

BALTIMORE CITY

First Courthouse

When the government of Baltimore County was removed to Towson, the new government of Baltimore City—judges, new clerk, new records—began to function in the old county courthouse at Baltimore. But this structure, large as it was for the period, soon became crowded. In 1866, extensive alterations and improvements were made, including an addition to the west side. Also the cellar was converted into offices for the sheriff and other city officials. In spite of this remodeling, two of the courts had to be removed from the courthouse soon thereafter to find temporary homes in the old Masonic Hall on St. Paul Street, designed by Jacob Small and finished in 1822.¹

Second Courthouse

As this crowding grew more acute, it became obvious that nothing else would do but the erection of a new and much larger courthouse. The General Assembly of 1876 passed an act providing for the issuance of \$750,000 in bonds for this purpose.² Scharf notes that there was an advisory building commission functioning at least as early as 1881, but nothing tangible seems to have resulted from the efforts of either the legislature or the commission.³ During the first months of 1892 it was obvious action could no longer be postponed. The General Assembly of that year passed an act authorizing the mayor and city council of Baltimore to issue up to \$6,000,000 of stock, part of which was to be used for the purchase of ground and the erection of a courthouse. The act also provided that before any further action could be taken an ordinance to the same effect (upon which the citizens of Baltimore could vote) would be required.⁴ The mayor and city council then passed the required ordinance October 7, 1892.⁵ It received a majority of the ballots cast at the November election following, but for some reason the ordinance was not ratified until 1898.⁶ The sum set aside for courthouse and grounds was at first fixed at \$1,750,000. The final cost, however, was approximately \$2,250,000.

Even before the ordinance was ratified, the old courthouse and other buildings, both public and private, on the same square block were pulled down. Razing began August 8, 1895, and by June 25 of the next year, it was possible to hold cornerstone ceremonies. The contractors finished the building in December 1899. It was occupied by the courts the following month. The architects were J. B. Noel Wyatt and William G. Nolting, the builders, John Gill & Sons of Baltimore and D. W. Thomas of Ohio. This enormous building is in the classical manner, three stories, high with a basement and sub-basement. Above the ground it is of Baltimore County marble; the basement is Howard County granite. The columns of the dome over the courtroom are of marble from the quarries of the Holy See; the inside paneling is of hardwood. The murals and statuary aroused the interest of various civic organizations who offered several prizes to stimulate competition. Some of the artists whose work is represented in the building are C. Y. Turner, Edwin H. Blashfield, John LaFarge and Jean Paul Laurens.⁷

¹ Scharf, *History of Baltimore City and County*, p. 728.

² Ch. 240

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 728.

⁴ Ch. 138.

⁵ Ordinance No. 100.

⁶ Ch. 361, Acts of 1898.

⁷ For a detailed account of the materials used and the art work see Clayton C. Hall, *Baltimore, Its History And Its People*, New York - Chicago, 1912, Vol. I, pp. 320-22 and *Murals in The Baltimore Court House*, Baltimore, 1912.