

Renovations Transform Historic Genesee Courthouse

With its timeless beauty, the Genesee County Courthouse is a piece of living history in Flint, Michigan. The courthouse, which has been undergoing extensive renovation and restoration work, is home to the Seventh Judicial Circuit Court, the Genesee County Probate Court, and offices of the county clerk and county prosecutor. Many important cases and events in Michigan history have taken place within its walls. It has served as the workplace of several of Genesee County's pioneering judges—Elza H. Papp, the county's first female circuit court judge; Ollie B. Bivins, Jr., Genesee County's first African-American circuit court judge; and Louis D. McGregor, the first judge from Genesee County to ascend to the Michigan Court of Appeals.



Located in the courtroom used by 7th Circuit Chief Judge Pro Tempore Richard B. Yuille, this mural shows the progression of law using representations (from left to right, center section of mural) of Mosaic Law, Natural Law, and Roman Law.



Restored original American Walnut courtroom furniture.

The neo-classical style courthouse, constructed in 1926 of granite, wrought iron, marble, Indiana limestone, and other materials, is listed in the national and state registers of historic places. It is one of several structures to have stood on the property, located at 900 South Saginaw Street, succeeding previous courthouses built in 1838, 1839, 1867, and 1904. The courthouse renovation and restoration, which has taken almost five years, was part of a \$25 million project that included other county departments and facilities. Major improvements to the building included the upgrading of heating, cooling, and electrical systems and the combination of the circuit and probate courts into an upgraded structure. Other changes involved the addition of attorney-client conference rooms, private corridors and elevators for inmate transportation, and improved public restroom facilities. The law library and jury management areas were also moved to an upgraded

space and the courthouse was made accessible for public use from two entrances—Saginaw and Beach Streets.

The project was a long-standing goal of the Genesee County Board of Commissioners, who allocated funds and provided a leadership role. Robert M. Ransom, Chief Judge of the Seventh Judicial Circuit Court and Allen J. Nelson, Chief Judge of the Genesee County Probate Court, as well as the Genesee County Building Authority, also played a major role in the project. Private donors and organizations within the legal and lay communities were actively involved in funding the project. The Genesee County Bar Foundation, the Genesee County Bar Association, the Flint Trial Lawyers Association, the Ruth Mott Foundation, and the Whiting Foundation, were among the many donors.

Due to the efforts of local artists and craftspeople under the guidance of Court Administrator Barbara A. Menear and Deputy



Restored outdoor lighting at the Saginaw Street entrance.



Photos by Michael M. Smith

Court Administrator Janet Patsy, the courthouse's intricate murals, brilliant light fixtures, and original American walnut courtroom furniture appear much as they did 77 years ago. According to them, the impact of the restoration work far exceeds the \$2 million that it cost to achieve the results.

Detailed original murals cover the walls in two of the courtrooms. By researching the history of the courthouse, Menear and Patsy found that a mural in another courtroom was removed when suspended ceilings and air conditioning were added in the 1970s. Using pictures and pieces of the original mural that were left above the ceiling, the mural was re-created under the leadership of Flint artist Stefan Davidek. Through their research, Menear and Patsy also identified and gave proper credit to the murals' painter, Edgar Spier Cameron, whose identity was previously unknown.

During the project, the paint and coloring on the walls of the courtrooms was also restored, original stenciled patterns and borders were uncovered, courtroom furniture was refurbished, and some of the interior lighting fixtures were used as models for the re-casting of nearly identical new versions.

According to Menear, the lawyers who frequent the courthouse notice and are appreciative of the improvements, especially the murals. In fact, she said that one of the judges has joked with her that he sometimes finds lawyers standing at the podium looking up at the murals instead of looking at him. "He makes the comment now that he has to share the spotlight with the beautiful murals," Menear said. ♦

Lauren Nowenstein is a staff writer for the Michigan Bar Journal.



This mural, in the courtroom used by Chief Judge Robert M. Ransom, was re-created by Flint artist Stefan Davidek and his staff. It represents the industries that have fueled economic growth in Flint and the surrounding area.

