toll and grist" arrangement, but public opinion labeled it a kick-back scheme. The beauty of the system was that it left no paper trail, the amount paid remained unknown, and nothing could be proven. Walsh might be accused of negligence but nothing else.

By the summer of 1871, the new county justice center had been completed. At the behest of Justice Busby, the court named the new building the Four Courts as of December 17 of the same year. This title referenced a similar structure in Dublin, Ireland.



The Four Courts, Dublin, facing the River Liffey, built 1786-1796 to designs by James Gandon, was one of the celebrated buildings of Georgian Dublin. Burned out 1922, reopened 1932.

Exactly how much cash this team grafted from the Four Courts project has remained a mystery, but efforts were made to find out. During construction, local taxpayers questioned its ever-expanding cost and constant accusations of fraud. They exerted pressure on the courts to investigate

the construction process. In December 1871, the court appointed a three-person panel called the Committee of Experts to conduct the investigation. The panel consisted of two general contractors – Ellis Leeds and Joshua Houston – plus architect John S. Mitchell, who acted as chairman. Over a ten-month period, they examined the project records and evaluated the work completed for quality and cost. They found that contractual obligations of the project amounted to \$565,602 and extra work added another \$200,000 to this total.

The most controversial items were the two iron contracts for the jail cells. They were bid at \$91,000 but finally cost \$151,000, an overrun of more than \$60,000 or 66%. Panel members found that the real value of the completed work was \$118,000, resulting in a county overcharge of \$33,000. Some other areas where the county was overcharged included heating -- \$18,203; masonry -- \$12,135; and carpentry \$16,471. In October 1872 the committee filed their 200-page report with the court accusing the Four Court contractors of overcharging the county a total of \$104,119. All values were predicated on local market labor and material costs. This report also mentioned the building's poor workmanship and inferior materials. For their service to the court each panel member earned \$2,500.

Nine days after the report came out, Walsh launched his own 75-page response defending himself and excusing his contractors. He attacked his accusers by suggesting that their motivation came from personal jealousy over his success as an architect rather than from the search for the truth. His excuse for the high prices the court had to pay: "If the contractors charged very high prices for extra work, you must blame them, but don't blame me. I had no control over their pricing." As supervising architect he was to insure the prices charged to the court were fair and reasonable. In the court of public opinion, Walsh's arguments fell on deaf ears.

The recently founded St. Louis Taxpayers League demanded that the court terminate Walsh as county architect and prosecute him for corruption. In response, the court asked the county lawyer, Thomas Reynolds, to examine Walsh's Four Courts conduct. Reynolds, a former Walsh associate, had partnered with him in the late 1850s to erect three commercial buildings. Reynolds' investigation supposedly exonerated Walsh from any wrongdoing, but the League called the proceedings a "whitewash."

The Four Courts scandal unfolded over a four-year period, from 1870 to 1873. On numerous occasions, both the *St. Louis Democrat* and the *St. Louis Times* revealed various aspects of the puzzle. Summarizing the situation, the *Democrat* made these remarks in March 1873:

Did Walsh not promise to complete the building at a cost of \$300,000? He promised to guarantee the cost with a bond. Of course, the bond was never made. Other local architects said the building could not be built for that amount. Apparently Walsh certified payment of \$104,000 to contractors in excess of current market value. . . Extra work at the Four Courts Building was very extensive and done at very high prices. . . we do not hesitate in saying that some stealing has been done by a collusion between the contractors and the supervising architect.”



Four Courts seen from the southwest, showing the skylighted dome of the Jail, with the Clark Street elevation behind. The Morgue is the light-colored building in the foreground. Photo by O'Reilly, ca. 1890, Gateway Heritage, Winter 1999-2000, p. 13

In spite of the scandal, the court failed to take any action against Walsh or the contractors. Walsh survived the public outcry over the scandal, but its consequences haunted him for the rest of his life, causing considerable damage to his architectural career. During the 1870s, his client base declined rapidly. The business community questioned his integrity. By the 1880s, he had only two reliable clients: the Agricultural and Mechanics Fair, and the Jesuits at St. Louis University. The scandal was a factor in Walsh's failure to retain his position as school board architect against Frederick Raeder in the board election of 1871. At the same time, it influenced Mayor Thomas Cole to block the construction of a new city hall designed by Walsh, who had won the design competition for it. It was in part responsible for his disassociation from the local poor house project (See "A Pauper's Palace and the Poor House Odyssey," *Newsletter*, Vol. XX, No. 1A, Spring 2014). His failure to be reinstated as the local supervising architect for the Second St. Louis Customs House (the Old Post Office) in 1878 was influenced by this scandal. When Walsh won the competition for the exhibition and entertainment center in

1883, the company directors refused to give him the commission because they didn't trust him. Instead the project went to J. B. Legg (See "The St. Louis Exposition and Entertainment Hall," *Newsletter*, Vol. XV, No. 2B, Summer 2009).



The Four Courts Building, from a c. 1900 postcard, Gateway Heritage, Winter 1999-2000, p. 13

High maintenance costs and need for constant repair made the Four Courts a source of frequent agitation in government circles. During its entire existence the building leaked every time a rain storm passed over the site. One leaking problem resulted from placing the gutters inside the building rather than on its exterior. Once the gutters became clogged, rain water flooded parts of the building, damaging the plaster walls. As a result, the gutters were relocated outside at considerable expense. In addition, both the mansard roof and dome leaked. In the jail area the space around the window and skylight frames allowed water to seep into the building. Efforts to remedy this situation failed. During the spring of 1875, the court ordered a grand jury investigation of the Four Courts' physical premises to find solutions to these ongoing problems. One issue concerned the crumbling brick walls laid in common mortar at the jail, repaired by reinforcing them with plates of boiler iron. One of the two large smokestacks had to be reattached to its supporting wall. Authorities removed the grates between cells because they acted as ladders to facilitate prisoner escape. Other problems included a cracked foundation in the court unit and failing window frames in the jail area. In summary, the grand jury concluded:

It is the unanimous opinion of the grand jury, there has never before been so much money put into so bad a structure in this or any other civilized country.

Over the years the jail quartered between 250 and 300 prisoners on a daily basis, while the building hosted many important criminal trials. The public focused on the more than thirty public hangings involving some of St. Louis'

most notorious criminals. Authorities conducted these events in the courtyard of the jail. Local newspapers described the hangings in lurid detail, much to the delight of their readers.

Fast forward to 1906, when another grand jury examined the viability of the Four Courts Building. They found a litany of problems: leaking roof, crumbling jail walls, sinking foundation, corroding water pipes, rusting iron cell bars, sagging kitchen roof, unusable laundry, and poor ventilation. Building experts told the jury that the building had deteriorated to the point where it could no longer fulfill the purposes for which it was built. The experts placed the lifespan of the building at 25 years, which was not the original intent of the authorities, architect or builders. Experts recommended certain immediate repairs be undertaken. This effort would give authorities enough time to construct new facilities for those organizations housed at the Four Courts.

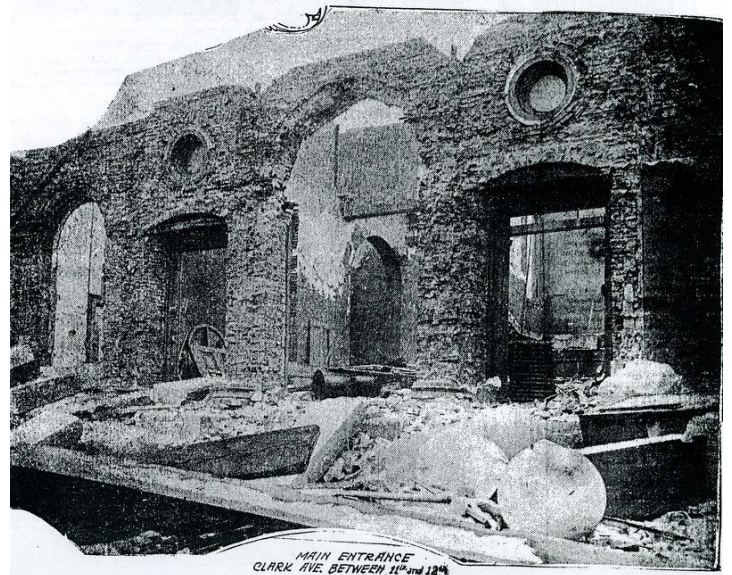
In 1907 the St. Louis Police Department left these premises and moved to a new three-story brick facility around the corner at 206-210 South Twelfth (now Tucker). Designed by city architect J. A. Smith, the new building cost \$50,000. Later the St. Louis Board of Election commissioners occupied that location. Architect Isaac Taylor designed and built the new Municipal Courts Building and Jail at the southeast corner of Fourteenth and Market. Upon its completion in 1909, the court system and the jail relocated (See "The Architectural Career of Isaac S. Taylor," *Newsletter*, Vol. XVII, No. 4, Winter 2011, p. 8).

By the end of 1913, the Four Courts had no occupants. In the twilight of its existence it served two humanitarian causes. Between December 5, 1914 and March 5, 1915, a soup kitchen feeding the poor at this location dispensed a total of 157,000 meals to those in need. The typical meal consisted of a thick noodle soup with vegetables and meat, accompanied by a slice of bread. Food for the project cost \$2,700. During the following winter, a temporary shelter was set up in the Four Courts to house homeless men.

Because of the dilapidated condition of the Four Courts, the city building commissioner condemned it on April 19, 1916. Sutton Wrecking Company purchased the rights to the structure for \$9,399. They demolished the building in June of the same year. Materials from the building sold for \$22,000. Sutton's net profit from the project came to \$3,000.

At the crossroads of his career Walsh obtained the most important architectural commission of his life. It became his signature work. Its high cost and poor construction raised issues of wrongdoing on the part of the architect and his contracting crew. Walsh's arrogance and prevarication fueled the controversy. The county court exonerated Walsh

and his associates from any wrongdoing because no evidence could be found linking them to criminal activity. Public opinion, however, traveled a different route. Proof or no proof, the Walsh crew looted the county treasury by manipulating the construction costs of the Four Courts Building. For the rest of his life, this opinion prevailed, damaging his career and architectural legacy and ending his quest to be St. Louis' most celebrated architect. Be it client or potential client, everyone associated with Walsh in this capacity had to respond to this lingering question – could he be trusted?



The main entrance to the Four Courts Building during demolition, from "War Scenes in St. Louis? No, The ruins of the Old Four Courts," St. Louis Globe-Democrat, March 18, 1917

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Book 17, Volume 19 (August 21, 1871 to May 6, 1872)
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Oct. 22, 1872; Nov. 1, 1872; Feb. 28, 1873; June 13, 1873;
April 2, 1875; Nov. 20, 1875.



The Four Courts Building, from St. Louis Illustrated, 1876, p. 23

2018 Society of Architectural Historians St. Louis Chapter Annual Meeting

by John C. Guenther, FAIA, LEED AP

The 2018 Annual Meeting of the Society of Architectural Historians St. Louis Chapter was held on Saturday, June 16, at Mudd's Grove, the 1859 Greek revival mansion and home of the Kirkwood Historical Society.

In addition to the business meeting, we toured Mudd's Grove, its collections and exhibits, including architectural drawings of the Kirkwood Train Station.

We next toured St. Peter's Catholic Church, a Mid-Century Modern masterpiece designed by Murphy & Mackey (1951). The sanctuary is both simple and dramatic. It features stain glass windows designed by Francis Deck and made by the Emil Frei Company. The altar is bathed in natural light from the circular clearstory cupola above.

Lastly, we toured the Kirkwood Train Station (1893) and heard from Arthur McDonnell, former mayor of Kirkwood, who shared current restoration plans for the station.

We are grateful to Esley Hamilton for planning this meeting.



*The Kirkwood Historical Society at Mudd's Grove
302 West Argonne Drive
Kirkwood, Missouri*



*St. Peter's Catholic Church
243 West Argonne Drive
Kirkwood, Missouri*



*The Kirkwood Train Station
110 West Argonne Drive
Kirkwood, Missouri*

2018 SAH-St. Louis Lecture Series

Our partnership continues with the St. Louis Central Library, 13th & Olive this fall. All talks take place from 6:30 to 8 p.m. on the fourth Tuesday of the month in the Training Room on the Locust Street side of the library. Remember that city parking meters are enforced until 7 p.m.

“Hadrian to Hadid: The Architecture of Rome Across Time”

Tuesday, September 25, 6:30 p.m.

John C. Guenther, FAIA, our chapter president and a distinguished architect in private practice, will present selected examples of the architecture of Rome across time. “Rome is a city of layers, rich in history, art, architecture, engineering, and urban planning,” he says. “Its architecture is a physical record of 28 centuries.”

“Housing the Mentally III: A Look at the History and Architecture of Asylums in America”

Tuesday, October 23, 6:30 p.m.

Peter Wollenberg, chapter past president and principal of Wollenberg Building Conservation, LLC, has found that

many notable but almost unknown buildings have been created in this country in response to the needs of the mentally ill.

“Contemporary Architecture of Mexico City”

Tuesday, November 27, 6:30 p.m.

Richard Mueller taught history at St. Louis University High School and several local colleges. His travels in retirement have resulted in several memorable talks. He reports that Mexico City is a city of stunning contemporary architecture. Our overview of the topic will include works by Sir David Chipperfield, Luis Barragan and many others.



The Pantheon is the best preserved Roman building anywhere and has inspired countless newer buildings.



MAXXI, the Museum of the Art of the 21st Century is a major work by Zaha Hadid.

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The Society of Architectural Historians
St. Louis and Missouri Valley Chapters

News Letter

NewsLetter is published quarterly by the St. Louis and Missouri Valley Chapters of the Society of Architectural Historians.

Please mail editorial correspondence and submissions for publication to: Esley Hamilton, Editor, 7346 Balson Avenue, University City, Missouri 63130 or contact him by telephone (314) 615-0357 or by email ehamilton@stlouisco.com. Deadlines for submissions of material for publication in **NewsLetter** are as follows:

Spring Issue	15 February
Summer Issue	15 May
Fall Issue	15 August
Winter Issue	15 November

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