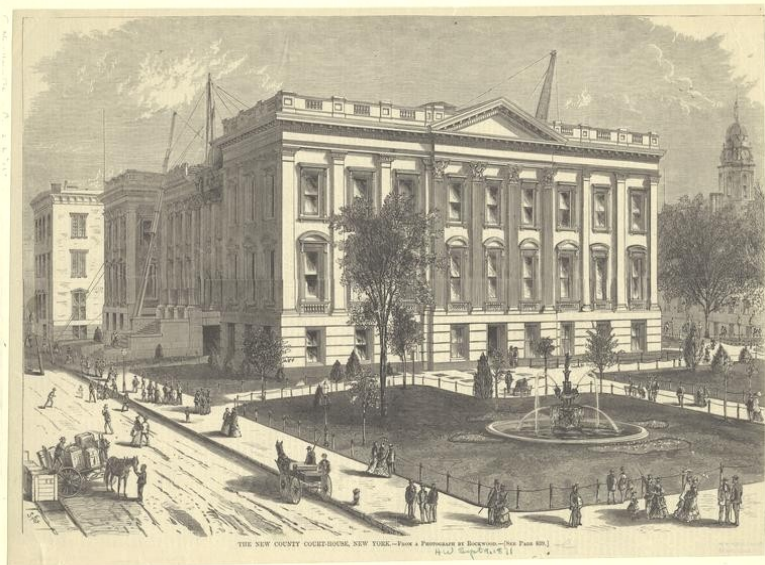


**THE NEW YORK COUNTY COURTHOUSE**  
**A Brief Architectural/Design History**  
**60 Centre Street**  
**By John F. Werner, Chief Clerk**  
**Supreme Court, Civil Branch, New York County**

**From the Tweed Courthouse to the “New” New York County Courthouse**

We celebrate the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our historic, much admired and architecturally significant New York County Courthouse, 60 Centre Street. This remarkable Courthouse is owned and maintained by the City of New York and has been occupied by the Supreme Court, Civil Branch, New York County, the Appellate Term, First Department and the New York County Clerk’s Office since it opened in 1927. It was conceived and constructed as the successor to the both famous and infamous Tweed Courthouse, which was completed forty seven years earlier, in 1880. The Tweed Courthouse, certainly an architectural treasure in its own right, had been marked for demolition throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Thankfully, it survived and, although no longer serving as a Courthouse, has recently been restored to its former grandeur.



*Tweed Courthouse—1871*

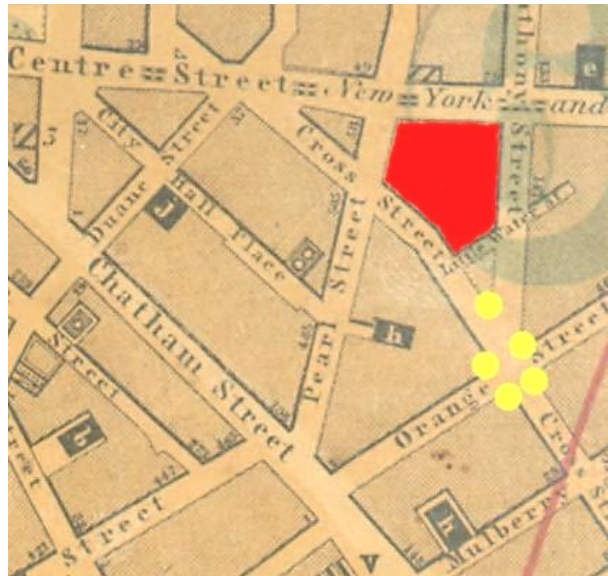


*Proposed New Courthouse Rendering—1913*

**Long Wait for the New York County Courthouse**

By the time of its opening in 1927, the advent of a new County Courthouse had long been awaited. It had been 24 years earlier, in 1903, when the New York State Legislature created a “Courthouse Board” charged with responsibility for approving the design and building this new Courthouse. A competition was held for the commission to design the courthouse. In 1913, the design

submitted by the highly regarded Boston architect Guy Lowell was selected. One of the unsuccessful competitors was the distinguished architect Cass Gilbert, who designed, among other buildings, the Woolworth Building, the United States Custom House at Bowling Green in lower Manhattan, the New York County Lawyers' Association building at 14 Vesey Street in lower Manhattan, and the United States Supreme Court. Ironically, Mr. Gilbert's design for the New York County Courthouse did not go for naught since he later employed it as the basis for the bottom six floors of his design for the Federal Courthouse at 40 Centre Street, right across the street from the New York County Courthouse, which opened in 1936.



*5 Points in Yellow and Courthouse Area in Red, from an 1849 map of New York City*

The competition for the New York County Courthouse commission proceeded in two phases. In the first phase, Mr. Lowell submitted a hexagonal plan for the building. In the second, he submitted the winning design, which was for an entirely circular building, modeled on the Roman Coliseum, one considerably larger (700 feet in diameter, with four main entrances and 16 courtrooms on each floor) than the one ultimately constructed at a location somewhat to the south east of that originally contemplated. The present courthouse borders what in the 19th Century was known as the "Five Points" tenement area.



*Courthouse construction 1923*

envisioned. The size of the exterior was reduced and the plan incorporated very large interior "light courts," a circular core and the very prominent portico which was to become famous the world over.

The lead article appearing in the New York Law Journal of February 14, 1927 captures eloquently the excitement which surrounded the dedication of the new County Courthouse three days earlier. That article provides an excellent account of the circumstances leading up to and surrounding the dedication and opening of the Courthouse and much information in this narrative is drawn from that article. The article provides the complete remarks delivered by all of the distinguished speakers at the dedication ceremony and is a “must read” for those interested in gaining a true sense of the excitement and drama of the occasion.



*Foley Square 1938*

It was on February 17, 1927 that the Supreme Court, Civil Branch, New York County and the New York County Clerk moved physically from the Tweed, where both had been occupants for decades, to the newly completed Courthouse.

The architecture of 60 Centre Street was conceived to complement the nearby Municipal Building, by McKim, Mead and White, which was of Italian Renaissance design. The dedication ceremony was held on a raised platform erected for that purpose in the building’s grand rotunda. Sadly, Guy Lowell had died unexpectedly only a week before while traveling in Europe. He was 56 years of age at the time of his untimely death. Luminaries present at the dedication ceremony included then Chief Judge of the New York Court of Appeals Benjamin Cardozo; Associate Judges of the Court of Appeals Frederick E. Crane and Irving Lehman (the latter would in 1939 become Chief Judge of the Court of Appeals); then former United States Supreme Court Justice Charles Evans Hughes; Senator Robert F. Wagner, Sr.; Presiding Justice of the Appellate Division, First Department, Victor J. Dowling; William J. Guthrie, Esq., who spoke for the Association of the Bar of the City of New York; and former Judge Samuel Seabury, who spoke for the New York County Lawyers’ Association.

### **Configuration of the County Courthouse**

Although often described as a “seven story building,” the Courthouse actually includes a ground floor, basement, six main floors, five mezzanine floors, and a diminutive “penthouse” (now generally referred to as the “seventh floor”) which when the Courthouse opened accommodated the Justices’ reading room, dining room and a large kitchen in which meals were prepared for the Justices by chefs then on staff. The kitchens and chefs were a casualty of the Depression and today the seventh floor is the location of the Court’s Administrative Office, with the original reading room serving as the Courthouse’s principal

Conference Room. Many of the mezzanine floors are constructed around the two-story Courtrooms. The fourth floor mezzanine was designed specifically for the offices of Court Reporters. If one includes the ground floor and five mezzanine floors the Courthouse is actually a 13-story building.

A word about the building's expansive basement, often referred to as the "sub-basement." In addition to the building's original heating plant (to which equipment for a building-wide air conditioning system was added a few years ago) the central core of the basement is equipped with large water pumps installed to abate significant ground waters, which are remnants of Collect Pond. In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and before, this pond - which was approximately 50 acres in size, 60 feet deep and fed by underground springs - was located at the northern perimeter of what was to become Foley Square and served as an important source of fresh water for lower Manhattan.

For decades, and until it was decommissioned in the 1960s, the Civil Defense headquarters for the entire City of New York was located in the sub-basement. Much of the space occupied previously by this Civil Defense headquarters remains essentially neglected and awaiting insulation and ventilation comporting with contemporary standards.

When the Courthouse opened in 1927 it included 36 operating Courtrooms, some of which have over the years been converted to Clerk Support Offices; today there are 32 operating courtrooms in the Courthouse. The Courthouse's fifth and sixth floors include its main, two-story Library and 42 Justices' Chambers.

The ground floor/basement of the Courthouse was designed as the principal quarters of the New York County Clerk's Office, including the County Clerk's large Record Room. Today, the County Clerk's personal office and that of the Chief Deputy County Clerk are on the first floor/rotunda floor (hereafter "first floor"), together with the County Clerk's Jury Division and a Cashier's office; the balance of the first floor is occupied by Court Support Offices and the large Motion Submission Part Courtroom.

### **Portico and Main Entrance**

The most prominent exterior architectural feature of the Courthouse is its famous portico. Thirty-two steps, 100 feet wide, lead up to this grand portico, which consists of 16 massive Corinthian columns - ten of which are aligned directly beneath the portico's triangular pediment - and large roof structure. Three carved granite figures representing law, equity and truth are atop the pediment and allegorical figures sculpted in granite in high relief grace the pediment itself. All of these figures are the work of master sculptor Frederick H. Allen. The pediment bears the inscription "The True Administration Of Justice Is The Firmest Pillar Of Good Government," taken from a letter written in 1789 by George Washington to Attorney-General Randolph. There are those who say that Washington wrote "the due administration," not "the true administration," but in this instance the stone carvers had the last "word."

Although not widely known, the roof of the great portico consists of a glass skylight constructed to provide natural light to what was originally a second Courthouse Library and



*Portico and main entrance*

reading room within the portico itself. This space has for many years been used essentially for storage and, more recently, to accommodate mechanical rooms to serve the building-wide air conditioning system installed in the 1990s. This space is impressive, but access has always been problematic (the only functional stairway to the space is reachable only by traversing the congested Clerk's Office of the Appellate Term, First Department).

### **Courthouse Murals**

The first floor entrance to the Courthouse is graced by a dramatic vestibule leading to a majestic colonnade, which leads to the great Rotunda. The second floor balcony opens on to the Rotunda. Throughout this now landmarked space, walls, floors and columns are of Italian and American marbles.

It was not until the mid-1930s, however, that work commenced on the renowned Courthouse murals, the largest of which is the Rotunda mural. The Rotunda is 200 feet in circumference and rises 75 feet to a cupola 30 feet in height, 20 feet across, with 10 stained glass windows and clerestory. Funding for the Rotunda murals and other Courthouse murals was provided by the United States Government Works Progress Administration (WPA). The Rotunda mural, as well as those throughout the Courthouse, including those located in the fourth floor Jury Assembly Rooms and the third floor Ceremonial Courtroom, were designed by Italian artist Attilio Pusterla and were painted by him and a team of outstanding artists he was able to recruit during the Depression. The mural project was one of the largest such



*Mural, 7th Floor conference room*

projects funded by the WPA. The murals were painted between 1934 and 1936. Of these murals, it is the Rotunda mural, “The History of the Law,” which is the most imposing and memorable. It consists of six “lunettes,” which depict pivotal developments in the history of the law over millennia. The History of the Law is one of Attilio Pusterla’s best known works and deservedly so. The mural - including its historical references in the law, brilliance of rendition, sheer intensity of color and remarkable scale - offers the thousands who traverse the Rotunda daily a truly rich, artistic impression of our treasured legal traditions.



*Rotunda lunette, Cicero and Solon*

It was not very long ago, however, that the Rotunda mural and other Courthouse murals were threatened seriously as a result of water leaks and general neglect. The Rotunda murals and those throughout the first and second floors, including the stenciling and decorative elements in the radiating corridors on the first and second floor, consist of paint on plaster, not fresco. Thus, these murals are particularly susceptible to water seepage, which causes the painted surface of the murals to peel away from the plaster, exposing the bare plaster beneath.



*Rotunda 1927, prior to WPA murals*

Through a wonderful collaborative effort - undertaken in the 1980s and continuing into the 1990s - among leaders in the Court, at the Bar and in New York City government, a major County Courthouse mural conservation campaign was undertaken and completed successfully. Private funds were raised by the New York Bar for the restoration of the Rotunda murals, including those gracing the vestibule and the colonnade; the City of New York undertook the restoration of the stenciling and decorative painting in the radiating corridors on the first and second floors. The City also assumed the major task of replacing the copper roof and water drainage lines over and about the Rotunda dome, which was required in order to eliminate to the extent possible future water seepage and damage to these murals. Among Court leaders most involved in this project were County Clerk

Norman Goodman, former Administrative Judge Xavier Riccobono and the late Justice Irving Kirschenbaum. Bar leaders most involved in raising funds for mural restoration included the late Justice Owen McGivern (then in private practice, but a former Presiding Justice of the Appellate Division, First Department), the late Milton Gould, Esq., Roy L. Reardon, Esq., and Alexander Forger, Esq. The lead conservator was Ms. Connie Silver.

Recently, a mural in our Jury Assembly Room sustained water damage, a reminder of the need for vigilance if the murals are to be preserved. In 2011-2012, after the initial publication of this narrative, significant water damage to an area of the Rotunda mural occurred.

As attentive as Norman Goodman has been to the New York County Courthouse and its artwork, he has been equally attentive to preserving the rich historical record of the archives of the New York County Clerk, which date back to the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. In the 1930s Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia abolished the Office of the Commissioner of Records, which, under the direction of the Office of the County Clerk, assisted with the preservation of historical Court records. That archive remained largely unattended to until Norman Goodman became County Clerk. In the 1990s he appointed a full-time archivist, soon to be joined by a second full-time archivist. Norman Goodman also organized a not-for-profit corporation: The Historical Records of the New York County Clerk, Inc., to assist with the preservation of the New York County Clerk's important historical archive. That not-for-profit corporation in many ways presaged the statewide effort - championed by, inter alia, Chief Judge Judith S. Kaye and Associate Judge of the Court of Appeals Albert M. Rosenblatt - to preserve the history of the New York State Court System with assistance of the more recently incorporated not-for-profit entity, The Historical Society of the Courts of the State of New York, Inc.

### **Courthouse Elevators**

When first opened the Courthouse had eighteen manually operated public elevators and two private elevators, each with an assigned elevator operator, serving no doubt in livery. The public elevators, long since automated, have been reduced to ten, or perhaps eleven if one includes the "freight elevator." Within the last decade a "book lift," which operated originally between the sub-basement and ground floor, was reconfigured to extend to the first floor and serve as an elevator satisfying the standards of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Additional renovation of the Courthouse is planned to meet the needs of the disabled, whose requirements were not considered in the original design of the building.

The shafts of the ten elevators taken out of service were renovated to create much needed additional office space, with doorways to the space installed where once elevator doors had serviced elevators. However, some of the shaft space used for additional offices was recaptured in the 1980s and 1990s to accommodate ventilation shafts for a building-wide air conditioning system. It should be noted that today the Courthouse is a very congested place. Designed for use by far fewer Justices, far fewer staff and far less public traffic, our Court has "outgrown" the Courthouse, and thus has expanded to quarters at 80 Centre Street, 111 Centre Street and 71 Thomas Street. On any given day an estimated 5000 persons may enter 60 Centre Street.



*Rotunda chandelier*

### **Plans for Further Renovations**

Only very recently we have been informed of plans to replace all of the building's 154 steam risers and 1261 steam radiators with an entirely new hot water heating system. This will be yet another major renovation in the Courthouse, but one required to address the failing steam heating system. As was the case for the last major renovation, this renovation is to take place in the midst of our very busy, fully operational Courthouse; it will be challenging indeed to proceed with that renovation without serious inconvenience to the public we serve, the Bar, our staff and the Justices.

### **“Light Courts” and Light Fixtures**

While during daylight hours natural light pervades much of the Courthouse, due in part to the very large interior light courts, lighting is also provided by many decorative fixtures, including monumental fixtures, the grandest of which are those beneath the Portico, and in the



main vestibule, colonnade and Rotunda. Those fixtures, as well as other decorative fixtures throughout the first and second floors, have survived largely intact. The Rotunda chandelier was removed, dismantled and fully restored at the time of the conservation of the Rotunda mural. Unfortunately, many of the decorative fixtures in our fifth and sixth floor corridors, in Chambers and elsewhere in the building have “disappeared,” been damaged or otherwise been compromised. The replacement florescent fixtures are mostly pedestrian. Also, hundreds of bronze decorative sconces which were ubiquitous throughout the connecting corridors and beyond fell victim to the City’s “save a watt program” and were replaced, again with pedestrian florescent fixtures, all before the advent of the threaded florescent bulb. We should continue to protect as best we can the remaining original fixtures.

**Furnishings**

The Courthouse’s commodious, two-story courtrooms are of traditional design, with the Justices’ benches, Courtroom “rails” and original courtroom furniture of black walnut (often



*Ceremonial courtroom doorway*

referred to as eastern black walnut and American walnut). Black walnut is today one of the scarcest and most coveted native hardwoods and because of that is now used almost exclusively for veneers. The New York Law Journal article states that “[i]n the courtrooms there are 582 benches for the use of the public; in the Courtrooms and offices 2500 chairs, 200 desks and 266 tables.” Most of the original benches and tables continue in use. As one would expect, we have lost and continue to lose many chairs simply due to wear and tear, although the court has made

an effort to repair and restore original furniture when, though damaged, it is salvageable. Many of the original desks have been a casualty of age, obsolescence, and more modern redesign of Support Offices. The Ex Parte Support Office (Room 315) has maintained to the greatest extent the “look” such offices had when the building first opened.

High wainscoting surrounds all of the Courtrooms. Also ubiquitous throughout the building were cork tile floors installed in Courtrooms, Support Offices and connecting corridors. The cork tiles were installed primarily to absorb sound and reduce noise in the Courtrooms and beyond. However, waxing of these cork tiles over years created a hard surface inconsistent with that purpose. It is only in recent years that most of the cork tile flooring has, simply because of significant wear, been replaced, generally with terrazzo tiles.

### **Technology**

In recent decades technology has greatly changed the operation of the courthouse. A “hard wire” local area network pervades the building with wiring, more often that not exposed. This network is part of the larger Unified Court System’s wide area network and with desk top and lap top computers on almost every desk, case tracking, data entry, and correspondence are primarily conducted by electronic means. The Supreme Court, Civil Branch, New York County, together with the New York County Clerk, is one of two pilot venues in the New York State Court System (the other being the Supreme Court in Broome County) enlisted specifically by the Court System to expand public access to court records through the electronic medium. Our Court and our County Clerk’s Office are also the “center of gravity” in the New York State Court System for electronic filing of court records, and in those cases in which parties electronically file their submissions to the court the original court file is the electronic file. In future we should expect a dramatic expansion of electronic filing, which of course provides simultaneous access to electronically-filed court documents within all quarters of the courthouse and to all with access to the internet and reduces very materially the need for storage space for case files. Not all electronic files will be posted on the Internet; matrimonial files, for example, all of which are confidential by law, and filings which are sealed by an order of a Justice will obviously not be posted publicly. In addition to electronic filings, the Court and the County Clerk are jointly scanning vast amounts of court records filed in hard copy form, and the vast preponderance of such scanned material, together with case tracking information, is now available on the Court’s Website: [www.nycourts.gov/suptmanh](http://www.nycourts.gov/suptmanh). That Website is also the vehicle through which information about our Court generally is being made available to the public.

Technology is also transforming the manner in which our Courtrooms function, particularly in the area of evidence presentation and the capacity of our Court Reporters to produce “real time” transcription of testimony. Wifi internet access is also available throughout most of the Courthouse.

### **Navigating In A Very Complex Courthouse**

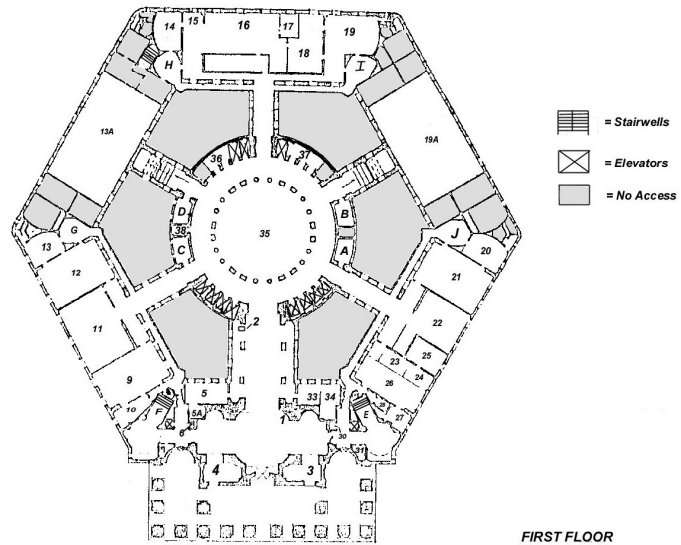
The Courthouse remains a very challenging environment, especially for attorneys new to the building and for the self-represented. The reasons are obvious: the inherent complexity of

the building itself and the distribution throughout the building of various Support Offices, both Support Offices of the Court and of the County Clerk. These Support Offices are located principally on the ground floor, first floor and third floor, with the Clerk's Office of the Appellate Term on the fourth floor. Ideally, all of the support services provided by these offices would be performed in a single or at least a contiguous space, but the Courthouse does not have a single space large enough to accommodate all of the staff required to provide those services. So for the

“uninitiated,” the relationship among all of these various Support Offices, including which office does what, can be very confusing. Much information about that is now posted on the Court's Website or can be obtained by visiting our Office for the Self-Represented, which addresses the needs of both self-represented litigants and attorneys new to the Courthouse.

The complexity of the layout of the building is also very challenging. Security requirements introduced in recent years, for reasons which are obvious, limit significantly the free flow of traffic into the building which had been enjoyed from the 1927 opening until the 1990s, when the first magnetometers were introduced. While needed of course, that security equipment, as unattractive as it is, compromises to some significant extent, especially at the main entrance, the beauty of the space. But, after navigating those “shoals” and gaining access to the interior of the Courthouse, one must still contend with its great complexity. A metaphor for that complexity is the fact that one can hardly proceed between two points on the same floor in a straight line. Each floor, including each of the mezzanine floors, is a veritable labyrinth; there are hallways which seemingly lead nowhere; and there are offices deep within the recesses of the building, from which, if one is fortunate enough to ever find them, one cannot easily retrace his or her steps out unless one has been prescient enough to employ a ball of string for that purpose. Although it is fair to say that habitues of the Courthouse very much appreciate it as a “period piece” and for its idiosyncratic qualities, there are times when one certainly would like to have been able to spend five minutes with Guy Lowell so that he could explain what he had in mind when he designed such a complex building.

On February 25, 1927, the edition of the New York Law Journal published a letter of attorney Osmond K. Fraenkel in which Mr. Fraenkel observed: “I spent some time this morning examining the new Courthouse. I believe that the Bar and the public will greatly appreciate this Courthouse and its many conveniences in time, but that these advantages are obscured by the complexity of the structure.” Mr. Fraenkel goes on to note that detailed plans of the building placed throughout would



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be very helpful, but that the “real secret of this building is to use the right elevator,” many of which, as Mr. Fraenkel could not have anticipated in 1927, no longer exist today! His premise then, however, was that by employing the correct elevator one would have a greater chance of landing withing reasonable proximity to one’s intended destination. Mr. Fraenkel suggests that one failing to employ such a strategy “does not know whether to go to the right or to the left and may find himself walking all around the building before reaching his destination.” Eighty years later, this remains the common experience even among those who have worked in the building for years.

March 12, 2008

*This material was printed in conjunction with a talk given on March 12, 2008 by Jon Ritter, Assistant Professor in the Department of History at New York University, entitled “Circles and Hexagons upon a Square: Urbanism, Architecture and Civic Identity at 60 Centre Street.”*