

# PRESERVING JUSTICE



Tom Spader Photos

The Ocean County sheriff's color guard files into historic Courtroom No. 1 for the opening ceremony, following its "loving restoration." Below, Judge Eugene D. Serpentelli, whose vision it was to restore the courtroom.

## Hear ye, hear ye: History is in session

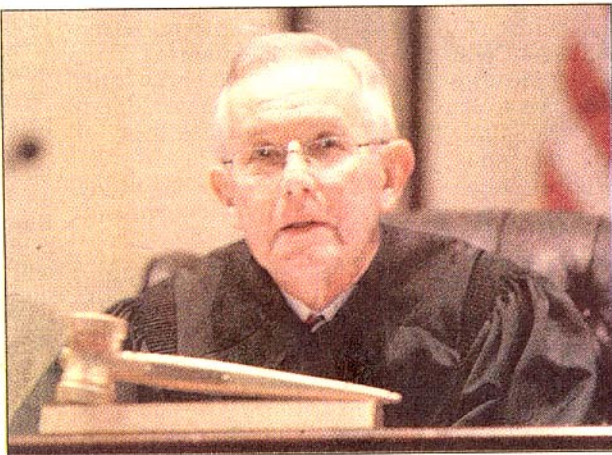
By **BRENDEEN SHUR**  
Staff Writer

**TOMS RIVER** — It may have cost more and taken longer than expected, but there is no way to deny the remarkable achievement of Courtroom No. 1.

Yesterday was the opening ceremony for the courtroom, originally built in 1851, and officials filled its seating area to pay tribute to Superior Court Judge Eugene D. Serpentelli and his vision of restoring the courtroom.

With a huge ceiling, four chandeliers and an apse and dome in which Serpentelli's bench was placed, the courtroom is a far cry from the cookie-cutter facilities used by other judges in the county. But it's more than just a building, it's also a piece of history.

New Jersey Supreme Court Associate Justice Jaynee LaVecchia said the restoration was represen-



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tative of the commitment Ocean County had to making the criminal justice system open to the public. She called the building a "loving restoration" that would have made the original designers proud.

"They understood their people's interest in justice," she said.

The restoration process was not as easy as initially anticipated, suffering from cost overruns and delays.

The project was started in January 2001 and was scheduled to be completed in June 2003 as part of a renovation project that encompassed the entire east wing of the Ocean

County Justice Complex. The entire project was supposed to cost \$3.5 million but grew to nearly \$5.3 million after various setbacks.

One of the first problems was that original plans did not call for a sprinkler system, which added \$454,572 to the cost. Then asbestos was found in the walls which required removal at a cost of \$260,000 and a delay of nearly a year. Steel beams were then needed for the ceiling of the courtroom, adding an additional \$94,000 to the tab.

"You should have seen the money we saved in doing this project," joked Freeholder John C. Bartlett Jr., before explaining that the project was put off until the right time. "We built it when we could afford it and we built it right."

Serpentelli read from old newspaper articles recounting the first repairs to the courthouse in 1870 and discussed the fire in 1929 that almost com-

pletely destroyed the building. He credited the freeholders with having the ability to make a tough decision to invest in repairing the courthouse.

"It takes courage, wisdom and an abiding sense of history to spend money to restore when it might be easier just to knock down and build anew. Some have little tolerance for the expenditure of public funds for such purposes," he said, adding that deceased Freeholder James J. Mancini must have been watching the proceedings with pride. "It is to their credit and it will be part of their legacy that they have not only preserved this structure but they have recaptured its historical roots for generations to come."

County historian Pauline Miller said Serpentelli had spoken with her about the restoration project, and she had visited the courtroom two years ago.

"It was a great pleasure for me to come in this room today and see it for the first time finished," she said. "Judge Serpentelli really is a passionate preservationist."

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