A BRIEF HISTORICAL SKETCH
OF THE
1847 COURTHOUSE, 1892 ANNEX
AND 1893 JUDGE’S BENCH
OF CHESTER COUNTY
PENNSYLVANIA

By
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This brief sketch of the historic Chester County courthouses and judge's bench was prepared for the April 10, 1987 dedication of courtroom 3, originally the law library of the 1892 courthouse annex. The information contained herein was drawn primarily from the records of the Chester County Archives and Records Services, which is sponsored jointly by the Chester County Historical Society and the County of Chester, and the newspaper clippings file at the Chester County Historical Society. Also consulted were several individuals whose recollections were important in tracing the more recent history of the judge's bench. These individuals are noted in the text. Architectural historian Alice Kent Schooler was most helpful in examining the bench and sharing her expertise on its construction.

This publication is respectfully dedicated to Judge John E. Stively, Jr., whose interest in and appreciation of the historical significance of the renovation of the courtroom and restoration of the judge's bench brought the projects to fruition.

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THE 1847 COURTHOUSE

The earliest county buildings in West Chester were the 1786 courthouse and 1791 public office building situated near the crossroads of the Wilmington and Philadelphia roads, now the intersection of High and Market Streets. The two buildings - described as "miserable specimens of architecture" by historians J. Smith Futhey and Gilbert Cope - served the county until the mid-nineteenth century, by which time they had become inadequate. Successive grand juries in 1845 recommended construction of a new courthouse, as did a number of petitions presented to the county that year. One such petition states:

That the belief has become general that the Public Records of the County are in a confused and suffering condition for the want of adequate room ... and moreover that the buildings in which they are kept are not so constructed as to afford adequate protection against accidents by fire ... It is about sixty years since these buildings were erected, and even if commodious enough at that time, although ill-constructed in the first place, have now become so crowded ... that much inconvenience results to the officers and public and it is evident that a short time only can elapse before it will be absolutely necessary to provide more room, and better accommodations for the public officers and safe-keeping of the public records.
Despite protests from other citizens who believed that a new courthouse was unnecessary and would be too costly for the taxpayers, the county commissioners decided in favor of a new building. In 1846 they engaged the services of noted Philadelphia architect Thomas U. Walter to design and supervise the construction of a new courthouse to be built on the site of the eighteenth-century structures. Walter had by that time designed several buildings in West Chester, including the First Bank of Chester County (now Fidelity Bank), which was across the street from the courthouse, and the county prison several blocks away. He had also designed the cupola that was added to the 1786 courthouse in the 1830s. The construction contract for the new courthouse was awarded to the West Chester firm of Ingram, Jefferis, Powell, and Taylor, low bidders at $44,749.67. Work began in the spring of 1846. The cornerstone for the new building, containing various documents and artifacts of the period, was laid on July 4th of that year. By the fall of 1847 the building was finished. Total cost for the entire project, including architect's fees and extra expenses, was $55,345.98.

The process of occupying the new courthouse began in late summer/early fall 1847. The first court session in the new building was an adjourned session of orphans' court held September 13th and 14th, before Judges Jesse Sharp and Thomas Jones. Courts of common pleas and quarter sessions commenced on the 25th of October. In its report to the latter court, the grand jury noted that "we cannot refrain from expressing our admiration of the plan and arrangement of the new Court house and offices and although not yet fully completed, we are pleased to have it in our power to say that in our opinion they will be an honor to Chester County." By mid-December 1847 the move to the new structure was complete. It was an impressive building. Walter's Greek Revival design included a pedimented pavilion on the southern facade and a pedimented portico with Corinthian columns on the eastern facade. Historians Futhey and Cope deemed the new courthouse "worthy of the tastes and resources of this ancient county."

The new building originally contained the county row offices on the first floor and a court room and judicial offices on the second. While this basic concept has been retained, the interior spaces have seen many changes over the years. For example, when the building first opened in 1847 there were six row offices situated along the east-west corridor on the first floor. Today two offices occupy this same space. The judicial areas on the second floor have also undergone major renovations over the years. On the other hand, the exterior of the building looks much as it did in 1847, with a few exceptions. The exterior walls were originally plastered with mastic, an adhesive compound. This began to decay in the 1850s and was replaced with the facing of pictou stone that remains today. A second change was the elimination of an entrance. When the courthouse was being designed, a spirited debate arose as to whether it should front to the east or to the south. To accommodate both views, the building was given both an eastern entrance onto High Street and a southern entrance onto Market Street. The southern entrance was later closed and converted to a window. Another major change to the exterior was the addition of the 1892 annex.
Just as the 1786 and 1791 buildings had proven inadequate by the mid-nineteenth century, so too the 1847 courthouse could not accommodate the county's growing space needs by the latter part of the century. By the 1880s row offices in the courthouse were becoming increasingly crowded, and both the county treasurer and the county superintendent of schools (then an elected county official) were forced to rent space outside the courthouse. In 1887 the county added a second law judge and for the first time in Chester County separate trials were held simultaneously. (There had been associate judges in Chester County since the late eighteenth century, but they held court in conjunction with the president judge. They did not hear cases individually.) With only one courtroom, the addition of a second judge created logistical problems on the second floor of the courthouse. These were remedied temporarily by holding court in both the courtroom and the grand jury room, but the latter was ill suited to this purpose and its use for the two functions resulted in scheduling difficulties. Compounding the situation was the fact that the grand jury room also served as the law library during this period.

As in the 1840s, there were calls for new construction as well as remonstrances against such an undertaking. Grand juries in the late 1880s reported on the need for additional space and the newspapers carried the opinions of a number of county citizens on the matter. In 1888 the court appointed a committee of Chester County Bar Association members to confer with the county commissioners and determine the best course of action. Of the many options reviewed the one eventually chosen was the addition of an annex to the western end of the courthouse, fronting onto Market Street. The county acquired the necessary property adjoining the courthouse early in 1890. In March 1891 the commissioners hired Philadelphia architect (and West Chester resident) T. Roney Williamson to design and supervise construction of the building. In June of that year the contract for construction was awarded to West Chester builder Plummer E. Jefferis, whose bid of $75,030 was the lowest of the eleven submitted. Williamson and Jefferis collaborated on a number of buildings in West Chester during this period.

Work on the annex began in June 1891 and was completed in the spring of 1893. The courtroom in the new building was used before it was actually completed, however. The heavy case load in the court of quarter sessions in the fall of 1892 necessitated the use of both the old and new courtrooms, even though the latter was still under construction at the time. The first court session in the new courtroom was a court of quarter sessions held October 31, 1892 before Judge William B. Waddell. In December of that year renovations began on the old courtroom. Court continued to meet in the new courtroom until late January 1893, by which time the renovations to the old courtroom were complete. Thereafter both rooms were used simultaneously. (The 1847 courtroom is now known as courtroom 1 and the 1892 courtroom as courtroom 2.)

Contractor Jefferis officially delivered the keys to the annex to the county commissioners April 8, 1893. Total
cost for construction, including purchase of the land, renovations to the 1847 courthouse, furniture, and extra work, was $116,446.53. Like the 1847 courthouse the exterior of the annex is today little changed from the original. It is of Indiana limestone with the main entrance on Market Street and a connecting passageway to the 1847 courthouse on its eastern side. Also like the 1847 courthouse, the annex originally consisted of row offices on the first floor and judicial offices on the second. Of the first floor offices only the recorder of deeds remains in its original location; others, such as the commissioners and treasurer, have since moved. The second floor contained the new courtroom, the district attorney's office, jury rooms, and a law library. Of these only the courtroom remains in its original place. The law library, with its gallery surrounding the reading area, was considered the room "admired more than any other in the building" according to an April 6, 1893 article in the Daily Local News. The article also noted that:

Chester county has at last a Court House that our people may well be proud of. It is really an imposing structure and strangers visiting West Chester make it a point to take a stroll through its corridors. There are very few counties in the State that can show as handsome and commodious public buildings. The structure which has stood since 1846 ... has been retained, and the Annex constructed across the rear end of it ... so as to make the entire structure one.

The 1893 Judge's Bench

The judge's bench that now sits in courtroom 3 has had a most unusual history since it was first installed in courtroom 1 in 1893. In the latter part of that year, as work on the annex was nearing completion, the county undertook renovation of the 1847 courtroom. The architect and contractor for the annex were engaged by the county to remove the 1847 furnishings and replace them with newer materials. As part of these renovations a new oak judge's bench was installed in the courtroom in January 1893. The new bench reflected the changes in taste and building techniques that had occured since the mid-nineteenth century. Architectural historian Alice Kent Schooler notes that "the proportions of the bench, its deliberate integration with clerks' desks 'en suite,' its intricacy of detail and its material all speak of 1890s manufacture, when technology was far more advanced than it had been in the late 1840s and when the manufacture of courtroom fittings was big business." The 1893 renovations to the courtroom also included relocating the bench from its original position along the west wall (where the main entrance to the room is now located) to its current position along the north wall. The middle window on the north wall behind the relocated bench was closed off at this time. The first court session with the new bench was held January 30, 1893 with Judge Waddell presiding.

The bench remained in use until 1966 when the county again undertook the renovation of courtroom 1. In this renovation the 1890s furnishings were replaced with materials more in keeping with the original 1840s design of
architect Thomas U. Walter. Although the 1893 arrangement of the courtroom with the bench along the north wall was retained, the 1893 bench itself was replaced. It was disassembled, removed from the courtroom, and left on the street for trash. West Chester attorney Fred T. Cadmus III noticed it and with the help of some friends had it taken to the basement of his office on West Market Street where it was reassembled. It remained there until late 1973 when Mr. Cadmus opened "The Country Lawyer" restaurant at Market and Church Streets near the courthouse. It was installed in a dining room which Mr. Cadmus called "Courtroom 6," as the courthouse at that time contained five courtrooms. During this time the bench served as a bar (not in the judicial sense of the term).

When the restaurant closed in 1983 the bench was targeted for sale at auction. Judge Charles B. Smith suggested to the Chester County Bar Association that it buy the bench. Attorney Ronald C. Nagle, then Treasurer of the Bar Association, purchased it at auction on behalf of the organization. The bench was again disassembled and put in storage in the barn of cabinetmaker Jim Cornogg in Cochranville, Chester County. In March 1985 Mr. Nagle, President Judge John E. Stively, and architect Edward E. Kirkbride examined the bench to determine its condition. Although some pieces were missing and numerous chickens had sullied its appearance, they decided that the bench was indeed usable. When in 1986 the county undertook the conversion of the law library in the 1892 annex into courtroom 3, the Bar Association offered to donate the bench to the county for use in the courtroom. Mr. Cornogg restored and reassembled the bench in the fall of 1986. The restoration included reproduction of some missing pieces of molding by Jacob Brothers, cabinetmakers from Warwick Township, Chester County. The bench was brought to the courthouse in the fall of 1986 and installed in the courtroom by staff of the county engineer's department who were renovating the space. The first formal session of court with the bench in the new courtroom was held February 9, 1987 before Judge Thomas G. Gavin. At the April 10, 1987 dedication of the new courtroom the bench was officially presented to the county by the Bar Association.