

## The Old Courthouse Sundial

The sundial located in the southeastern courtyard of the Old Courthouse is the only surviving original landscape feature of the building dating to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The sundial was placed in 1859, before the building was completed, and has never been moved from its original location. The sundial was fabricated by artisans working at the St. Louis arsenal on South Broadway from spare ordnance materials. A second sundial was also fabricated and placed on the grounds of the arsenal later in 1859. This sundial also survives.

In 1958 a major effort was undertaken to restore the Old Courthouse sundial, particularly the limestone base, which had deteriorated greatly. At that time the original base was removed and a new one was fabricated of concrete. The cast iron pedestal of the sundial is so deeply embedded in the earth that the sundial was not moved during this process. Photographs taken of the sundial at that time indicate that the hinge mechanism may have been broken at some point prior to 1958, and this was also repaired.



After a major construction project in the southeast courtyard to fabricate accessible ramps for the Old Courthouse, a second restoration effort was called for in 2017, and will involve sandblasting and properly painting the cast iron pedestal of the sundial.

The following are excerpts from the St. Louis County Court Records of 1858-1859. Other than casual mentions of the sundial as existing within the courthouse landscape, no further information in these records details the life of the sundial after 1859. As the builders and owners of the Courthouse, the St. Louis County government, through their court, monitored construction and repair to the Old Courthouse between 1839 and 1876.

#### **November 4, 1858**

Ordered by the Court that the County Engineer procure and cause to be set up or placed within the Court House Square on the South East Corner thereof a suitable dial or plate to show the hour by Sun and Shadow. And as the Court entertains a high opinion of, and great confidence in the attainments Skill and experience in the walks of Science of Major W H Bell, of the Army of the United States, and now Stationed at the Arsenal, it is therefore further Ordered that the said County Engineer for and in behalf of the County of St. Louis respectfully request Major Bell to superintend and overlook the construction and setting up the dial or plate aforesaid.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Maj. William H. Bell's command of the Federal St. Louis Arsenal lasted from 1840 until 1861. He was a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1820. His administration was uneventful until the advent of the Civil War. In 1861, with secession of many of the southern states and looming conflict, the arsenal constituted an important warehouse of arms and ammunition that both sides wanted to possess. Within these buildings there were stored 60,000 stand of arms (mostly Enfield and Springfield rifle muskets), 1,500,000 ball cartridges, several field pieces and siege guns, a large amount of machinery in several shops, and munitions of war in abundance. In the main magazine there were 90,000 pounds of gunpowder. It rivaled Harpers Ferry as a major installation of Federal munitions and supply.

"Missouri State Militia Brigadier General Daniel Frost visited the St. Louis Arsenal on January 24th to speak with its commander, Major William H. Bell. Bell was a North Carolina native who was sympathetic to the Southern cause. Frost described the results of the meeting to the Governor of Missouri, Claiborne Fox Jackson, in a note:

*I have just returned from the arsenal . . . I found the Major everything that you or I could desire. He assured me that he considered that Missouri had, whenever the time came, a right to claim it [the arsenal] as being on her soil. He asserted his determination to defend it against any and all irresponsible mobs, come from whence they might, but at the same time gave me to understand that he would not attempt any defense against the proper State authorities . . . In a word, the Major is with us, where he ought to be.*

*This arsenal, if properly looked after, will be everything to our State, and I intend to look after it; very quietly, however.*

Shortly after this letter was written, Bell's complicity with the secessionists was disclosed to Arm Headquarters in Washington, and Bell was ordered to be transferred to the East Coast. Since he had substantial property interests in the St. Louis area, he chose to resign from the army and retired to his farm in St. Charles County. [James Peckham, *Gen. Nathaniel Lyon and Missouri in 1861: A Monograph of the Great Rebellion* (New York: American News Company, 1866), p. 43-45; Robert Julius Rombauer, *The Union Cause in St. Louis in 1861* (St. Louis: Press of Nixon-Jones Printing Company, 1909), p. 142-143; *The War of the Rebellion*, Series 1, Vol. LIII, pp. 484-483].

"The United States War Department kept hearing rumors of plans to seize the arms at the St. Louis Arsenal. On January 26th, General-in-Chief Winfield Scott, United States Army, had his Adjutant-General sent the following telegram to the U.S. Commander of the Department of the West, Brigadier-General William Harney: *Give particular attention to the safety of the Saint Louis Arsenal, and for that purpose call to the arsenal any part or the whole of the recruits from Jefferson Barracks.*

"On January 29th, Harney would have a messenger sent to Captain Nathaniel Lyon in command at Fort Scott, Kansas: *Repair forthwith with your command to Saint Louis Arsenal.*

"Major Bell was removed from command of the Arsenal and replaced by Major Peter V. Hagner, who assumed command on January 24<sup>th</sup>, 1861." [Thomas Loundes Snead, *The Fight for Missouri* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1886), p. 117]

*(St. Louis County Court Records, Book 9, Page 54)*

**April 30, 1859**

1. William H. Bell the producer of this Sun Dial asks that this instrument be placed in the hands of a qualified Officer in order to insure against any form of damage.

A) Upon examination the author asks that he receive payment for Contracted work.

2 Item: Placed to be set at Noon and on any day of the week to be fair at Meridian.

3 Position: Placed in said position for reading that the Sun will so strike this Instrument at the appointed hour each day without the chance of shadows from other Blds. Causing any obstruction.

4 Construction: Brass, Iron, Lead with a Limestone foundation and coping.

A) Cast Iron hollow Shaft.

B) x inch exterior diameter

C) 7 feet in Length

5 MERIDIAN PLATE: Gives the Length, Width and also the Mineral.

6 MERIDIAN LINE: Drawn and cut with the aid of a sciameter, to help the accuracy be as xxx perfect as possible.

7 DIAL PLATE: Mineral; Diameter; Security; Purpose and also Imperceptible motion Correction.

8 GRADUATION OF THE DIAL PLATE: Sum of all of the measurements; Also the calculation of all of the angles which might tend to put this instrument out of Commission.

9 DIAL COVER: Mineral, Type; Security; Purpose; Opening Position and reason for this new type of cover on this particular instrument.

10 SCIA CHRONOMETER: Use for the setting of the Time Pieces at the Meridian, Explanation the necessity of the Construction.

*(County Court Records; JNEM Archives 30 April, 1859)*

**4 May 1859** – The Court appoint Benj. F. Crain Superintendent of the County Sun Dial.  
*(St. Louis County Court Records, Book 9, Page 101).*

Locke R H for Sixty one 20/100 Dollars on a/c of Sun Dial.  
*(St. Louis County Court Records, Book 9, Page 108).*

**May 24, 1859**

Shaw Jno. for Seven hundred Twenty nine 95/100 Dollars on a/c of Court House & Sun Dial \$34.00

*(St. Louis County Court Records, Book 9, Page 117).*

**May 25, 1859**

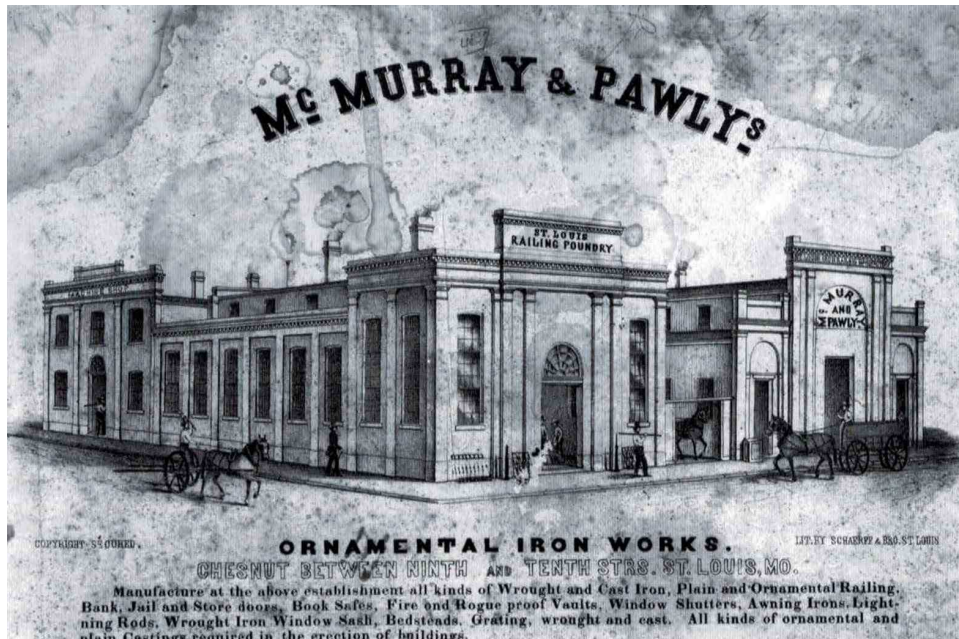
Kingsland & Ferguson for Four hundred Ninety 72/100 Dollars on a/c of Sun Dial.

*(St. Louis County Court Records, Book 9, Page 93).*

**June 8, 1859**

McMurray & Co. for Four hundred Sixteen 71/100 Dollars on a/c of Court House 282.19, Sun Dial 127.52, Jail 4.50, County Farm 2.50.

(*St. Louis County Court Records, Book 9, Page 125*).<sup>2</sup>

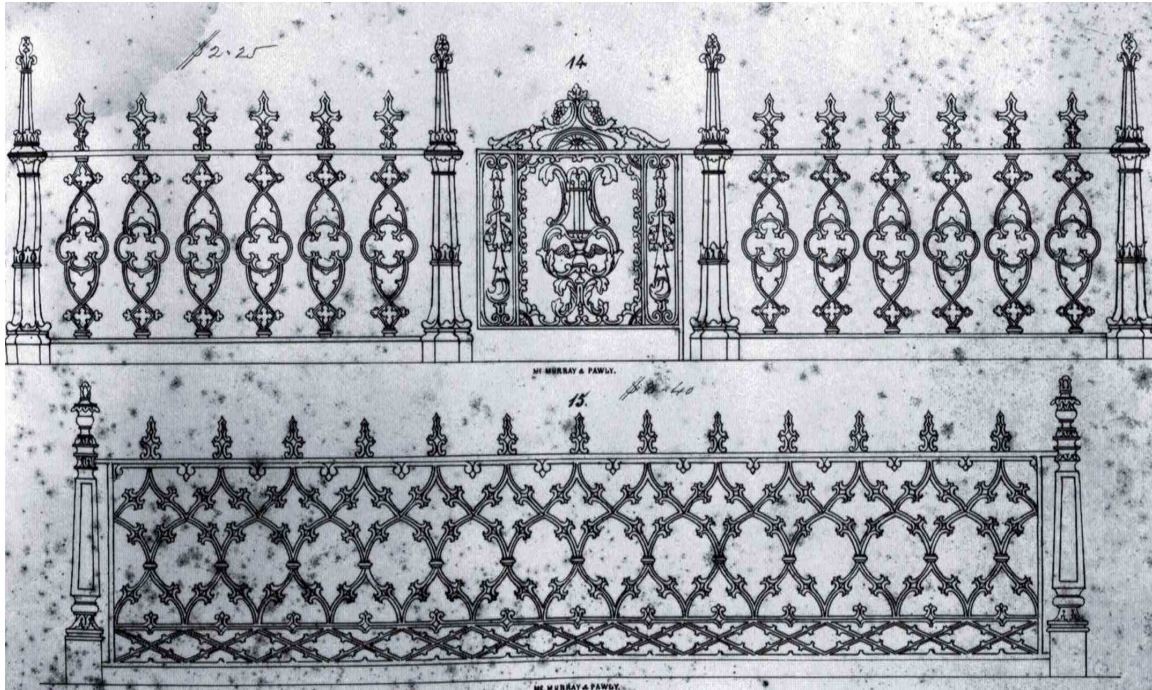


**An 1856 advertisement for McMurray and Pawly Ornamental Iron Works, showing the factory buildings.**

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<sup>2</sup> This expense may have been for the fence surrounding the sundial, as the McMurray firm was a business specializing in iron castings; they were well-known for their iron fences and gates. The firm had done a lot of work on the Old Courthouse during the expansion of the 1850s; see the “Contract for a Wrought Iron Roof, with Cast Iron Footings, West Wing of the Courthouse, July 17, 1856, in the collection of contracts for the Old Courthouse, Jefferson National Expansion Memorial Archives.





An 1855 advertisement for McMurray and Pawly Ornamental Fences (Missouri History Museum).

**July 25, 1859**

Griffith Jno. for One hundred Sixty four 20/100 Dollars on a/c of Court House & Sun Dial.  
*(St. Louis County Court Records, Book 9, Page 138).*

### **The St. Louis Arsenal Sundial – Sister of the Old Courthouse Sundial**

<http://sundials.org/index.php/component/sundials/oneDial/847>

The sun dial and the surrounding fence were fabricated by arsenal personnel and dedicated on December 12, 1859. It displays the range of skills in practical arts and sciences possessed by arsenal craftsmen. Created entirely from spare ordnance materials, the sun dial was a scientifically precise instrument, measuring 17 inches in diameter. It was used for many years as the definitive chronometer of the arsenal. Engraved upon it was the poem “The Bird of Liberty,” reflecting the patriotic fervor of the day. Although the brass face has been much worn by years of polishing and weathering, many details of its original ornate engraving are still visible. The fence pickets are musket barrels; the corner posts are small cannons.













Form 10-306  
(Oct. 1971)

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY - NOMINATION FORM  
FOR FEDERAL PROPERTIES

(Type all entries - complete applicable sections)

STATE:

Missouri

COUNTY:

St. Louis City

FOR NPS USE ONLY

ENTRY DATE

1. NAME			
COMMON:			
St Louis Air Force Station			
AND/OR HISTORIC: St Louis Arsenal, St Louis Depot, St Louis Barracks, St Louis Clothing Depot, St Louis Medical Depot			
2. LOCATION			
STREET AND NUMBER:			
Second and Arsenal Streets			
CITY OR TOWN:		CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT:	
St Louis		3 - Ms. Lenor K. Sullivan	
STATE:	CODE	COUNTY:	CODE
Missouri	29	St Louis City	510

It should also be noted there is on the parade grounds of this site a very fine sundial, made and emplaced in 1859. This dial is probably one of the few remaining examples of this type of art. An article was written about this sundial entitled "Sundials", by Terry B. Morton, and was published in the Historic Preservation magazine in 1961, Vol 13, Issue No 1, Pgs 30-34.