

Superior interior

Judge Serpentelli wants to restore (architectural) order in the court

By LINDA REDDINGTON

While Stafford, Eagleswood and Long Beach Township are kicking off a year of anniversary celebrations this year, Ocean County is making big plans for its 150th birthday in the year 2000.

A part of that celebration will include the restoration of Courtroom 1 in the historic Ocean County Courthouse.

The impetus to get the work done can be credited to Judge Eugene Serpentelli, who, along with having a passion for the law, has a passion for antiques and history.

And when it comes to history, the Ocean County Courthouse has seen plenty. It was built in the 1850s in what he describes as a "classic Egyptian style." Curiously, it had no official courtroom at the time; the space that Courtroom 1 now occupies was a multipurpose room.

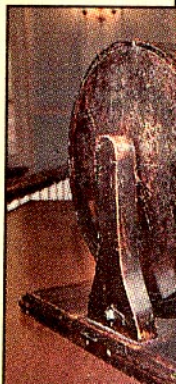
In 1870, the room was redone as a courtroom in typical Victorian style. At that time, a section was added to the rear of the room. It had a domed ceiling and was not just semi-circular but closer to three-quarters of a circle, thus earning it the description "Grecian bend," after a bustle fashionable ladies of the time wore under their skirts.

Twenty years after that, the back of the building was squared off, creating a judge's robing room on one side of the Grecian Bend and a "lawyer's retiring lounge/library, now a jury room, on the other. There never was a jury box in the room," Judge Serpentelli said.

On Oct. 25, 1929, a fire destroyed most of the area around the judge's bench.

Renovations to the room over the years have resulted in a mishmash of architectural styles. There are reliefs on the walls that look like rectangular pillars, topped with composite capitals, a mixture of Corinthian and Ionic styles. The window and door frames are believed to be the originals, as are the beveled glass windows.

A dropped, "popcorn-textured" ceiling is dingy grey with dust and heating fumes. It cuts off the top of the wooden arch behind the judge's bench. The tweed carpeting has a 1970s look, while the wooden auditorium chairs with book racks under the seats look as though they would be right at home



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in a schoolroom from the 1930s.

At one point, the Grecian Bend was closed off with a wall to create an extra room, and windows were set into the back of it.

All that will change, thanks to the judge's ability to impress upon the county freeholders the importance of the courthouse's place in history.

Originally from Belleville, Judge Serpentelli lived in Whippany while attending law school and it was at that time that his brother, who had a home in Ocean County, invited him down

for a summer.

Serpentelli's life as a judge in the Ocean County Courthouse began Nov. 27, 1978. He already had 15 years of experience practicing law in Brick and Point Pleasant.

"I saw what I thought would be a great opportunity," Serpentelli said. "I never desired to be in a big law firm or an urban environment, and I decided this was where I wanted to be."

His first experience in Courtroom 1 was in 1964 while practicing as a lawyer for a case in which an insurance company was being sued to pay for a boat that had sunk.

"They (insurance company) said it was a clunker and that it had sunk from its own weight," he said.

Did he win. "They settled," he said, smiling.

That first experience in Courtroom 1 made an impression on him. His interest in the room was piqued further after he first became a judge. At that time he worked with Judge James Havey and was invited to sit next to him at the bench and observe.

Serpentelli was assigned to Monmouth County in 1982, but, when he came back to serve in Ocean, by coincidence the only room available for him was Courtroom 1.

"There are some disadvantages to it," he said. It's cold in winter, hot in summer, has poor acoustics and no jury box — and it has a ghost."

Despite the discomfort, and the ghost, which reportedly turns lights on and off, along with other spectral tricks, the judge developed an affinity for the room and he began researching its history. He had been a history major at Rutgers before he decided to take up law, and he still had "an abiding interest in it," especially the 18th and 19th centuries, which led him to build a Colonial Williamsburg reproduction home.

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Besides collecting antiques, he collects gavels. They line the shelves in his office and people are always giving them to him, including Watson Pharo, who handcarved for him a gavel and sounding board from wood salvaged from the old Beach Haven railroad station.

"Funny thing," he said, "I've never once used a gavel in my 20 years on the bench. If you have to start slamming a gavel to get respect, you're in trouble."

When Serpentelli started thinking about possibly restoring Courtroom 1, he began having a lot of conversations about it with Pauline (Polly) Miller, head of the Ocean County Cultural and Historic Commission.

"It's been interesting to work with the judge on this," said Miller, who has been working on a book, a three-part history of the county, for the sesquicentennial in 2000. She said artist Joyce Lawrence has been commissioned to do a painting of the courthouse and that the painting will hang in Courtroom 1.

Serpentelli said he and Miller had difficulty finding anyone who had any recollection of what the room looked like before the fire in 1929.

He said he contacted the oldest lawyers in the area, including Julius Robinson from Beach Haven,

but nobody remembered.

He had better luck with newspaper reports. An account in the Ocean County Courier from 1870 gave an "excruciatingly detailed description," although he didn't completely trust it because the florid newspaper style of that time often included editorial embellishment. But it was in the Courier that he discovered the reference to the semicircular room as "the Grecian Bend," and also found an advertisement for the very bustle that inspired the comparison.

His research also took him to look at minutes of old freeholder meetings, where he found expenditures for carpeting and other details.

The courthouse itself was based upon blueprints from the original Hudson County Courthouse, Serpentelli said.

The freeholder minutes said they didn't want "a big city courthouse, so it wasn't fancy." Huge tree trunks supported the ceiling, and anyone who goes up into the "attic" can see them, their scorched surfaces evidence of the 1929 fire.

The verbal description of Courtroom 1 was all he had to guide him in his plans for restoration until the county acquired some of the belongings of the Hon. Wilfred Jayne, whose law offices had been located across the street from the courthouse. Among Jayne's papers were three photographs of a trial that took place

in Courtroom 1 before the fire.

The case was the most scandalous of the courthouse had seen. The State vs. Giberson took place in 1922. A Mrs. Giberson was charged with murdering her husband and trying to hide the murder weapon by throwing it into the outhouse.

"There is interesting testimony about retrieving the murder weapon," Serpentelli said with a smile.

Though the old photographs are in black and white, it is clear that Courtroom 1 had decorative panels on the walls, which once held gaslights. Chandeliers were suspended from four similarly panelled ceilings to illuminate the room. There were pews of black American walnut in the courtroom, rather than chairs. The current railing, separating the trial area from the public area, is an approximate copy of the original.

"Articles also mention that there were spittoons in the courtroom," Serpentelli said. "And men were allowed to smoke cigars in the courthouse."

There will be no spittoons in the room when it is restored but all efforts will be made to bring it back as close as it was to its original 1870s look.

There is some question whether the dark wood paneling can be stripped if its layers of white paint and refinished. The judge said the architect (Roth, Johnson and Fannocone of Edison) thinks some of the door or window molding will have to be replaced with reproductions, but Serpentelli, Miller and Freeholder John Bartlett Jr. are adamant that the original woodwork be saved.

"If we can't strip it and stain it, there are new paints that mimic stain," the judge said. "We may have to make some compromises."

Once the Grecian Bend is opened up again, it is expected to cause further acoustic problems in the room, and Serpentelli said sound baffles may have to be constructed and placed below eye level behind the bench.

"The architect says he can put a curtain behind the bench that can be closed when court is in session to help with the sound," Serpentelli said. "I can just see Joan (Court Clerk Joan Zuczek) popping out and saying 'Heeere's Gene -y!'"

He commended the freeholders for agreeing to spend the money on restoring the courtroom and said everyone is pushing to have the work done in time for the formal ceremony marking the county's 150th birthday.

Historic artifacts, as well as paintings of deceased judges that now hang behind bench, will be placed in the jury room to make a minimuseum.

Among the historic objects is a picture of the first lay judge, James D. White, and his wife. The pair are so dour they make the farmer and his wife in Grant Wood's famous painting, "American Gothic," seem downright jolly by comparison.

There is an antique coat tree on which the extra-large sized robe belonging to Judge Wilfred Jayne, 1888-1961, hangs.

"I put it on once," Serpentelli said. "It draped on the floor and I could wrap it around me a couple of times. He was a really big man."

The room originally had church pews, so that's what people will be sitting on come Y2k. The wooden folding seats will be put up for sale shortly. They come as pairs, two fastened together.

There are few electrical outlets in the room, so some of those will be added.

The judge's bench, which is a bit small for the large room, was put in place when the Hon. Maya Berry presided and will be returned to the Berry family. Serpentelli is looking for a bench, new or old, that approximates the original.

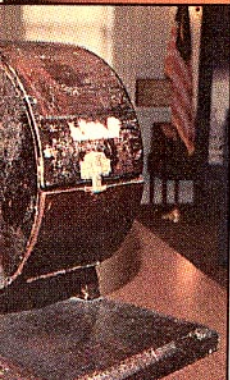
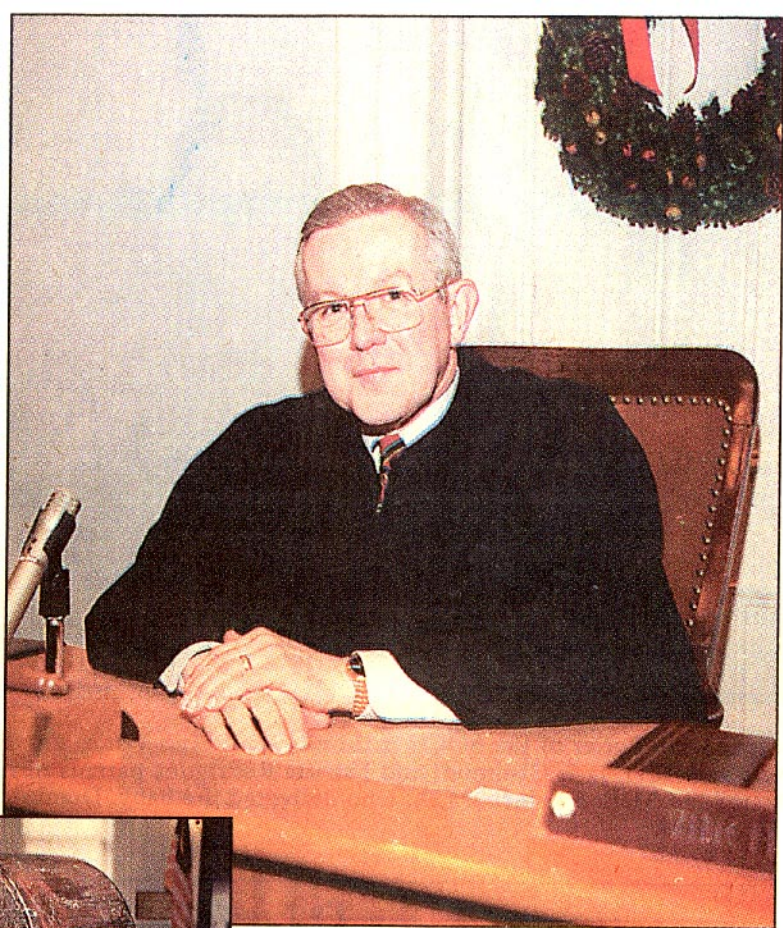
The foyer, now closed off to make offices, will be reopened and made into a Victorian-style sitting room. The stairs going down from the foyer are the originals and an attempt will be made to refinish the beautiful balusters. The rubber treads will come off the stairs and may be replaced with carpeting.

The county expects to be able to put the job up for bid by the end of February.

"If it's not completed by Feb. 15, 2000, Polly Miller will insist on a public hanging of all of us on the front lawn," he joked.







Superior Court judge, The Hon. Eugene Serpentelli has taken a personal interest in getting the Ocean County Courthouse's Courtroom 1 (below) restored to its original glory in time for the county's sesquicentennial celebration. Inset, an old-fashioned ballot box is one of several antique artifacts that will be housed in a little museum room off the main courtroom.



Chairs in Courtroom 1 will be sold in pairs and replaced by pews.