

Preliminary Research Report on Appearance of Main Courtroom,
Ocean County Courthouse, Toms River, New Jersey

September 1998

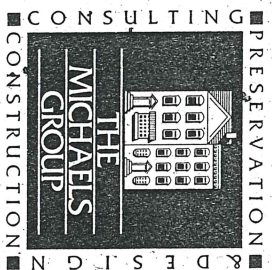
Sources Consulted:

Materials provided by Judge Eugene Serpentelli
History of the Ocean County Courthouse
Acrotetion: Research and Renovation Plan Report
Ocean County Historical Society and Library
Ocean County Clerk's Office
Monmouth County Historical Association
NJ State Historic Preservation Office
NJ State Archives and Library
NJ Historical Society

The focus of this investigation was to find any additional information (written descriptions or photographs) regarding the appearance of the courtroom during the period of 1850 when it was built to 1929 prior to a fire which devastated the interior and caused the room to be re-built. Specifically, The Michaels Group was directed to gather information on the extensive 1871 remodeling which transformed the courtroom into rococo splendor, and to determine whether a fire in the 1880s further caused an alteration to the courtroom's decor.

Pauline Miller, author of the brief history of the Ocean County Courthouse Complex, told us not a lot has been written describing the interior of the courtroom. To the best of our ability, using the known sources we had at hand and in the time frame allotted, we were unable to discover any detailed information about the c. 1850 appearance. We also were not able to find any information to confirm that a fire occurred in the courthouse sometime in the 1880s which would have altered the appearance.

There is an account of the courtroom re-dedication after the extensive remodeling of c. 1870 which is referred to by several sources as giving a description of the new interior decor. The article appeared in the *New Jersey Courier*. However, there is a discrepancy regarding the date of the article. The National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (1978-79) cites an article in the *Courier* on March 17, 1869. At the State Archives, we pulled up that issue as well as every issue in the month of March, February, April, May and June and found nothing about the Ocean County Courthouse. We also tried the same time frame for the year 1870. The Monmouth County Historical Society's Library was closed for the summer, but this week referred us to the



Ocean County Historic Society. The Acroterion report notes that the article appeared on March 29, 1871. The Michaels Group will continue to pursue finding this article, although the "gist" of the information appears in several of the sources given to us by Judge Serpentelli.

Again citing the National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, there is an interesting observation by the author regarding the interior decoration of the courtroom. "The walls and ceiling of the courtroom were decorated with intricate plaster carvings of ribbons, birds, and cupids." This varies from other descriptions of the courtroom as being frescoed; the History of the Ocean County Courthouse cites a March 29, 1871 article as saying this: "...The ceiling and walls have been frescoed in a most workmanlike manner, and looks as cheerful and smiling as a reception parlor..." If this is the "missing" article, there seems to be no mention of the exact ceiling design."

With this information in mind, it may be possible that the ceiling had decorative plaster moldings of ribbons, bird and cupids and that, as shown in the photograph taken in the courtroom just prior to the 1929 fire, the wall treatment was much more restrained, complementing the ornate ceiling and the "fine carpets" (March 29, 1871 reference).

Our research has confirmed that the existing decor dates to c. 1940-50, and that virtually any information about the exact appearance of the courtroom c. 1871-1929 is nonexistent. Therefore, the project will technically be a reconstruction or renovation based on information about courtroom interiors of the period chosen by Ocean County -- 1850 when the building was built; 1871 when the extensive remodeling took place, or 1930 when a fire caused the interior to be completely re-built. Arguments can be made for any of these periods if Ocean County wishes to perform an historical renovation.

It is important to recognize that the NJDEP, in a Project Review Letter dated May 28, 1991 regarding a proposed Rehabilitation Grant, states that "it was discovered during the NJHT site visit that the Greek Revival door moldings and transoms in the foyer match the adjacent window molding, and could be original to the building. This detailing was not documented in the encroachment application for the rehabilitation of the courthouse...Both the 1870s Rococo remodeling and 1929 fire were contained primarily in the courtroom, so it is possible that the foyer retains much of its original historic fabric. Therefore, demolition of second floor walls to enlarge the foyer without further research and documentation would violate Standard 2 [of the Secretary of the Interior's Guidelines for Rehabilitation].