

Bringing court's past to life

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STAFF WRITER



HISTORIC COURTROOM

■ Originally an 1850s community multipurpose room, used for political meetings and social dances as well as court hearings.

■ Mustering center for Union Army volunteers when Civil War started in 1861.

■ Emergency repairs in 1870-71 grew into full-scale reconstruction in Victorian style.

■ Interior damaged in 1929 fire; 1954 renovations walled off judge's aspe and covered original walls and ceiling.

■ Newly completed four-year restoration of courthouse facilities included replacement of 1850 wooden ceiling beams with steel truss system, re-creation of interior and decor according to contemporary 1870s accounts.

When old roof beams dating to 1850 were removed from the Ocean County Courthouse, Toms River, county employee and woodworker Watson Pharo took some pieces to make a special memento — a wooden gavel and striker to commemorate yesterday's rededication of the restored Historic Courtroom 1.

Counting circular tree growth rings still evident in the old timbers, Pharo calculated they were cut from trees that sprouted around 1640, said county Freeholder John C. Bartlett Jr.

That was more than half a century before the first permanent European settlement of Ocean County. As those white cedars grew, the colony of West Jersey was starting the American principle of open, public judicial proceedings, with a 1677 declaration "that justice may not be done in a corner, or any covert manner," state Supreme Court Justice Jaynee LaVecchia said yesterday,

Restoring the courtroom to its 19th-century appearance — the centerpiece of a four-year, \$5.2 million improvement project — is "a monument to the county's long-standing



An inkwell with quill in the restored Courtroom 1 at Ocean County Courthouse.

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Guests gather in the restored Courtroom 1 at Ocean County Courthouse yesterday for a dedication ceremony. (STAFF PHOTO: TIM MC CARTHY)

Court

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dedication to the dignity of the law," LaVecchia told a crowd of more than 200 who gathered in the courtroom yesterday.

"Reason, justice and the rule of law deserve a nice place to live," said Edward B. Kasselman, president of the Ocean County Bar Association.

With its chandeliers and sconces that resemble 1870s gaslights, and rich, cherry-stained woodwork and furniture, the courtroom could be a movie set for an imaginary trial of Billy the Kid. Its completion marks a long-sought goal for historic preservationists and longtime Superior Court Assignment Judge Eugene D. Serpentelli, who started the county Board of Freeholders thinking about an eventual restoration not long after he took his post 21 years ago.

County Historian Pauline S. Miller said yesterday's dedication was the first time she saw the finished result, after four years of advising the judge and other restoration enthusiasts who searched libraries and archives for details from the 1800s.

"I'm just enjoying and feasting on the details we talked about," she told the audience, her eyes roaming the room.

Over a 2½-year period, workers removed overlaid wall panels and ceiling tiles, and reopened the apse, a half-round chamber that is again a backdrop to the judge's bench. Plaster panels and wood trim were finished in colors that would have been used in the mid-Victorian era.

As layers were removed from the sagging ceiling, the old beams began to twist, Serpentelli recalled. "Then we brought in a structural engineer, and they ordered us out of the building," he said. "They were concerned it wouldn't withstand a 10-inch snowfall."

A new steel truss roof system was installed in August 2003 — just in time for heavy snow — and the new ceiling was built 18 feet off the floor, close to the original 20-foot height but with room for the heating and cooling system, he said.

The original courthouse, built in 1850, was a triumph of frugality, Serpentelli said. County officials got Capt. Joseph Coward to donate both a corner of his cornfield and 6,000 red bricks to get the project started, he said.

After a horseback tour of other county courthouses, the freeholders settled on Hudson County's courthouse, built in Jersey City in 1845, as a model. They even managed to borrow the plans at no cost, Serpentelli said.

Perhaps some of the freeholders' cost-cutting came back to haunt their successors. Serpentelli quoted an 1870 account in the New Jersey Courier, reporting on a freeholders' meeting in "our old rattletrap of a courthouse, which is tumbling down as fast as it can. In fact, on Saturday, a large quantity of plastering did fall."

But by 1870, Ocean County was sharing in the nation's post-Civil War prosperity, with thriving farms, fisheries and a

new railway service. Serpentelli said the historic record is incomplete but county officials had enough money to build a proper courtroom in the Victorian style, pronounced by the Courier to be "a gem of beauty."

The courtroom was severely damaged by a fire on Oct. 25 and 26, 1929. It was the midst of Prohibition, and it's believed the fire started after an unauthorized party in the courthouse basement, Serpentelli said.

"Wine, women and song," Serpentelli said. "Someone carelessly threw a cigar away. The freeholders decided they had to get to the bottom of this. They conducted what they called 'an inquisition.'"

But the investigation may have gotten too close to prominent people who attended the party, and the freeholders instead quietly fired a court reporter, he said.

The courtroom was never fully refurbished, and workers found evidence of fire damage throughout the restoration project, the judge said.

Miller recalled looking at one scorched 1850 wall column, and urging Serpentelli to keep it. "I'm a historic preservationist, and I don't believe in tearing down anything," she said. Like the roof-beam wood that sprouted in the 17th century, the column came from an old-growth tree cut at the Double Trouble sawmill, a few miles south on Cedar Creek in Berkeley, she said.

Serpentelli "is a very passionate historic preservationist. . . We owe him for holding this all together," Miller said. The project means "people 150 years from now can see the history of Ocean County right here."

**BUILT
IN
1850**

ORIGINAL ROOF BEAMS: Made from trees that sprouted around 1640

RESTORATION PROJECT: Over four years at a cost of \$5.2 million



The Ocean County Sheriff's colorguard, lead by Sgt. Jeff Hein, enters the restored Historic Courtroom 1 at Ocean County Courthouse yesterday during the dedication ceremony. (STAFF PHOTOS: TIM MC CARTHY)



Guests gather in the restored Courtroom 1 at Ocean County Courthouse yesterday for a dedication ceremony. (STAFF PHOTO: TIM MC CARTHY)