

# John Marshall Clemens' Justice of the Peace Building in Hannibal, MO

205 Hill St.  
Hannibal, Missouri

## Virtual Tour by Emily Schwenneker, age 13

### Special points of interest:

- John Clemens' court records can be viewed at the Mark Twain Museum
- The building served as a scene in some of Twain's writings
- Rooms presently contain scenes depicting stories by Twain



The Justice of the Peace served in the same capacity as present-day judges.

The Justice of the Peace Office has long been an important landmark in Hannibal, Missouri. Nobody knows the exact date the office was built, but it is believed to have been before 1844 when John M. Clemens became the Justice of the Peace. The building has historical significance and is many times remembered in the books of the one-of-a-kind author, Mark Twain. Today, many people visit each year to relive some experiences in young Samuel Clemens' life and to make their own.

John Marshall Clemens, Samuel Clemens' father, had many jobs in Hannibal before he was elected for the extravagant position of Justice of the Peace. His first job in town was as a lawyer. No records of John Clemens' law practice are known today, but he did go on to be elected for the position of Justice of the Peace in 1844. John Clemens remained Hannibal's Justice of the Peace until his death by pneumonia in 1847.

John's duties as the Justice were numerous. He was paid very little, but bore a great concern regarding others' opinions. The Justice of the Peace served in the same capacity as pre-

sent-day judges. Clemens had to decide who was guilty or innocent, and if guilty, what their punishment would entail. In the Mark Twain Museum, which is just a short walk from this historic building, visitors can see a few of the cases dating from September 14, 1844 to October 19, 1946 over which John M. Clemens presided. Mark Twain reminisced in *Life on the Mississippi*, "My father was a justice of the peace, and I supposed he possessed the power of life and death over all men and could hang anybody that offended him."

Mark Twain's books influenced the setting of the office that visitors see today. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* used the building as a scene in Chapter 23 for "The Salvation of Muff Potter". Today visitors are treated to this famous scene through one of the building's windows. It is easy to imagine Muff Potter on trial and Injun Joe crashing through the window to make his escape. Another classic scene by Mark Twain was described in *The Innocents Abroad*. Twain described a day that he played hooky, and in order to avoid his mother's wrath he sneaked into the dark law office and fell



The leaning white law office stands between Grant's Drug Store and the Becky Thatcher house.

asleep. Unbeknownst to him, a murder had occurred that day, and when he awoke later that night the moonlight showed him the corpse of the murder victim lying nearby. The scene visitors now observe in the back of the law office is based on Twain's classic tale:

"Once when I ran away from school I was afraid to go home at night, so I crawled through a window and laid down on a lounge in my father's office. The moon shed a ghastly light in the room, and presently I descried a long, dark mysterious shape on the floor. I wanted to go and touch it--but I didn't--I

**JOHN MARSHALL CLEMENS'  
JUSTICE OF THE PEACE BUILDING IN HANNIBAL, MO**



**“By and by when the moonlight fell upon it, I saw that it was a dead man lying there with his white face turned up in the moonlight.”  
-Mark Twain**

**“I didn’t hurry--simply went out of the window--and took the sash along with me.”**

restrained myself--I didn't do it. I had a good deal of presence of mind--tried to go to sleep--kept thinking of it. By and by when the moonlight fell upon it, I saw that it was a dead man lying there with his white face turned up in the moonlight. I never was so sick in all my life. I never wanted to take a walk so bad! I went away from there. I didn't hurry--simply went out of the window--and took the sash along with me. I didn't need the sash, but it was handier to take it than to leave it. I wasn't scared, but I was a good deal agitated. I have never forgotten that man. He had fallen dead in the street and they brought him in there to try him, and they brought him in guilty, too.”

The history of the John M. Clemens Justice of

the Peace building is unique in other ways. The office of the Justice of Peace was originally located in the 100 block of Bird Street. In the 1940s the building was neglected, empty, and scheduled for demolition. Fortunately, the Warner Brothers movie studios purchased the building and donated it to the City of Hannibal as a “thank you” for the town's help during their filming of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. They presented the gift on Mark Twain's birthday, November 30, 1943 and contributed to its restoration. Renovations took approximately 4 years to complete. The renovations started in 1955 and were completed and opened to the public in 1959. In 1955, the Justice of the Peace Office was moved to its present location

at 205 Hill Street, just across the street from the boyhood home and between Grant's Drug Store and the Becky Thatcher house. Old furniture and books help create the scenes described by Mark Twain, and it is easy for visitors to pause there and imagine that small boy coming out the window and taking the sash with him.

~E.S.



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**J.M.Clemens ~ Justice of the Peace Building**



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**This virtual tour of the J.M. Clemens Justice of the Peace building in Hannibal, Missouri was written by Emily Schweneker of Princeton, Missouri as a project for the 2nd Annual Mark Twain Young Authors Workshop.**