

History of Ward County

The 'Courthouse', symbol of authority and administration, has been changed many times since that 23rd day of November 1885, when the three commissioners of 'County of Ward, Territory of Dakota'... met pursuant to agreement at the store of J.L. Colton at Burlington at 9:00 A.M. for their first meeting.

The region was at this time under territorial rule. The Congress of the United States had organized the Territory of Dakota by the act of March 2, 1861. Ward County was named for Hon. J. P. Ward, a member of the legislature of 1885. North Dakota was not admitted to the Union as a State until October 1889.

They declared 'The three most public places in Ward County shall be at the post-office at St. Carl and Burlington and at the store of J.L. Colton in Burlington'. Minot was not on the map yet.

At the December 15 meeting the commissioners made the first move which the headquarters of the county was to take before reaching the splendid edifice of today. They met at the store and 'adjourned to meet in the schoolhouse'.

On April 26, 1886, 'The Clerk was instructed to find out and report to the board the cost of material for the courthouse'. James Johnson signed the minutes asking for bids. He was deputy county clerk.

The first courthouse could not have been a pretentious structure. The records say "Bill of \$73.19 to W.L. Millar for lumber and hauling from Devils Lake allowed. On motion Herman Christianson's bill of \$12 was allowed for building the courthouse".

August 18, 1887, after the treasurer, clerk, probate judge and register of deeds had demanded suitable quarters for their offices, "the building on Lots 6 and 7 in Block 4 in Burlington together with said lots was rented of J.L. Colton for 18 months at \$600.

In the election of November 6, 1888, it was voted to move the county seat from Burlington to Minot. The recorded vote was 499 to 134.

The January 14 record says: "The county clerk was instructed to notify all officers-elect to move their offices to the first floor of the brick building situated on Lot 8, Block 3 in Minot. The building belonged to D.M. Brogan".

April 8, 1890 after bids had been called for and opened, C.E. Gregory was employed to draw a contract with Hiram T. VanWagoner for building a courthouse and jail on the lot where the present courthouse stands. The cost was \$8,000.

October 27, 1891, the board accepted the new courthouse building.

August 29, 1904 bids were let for "repairs" to the courthouse. This was because the commissioners knew that many voters of Imperial Ward County would vote against a new building for Minot and the law allowed repairing to be done at the will of the commissioners.

The building cost \$22,000 or \$23,000. It was the new portion of the old courthouse. At that time it was considered a magnificent structure. It was planned that shortly after another unit similar to the "repair" addition would be built and the old red brick portion torn down, but something happened and that was all the courthouse Ward County had until the present one.

The present structure was approved for construction at the November general election in 1929 build at a cost of \$450,000 with existing county funds, and was dedicated May 31, 1930. The building exterior is sandstone. The interior features several different kinds of marble, some leaded glass windows, bronze gates between the vestibule and the main lobby, a skylight and sufficient windows to provide every room in the building with outside daylight. It covers 49,000 square feet. The building was designed by a St. Paul firm and built by Minot contractors Olson and Orheim. The building was described as being "in the spirit of modern American architecture...perhaps the first building of its type in North Dakota".

Since the courthouse was built, carpeting has been installed in most of the offices. In 1968 the heating system was converted to gas. In 1974 a new roof was put on and a new electrical service installed. The exterior has been cleaned, and minor repairs continue each year. Time has demanded the remodeling and relocation of some county offices.

The Ward County Jail was added to the Courthouse in July of 1984. It is a Class I incarceration unit with a capacity of 86 inmates in 56 cells.

County government has also continued to evolve. Until 2001 there were five county commissioners and five additional elected officials heading county government. In 2001 the Clerk of District Court was transferred to a State agency. All employees are now State employees.

Effective January 1, 2001, after the approval of a home rule charter for the County at the primary election held June 13, 2000, home rule went into effect. The charter enumerates a number of powers available to the County Commissioners in addition to those already allowed by the State constitution and the Century Code. According to terms of the Charter, the County's levying authority is made more restrictive than current State law, the citizens were given the power of initiative and referendum, and the elective positions of the County Auditor/Treasurer and the Register of Deeds were made appointive at the end of their current terms (2003). The charter was prepared by a five member citizen panel appointed by the Commissioners and received a 63% favorable vote of the people.

Effective in 2003, Ward County will maintain five County Commissioners but will drop to two elected officials. Those are Ward County Sheriff and Ward County States Attorney.