

Edward O. Fallis, Architect of the Lenawee County Courthouse

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The first building I took note of on our move to Adrian was, for good reason, the County Courthouse. At 130 feet tall, it is still the tallest and most massive public building in Lenawee County, its tower and flag punctuate the northern corner of the downtown business district with its height and assemblage of colors and elaborate shapes that pronounce the building as “something special”, -- something unique that a visitor should automatically notice.

County Courthouses are curious demonstrations of a group of people who share a geographical region and community bonds who want to show pride in where they live, in support of the political institutions at the local and regional level in a very tangible form that pique my desire to know more about why one design better suits the expression of dreams and of belief in a better future than a building designed to provide justice and allow for the administration of a county. Why should the people of 130 years ago have sacrificed much more than required to simply build a County office building for the Courts instead of taking their ideas of civic pride and creating buildings that symbolize both the people of the county and their institutions in a particular style or form that dignifies and elevates the law before its peers, and provides a permanent home for the proceedings and records of those courts.

In building the Lenawee County courthouse, and engaging one of the best architects in the region in E. O. Fallis to be its designer and building supervisor, Lenawee County in 1883-4 chose to build a courthouse that suited all of those ideals: permanence, culture, and impressiveness to express their regional wealth and their own sense of importance for Adrian and Lenawee County, as well as themselves to create a building that served well for ninety years as a 'signature' building of the county—one that as Adrian became overshadowed by Detroit and Toledo became a symbol of the continuity of heritage and civic pride in some ways, but it has become, sadly, also something of a "white elephant" as well. Such a building should not languish in that status forever, it is a landmark worth restoring to its former glory, as the visionary people of Paulding, Ohio did with their own beautiful renovation of their version of Fallis' same courthouse as our Lenawee County building.

As a unabashed fan of public spaces for governmental use, my interest in understanding the Victorian compunction for creating civilization and a testament that the area around such a formal and controlled space in a city speaks for the orderliness of the people who commissioned such a building and also to the wealth and dedication of those people to have a well-designed and much greater than simply utilitarian public building also speaks to the Victorian love of ostentation with a purpose: to impress, to awe, to confirm the impression of culture and permanence through architecture, even when that permanence is endangered by the indifference of its occupants.

The Lenawee County Courthouse was designed in 1884 by Edward Oscar Fallis of Toledo, Ohio. It is a four-fronted Romanesque-inspired building constructed of red brick with sandstone coursing on a rusticated stone foundation. Although it takes many cues from the Henry Richardson's Romanesque Revival style, Fallis was not a doctrinaire architect, choosing his own path and stylistic features for his

clients in a way that fit the finest of the eclectic style of Victorian architecture. Its finest feature is the gabled arcades and their extraordinary display of iconographic and floral terra cotta work on the walls of the building that are partially decoration, and partially inherent design elements. The massive building displays impressive gabled entrances on three sides and a decorative gable on the fourth (west side). An impressive central tower topped by a rounded cupola crowns the hip-roof structure. It is a structure that could define “impressive” well. In the twenty-first century, 130 years on, the courthouse on its square just north of downtown Adrian is the cap to what is a noticeably historic area, and is one of the most impressive of all the courthouses in all of southeastern Michigan, and Fallis’ other work creates a montage of the buildings that have the greatest standing in the entire region, with courthouses in Adrian, Monroe, Paulding, and Bryan, houses, public buildings, and the Performing Arts Center in Toledo, along with other public buildings in Indiana and Illinois.¹

The courthouse stands upon a rectangular “square” bounded by Main, Maple (formerly Railroad), Winter and Front Streets at the north end of Adrian’s central business district. The building faces east on Main Street and from that side it is most natural to enter it, although there are entrances on Maple and Front Streets that are equally “massive and handsome.” The front of the square is covered with a lawn, trees, and walkways that lead to broad stairs at all entrances; the rear has been paved for use as a parking lot. The building measures 134 by 108 feet, with the top of the central tower 132 feet about the ground. The tower was once topped by a 21 foot flagpole that has since been removed for a smaller one. The building has a main hip roof that tops the north-south rectangle of the plan. There is a secondary hip roof behind the gables on each side of the building that is formed from the east-west rectangle of the plan. The gables form a joining in the middle of the building plan from which the central tower rises. Four large chimneys project from the north-south hip roof a distance of 23 feet. Their sides are ornamented by decorative terra cotta figures and portraits. The original slate roof was laid in 1884, but has since been replaced with an asphalt shingle roof beginning in 1973. Near the center of the elevation a horizontal band of green tile extends entirely around the building, counterpointed by yellow sandstone and deep red brick, with red terra cotta floral and portrait tiles acting as design accents in strategic points along the façade of the building.²

¹ Koch, Michelle. Lenawee County Courthouse National Register Nomination. Michigan Department of History, Libraries, and Arts, Lansing, Michigan. November, 1990. Used by permission.

² Koch, Michelle. Lenawee County Courthouse National Register Nomination.

The foundation, which rises six feet above grade, is of “rusticated” sandstone from Ohio, the foundation is topped with a belt course of sandstone from Jackson County, Michigan. Above the stone courses, the brick masonry begins, and is laid in white mortar. The bricks were made and shipped from Zanesville, Ohio. The general plan of the building is that of a slightly elongated Greek cross to the north and south wings extending from a common center from a square central building core. The original configuration of the building had all county offices in “apartments” on the first floor, including the clerk of the court in the Northwest suite, who had a private spiral staircase to the courtroom above. There was a large courtroom that still exists today as the County Commission room, and the judges’ chambers and other court functionary rooms took up the entire second floor of the building.³

The fenestration is plain, on the first floor, with no obvious mullions, sills, or headers, and relies on negative space to offset them from the rest of the building. Perhaps this is as well, because the façade is already quite busy with the horizontal elements and with all the color blocking of the terra cotta blocks and sandstone going on above it. The first floor of the building in general is a de-emphasized space in order to promote the sense of height in the rest of the building. One thing that is curious in the design is how the actual entrance doors at the east side are actually downplayed in favor of the more theatrical story and a half upper arcade with its fan window, while the north and south facades play up the entrances by elevating their porches to the full height of the first floor of the building, while the land falls away giving a considerable flight of stairs to climb to get entry to the building.

It is in the second floor of the exterior where large blocks of yellow sandstone that act as headers in a band around the building bring the play of color and mass into full work, the sandstone blocks are arguably not intentionally designed as window headers as such, but have that utility with the very small dentilated headers of cast iron painted to match the stone carved into the larger blocks which are rather masses of space and color. Oddly enough, Fallis was using color much like an anticipation of a post-modernist in the use of color blocking in this way. At the first floor height where the headers of the windows would lie are bands of green terra cotta inlaid into the yellow sandstone to give a powerful horizontal offset to the soaring feel of the vertical front arch and gable that overwhelm the actual doorway of the building in favor of a more powerful second story engaged arcade and free standing arch and columns that are more visual than functional. This arcade takes up two floors of vertical space

³ Adrian Times and Expositor, Newspaper. “A Happy Change. Out of the Old House into the New” 12/1/1885. Archived at the Lenawee County Historical Society.

under a receding gable that is heavily decorated in mid-relief terra cotta floral tiles and portrait tiles at the north and south entrances. The entire five story arcade and gable complex produce a powerful and striking whole that is no less a reasonably harmonious one. The other features of the offices on the exterior are set back along a line from the corner of one with to the midpoint between the other corners. There are massive sandstone window headers on the second floor, with a thin course of sandstone for sills and no rails other than plain brickwork, as well as white painted corbelled support brackets with dentilation in line at the eave, again emphasizing the horizontality of the field of the building, counterbalancing all the vertical elements of the arcade, the arcades, tower, belfry, and the chimneys.

The arcades are concluded by gable ends on all four sides of the building, the Eastern end as the main entrance being given the most compelling architecture with a course of three square windows set into a pediment of carved wood brackets and two rose panels in medium relief, and above that in the highest position, an oculus window framed by terra cotta triangles of foliage. This leads the eye to the tower, which is divided into a tripartite Romanesque vault that ends in a mirrored oculus window framed by a mansard roof that leads to the domed top. It is recorded in the *Adrian Times* that the public had access to the large area at the belfry level at the opening of the courthouse and “were afforded a fine view” from there. There is no evidence when the tower was closed to visitors, but the tower has been closed for many years now.⁴

The interior of the building, mostly the first floor, has suffered from a utilitarian remodeling attempt from the 1970’s. The current configuration of the courthouse is in the nature of a political and financial compromise. The terra cotta and tile work from the original were retained after the re-roofing in 1973, but the first floor office space has been heavily reworked to fit 1970’s taste with dropped acoustic ceilings, florescent lighting and a reworking of the central crossing of the building on the first floor that inserts doorways and metal security doors in the north and south door arches of the crossing to make the building possibly more secure or simply to regulate traffic from the north and south entrances. The central crossing hallway has had some attempts to preserve it, including detail painting of the engaged columns and an attempt to create a welcoming and more formal public space for the county offices of the Register and Clerk, but the north and south halls are incongruously bare, except for the very elegant and large stairwells and balusters made out of massive southern yellow pine and

⁴ *Adrian Times and Expositor*, Newspaper. “Lenawee’s New Temple of Justice Near Completeion” 12/1/1885. Archived at the Lenawee County Historical Society.

stained to complement the wood that lead upstairs. It is this woodwork that keeps the links of the past with the present in the building. The Georgia pine woodwork as not been removed, and still provides links to the original building.⁵

The second floor has escaped most of the more aggressive remodeling that the first floor has endured, and still has touches of the original building that was dedicated in 1884 with Fallis in attendance. The main courtroom is the County Commissioners' hearing room, and can act as an additional courtroom in reserve still. The room itself is still in its original woodwork and has the original brasses and furniture, most notably, the theatre seating for the public which is original to the room, as well as the furniture for inside the bar. The dais still exists for the judges' bench, with a mural of Justice in the West painted by Toledo muralist, Romeo Berra. The Law Library is now a records room, and the clerk's office is the County Administrator's room. The drop ceilings that have defaced the once ornate spaces in the second floor have also been installed in these rooms, taking away in a lesser way from what was once impressive and beautiful rooms, but the building is still with us, despite a determined drive by the county commissioners in the 1970's to have the building demolished, which was only defeated by a public referendum in 1974 before the Bicentennial raised consciousness of citizens for the value of historic buildings.

Because of that referendum, the County agreed to maintain the Courthouse as the office building of the County, but the Courts moved to the new building across the street. But in the course of this remodeling, many historic features of the building were covered over or destroyed for the sake of ease of maintenance and the historic nature of the building's interior suffered, but was not completely lost. It is indicative of how close a call the Fallis courthouse had that there still is posted on a wall of the building the concept sketch of the new modernist building that was fortunately, never built. Part of this compromise was, however to relegate the old courthouse to lesser duties when the new Lenawee County Justice Center was built across the street, and the courts moved into that building in 1979. This was part of a nationwide trend, during the 1970's based on the evidence of several county courthouses restored versus destroyed during that period, and my own experience in my home town, also a county seat, experienced the same quandary to either destroy the old courthouse, or rebuild it. Lawrence rebuilt, then added a similar justice center adjacent, as well as many other towns and counties since

⁵ Personal Observation and Site visit. Georgia Pine is cited in Koch's report.

including one of Fallis' own counties in Noble County, Indiana, which saved his seventh courthouse from the wreckers and also did historic renovation with that building.

Other people have praised and even emulated the Lenawee County Courthouse: in 1888, a commission from Paulding, Ohio came to Adrian after looking at courthouses across northern Ohio and southeast Michigan, to find the most admirable building for their own new courthouse after the original Courthouse in Paulding had burnt down four years previously.⁶ The Paulding County commission gave E.O. Fallis the job of creating "a less complicated" version of the Lenawee County courthouse in Paulding. Using a more restrained aesthetic with simple brick and stone accents, and a very unusual "bridged" arcade that hid the building's four chimneys inside a massive east and west front, the Paulding County Courthouse is indeed an almost more elegant and pleasant to the eye version of the same set of plans. Gracing its' town square, the simpler version of the building in Adrian is an example that Lenawee county could adopt as its own after having come out beautifully from a complete historic restoration that celebrates the old and incorporates the new in a functional and practical building that still acts as the county's home for its courts, and for its county offices of Register and Clerk, with the assessor in a modern basement. It would be worthwhile for citizens of Lenawee County to visit Paulding and see what a progressive historic restoration might be like for a building that, because of its note as a work of historic architecture, is worth a chance at historic restoration. It would be ironic if someday the sixth courthouse of a noted regional architect informed the restoration of the fourth work of public service of that same architect. It is also true that both Courthouses are listed on the National Register of Historic Places for their Architecture, the Architect himself, and the historic significance that the buildings have had over their counties over the years.⁷

The Lenawee County Courthouse is the highest degree of the art of Edward O. Fallis. Because of the wealth of the county in the 1880's the pride and ambition of the citizens of the county and of the City of Adrian, and the general sense of permanence and belief in a courthouse that would serve as not only a place to simply hold the required spaces to administer the county and its courts, but a place that would uplift the citizens and give them a sense of the gravitas and importance that a court ought to have in those days and beyond, they commissioned, bonded, and spent \$47,460 very sound 1884 dollars for such a building as the one that still survives to this day. The people of Lenawee County allowed Edward Fallis the chance to "use all the bells and whistles" in his design and execution of this building,

⁶ Henry Paulding County Historical Society, History of the Paulding County Courthouse. Brochure.

⁷ Site Visit, and conversations with employees at the courthouse.

and it shows in a way that does not look overly decorated, but very much a Victorian building in style and architecture.

To understand the architecture, it is wise to understand the Architect. Edward Oscar Fallis was born June 8, 1851 in Largo Indiana, the son of John Fallis, a miller, and his wife Martha Craig Fallis. His extended family were all millers and very migratory based their success (or its lack) in the family business. The Fallis family moved to Toledo 1866 when the family mill in Indiana failed, and it was there that Fallis started working as a copy boy and runner in the office of C.C. Miller, architect in his early teens. Miller was one of the more acclaimed architects of his time in Ohio and in the West, and his planbook, co-authored with M.F. Cummings, “Designs for Street Fronts, Suburban Houses and Cottages” was a national hit for architectural plans then, and is now a reference for historic preservation. As Fallis worked, he found success and was trained as a draftsman while still in his youth, and by appearances, Fallis was a quick and dedicated study, because in 1873, Miller moved to Chicago, taking his office with him, but selling Fallis his business in the Toledo area, along with his shingle. Fallis then set up an office, and began designing residences, mostly in the near West Side of Toledo, and as his reputation improved, into the fashionable West Side now between the University of Toledo and the Toledo Museum of Art. E. O. Fallis constructed or designed fifty four houses during his career as an architect, the grandest still extant is the Butler residence in Grand Rapids, Ohio, showing on its front porch the signature motif of a Fallis building, the fat convex balustrades that are in every building he worked on.⁸

After several years of working on residential work, Fallis got his first major professional break by winning the commission for the Schulyer County, Illinois courthouse in Rushville, Illinois in 1881 (extant). This was the “Golden Age of Courthouses” were a talented architect could make a good living designing courthouses, and Fallis was about to become part of that period. Shortly after this commission, Fallis was commissioned to design the Monroe County Courthouse in Monroe, Michigan (extant) in 1882, then in 1883, he was commissioned to design two courthouses in the same year, the Kalamazoo County Michigan courthouse (demolished, 1933—Bronson Park in Kalamazoo is what remains) and the Lenawee County Courthouse (extant) which he also acted as construction supervisor and foreman on, recording his only firing of a workman for theft during construction. Fallis was then commissioned by the Montgomery County, Kansas commissioners to design their county courthouse (destroyed, 1935) in

⁸ Ligibel, Theodore J. E.O. Fallis, Master Architect in Perspective. MA Thesis, Bound. Bowling Green State University, Ohio. December 1981. Comprehensive biography of Fallis’ life and work. Dr. Ligibel allowed me to use this with his permission. This short biography is a redaction of his much longer work, and my thanks go to him.

1885, then in 1887, he was approached by the commission from Paulding County, Ohio, who conducted a thorough search of available designs before coming to Fallis and asking him for a less ornate version and smaller version of the Lenawee County courthouse, Fallis obliged, and in late 1888, the Paulding Courthouse was opened for business. It is likely the most perfected of all his courthouses, because it is the culmination of several years tinkering with the same basic design. In 1889, Noble County, Indiana commissioned a much more vertical style of Richardsonian Romanesque with a very tall central clock tower, and in 1891, Williams County Ohio agreed to also build a very similar one to Noble County. There are hints that Fallis may have bid on and lost other competitions for courthouses, but these are the definitely built buildings in his work, and have become the most durable and lasting of all his catalog of designs.

Fallis was often working with a shop of one to two draftsmen, several apprentices and copyboys/runners during his best years. He moved his shop at least six times in Toledo before settling in the Nasby Building in Downtown Toledo. As an aside, the Nasby Building was described by a wag from the Detroit News in 1905 as: "An architectural confection needing only a bride and groom stuck on top".⁹ But this building became Fallis' office for twenty-five years. In the course of those years of practice, Fallis had four fires engulf his office, destroying all his archives four times, and what was not destroyed by fire was disbursed to the owners of the buildings who had surviving construction drawings by his heirs at his death. In 1896, Fallis hit upon his single largest commission, from the State of Ohio, for the State Hospital for the Insane. Fallis and his staff undertook this commission with a will, designing a reception building, a power plant building, a men's and women's clinic building, a recreation building for both sexes, and over 100 cottage residences for the inmates of the institution. It was to be a humane place, with no person being kept in an institutional building, and according to the treatment standards of the day, a quiet and restful place for people to get better. A few of these construction drawings, in prime condition, exist at the University of Toledo archives on vellum, and are impeccably drawn to a very high standard of work. They are almost all the Fallis drawings that survive. The State Hospital was dismantled beginning in 1972, and all that remains is the Cemetery.¹⁰

Fallis was not an architect of catholic tastes, he tended to work to whatever style would get him the best commission and pay the bills in such a way that left him comfortable. He had reverses, and as I

⁹ Quote and photo at <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/200058408419365945/> that critic was dead on!

¹⁰ Site Visit to the University of Toledo Library, Ward M. Canaday Center for Special Collections. MS 223, Fallis Drawings for Toledo State Institution for the Insane, 1896.

have documented, fires that destroyed his practice, but he continued onward. One example of his greatest single commission was also, sadly for Fallis, his greatest disaster. The Grand Island Hotel near Put-In-Bay, Ohio was a huge tourist hotel on the shores of Lake Erie at least twice as large as the Grand Hotel on Mackinaw Island, it was commissioned in 1898, and with Fallis as the construction supervisor the building was ready for its first guest the following fall of 1899. It appears to have been a great success with the tourist market for several years until October of 1908, when fire caught in a room and went uncontrolled for hours until the entire building was involved and was a total loss. The fire lasted two days, no one was killed or seriously injured, but the owners did not rebuild, and what was once one of the largest tourist hotels on the Great Lakes is now an Ohio State Park, and the hotel site is a primitive campground where campers can trace the foundation ruins.

Edward O. Fallis continued to design useful and important buildings well into the 1910's, a warehouse, residential work, public buildings such as theatres, churches, and other buildings. The last major work he did was the Huntington Theatre downtown, which started out as a movie theatre in the grand style, and over many years and several renovations has morphed into a public performing arts center. As he grew older, after his wife died, he moved in with his daughter and her family, knowing that he had made a permanent difference in the built landscape around the region, and especially around Toledo. Edward Oscar Fallis was one of the very first Fellows of the American Institute of Architects, valued and consulted on all matters of his profession and as a member of his community, and he had apprentices who did go on to long careers as architects themselves, he lived modestly and died comfortably in Toledo in April, 1927.

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