



Postcard showing the front of Los Angeles County Courthouse from the corner of Grand and First Streets. Caption reads: "The new county courthouse is located at the Civic Center and is one of the finest administrative buildings found anywhere. It has been planned for the enormous expansion and increase in population for Los Angeles County."

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Making the Stanley Mosk Courthouse

BY MICHAEL L. STERN*

MORE THAN 60 YEARS have passed since the dedication of Los Angeles' main courthouse by United States Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren on October 31, 1958. The construction of this monumental structure with its 100 courtrooms took 25 years of diligent political action and planning by civic and judicial leaders. Although no public ceremony marked this anniversary, the occasion prompts us to revisit the rich history of this landmark building and its predecessors.

When the doors of Los Angeles' fifth principal courthouse opened six decades ago, it was heralded as the "Dream Courthouse" and the "Courthouse to Last 250 Years." In 2002, the County Courthouse was renamed as the Stanley Mosk Courthouse in honor of former Superior Court and California Supreme Court Associate Justice Mosk, the longest-serving justice in the Court's history (1964–2001). It has fulfilled its destiny as a worthy successor to the Los Angeles courthouses that preceded it.

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The first Los Angeles courthouse was the humble adobe home of County Judge Agustin Olvera, a former Mexican official who was elected in 1850 by 377 of his new fellow citizens soon after California attained statehood. It was located on the plaza adjacent to the mission church La Iglesia de Nuestra Senora la Reina de Los Angeles, founded in 1776. With virtually no legal training and limited English, Judge Olvera used an interpreter when he presided over cases under the bilingual first California Constitution.

From 1852 to 1861, court was convened in various downtown buildings, including rented space in the judiciary's second main home in the elegant Bella Union Hotel. Standing at 314 North Main Street, it was the best hostelry in town. But even in those rough and tumble times, it was recognized that dignified legal proceedings ought not to be conducted within shouting distance of its boisterous barroom.

By the time Lincoln was elected president in 1860, county officials were searching for a more suitable courthouse location. They finally settled on the second floor of the Market House, a two-story building near the site of the current City Hall with a market and outdoor stalls on the first floor. Up to that time, the



The Clocktower Courthouse



The Red Sandstone Courthouse, c. 1892

second floor had been a multi-purpose theater offering bear baitings, cock fights and an occasional circus. Courtrooms and judges' chambers were constructed for what became the third main courthouse, which served as home of Los Angeles' judiciary for the next 30 years (1861–1891). One must wonder if any lingering echoes of past amusements could be heard when Los Angeles judicial legends such as Judges Ignacio Sepulveda and H. K. S. O'Melveny raised their gavels in this converted arena.

By 1880, this building began to be called the "Clocktower Courthouse" when a gigantic four-faced clock with 11-foot hands and large Roman numerals was installed in the prominent central tower of the Market House. The huge clock became a principal landmark of that era and would play a part in Los Angeles courthouse architecture to the present day.

But the courtrooms of the Clocktower Courthouse were small and cramped, prompting many waiting for their cases to be heard to congregate at the downstairs market stalls. When someone was needed in court, the bailiffs poked their heads out the courtroom windows and shouted three times for those whom they wanted, always appending "esquire" to the attorneys' names. This call system was basic, but it served its purpose until 1891. By then, the Clocktower Courthouse had outlived its usefulness.

Los Angeles' booming economy and exploding population in the late nineteenth century stimulated constant discussion about constructing a grand courthouse that met expanding judicial needs, and both satisfied and reflected civic pride. In courthouse planning that began in the mid-1880s, it was decided that the best location was Pancake Hill, a slope then occupied by Los Angeles High School at Temple and Broadway where the Foltz Criminal Courts Building now stands. By 1886, the school buildings had been moved to nearby

Fort Moore Hill, a former cemetery where the school headquarters and later a high school have been located ever since. In April 1888, the cornerstone for a fourth main courthouse was laid.

The magnificent new multi-story courthouse opened in August 1891 with great celebration. Locals proudly boasted that it was the largest and most beautiful courthouse west of the Mississippi. An outstanding example of Romanesque Revival architecture whose exterior was clothed in distinctive red stone, it was nicknamed as the "Red Sandstone" courthouse. Notice the cathedral-like massive arches, Victorian gables, quaint spires and ornamental stonework of this grandiose edifice.

Lending continuity, the huge clock face of the Clocktower Courthouse was removed and reinstalled on the imposing central tower of the Red Sandstone courthouse. Efforts to replace the weight-driven pendulum clockworks with an electric mechanism failed, however, so the decade-old weight-driven system was reconnected to the original clock face with its impressive numerals and 11-foot hands.

The state-of-the-art Red Sandstone was equipped with new fangled inside and outside bird cage elevators (the type still operating in the 1893 Bradbury Building at Third and South Broadway). The windowed elevator tower became a tourist attraction, nicknamed the "honeymoon tower" because couples ascended it to the third-floor marriage license office. The lift was said to be slow enough to allow for last-minute reconsideration.

The Red Sandstone was the scene of many important legal proceedings in its heyday, beginning in the Gay Nineties. But even this majestic temple of justice began to suffer from wear and tear as the Roaring Twenties came to a close. In March 1930, the tired elevators ceased working after four decades of service. Even the judges had to trudge up long flights of stairs to mete out justice.

In 1931, an early morning earthquake caused large chunks of the unreinforced brick tower to come crashing down into a judge's chambers. The tower was declared unsafe and ordered removed. The final coup de grace to the proud old Red Sandstone Courthouse came at 5:54 p.m. on March 10, 1933, when the tremendous Long Beach quake struck. The beloved castle-like courthouse was irreparably damaged and the courts were forced to abandon it. Angelenos mourned when this majestic palace of justice was razed in 1936.

For the next 25 years, the Los Angeles courts were scattered around the civic center area in temporary courtrooms at the Hall of Justice, City Hall and wherever space could be found. An unattractive complex of low-lying wooden bungalows, dubiously called the Plaza de la Justicia, was constructed on the Red Sandstone site opposite City Hall. But these makeshift courtrooms were an unsatisfactory solution for a judicial housing crisis. For instance, the build-out at the old Brunswick Building (1883), now the L.A. Plaza on Main across from Olvera Street, was so inadequate that Superior Court Judge Arthur Alarcon once overheard an attorney instructing his client how to perjure himself through the other end of a heating duct that led to his chambers.

The Los Angeles Board of Supervisors and local leaders were well aware that decisive action was required to construct a new courthouse befitting Los Angeles and meeting the constantly growing judicial demands. By 1936, the first of a series of suggested designs to house the Superior and Municipal Courts was presented.

However, in the heart of the Great Depression, it was one thing to propose new public works and another to get them off the ground. The county coffers were empty and funds for a new courthouse could not compete with more dire needs. Multiple attempts to borrow federal funds failed. Then came World War II and it was inconceivable to initiate courthouse construction with building materials in short supply. Ballot measures to fund courthouse construction bonds were rejected by cost-conscious voters in 1936 and 1946.

Nonetheless, the Board of Supervisors remained determined to provide a courthouse that was adequate to serve the public's legal needs. Unable to convince the electorate to authorize court bonds, the Board ingeniously set aside at least \$2 million a year to build a courthouse on a "pay-as-you-go" basis. As this fund gradually grew, Board members engaged in a tug-of-war about whether to build at First and Hill or two blocks up at Temple, where the cathedral now stands. The former site finally won out, especially as it was favored by a legal community that wanted the courthouse closer to the Spring Street corridor where many law offices were then located.

With a courthouse location decided and funding in place, the Board turned to selecting an appropriate

design and architects. Proposed designs ranged from skyscraper configurations to a series of "split-level" structures on terraces cascading downhill from Grand to Hill astride First Street.

The site itself was a major challenge for the architects. It was an irregular steep hill that, until 1943, had been a summit to which a railway car — like Angel's Flight at Third and Hill — mounted from Broadway near City Hall. A roadway tunnel ran through a part of the hill, northerly on Hill to Temple starting at about the present location of Grand Park. Nevertheless, an advantage of this site was that there were few buildings on this inhospitable rock and dirt mound.

After intense wrangling about construction costs, the supervisors approved the preliminary design of the Mosk Courthouse as it exists today in 1954 based upon a submission from an architectural team headed by the award-winning African-American architect Paul Williams. During his long career, Williams worked on the designs of many public and private buildings in Los Angeles, including the Shrine Auditorium, the LAX theme building, First A.M.E. Church and homes for Hollywood stars like Lon Chaney and Lucille Ball.

On March 26, 1954, United States Chief Justice Earl Warren lowered a shovel at First and Olive to break ground for an ambitious \$24 million project. Fewer than two months later, on May 17, 1954, he would author the Supreme Court's unanimous decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* that changed America forever.

Once the dignitaries congratulated themselves on getting the project off the ground after two decades of effort, the actual construction presented significant challenges. These included hollowing out and leveling the largely vacant site by excavating 460,000 cubic yards of earth (enough to fill 12 football fields to the top of the goal posts); carting in 25 railroad cars of Vermont marble; delivering 50 railroad cars of Texas granite for



Courthouse construction site, 1956.

PHOTOS PP. 16–17: WATER AND POWER ASSOCIATES

the building facing (nearly the weight of three Navy destroyers); and crafting enough white oak to panel 100 Superior Court and Municipal Court rooms in two side-by-side buildings, separated by a small, almost imperceptible gap.

By early fall 1958, Los Angeles's fifth county courthouse was nearing occupancy by judges and staff who had been scattered throughout downtown in improvised courtrooms. The modern edifice included the latest in engineering and technological innovations including automatic elevators. Although automation made the "starter" person (to ensure that elevator doors properly opened and closed) superfluous, that employee was allowed to stay a few years more to complete his service for retirement. Escalators, another first, would also whisk passengers between floors.

The up-to-date courthouse offered a bit of old mixed with the new to lend continuity. The historic 11-foot hands and numerals from the Clocktower and Red Sandstone clock were retrieved from storage and installed on the new courthouse tower. A bronze cornerstone inscribed "Los Angeles County Courthouse 1958," surrounded by a carved frieze made of red stone from the Red Sandstone courthouse, was placed at the Hill Street entrance. Inside, is a copper box filled with historic documents, including newspapers of the day and a Los Angeles telephone directory.

Still, there were some detractors. A few complained that the tiled corridors, running the length of two blocks, were too long to be easily walked. A court reporter made fun of the slick hallways by roller skating up and down from one end to the other. The judges were ridiculed for insisting on the "extravagant" expenditure of \$1,200 for each courtroom's drinking fountain. The county supervisors continued bickering over the landscaping budget, which resulted in the ground coverings for opening day being green-painted wood chips and sawdust rather than grass.

Some also commented that the stark, ultramodern interior of the courthouse lacked character due to a paucity of decoration or artwork. In fact, the donation of a magnificent sculpture of Abraham Lincoln from Beverly Hills neurosurgeon and sculptor Dr. Emil Seletz was blocked on the ground that the generous doctor's gift presented a conflict of interest because he frequently appeared as an expert witness. Fortunately, this controversy was later resolved and the solemn bust of the young Lincoln is displayed in the Hill Street lobby today.

On the eve of the formal dedication ceremony, a member of the Board of Supervisors objected to hanging a portrait of Chief Justice Warren in the new courthouse, reportedly because of his opinion in *Brown*. This too was ironed out when the supervisor said that he "didn't mean" anything derogatory.¹ The portrait was hung, but it was later transferred to the California Supreme Court, where it hangs today in the public entry



Los Angeles County Courthouse dedication ceremony.

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of San Francisco's Earl Warren Building, which is part of the Ronald M. George State Office Complex.

At last, the dedication day, October 31, 1958, arrived. In a ceremony marked by pomp and circumstance, festive music performed by the county band and attended by some 3,000 gathered on Hill Street in front of the courthouse,² Chief Justice Earl Warren proclaimed a commitment to justice to be administered in the largest courthouse of the land:

This beautiful building, spacious today and most modern in its appointments, will soon be outmoded and as much a relic as was the little old sandstone courthouse at Broadway and Temple Street when it was abandoned in 1933. . . . We are, of course, proud of it as a building, but our most fervent hopes for the future . . . must rest largely on the standards of justice maintained in it. . . . The spirit and meaning of our courts do not lie in the material settings we provide, but in the living principles which they enshrine.³

Chief Justice Warren's eloquent remarks are as vital on this diamond jubilee anniversary as when delivered on the steps of the Mosk Courthouse more than 60 years ago. ☆

ENDNOTES

1. "Courthouse Stirs Up Dedication Squabble," *Los Angeles Mirror News*, Oct. 30, 1958.
2. "Bench, Bar, Community Leaders Dedicate \$23,000,000 Court," *Metropolitan News*, Nov. 3, 1958, p. 1.
3. *Ibid.*

Editor's note: For more on the Mosk Courthouse and architect Paul Williams, see "A House for Equal Justice" in CSCHS Newsletter, Spring/Summer 2014, <https://www.cschs.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/2014-Spring-Paul-Williams.pdf>.