

Missouri History through the Art of Our State Capitol

Written by Bob Priddy

Capitols

Missouri's Capitol is more than stone and steel, more than a building where laws are made.

Capitols are seen as shrines to democracy, symbols of a state's greatness, nobility and power, structures to inspire the people to reach for their noblest goals. Missouri's Capitol also is the product of political decisions, land speculation, and a lightning bolt that was the best thing that ever happened to Jefferson City.

Representatives and senators meeting in the first state Capitol in St. Charles decided the permanent seat of government should be in the center of the new state. Uncertainty about the legality of land titles of the first site choice of commissioners led

to selection of a second choice that became Jefferson City.

A brick Capitol was built and the seat of government was moved to the village on Oct. 1, 1826. But on the night of Nov. 15, 1837, some coals fell from the fireplace in the Secretary of State's office and set fire to the wood floor. The fire destroyed the building in a short time.

Construction of a new building on a hill to the west was finished in 1840. It was expanded with two large wings on the north and south ends in the 1880s, but within 20 years the expanded building was considered inadequate and a firetrap.

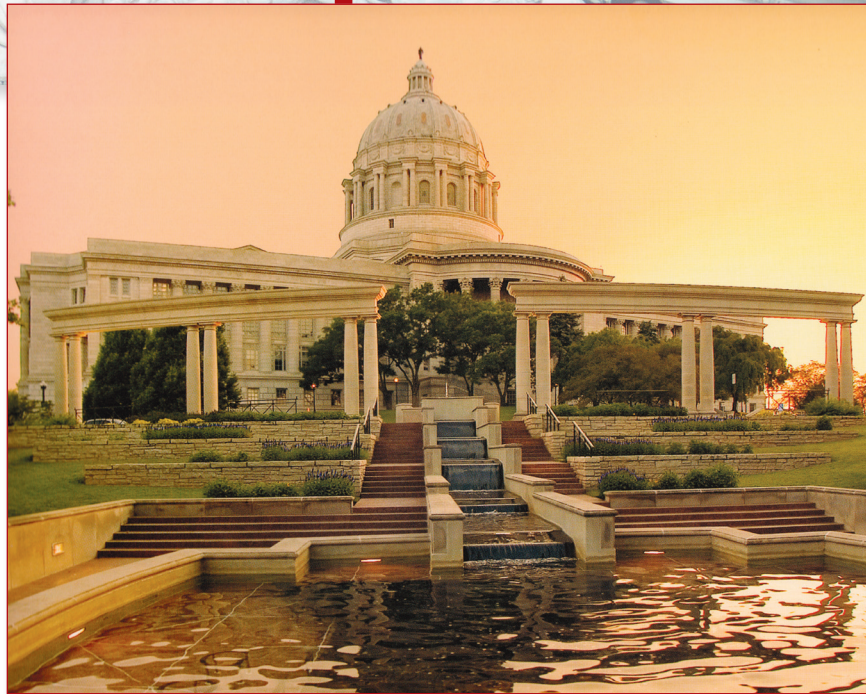
Jefferson City's position as the permanent seat of government was not secure because of the condition of the Capitol and because of other considerations, including lack of an adequate fire department. Critics of Jefferson City forced a statewide vote in 1896 on moving the seat of government to Sedalia, but lost. Voters in November

1910 rejected a bond issue to construct a new building in Jefferson City.

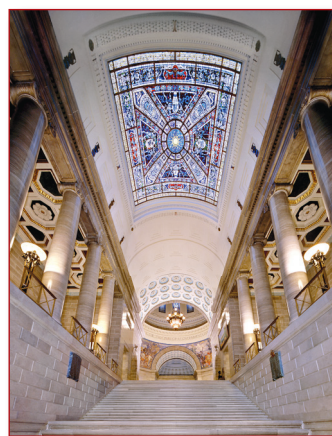
A few weeks later, on Feb. 5, 1911, a lightning bolt from a fast-moving storm struck the dome of the expanded Capitol, and within hours the 71-year-old building had been gutted by fire. Even as the fire burned, some members of the legislature were talking of moving the seat of government away from Jefferson City. Several cities offered land and money, but no specific proposal could get enough interest from the legislature.

The Senate, which met in the Supreme Court building for the rest of the session, and the House, which met in a nearby church hall, proposed a bond issue for a new building in Jefferson City. Voters approved the proposal in August, ending all hopes of others once and for all that another city would become Missouri's capital.

A special commission appointed to oversee construction of the building carried on a long dispute with the builder about the kind of stone that would be used before the commission demanded that limestone from Carthage be used for



Missouri's Capitol, built 1913-1917, basks in the early evening light. In the foreground is the state veterans memorial, one of several memorials on the Capitol grounds. Photo by Lloyd Grotjan. Courtesy of Missouri State Archives



Visitors who enter the Capitol through the great bronze doors on the south front climb the grand stairway to the magnificence of the third floor rotunda and the four 22-foot high paintings of Sir Frank Brangwyn. The third floor also contains 16 smaller paintings by Allen T. True. Photo by Lloyd Grotjan. Courtesy Missouri State Archives

When taxes collected to pay off the bonds raised \$1 million more than needed, a new commission was picked to use the money to decorate the building. The commission hired the foremost painters, sculptors, stained-glass and tapestry designers to tell the state's history through art that makes Missouri's Capitol unique among state capitols and the shrine to democracy that its designers dreamed of.

Bob Priddy is a veteran Missouri Capitol reporter and co-author of "The Art of the Missouri Capitol: History in Canvas, Bronze and Stone."

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R.CCR.1, R.CCR.5, SL.CCR.2

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Missouri's second Capitol in Jefferson City was struck by lightning on Feb. 5, 1911, and was gutted by fire within hours. Courtesy Priddy postcard collection, Missouri State Archives.