

# Bethinking of Old Orleans

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## COURTROOM INSPECTION



Restoration and redecoration of the main Courtroom in the Orleans County Court House has recently been completed. To give the public a firsthand opportunity to see this spectacular room after its rejuvenation, the Court House will be open Saturday, May 8 from 10 A.M. to 1 P.M. All citizens are most cordially welcome to stop by the Court House during these hours for a "Look/See." Several members of the Orleans County Legislature will be present, along with Superintendent of Buildings and Grounds, Ron Tower. The County Historian will also be on hand to informally answer questions of an historical nature concerning the Court House and the historic district within which it stands.

The main Courtroom was last redecorated in 1976 with funds received through a bequest of John Husa from Kendall. Mr. Husa designated in his will that the county should be his residuary beneficiary which amounted to \$8,983.22. This money was used in the renovation of the courtroom and was recognized with a bronze plaque. That was seventeen years ago! Over the course of time, unsightly water stains began to appear on the ceiling because of leaks in the roof. A small piece of decorative plaster high in the ceiling fell, which was cause for concern. The walls over time, began to flake and plaster began to crack off. Likewise, over seventeen years the sun took its toll on the drapes causing fading and shredding of the linings.

In 1990 through the Environmental Quality Bond Act, the county received a grant to install new roofing, thus putting a stop to unwanted leaks. Once roofing was completed, interior work could then be pursued.

In early 1993 the county maintenance crew began preliminary work in restoration. All the finish coat of plaster was removed from the walls. It was this three-eighth inch layer which was peeling. Mr. Robert Brown of Gasport did all the plastering for this phase of restoration. Panek Coatings painted the interior a soft off-white which is just slightly darker than before. New drapes, which are a deep red, have been provided by Thompson's Home Furnishings. The single electrolier which was placed there in 1928, has been rewired and painted gold to match the capitals on the pilasters and pillars. Two capitals had to be replaced as the original plaster ones were in such a state of deterioration as to make them unsafe.

Our present Court House was constructed in 1857-58 from plans drawn by William V.N. Barlow,

a local architect. The building committee had \$20,000 at the time with which to build, heat, light and furnish a Court House. When complete, the committee turned back \$153.39 of unexpended funds, which was quite an accomplishment even in those days.

During the 1870's a false ceiling was added to the courtroom which lowered it and provided better acoustics. In the late 1920's a portion of this collapsed. An electrician working on the lighting above, called the supervisors' attention to the fact that the original ceiling was all practically intact but covered up. In 1928 J. Mills Pratt, an architect from Rochester, was hired to restore the original ceiling thus removing the false one. At that time it was insulated which improved the acoustics. This work in 1928 cost \$22,749.66, more than the cost of the entire original building.

The Courtroom has pretty much stayed the same in appearance since 1928 when it was painted a light buff with red velvet drapes. In the late 1940's it was again redecorated, that time with green drapes.

It was indeed, the 1928 renovation that saw the greatest changes. At that time all the original inside folding louvered shutters were removed. The Courtroom was of course, first lighted with gas, using four gasoliers. During the 19th century it was also painted dark colors at different times including a dark muddy brown on one occasion and a dark olive green at another time. The original witness stand is long gone having been replaced with one using modesty panels rather than open spindle work. However, the original balustrade separating jury seating, spectator seating and trial area are all intact as is the original Judge's bench and nearby clerk's desk.

Orleans County can be extremely proud of its Court House and the main courtroom. This room is one of the finest Greek Revival interiors in Western New York. Having over the years, conducted innumerable guided tours, I am always amazed at how impressed visitors are when they first see our 135-year-old Court House. Its exhibit of simplicity and dignity always create a sense of awe for our visitors.

As a county official, I urge you to take a moment on May 8 to stop by, especially if you've never seen this splended piece of our local heritage. One never needs to travel to Colonial Williamsburg to get a sense of American pride. It's right here in Orleans County, New York.