



The Old Courthouse and the Civic Center

The Orange County Archives

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**Presented by Archivist Phil Brigandi
to the Orange County Board of Supervisors
Oct. 25, 2005
The Orange County Archives**

- The original offices of Orange County government in 1889 were two rented rooms in two different downtown store buildings at Fourth and Spurgeon streets in Santa Ana.
- Several local property owners had hoped to get the new county as tenants, but J.R. Congdon trumped them all by offering the space for just 50¢ a year! But that was only for the first two years. After that, he got another ten years worth of rent out of the county.
- The following is one of only two pictures I've ever seen of the original county offices, taken in about 1895.



- In 1893, the county finally decided it was time to do something about a permanent courthouse. They put out a call for proposals for a site, and were considered several locations around Santa Ana.
- County officials ended up buying a vacant lot on the north side of town from William H. Spurgeon, the founder of the city of Santa Ana and the first chairman of the Orange County Board of Supervisors (even though he had retired from the board by then). The price was \$8,000, and the deed stipulated that a courthouse had to be built on the site within ten years.
- Notice the street names surrounding the courthouse site back then ... Sixth is now Santa Ana Boulevard, Church Street is now Civic Center Drive, West Street is now Broadway. Only Sycamore has survived with its original name intact.

MAP OF THE COURT HOUSE SITE

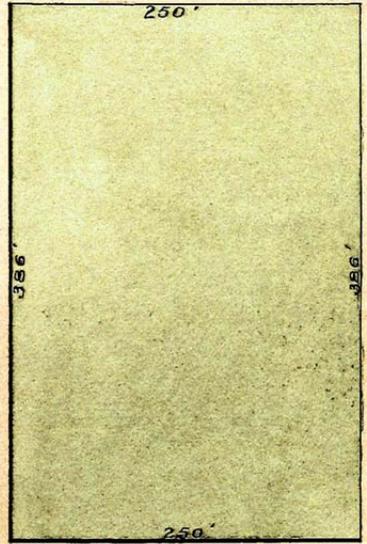
AT SANTA ANA CAL.

By S.H. Finley, County Surveyor.

N

66' CHURCH ST. 66'

WEST ST.



SYCAMORE ST.

30' 7th St.

S.W. Cor. Blk. 22 Town of Santa Ana

60' SIXTH ST. 60'

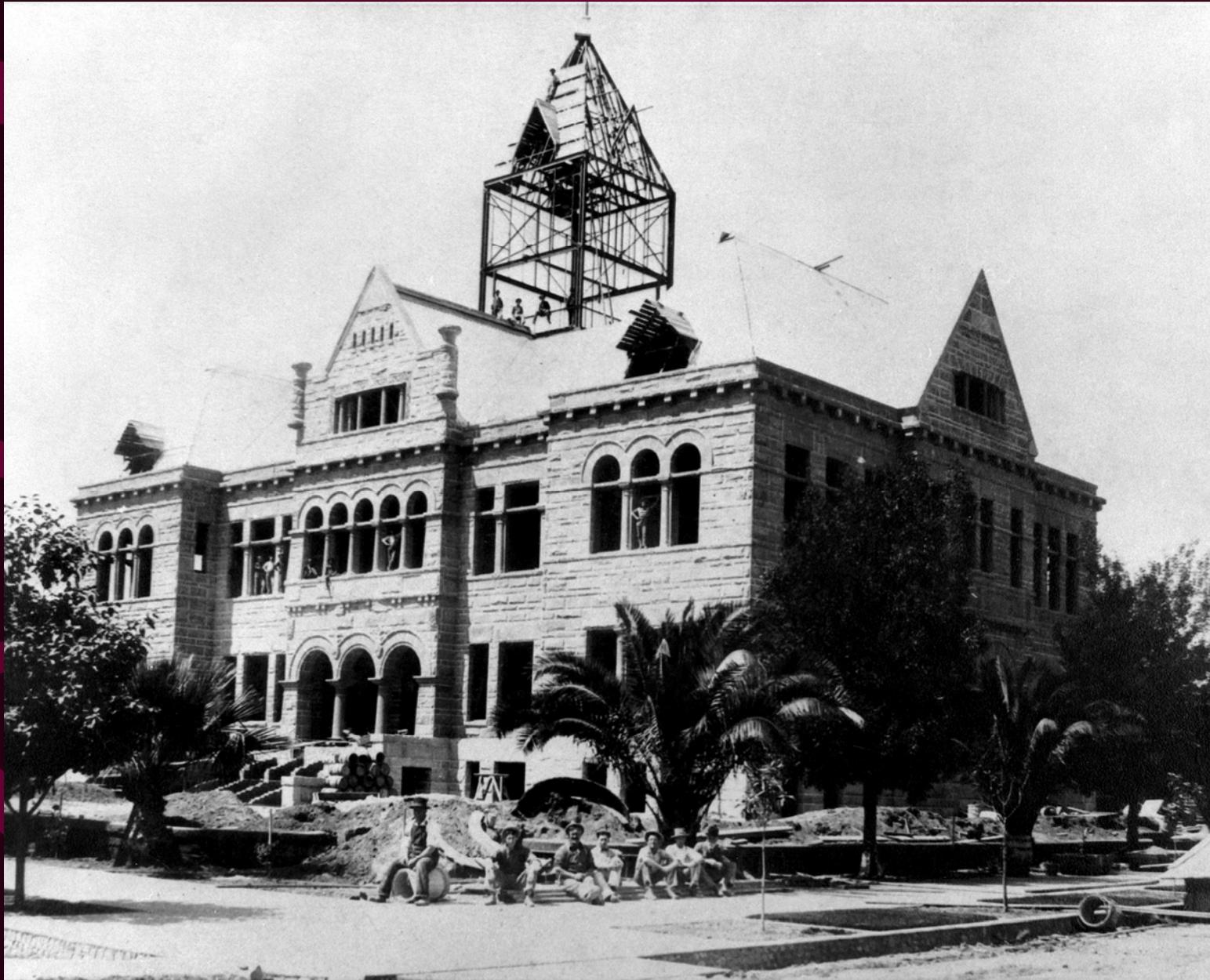
Scale 50' = 1 inch

- The first thing built on the new courthouse block was a county jail on the north end of the property. The jail was completed in 1897 and stood for nearly 30 years. The outline of the building is still marked out in brick and concrete within the parking lot of the Old County Courthouse.
- Finally, in 1899, the Board decided to get moving on a new courthouse. Local voters approved a \$100,000 bond act, and a call went out to architects for a design competition.
- Some of the plans submitted were a little curious to say the least. One called for a triangular-shaped building topped with 128-foot tall spire. Another looked like the State Capital.



The original Orange County jail

- In the end, the Board went with a more traditional design for the courthouse. The Richardson Romanesque style was actually already a little dated when construction began in 1900.
- The red sandstone exterior came from Arizona, but it's just a façade. Underneath, the Old Courthouse is a steel-frame, brick building. Even the tile roof on top is actually made of pressed metal, as was the 135-foot cupola that was taken down after the Long Beach Earthquake in 1933.
- Construction took 17 months, and cost \$117,000. The building was officially accepted on September 23rd, with all county offices ordered to move in no later than October 1, 1901. The formal dedication was held on November 12th.
- The 1901 Courthouse was home to every single county office, and our one and only Superior Court. But we soon outgrew it.

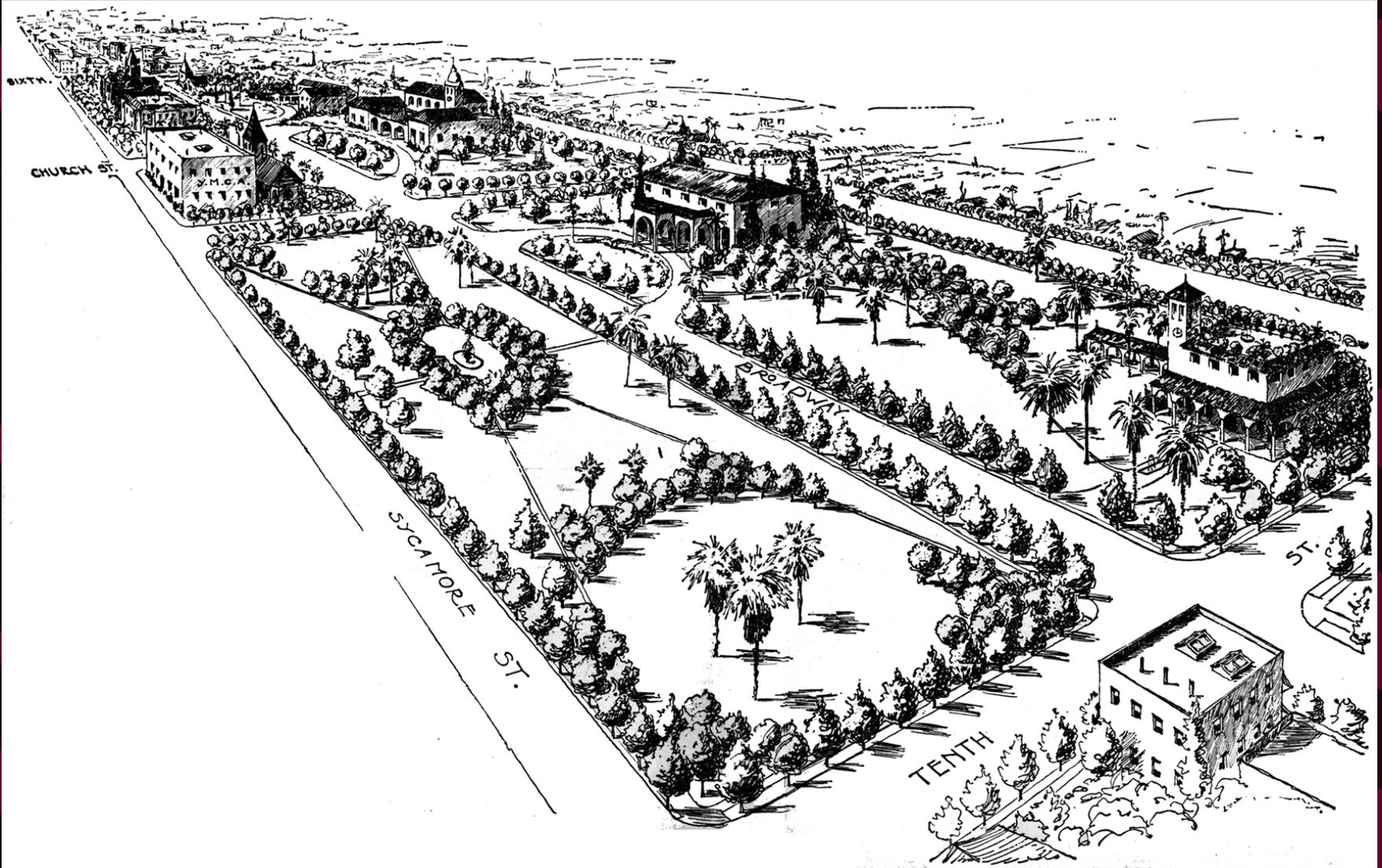


- In 1924, the county built a new jail on Sycamore Street, and a Hall of Records north of the old jail. Civic Center Drive cuts through the site today, but you can still see some of the palm trees that stood in front.
- Then in 1930, the county bought the St. Anne's Inn – a failed tourist hotel that sat about where the Hall of Administration is now – as the courthouse annex.
- The first plan for an actual Civic Center was prepared by the City of Santa Ana in 1927. It ran north of the Old County Courthouse for four blocks, and included sites for a museum, an amphitheatre, and a park.
- If you look at the next two slides, you'll see the old buildings and a drawing showing the Old Courthouse in the upper left, with the park running all the way down to Tenth Street.

Sycamore Street
Jail



St. Anne's Inn



- The idea of creating a real Orange County Civic Center idea was revived in 1945 as a joint project of the County of Orange and the City of Santa Ana. New plans were drawn running west of the Old Courthouse, and the county began buying up land in the area.
- Ground was broken on the Civic Center's first building in 1953 – it was the Health Care Agency then. Today it's the Public Defender's office. But work on the project slowed over the next ten years with the failure of three successive bond acts to build a new courthouse.
- Finally, in 1966, the City and County formed a Civic Center Authority, which arranged for the financing of today's Courthouse.



- When the new courthouse was completed in December, 1968, that left the Old Courthouse in limbo. There was actually some question in the 1960s whether it would be saved at all.
- After being used for offices and historical exhibits for several years, it was declared seismically unsafe in 1979, and closed up. It was retrofitted and restored in the 1980s, reopening in 1987.
- Except for Mission San Juan Capistrano and the Matterhorn, the Old Orange County Courthouse is probably the best-known landmark in Orange County. It is the oldest surviving courthouse in Southern California, a California State Historic Landmark and listed on the National Register of Historic Places.
- Since 1984, it also has been home to the Orange County Archives.



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Orange County Clerk-Recorder Dept.

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