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The Statehouse: A colorful past

Capitol has had its share of controversy during the past 100 years

By Chris Grenz

The Capital-Journal

Editor's note: Topeka will celebrate its 150th anniversary next year -- and there is much to learn about the city before then. "Our Town: Topeka," a weekly series that will appear on Sundays through September, will explore Topeka's rich history and the people who have made the city what it is today.

Historians say the Kansas Capitol is celebrating its 100th birthday this year.

But one could argue that this year, rather than a centennial, the Statehouse will ring in its first birthday.

Construction of the building took 37 years and cost \$3.2 million -- as well as the lives of nine construction workers. But, how is a building's completion measured? In 1903, when officials deemed the building complete, the work wasn't finished. There were details and fine tuning that would stretch for years, such as ornately carving the porticos.



Thad Allton/The Capital-Journal

After a century of debate concerning the artwork at the Statehouse, the "Ad Astra" statue was placed on the Capitol dome in October.

And it wasn't until October 2002 that, after a century of debate, a statue finally was placed on top of the dome. For many Kansans throughout the years, the Capitol had been unfinished until that moment.

Then again, the Kansas Capitol continues to be a work in progress. Right now, a nine-year, \$135 million renovation project is under way.

So, maybe, Kansas' Statehouse still isn't finished.

In the beginning

The location for the Capitol was a hard-fought battle that spanned decades. Between 1854, when Kansas was organized as a territory, and 1861, when Kansas became a state, Kansas had five different capitals -- none of them Topeka.

After the first official Legislature met in Topeka, the question of where to locate the state's Capitol permanently was, in a fashion true to Kansas' Populist roots, put to a vote of the people. Topeka won out, although Lawrence, Leavenworth, Emporia and Baldwin City were other contenders, according to "Kansas Builds a Capitol," which was published in the Kansas Historical Quarterly's Autumn 1972 edition.

The article is recognized as the definitive history of the building. It was written by Robert W. Richmond, former assistant director of the Kansas State Historical Society, who spent countless hours researching the Kansas Statehouse.

"I think it's a magnificent structure," Richmond, 75, said in an interview. "The original craftsmanship that went into it is really sort of amazing, particularly when you consider that so much of that work was done just by hand or with the kind of mechanical help that pales by comparison to the kinds of cranes and those sorts of things which we have today."

According to the article, the young state had no public buildings, so the first Legislatures met in rented buildings.



Kansas State Historical Society

Remodeling of the Senate chamber began in about 1884. Although most people praised the new chamber and its elaborate chandeliers and furnishings, critics who wanted the state capital in other towns used the remodeling project to fuel their complaints.

But The Topeka Association, a company formed in 1854 to found and develop Topeka, donated a four-block, 20-acre site to serve as a site for a Capitol building. The presentation was made by Cyrus K. Holliday, one of the city's founders.

In 1866, the Legislature passed an act "providing for the erection of a State House, making an appropriation therefor, and providing the funds therefor by a sale of public lands."

The building would be constructed -- and paid for -- in three major stages spanning nearly four decades. Construction workers began with the east wing in the summer of 1866, and the cornerstone was laid on Oct. 17, 1866. A large parade, led by the Topeka Brass Band, celebrated the occasion, and a time capsule containing a Bible, state laws and documents, newspapers, currency and numerous other items was stashed away inside the walls of the Capitol.

"Peace and good order prevailed (and) politics were left out in the cold," the Topeka Weekly Leader newspaper reported on Oct. 18, 1866.

A setback

Parades and fanfare faded to disappointment when, just a few months after the celebration, officials realized the Capitol's foundation was cracking and crumbling. The brown sandstone taken from southeast Topeka on the advice of geologists turned out to be unfit for construction. The work had to be redone -- at a cost of about \$8,000. The foundation was rebuilt with more durable limestone.

"The disastrous beginning of a noble project gave rise to a variety of comments, some of them facetious," Richmond wrote in his article.

As if a crumbling foundation wasn't bad enough, the new building also lacked plumbing and bathrooms. Outhouses had to be put up, and the detailed specifications for the "privy" took up seven pages in the Board of Statehouse Commissioners' minutes.

New digs, construction

By Christmas 1869, state workers were moving into the mostly completed east wing. Topeka's Kansas State Record newspaper reported on the new building on Dec. 22, 1869. Ironically, the paper wrote that the temporary wooden steps leading into the new Capitol had a "remarkable resemblance to the 'shoot' up which the pigs march to certain death in a slaughterhouse."

The newspaper also noted the state's treasury wasn't heavy to move because there wasn't enough in it to be a problem. And, the paper reported, the governor's office contained a "private room, where he retires when overwhelmed by the cares of the State, and -- rests himself."

"So comfortable are these new apartments that we expect the office of Governor will be hereafter in greater demand than ever," the paper said.

Early in the Statehouse's life, a stone wall was built around the edge of the grounds, which was later replaced with a "five board, pig-tight" fence as the east wing neared completion, Richmond wrote.

In the fall of 1879, work began on the west wing, which was to be constructed 4 feet wider and 6 feet longer than the east wing using limestone culled from Cottonwood Falls.

The House and Senate met jointly in the Senate chamber beginning in 1870. The House first met in its own chamber on Jan. 17, 1881, "surrounded by the unplastered walls and supported by a temporary wooden floor. The east and west wings were connected by a covered board walkway sometimes referred to as the 'cave of winds,'" Richmond wrote.

With so many politicians wandering the halls, the name seemed appropriate.

Closing the gap

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In 1884, construction began on the center portion, as well as the north and south wings, of the Capitol. Because it had to support the weight of the rotunda, the foundation was sunk nearly 25 feet to the bedrock below. By year's end, the foundation was laid.

Also at that time, the Senate chamber was remodeled after having served as the lone chamber during the early years. Although most praised the new chamber, critics who still wanted to see the capital city elsewhere in Kansas used the remodeling project as ammunition. Sol Miller, editor of the Troy Chief, became an outspoken critic.

"Topeka imagines that the greater the sums of money that are sunk in this building, the less chance there will be for removing the Capital," he wrote in 1887. "A large proportion of these immense sums goes for the benefit of the sharks of Topeka, who live off the State. ...

"The State would save hundreds of thousands of dollars, even now, by abandoning the present State House, and building a new one at some central portion of the State."

But the work progressed -- until it seemed disaster had struck again. In September 1889, newspapers reported the dome was cracking under its own tremendous weight. The press blamed shoddy architectural plans. But repairs were made, and the dome was salvaged.

The work was spread over so many years, in part, because it was the conservative nature of Kansans to take it slowly with a pay-as-you-go mentality. But Richmond said construction practices of the times also kept the work from progressing more rapidly.

Some of the Statehouse woodwork was battered in 1893 during the "legislative war." That year, the Populists and the Republicans both claimed to be in control of the House of Representatives. They went so far as to convene two competing Houses, complete with elected officials, and conducted business simultaneously in the same room for a month.

Finally, on Feb. 15, 1893, Republicans marched to the House and, finding the doors locked, smashed their way inside using sledge hammers. In the end, the Kansas Supreme Court ruled that the Republicans should hold control and the House finally got to work. Eleven days later, the session ended.

Art battles

As work continued, other battles were waged over artwork. Much of the infighting -- perhaps not surprisingly -- also was political in nature.

One of the most notorious arguments came in 1898 when a skilled fresco painter named Jerome Fedeli was hired to paint four murals on the inside of the Statehouse dome. Fedeli's design included tall, slender Grecian women -- who were partly nude.

Republicans seized on the Populist Party-backed paintings, referring to them negatively in anti-Populist propaganda. The figures were called "the nude telephone girls," a reference to the long-armed telephone

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Mary Madden, of the Kansas State Historical Society

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operators who were in high demand in those days.

When Republicans again had control, the paintings were erased in 1902 and replaced with four allegorical murals depicting knowledge, plenty, peace and power. Those panels included women, too -- though this time with clothing. The state paid \$7,600 to erase and replace what Fedeli had done for \$1,600, Richmond wrote.

In the late 1930s, murals again became a hot topic when Kansas artist John Steuart Curry painted on the walls in the east and west corridors of the second floor. Some said his animals weren't proportioned correctly, others said the pig's tail curled the wrong way, and some objected to the depiction of John Brown and the absence of other state history, Richmond wrote.

But the most significant battle over art was waged for a century. Early on, many Kansans wanted to top the dome with a statue of Ceres, the Roman goddess of the harvest. But when her loose morals were called into question, there was public outcry about spending \$6,950 to put her atop the Capitol. Arguments over who or what should top the building would continue for 100 years.

The state paid the final bill on the Statehouse construction on March 24, 1903.

"As one examines the controversies of 37 years, it appears that the building might have been finished in spite of builders and politicians, rather than because of them," wrote Richmond, who also penned a book about the state's history called "Kansas: A Land of Contrasts." First published in 1974, the book's fourth edition was printed in 2000. "Yet, it was done, and it became a source of pride to Kansans despite the arguments over interior and exterior features."

To the stars

The Statehouse finally received its statue on Oct. 8, 2002 -- and then again a second time a few days later. Amid a crowd of several thousand, the 4,420-pound statue was hoisted 286 feet into the air and atop the dome. But when five of the 17 bolts designed to hold it firmly in place couldn't be tightened, the statue came back down.

The delay didn't worry sculptor Richard Bergen, who named his statue of a Kansa Indian warrior "Ad Astra" in reference to the state's motto, "Ad Astra Per Aspera," which is Latin for "To The Stars Through Difficulty."

Bergen had spent 14 years on the project -- at times as one of the few people who continued to believe the statue would ever see the top of the dome. Politics and funding concerns threatened to derail the project several times. In the end, the state's share of the \$1.6 million project was about \$160,000, thanks to private donations.

The day the statue went up, Bergen woke early and gazed at the Capitol from his hotel window.

"This," he later said he told his family, "is the day we change the face of Topeka."

Taken as a whole, the Statehouse offers a lot about not only government and politics, but also art, architecture and famous Kansans, said Mary Madden, the assistant director of education and outreach for the Kansas State Historical Society and supervisor of the Capitol Tour Center.

"I think it's a very elegant building and it's a wonderful historical resource for our state," she said.

"There's a lot of history to be found in that building."

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FAST FACTS

- Construction of the Capitol began in 1866 after the Board of Statehouse Commissioners approved a resolution allowing the construction of the east wing to begin immediately. The cornerstone was laid Oct. 17, 1866, on the northeast corner of the building.
- Less than a year after construction began, the sandstone foundation crumbled into mud in 1867. The crumbling was blamed partly on a severe winter and partly on the fact that sandstone is a form of shale. The sandstone foundation was replaced with limestone.
- The Senate chamber was first used in 1870, when the Senate and House had a combined session in the Senate chamber because the House chamber wasn't finished.
- Work started on the west wing of the Statehouse in 1879, at a cost of \$60,000. It is architecturally similar to the east wing but is 4 feet wider and 6 feet longer.
- The House chamber was first used in 1881.
- A covered wooden bridge called the "cave of the winds" was built to connect the two legislative chambers after the House chamber was completed.
- The construction of the central part of the Statehouse was approved by the Legislature in 1881, as well as money to complete the west wing.
- It ultimately cost about \$300,000 to construct the west wing, \$200,000 less than the cost to build the east wing.
- A remodeling of the Senate chamber and construction of the central part started in 1885.
- After 37 years of construction, the state paid off the final voucher for Capitol construction on March 24, 1903. The total cost was about \$3.2 million.
- Since its completion, several renovations have been undertaken to preserve the Capitol. A Kansas Geological Survey found that weather, air pollution, chemicals and bird droppings have caused deterioration. Also, poor-quality limestone resulted in natural deterioration. Since 1967, central heating and air conditioning have been installed, legislative chambers and offices have been remodeled and storm windows installed.

Source: The Kansas State Historical Society

Were your relatives among the Mexican immigrants who settled in Topeka in the early 1900s? If so, we want to hear their stories and see any photographs you might have.

Please send your stories by July 3 to Jan Biles, weekend editor, Topeka Capital-Journal, 616 S. E. Jefferson, Topeka, 66607; e-mail to jbiles@cjonline.com; or call (785) 295-1292.

Resource list

Learn more:

- "Kansas Builds a Capitol," by Robert W. Richmond, Kansas Historical Quarterly's autumn 1972 edition
- www.kshs.org/places/capitol/history.htm
- www.kansasphotos.us/cappic/cappic.htm

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