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## A Moment Of Fortitude: The Chase County Courthouse

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## A MOMENT OF FORTITUDE: THE CHASE COUNTY COURTHOUSE

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Can a building determine the fate of an entire community? The Chase County Courthouse did. Cottonwood Falls had been the seat of Chase County since 1859, but by 1871, with the Santa Fe Railroad making tracks between Emporia and Newton, the small city couldn't chance its future on the battered log cabin that had served as the courthouse since the early days of the Civil War. In the place once known as Wise County, these men would build their house upon the rock – and would win a county seat war without firing any shots.\*

In building their symbol of permanence, the town's boosters did not take any chances. To design the courthouse, the commissioners hired the state's first professional architect, John Haskell, whose Kansas bonafides included ties to the New England Emigrant Aid Company and the design of the recently completed Kansas Statehouse. It was the first of many courthouses Haskell would design after the Civil

*\*Ironically, Chase County founder Samuel Wood died in the Stevens County seat war in 1891.*

OPPOSITE PAGE: VIEW FROM CHASE COUNTY COURTHOUSE  
*Mark A. Fisher*



War, a Second Empire Style masterpiece that would place one of the county's greatest natural resources, native stone, on spectacular display.

Before they could execute Haskell's vision, the commission had to secure the \$40,000 necessary to build the best permanent courthouse they could afford. It almost didn't happen. The measure passed by a mere sixty-four votes, 301 to 237. Some dissenting voters were likely angling for county seat status for their own communities. Others thought the cost, the equivalent of nearly a month's income for each man, woman, and child in the county, was too great. But for those familiar with efforts in other communities, \$40,000 may have seemed a bargain. Four years earlier Lyon County had passed \$400,000 in bonds to attract the Santa Fe and KATY Railroads to ensure Emporia's future as a regional industrial and business center. Besides, \$40,000 was no more than the monthly payroll of the county's biggest business enterprise, Barney Lantry and

Sons stone company. Forty thousand dollars was enough to prime the pump, to ensure a bright economic future for Cottonwood Falls and Chase County.

The effort paid dividends. It is said that "more than 60 men who came from Leavenworth and elsewhere to build it became enamored of the county and settled here." Today, the Chase County Courthouse is the oldest operating county courthouse in the state, a so-called "monument to pioneer fortitude." It wasn't a log cabin, but a narrowly approved French-inspired architectural masterpiece that came to symbolize the true grit of the ranchers, cowboys, stonemasons, and pioneers, the big thinkers who saw a bright *Future of the Flint Hills*.

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*Christy Davis is a fifth-generation Kansan and executive director of Symphony in the Flint Hills, Inc. She resides in Cottonwood Falls, Kansas, with her husband, Luke, and son, Jack.*



FLINT HILLS ORIGAMI CRANES & NEST (INSTALLATION)  
Chiyoko Myose