

WELCOME TO THE OFFICIAL SITE FOR ST. JOSEPH COUNTY INDIANA

WEATHER



History of St. Joseph County Courts

The Indiana Constitution mandates that Indiana shall have Circuit Courts and St. Joseph County has had a Circuit Court since its inception in 1830. The Court has remained in continuous operation since 1831. The Circuit Court first convened in the home of Alexis Coquillard, who established the first American home in St. Joseph County in 1823. It held court there until 1832, at which time a wooden courthouse was built in what is now downtown South Bend. In 1855, the wooden courthouse was demolished so that a modern, sturdier courthouse could be erected in its place. This courthouse stood on what is now Main Street until 1896, at which time a third courthouse was built. In order to provide space for both courthouses, the 1855 courthouse was transported approximately thirty yards to the northwest using a system of rolling logs and pulleys. To this day, the 1855 courthouse sits on the same spot on the corner of what is now Washington Street and Lafayette Street in downtown South Bend. The 1896 courthouse was built on the spot where the 1855 courthouse originally sat, and it remains there today.

While the Circuit Court is the only St. Joseph County court established by the Indiana Constitution, the State saw fit to add more courts in St. Joseph County because of the large caseload that it generated. Thus, the St. Joseph Superior Court was established by statute in 1900. St. Joseph County has also operated a separate Probate Court system since 1831, at which time there were two probate judges in addition to the one presiding judge of the Circuit Court and two associate judges of the Circuit Court. St. Joseph County is currently the only county in Indiana with a Probate Court separate from the Circuit and Superior Courts.

The St. Joseph Probate Court, located in South Bend, Indiana, and has been located in the Thomas N. Frederick Juvenile Justice Center (JJC) at 1000 South Michigan Street since 1997. The center includes ample public parking, easy access to public transportation and offices for the: Court's staff, County Clerk, Probation Department, CASA Program, Child Production Team (St. Joseph County Office Of Family And Children), St. Joseph County Prosecutor, and St. Joseph County Public Defender. The JJC is a state of the art building. Its design and technology are an integral part of the Court's facility. Integrator.com (formerly Security Automation Systems) of Noblesville, Indiana, installed various components to provide security, including extensive monitoring of secure and non-secure areas. All the Probate Judges are currently located in the JJC.

Presently, there are three types of courts in the St. Joseph County Court system. The judges and magistrates of the St. Joseph County Court system are located at three different sites across the county. Magistrates are judicial officers, similar to judges, who conduct hearings on matters, but cannot issue opinions. There are two courthouses in downtown South Bend that house the Circuit Court judge, seven Superior Court judges, and three magistrates. The Probate Court also sits in South Bend and houses the Probate Court judge and three magistrates. Another courthouse in Mishawaka houses one Superior Court judge and one Circuit Court magistrate.

The St. Joseph County Courthouses are not only home to the local St. Joseph courts, but also to a trove of legal and historical art. Upon entering the 1855 courthouse one is confronted with its original entrance. The original doorway, surrounded by Lemont limestone, is still in its original condition. If one continues through the entrance and down the hall they will be confronted with a plaque that details the history of both the 1855 and 1896 courthouses. However, if one travels up the stairs to the Traffic & Misdemeanor Court one can see a wonderful representation of period architecture and woodwork.

The 1855 courthouse is not the only place where such art and woodwork can be found. In the 1896 courthouse one must only walk into the rotunda and look up to witness the truly magnificent craftsmanship that covers the inside of the dome. At the base of the woodwork, along the walls, are murals depicting scenes of when the explorer LaSalle explored the area of St. Joseph County, between 1679-1680. Also along the second floor rotunda is a portrait of F. Kenneth Dempsey,

Judge of the St. Joseph Superior Court from 1955-1973, who helped preserve the courthouse and its heritage for the people of St. Joseph County. Almost every courtroom is an impressive work of craftsmanship and history, preserved in its original state.

Finally, upon leaving the courthouse, one should stop and view the Civil War Memorial that is placed on the corner of Main St. and Washington St. It is a memorial dedicated to the men, from this county, who fought and died during the Civil War. The memorial lists both the names the companies raised in St. Joseph County and the major battles in which those units took part. These are all important pieces of St. Joseph County heritage that have been preserved for the benefit they provide to the People of St. Joseph County.

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