

Pontotoc County celebrates restoration of historic courtroom

April 25, 2006

A community's history is priceless, and the preservation efforts reflected in the restoration of the Pontotoc County Courthouse will serve the community for future generations, judges and other public officials told a crowd gathered Sunday, April 23, to commemorate the completion of the second floor courtroom renovation.

Pontotoc Mayor Bill Rutledge said, "We don't ever need to...put a price tag on preserving history. This courthouse was built in 1915. You think about the decisions that were made back then and how they have affected generation after generation. Something that happened right here has made a difference in who we are today."

Work was recently completed on restoration of the second floor courtroom. The project cost \$1,200,000. Pontotoc County spent \$700,000. Save America's Treasures provided a \$300,000 grant, and the Department of Archives and History provided \$200,000, said Pontotoc County Chancery Clerk Reggie Collums.

"I think it was money well spent," Collums said. "I think it is something that all of Pontotoc County can be very proud of."

Collums said he watched the restoration as it took shape daily. Every day when he would step off the elevator, "it would just about take my breath away," he said.

A 1970 renovation had lowered the ceilings, covered the balconies and windows and shrank the size of the courtroom to create office space, said Pontotoc County Circuit Clerk Tracy Robinson. The judge's bench was moved to the opposite end of the courtroom.

The most recent restoration sought to return the second floor courtroom to its original appearance. Although some area residents familiar with the original courtroom said the restoration wasn't exact, the project returned most features to the way they looked in the early 1900s.

On the day of the courtroom dedication, the afternoon sun cast golden patterns on the carpeted floor. A few spectators surveyed the crowd from the lofty balcony.

Massive light fixtures hang from the high ceiling. Rich, dark, carved woodwork separates the spectators' seats from the court. A line from Shakespeare, "To thine own self be true," adorns the wall behind the judge's bench.

Nobody remembered the writing on the wall until workers painted primer over it, then it shone through, Collums said. A judge long since retired had it put there years ago. It was meant to be restored.

Senior Circuit Judge Thomas Gardner of Tupelo thanked the Pontotoc County Board of Supervisors for their commitment to the restoration effort. "It is absolutely beautiful. You and the people of this county are a real credit," he said.

Retired Circuit Judge Barry Ford of Pontotoc said, "This is something you can be proud of. Your tax dollars are being spent wisely."

Court of Appeals Judge David A. Chandler of Ackerman said, "This is really remarkable, and I commend you for making these facilities available."

Laughter rippled through the old courtroom as several prominent judicial officials shared personal recollections that revolved around the courthouse.

U.S. District Judge Glen H. Davidson, Chief Judge of the Northern District of Mississippi, recalled his first paying job. A Pontotoc County official promised to pay him 25 cents for every pigeon he shot with a BB gun. “It went well until I pinged one of these windows,” he said.

Supreme Court Justice Chuck Easley of Caledonia said he used to farm in Pontotoc County “before I went broke and had to be a lawyer.”

First District Chancery Judge Talmadge Littlejohn of New Albany recalled standing on the old courtroom’s pine floor before Judge William Inzer to try his first case in Chancery Court. One of the witnesses was pressed about her recollection of a certain date. She replied that she knew that was the date because it was the date a setting of eggs was supposed to hatch.

Judge Littlejohn, who has practiced law for 46 years, said it’s important to preserve the past for future generations. “All these things are going to pass away if we don’t take a stand to make sure these things are part of our history, our heritage and our hope,” he said.

First District Chancery Judge Jacqueline Mask of Tupelo called the courtroom and the gathering awesome. “I became so humbled by the fact that I am able to work with and able to serve with such an outstanding group of people. Let us not forget. Let us continue to be an example, to serve the people and dispense justice so that Pontotoc County is a safer place to live and work,” she said.

Retired Supreme Court Justice James L. Roberts Jr. of Pontotoc, a former chancellor who now serves as municipal judge in Pontotoc, said courts and courtrooms exist to serve the public. “I hope this courtroom and what it represents will always remain sacred to you as a society because this is where we go to civilly resolve our disputes,” Judge Roberts said.

Judge Gardner and other court officials also took the occasion of the courtroom dedication to recognize a long serving court staff member, Bailiff Devan Dallas, who recently turned 80. Dallas opened court for the ceremony. Although Dallas expects to formally retire at the end of June, Judge Gardner said he won’t let Dallas go so easily.

“It is the sentence of this court that you serve for the rest of your natural life, and if we need you, you come running, but leave your pistol at home,” Judge Gardner said.

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