

**BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS**

**DATE:** October 7, 2014

**AGENDA ITEM NO.** 17

**Consent Agenda** ☐

**Regular Agenda** ☒

**Public Hearing** ☐

 **County Administrator's Signature**

**Subject:**

Authorization to Request Designation of the Old Pinellas County Courthouse as a Local Historic Resource by the City of Clearwater.

**Department:**

Real Estate Management

**Staff Member Responsible:**

Paul Sacco, Director

**Recommended Action:**

I RECOMMEND THE BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS (BOARD) AUTHORIZE SUBMITTAL OF AN APPLICATION TO THE CITY OF CLEARWATER REQUESTING DESIGNATION OF THE OLD PINELLAS COUNTY COURTHOUSE AS A LOCAL HISTORIC RESOURCE.

**Summary Explanation/Background:**

The purpose of this request is to receive authorization from the Board to submit an application to the City of Clearwater (City) requesting designation of the Old Pinellas County Courthouse (as depicted by the boundary outlined in Attachment A) as a local historic resource.

The Old Courthouse has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 1992, however, no specific protection is afforded by placement on the National Register. This local designation by the City would mean that any renovation/restoration activities undertaken by the County would require a Certificate of Appropriateness (COA) be obtained from the City to ensure that the historic character of the Old Courthouse is preserved during renovation. A COA is not required for routine repairs and maintenance activities. In addition, this designation may provide the County a greater opportunity to receive grant funding for renovation due to the higher standing and increased focus as a national and local preserved building.

The Old Pinellas County Courthouse was the first permanent building erected to serve as the seat of County government in Pinellas County. It is also an excellent example of Neoclassical Revival Style architecture and is representative of the work of the well-known Tampa architect Francis J. Kennard. With this in mind, the Pinellas County Historic Preservation Board recommended the Old Courthouse be submitted to the City of Clearwater for a local historic designation. Planning staff discussed the proposal with the Real Estate Management Department, who concurs with the recommendation. Therefore, with the Board's authorization, Planning Department staff will prepare an application to the City of Clearwater requesting designation of the Old Pinellas County Courthouse as a local historic resource. (Attachment B provides additional historical background on the Courthouse).

**Fiscal Impact/Cost/Revenue Summary:**

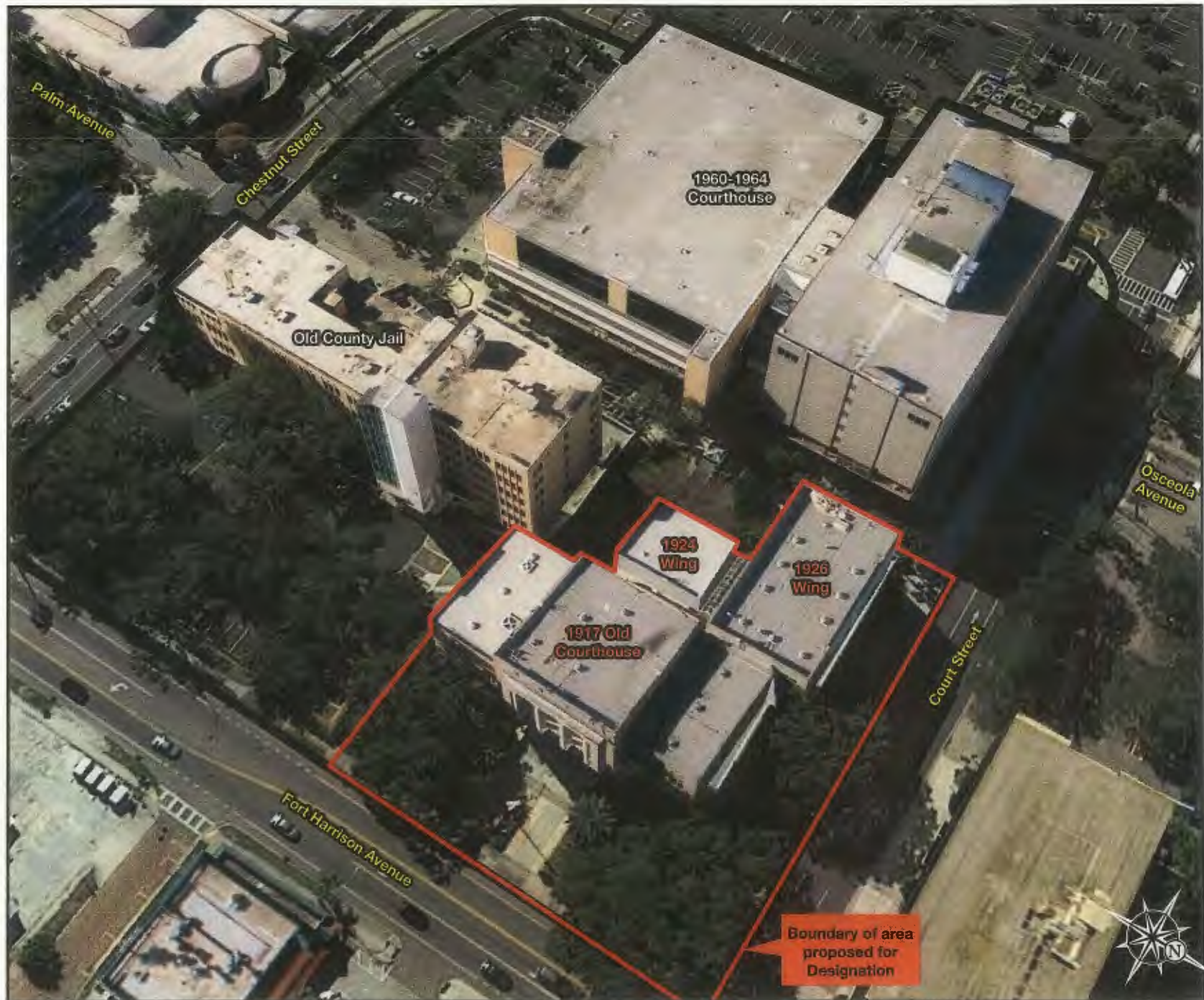
N.A.

**Exhibits/Attachments Attached:**

Attachment A - Map depicting boundary of the Old Pinellas County Courthouse recognized on the National Register and proposed for designation as a historic resource

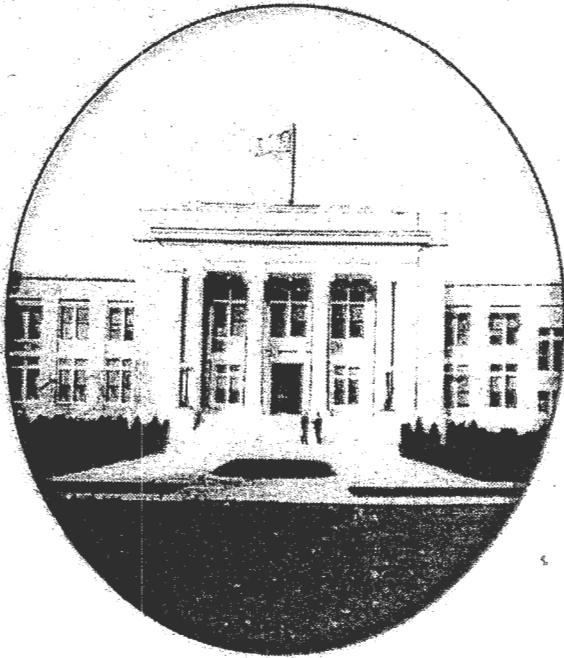
Attachment B - Copy of "History of the Old Pinellas County Courthouse" Brochure

# Attachment A





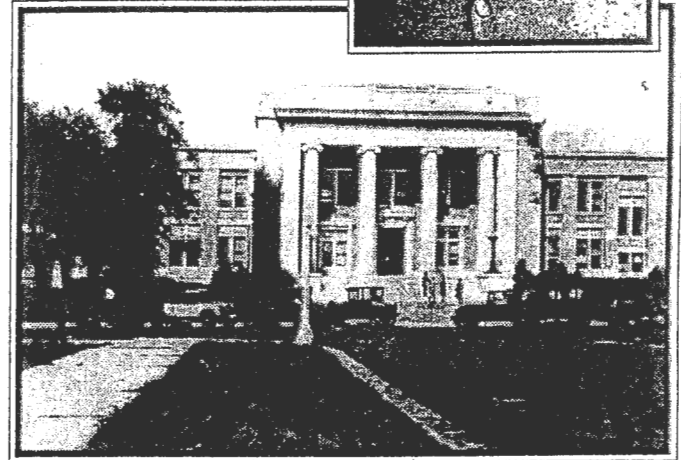
# History of the OLD PINELLAS COUNTY COURTHOUSE



**T**he history of the Old Pinellas County Courthouse actually begins with the history of Pinellas County itself.

Since territorial days, the Pinellas land mass had been a part of Hillsborough County, and was known as West Hillsborough. As early as 1887, Largo pioneer William A. Belcher had introduced the idea of an independent Pinellas peninsula, and proposed that it be called Gulf County. Gulf County never came to be, but the move toward independence stayed alive, and gave birth to a new county and a new county courthouse.

*William A. Belcher*



*Pinellas County Courthouse 1924. Photo compliments of Roy Helms.*

## **T**he Quest for County Independence

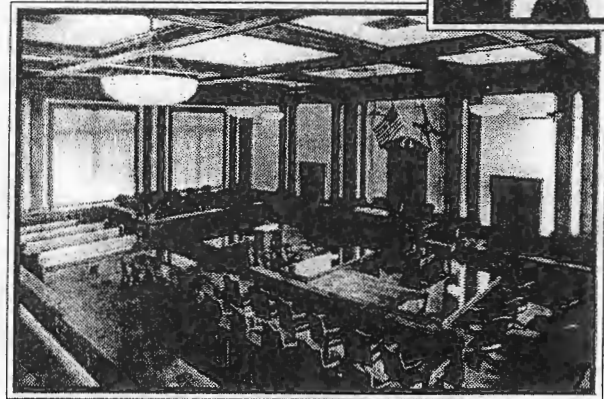
As the Pinellas peninsula grew in population, residents began to clamor for change. Travel between the western land area and Tampa was extremely difficult. Even though the automobile had been introduced in Pinellas during the first decade of the 20th Century, the roads between Pinellas and Tampa were virtually nonexistent. Many Pinellas residents began to feel that their cities were being left out of the Hillsborough decision-making process. They felt that Pinellas was not receiving its fair share of local tax dollars for roads, bridges and schools. In 1907, William L. Straub, then editor of the *St. Petersburg Times* newspaper, proposed a "Pinellas Declaration of Independence," and began crusading vigorously for separation from Hillsborough County with articles and cartoons. In 1911, the Florida legislature approved the proposal, and on January 1, 1912, Pinellas County officially came into being as Florida's 48th county.



*The first Pinellas County Courthouse*

served as an area of segregated seating. For years, this courtroom was the domain of Judge John Ulmer Bird (1887 - 1964), who was widely regarded as one of Florida's most outstanding jurists. Tough but fair, he was instrumental in reforming many state criminal procedures and helped create the practice of withholding adjudication for first-time offenders. His taste in artwork reflected his stand on dignity in his courtroom. In 1937, local artist George Snow Hill painted a series of large murals designed to decorate the courtroom interior. The paintings depicted some bathers enjoying the Pinellas County waterfront. Swimsuits had no place in the courtroom, argued Judge Bird, and he banished the canvases to the Clearwater Auditorium. Today, Judge Bird's portrait hangs in place of those original murals painted for Courtroom 1.

*Judge John Ulmer Bird*

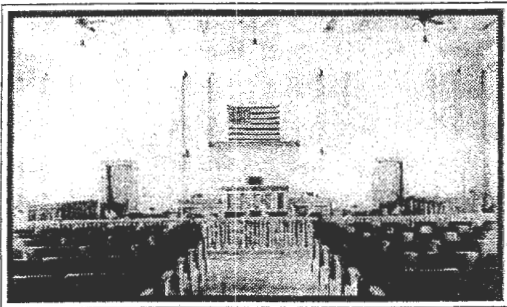


*Courtroom 1, 1935*

## **G**rowth Necessitates Expansion

The frenzy of the 1920s land boom era created a demand for more courthouse space, and in 1924, Kennard designed a two-story addition to the west side of the courthouse building at a cost of \$25,000. In 1926, expansion was underway again, as an additional two-story wing, extending from the northwest corner of the original building, provided for more offices and judges chambers, as well as a second grand courtroom, Courtroom 2, designed as a breezier, southern-style alternative to the dark, massiveness of Courtroom 1.

Growth continued in Pinellas County. After World War II, many soldiers who had trained in Pinellas County during the war, decided to move down with their families and make it their permanent home. Social security payments and private retirement pensions enabled thousands of retirees to enjoy the good life in Florida. The local school population doubled, then tripled. Dredges turned submerged lands into new subdivisions. People flocked to make Pinellas



*Courtroom 2, 1920's*

County the population mosaic it is today.

## **A** Question of Location

The new county needed a new county courthouse, but where to put it was the issue. During the struggle for independence, William Straub had promised to place the courthouse in Clearwater for twenty years, and to give the city three of the five county commission seats. This plan was challenged by St. Petersburg power brokers who advocated a general election among Pinellas County residents to determine the seat of county government.



*William L. Straub*

St. Petersburg officials even went so far as to donate a tract of land for the courthouse location. Clearwater leaders countered with their own donation of land on Ft. Harrison Avenue, an area now occupied by Peace Memorial Presbyterian Church. In May of 1912, County Commissioners voted to hastily build a two-story frame courthouse in Clearwater to serve as the County Seat, thus settling the location issue. The project was completed in 26 days, at a cost of \$3,750, using volunteer citizen labor. The newly erected courthouse was guarded by citizen volunteers at night to prevent vandalism from the disgruntled south county contingencies. Hard feelings between Clearwater and St. Petersburg persisted for many decades, as a result of this hastily resolved question of county seat location.



## **The Old Pinellas County Courthouse Takes Shape**

Fledgling Pinellas County soon outgrew its first wooden courthouse, and in 1917 construction began on a new courthouse and jail. County Commissioners approved a \$160,000 bond issued to finance the construction. Land on Ft. Harrison Avenue was purchased for \$5,000. Tampa architect Francis Kennard was chosen to design the new building. Kennard was one of the most celebrated architects in the Tampa Bay area at the time, having designed the Belleview Biltmore in Belleair in 1897, the Lee County Courthouse and the Hillsborough High School.

Kennard set to work to make the Pinellas County courthouse a lasting monument to style and beauty. The new brick courthouse, presenting an imposing 150-foot long neoclassical style facade, sported an elegant entrance portico constructed of Indiana limestone. Its 14,000 square feet of space housed county records, business offices and commissioners' offices on the first floor, with judges' offices, jury and grand jury rooms on the second. Also on the second floor was a breathtaking highlight of the new Pinellas County Courthouse, the Grand Courtroom, today known as Courtroom 1.

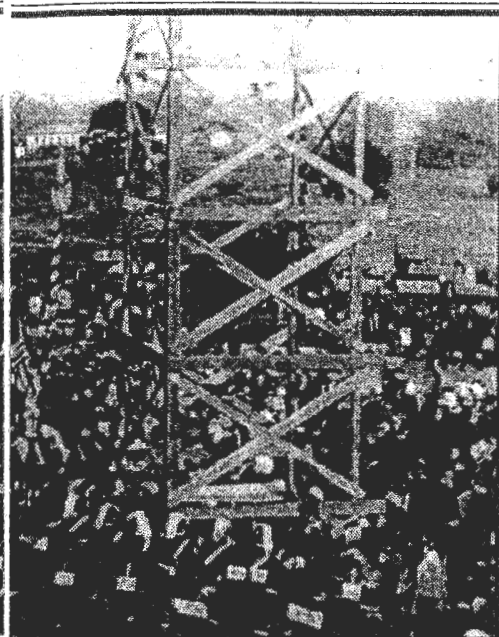
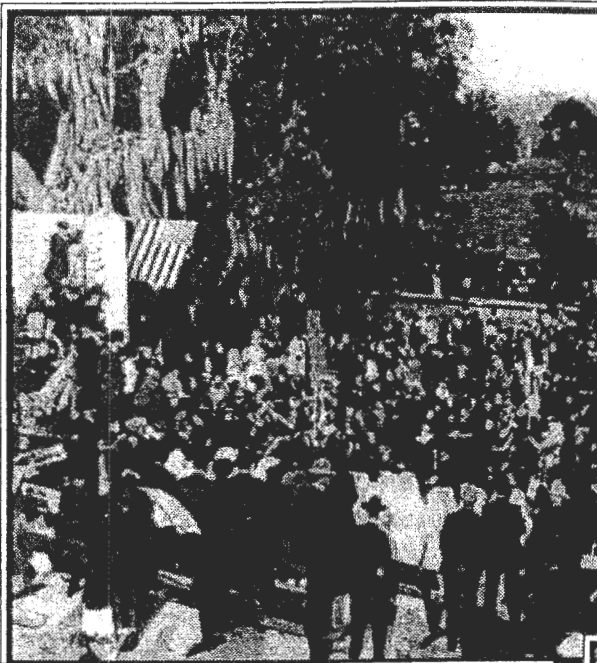
Varnished wood paneling and pilasters frame the lofty ceiling of Courtroom 1. The room contains a large balcony that



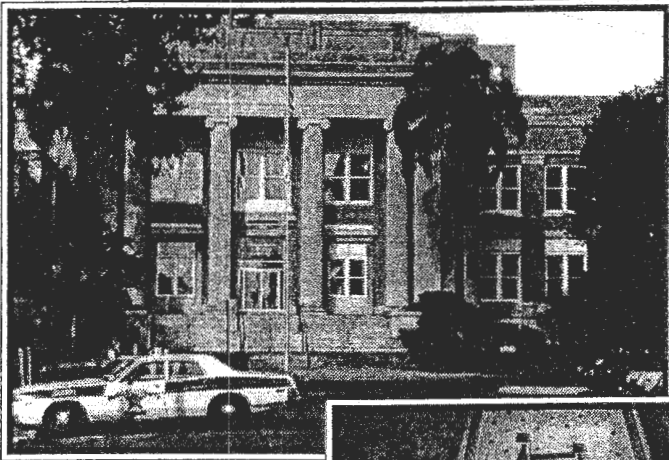
## **Modern Times Take Over**

With the increased growth came increased demand on county government, and an increased need for even more courthouse space. A county courthouse annex was built in downtown St. Petersburg in 1950. This helped to ease the need for a larger facility only slightly. By 1960, county commissioners were once again struggling with overcrowding, and they approved \$4,000,000 to build a new courthouse adjacent to the original complex, the present day Pinellas County Courthouse on Court Street in downtown Clearwater.

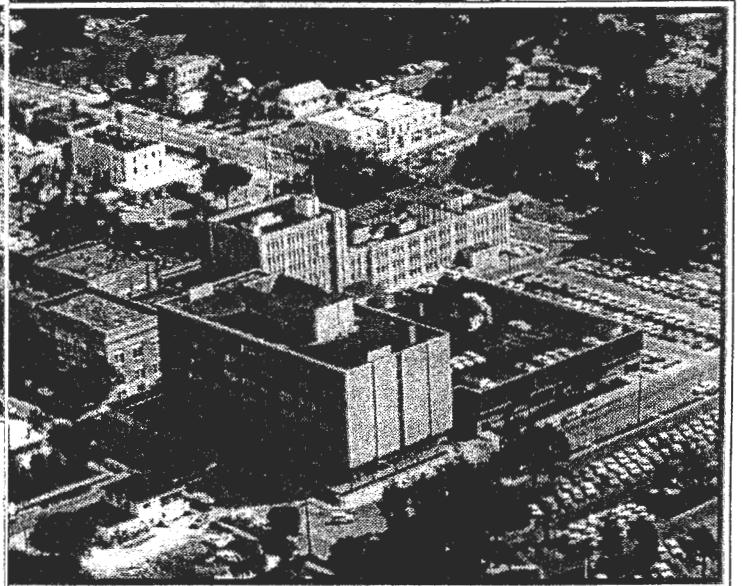
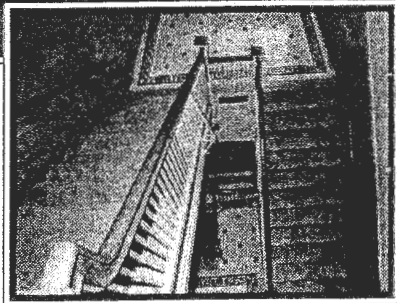
Of course that begged the question of what to do with the Old County Courthouse. Some talked of demolition, but planners chose to "modernize" it instead. Contractors nailed up plywood paneling over the walls of the stately marble hallways. They rolled red carpet and, in some areas, linoleum over the honeycomb tile floors. Drop ceilings were installed to hide the darkly stained oak beams, and to accommodate modern air conditioning equipment. The ceiling of Courtroom 2 was lowered and its balcony boarded up to be used for storage. The building's once grand architectural eloquence was reduced to stark functionality, and the strain of time and abuse continued to manifest itself in deterioration and decay.



*Left: Cornerstone  
laying of Pinellas  
County Courthouse,  
Nov 15, 1917.*

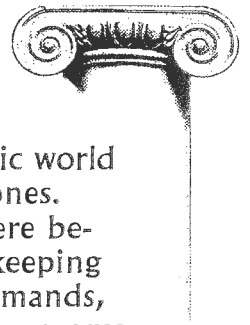


*Above: 1976, waving  
the bicentennial flag.  
Right: Tile work in  
the stairwells.*



*Above: Aerial View of the New & Old Courthouse, late 1960's.*





## **A Return to Traditional Elegance**

By the early 1980s, the Old Courthouse was in serious disrepair. The roof was leaking badly and there was some discussion of demolition being the only practical recourse. But in 1984, Judge Radford Smith, who was fed up with holding court in the now dilapidated Courtroom I, began to spearhead a plan to save the Old Courthouse from extinction. Together with Court Administrator J. William Lockhart and Pinellas County General Services Director Carl Barron, Judge Smith led the way to Phase I of the courthouse restoration, the first step in bringing this grand old building back to its original splendor.

Reconstruction plans took a giant leap forward in 1987, during the Courthouse's 75th Anniversary *Diamond Jubilee* celebration. The Courthouse Restoration Committee, a subcommittee of the original *Diamond Jubilee* Committee, worked tirelessly to procure grant money to finance many aspects of the rebuilding. The efforts of this committee provided the momentum that lead to restoration of the entire courthouse structure, finally completed in 1997.

Phase I areas restored in 1988 included Courtroom I (The Grand Courtroom), along with its judge's chambers, witness rooms, grand jury rooms and a prisoner holding area. Phase II of the restoration included the renovation of all public areas, including hallways and restrooms,

Eighty years ago, the electronic world was still marveling over telephones. Computers and fax modems were beyond anyone's dreams. Yet in keeping with today's communication demands, the restored Old Courthouse has many modern electronic connections hidden away as part of its infrastructure. The aforementioned law library has power sockets and modem connections installed on all the reading tables. Courtroom work areas are equipped with their own power outlets, audio/visual inputs and modem connections to accommodate modern electronics.

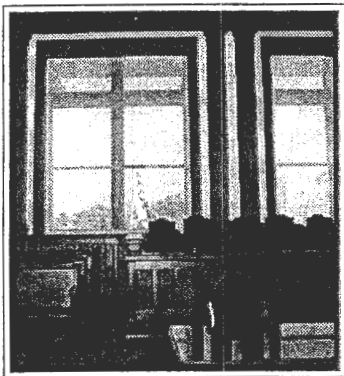
The exterior walls of the original Courthouse are made of load-bearing bricks. The bricks themselves support the weight of the structure, rather than being affixed to an internal load-bearing matrix. During reconstruction, any penetration of the brick walls, for air-conditioning duct work, fire sprinkler piping or wiring conduits, necessitated shoring up the walls so that their load bearing capacity was maintained. The exterior walls had weathered over the years as well, allowing moisture to seep through, causing peeling and bubbling on the interior plaster walls. A major effort of the restoration process was the repointing and sealing of all external brick surfaces. Over the years, a moisture problem had developed in the basement, due to seepage through the subterranean sections of the external walls. County construction crews had to excavate an area around the building

down to the foundation so that they could seal these areas and waterproof the foundation and sidewalls.

Perhaps the biggest challenge to reconstruction crews was the installation of modern climate control, fire sprinkler and smoke detection devices. New air conditioning equipment and fire sprinkler systems had to be designed to fit into the narrow joist area between floors, and it had to be done unobtrusively to blend in with the original architecture of the building.

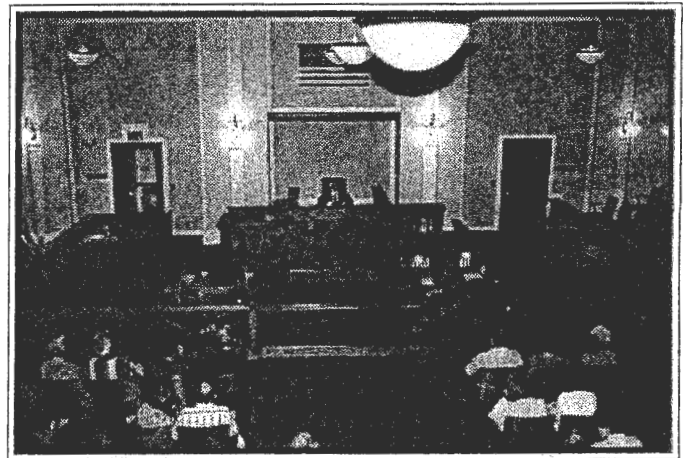
In days gone by, lead and asbestos were often found in building materials, and indeed during restoration, lead was found to be present in the paint, and asbestos was found in the caulking of the Old Courthouse. During the lead and asbestos removal process, many of the original windows were damaged. However, thanks to a \$35,000 grant from the Bureau of Historic Preservation, Division of Historical Resources, Florida Department of State, all the Courthouse windows were restored, rebuilt or replaced. All elements of the

restored windows are comparable to elements of the original items. All the windows function; all the transoms open and close. Yet, the building's modern climate control system requires that they be kept shut.



*Restored windows in Courtroom 1*

installation of an elevator to provide access for the physically handicapped, and various other building support services such as air-conditioning and electrical work. Phase III included restoration of Courtroom 2, along with judge's chambers on the second and third floor. The fourth and final restorative phase, completed in 1997, included design and construction of an atrium, to provide a safe and secure, yet aesthetically pleasing path into the west entrance of the building. The original building was erected before today's modern Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements, so the new west entrance was designed to fulfill these requirements and facilitate traffic between the Old Courthouse and the main Pinellas County Courthouse. The three original outside entryways to the Old Courthouse are magnetically locked, opening as exits only in the case of a building emergency.



*Judge Radford Smith holding session in the newly refurbished Courtroom 2, 1998.*

## **R**econstruction Challenges

Bringing an 80-year-old building up to modern standards presented several unique challenges. Many of the original plans were not as detailed as modern blueprints. Much of the structure had to be field measured so that an accurate set of "as built" plans could be compiled.

One of the features of the Old Courthouse is a 22,000-volume law library comprising areas on the first and second floors. The original Courthouse floors weren't constructed to support such heavy floor loads, so County architects had to reinforce the library floors from below with steel beams. Placement of the library stacks had to be very exact, so that they sat directly above the steel beam supports.



*Law Library 1998*

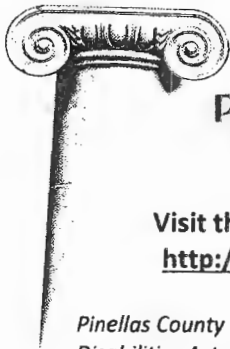
## **M**oving Ahead... to Yesteryear

Many buildings in Pinellas County have undergone restoration, but the Old Courthouse is unique in that it was restored to its original function as well as its original design. Instead of being used as a museum or other public display, the Old Courthouse is a functioning courthouse, hearing civil suits, small claims cases and simplified divorces. Trials are being held, legal issues are being discussed, and court clerks' offices are being maintained there within the building. Judges once again occupy the benches, juries again hear testimony and attorneys now, as before, plead their cases, their voices echoing off red oak balustrades and majestic 20 foot ceilings.

The past has met the present. Modern technology has been woven into a historical tapestry. The tradition and romance of a bygone era continue to color our modern dealings with issues involving the law, as the Old Pinellas County Courthouse stands proudly once more.

The Old Pinellas County Courthouse was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1992.

Special thanks to Howard Hansen, President of St. Petersburg Preservation, Inc. who researched much of the information contained in this pocket brochure.



Visit the Pinellas County Website  
<http://www.pinellascounty.org>

*Pinellas County complies with the American with Disabilities Act. To obtain accessible formats of this Document, please contact the Department of Communications at (727) 464-4600/ TDD (727) 464-4062.*

The photographs in this publication were provided by Heritage Village and Pinellas County Communications.



Learn more about Pinellas County's history at Heritage Village:  
11909 125<sup>th</sup> Street North, Largo, FL 33774  
Hours Wed – Sat 10am-4pm, Sunday 1pm-4pm Phone  
(727) 582-2123 Fax (727) 582-2211



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