

# PRESERVING OUR STATE'S LEGAL HERITAGE: RESTORATION OF THE HISTORIC MIAMI COURTROOM 6-1

📅 Vol. 83, No. 7 July/August 2009 Pg 78

👤 Maria S. Johnson 📁 Misc

The  
Dade



County Courthouse is a well-known Miami landmark with over 80 years of history, and Courtroom 6-1 is the grandest courtroom in the Dade County Courthouse. Often referred to as the “ceremonial courtroom,” it is used for trials, meetings, investitures, educational seminars, chief judge elections, and other important public events. Every current judge in the 11th Judicial Circuit took his/her oath of office in Courtroom 6-1.

From the opening of its doors on September 6, 1928, Courtroom 6-1 garnered much attention. Not only was it the scene of every felony case in the county, but it was

situated in the tallest building south of Baltimore, Maryland.

Within the walls of Courtroom 6-1, gangster Al Capone, who had a home in Miami Beach, was tried and acquitted of perjury in 1930. Would-be assassin Giuseppe Zangara was sentenced to die after attempting to kill Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933 at Bayfront Park. He missed, but ended up shooting to death the mayor of Chicago, Anton Cermak. It is the courtroom where, in the 1930s, a gunshot accidentally went off during a trial of a man accused of hunting out of season, and a real human skull was passed around to horrified jurors during a scandalous murder trial. In 1966, national media crowded into 6-1 for the trial of socialite Candace Mosler and her lover/nephew accused of killing Mosler's wealthy husband. They were acquitted. America's landmark tobacco trial was held in the courtroom in the 1990s.

The \$650,000 restoration of the spacious courtroom, which took eight months, is a natural move toward preserving local legal history. "No other courtroom in Miami-Dade has hosted as many historic cases as this one," said Miami-Dade Circuit Judge Scott Silverman, who led the push for the restoration and heads the 11th Judicial Circuit Historical Society. The idea to restore the courtroom to its original look began in 1999 with the completion of a similar renovation of the courthouse lobby.

Among the many donors and supporters who helped finance the project, the Dade County Bar Association is hailed for its efforts to corral the many private donors

from the South Florida legal community and the support of many others. The local bar association's efforts in the restoration project were spearheaded by Joseph H. Serota and Robert Fiore, former presidents of the Dade County Bar Association. The 11th Judicial Circuit Historical Society held a groundbreaking ceremony on May 15, 2007, to kick-off the Historic Courtroom Restoration Project. A short film was shown on the history of the Dade County Courthouse with original black-and-white newsreel footage.



Over the years, acoustic tiles were placed over every inch of the courtroom's walls, obscuring the beautiful 1920s painted plaster walls.

The original

Florida pine floor was covered with carpet and linoleum. Many of the courtroom's wooden railings and beams were covered with a dark brown paint, covering up the beauty of their natural luster.

Wall fans, ornate desk lamps, and candelabra-like sconces have been returned. The original benches used by the judge and stenographer and the witness box

have been refinished. The high, wood-beam ceilings have been refinished with hand-carved daisies splashed with color.

One aspect in which Courtroom 6-1 is in no way like its predecessor is technology. The design team as well as Judge Silverman and the co-chairs of the renovation, Robert Fiore and Joseph Serota, knew they had to be wary of just creating a relic. “This courtroom is state-of-the-art,” says Fiore. “It’s extremely functional and it’s an honor to be physically present and argue a case in such a phenomenal piece of history.”

There are large, bronze plates on three walls of the courtroom that were not present in 1928. Each plate has an electrical outlet and a video input, allowing court proceedings to be recorded wirelessly and controlled via a closed-circuit television from a small command center in the jury’s quarters.

As Judge Silverman puts it, “When you get to practice law in this courtroom, everything changes. *This* is a courtroom.”