SOME COURTHOUSE HISTORY…….

By 1800, the population north of Pittsburgh had grown sufficiently to warrant the creation of a new county in the Commonwealth, with land carved from the huge neighboring Allegheny County. The 200-acre county seat was chosen for its roughly central location and its elevation, and likely seemed the ideal spot for a courthouse that could be seen from miles away. Both the new county and borough were named after Scottish-born settler and Revolutionary war hero General Hugh Mercer.

The County's legal matters were first adjudicated in a tavern near Mercer, then in a courtroom on the second floor of a hewn log building that was located on the west end of the diamond. It housed the county jail on the ground floor and served as a Presbyterian church on Sundays. Before long, the county's mounting access to justice and legal needs outgrew the log building and plans were laid out for a bona fide courthouse.



First Courthouse
1807-1866

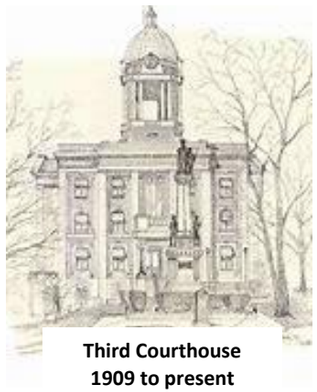
The first dedicated Mercer County Courthouse was a small, two-story brick structure located in the center of the diamond and built in 1807 at a cost of $7,116. The building featured an elegant cupola with wings on the east and west sides that accommodated county offices. These were eventually torn down when the building was enlarged in 1840. This courthouse served Mercer County for 57 years until it was lost to a fire that began in the cupola on the evening of February 25, 1866. At one time, Mercer had a fire engine that may have been of service when it was new, but it had been neglected for so long that it had become practically useless at a fire. When the courthouse burned, the firemen drug the engine to the fire, but became so frustrated when they could not get it to even throw a single stream of water. It was decided to roll the truck into the burning building. "If you won't quench the flames, you shall feed them," they said.

The Board of Commissioners wasted no time formulating a plan for a new courthouse to be built, breaking ground as soon as weather permitted. Upon its completion in 1868, the stately Grecian-Corinthian styled building had cost $98,000 to build. It boasted porticos on the north and south sides as well as an ornate octagonal cupola, supported by fluted columns, which later held the town clock. Like its predecessor, the new courthouse was situated in the center of the diamond.

Second Courthouse
1868-1907



On December 15, 1907, the second Mercer County Courthouse succumbed to a fire, apparently the result of the gas lights used to illuminate the new cupola clock by night. The county government was temporarily moved to the Mercer Academy Building on North Erie Street while the current courthouse was being built.



Third Courthouse
1909 to present

Construction of this magnificent building started in 1909 and was completed and open for business three years later in 1911. This is the third courthouse (fourth if you consider the temporary log building) in the county's 204-year history, located on the exact same location. The total cost was between $450,000 and $500.000. Even using a moderate rate of inflation, the replacement cost in today's terms would be approximately $25 million dollars.

Throughout the many years, Commissioners have taken numerous steps to keep the building maintained. However, the infrastructure system, and in some areas, the structural integrity, were in extremely poor condition, requiring immediate action**.** Thus, in 2001, a major restoration project was undertaken to maintain this historical asset for future generations. The approximately $12 million-dollar, three-year project corrected many areas that had fallen into disrepair, such as structurally weakened and crumbling ceilings, electrical wiring that was deemed a fire hazard, inadequate heating and ventilation, failed plumbing and sanitary sewer lines, and finally deteriorating priceless historic artwork in the courtrooms and the rotunda. In addition, to accommodate the state approved Fourth Judgeship, a fourth courtroom was added.





Designed in the Beaux-Arts style by the noted architectural firm of Owsley & Boucherle, the exterior of the building features pillars and stairs adorning the north side of the courthouse. Smaller porches with smaller pillars beautify the east and west sides, while the south, or ground floor entrance, greets visitors with a two-story balcony and pillars. Projecting upwards some 160 feet high, at the center of the roof, the aluminum dome contains a huge clock with dials facing the four cardinal points of the compass. The dome, which can be seen for miles from every direction, is a reproduction of St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City in Rome. The restoration included major repairs to the dome and roof. The clocks were not functioning, and parts were no longer available. Therefore, it required that the clocks be totally replaced.

Many changes were made to restore the exterior lighting of the courthouse. Now period lights line the square and surround the building and floodlights illuminate the walls. In addition, the south entrance was expanded to allow for an increased number of handicapped parking slots and easier access with an electronic door opener. As of 2021, it is now the only point of entry for security purposes. The grounds have been enhanced with the Memorial Gardens that are nestled on each side of the north portico. The World War II Memorial on the east lawn joins the Civil War and Vietnam War Memorials.

Federal and State flags, along with the official Mercer County Seal and Mercer County Flag decorate the main rotunda. The County Seal was adopted in 1988 and the official flag in 1989. The rotunda includes portraits of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the Revolutionary War General, Hugh Mercer whom the county is named after, and the official architectural drawing of the courthouse. Also, in the rotunda is an antique cabinet, which features county memorabilia on loan from the Mercer County Historical Society.

Offices on the first floor include the Commissioner's office connected to a public conference room, the Clerk of Courts/Register of Wills, Victim Witness, Recorder of Deeds, Prothonotary, and Veterans Affairs. Major structural additions were placed in both the Clerk of Courts' and Prothonotary's offices to address the weight bearing needs for the updated large capacity filing systems.



Visitors to the courthouse marvel at the gleaming marble floors and monumental staircase leading to the upper floors, which are devoted to the law. The splendid spaces and finishes of the Mercer County Courthouse, as well as its unique architecture, supported it earning a place in the National Register of Historic Places in December 1998.

The two original courtrooms are located on the second floor. Courtroom One features the mural titled *Criminal Law* by Vincente Aderente, a native of Italy who was trained at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. A mural titled *Civil Law* by A.E. Foringer, a native of Pennsylvania who studied in Pittsburgh, is in Courtroom Two. Foringer is known for his poster, *The Greatest Mother in the World*, which is used by the Red Cross. Stained glass in the ceiling of each courtroom was cleaned and protected in the attic area by a Plexiglas shield. Historical lighting fixtures have replaced poor and noisy fluorescent lighting. Walking around the second floor's white marble railing, eight light green columns of scagliolia (or imitation marble) are visible. This material was used at the time to reduce costs. However, today the columns are considered to have much greater value than had they been constructed of marble.



Walking around the third-floor railing, the dome's mural representing *Justice, Power of the Law, Innocence,* and *Guilt* can be viewed by artist Edward Simmons of New York. He had previously won awards at the Paris Exposition and the Pan-American Exposition. Simmons is also noted for painting the nine panels that decorate the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. Many occupancy changes took place on the third floor. The Law Library was relocated to the ground floor (or lower rotunda area) and the Court Administrator and staff were then relocated to that space. The Fourth Courtroom that houses the Judge's Chambers, a Jury Deliberation Room, and staff areas, was formerly occupied by the Victim Witness and District Attorney's office. The Third Courtroom houses the Judge's Chambers, a Jury Room, and staff areas. To provide sufficient space for the relocated offices, the renovations included transferring a lawyer's lounge from the second to the fourth floor.

The ground floor (or lower rotunda) experienced numerous changes from the restoration. The south entrance is now the single point of entry and provides a security check point. The ground floor no longer feels like you're entering the "basement" of a building. Whether entering this area from either of the two corridors, or descending the marble stairs from the main floor, you no longer encounter the noisy mechanical systems that generated the airflow for the second-floor courtrooms. You now enter a quiet foyer ornamented with eight large columns. The mechanical area was then converted to an employee lounge. Maintenance department offices with a workroom and office supply storage is in this area. This wing also contains a Federal Post Office mail depot and courthouse mailroom. The west wing of the lower rotunda contains the Assembly Room, Fiscal, Human Resources, Management Information Systems (not open to the public) and the Law Library. The east wing includes the offices of the Treasurer, Controller, Tax Claim and Tax Assessment Departments, as well as a modernized equipment/mechanical room. This is where the heating and cooling system is located which regulates and controls the courthouse boilers. The sole courthouse elevator is located next to the equipment room.

In 2000, Mercer County celebrated its Bicentennial as a county. The heating and air conditioning systems were updated, and the inside of the courthouse was redecorated. A band shell was added to the grounds (pictured below) that was torn down and rebuilt in 2022. The bandstand is used year-round by different community groups and is home to the town Christmas tree every December. In addition, the Mercer Community Band performs concerts on Friday evenings during the summer months for the community.



A Self-Guided Tour of the Mercer County Courthouse

Mercer County PENNSYLVANIA



Your Mercer County Courthouse

Admiring the majestic courthouse commanding the center of Mercer's 'diamond,' it is hard to imagine that the hallowed halls of justice originated from such humble beginnings, having previously served the county's citizenry from a tavern, a log structure, a school and two prior courthouse buildings. The Mercer County Courthouse of today has been called a physical, architectural, and historical landmark, and with good reason.