

## Will There Be a Clock in the Court House Tower?

We saw the clock tower on the court house covered, or almost covered, with scaffolding for most of 2023. The Monroe Times did a wonderful special section on downtown construction on September 30. That issue addressed the recent renovation of the court house and other downtown improvements. We're going to look back here at the building of the courthouse with a focus on the clock, the bell, and the tower that contains them.

Sealed bids for the construction of the new Court House were to be submitted by May 6, 1891. Sketches of the new building had been adopted by the county board on January 10 and were printed in the Sentinel on February 25. After the bids were opened, it was found that all of them exceeded the "amount contemplated." Bids were again sought through noon on May 20.

After the plans were modified, the contract was awarded to William J. McAlpine, of Dixon, Illinois, for \$34,956. His bid for the original plan and specifications was about \$42,000. The editor felt that the county board should have committed to the original plans. "While the \$35,000 building will be a fine structure and adequate for many years, the expense of \$7,000 or \$8,000 more put into stone, iron and other non-combustible material would make the Court House a lasting monument, one that would be good a hundred years hence."

The contractor who purchased the former Court House (photos on page 5 of the Pictorial History of Monroe) was ordered to begin demolition on June 8. However, demolition actually began on June 5 and took place rapidly. Many relics, including a document from 1834, were taken away by those who were interested in those things.

An old citizen was concerned about the destruction of a number of trees on the Court House lawn. He asked that "the remaining trees in court house park be preserved from destruction by boxing them up to the lower limbs. Several of them have already been bruised and barked by the debris of the old court house."

Construction of the current Court House began quickly. In mid-July, contractor McAlpine stated that he could "keep the place open for the corner stone until the second Wednesday in August." He was evidently able to hold it a bit longer as the ceremony for laying of the stone was held on Thursday, August 27.

The first mention of the clock appeared on July 1, 1891 in a short article that said, "A large striking clock in the tower of the new Court House will obviate the changing of many church bells at all times of the day on Sundays. The difference in time, and the various hours for holding meetings, make the bell ringings confusing - and church services are disturbed by neighboring church bells. This is a rebellious matter to talk about, but it is a fact." It is unknown how many churches were ringing bells at that time.

It was reported on October 28 that the contract for making the weather vane to sit atop the steeple on the Court House tower was awarded to Excelsior Heater Works for \$60. It was stated that the "pattern



This is an undated photograph of the Court House from the collection of the late Howard Schulz. This is one of the best early shots showing the tower clearly.

is a very nice and suitable one.” The “beautiful gilded weather vane” was placed into position on November 16 by Mr. Kelly, of Excelsior, with assistance from contractor McAlpine’s men. It added that, “The arrow minds the wind very quickly, being upon ball bearings, and nicely balanced and adjusted from the center rod, which passes through the iron pinnacle of the main tower, and is fastened to the bracing timbers of the roof of the tower.”

The bell had already been installed in the tower by the beginning of November. Even though the original sketch showed that a clock was to be placed, an article on November 4 created some doubt as to whether that would happen, “Should a clock be purchased for the tower, . . . this elegant toned bell will be utilized to tell the hour. It is one of the finest toned bells in the country.”

It was announced on November 13 that the city council looked at furnishing either of two different clocks for the Court House tower. One was made by Seth Thomas Company and the other by Howard Clock Company; both included the four dials and would strike. Bids for the clock were opened on January 19, 1892. City council voted on February 2 to purchase the Howard Company clock number 1 striking clock with a long pendulum for \$500, with the cost being split evenly between the city and the county.

It was decided by the city council again on February 16 to purchase four illuminated dials from the E. Howard Clock Company for \$270. The clock had arrived by March 16 and was expected “to be put in the tower without delay.” I saw nothing else in the paper about the installation of the clock and dials.

I have heard that there is a least one photo of the construction of the Court House. If anyone can put me in touch with the person who has possession of it, I’d be most appreciative!

More will be shared next week about the tower through the following decades.